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# 'It means everything': special educators' perceptions of relationships and relational competence
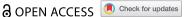
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**ABSTRACT**

A compelling body of international research demonstrates that a positive, supportive teacher-student relationship is essential for students' development, especially for at-risk students. In this article, the educator's ability to build such relationships is discussed in terms of 'relational competence'. Special educators' relational competence is a largely unexplored topic. This article contributes by reporting on an interview study with 21 experienced special educators. The study focuses on the educators' perceptions of their relationships and relational competence. Two research questions (RQs) are explored: (1) What is the role of social relationships in (successful) work as a special educator? and (2) How is the relational competence of special educators realised in practice? The results are presented in themes and subthemes, and are supported by significant quotes. Regarding RQ 1, the study shows that the informants perceive positive social relationships as fundamental in their work and relational competence as particularly important in their profession. The results for RQ 2 show that relational competence is realised by an accepting attitude in the 'here and now'; by finding a personal connection to the student; and by building trusting relationships over a longer period of time. Comments on implications for special education teacher preparation are provided.

## Introduction

The idea that teachers require the capacity to build positive, supportive relationships with students is widely recognised today. In the last three decades, a compelling body of international research has demonstrated that a positive, supportive teacher-student relationship is essential for students' social development, academic achievement, wellbeing and motivation for learning (Hughes 2012; Roorda et al. 2011). Relational competence, which refers to teachers' ability to support, activate and motivate individual students and to develop relationships based on qualities such as respect and empathy, is considered to be a fundamental part of teacher professionalism (Nordenbo et al. 2008). According to Aspelin and Jonsson (2019) the concept of relational competence includes abilities to communicate verbally and nonverbally in order to achieve attunement in relation to students and others; to cope with emotional indicators of ongoing relationships – one's own as well as one's

partners' emotions – and to regulate the degree of closeness and distance in relationships.

The quality of teacher-student relationships also strongly affects at-risk students and students with disabilities (Plantin Ewe 2019; Sabol and Pianta 2012; Murray and Pianta 2007; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2003). Sabol and Pianta (2012) claim that '… high quality relationships with teachers appear to decelerate the deleterious effects of risk and promote healthy functioning for children with externalizing and internalizing problems … ' (219). For at-risk students, teacher-student relationships could function as a protective factor and as a vein for development (Spilt et al. 2014). As a contrast to studies showing the positive aspects of special teacher and student relationships, Carter and Hughes (2005) and de Boer et al. (2012) show that special teachers' close attachment to students tends to suppress students' opportunities for social interaction. Östlund (2015) also points to the potential risk that a too close educational relationship may suppress student agency.

Taken together, research suggests that the teacher-student relationship is crucial for educational progress, and that relational competence is an important teacher competence, not least for students in need of special support. From this background, we would expect there to be an extensive number of qualitative reports on how educators understand relational competence as part of their profession. However, international research in the field has mainly used survey-based methods, focusing on how teacher-student relationships influence students' behaviour and achievements (Hughes 2012). Qualitative studies also play a minor role for research on relationships in special needs education (see e.g. Plantin Ewe 2019).

## Aim and research questions

The present study aims to explore experienced special educators' perceptions of relational competence and how it is manifested in their occupational roles. Accordingly, the research questions (RQ) are:

RQ 1: What is the role of social relationships in (successful) work as a special educator?

RQ 2: How is the relational competence of special educators realised in practice?

## The context of special education

In research and in practice, the concepts of special and inclusive education have fluid meanings (Florian 2019; Nilholm and Göransson 2017). These concepts have evolved from a focus on students with disabilities and their physical placement to the school's ability to meet students' differences in both academic and social respects. In Sweden, there are two occupational groups – special educators (*specialpedagoger*) and special needs teachers (*speciallärare*) – working with inclusive practices and special educational needs. In this paper, we will, as suggested by Göransson et al. (2015), refer to both groups as 'special educators'.

