

# Teachers' understandings of shyness: Psychosocial differentiation for student inclusion

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Shyness is not a recognised special educational need, yet studies reveal that shy children underperform academically and present psychosocial vulnerabilities. We present a Norwegian study of elementary school teachers who have experience in working with shy children. Framed by a cultural–historical understanding that concepts are tools employed by teachers as they work on problems of practice, the study examined (i) how shyness is a concept allowing teachers to interpret behaviours of children and (ii) why they employ the concept and what demands were being addressed. Data were gathered through post-observation stimulated recall interviews with 8 teachers and three focus group sessions with 11 teachers. Seeing shyness as a tool for identifying the demands made by children regarded as shy, revealed sets of child behaviours which required two distinct forms of differentiation: (i) augmenting cognitive support with psychosocial feedback to help the child overcome the behaviours impeding their engagement as active learners and (ii) making extra efforts when eliciting children's understandings in order to give formative feedback and support progress through pedagogic sequences. By identifying the behaviours underpinning broad descriptions of shyness, such as anxiety, the analyses show that teachers employ shyness as an overarching concept which reveals psychosocial demands that may not be entirely addressed by the repertoires of responses available to them.

**Keywords:** shy; psychosocial; teaching; inclusion

## Introduction

In this article we discuss how and why teachers use the term 'shyness' when interpreting the behaviour of students. The study was conducted with elementary school, Grades 1–7, teachers in Norway, where schools are legally required to include all mainstream students in classroom activities. Teachers are therefore expected to adapt their teaching to each learner, including those whose behaviour may be described as shy.

The analyses we present draw on the first stage of a 5-year study of how teachers work with children they deem to be shy. In this stage we examined what teachers meant by shyness and how an ascription of shyness connected with assumptions about

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the demands shy children made on them as teachers. Our analyses are based in a cultural–historical approach to tool use (Wartofsky, 1979; Engeström, 2007), where tools—including concepts such as shyness and material artefacts such as school curricula—inform both teachers’ interpretations of and responses to problems of practice.

This approach underpins the twin focus of the study to be discussed here, shown in Figure 1. One element is how interpretations of a problem are mediated by the conceptual and material tools that are available. The other element is the demands that learners’ apparent shyness make on teachers. We recognise that these demands also reflect the dynamic aspects of mediated action; while teachers make demands on children by expecting task engagement and achievement, students make demands on teachers through their intentions and responses (Edwards *et al.*, 2019).

The dynamic shown in Figure 1 reminds us that teachers’ interpretations may also shape how the tools are fashioned and used. Concepts may therefore become refined or stretched when employed to understand specific children and the demands they present. Consequently, our premise is that how teachers employ concepts to understand children will, at least in part, be articulated in terms of the demands these children make on their pedagogy.

This framing of how and why teachers use the concept of shyness calls for us to understand what teachers mean when they interpret the behaviours that they see as constituting shyness, before we can make sense of the strategies the teachers select when working with these children. Our aim in this article is, therefore, to identify how teachers understand shyness and what demands their use of the term make on them as teachers.

#### *What psychological research tells us about shyness and schooling*

Shyness does not bring a child to the threshold where they may be seen as having special educational needs and warrant statutory support through, for example in

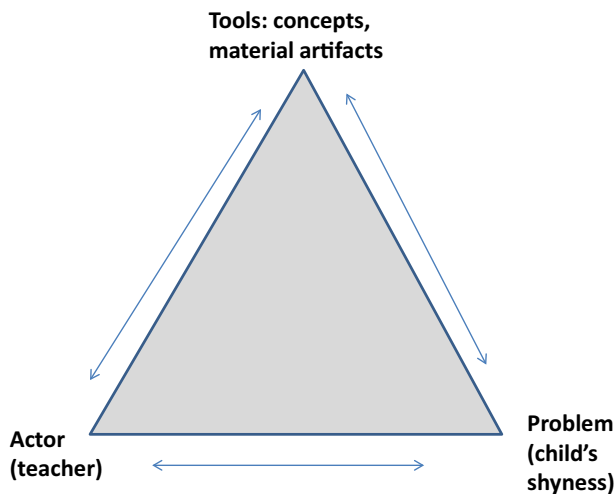


Figure 1. The relationship between actor, tool and problem [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

England, an Education and Health Care Plan. Psychological research indicates, however, that it can be associated with lower attainment and therefore make specific demands on teachers aiming at inclusive classrooms.

