Enhancing pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence

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A rapidly growing body of research reveals that teachers' abilities to build positive relationships with students play a vital role in education. However, there is a lack of research regarding teacher education. This article aims to contribute by reporting from a project focusing on pre-service teachers' relational competence. More specifically, it focuses on a phenomenon labelled socio-emotional competence. The first section discusses meanings of the concept, using a relational framework, and it highlights three aspects: i) the teacher acts sensitively and responsively; ii) the teacher is directly present to the student and manages feelings; and iii) the teacher confirms the student and supports the student's emotional development. The next section discusses indications of improvement in pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence, based on data from an intervention study using digital video as the main method. The findings show that pre-service teachers' relational understandings improved in several respects: they began to use a variety of words for specific emotions, to understand emotions as aspects of interaction, and to support their interpretations with behavioral cues. The concluding section considers why the intervention was successful and why socio-emotional competence seems to play a subordinate role in teacher education.

Keywords: relational pedagogy; teacher education; socio-emotional competence; relational competence; teacher-student relationship

Introduction

A growing body of international research suggests that a supportive teacher–student relationship is essential for students' progress – academically, socially, and emotionally (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Wubbels, Brok, Tartwijk, & Levy, 2012). Teachers' ability to build positive relationships

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plays a vital role in education (Nordenbo, Larsen, Tiftikçi, Wendt, & Østergaard, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In recent years, researchers in the field have become increasingly interested in how relational models of professional development can be implemented in teacher education. Sabol and Pianta (2012) state that "Although most relationally-focused professional development opportunities are typically implemented during in-service, pre-service programs may be a particularly important place for relational training" (p. 226). Promising studies (Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhees, Snell, & La Paro 2003) describe how to develop pre-service teachers' relational attitudes of "sensitivity" and "responsivity", but much remains to be explored in this area.

In Scandinavian educational research, the concept of relational competence is increasingly used to define teachers' ability to build positive relationships (Aspelin, 2018; Drugli, 2012; Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016). This applies particularly in Denmark, where relational competence has been described as "one of the most prominent concepts in our time in Danish teacher education and school" (Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016, p. 11). Juul and Jensen (2003) introduced the concept, distinguishing between 'pedagogical craftsmanship' (educators' actions in relation to students), and 'pedagogical ethics' (educators' attitudes). The concept gained significant importance in Danish education through a research review published a decade ago. In a comprehensive and systematic review of 70 national and international effect studies, Nordenbo and colleagues (2008) concluded that proficient teachers manifest three basic professional competencies: didactic/instructional, leadership, and relational. In the report, relational competence represents teachers' skills in supporting, activating, and motivating students, and in developing relationships based on qualities such as respect, tolerance, and empathy. Other studies in the field use qualitative approaches; for instance, a recently published Danish dissertation (Klinge, 2016) portrays four teachers who, in different ways, manifest relational (in)competence. Nevertheless, research on pre-service teachers' relational competence is rare. Two exceptions are a four-year Danish research and development project and a two-year Swedish intervention study, described below (cf. Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Woolfolk Hoy, 2013).

In the Danish project, two groups of pre-service teachers participated along with 14 teacher educators and 18 primary school teachers (Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016). The purpose was to develop "attentive presence and empathy as components of relational competence" (Skibsted & Mathiesen, 2016, p. 14). The project was linked to follow-up research (Herskind et al., 2014; Nielsen & Fibaek Laursen, 2016) using qualitative interviews and participant observations with the pre-service teachers. Findings show that the project was for the most part successful in that the pre-service teachers developed a reflective and open-minded attitude towards their experiences and reactions.

