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# Teachers' Relational Competencies: the Contribution from Teacher Education

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Research has thoroughly documented the importance of good social relations in school. Good relations in the classroom improve students' academic achievements and wellbeing (Nordenbo et al., 2008; Hattie, 2009). This applies to relations among fellow students and the relations between teacher and students. General research reviews of typical characteristics of good teaching single out relations as one of the most important factors, and it is well-documented that teachers' relational competencies are of core importance to build good relations in the classroom (ibid.). However, there are only limited experiences of developing teachers' relational competence in teacher education and only a limited amount of scientific knowledge exists concerning how to develop teachers' relational competence in pre-service teacher education. This article aims to contribute to the development of such knowledge.

Current research into the significance of relations in the teaching process, relational teacher competencies and how these can be developed in the teacher education programme is outlined below followed by a presentation of our own case-study of a Danish project in teacher education. But first, we shortly discuss terminology.

## A Note on Terminology

There is no settled terminology that is generally accepted within the field, when it comes to either students' learning or teachers' competencies. Different authors use different concepts to describe roughly the same phenomena. The following are among the most important concepts in relation to *students' learning* in school:

*Emotional literacy* is often defined as a combination of self-understanding, the ability to understand and manage emotions, understand social situations and make relationships (Weare, 2004).

*Emotional intelligence* was defined by Goleman (1995) as managing feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals. According to Goleman, there are four major skills that make up emotional intelligence: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management.

*Mental health and well-being* are concepts normally used in their widest sense. WHO (2014) defines mental health “as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.

*Social-emotional learning* is a widely-used concept and it is defined by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning as:

“The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2016).

The most frequently used concepts involving *teacher competence* are:

*Social-emotional competence* can be defined simply as the outcome of social and emotional learning (Jennings, 2011). When used to refer to teachers’ social-emotional competence, it is worth adding that the concept is about the ability to manifest these competencies in school settings (Tom, 2012).

*Relational competence*: based on a systematic review of international empirical research on teacher competencies, a teacher who manifests relational competence is described as someone who “exercises student-supportive leadership to promote student activation and motivation to give the student the opportunity to practise self-management, taking differing student capabilities into account. This increases both academic learning output (e.g. higher motivation) and autonomy. A good relationship between teacher and student requires the teacher to show respect, tolerance, empathy and interest in students. Each student is characteristically viewed as having the potential to learn and to achieve this learning individually.” (Nordenbo et al., 2008, p. 84).

These definitions overlap in many different areas. Similarly to Weare (2004), we recommend proceeding pragmatically and eclectically with

these terminological differences. In this article, we mainly use the concept of “relational competence”, because it is used to designate the project on which this article’s empirical section is based.

## **Research on Relations in Teaching and Social-emotional Learning**

Research has demonstrated that relations are an important aspect of good teaching. In his synthesis of meta-analyses, Hattie (2009) emphasises four variables in particular concerning the teacher’s relations with students: non-directivity, empathy, warmth, and encouragement of higher-order thinking. In his synthesis of research into good teaching, Helmke (2012) also includes teacher-student relations as one of the most important factors. He emphasises the teacher’s empathy in particular.

The research syntheses of Hattie (2009) and Helmke (2012) are based on studies of the quantifiable effects of students’ academic outcomes. Teacher-student relationships are also important from an ethical perspective. The purpose of teaching is to change the student for the purpose of some kind of betterment, making it a significant moral aspect of the teacher’s relations with students (Frelin, 2013). The influential work of van Manen (1991) launched the designation “tact” to describe the ethically-influenced relational competence of teachers.

Relations are important for teaching in general and they play a special role in certain approaches to teaching: Programmes aimed at promoting students’ social-emotional learning have a well-documented effect on factors such as students’ well-being and social-emotional competencies (Weare, 2004; Weare & Nind, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011), and the same is true of programmes dealing specifically with mindfulness-based approaches (Weare, 2013).