Shyness has been variously theorised in psychology, for example in terms of behavioural inhibition to the unfamiliar (Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005) and social withdrawal (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). A substantial literature has investigated shyness, defined as a temperament or personality trait that is characterised by individual differences in wariness and anxiety in the face of social novelty and perceived social evaluation, reticence in social situations, and embarrassment and self-consciousness in situations where shy individuals perceive themselves as being or likely to be socially evaluated (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). Research within this framework has shown that shy children may encounter a range of difficulties within the school setting (Kalutskaya *et al.*, 2015). In comparison with their less shy peers, their educational attainments tend to be lower, performance on tests of language development is often poorer, they are more likely to have difficulties in adjustment to school, have more frequent absences due to minor physical ailments and are at greater risk of meeting clinical diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder (Evans, 2001, 2010).

That many teachers recognise shyness as a potential problem is evident from reports of their adoption of strategies to help shy students overcome their difficulties within the classroom. Coplan *et al.* (2011) examined elementary school teachers' reports of the likelihood of using a preselected set of strategies for hypothetical shy, quiet children as described in vignettes. In comparison with average or typical children, there was greater likelihood of using social learning strategies (verbal encouragement and praise, concrete reinforcement and modelling behaviour) and peer-focused strategies such as involving classmates and encouraging joint activities outside the classroom. In another study based on vignettes and hypothetical cases, Deng *et al.* (2017) included items referring to social learning strategies in a study involving preservice elementary school teachers. Items referred to the promotion of social skills, involving a classmate in problem solving, praising the student for appropriate behaviours and encouraging the student to join activities. Participants reported a greater likelihood of using these approaches with shy students than with average and exuberant students.

Teacher characteristics and the properties of teacher–student relationships also influence teachers' approaches to students' shyness. Lao *et al.* (2013) found that teachers' understanding of their shy students was influenced by their own experience of shyness as children or adults. Higher-quality relationships were associated with greater social skills and adjustment among students (Arbeau *et al.*, 2010). Zee and Roorda (2018) found that students' self-reported shyness correlated negatively with teacher ratings of closeness and conflict in teacher–student relationships.

Research that focuses on individual differences along a standardised, quantitative measure of shyness—such as the Child Behavior Scale (Ladd *et al.*, 1996) or the Child Social Preference Scale (Coplan *et al.*, 2004)—provides a degree of insight into teachers' understanding of shyness but fails to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. Correlations can be modest, even if statistically significant (e.g. in Zee and Roorda, 2018 study). The interview study reported by Lao *et al.* (2013) identified shyness as a combination of the themes of social factors, personal factors and social

relations (sympathy, empathy). Research ought to take this complexity into account and investigate in greater detail teachers' understanding of the forms of shyness as they encounter them among individual students.

Shyness also implies psychosocial challenges in peer relationships: it is associated with having a limited number of friends; although there may be one stable friendship, which may be with children who experience similar psychosocial difficulties (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). They are also at risk of peer victimisation (Hanish & Guerra, 2004), which they evoke by presenting themselves as physically and emotionally weak and unlikely to retaliate (Rubin *et al.*, 2006). They may then use social withdrawal to cope with peer victimisation (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004), creating a transactional cycle where the shy child is bullied and responds by withdrawal, which is followed by further victimisation (Rubin *et al.*, 2009). The particular contribution of the present study is to focus on what teachers do to mitigate the potential difficulties faced by individual shy children in actual complex school settings.

### **A cultural–historical framing of pedagogical interactions**

Given our Vygotskian cultural–historical framing where concepts, such as shyness, may serve as tools to enable teachers to carry out their work, we suggest that teachers may find shyness a useful way of categorising students who appear withdrawn or who communicate minimally. A recent Norwegian study (Nilsen, 2018) has shown that when special needs mean that children are quiet and withdrawn they tend to 'fall by the wayside'; hence shyness may be a useful label enabling teachers to select strategies that have been proved to work with other children displaying similar behaviours. Hjørne and Saljo (2004) have similarly argued from a Vygotskian perspective that practitioners employ relatively broad categorisations of learners to guide their interpretations of children and their professional responses. In this sense we can see the concept of shyness as a tool for diagnosing the demands made by certain students.

Teaching is a complex and interactional activity, in Figure 2 we indicate the different interactional demands that teachers address through a typical pedagogic sequence. A brief outline of the sequence allows us to point to how the behaviours associated with shyness may present challenges for teachers. The sequence (Edwards, 2014) is based on Vygotskian understandings of learning (Vygotsky, 1997) and is informed by Galperin's detailed cultural–historical account of pedagogic strategies (Engeness & Lund, ).