Two groups of pre-service teachers participated in the Swedish project. Informed by conceptual studies (Aspelin, 2017a; 2017b), we developed a model of relational competence (Aspelin, 2018; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019) that includes three sub-competences: communicative (capacity to achieve high cognitive and emotional attunement in their communication with the student), differentiation (capacity to regulate their closeness or distance in their relations with the student) and socio-emotional (this is discussed in the next section; relational competence includes behavioural, cognitive, and emotional components, and these are intertwined in

pedagogical practice). The first data collection gathered information about the pre-service teachers' developmental needs in the area of relational competence. Findings indicate that pre-service teachers need to develop more precise understandings of interpersonal communication and how to build the teacher–student relationship in this context (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). The second data collection aimed to explore how pre-service teachers' relational competence could be promoted, using digital video technology and explicit criteria (Holmstedt, Jönsson, & Aspelin, 2018). The study presented below used data from the second data collection and focused on socio-emotional competence.

The aims of this paper are i) to adopt a relational framework to discuss and define socio-emotional competence and ii) to outline signs of improvement in pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence. The next section describes the framework and discusses and defines socio-emotional competence, followed by a presentation of a thematic analysis of pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence, concluding with how this competence could be enhanced.

What is socio-emotional competence?

Illustration: a classroom episode

Below, a brief classroom episode from the commercial movie Precious (2009) is transcribed in detail to illustrate the forthcoming discussion of socio-emotional competence.

The movie is set in Harlem, New York, in the late 1980s. Sixteen-year-old Claireece Precious Jones has a very difficult life situation: she is abused by her parents, lives in a ghetto, has hardly any friends, feels alienated in school, and is illiterate. In the episode below, Precious has just arrived at a new school and meets her teacher and classmates for the first time. Verbal and nonverbal communications between Precious (P) and the teacher, Miss Rain (T), are transcribed. The episode lasts for about one minute. Miss Rain has just asked the students to introduce themselves by answering a number of fairly innocuous questions (their name, where they live, 'something you do well', etc.). At first, Precious rejects Miss Rain's invitation, but shortly after, she begins to speak:

3.44. P: My name Claireece Precious Jones. I go by Precious. I live in Harlem, I like yellow and… I had problems at my other school. So, I come here.

Precious looks down at her desk. When she begins to speak, she glances up at Miss Rain. When she says 'I go by Precious', she first looks down at her desk, then up at Miss Rain again. After the word 'and' is a short pause in which Precious looks down at her desk, then up at Miss Rain again. At the end of the sequence Precious again looks down at her desk.

4.06. T: Something you do well?

Miss Rain sits pretty close to Precious. She has an open body position (does not hide herself physically) and her face is directly turned to Precious. She speaks with a soft, but also well-articulated voice. Her lips shape a tiny smile.

4.09. P: Nothing.
Precious shakes her head 12 times, while looking down at her desk.

4.12. T: Everybody's good at something.
Miss Rain's response follows immediately after Precious says 'nothing'. She still has an open body position and face. Also, she continues to speak relatively lowly and softly, but the phrase is pronounced distinctly, as if she is telling a fact. She nods her head a bit, as an accompaniment to the verbal statement.

4.16. P: Mm-mm.
Precious first looks up at Miss Rain, then down at her desk again, and then she closes her eyes. She shakes her head several times while uttering the vocal sounds of denial.

4.18. T: Come on…
Miss Rain confronts Precious. Her voice sounds a bit firmer than before. As soon as Miss Rain has spoken, Precious looks up at her teacher. Next, in a short pause, Precious closes her eyes.

4.23. P: Well, I can cook. And… I never really talked to the class before.
At first, Precious's eyes are closed, but she opens them when she says 'cook'. When she says 'and', she looks back down at her desk. Shortly after, once again, she looks up at Miss Rain. When she finishes her sentence, she keeps her eyes on Miss Rain for a longer time than before. Finally, she closes her eyes again.

4.35. T: How does that make you feel?
Miss Rain continues to speak with a soft voice, facing Precious. At the end of her utterance, her eyes blink several times.

4.45. P: Here… It make me feel here.
The moment before she responds, Precious looks up at Miss Rain. She closes her eyes the second time she says 'here', but shortly after she looks at Miss Rain – then closes her eyes again.