## **Research on Relational Teacher Competencies**

What competencies do teachers need to promote good relations and social-emotional learning? A general principle of teaching is that the teacher must have a command of the skills that they want students to learn and that this command must be on at least the same level as the goal set for the students. This principle naturally applies not least to social and emotional competencies, mindfulness, or whatever concept one prefers. Weare also emphasises that “It is axiomatic within the community of mindfulness teachers that those who would teach mindfulness to others need to be experienced practitioners themselves and practice mindfulness on a regular basis” (Weare, 2013, p. 147). The intervention model of Jennings et al. (2013) – CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) –

considers the teacher's social and emotional competencies a requirement for student outcomes. Also, a comprehensive meta-analysis of the effect of social and emotional learning emphasises the significance of the teacher's knowledge and competence (Durlak et al., 2011).

Research into teacher competencies generally emphasises the significance of relational and social-emotional competencies. A systematic review of research into identifying the teacher competencies with a quantifiable impact on student outcomes showed that relational competence is one of three fundamental teacher competencies (the other two being didactic and classroom-management competencies) (Nordenbo et al., 2008).

Studies of Dutch teachers (Klaasen, 2002) and Serbian teachers (Pantic & Wubbels, 2010) both showed that moral, social and relational competencies are important but that teachers' competencies in these areas are frequently inadequate.

Korthagen (2004) emphasises that teacher competencies are based on the teacher's beliefs, identity and mission as an educator. Therefore, there is a need for a holistic approach to teacher education that involves working on future teachers' professional identity and experience of their mission.

There is general agreement that the relational and social aspects of the learning process have been increasingly challenging for a number of years (Jennings, 2011). The general authority of teachers, previously associated with the teacher's position, has been weakened, and it has become more important for the individual teacher to earn students' respect. The number of disruptive students in the classroom has increased, and in many countries, special needs students – previously assigned to special needs classes – are now included in ordinary classes (Jennings, 2011).

At the same time that the social and relational aspects of the teaching process have become more difficult, the level of ambition has risen. The development of students' social and emotional competencies has become an object of focus (Goleman and Senge, 2014), and life skills and communication skills are considered to be some of the most important skills of the 21st century (Bellanca and Brandt, 2010).

Consequently, teachers are facing increasingly stringent requirements and rising expectations in social and emotional areas, and at the same time the conditions for fulfilling these are becoming more difficult. In this situation, it is crucial for teachers to be assisted in acquiring the best skills possible. The interest in emotional competence is traceable far back in history, whereas the interest in the school's contribution to promoting students' mental health and emotional competence is more recent and emerged particularly in the 1970s (Weare, 2004).

Interest in the teacher's personality arose in the early 1900s, and a number of research projects seeking to find the ideal teacher personality were conducted over several decades (Getzels & Jackson, 1963). Identifying the specific personality traits that characterise a good teacher proved impossible, however. Instead, the research showed that the personal qualities in the teaching process constituted the key element for students' outcomes (Ryans, 1960). This shifted the focus from the teacher's personality traits to the teacher's competencies. It was no longer a question of having the right personality, but of developing the right competencies. Recently, initial results were generated by systematic efforts to develop teachers' social, emotional and relational competencies through in-service training programmes (Weare, 2013; Jennings et al., 2013).

In the light of the fundamental and increasing importance of teachers' relational competencies, it is important to study whether pre-service teacher education could contribute to the student teachers' development of these competencies.

### **The Present Study**

This article presents experiences described by student teachers who participated in the development project at VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark. The project is being carried out with selected student teachers throughout their teacher education in the period from 2012 to 2016. The present article is based on the interviews in 2014 where 12 student teachers from the project classes ('project-group') were interviewed in the late spring, shortly after they had completed their internship and were halfway through their four-year teacher education program. 10 student teachers who attended the ordinary teacher education program ('mainstream-group' or 'control group') were interviewed as well. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate the students' preliminary experience with relational challenges in teaching practice and whether there were differences between students in the project group and the mainstream group.

### **Development of Relational Teacher Competencies**

The development of teachers' relational competencies has been studied in both pre-service and in-service education. A number of courses have been developed in the field of in-service teacher education. The common feature of these courses is that they aim to develop teachers' habits of mind in an endeavour to make teachers better at reducing stress and developing supportive relations to students (Roeser et al., 2012). The CARE project has conducted courses and studied their effect in in-service education and has documented improvements in the well-being and efficacy of the par-

ticipating teachers (Jennings et al., 2013). A pilot study of a modified version of a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course for teachers showed that the participants improved their observer-rated classroom organisation, among other outcomes (Flook et al., 2013).