Framed by the Vygotskian distinction between the intermental (public) sphere and the intramental (private or semi-private) sphere, the sequence typically starts in quadrant 1 with whole-class or large-group teacher-led activities, moving to quadrant 2 after the teacher is confident that pupil responses in a question and answer session indicate that they are ready to work on structured tasks alone, in pairs or in small groups, which help them use the conceptual language and refine their understandings of the new ideas. It may be necessary to return to quadrant 1 if formative assessment reveals that students are encountering difficulties with these tasks. In most teaching sessions the next move is to quadrant 4, often in the form of a plenary question and answer session or quiz, where the teacher can check understandings. The more open-ended tasks to be found in quadrant 3 may appear less frequently, as they require

<p><i>Public</i></p> <p>4. Students demonstrate their grasp of key concepts and ways of enquiring</p>	<p><i>Public</i></p> <p>1. Teacher introduces key concepts and models ways of engaging with them with the whole class and engages in whole-class question and answer sessions to gauge readiness to move to quadrant 2</p>
<p><i>Semi-private</i></p> <p>3. Students tackle problems together which require them to employ and connect key concepts and ways of enquiring</p>	<p><i>Semi-private</i></p> <p>2. Students do tightly structured tasks alone or in small groups which demand engagement with key concepts and related ways of enquiring</p>

Figure 2. A Vygotskian-based pedagogic sequence

students to collaborate to employ and connect several recently acquired concepts and demonstrate an assured grasp of the modes of enquiry associated with a specific aspect of the discipline. The move from quadrant 3 to 4 often requires learners to give public presentations of the outcomes of their problem-solving.

Three features of this sequence are particularly relevant to the challenges presented to teachers by children with inhibited behaviour. First, the cycle requires the learner to take gradual control over their own learning, with the teacher's role becoming increasingly one of responding to learners as they tackle tasks in the intramental sphere. Second, the work done in the intramental sphere is crucial to children's learning and that work requires them to test their understandings by using the language in which the concepts to be learnt are embedded (Mercer, 2013). Third, the first two features mean that the role of the teacher shifts from being a model in quadrant 1 in the public or intermental sphere to undertaking formative assessment, offering differentiated support or being a resource to be called on when the child is active in the intramental sphere.

We suggest that the differentiation of support demanded by children seen as shy can be considerable. Teachers' attempts at sensitive and timely responses to students as learners as they move through the quadrants are not helped by the psychosocial difficulties that shy children exhibit. They may, for example, resist teachers' attempts to reveal their understandings and possible misconceptions. Their inhibited behaviour and inability to make their understandings easily visible to the monitoring teacher may therefore make formative assessment and responsive teaching difficult to accomplish. Consequently, the demands that shy children place on teachers who are attempting to create inclusive classrooms extend beyond differentiated support for their engagement with curricula, to include attention to their socio-emotional well-being. Here we are in line with Norwich, who has consistently argued from a special needs perspective that differential teaching calls for sensitivity and expertise (Norwich, 1994; Norwich & Lewis, 2001).

So far, we have reviewed studies of shy children's difficulties at school and pointed to the possible challenges that shy behaviour presents for teachers who are aiming at inclusive classrooms, where student engagement in curriculum activities is crucial. In

order to test this interpretation of how and why the label ‘shyness’ is used, we have pursued the following research questions.

1. What does the concept of shyness mean for teachers?
2. What demands do students who are described as shy present to teachers?

## The study

### *Sampling*

The first stage of the 4-year study, discussed here, was designed to elicit teachers’ understandings and use of the concept of shyness in order to inform a national survey of teachers’ strategies with shy children, which is currently underway. In this stage we undertook purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), selecting teachers understood to have successful experience of working with children seen as shy and therefore likely to be able to articulate their approaches. These teachers were recommended by people we trusted as highly competent professionals, such as the Educational Psychological Counseling Service, higher education colleagues who worked with teachers and elementary school principals. To help the teachers identify children they might label as shy, we drew on the five-item shyness subscale of the teachers’ version of the Emotionality Activity Sociability (EAS) Temperament Survey developed by Buss and Plomin (1984) and used by Crozier and Hostettler (2003) in their study of primary schoolchildren’s vocabulary development, to identify eight possible signs of shyness among Norwegian elementary school children. The signs included anxiety, poor self-esteem and being withdrawn. These items were not intended to limit teachers’ accounts of shy children, but to give some guidance for the selection of the children they were to elaborate on in the interviews. It was intended that the interviews would reveal what these labels meant for teachers in terms of children’s behaviours and the demands they presented.