Framework

The present study (and the Swedish research project as a whole) was based on a relational framework in which a relationship is seen not merely as a connection shaped and changed through interaction, but also as a fundamental condition of human existence. Hence, relational competence is understood not as a capability owned by separate agents, but as a phenomenon situated between two or more people, in this case teachers and their students. A more specific relational perspective used in the project is Thomas Scheff's theory of social bonds (Scheff, 1990). Scheff, together with Arlie Russell Hochschild, Randall Collins, and others, pioneered the sociology of emotion (Kemper, 1990). According to Scheff (1990) social bonds are phenomena that hold individuals and groups together in society. Such bonds are temporary, dynamic, and largely unpredictable, existing and taking their form in interpersonal encounters. Shame and pride are considered the two basic social emotions; they deliver direct information to individuals about the status of their social bonds: shame indicates weak bonds, and pride, strong bonds. Shame and pride arise when individuals visualize and value their own behaviours in the eyes of others. These emotions are not inherently negative or positive, but rather serve as messengers about the quality of interpersonal relationships. In the next subsection, which largely builds on Scheff's theory, relational competence is understood as a teacher's capacity to build strong and vital bonds through inter-personal communication. Accordingly, socio-emotional competence is their capacity to manage emotional indicators within those bonds (Aspelin, 2018; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019).

Meanings of socio-emotional competence

To be sensitive and responsive. Broadly, the concept of teachers' relational competence includes being attentive to the atmosphere in the group by taking in and organizing a variety of impressions of the moods and reactions of many students. However, in this context, socio-emotional competence is primarily understood to apply to a one-to-one-relationship in which a teacher and a student meet face to face. From the relational framework, emotions are part of an ongoing process of experience and behaviour, neither separated from nor controlled by external social influences. In other words, emotions are conceived as aspects of the interactions between and within individuals. Also, emotional expressions are understood as signals to the participating individuals about the character of the social bond. Following Scheff (1990), teachers demonstrate socio-emotional competence by acknowledging their students' feelings of shame and/or pride, and they act appropriately to promote their bonds with their students. Rimm-Kaufmann et al. (2003) defined relational competence in terms of sensitivity and responsivity. On the one hand, socio-emotional competence means that the teacher perceives the student's feelings and reflects on indications of the quality of their bond. On the other hand, the teacher responds to the student in such a way that the bond is strengthened (or repaired). In other words, the socio-emotionally competent teacher experiences both sides of the relationship and responds adequately to the student's needs.

Apparently, Miss Rain meets Precious in a sensitive way. She asks questions that show interest in her student's experience of the situation. She observes and reads signs of Precious feelings, which she invites by

her open body position and facial expression. However, Miss Rain's empathetic approach is not unlimited. She shares Precious' feelings without being overwhelmed by them. Quick as lightning she alternates between her interpretations of the student's feelings and her own emotional responses, acting both sensitively and responsively.

To be emotionally present and to manage emotions. From the relational framework, emotions are phenomena directly connected to interactional processes. Based on this notion, the main concept of this article is socio-emotional competence, not just emotional competence. We could say that the phenomenon is defined as part of the process Mead (1934/1947) called 'taking the role of the other'. According to Scheff (1990), building social bonds requires individuals who are emotionally present to each other, perceive each other's roles emotionally, and share each other's feelings. The concept involves individuals acknowledging and, in some sense, managing their own and each other's emotions, unbounded by static emotional conditions. In this context, we can also apply Hochschild's (1990) concept of 'emotion work', in which individuals manage emotions from their professional role. If we adopt Scheff's and Hochschild's concepts, socio-emotional competence means that teachers interpret and manage emotions in ways that benefit the partner and the relationship, as well as themselves.