Special education teacher preparation in Sweden comprises 90 ECTS and is a supplementary programme for teachers with at least three years of teaching experience. Sweden has a long tradition of preparing teachers to work with special education and

special educational needs. The precursors to today's education emerged during the second half of the 19th century and were mainly focused on the education of students with specific disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities and hearing impairments (Bladini 1990). Since the middle of the 20th century, the state has been responsible for such programmes, which means that they are incorporated into teacher college universities. The orientations of the programmes have varied over time, but a clear focus on specific disabilities has permeated the content of the courses. In the past 30 years, a focus has also been placed on supervision, school development and inclusive practices (Bladini 1990; Göransson et al. 2015). Tissot (2013) notes a similar change in the UK, giving Special Educational Needs Coordinators an extended responsibility to be leaders and administrators. Göransson et al. (2015) emphasise that Swedish special educators report that they have good knowledge about mapping and evaluating individuals' learning environments and their participation. On the other hand, knowledge about the mapping and evaluation of individual learning objectives, social goals, the development of independence and the development of critical thinking is not reported. Furthermore, the special educators claim that they do not have enough knowledge about how students' influence on their own learning situation can develop. Göransson et al. (2015) also stress that professionals working with students with special educational needs regard values such as relationships and equality as prominent, and emphasise learning objectives and individual freedom to a lesser extent.

## Theoretical framework

This article, as well as the larger project, is situated in the field of relational pedagogy (Aspelin and Persson 2011; Bingham and Sidorkin 2004). Research that adopts relational perspectives makes relationships the focal point of analysis. Relational studies aim to dissolve the subject–object dichotomy that has dominated Western thought for centuries (Gergen 2009). In this article, relational competence is essentially not viewed as a capability that is owned by separate agents; rather, it is seen as a phenomenon that is situated between the teacher and others.

Later in the article, we will discuss our findings from a relational framework. When we discuss RQ 1, we will use two concepts developed by Von Wright (2006). Von Wright introduces a distinction between a 'punctual' and a 'relational' perspective on the human being and on education. From the punctual perspective, social life (e.g. teaching) is conceived as a series of traits located within the individual and/or in his/her environment. From the relational perspective, social life is understood as ongoing interaction processes. The two perspectives imply different pedagogical attitudes. From the punctual perspective, the teacher manages the student as a closed and predictable self, and focuses on different sub-functions of the student (e.g. individual traits or capabilities). In contrast, from the relational perspective, the teacher encounters the student as an open, unpredictable self, and focuses on the student as a unique person, interacting within a particular relational context. Von Wright (2006) emphasises that these perspectives are analytical constructions, and should not be seen as separate phenomena in real life.

In earlier studies, relational competence has been conceptualised as an inter-human phenomenon seen through different theoretical lenses (e.g. Aspelin 2017). When we discuss RQ 2 below, we will adopt Shibutani's (1961 [1995]) distinction between the

'conventional role' and the 'interpersonal role'. Shibutani suggests that individuals in institutionalised contexts interact in two analytically distinguishable roles. A 'conventional role' is 'a prescribed pattern of behaviour expected of a person in a given situation by virtue of his position in the transaction' (46). An 'interpersonal role', however, is about the expectations that emerge from the participants' personality and from concrete, particular relationships: 'Each person develops his own ways of treating partners … by adjusting to the demands made upon him by the particular individuals with whom he comes into contact' (326). From this notion, relationally competent teachers take responsibility as educators in a conventional system, and as fellow beings in an interpersonal system.

## Method

### Sample and interviews

This is an interview study with semi-structured interviews and qualitative thematic analysis. The sample consists of 21 special educators (19 female and two male). The educators were recruited by visiting an alumni network meeting for practicing special educators. All attendants were informed about the upcoming study and asked whether they would consider participating. Those who volunteered shared their contact information with the researchers and were later emailed about the specific date and time for the interview. Participants were also asked to provide background data on their education and current employment through a short questionnaire. This data is summarised in Table 1. As can be seen, the participants have worked as teachers for between nine to 42 years (mean = 19 years) and as special educators for between one to 16 years (mean = five years). The majority of the participants have previously worked as general-education teachers, and currently work as special educators at community schools. It should be noted that the data in Table 1 is reported in order to provide an overall picture of the sample. No attempts have been made to identify potential differences between the teachers in relation to any of these factors since, due to the limited sample in this study, such differences may be purely coincidental.

The participating educators were divided into equal-sized groups, based on the geographical location of the schools, and each of the researchers was assigned to one of the groups. All of the interviews were semi-structured and followed a common interview protocol with 11 main questions, divided into three parts: (1) the perceived importance of relationships in their work as special educators, (2) the professional role of special educators, and (3) how relational work is manifested in practice. The interviews with educators were carried out at the schools where the educators worked, or at the university, and were recorded with a digital MP3 recorder. On average, the interviews lasted for approximately 52 minutes (18 h and 13 min in total). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were used as data for the study.