The teachers, all from different elementary schools and regions of Norway, were in two subsamples (see Table 1). The first ( $n = 8$ ) were teachers who currently worked with a child they could describe as shy. These teachers were interviewed individually using a stimulated recall method (Dempsey, 2010), after we observed them working with the shy child in a whole-class teaching session. The second group ( $n = 11$ ) were not currently teaching a child they described as shy, but had recent experience of doing so. These teachers were interviewed in three separate focus group sessions ( $n = 4, 4, 3$ ). In Table 1 we have not indicated the year group these teachers were currently teaching, as they were recalling experiences over previous years.

### *Data collection*

*Individual simulated recall interviews.* Prior to each interview, the first two authors made observations over a 1- to 2-hour period in the teacher’s 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 their immediate surroundings. The field notes captured the teacher’s general and specific approaches that appeared to



Table 1. The participants

Individual interviews ( <i>N</i> = 8 teachers)		
Female/male teachers, grade	Experience	Focus groups (three groups, <i>N</i> = 11 teachers) Teachers and years of experience
Female, Grade 6	10+ years	Group 1, 4 teachers: Male, 10+ years; Male, 0–5 years; Female, 10+ years; Female, 5–10 years
Female, Grade 5	5–10 years	Group 2, 4 teachers: Female, 5–10 years; Female, 0–5 years; Female, 10+ years; Male, 10+ years
Female, Grade 7	5–10 years	
Female, Grade 6	10+ years	Group 3, 3 teachers: Female, 10+ years; Female, 10+ years; Female, 10+ years
Female, Grade 2	0–5 years	
Male, Grade 7	10+ years	
Female, Grade 6	10+ years	
Female, Grade 5	0–5 years	

offer positive support for the shy child's learning. These notes, together with related video clips, informed reflective stimulated recall interviews tailored to each teacher. These were held in school between 2 and 7 days after the observations. In every interview the focus was the teacher's actions in the class and their rationales for those actions in relation to their diagnosis of shyness in the child. The interviews were conducted by the first two authors, one led the interview and the other took notes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and lasted between 47 and 82 minutes, producing a total of 503 minutes of interview data.

*Focus group interviews.* These were carried out by the same two researchers and took place at the university. One researcher led the interview and the other took notes and also added questions at the end if there remained lines to be followed up. The focus group sessions employed prompts organised in a semi-structured interview guide concentrating on teachers' conceptions of shyness and their own actions in classrooms, they also allowed probing of themes emerging from the individual interviews. Sessions started by eliciting teachers' conceptions of shy children. Participants responded one by one, and as each session continued interactions became increasingly conversational with teachers responding to each other's examples to provide rich data on professional diagnoses and responses. The sessions were audiotaped and transcribed and lasted between 78 and 91 minutes, producing a total of 260 minutes of focus group interview data. The interviews were all conducted in Norwegian and were translated into English.

### *Data analyses*

In analysing the two sets of interviews, we employed the theoretical resources we have outlined, while remaining sensitive to the data. When identifying what teachers meant by shyness, we were initially led by existing research on shyness such as descriptions of anxiety, quietness, and so on. However, as we were entering an under-researched area, with our focus on teachers' use of the concept of shyness, we were at pains to

employ the theoretical resources of cultural–historical approaches and delve below these labels to access what the terms meant in relation to teachers’ classroom work. By seeing concepts as tools to be deployed in professional work, we intended to reveal how and why teachers used the concept of shyness in relation to the demands presented by shy children.

To sustain sensitivity to the data, we followed six steps in thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (i) familiarisation with the data; (ii) generation of initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing the themes; (v) defining and naming the themes; and (vi) producing the report. The first two steps involved transcribing the audio-taped interviews and examining each text as a whole to get a sense of teachers’ descriptions of shyness as well as teachers’ perceptions of the demands that shy students present. We studied the individual interviews first and then the focus groups. Steps (iii) and (iv) involved identifying meaningful text segments that addressed the two research questions: what did shyness mean for them and what demands did it create for them as teachers? We next condensed the meaning of these segments into sub-themes which captured specific student behaviours that alerted the teachers to student demands, which they related to shyness. Examples of sub-themes included behaviours such as quietness and attempts at invisibility.

Step (v) was to organise these sub-themes into three main themes to capture both the how and the why of the use of shyness as a tool in teachers’ work. The three themes therefore represented the broad categorisations of shy children that were evident in the data and were employed by the teachers when identifying the demands placed on them. Unsurprisingly, the three super-ordinate categorisations reflected language commonly used to describe shy children: withdrawn behaviour, anxiety and low self-esteem.