In the context of this article, it is more relevant to focus on initial teacher education. In this respect, the most thorough studies of mindfulness-inspired approaches so far have been conducted at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, which studied the effects of an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE) as an elective course in the teacher education programme. The primary aim of the course was to prevent stress and burnout rather than enhance participants' teaching competencies. The results showed enhanced teaching self-efficacy, among other things, compared to a control group. Qualitative in-depth interviews with the participants after graduation showed that they perceived themselves to be better placed to be attentive in the classroom and grab the teachable moment (Poulin et al., 2008). Several participants shared the knowledge they learned with their students and observed that this was an effective response to the needs of their classes (Poulin, 2009). A qualitative study using a grounded theory approach showed that MBWE participants became better at nurturing themselves as teachers, and several developed a more holistic view of teaching (Soloway, 2011).

### **Context: Teacher Education in Denmark and the VIA Project**

The education of teachers in Denmark takes place at seven university colleges, most of which have several different campuses. The programmes are of a concurrent type in which student teachers interchangeably work with theory and have periods of practicums throughout the programme. The programmes last four years and include pre-service teaching at schools for a total of six months, the organisation of which is decided by each college. The general outlines of the programmes are regulated by legislation: duration, content, rules regarding the institutions, management, etc. The theoretical part of the programme includes pedagogical subjects as well as school subjects.

The official goals of the teacher education programme in Denmark state that the teacher must be capable of facilitating development-supporting relations with particular emphasis on one's own position as teacher. The teacher education programme at VIA University College, Campus Aarhus, is carrying out a project from 2012 to 2016 in which a number of student teachers undergo an adapted version of the ordinary teacher education programme, in which particular emphasis is given to relational competencies. The project is being carried out in collaboration with

the Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children. The aim of the project is to produce knowledge on how to develop student teachers' relational competencies in initial teacher education. No detailed goals of the project were specified. During the first two years of the project, which this article deals with, the student teachers participating in the project have typically taken part in one whole-day seminar per month involving theoretical discussions and practical exercises involving communication, supervision, mindfulness and body awareness. Wherever possible, student teachers taking part in the relational project have done their internships with mentor teachers who are particularly interested in relations with pupils as part of the instruction.

The project activities were developed on an ongoing basis in collaboration with the student teachers. Consequently, the project is a development project rather than a well-defined and pre-defined intervention programme. Even though the activities in the project were not totally pre-defined they were neither randomly selected. The organization of project phases year by year was guided by the overall principles that the intervention activities should involve the participants' experiences of their breath, their body, their consciousness, their heart/empathy, and their spontaneously creative mind (Jensen, 2014). These five so-called gates to conscious awareness can be accessed in various practices and the guided exercises in the project often included two or three gates in each exercise activity. For example, a meditation could begin with awareness of the breathing followed by guided awareness of various body parts and continue to awareness of the flowing stream of emotions or thoughts or awareness to the heart area and loving kindness to a specific person. The specific exercises and activities in the project were decided according to the alignment with the project aim and according to themes and questions brought up by the student teachers.

## Method

Two classes were randomly selected by the institution management to participate in the project, in total 50 students. All of them were assigned to participate from the beginning of their teacher education. The majority of the participants were ethnic Danes in their 20s. Less than ten participants had other ethnic backgrounds.

We are two researchers from Aarhus University who have studied the project since its beginning in 2012 and will continue to do so until the conclusion of the student teachers' education in 2016, and including the first year of the graduate teachers' work in school, 2016–2017. As researchers, we are independent of the project institution. Throughout the

four project years, we will have engaged in dialogue with the teachers involved, but otherwise we will not be actively involved, either as initiators or as educators.

We have applied a phenomenological approach in the study of the student teachers' experiences and learning in the course, their education, and beyond into school practice (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009). Therefore we took part in course activities, and we joined exercises and conversations in classes to learn what the student teachers learned in practice. For a more systematic data collection, we interviewed the student teachers in 2014 and recently in 2016 about their experiences in groups of 3–5. We will conduct similar interviews in 2017.

### Procedure

The interview subjects volunteered to take part in interviews after being encouraged to do so by their teachers. We assume that the student teachers from the relational project who volunteered take a relatively positive view of the project. Therefore we may learn whether the relational competence project makes a difference considering the positively attuned student teachers' experiences of students in internship in school, as well as their experiences of themselves as becoming teachers and of their opportunities to transform challenging relational situations when they are in the teacher's role.