At the beginning of the quoted episode, Precious acts insecure and ashamed. This is indicated, for example, by her continuously looking down at her desk and shutting her eyes when she speaks. Precious attributes to the environment a negative attitude, and she holds onto negative feelings about herself. In contrast, Miss Rain is emotionally positive, present, awake, and open to Precious's experiences. She is sensitive to subtle shifts in her student's behaviour. Even so, Miss Rain does not let Precious' shame control her pedagogical action and her empathy has clear limits. She experiences the student's side of the relationship and manages the emotions as they arise.

To confirm the student and have a sustainable emotional influence. Socio-emotional competence, as we have seen, refers to teachers' relational actions and attitudes in an ongoing communicative process. However, the phenomenon also includes a wider, pedagogical purpose. Scheff (1990) suggests that shame and pride are indicators of the status of the social bond and provide messages about how to strengthen the bond. From this perspective, we could say that relationally competent teachers reflect on the emotional flow they experience and act to build sustainable bonds. The teacher supports individual students' feelings of pride as well as their ability to acknowledge and deal with shame. The teacher's emotional task is not just to confirm students in the here and now, but also to promote their emotional development. Jordan's (2004) notion of relational competence may contribute to this discussion. Jordan defines relational competence as the capacity to move another person emotionally and to be moved in turn. Acting relationally competent therefore includes supporting individuals to move forward emotionally and to initiate significant changes in their future relationships. Socio-emotionally competent teachers make a difference; their actions have a positive, valuable impact on the student's self-esteem.

Miss Rain has an active approach to emotions; she encourages Precious to reflect on and manage her emotions, to break out from her shame, and to acknowledge feelings of pride. She embodies the message that feelings are not constant conditions. At the end of the episode, Precious' emotional attitude has been transformed; she and her teacher experience mutual pride. Also, Precious has been part of a relationships that has potential value for her future education, as becomes evident later in the movie. Miss Rain's emotional influence is productive in the concrete situation and in the longer run.

Methodology

The present study aimed to explore how pre-service teachers' understandings of socio-emotional competence could be enhanced by an intervention focused on digital video recording and using criteria for interpersonal communications. We chose digital video as the main method based on research showing that this method has a positive impact on teachers' relational capacity (Pianta, Stuhlman & Hamre, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Hughes (2012) refers to a body of research in which teachers were given feedback on the relational aspects of their teaching and this process improved both teacher–student relationships and students' achievements. Hughes recommends that teachers and pre-service teachers explore social and emotional climates that are positive for learning. Hughes also advocates a model in which teachers and pre-service teachers reflect on their communications with students on video films.

The study was designed as an intervention study. A group of pre-service teachers [n = 10 (mean age 29 years)] analysed teacher–student relationships portrayed in video sequences. These participants attended a teacher-education programme for teaching grades 4 to 6 (i.e., students aged 10–12 years). The study was conducted during the sixth semester of the eight-semester programme. All pre-service teachers in the course participated. Altogether, the researchers met the participants on four occasions, each lasting 2 to 3 hours. The analysis below discusses results from occasions 1 and 2. The study was carried out in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for the Humanities and Social Sciences set out by the Swedish Research Council.

Professional film-makers created the video sequences. The research team wrote manuscripts for three sequences to take place in the school environment. The stories were taken from previous research or our own experiences and focused on interpersonal communications between teachers and students. We aimed to depict situations in which the teachers were challenged in some way. The film makers processed the manuscripts, engaged actors and extras, arranged the scenes, and recorded and edited the films.

Findings below focus on the pre-service teachers' responses to one of the video sequences. This sequence takes place in a classroom and portrays a parent–teacher conference, between a teacher, a student, and the student's mother. The plot is as follows: the teacher reads assessments from various teachers and repeatedly asserts that the student is too quiet and should speak up more in the classroom. The student looks more and more dejected, which the teacher does not notice. The mother becomes upset and says that the teachers seem to neglect the student as a person.

