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# Transition from primary to secondary school:  a case study from the United Kingdom

This chapter presents ethnographic research from a project which followed children in a UK primary school in their final year (referred to as year six, children are 10 and 11 years old) in primary school to their first year in secondary school (referred to as year seven, children are 11 and 12 years old).  In the UK children might make as few as two transitions between schools (from primary to secondary) or as many as four (from infant to junior to secondary to post 16 colleges). The transition focussed on here is one which nearly all children in the UK make and as such the data and analysis apply to a large number of children in the UK.  The chapter will present data which provide insight into the practices of the primary and secondary schools and enable a reflection on the experiences of the children in managing their transition.  I do not claim that the practices in the schools, or the experiences of the children, are the same for all schools in the UK, rather I use the data to illustrate important aspects of transition from both the personal (the children) perspective and the policy (school and government) perspective.   Such perspectives will, I hope, be interesting to a wider international audience because the issues raised are applicable to educational transitions over time and over place and contribute to a meta understanding of transition.   The main argument of the chapter, which emerges from the research, is that explanations of the mechanisms of transition are distributed across social meanings but that transition is experienced at an individual level.  Further, those social meanings construct learning in the new transition environment, the quotidian practices of the secondary school are not neutral to the new students, they are value laden and serve to include and exclude and so demand attention.  This, it is argued, is an ontological truth surrounding transition.

## Defining Transition

At its most basic level transition is the movement from one educational institution to another.  In the case of the transition considered here, it is the required shift from primary school (which educates ages 4 – 11) to secondary school (which educates ages 11 – 16/18).  UK children and

parents may apply to a number of secondary schools who admit new students based on a range of criteria.  The children leave their primary school towards the end of July and start their new school at the beginning of September – about six weeks later.  Thus transition can be thought of as a physical relocation. However, concomitant with this physical movement is a psychological repositioning and in this chapter transition will be defined and understood from this perspective. The definition of transition used reflects the imperative for students to negotiate their place in the new institution, given their previous experiences and the demands of the secondary school environment.   This understanding of transition is influenced by Wenger's community of practice theory (1998) and positions it in a particular way " ... transition is not seen to be an isolated venture, it involves social interaction and active participation with other members [of the community]" (Crafter & Maunder, 2012) essentially, transition is the process of learning 'to be' in the new community.  Wenger's theory defines learning as the process of identity shift in participation in particular communities which are constructed by negotiated and shared practices.  A useful way to understand this is to contrast it to more traditional understandings of learning as it is understood currently in the form of the structures of the UK education system.  This position could be described thus: there is an assumption that knowledge is received, largely unproblematically, from teachers. Children enter classrooms, sit down and listen to the teacher or engage in the prescribed activities and acquire the knowledge and skills as specified in the national curriculum, for example the formula for solving an algebraic equation, or the date of the English Civil War, or how to count to 10 in German.   Some children do this better than others but this can be explained by innate intelligence: some children will always do better than others because they are cleverer. Motivation can also be invoked to explain individual differences in achievement, some children are better motivated because they come from 'better families' and so do not misbehave and do their homework and so are more able to succeed.  A third reason for difference might be the quality of the teacher, although actually it is difficult to uncover the qualities a good teacher is supposed to have.  All of these explanations are about individuals, success in learning is located in the individual child or the individual teacher and learning is posited as an acquisition model (Tobbell, 2006).  In contrast to this view the communities of practice literature suggests that to understand performance in children, attention needs to be given to the various communities of practice of which they are members and their levels of participation in these communities.  Rather than learning as acquisition, learning is seen as participation in social spaces (Tobbell & O'Donnell 2013).