### Instruments

The interviews were phenomenologically based, qualitative, and in-depth asking for detailed descriptions of significant incidents as they were experienced by the student teachers during their recent pre-service training (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009). In order to recall such lived experiences, the interviews were initiated by a guided body scan followed up by an invitation to recall an incident with good contact to a pupil ('a good relation'), and an incident in which they experienced to be a good teacher ('teacher identity'). After the guidance, the interviewees had 10 minutes to individually depict the incidents as experienced. In the group each member then described his/her incident and its significance, and in group they all discussed the special and the common features of their described experiences. The interviewer guided their reflections to focus on shared themes and explored how to understand and explain the experiences. The interviewer asked questions attempting to make the interviewees wonder and study together how they 'did' in order to become mindfully aware of 'the good opportunities' for relation-building in the complex classroom practice.



## Analysis

The analysis was a meaning categorization (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015) conducted as an iterative process looking for shared themes as well as variations in and across the two groups. The purpose of the analysis in this article was to study whether the relational project had resulted in a situation where the student teachers in the project-group experienced their pre-service training in school and the teacher's role differently compared to student teachers in mainstream-group.

A recurring theme concerning the student teachers' relationship to the teacher's role emerged in the initial analysis phases as a key difference between participants in the project-group and the mainstream-group respectively.

## Results

The results of this analysis focus on differences between participants in the project-group and the mainstream-group because these differences illuminate effects of the relational competence project. Some differences are discreet variations in the large palette of shared experiences and orientations described by the student teachers. Approximately 95% of their teacher education is shared as the relational competence-project is only a small part of the participants' entire education. The analysis of differences is compared to some of the shared experiences across groups in the end of this part of the article.

### Experiences of Student Teachers in the Project-group

The main results of the interviews were that student teachers who participated in the relational project-group are aware of the possibility of analytically distancing themselves from the teacher's role. Student teachers from the relational project consider the teacher's role as something that can be entered into and withdrawn from. Even if someone *is* a teacher (or in the process of becoming one), it is possible to withdraw from the role and be on an equal footing with the students. Being in touch with oneself makes it possible to take a more distanced and reflective approach to the teacher's role, which can make it easier to establish close contact with the students. The student teachers in the relational project experience being able to be in the role wholeheartedly, but at the same time do not fully identify with it. They can experiment with the role, they can show pupils that they are ordinary human beings, while being a teacher at the same time, and that they can occasionally drop out of the role altogether. The following presents the results in more detail.

### *Methods for Restoring Calm*

Several student teachers described how the relational project has truly helped them to establish such a sort of contact with the students that they can restore calm in the classroom without having to enter into the traditional authoritarian role:

It's like a magic wand. We used it in every lesson. It's a good tool for restoring calm. Even if the students have just returned from a break, and everyone's climbing the walls, this tool enables you to calm them down.

The student teachers also explained how mentor teacher shouted and yelled at students until she went red in the face. The students showed little respect for this tactic. Instead, the student teachers found that beginning the lesson with a concentration exercise, lasting 2–5 minutes, would restore calm. The mentor teacher usually spent ten minutes scolding them, ruining the rest of the lesson in the process. The student teachers explained:

Instead of the example of the teacher who stood there shouting – regardless of whether they needed to gear up or down, she would shout at them – it was satisfying to see how other techniques work than those you bring with you from back in your school days. In other words, throwing chalk at students isn't the only way to make them sit still. But there are other methods that work, too, and actually spread a much better atmosphere and feeling of security in the classroom.

Other student teachers described how they would use movement exercises to liven up a class when it was low on energy. And another student teacher described how he felt it was easy to create good relations.

It came very automatically and in relation to the fact that we had these courses here (*in the teacher education programme*). It seems to be well-assimilated now, in my opinion.

### *Competence to Enter Into and Drop Out of the Teacher's Role*

One student teacher, who did his internship in physical education, described an episode involving a student who was being noisy and disruptive. The student teacher described how he was very annoyed by this and “was very close to going through the roof”. However, he then began to think about how it could have been him when he was a student. This defused the student teacher's irritation, and he talked with the student in the equipment room afterwards.