### Analysis

The interviews were analysed with conventional thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (or 'themes') within qualitative data (Clarke and Braun 2017). The analysis was mainly inductive in nature and followed the

**Table 1.** Background data for participants.

| Number | Sex | Years as a teacher | Teacher education | Years as an SE | SE specialization | School |
|--------|-----|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------|
| 1 | Female | 42 | GET | 16 | | CS |
| 2 | Female | 21 | GET | 7 | Mathematics | CS |
| 3 | Female | 16 | ST | 1 | | USS |
| 4 | Female | 27 | PST | 5 | | CS |
| 5 | Female | 11 | GET | 2 | Language | CS |
| 6 | Female | 11 | GET | 7 | ID | CS |
| 7 | Female | 14 | ST | 6 | | CS |
| 8 | Male | 20 | GET | 5 | | CS |
| 9 | Female | 14 | GET | 1 | ID | USSID |
| 10 | Female | 20 | ST | 2 | Mathematics | CS |
| 11 | Female | 19 | ST | 2 | Language | CS |
| 12 | Female | 16 | GET | 4 | ID | CS |
| 13 | Female | 15 | GET | 4 | ID | CSSID |
| 14 | Female | 28 | GET | 15 | | CS |
| 15 | Female | 9 | ST | 1 | | USS |
| 16 | Female | 26 | GET | 6 | | CS |
| 17 | Female | 15 | GET | 1 | | USS |
| 18 | Female | 23 | GET | 4 | ID | CS |
| 19 | Female | 14 | ST | 2 | | USS |
| 20 | Male | 9 | ST | 4 | ID | AE |
| 21 | Female | 24 | ST | 9 | | N/A |

**Abbreviations**: SE = Special educator teacher; GET = General-education teacher; ST = Subject teacher; PST = Preschool teacher; ID = Intellectual disability; CS = Compulsory school; CSSID = Compulsory school for students with an intellectual disability; USS = Upper-secondary school; USSID = Upper-secondary schools for students with an intellectual disability; AE = Adult education.

procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which means that the following steps were taken:

First, each individual researcher read and re-read the transcripts from his/her own interviews, noting down initial ideas. These initial ideas were then shared with the research group and the group agreed on a common coding procedure. Second, using the common coding procedure, each individual researcher systematically coded the entire dataset. The individual coding was then compared across the research group and differences were resolved through consensus decisions. Potential themes were identified. Third, each researcher collated all data relevant to one of the potential themes and checked whether the theme worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset. Themes and coded extracts were shared and discussed with the group. Fourth, each researcher wrote a description of his/her theme and any potential subthemes, and selected compelling extract examples, which were then shared and discussed with the group. Fifth, a final analysis of the selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research questions and literature, was made by the research group. The descriptions of the themes and subthemes, as well as the extracts, were then translated into English by the researchers.

## Findings

Below, the findings are presented in four main themes together with subthemes. Significant quotes – that is, examples of central patterns distinguished in the analysis – are included under each subtheme. The number in parenthesis after each quote refers to the participant number in Table 1. Theme 1 answers RQ 1 while Themes 2–4 answer RQ 2.

### Theme 1: special educators perceive positive relationships as the basis for their work

The informants claim that interpersonal relationships are fundamental in education and crucial for their success as educators. They also speak of special conditions for relational competence in their work as special educators. When referring to relationships, they mainly refer to relationships with their students.

### Interpersonal relationships are fundamental

Almost all the informants use expressions such as 'A and O' [Alpha and Omega] or 'the basis' when they describe the meaning of relationships in their profession:

> Super important. Relationship is … the basis that makes everything work. (13)

> It means everything, you won't get anywhere without them. (2).

> Yes, I think it is A and O. If I don't have a positive relationship with a student, for example, in my small room, I won't be able to work with them. It wouldn't work. (18)

As shown by the quotes above, the special educators perceive positive relationships as a basis for education. They seem to conceive relationship not merely as a connection that is shaped and changed in interaction, but also as a fundamental condition for human interaction. When they speak of relationships, they mean interpersonal relationships.