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The 'work' of transition becomes the negotiation of the new social space.  *Transition can then be understood as the nature of the child's participation in the important practices of the new school and the attendant identity shifts.*

## Successful transition

There is some evidence that links transition experience to future outcomes in school, although given the range of transition literature, there is little which manages to make any substantial links between the transition experience and ongoing school performance.  Waters, Lester, Wenden & Cross (2012), in a questionnaire study in Australia, found that one year post secondary transition, those students who reported more troublesome transitions were doing less well in school and were considered to present less robust social and emotional health. Lyons & Wood (2012), in a UK study on secondary transition, report that between 25% - 30% of children experience problematic transitions and that the problems persist for 10% of those children.  Although this claim is difficult to substantiate across all secondary transitions because, as Waters et al. (2012) point out, there is very little longitudinal research which enables a systematic understanding of transition experience and outcome.  However, it  might be concluded from a range of studies from around the world ((e.g. (Sweden:  Helldin 1998, France: Bourcet 1998, Greece: Kakavoulis 1998, UK: Sainsbury, Wheeton, Mason & Schagen 1998, Canada: McDougall & Hymell 1998, Australia: Speering & Rennie 1996, Italy: Zanobini & Usai 2002, Finland: Lahelma & Gordon 1997, Norway: Kvalsund (2000), New Zealand: Ward (2000), Israel: Shachar, Suss & Sharan (2002) USA: Alspaugh J (1998)), that educational transitions present challenges for  children and that for some the transition marks a decline in their success.

In fact, whilst the term 'successful transition' is used in the research, a definition of this tends to be assumed rather than defined.  For example, Horwitz and Snipes (2008) present a research brief concerning the support for successful transition to high school in the USA.  They point out that many students who drop out of high school experience difficult transitions, but they do not provide a picture of what a successful transition looks like.  Darmody (2008) investigates barriers to successful school transitions in Ireland and Estonia but again success is undefined.  Given the amount of research  there is on transitions at all levels of the education system and beyond it perhaps behoves practitioners and researchers to consider what constitutes a successful transition and understand how that  experience might influence future outcomes.  This is a more tricky endeavour than it first

seems.  Following the definition above one might argue that success can be recognised through *full participation* in the new school.  In Wenger's theory full participation represents the point at which an individual's identity is constructed by the community of practice (CoP) but importantly their identity can influence the practices of that CoP and the participation of others.  As I will argue later, it is difficult to see that students have any power to influence the practices in UK schools (Tobbell 2006).  Does this mean that there are no successful transitions?  One might argue that success can be measured in outcomes – good exam results, entry into Higher Education, well paid employment. This would mean a long time lag in measuring successful transition (and as highlighted above there is a paucity of research which does this), which may not be useful to the individual child undergoing transition or to teachers trying to help children in transition.  Success could be understood in terms of the child's subjective experience – is s/he happy in her new environment?  However, there is little focus on the role of happiness in education and emotional factors tend to be focused on self-esteem and resilience (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008) and there is some evidence that enhancing these factors alone is insufficient to ensure effective outcomes (Midgley & Edelin, 1998). It may be that children can be unhappy and still succeed, or happy and not succeed in school, success in life might be another matter.

To understand success we therefore require a system which allows for consideration of the future and the child's subjective experience and current performance.  One useful approach may be to consider the nature of the child's participation in the new community and the attendant emergent identity (given that identity can be understood through participation, and learning is contingent on identity, (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007)).  This is a useful notion because it acknowledges identity is not a stable or static phenomenon. Identity is a work in progress and it shifts according to social context and trajectories emerge and recede along with those shifts.  These trajectories can assist in understanding (I deliberately avoid the use of the word 'predicting' here because the multiplicity of interacting factors which contribute to trajectories militate against linear pathways) the current and future transition journey.   Successful transition would include trajectories which enable effective participation in the school at the time, that may be a child who fully embraces the new practices, identifies and capitalises on opportunities and understands how such participation can lead to their next transition (be it to education or employment).  Problematic transition trajectories would be evidenced by children who feel marginalised by or marginalise themselves from the school.  They reject or resist participation and so construct their identities as anti-school.

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## Practices, participation and transition

I pointed out above that practices are not neutral.  The way something is done and the meaning which underpins the way it is done contribute to the nature of individual participation.  Upon entering an established community of practice, in this case secondary school, the new student brings with her/him the experience from the primary school and, lacking any other source of comparison, may use this to understand what is happening (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010).  But there is not necessarily any continuity between the two schools, former experience may not help because the practices at secondary school have formed in a different social context inhabited by identities which have formed in this particular context.  Given that human beings are essentially meaning negotiators, the new students must first observe and then perform the new practices but this will be contingent on their understandings of them.  The process of negotiation will be underpinned by individual perceptions of personal identity (although clearly children will not think about it in this conscious and structured way), the activities and people they like and dislike, the energy and motivation they bring with them and the energy and motivation which emerges in the new school (Wenger 1998).  To illustrate this consider the process of learning.  In research I have carried out (Tobbell, 2003) the children in their first year of secondary school commented that learning had changed from group collaboration to individual endeavour.  The children were still required to undertake tasks and present work but they were not encouraged to work together. The valued practice of learning shifted and their expectations of help and support from primary learning were subverted and this resulted in them feeling more isolated.  The new practice shifted their learning identities and for some children this was not beneficial.