I talked to him and put one hand on his shoulder and said: “Quite annoying that things didn't work out, wasn't it?” Then I smiled a little and

said: "Couldn't we have made a better job of it?" (*handling disruptive behaviour*) "Yes, we could have," the boy answered.

When they returned to the class, they joked about it, and the student teacher experienced how he had had excellent contact with him, and the fact that this was because he had made contact with the student in a "non-teacher" manner.

Another student teacher described how she and her group had been assigned to a decidedly "dull" class for their internship. There was "absolutely no life", regardless of what they did. "We did cartwheels" but nothing seemed to help. But then one day "something happened". The class was outside playing a game:

And then I had to compete in a foot-race against one of the students and I very much wanted to win. I ended up falling down, and as I lay there on the ground, I thought (...) we were having so much fun. Things turned around from that moment on. They were killing themselves laughing once they knew I was all right.

Here, too, is an episode where the fact that she – literally – falls out of the teacher's role makes a decisive difference. It was not just the actual mood that changed, but the academic teaching also improved after the episode. "The students became very academically minded and wanted to participate."

A student teacher stated that, in his opinion, you have established good contact when "you base your conversation on things other than school issues" and when you are "on an equal footing" with students. Other student teachers in the group of interviewees continued, saying that you cannot be afraid to make a mistake and you have to be willing to give something of yourself. They also said that you have to want something other than academic results from students. And you have to be open to episodes where something amusing and unexpected happens all of a sudden. A student teacher said that one of her best experiences during her pre-service training was when she began talking to a few students in the canteen "about computer games, clubs and all sorts of things". They actually started discussing things in detail and the students stuck around even though school was actually over.

One aspect of this contact, which is not only professional, also involves being open to students. A student teacher described how she had been contacted by a student who said:

"Hey Randi, come over here!" and motioned for me to come over to him. I remember thinking that this must be what it feels like to be a

teacher, when a child comes up and says, “Hi, you’re just the person I need right now, please come with me.” I felt quite proud that I was the person he wanted to talk to... It actually felt good to know that I was just the one he wanted to talk to.

It turned out that the boy had some personal problems that he wanted to discuss with the student teacher.

According to another student teacher, being able to enter into and drop out of the teacher’s role in relation to the students is crucial, and she described an exercise where she took part on an equal footing with the students:

There I somehow dropped out of the teacher’s role. But, of course, if I am supposed to instruct them in something they haven’t properly understood, I enter into it again. But otherwise I drop out of it and put myself on an equal footing with the students.

This student teacher seems to have a rather traditional and strict version of teacher role in mind when talking about “teacher’s role”.

Along the same lines, another student teacher said that this ability to enter into and drop out of the teacher’s role had been developed by the relational course:

I think perhaps that this relational course has taught us how using this option is OK. In other words, that you say: “I am just me, and this is what I have to offer”. That you must be professional at all times, but that you don’t always have to sit there looking up how you should react in the answer book.

The quote shows that the student teacher is aware of the fact that it is never possible to completely drop out of the teacher’s role when they are in school with the students, but that it is possible to distance oneself from the traditional version and that you can indicate to the students that although you are a teacher, you are also just yourself, too.

Being able to enter into and drop out of the teacher’s role is also a matter of being able to strike a suitable balance between the professional and the personal. Another student teacher said this about the balance:

It (*the relational project*) has heightened my awareness of how I can enter into the teacher’s role. And this largely relates to the act of striking a balance between the professional and the personal. While being true to yourself at the same time. And not compromising your own principles and values, things like that.

And a little later:

By opening up to them, I feel that they usually open up to me, too. And I have had lots of positive experiences of this happening.

### *Experimenting with the Teacher's Role*

Several student teachers in the project-group used the internship to consciously experiment with the teaching role. A student teacher said:

One of my goals with the internship was to experiment with my teacher's role. Because I'm very rigid and authoritarian, and because I feel that whenever I enter a room, I own it (...) I agreed with my mentor teacher that I would go in and take charge of a few lessons that were completely chaotic, where I didn't have a plan and I couldn't ask anyone for help. That gave me the opportunity to actually see how I coped with the situation. And it went fine, of course!

Very few student teachers, however, perform such radical experiments with the teacher's role that they dare go from "rigid and authoritarian" to "completely chaotic".