During this stage of the data analysis, the team examined the links between the described behaviours (sub-themes) and these broader categorisations. The three super-ordinate categorisations and their related sub-themes were potentially not discrete. For example, quiet behaviour could arguably relate to all three thematic categories. However, the detailed descriptions of how the quiet behaviour was interpreted and responded to by teachers guided the placing of quietness in relation to the thematic category *Shy children are withdrawn and inward-looking*. Similarly, attempts at invisibility by a child as a behavioural sub-theme were also placed under the theme of being withdrawn and inward-looking, as they were construed as a sign of being withdrawn rather than of anxiety or low self-esteem by the teachers. This additional organisation of the data was therefore not a matter of further data reduction; rather, it allowed us to examine and discuss the contribution of each behavioural sub-theme to how teachers understood and deployed their broad conceptualisations of shyness in relation to the demands they perceived were being made on them by the children’s actions. Importantly, the categorisations referred to behaviours and not to children: students could exhibit behaviour in all three broad behavioural categories.

These analytic steps were undertaken individually by the first two authors and also involved whole-team discussions. Consequently, the processes of searching for themes, reviewing, naming and renaming the themes followed a hermeneutic iteration between the whole and the parts (Kalutskaya *et al.*, 2015) and between the data and the theory.



*Validity, reliability and ethics*

Recruiting participants was in accordance with the requirements of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. All participants signed standard informed consent forms and the interview data were anonymised after data collection. Having two researchers involved in data collection strengthened the reliability of the data while the research design, using observations and interviews, contributed to maximising trustworthiness (Hays & Wood, 2011). There was also a degree of member checking with the teachers who were interviewed individually, as the teachers could confirm and elaborate on the observations during the interviews. Further, to ensure validity in relation to analyses, the research group (four researchers from three different countries) collaborated closely throughout all the stages in the research process, from reviewing relevant literature for the research questions to discussions and elaborations of the analysis and findings, as recommended by Kvale *et al.* (2015).

**Findings**

The three main themes captured how teachers broadly categorised students they saw as shy. They represent teachers' attributions of within-child features, which were inferred from the particular behaviours that constituted the sub-themes. The thematic categories and the sub-themes were as follows.

- a *Shy children are withdrawn and inward-looking*: they try to make themselves invisible, act quietly, appear disengaged, lack interactional skills and seem sad.
- b *Shy children are anxious*: they avoid making mistakes, appear fearful, seek stability, need to be in control and can be too dependent on adults.
- c *Shy children have poor self-esteem*: they under-value themselves academically and socially and dislike their appearance.

While these categories reflected aspects of the EAS Temperament Survey (Buss & Plomin, 1984), we were able to connect them with the specific behaviours that made demands on teachers. Consequently, we address both research questions concurrently while presenting our analyses.

*Shy students are withdrawn and inward-looking*

We now look in more detail at the behaviours constituting this categorisation: children's attempts at invisibility and behaviours described as quiet, disengaged, lacking interactional social skills and sad.

Shy students' *invisibility* was mentioned by several teachers; it was also described in terms of '*the ones who disappear in the crowd*', '*the overlooked*' or '*the ones you don't see in class*'. It was seen as problematic in relation to all four quadrants in Figure 2, but particularly in quadrant 2, where formative assessment is the aim. One teacher explained: '*She was trying to make herself invisible [ . . . ] they don't make much out of themselves; they tend to disappear if you're not aware of them being there.*' Being aware can be seen as a demand for the teacher to make an effort to make contact with the shy student and elicit their understandings.

*Quietness* was frequently mentioned as central to definitions of shyness and again mainly in relation to quadrant 2 aspects of a pedagogic sequence. Other ways of expressing concerns about quietness included: ‘*she retires, looks down*’ and ‘*she goes quietly into her seat*’. One teacher who had several shy students in her class over the years explained: ‘*In the classroom, I mean, they are present, but they are very quiet. . . They don’t ask for help much either.*’ She also connected quietness with lack of activity on the child’s part and explained the pedagogic demands made by shy children as follows: ‘*It is important to be aware of the quiet silent students and keep them in the back of one’s mind all the time and stop by them and ensure that they are keeping up.*’

Shy students’ lack of response led teachers to suggest they were *disengaged as learners*. Descriptions of behaviour included ‘*he blocks out the world*’, ‘*she gazes out of the window*’, ‘*stares at a point far away*’ or ‘*it is as if she doesn’t care*’ (when she doesn’t reply as expected). A sixth-grade teacher described a shy student thus: ‘*She seems uninterested in a way, both in other students, and when we are talking to her, as if things don’t concern her.*’ She also reported that the shy student seemed indifferent during teacher–student dialogues (a quadrant 1 activity): ‘*The other students might sit a bit close to me, while she sits at a distance and seems not interested.*’ The demands created by this perceived disengagement centred on *the help the children needed* if they were to learn how to approach people and engage with them. These skills are particularly needed in quadrant 3 problem-solving activities, but also in the other quadrants.