## Researching transition

Such understandings of transition demand certain research epistemologies.  Firstly, a focus on the nature of an individual child's participation (Wenger's theory posits that on entering a new school the child is a legitimate peripheral participant by virtue of their newness, with little understanding of the demands of the community.  From this position the child may develop in a number of ways, towards full participation, where s/he embraces the new practices or more problematically towards marginalised participation, where the child rejects the new practices and disassociates her/himself); secondly, a focus on the practices of the new community.  In Wenger's theory practices are not neutral, rather they are value laden, rich in meaning and may serve to enable or disable participation.

To this end ethnography could be thought of as the quintessential transition methodology.  One of the most important aspects of researching transition, given the definition offered here, is to generate data which represent the practices which construct participation.  This means that very ordinary exchanges and activities (such as how teachers greet their students or the content of the mathematics curriculum) make part of the data.  Ethnographic approaches involve the immersion of the researcher in the focal community, observing day to day events.  The task is to make the implicit (those practices which are 'normal', never discussed and never really questioned any more) explicit but importantly to make the explicit (that which is obvious for all to see) implicit.  So the research becomes a process of understanding how new students understand and negotiate the new practices and the extent to which this process enables them to participate in a positive and empowered way.  To this end, the remainder of the chapter will present and discuss data from a two year ethnographic study which followed children from one UK primary school to their secondary school.

## Aims

 The identified aims for this work are:

- To explore individual children's participation in their new secondary school in light of their primary school experience;
- To explore the continuities and discontinuities between primary and secondary school which demand understanding and negotiation from new students.

### Data Collection

  Data were collected during two school years, the last year in the primary school and the first year in the secondary school.   The ethnography encompassed multiple methods and the data presented comes from:

- Observations made in both schools;
- Interviews with children at primary school;
- Interviews with the same children at secondary school;
- Interviews with teachers at primary and secondary schools;
- Documents from primary and secondary school;
- Wider educational policy documents.

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### Analysis

The project generated a large amount of data and inevitably this discussion can only focus on a small proportion of it. To enable a systematic approach to this, I adopted Anderson's (2002) focused problem approach which calls for the identification of an issue and a focus on data which illuminates that issue. The analysis was informed by a number of factors. Firstly, I focused on the 'problem' and expressed this as aims (see section above). The aims were shaped by theoretical assumptions discussed above and also by the goals of this chapter where I wished to highlight important aspects of transition which had the potential to inform an international audience. As a result I sought to identify factors which, whilst specific to the focal schools, revealed larger insights surrounding the ontology of transition. The analysis was guided by both the problem and the theory, meanings which revealed themselves from the data were framed in terms of socio-cultural understandings of learning.

### Analytical process

In order to identify the meanings which emerged from the data in light of the identified research aims, the data were read and re-read in a constant comparative technique. This process was carried out by me and two other socio-cultural educational researchers. This resulted in initial codes which, through discussion, were subsequently merged enabling key emergent themes to be identified and compared. From this process, the final themes were established.

# The focal schools

Both schools in this research are situated in the north of England, in a small town (population 70,000). The town is representative of the wider area, having a mixed ethnic community and diverging socio-economic profiles. The UK education system allows for religious, state funded schools and the two schools considered here were both Catholic schools. St John's Primary School was one of four feeder schools to the Sacred Heart High School. St John's had about 400 pupils (which is a standard size for UK primary schools) and the children lived in the area immediately surrounding the school. The Sacred Heart had just over 1,000 pupils from 11 years old to 18 years old. Both schools, at the time of the research, attracted wide support from the community and had received good reports from government inspection bodies. The schools' structures and practices reflected wider UK norms. As is typical of UK schools, students were taught according to the National Curriculum and participated in state controlled assessments. Both schools, again typically for the UK, were formal institutions where children were required to wear a uniform (although the

uniform at St John's was just a red sweatshirt or t-shirt and black trousers or skirt, whereas as Sacred Heart, all pupils were required to wear formal shirt, tie and blazer jacket displaying the school crest) and address teachers by their titles. At St John's there were two year six classes, one with 28 pupils in it and one with 29 pupils. The primary school children were taught primarily by one teacher for the entire curriculum (although there was some change for mathematics and science but not for all pupils). In the secondary school the class sizes ranged from 25 – 32 pupils and each subject was taught by a different teacher.