The student teachers experience the teacher's role as intimidating and full of contradictions – "you have to be both an authority and a friend" – but that you can take on the role nonetheless. A student teacher explained how two things helped her:

First of all, I always have to take a deep breath if I am in the process of leaving the situation. This also includes being aware of the brevity of the situation you are in ... it's not you... it's the situation you are involved in that is difficult for you to handle. And there is a remedy for this.

She continued:

In any case, I feel a sort of calmness by just being able to say: "It's not me who is in dire straits. It's not the students either. It's the situation we are creating together that is in dire straits." Therefore, we can try to do something to make it better. We have to change things to make everything all right again.

### *Being in Touch with Oneself: The "60-40" Principle*

One of the main points of the relational course has been that you have to be in touch with yourself in order to be able to be in touch with the students. Several student teachers have embraced this point. One described how he was standing at the blackboard reviewing some difficult material. He sensed that the students did not really understand what he was talking about, and so he tried different ways of explaining it but without success.

Eventually he became rather impatient and was just about to “fly off the handle a little, but I restrained myself.” He used the “60–40” theory about using most of one’s awareness for staying in touch with oneself:

And then I thought: “Now I have to take a deep breath, and another one, and start again.” I can really remember that it had a profound effect on me, the deep breathing and then trying to start again. Thinking of a different way to explain it.

Another student teacher said:

In my opinion, I have wholeheartedly embraced this 60–40 balance – being 60% grounded in yourself – at any rate. The fact that, in order for me to be able to give of myself, I have to be firmly grounded in myself and know exactly what I’m bringing with me and have to offer, and what I can give today, right now.

According to this student teacher some peaceful contemplation is probably best for establishing contact with oneself (the 60%), but also with students (the 40%).

This 60–40 was mentioned earlier. Knowing that you have just enough time to breathe deeply and think about how they (the students) are doing right now.

For instance, this could lead to a situation where the student teacher become more aware of the slightly more reticent students and make a point of encouraging them to take part.

### *Being Able to Accept Your Feelings and Let Go of Them*

Being in touch with yourself requires you not only to be aware of what you are thinking and feeling, but also to not get mired down by your emotions. A student teacher described how he frequently became nervous if he had to stand up in front of a group of people. This was often a self-perpetuating problem, because he would say to himself, “Oh, no. Now I’m going to get nervous.” To him, the relational project has meant:

(...) that I’ve have become better at saying: “Oh, no, now I’m a little nervous” and then saying: “That doesn’t matter”. In other words, getting over my nervousness and then saying: “Yes, it exists and that’s OK. Fine. Now something else in this situation is more important.” I think that this has helped me. Consequently, it is easier to be open and talk to other people than when you are just standing there having a fit of anxiety.

Another student teacher followed up on this:

The act of articulating some things can actually help you to relax completely. I think that this was partly responsible for the feeling of having succeeded that I had after some of the German lessons.

A third student teacher talked about the problems she has with being short-tempered:

"Hey! I am starting to lose my temper. What should I do now?" This enables you to know what you are feeling right now. (...) Being able to accept that now you are entering this frame of mind. And then just being in it (...) Just accepting it.

### Student Teachers from the Mainstream-group

Whereas student teachers from the relational group take an experimental and somewhat distancing approach to the teacher's role, student teachers from the control group appear more inclined to think that it is important to precisely tailor a specific version of the teacher's role to one's own personality.

A student teacher described how fortunate she was to experience how the good combination of having good relations with students and earning their respect came to her spontaneously.

But it is hard to explain where it comes from (*the combination of being able to relate and earning their respect*). I just think I have it in me.

Interviewer: So it just comes naturally to you? (...)

Yes, I think so.

Other student teachers have seen how a little experience made them more aware of their personal preferences in terms of the teacher's role. A student teacher explained how she realised that complete calm in the classroom is important to her whenever she has to teach:

Some people have the ability to stand there teaching, even in the midst of lots of noise. But I can't teach if it's noisy. It stresses my train of thought. Quietness is imperative.

Student teachers in the control group apparently think that it is possible to gradually shape one's own teacher's role after having amassed sufficient experience. Another student teacher said:

Then suddenly, at some point, perhaps when you have 10 years' experience, you will have created a teacher you are satisfied with. Where you

actually feel that you are in such harmony with the role that you can handle anything that could arise in any situation.

