INTRODUCTION

Problems regarding absenteeism, school failure, disobedience and misbehaviour in the early years of secondary education are often associated with the drastic changes occurring in everyday’s life of students during the critical transition from primary to secondary school (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Howard & Johnson, 2004). The culture of primary school focuses on providing caring and hospitable environments, offering a sense of belonging and sustaining cohesion to collective young individuals. In contrast, secondary school culture is directed to teaching specific subjects and differentiation of students based upon academic achievement leading to the construction of fragmented and isolated experiences (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Therefore, the two cultures set different expectations that should be met by students. Unfortunately, not all students can meet the expectations when entering the secondary school due to various reasons such as having low inhibitory control, externalizing problems, academic underachieving and experiencing harsher parents (Hughes, 2010).

Many students display a drop in motivation and engagement in learning after the transition from primary to secondary education (Opdenakker & Maulana, 2010) because transitions seem to facilitate stressful, yet excited moments for them (Johnstone, 2002). In effect, students’ level of anxiety, emotional stability, confusion, hostility and disengagement during this transition may boost to a great extent (Howard & Johnson, 2004). In addition, students’ enjoyment and pride tend to decrease (Ahmed, 2010) while students’ boredom and anxiety tend to increase over time (Hill & Sarason, 1966; Zeidner, 1998). Differences in the culture of primary and secondary education are sometimes called in as a plausible explanation. There is also evidence for further decrease of motivation during the first year of secondary education (Opdenakker & Maulana, 2010) as well as for changes during the whole period of secondary education (Van der Werf, Kuyper, & Opdenakker, 2008). Although there is evidence that motivational and learning engagement problems are reported most frequently in vocational secondary education (e.g., Byrne, 1991; Creten, Lens, & Simons, 2001; Hastings, 1994;
Olweus, 1993), this does not imply that higher ability tracks of secondary education do not suffer from student emotional and behavioural problems.

There are multiple factors determining students’ performance. Teacher and student characteristics, together with other contextual aspects (e.g., school, parents, home, etc.) play roles in constructing unique and complex events during school periods. Nevertheless, research shows clearly that teacher variables, amongst other factors, are the most significant predictor of students’ attitudes (Osborne, Simon, & Collins, 2003). Amidst other teacher characteristics, teacher-students relationships are argued to be one of the major factors determining students’ success at schools (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Speering & Rennie, 1996).

Previous studies have shown the importance of healthy teacher-student interpersonal relationships (TSIR) for student outcomes (e.g., Den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004; Henderson, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000). However, little is known about the development of the TSIR during a school year. More in particular, developmental trends of the TSIR after the transition to secondary school have been neglected. In this study, the first year of secondary school is considered as the transitional year between primary and secondary education due to the fact that it is the initial year when students experience secondary education environments, which based on the literature reviewed above, are different from primary education environments.

Teacher-Student Interpersonal Relationships (TSIR)

Two basic approaches underlying the interpersonal perspective on teacher-student relationships are the Communication Systems Theory (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) and the Personality Theory of Leary (1957). According to the first approach, the teacher and students form a system in which actions of one part influence the others within the system in a reciprocal manner. The Personality Theory of Leary provides a base for studying interpersonal relationships of those involved in the system. Leary developed a circumplex model representing the most apparent traits of human nature. This circumplex model is a circular continuum of personality. It is formed from the intersection of two base axes called Power and Love, and offers a map of interpersonal traits. These two perspectives facilitated the construction of a diagnostic measure to study the TSIR based upon students’ and teachers’ perceptions throughout the world (see Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005 for a review).

Derived from the theoretical frameworks mentioned, a Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior (MITB) was constructed. This model follows a circumplex model applying two orthogonal dimensions as identifiers of interpersonal behaviours called Influence and Proximity. These dimensions are independent to each other and assume that every individual’s interpersonal behaviour shares the characteristics of both dimensions. Influence refers to behaviours that emphasize control relative to others, while Proximity represents behaviours underlining one’s interpersonal bonds with others.