The children in this research ended their primary career at St John's towards the end of July and started their secondary schooling at the beginning of September, six weeks later. All the children had previously visited Sacred Heart, first with parents and carers and then on their own on a day designed to enable transition at the beginning of July. Again, this represents typical practice in the UK education system.

## Transition as an individual endeavour

Whilst explanations of the transition process in this chapter are grounded in proximal and distal social structures, transition is experienced by the children on an individual and personal level. Those undergoing transition speak of their individual challenges and in so doing illustrate their interactions with the new environment. This theme considers one story, that of Joanna. It demonstrates two points made above. Firstly, the shifting nature of trajectories which emerge from participation and secondly, how the denial of the student's contribution to the school can close down learning. Read Joanna's story below.

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Joanna, by all measures, was an able and successful pupil in her primary school.  In lessons she was top of the class.  When the teacher asked a question she was usually the first to put her hand up and offer an answer.  She would tackle more difficult assessments voluntarily, just to see if she could do it, and often she could.  She was quick, finishing up activities in advance of the others in the class and she was clever, particularly in maths where she would tackle algebra problems above primary level.   She always did her homework on time and tried her hardest in all the class tests.  Her teachers liked her and predicted good results in the State tests, which she got.  Joanna had a group of friends and in the playground joined in skipping games or sat around chatting. She was a happy pupil who contributed to the school willingly.

She was looking forward to moving schools although she admitted she would miss primary school but she anticipated that secondary school would provide some interesting challenges.  She particularly wanted to do more science and learn some languages.

At first things went well at the new school.  Based on her primary school results, Joanna was put in the top set for mathematics and at the beginning of the term she was excited.  However, as the term advanced Joanna's school behaviour changed.   She stopped putting her hand up in class.  At one point, a teacher directly asked her for the answer and she replied 'Why are you asking me, I didn't put my hand up.'  The teacher pressed her, she knew the answer and reluctantly gave it.  She started to fall behind in maths lessons, saying she didn't understand the work.  She found many of the lessons boring but worse than this she felt she had been treated unfairly.  A fellow student had accused her of making threatening telephone calls outside of school hours and she had been called in to see a senior teacher and shouted at.  Even though it was proved Joanna hadn't done this, she didn't receive an apology or an acknowledgement  of the mistake from the senior teacher or any other teacher.  She thought secondary school was a cold and unfriendly place and looked back on her primary school as somewhere warm where everybody understood her.

Joanna moved from a willing and active participant in her primary school, where her teacher recognised her skill and set her more difficult maths problems to stretch her to an unwilling and almost surly participant in her secondary school.  She was including herself out.  It would clearly be inaccurate to claim that Joanna was not a clever girl, her success in primary school showed she was. At the secondary school I was advised by a teacher to avoid interviewing Joanna for my research as she was not a 'nice' girl.  I would challenge this and suggest that in fact it was the environment that was not 'nice' for Joanna.  Full participation requires that individuals can influence their community as well as be influenced by it.  In primary school, Joanna's performance influenced her class teacher to set new and more difficult tasks.  In secondary school her teachers did not understand that she

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required an apology for the false accusations. Not even the most optimistic of people could construct this as a welcome into the new school.

Cullingford (1988) points out that a good pupil obeys all the teachers' rules and actions unquestioningly. It might be argued that this is important because the institution cannot function if the inhabitants question the rules. But an unquestioning observation of the rules is a denial of the possibility of participation for the pupils. Merely following the practices laid down by others does not constitute participation in community of practice terms, it does not lead to identification with the community. Indeed, should the rules constitute a very different set of interests to that of the pupils it might lead to what Hodges (1998) has termed dis-identification. That is constructing self as opposite to the community. In her positioning of herself in the new school community, Joanna has become a less effective learner. She finds maths difficult, she won't answer questions in class, the teachers don't like her. As a result of her transition, secondary school Joanna is a very different person to primary school Joanna.