Independent of this student teacher, another interviewee also mentioned this ten-year perspective:

I don't think I will be a good teacher until ten years from now, in other words when I truly feel that I have everything fairly well under control.

This requires learning more about oneself through the process of amassing this experience and realising the factors which influence how one is as a teacher:

The more experience you get, the better. The further you proceed in this training, the more you learn from it. You can have a lot of ideas about how you actually are or which type of teacher you want to become, including what it is like when you are actually in the situation.

A group of student teachers say that it is a matter of being authentic in the teacher's role, i.e. shaping a teacher's role so that you feel that you are being true to yourself. One of them said that everyone has his/her "own unique personality".

As one gradually shapes one's own teacher's role, one becomes calmer and more self-assured, knowing that what one does actually works. Another student teacher followed up on this:

You become calmer, you feel a little more self-confident and have faith in the fact that what you do actually works. You have the experience.

By contrast with the student teachers from the relational project, some of the student teachers from the control group described episodes in which they acted somewhat inappropriately emotionally:

But often when something intense happens, it is easy for you to lose your head and your ability to maintain calm.

### **Common Features of the Two Groups of Student Teachers**

The two groups shared many experiences and perceptions, which is not surprising given that they are taking part in a teacher education programme where most of the content is identical for the two groups. Both groups of student teachers wanted to make a difference through their teaching, and they mentioned good contact with students and becoming more relaxed over time as important experiences.



*Accomplishing Something*

Student teachers want to experience doing something that makes a difference. They experience this with the greatest clarity when they can help weak students. Several student teachers describe processes in which they have assisted students who were academically perhaps a little weak, but whose self-confidence was even weaker. This gives them the feeling that they are on the way to becoming a teacher when one sees how such students can be helped to improve their academic results and gain more self-confidence and how students who are mired down can be helped to move forward. The feeling of accomplishing something has a calming effect. A student teacher from the mainstream-group said:

And I felt that I could help them without feeling nervous about all sorts of things at the same time. And this also included having the feeling of making a difference. (...) It actually feels incredibly nice to know that you can help other people.

This sense of accomplishment can also come from genuinely feeling that the class is academically involved in what you are teaching. A student teacher from the project-group happily related how he got a class to realise that water is not an element.

I feel pleased to tell students that they can also investigate how the world actually works.

A few student teachers strongly identify with their school subjects and feel uplifted by it. A participant in the project-group said:

I become a happier person just by being in a physics laboratory.(...) The subject fills me with happiness and enthusiasm, and I'm particularly enthusiastic when I can get the students on board with the subject matter as well.

*Close Contact with Students*

Several student teachers spoke warmly about occasionally being able to experience a special closeness to a student and momentarily excluding the rest of the class from their awareness. A participant in the mainstream-group said:

About taking the time to see the individual. And the fact that the two of us have been sitting and talking, perhaps without everyone else having to listen in. That maybe this is where you can create a feeling of "You are all right, damn it".

Achieving close contact is experienced as a success also by student teachers from the mainstream-group:

When she opened up to me, I felt I had accomplished something.

And if you also experience being able to help the student well on their way academically, you feel good as a teacher, too. Some student teachers have also experienced being able to help students with personal issues, such as helping a student articulate feelings that are difficult for them to express.

Student teachers experience being actually capable of accomplishing something by interacting with students on their own terms and ignoring an incorrect perception or label which a student may have had to endure previously. A great service can be done for students who consider themselves poor at Mathematics by interacting with them as if they are good at mathematics. This is a rewarding experience for the student teacher too.

*Becoming More Relaxed and Being Able to Improvise*

Student teachers have already experienced how a little experience makes them calmer, more relaxed, and better able to improvise and go with the flow in terms of what is happening in the classroom – rather than just sticking to their plan. One student teacher from the mainstream-group said that she had become better at “letting things rip and seeing where it leads”.

It felt good to have an inner harmony which makes you feel like daring to do something you hadn't considered.

Both groups of student teachers have experienced how informal humorous relations with students make teaching easier. A participant in the mainstream-group said:

My teaching was greatly helped by the fact that the students felt that it was all right for them to poke fun at me.

The student teachers have experienced how they have been less anxious about making mistakes. They feel energised and feel that they are better teachers. Instead of nervously clinging to their pre-planned lessons, they are better at adapting their teaching to the specific students in the class. Also realising that what works in one class will not always work in another.