The intervention contained the following three distinct steps:

1) The pre-service teachers watched the video sequence and then analysed the situation, using general questions about the teacher–student relationship, namely: i) Describe the situation: What do you notice? ii) Analyse the teacher–student relationship: a) In what way(s) do you think the teacher acts to support a positive relationship with the students? b) In what way(s) do you think the teacher counteracts a positive relationship with the students? iii) Describe how you think the teacher should have handled the situation.

2) Explicit criteria for teachers' relational competence, elaborated from Scheff's theory, were then handed out to the participants (see Appendix). The criteria were explained by an expert in the field, who also modelled how to use them, by analysing the sequence from Precious, transcribed above.

3) The pre-service teachers analysed the first video sequence again, this time with the support of the criteria.

Thus, data for this section are 10 pre-service teachers' analyses of simulated teacher–student relationships presented on digital video, written before and after they had access to criteria for teachers' relational competence. The texts were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and responses before and after the intervention were compared to identify differences between the two occasions. All comments relevant to emotions were noted and transformed into themes. In the section below, words that signify emotions are marked in italics.

Findings

Before the intervention

Earlier studies that focused on the first occasion (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019) revealed that the pre-service teachers focused on didactic and leadership aspects when they analysed the film. They mainly commented on how the teacher organized the conference, evaluated the student's performances, and reported on grades. Most participants also commented on the teacher–student relationship, but with relatively vague and abstract terminology.

From an emotional perspective, the parent–teacher conference is quite dramatic: the student apparently feels repressed. Even so, the pre-service teachers hardly mention emotions at all. When they do, they use indistinct expressions; mainly the Swedish word jobbig, translated below as 'problematic', 'difficult', 'demanding', and 'hard':

> The student seems to think that the situation and the assessments are demanding [*jobbiga*], which the teacher doesn't notice. (Rachel, Occasion 1).

> We notice that when the teacher mentions the student's silence, the student reacts and thinks that it is hard to take [*jobbiga*]…. (Ebba, Occasion 1).

Also, the pre-service teachers use the word jobbig to describe the emotional atmosphere of the social situation:

> The teacher is quite straightforward and does not seem to consider that teacher–parent conferences could be hard [*jobbiga*] for students, and she does nothing to ease the situation. (Sarah, Occasion 1).

> It seems to be a problematic [*jobbig*] situation for both the student and the teacher (…). (Linnea, Occasion 1).

The pre-service teachers also describe the student's feelings in other, yet still quite vague, emotional terms:

> I don't think that the student will leave this conference encouraged by the teacher's words, but rather the opposite: fully *depressed* and not at all motivated to get higher grades (Olivia, Occasion 1).

> The teacher does not seem to be able to read the atmosphere, to see that the student feels *uncomfortable* (…). (Astrid, Occasion 1).

> On the video, we see a student who's not feeling good. (Alicia, Occasion 1).

There is one exception in the texts, a pre-service teacher who notes a distinct emotion:

> It looks like the student is becoming *anxious*, and the teacher doesn't notice this, but just keeps on babbling. (Alicia, Occasion 1).

Thus, before the intervention, the pre-service teachers hardly mention emotions; when they do, it is in general, vague terms, unrelated to concrete observations.

After the intervention

The pre-service teachers' analyses changed radically on the second occasion: i) they shifted focus from didactic and leadership aspects to the teacher–student relationships, and ii) they advanced from a rather sketchy to a more precise analysis of relationships. These findings, reported earlier (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019), are reflected in the pre-service teachers' more detailed understanding of emotions. First, all participants use words that designate specific feelings. For instance, Rachel uses four such words below:

The teacher does not read the student's feelings and doesn't show any *empathy* (…). The student expresses *shame* and *grief*. The student shows, with both facial expression and gestures, that she is *embarrassed*, from beginning to end. (Rachel, Occasion 2).

Second, the pre-service teachers explicitly connect emotions to individuals. Ebba, for instance, uses several words that describe what the teacher and the student seem to feel:

The teacher searches for eye contact with the student; she nods and smiles now and then, but she seems *stressed* and *detached*. She does not confirm the student… because she doesn't notice that the student is showing signs of *anxiety*. (Ebba, Occasion 2).