## Transition as a negotiation of social practice

An accepted, though implicit, practice in education is to 'blame' the student and to attribute lack of success to intra-psychological factors (a learning disability, a naughty child, unmotivated). From this position the work of transition is focussed on the child, how must that child change in order to fit into the new school? However, an acceptance of community of practice positions on transition demands a reversal of this: how might the school change to accommodate the new child? In order to illustrate the huge demands on a child in transition from a UK primary to secondary school, the table below sums up and compares aspects of St John's Primary school and the Sacred Heart Secondary school and has been constructed from the range of data identified in the data collection section above.

| St John's Primary School Practices | Sacred Heart Secondary School Practices |
|---|---|
| **Physical Space**<br>• Each class had a dedicated classroom.<br>• Each child has personal desk space.<br>• Each child has a space to hang their coat and bag.<br>• The children stay in their classroom for most lessons.<br>• There is a playground where activities are | **Physical space**<br>• The students meet in a tutor group room at the beginning and end of each day.<br>• The students move rooms every lesson. They do not enter classrooms until they are invited by the teacher and are expected to form an orderly queue outside the class.<br>• The students carry their coats and bags around |

| | |
|---|---|
| provided for the children and supervised by adults.<br>• The school houses 400 pupils and 21 teachers. | with them, there is no space for their belongings.<br>• At break times students hang round the school grounds. Teachers are stationed at entrances to prevent access.<br>• The school houses over 1000 pupils and over 100 staff members. |
| **Teaching and learning**<br>• 40% of time is taken up with study of maths, English and Science.<br>• The remainder of the time is devoted to religious education, history, geography, art and design, information technology, PE.<br>• Teachers are generalists, trained as primary school teachers.<br>• One or two teachers lead the class for all topics.<br>• The teacher determines the amount of time spent on a subject, which varies.<br>• Study is often topic based – for example a class might study The Egyptians, which involves history, geography, IT, religion and art and music.<br>• The pace of the day is determined by the teacher and is divided into whole class, group and individual activities.<br>• Children are expected to have a book to read and time is devoted to this at registration and at the end of activities. | **Teaching and learning**<br>• The day is divided into six separate lessons determined by a timetable. End of lessons is signified by a bell.<br>• The students have maths and English lessons five times per week.<br>• The rest of the lessons are divided equally between the remaining subjects which include two foreign languages, design and technology, music, history, geography, PE, combined science, personal and social development, religious education.<br>• Teachers have undergraduate degrees in their specific subjects and are trained to teach those subjects.<br>• Each lesson tends to follow the same format. The teacher presents the subject material and the class engages in individual activity.<br>• The lessons are structured by a text book. |

*Table One:  A comparison of St John's primary school and Sacred Heart secondary school practices and context*

The practices in the secondary school are second nature to the teachers and experienced pupils and one can understand that they have ceased to question them.  But this is not the case for the new students.  Six weeks prior they were in a completely different environment and with little preparation they must negotiate a myriad of new practices.  Many of these practices may seem benign and indeed they might be, but a practice cannot be considered in isolation in transition, everything is new and strange.

A striking aspect of many UK secondary schools is the lack of dedicated space there is for the students.  Whilst the teachers have offices and classrooms and a staffroom, the children have

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nowhere to call home and walk around the school with their belongings on their backs. Given the contrast to their primary school, where they had a classroom and a cloakroom one might argue that this is physically exclusionary. Added to this, the classrooms belong to the teachers, the students are visitors. In this school, they were not permitted entry to classrooms without the express permission of the teacher. This did seem to be an odd way to organise things. Although one can see why specialist rooms are required for certain lessons (art, science, music) for other lessons the wisdom of moving 1,000 children around a building, six times a day was questionable. At aged 11 it proved difficult for the students to move through crowds of 15 and 16 year olds, who were physically bigger and stronger and asserted their dominance. This seemed like yet another way of showing them they weren't welcome. Not all schools do this of course, however, the point here is that of encouraging a sense of belonging. The goal of transition is to participate but the practices must allow for participation.