This disengagement also manifested itself as a *lack of interactional social skills*, such as ‘*she is just observing, she doesn’t take part*’, ‘*she has difficulty with eye contact*’ or ‘*she struggles with social interaction, making contact and getting relationships with her peers*’. This lack of social skills could be connected by teachers with a ‘serious’ demeanour and an *appearance of sadness*. One teacher said: ‘*When I started working with her last year, I thought it looked as [if] she was carrying all the sorrows in the world on her shoulders because she looked so sad.*’ The teacher was concerned about the student’s body language and how it affected the other students in class. Here the demand was a psychosocial one, with implications for how the student may collaborate as a learner in quadrants 2 and 3.

### *Shy students are anxious*

We now turn to an examination of the following behaviours: avoiding making mistakes, fearfulness, seeking stability, needing to be in control and being too dependent on adults.

Shy students’ attempts at *avoiding mistakes* was frequently mentioned and sometimes described as ‘*perfectionism*’ or a dislike of comments by others ‘*when she gets things wrong*’. One sixth-grade teacher described a shy student thus: ‘*When she has decided to do something, she needs to get it correct; she does not fancy making mistakes [. . .] she is a perfectionist. [. . .] I see the conscientious girl who wants to do what she has been told, and wants to do everything right.*’ This teacher had worked at creating a class environment where mistakes are possible and ‘. . . it’s ok not to be top notch in everything’. She consistently organised the class to reduce stress for all students, but observed that a stressful class environment is particularly difficult for shy students.

A child's *fearfulness* could also lead to teachers using the term 'shy' to describe them. Fearful behaviour included 'returning rapidly to her seat', 'sitting in a protective position with knees at her chest', 'nervousness over transitions' and 'she feels that she is not entitled to use the teachers' time'. Fearful behaviours could also arise when watching movies. A seventh-grade teacher explained: 'When we for example watch something that nobody else finds creepy or unpleasant to watch, he is often turning all emotional; I can see tears in his eyes.' Noise and chaos in classrooms similarly led to fearful reactions in shy students. A sixth-grade teacher reported: 'She [the student] is sensitive to noise, chaos, and afraid of losing perspective.' Sitting in the middle of the classroom could also frighten shy students. The same teacher elaborated: 'She doesn't feel comfortable and safe when sitting in the middle, so I let her sit a bit to the side, closer to the wall'. Here the demand is sensitivity to the psychosocial aspects of the child's life at school, with implications for classroom organisation for inclusion.

*Seeking stability* in school life was also frequently mentioned in relation to shy students. The students needed 'predictability', to 'have an overview' of the school day and 'dreaded unstructured situations'. One fifth-grade teacher explained: 'She benefits from knowing that it is stable from day to day.' Teachers noted that shy children therefore often needed a feeling of *being in control* as a way of reducing anxiety. One second-grade teacher described her student as follows: 'Yes, so as early as in kindergarten she could tell the time from the clock on the wall, and all the days of the week and all those kinds of control issues. Needing to know what time children's TV starts, when she is being picked up or what day it is today.' The demand here relates to classroom organisation for inclusion: a predictable classroom routine and an overview of the plan for the day and the week.

Being *too dependent on adults* was also identified as a psychosocial concern with, for example, needing 'support from adults to get started with tasks in the classroom'. One teacher discussed how her student preferred the company of adults over peers. When with peers she rarely spoke, however she liked conversations with teachers both in and out of school. 'She often seeks contact at school, or on school trips she also tends to seek contact, or if we sit on the bus, she often seeks adult contact.' The teacher felt that the student tended to come too physically close: 'She doesn't draw a line, I at least have a zone around me where I feel it's comfortable to talk to people – it seems as if she doesn't have that.' Another teacher discussed the dilemma a Grade 7 boy presented: shy students need supportive relationships with adults and at the same time these relationships should not encourage dependency. The teacher described his relationship to this student: 'With him, I put my arm around his shoulder, because he needs it. He would hug me, like every day. . . we try to tone it down because the others started reacting to him seeking contact with adults in that way.' The demand here was to *reduce over-dependency on adults*.