Linnea interprets the teacher's behaviour as lack of patience and the student's behaviour as expressions of shame:

The teacher doesn't share the student's feelings (…). The student's gaze flutters and she feels *ashamed* of her feelings. The teacher shows no *patience* in receiving feedback from the student, she just keeps on talking. (Linnea, Occasion 2).

Alicia interprets the teacher's behaviour in terms of irritation:

This makes the teacher surprised and she looks *irritated*. The teacher bites her lips. (Alicia, Occasion 2).

Third, the pre-service teachers now connect emotions to the visible interaction between teacher and student and support their interpretations with behavioral cues:

I would say that the teacher is not the least responsive to the student's feelings – she doesn't observe that the student presses her lips together and looks down at her desk and tries to hide her face. When the teacher first mentions that the student is quiet, the student looks down at her desk and tries to hide her face a bit with her hand, as if she is *ashamed*. (Ninni, Occasion 2).

The teacher is not sensitive to the student's feelings. Obviously, the student is *sad* and she is cringing on her chair. But the teacher keeps going on, like a steamroller, even though the student is not *comfortable* at all. I get a very bad feeling in my stomach, because, apparently, the student is *sad*. (Olivia, Occasion 2).

Similar observations and interpretations appear in other texts, such as the following:

> The teacher is not sensitive to the student's feelings (…). The student shows that she is feeling *uncomfortable* and *insecure* through continuously looking down at her desk. (Astrid, Occasion 2).

> We see a teacher who is not sensitive to the student's feelings. Also, we see a student who doesn't feel good, she seems to become *anxious* when the teacher talks about grades and tells her that she is silent. The student looks down at her desk and covers her eyes with her hands. (Alicia, Occasion 2).

> It is clear that the student doesn't feel good in this situation, but, still, the teacher continues the conversation as if the student isn't showing anything. The student has a hiding behaviour, which is shown when she looks down at her desk and repeatedly tries to hide her face behind her hand. (Rachel, Occasion 2).

Thus, we see indications of improvement: after the intervention, the pre-service teachers use a variety of words for different, specific emotions. They also speak of emotions as individual experiences. Moreover, they connect emotions to the teacher–student relationships and seem to understand emotions as aspects of the interaction rather than as activities taking place within separate individuals. In addition, the pre-service teachers' interpretations are based on visible behavioural signs in the film.

Discussion

One pertinent question we need to ask is why teachers' socio-emotional competence plays such a subordinate role in teacher education? One reasonable answer could be that research in the field is still lacking, which makes it difficult for educators to find theoretical support. The same reasoning applies to teachers' relational competence in a wider sense (Nordenbo et al., 2008). Another possible answer – and this follows Fibaek Laursen's (2004) assertion about relational competence in general – is that emotions are not regarded as aspects of professionalism, but rather as private and personal issues. Yet another reason may be that emotions, especially 'negative' ones, are considered risky topics among teachers (and other professionals). Skibsted and Matthiesen (2016) argue that many teachers are not inclined to discuss relational problems in their classes. In more general terms, Scheff (1990) states that there is a tendency in late modern society to avoid acknowledging human inter-dependence and human shortcomings, and thereby shame and similar feelings are systematically suppressed. Furthermore, teacher education, as well as education in general, is increasingly focused on academic standards, goals, and achievements. At the core of most curricula we find subject knowledge and

didactic competence. Finally, many educators would probably say that socio-emotional competence is implicit in the educational processes that it develops by itself in parallel to other competencies.

This paper proposes that socio-emotional competence is an important pedagogical competence and that it can be developed in teacher education. The concept has been discussed from the basic idea of emotions as aspects of ongoing relational processes. It has been defined as a relational capacity – the ability and willingness to act sensitively and responsibly, to be emotionally present and manage feelings, to confirm students emotionally in the here and now, and to promote students' emotional development. The article recommends that teachers and pre-service teachers develop socio-emotional competence in these senses.