### Relational competence is of particular importance for special educators

Several informants claim that positive relationships are especially important in their work as special educators:

> I think that it is very important to have positive relationships. And it is of special importance in my role, when I meet students with special needs … (5)

> Our students who have/ … /severe autism have huge problems with relationships. Now, if they have that difficulty – think of how important it is that the adults around them understand the importance of creating a positive relationship. (13).

As shown by the quotes above, the special educators seem to think that relational competence is of particular importance for them as special educators. For example, the informants claim that their students are in specific need of positive relationships with educators/adults. Furthermore, since special educators meet their students less often than other educators do, relational competence becomes more critical.

### The educators mainly speak of relationships with students

The informants claim that their relational competence takes different forms, depending on who the other party in the relationship is:

> It is the foundation, the basis, that I have a positive relationship with the students. Now, I work in a school … [I] mainly have students in classes 0–6, and then it is also very important to have a positive relation with the guardians. But this, how I respond to the student, how I connect to the student, is of great importance. (16).

> I would say that it means everything. It is A and O. If you cannot build positive relationships … if you don't have positive relationships with the students, with the school staff, with your

principal, with the colleagues – you cannot achieve anything if you can't build positive relationships. (17).

As shown by the quotes above, the special educators mainly connect relational competence to their relationships with students, although they also refer to their relationships with colleagues, parents and others. Regardless of the other party in the relationship, interpersonal relationships are understood as fundamental.

### Theme 2: special educators perceive relational competence as mainly realised by an accepting attitude

The informants see relational competence as primarily manifested by an accepting attitude, although it is also seen as manifested by a challenging attitude.

#### An accepting attitude

According to the informants, relational competence is mainly realised by an accepting attitude:

> Partly that I am calm, listening to the student ... A humility towards the student, too. You cannot just jump in and say: 'yeah, you're having trouble with this'. (21)

> Often, my relationships with students aren't demanding, because I don't make any demands. The teachers and the mentors make demands./ ... /And, as long as my door is open and the couch is there and you can come and go a bit as you please, there are no problems in the relationships. Problems come with demands. (7)

As shown by the quotes above, the informants connect relational competence to an attitude in which the students are accepted as they appear in the 'here and now'. This attitude is adjusted to the particular situation, and has a unique form in every single contact. The informants use different expressions to describe this attitude: to act non-evaluating; to be humble; to care; to pay attention to, listen to or show interest in the unique individual; and so on.

#### A challenging attitude

The educators also claim that relational competence is realised by a challenging attitude:

> But I know I can ask: 'Do you want to tell me?' 'Sure I do'. So, this is also a response. You, so to speak, lift up the students' strengths. I know them, and try to push them forward. You know, I always want to challenge my students. (12)

> So, yes, a bit more relationship building is needed from us, who don't meet the student all the time, who do guest performances. Then you must be skilled in winding up the student and using all the tricks you can to catch the students' interest. (4)

As shown by the quotes above, the informants (also) connect relational competence to an attitude in which the students are challenged. For example, they use expressions such as 'pushing the students', 'lifting them up', 'catching their interests' and 'changing them'. This is a more goal-oriented and progressive attitude than the one described above.

### Theme 3: special educators perceive relational competence as realised by finding a personal connection to the student

The special educators claim that their relational competence is realised by finding a personal connection to the student. This connection can be established in different ways and by different 'strategies'.

#### Seeing the students as individuals

According to the informants, they, as special educators, can establish a personal connection with the students by seeing them as individuals, and thereby showing that they care for them. The informants also express that they, as adults, have to 'open up', so that the students can see the person behind the professional:

> It's not like we start working immediately; instead, we always talk a little about how the day has been or what they've done during the weekend or if they have something to tell me./ . . . /then I'll ask about that the next time I see them./ . . . /So that they feel that you've been listening to what they were saying. It's not only a game, it's important. (11)

> Humour is an important component, as is meeting on a personal level, [so] that I can open up to them and also tell some jokes. And he knew a lot about me and my family and my dogs and he told me about his family. I mean . . . we didn't just talk about school stuff. (9)

As shown by the quotes above, this strategy means that the educator invites the students into a mutual exchange, where both student and teacher meet on a personal level. Establishing such a relationship improves the opportunities to cooperate with school work, according to the educators.