### *Shy students have poor self-esteem*

The students' low sense of self-worth was manifested for their teachers in their underestimating themselves academically and socially and disliking their own appearance.

The teachers often described their shy students as able. Some were academically strong and others were good at drawing, running and taking responsibilities. The

problem was that the students *underestimated their capabilities*. This was expressed by statements such as *'I'm not sure that she knows about her academic abilities'* or *'Other students don't know her [academic] capacities'*. One sixth-grade teacher described her student: *'She is talented and high achieving, but she does not reveal her talents.'* Another sixth-grade teacher described her student as high achieving in maths, but underestimating herself: *'What she thinks of herself is not in line with what I see of her.'* The learning cycle shown in Figure 2 requires students to grow in confidence as a learner and here shyness appears a way of explaining why that confidence is not being achieved.

Several teachers pointed to how shy students have *low expectations for their own popularity* with peers: she thinks that other children are *'laughing at her'* or children are *'whispering about them'*. One teacher explained: *'She has some problems in relation to friends, getting new friends and approaching others'*, which has implications for the collaboration demands inherent in Figure 2. Another teacher discussed a shy student who felt she had some friends but was unsure if they felt the same way. The student observed: *'But yes, I feel that they are my friends, but I'm not certain they feel that I'm their friend.'* The demand that this and similar accounts presented to teachers was again both a psychosocial and a pedagogical one. Isolation outside the classroom was a related issue. Teachers reported that shy students were often alone during break time. The demand this presented took the teachers' concern beyond the classroom. They responded, for example, by giving students specific roles during break times, such as being a welfare leader in the playground.

The teachers also reported that children they described as shy were particularly *concerned about their appearance*, for example: *'she is very aware of anything that could possibly make her different from the rest'*. A sixth-grade teacher also explained: *'If she all of a sudden would start talking, she feels like her voice is weird, and that she has ugly teeth so she can't smile.'* *'I say to her that she has a very nice smile and from time to time I see that she actually believes me. But she has very low self-confidence regarding her looks, and you know, we have a lot to work on, but our main task as teachers is maybe to help them academically, but I feel in a way that I have to dive into other things as well.'* Here the teacher is pointing to a central issue arising from our analyses. The core psychosocial aspects of shyness need to be addressed as a way of enabling students' engagement as learning within the current forms of pedagogy. Differentiation by pedagogic support or by adjusting expected outcomes is not enough if inclusive classrooms are the aim.

## Discussion

The aim of the analysis has been to identify the meaning of shyness for teachers in Norwegian elementary schools and what demands students who are described as shy present to teachers. The teachers involved in the study all had recognised expertise in working productively with children regarded as shy and were therefore not representative of all Norwegian teachers. Working with teachers who have sound experience in this area of pedagogy has allowed us to go in some depth into how teachers use the concept of shyness in their pedagogy and the implications of using it for their work as teachers. We first address the two research questions and then consider what our methodological approach has offered the field.

*Teachers' conceptions of shyness and the demands they present*

The analyses identified three main categorisations employed by teachers as tools for selecting and organising their responses to student shyness-related behaviours and the demands they create. Withdrawn behaviour gives rise to demands connected primarily to a participative pedagogy; children's anxiety prompts teachers to respond mainly to psychosocial demands; while low self-esteem calls for them to consider both the pedagogical and psychosocial demands that the children they consider to be shy make on them. The term 'shyness' was therefore meaningful for the teachers. It functioned as a useful overarching categorisation, or tool in cultural-historical terms, which allowed them to identify specific children, diagnose their needs and respond.

These comments reflect the outcomes of previous research, which has revealed how shy children may perform less well than their peers at school (Evans, 2001, 2010; Crozier & Hostettler, 2003) and have psychosocial needs (Crozier, 1995; Rubin *et al.*, 2009). Our analyses also find support in those of Lao *et al.* (2013), who have shown that features of shyness may be intertwined as combinations of social and personal factors, and social relations such as sympathy and empathy. The teachers were aware of these challenges in their efforts at inclusive classrooms and attempted to address their complexity. They had developed sensitivity to the demands made on them as teachers by shy children and had a repertoire of responses which assisted the students' inclusion in school life. Linking the behaviours listed as sub-themes of shyness, these expert teachers have provided useful indicators for teachers who may lack sensitivity or experience with such students.