Moreover, the study shows that pre-service teachers' conceptions and valuations of socio-emotional competence could be developed significantly within a small project. Previous research confirms that digital video is an effective method for professional development in general. Findings in this article are consistent with studies that have used video-based reflection to promote pre-service teachers' relational competence. By observing and analysing interactions between teachers and students on video films, the pre-service teachers in the current project advanced from hardly noticing emotions at all to delivering relatively qualified relational observations and interpretations. After the intervention, the pre-service teachers were significantly more advanced in their abilities to i) name specific emotions; ii) link emotions to individual experiences; iii) describe emotions as aspects of interaction between teachers and students; and, iv) connect emotions to visible behaviour. They also began to understand managing emotions as a part of teachers' professional responsibility.

A focus group interview with the whole group after the project suggested why the intervention was successful (see Aspelin, 2018). Before the project, the pre-service teachers had not reflected much on teacher-student relationships. The courses at the university had focused on other issues. Hence, the pre-service teachers were confused on the first occasion, when they were asked to do a relational analysis of a film sequence. In their responses on the first occasion, they approached the questions from a common sense perspective combined with the didactic approach they were trained for. According to their statements, their progress on the second occasion was due to the combination of explicit criteria, modelling, and analyses of teacher–student interactions from video sequences.

This part of our project focused on pre-service teachers' conceptions of relational competence. It remains to be seen whether the intervention had any practical pedagogical consequences for the participants. An article published in this journal (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017), in which the researchers examined the changing beliefs and experiences of three elementary school teachers who participated in education about relational pedagogy, reveals that it was far from easy to go from relational theory to pedagogical practice. These findings are in line with preliminary results from the final part of our projects, in which four pre-service teachers were video-filmed during their in-service training and interviewed about their teaching.

Of course, just because it could be difficult to bridge gaps between theory and practice, we should not prevent ourselves from trying to promote important competences in teacher education. Reeves and Le Mare (2017) conclude that: 'We must ensure that pre- and in-service teachers are properly supported to develop a

relational pedagogical orientation so as to foster positive social, emotional and academic development and life success for children'. This sentence reminds us of the main reason for promoting pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence: so that students in school will meet caring teachers.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Much remains to be discovered and explored in the area of teachers' relational competence. Because this paper is based on a small-scale study with only ten participants, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations of pre-service teachers. Moreover, because the study aimed to focus on and explore the pre-service teachers' analyses of constructed situations, it remains to be seen how the participants would act in actual pedagogical situations. A general suggestion for future research is to explore pre-service teachers' relational competence in their pedagogical practice. Other methods may also be useful to examine this area. The current study mainly used video-based reflection. In the next phase, we will add a dimension of virtual reality to give participants an (even) more authentic experience of the educational situation. We will also focus on a larger population, approximately 80 participants, and another type of student-teachers, namely pre-service special educators. With these targets, we expect to get data that will enable comparisons of relational competences in different educational settings.

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APPENDIX

Criteria for Analyzing Teachers' Relational Competence
Communication
- Teacher's verbal communication is attuned to the student; the teacher focuses on being understood by, and understand, the student.   - The teacher uses verbal and/or non-verbal communication to invite the students to take part in discussions.   - The teacher's non-verbal communication is attuned to the student; the teacher confirms the student through the communication (gestures, ways of speaking, body position, facial expression, etc.).
Differentiation
The teacher maintains an appropriate distance between herself/himself and the student; the teacher is not too far away or too close in her/his relationship with the student.
Emotions
- The teacher is sensitive to the student's feelings; the teacher "reads" the student's emotional dexpressions, responds appropriately, and manages own feelings.   - The teacher acts in order to create a good atmosphere in the group.
Professionalism
- The teacher acts responsibly in relationships; she/he appears as can be expected by a professional.   - The teacher meets every student as an individual.