#### Starting from students' own interests

As a special educator, it is possible to establish a personal connection with students by starting from the student's hobbies or personal interests, such as video games, soccer or skiing:

> And then it was a lot about different action figures and things like that. And he had some figures with him, but wasn't allowed to have them in the classroom./ . . . /But when he was with me it was OK and he could have these figures there. And then it was OK to do the things that we did. (5)

> And her special interest was quite unique, she'd learned Korean writing./ . . . /And so I asked her: 'Is it possible to write numbers with that too, could you do that?', 'Yes, that would be possible.'/ . . . /Yes, then she started doing math. She wrote in Korean. But then I said: 'you have to write . . . I mean, I don't understand Korean, so you have to write . . . You have to translate it so that I can understand'. And she did. (1)

As shown by the quotes above, when using this strategy, the educator starts from the student's interests in order to establish a personal connection with the student. In contrast to the strategy outlined above, in which the educator invites the student into a mutual exchange, this strategy is unilateral, since the teacher does not necessarily share the same interests. Another difference is that the students' interests are not only used as a means to establish a relationship, but also, at times, to facilitate the actual school work.

### Finding the students' specific strengths and weaknesses

As a special educator, it is possible to establish a personal connection with students by trying to understand the student's specific strengths and weaknesses and adjusting the learning environment based on this understanding:

> / … /when it comes to students with difficulties, as is the case here, then you have to understand the specific problems that these students are facing. Having knowledge about it is obvious, but understanding it … Knowledge is not always enough, but you have to understand: 'What's making this particular thing difficult for the student?' And then you have to establish a relationship. (12)

> It's a little difficult to put into words, but to understand his logic … When I finally figured out how to present things, it was so much easier to work with mathematics … Kind of how he perceives the tasks. (20)

As shown by the quotes above, when using this strategy, the educator tries to create a complete picture of the student, including their specific strengths and weaknesses, and their personalities. The educator then uses this picture to view the situation from the student's perspective, and adjusts the learning environment accordingly.

### Theme 4: realisation of relational competence through the development of trusting relationships

The special educators claim that their relational competence is realised by building trusting relationships. This often involves laborious work. In contrast to Theme 2, which had a 'here and now' perspective, this theme is about a long-term relationship strategy.

### Trust is the foundation

According to the informants, relational competence is realised through relationships characterised by trust. Students at risk may lack trust in adults, and earning their trust is crucial for rebuilding their relationship with the school:

> Then, I would probably say that, in some way, trust, I think, is something you have to create. That is, students … feel trust in you as a person, and feel that you have knowledge and an interest, and that you are committed to their development. (20)

> What I have noticed when I've met students who have been in difficulties,/ … /when the problems are already there, and you meet that student for the first time, they are quite annoyed by both school and maybe also by life. And, many times, I notice that the students, they lack trust in the adult world. So trust/ … /is a word or concept that is important when talking about relational competence, trust. (9)

As shown in the quotes above, the informants see trust as the foundation of relationships, and thus as a central part of their relational competence. They believe that their students often lack trust in the adult world and that they, as educators, therefore need to work actively to win the students' trust.

### Building trustworthiness takes time

The informants say that it takes time – often a long time – to build trusting relationships:

> Then, it can take a little different time in relationships … that is, the creation in the relationship and that … but it is also allowed to take time. This is not something that can be rushed, since there are many influencing factors. (6)

> We will fix this./ … /It is not always what you say, but it is important to convey a feeling when you're creating relationships. It has to … kids feel, especially these kids who are in difficulties. If they've been in trouble for several years, well, it can take a year to really gain this trust. (14)

As the quotes above show, the informants believe that the building of trust, especially in relation to students in difficulties, must be allowed to take time. The process should not be forced. It also takes different amounts of time, depending on who the student is and what he/she has been through before.

### Building trust is often laborious work

The informants say that building trusting relationships is often a laborious job:

> But in the beginning, I can … maybe just tell her that, 'yes, I understand that you're lying, we will talk more about that later'. To make her aware that, 'yes, I'm in control', but we can't do anything about it now, because we haven't built anything up, we just have nothing to build on. (12)

> He didn't talk. I didn't even know if he had a language. But I was where he was. During a week, the lessons were from eight to twenty past nine. Then, after a week, we told him, 'now you will be at school until 12 o'clock'. And then slowly build up. But it took the whole fall and half of spring before he took off his jacket, before he took off his shoes. (18)

As the quotes above show, the informants say that building trusting relationships requires strong personal commitment and patience from the educator. Obstacles are often encountered during the process; for example, students may hold defensive positions or have excessively extroverted behaviour. These obstacles need to be overcome in order for the student to develop, which requires strategies.