This is also true of the approaches to teaching and learning. Primary school children tend to report great excitement about their move to secondary school. They anticipate more exciting lessons, they look forward to learning different things. Too often the reality is a let down. At the Sacred Heart, the lessons were divided into six 50 minute sections. Given the need for movement from classroom to classroom, waiting for the teacher to admit the new class, sorting out books and coats and bags in the new class, the lesson time was about 40 minutes. Each lesson tended to follow the same pattern: the teacher would stand at the front and talk at the students for the first half, explaining what they would be learning and then tasks would be set, that the children undertook individually. So, the teacher might explain averages and then set a series of exercises from a text book on averages. There was little opportunity for flexibility. If some students struggled then there might be little time to address this before the bell sounded for the move to the next lesson. On some days, the children might spend the six lessons without speaking at all. Many children I talked to liked the change of classrooms and lessons because it made it less boring. However, it might be argued that the timetable produces boredom, providing insufficient time for varying teaching methods – for example the use of computers or group projects. Again, I am sure this is not the same for all schools in the UK but the learning point for transition is that consideration needs to be given to the practices. If the timetable does not allow for student interaction and exchange then once again the opportunity for students to become full participants is limited because it is difficult to effect change if you are silenced.

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Further, the nature and extent of the change which the new students must negotiate needs to be considered. The greater the discontinuity from their previous experience, the more work there is in negotiating the transition. In a day of six lessons, with six different teachers, there may be six different sets of expectations which emerge from the teacher's pedagogic approach and the demands of their specialist subject. As I have said before, this is normal for the experienced members of the community, but for the new entrants such practices can be too much.

## Synthesising the findings

The two themes identified above illustrate the importance of the context in understanding transition. Joanna underwent an identity shift from able pupil to disengaged pupil in part as a result of the practices of her new school. She spoke wistfully of her primary school as a more caring place. The individual experiences of students are constructed by the wider practices and context. The second theme illustrates the depth and breadth of change. Change is an inevitable part of human existence but attention needs to be given to the interaction of the individual learner with the changes they face in order to help them in their negotiation of that change. It might be argued that in successful transitions students understand, accept and participate in the new practices, allowing them to learn. It could equally be argued that secondary schools need to examine their practices and observe students' participation in them.

## Conclusion

The anxieties and challenges of transferring from primary to secondary school in the UK have not changed significantly over the last 40 years for which research is available (Mellor and Delamont, 2011), children anticipate more interesting lessons and improved facilities but worry about coping with the new environment. More recently, government and schools seem to have become more aware of transition and some interventions are in place (for example giving children 'taster days' prior to joining the new school, separating the new students from the main school for a period, running transition clubs for new students) but the evidence for the efficacy for these is sparse. Indeed, I can detect no amelioration in the transition of children from the literature. One possible reason for this is that few people (teachers or government) question the practices of the school and the mechanisms of individual participation in these practices. As I have highlighted above, it is important to make the implicit explicit and in so doing to deconstruct the inter-relationships between practices and students' participation and so, ultimately, their learning. The emergent ontological feature, important across time and space, is that the process of transition is the

interaction of the individual with the context and so, to understand it and improve it, attention needs to be given to that interaction, to look at one in isolation from the other would not enable a sufficiently complex understanding.

Transition constitutes work for students and it is not a neutral process. New students are constantly interpreting the environment and drawing conclusions about their place in it. If they don't see a place for them, or the place they see is not inviting, then they may disengage and so a problematic trajectory emerges. I do not think that the management of transition is the task of the primary school. It is the responsibility of the secondary school to understand how their rituals and goals impact on the new pupils from both an individual and collective point of view. The great problem for schools in the UK is that they have increasingly little flexibility as the State intervenes more and more in education policies and so they have less opportunity to respond to the needs of individuals. The second challenge is that very few practices, if any, are good for everybody (although some are bad for everybody, for example having no space to call your own in the school) but in large secondary schools, it is not possible to shift systems to suit all. This calls for a pragmatic approach, the practices need to be as benign as possible and allow the maximum number of students to participate. It may be that this could be achieved more easily if students were allowed more power to change practice. Without this, full participation is not possible. This is the emergent ontological feature relevant to all education systems – education is not something that can be done 'to' students. It requires collaboration, it can only be done 'with' students.

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