Student teachers are interested in striking a balance between their professional, personal and private spheres. Several student teachers touched on the fact that it is fine if the students get a sense of the individual behind the teacher. One is more than a teacher.

## Discussion

In the present study, we have examined the experiences of student teachers in a project focusing on relational competencies compared to student teachers following the ordinary teacher education programme. The student teachers in the project-group articulated that they were not identical with the teacher's role, not even when they could form a personal teaching practice. They considered it valuable to be able to drop out of the teacher's role or put it aside and say, "I am who I am". In some situations, it put them better in touch with the students. The student teachers in the project-group viewed reflection and experiments, together with experience, as the way to become a better teacher.

Student teachers from the mainstream-group envisaged themselves as an individual with specific qualities. Correspondingly, they expected there to be one specific teacher's role for this unique personality, and that it would take time and lots of experience to create this role. They imagined that when the role was finally formed, they would feel comfortable in it and be an effective teacher. The student teachers from the mainstream-group apparently considered the amassing of lots of practical experience to be the golden path to becoming a better teacher and developing a personalised teacher's role.

From this, can we conclude that student teachers have actually acquired relational competencies to a greater extent than the control group? No, it is too early to reach this conclusion. Based on this study, we cannot draw any conclusions about the extent to which the VIA project has resulted in student teachers acquiring the relational competence as described in the previously mentioned definition by Nordenbo et al (2008). However, the reflective, experimenting approach to the teacher's role and their approach to experiences which the student teachers are in the process of assimilating is probably an important step towards relational competence.

### The VIA Project Compared to Other Approaches

Most of the targeted attempts to develop student teachers' personal and relational skills in other programmes have been carried out on the basis of mindfulness approaches, usually as a modified version of the MBSR course. The significant strengths of these projects are that their effects must be considered well-documented by now and that they have the nature of a precisely defined intervention. The inherent weakness of these projects is that they risk being only a small (eight-week) part of a three or four-year teacher education programme, and that the competence associated with this cannot be integrated into general teaching competencies.

Compared to courses inspired by MBSR, a strength of the VIA project is that the relational project is integrated into the rest of the teacher education programme because it is developed on an ongoing basis using input received from student teachers and lecturers. The project is long-term, as it runs through all four years of the teacher education programme. Another crucial quality of the VIA project is that most of the student teachers in the relational project do their internships under teachers who have incorporated relational aspects in particular into their teaching.

Since the 1980s, reflection has been considered an important aspect of teacher competence (Schön, 1983; Hatton & Smith, 1995), but it is often difficult for student teachers to learn to be reflective, and many student teachers are critical of the teacher education programme's reflection ideal (Soloway, 2011, p. 113). The preliminary results of the VIA project indicate that the deliberate efforts involving relations, mindfulness, communication and awareness make it easier for student teachers to be reflective.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of this Study**

The study and how it is designed have several strengths: The study is randomised in the sense that the participants were randomly selected by the institution. The study design is longitudinal in that we follow the students throughout their four-year teacher education programme and during their first year as qualified teachers. In addition, we have endeavoured to boost the credibility of the study by also interviewing a group of students following the mainstream teacher education.

The phenomenological approach in interviews and analysis has given access to detailed descriptions of the students' experiences (in drawings, body expressions and verbal language). The data has described experiences and multimodal kinds of meaning as experienced and articulated by the individual student teacher. In the group reflections, we gained access to their use and the negotiation of meanings of the language and theories they have learned throughout the project as part of their teacher education. This rich information has been analysed by two researchers who were looking for themes emerging in the data. We compared our readings and critically examined the criteria for themes in the interview material. The analytical results are therefore strongly founded in the data.

The study applied qualitative methods which are relevant in order to illuminate experiences in social activities such as education. However, other research paradigms might criticize the present study for not using objectifying and quantifiable data collecting methods and analysis.

Obviously the study is also limited by the fact that the student teachers have yet to complete the whole process. As the study continues further results will be reported in future articles.

## Conclusion

Halfway through a four-year process with particular emphasis on relational competencies, the student teachers participating in the project are taking a more reflective and experimental approach to the teacher's role and they approach personally experiences as indicators for professional orientation and action. Although this may not be a fully developed relational competence, it is presumably a significant step along the way.

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