## Discussion

The aim of this paper is to explore experienced special educators' perceptions of relational competence and how it is manifested in their occupational roles. International research has shown that the quality of the teacher-student relationship plays a vital role in education. The present study contributes to the field by highlighting special educators' relational competence. This work provided a thorough qualitative understanding of how special educators perceive relational competence as part of their profession. Below, the findings are summarised and the research questions are discussed.

### A clearly empathised relational perspective: a need for a more nuanced discourse?

The title of this article, 'It means everything', summarises the findings as a whole, especially those of RQ 1. The special educators perceive positive social relationships as essential, and consider that they could not do their job without skills in building and promoting them. In other words, they perceive relational competence as being at the heart of their work and as a basic educational competence – if not the most basic. They also seem to imply that relational competence is of particular importance for special educators, since their students

are in specific need of positive relationships with adults. Based on Von Wright's (2006) concepts, the results indicate that the special educators understand their work mainly from a 'relational perspective'. That is, they understand students and others as subjects in relation to their environment, and not as objects defined by inner and/or outer attributes. Relational competence is understood as a situated skill that is manifested in interaction, rather than as something that the individual teacher possesses, regardless of context. It may be surprising that the special educators so strongly underscore the importance of *interpersonal* relations, and that other relationships (e.g. between student and groups, student and organisation etc.) play minor roles in this discourse.

However, this study also indicates that the special educators' perceptions of relationships are experience-based rather than theory-based, which means that although they emphasise that relationships are essential, they do not provide very nuanced arguments about what this means. For example, expressions such as 'A and O' and 'the basis' are frequently used, but theoretical concepts that could clarify the meanings of such expressions are not applied. That special educators emphasise relationships, yet sometimes do so in a rather standardised form, suggests the need for a more nuanced relational discourse on special education, in both practice and on the level of policy.

### An accepting, interpersonal role: a need for more challenges?

Theme 2, which was the first theme answering RQ 2, showed that relational competence, according to the special educators, is realised by an accepting (non-demanding, caring, humble etc.) attitude. The educators focus on the student as a person. They associate relational competence with encounters in the 'here and now', between the educator and the students (or others). According to Shibutani's (1961 [1995]) concept, the special educators largely perceive their position as an 'interpersonal role'. They imply that, first and foremost, the pedagogical relationship has an intrinsic, personal value, and that their aim is to meet and care for the student as a human being. Then, as understood from Shibutani's framework, their relational competence largely comprises the ability to build relationships that are expected of the teacher as a human being encountering other human beings. For example, the special educators rarely talk about relationships as a means of achieving learning goals or other goals. Nor do they comment much on methods for influencing students, or on how to manage students' shortcomings, diagnoses or any specific difficulties. It is likely that the results would be different if a corresponding study were to be conducted with other educators, such as subject teachers.

However positive and sympathetic it may be for special educators to focus on the student as a person and to emphasise an accepting attitude, this result may also indicate something problematic. If we assume that education is about confirming the student both as who he/she *is* and as who he/she *could become*, it seems noteworthy that a challenging, goal-oriented and progressive attitude plays such a modest role in the material. Consequently, the question of whether the educators sometimes have a *too accepting* pedagogical attitude could be raised. Research (e.g. de Boer et al. 2012) points at the potential risks of too close relationships between special educators and their students. Indeed, strong interpersonal bonds are crucial in education, especially in special

education. Nevertheless, an optimal pedagogical relationship is characterised by a balance between closeness and distance (Aspelin and Jonsson 2019).

### The primacy of a personal connection: a need for a more professional relationship?

Theme 3, which answered RQ 2, showed that relational competence, according to the special educators, is realised by finding a personal connection to the student. The educators describe three different 'strategies' for making this connection: (1) seeing the student as an individual and engaging in a mutual exchange, (2) starting from the student's hobbies or personal interests, and (3) creating a complete picture of the student in order to identify his/ her specific strengths and weaknesses and adjust the learning environment accordingly.

The first two strategies, which relate to the 'interpersonal role' described by Shibutani (1961[1995]), assume that a personal connection needs to precede a professional relationship (or a 'conventional role'). This assumption about the primacy of a personal connection not only quantitatively dominates the data, but is also strongly emphasised by most of the respondents. It is therefore of interest to question where this assumption might come from.