The teachers in the study were all tasked with creating inclusive classrooms where they were required to provide differentiated support and challenge learners according to their strengths and needs. Our analyses indicate an elaboration of teachers' differentiation when working with shy children, which reflected the complexity just outlined. The children they regarded as shy required differentiated support arising from two specific demands. First, the support was not simply a matter of reducing the challenge of the task and creating a pathway of smaller steps towards the desired learning outcome. Cognitive support was augmented by psychosocial feedback aimed at helping the child overcome behaviours that impeded their engagement as learners. The second demand for differentiation was that teachers needed to make extra efforts when eliciting children's understandings so that they could give formative feedback and support their progress through a pedagogic sequence (Figure 2) (Edwards, 2014).

Our present analyses suggest there is a risk that teachers' use of shyness may over-extend the concept as a tool which allows them to focus on learners' engagement in classroom life. Their broad use of the concept may be at the expense of further diagnoses of learners' needs. It may mean that teachers do not recognise that some behaviours can represent other underlying psychosocial difficulties caused perhaps by unfortunate home situations or more serious mental health difficulties. This concern returns us to our earlier point that our interpretations of problems are mediated by the conceptual and material tools that are available (Figure 1). In that sense shyness is an available and useful conceptual tool which enables teachers to recognise and respond to the demands of children who are having difficulty engaging in interactive



pedagogies. Some of these children may be shy, while others may be revealing symptoms of other difficulties.

Another danger suggested by our findings therefore is the extent to which teachers are making psychosocial diagnoses and responding to them. Our findings have shown that these teachers worked with children they saw as shy beyond the confines of classrooms, supporting, for example, how they interact at break times. Because shyness is not seen as a special educational need requiring an external referral, teachers tend to deal with its psychosocial demands without additional support from school counsellors or the equivalent. There are therefore ethical considerations in relation to reasonable expectations of teachers and how they might help children deal with dependency on adults, loneliness, isolation and peer victimisation; and indeed, be alert to the need for safeguarding measures.

### *Methodological considerations*

Our concern was to examine shyness from the point of view of the teacher in some depth, rather than eliciting their responses to researcher-produced questionnaires or relying on self-reporting. We took the perspective of the teacher in order to understand how they were making sense in their classrooms, interpreting and navigating the pedagogic demands (Edwards *et al.*, 2019; Edwards, ) presented by children they regarded as shy. We were not intending to link strategies with outcomes, as that would have called for a design that accommodated the gradual changes that teachers' strategies were aimed at. However, we had some confidence in beneficial outcomes, as the participants were all recognised by fellow professionals as having successfully worked with shy children.

Our cultural–historical framing allowed us to conceptualise shyness as a diagnostic tool used by teachers. This framing allowed us to reveal what the idea of shyness meant for teachers as they employed it to describe children and their behaviours, and explain why they worked with the students in specific ways. The observations prior to the individual interviews were open-ended, field notes and video recordings, and were used only to stimulate teachers' reflections on how they used the concept of shyness and what demands then arose. The focus group interviews also provided rich data as the participants spoke conversationally about children, what shyness meant for them and why they needed to be alert to it. The conversational structure meant that teachers stimulated each other into greater and greater elaboration of the ideas under discussion and their ways of working with shy children. The focus on shyness as a tool for making sense of children's behaviour allowed us to access teachers' thinking about these children, bring coherence to two different but compatible data sets and offer explanations for how and why teachers found the concept useful.

## **Conclusions**

In aiming at inclusive classrooms, teachers employed the concept of shyness to enable them to identify a set of children who needed additional psychosocial support if they were to engage as learners. One question highlighted by the present analysis is whether shyness is more likely to be regarded as a problem in current pedagogic



settings where student talk and collaboration is seen as crucial to the learning process. If so, the need for greater attention on how to work with shy children is clear.

The teacher participants in the study were impressive in the way they worked thoughtfully beyond limited academic parameters. Each exhibited sensitive awareness of the complex demands made by the children as students in the classroom. However, it is important to remember that these were demands that the teachers recognised and may not necessarily reflect the actual needs of the child.

This conclusion is far from being a criticism of the teachers. As one of the participants put it: ‘... our main task as teachers is maybe to help them academically, but I feel in a way that I have to dive into other things as well’. Such ‘diving in’ calls for better understandings of shyness as a concept within the teaching profession. It may also reveal the need for systems of support for children who exhibit those psychosocial difficulties, which could be indicators of other serious problems, but who do not immediately reach the threshold of a special need. What our study has shown is that teachers see shyness in terms of behaviours making pedagogical demands, which require them to go beyond their purely academic responsibilities to offer students considerable psychosocial support.

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