Similar to some of the other themes, such as viewing interpersonal relationships as a foundation for working with students in need of support, the respondents use colloquial speech when expressing their beliefs. Rather than expressing their beliefs through the use of a formal and professional language, such as by using theoretically grounded terminology and concepts, they typically use less precise, everyday words. A possible interpretation of this observation is that these assumptions are experientially grounded, as opposed to being more theoretically grounded knowledge acquired through formal education. Furthermore, when asked, most respondents state that they were not explicitly taught how to establish relationships with students during their formal education.

Of course, the assumption of the primacy of a personal connection is not necessarily any less true just because it is experientially grounded. However, this assumption might limit the readiness of special educators when working with students who are not interested in establishing a personal relationship, or who are unwilling to communicate for other reasons. Furthermore, this assumption of the primacy of a personal connection highlights an area in which more knowledge is needed, and in which findings from research that potentially conflict with this strong conviction might prove difficult to implement.

### Long-term relational work as the focal point: a need for more focus on academic goals?

Theme 4, which answered RQ 2, showed that relational competence, according to the special educators, is realised by building trusting relationships. This process is accomplished in the long term, often involves laborious work, and is often hindered by the students' lack of trust in the adult world. Through differentiation in the relationship – which can involve flexibility between making demands on the student and not making any demands at all – the special educators work patiently and purposefully to regain the students' trust and rebuild their confidence. Here, an image of the informants prioritising their students' personal development emerges. Once again, according to Shibutani's (1961 [1995]) concepts, the informants mainly understand their task as a social endeavour, which means that

they act in an 'interpersonal role' rather than in a 'conventional role'. Their mission seems to be to support their students in gaining trust in school and in the adult world.

To some extent, this finding seem to confirm the results found by Göransson et al. (2015), which indicate that special educators emphasise values such as relationships and equality, and do not attach as much weight to academic goals. For the informants, education is not primarily about organisational perspectives, but about building long-lasting and trusting relationships.

## Conclusions

When describing how special educators' relational competence is realised in practice, three main themes were identified in the interviews. First, relational competence is mainly perceived as having an accepting and caring attitude towards the students. Second, most educators strongly emphasise that a personal relationship needs to precede a professional relationship. Third, they emphasise that there is a need to invest in the long-term building of trust. Taken together, these findings suggest that the educators in this study clearly view a personal relationship with the students as central to all aspects of their work. Having such a relationship requires the educators to 'open up' in turn, in order to build a personal connection; in addition, they sometimes feel that they have to downplay the qualification purpose of education. While perceived as successful by the educators, this interpretation of relational competence may also be seen as fragile, partly because the work with these (sometimes quite vulnerable) students relies on relationships that may be temporary or otherwise unstable, but also because not all students are comfortable with having personal relationships with staff. Finally, the use of colloquial speech, rather than formal language, when discussing relationships is an overarching tendency that transcends the themes. This could be due to knowledge about relationships and relational competence being experientially grounded and not acquired through formal education – an interpretation that was substantiated by respondents stating that they were not explicitly taught how to establish relationships with students during their education.

## Implications for special education teacher preparation

According to the informants, relational competence should not be defined in terms of specific methods or techniques, nor should it be understood as something that some special educators have but others lack. Instead, it is a competence that all educators manifest, more or less, in everyday situations and encounters. Overall, communicative aspects are central in the informants' understandings of relational competence. This result has implications for special education teacher preparation.

The findings suggest that pre-service special educators need opportunities to reflect on interpersonal communication in different educational situations that represent behavioural variations. For example, one task could be for pre-service special educators to describe, interpret and analyse the interaction between special educators and students with diverse needs. Also, they could discuss how the educators could have acted differently in order to enhance the relationships. Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2003) have proposed three questions that are useful for such a discussion of relational competence: (1) What constitutes sensitive behaviour towards a child with a specific disability?; (2) How much

sensitivity is enough to promote learning and development?; and (3) Is sensitivity more essential for children with certain disabilities than for children with other disabilities?

In the next part of our project, pre-service special educators will reflect on simulated interactions in video films. The analysis will focus on the informants' developmental needs regarding how they understand relational competence. This is our next step for developing knowledge about this essential – but still largely unexplored – phenomenon in special education.

## Disclosure statement

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