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ABSTRACT

A supportive relationship between teachers and students has been shown to have positive effects on students' performance and social development. Preservice teachers' relational competence is, however, an unexplored area. The purpose of this study is to contribute to educational research about relational competence in teacher education by introducing a Swedish project which focuses on interpersonal aspects. The study has three parts. In the theoretical part, a conceptualization of teachers' relational competence using Thomas Scheff's theory of interpersonal relationships is outlined. In the empirical (pilot) part, a methodology for prompting preservice teachers' analyses of teacher–student relationships is described, as well as a thematic analysis of their responses. The theoretical conceptualization is then used together with the empirical data in the third part, in order to identify development needs of preservice teachers in terms of relational competence. According to the conceptualization, relational competence includes three sub-concepts: communicative, differentiation, and socio-emotional competence. From the analysis of preservice students' texts, the article identifies development needs in relation to the three sub-concepts. The concluding discussion focuses on lessons learned from the study regarding how to promote teacher students' relational competence.

1. Introduction

Studies on the teacher–student relationship began to take form as a field of research in the middle of the 1990s. Since then, extensive research, including research reviews and meta-analyses, has shown that supportive relationships between teachers and students have beneficial effects on parameters such as students' subject-specific performance, social development, satisfaction, well-being, and motivation to learn (Cornelius-White 2007; Hattie 2009; Martin and Dowson 2009; Murray and Pianta 2007; Roorda et al. 2011; Sabol and Pianta 2012; Wubbels and Brekelmans 2006). Not least, such relationships have proven to be highly important for students with disabilities (Drugli 2014; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2003; Sabol and Pianta 2012).

A significant portion of Scandinavian research in the field has focused on the concept of relational competence (Ågård 2014; Aspelin 2015, 2017; Drugli 2014; Frelin 2010;

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Herskind, Fibaek Laursen, and Nielsen 2014; Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015; Klinge 2016; Nordenbo et al. 2008; Rökenes, Linder, and Breinhild Mortensen 2008; Skibsted and Matthiesen 2016a). Herskind, Fibaek Laursen, and Nielsen (2014) claim that there is near consensus among researchers on how to define teachers' relational competence. Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen (2015) agree and suggest that 'the true core of relational competence … consists of being able to meet students and parents with openness and respect, to show empathy and to be able to take responsibility for one's own part of the relationship as an educator' (206).

Today, relational competence is 'one of the most important concepts of our time within Danish school and teacher education' (Skibsted and Matthiesen 2016b, 11, our translation). The concept gained scientific weight through a research review conducted by the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research (Nordenbo et al. 2008) in which it is regarded as a basic competence, along with didactic/instructional and classroom management/leadership competences. In a comment to the review, Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen (2015) state: 'While a large and growing body of research on both classroom management and general and subject-specific teaching competency are available for teachers and teacher educators, the same cannot be said about relational competence' (203). Thus, there is need for more research in the field, not least regarding relational competence in teacher education (Nordenbo et al. 2008; Skibsted and Matthiesen 2016a). This has made it difficult for educators to work systematically to develop preservice teachers' relational competence. However, over the past few years at least two such projects have been initiated in Scandinavia: one Danish (four years) and one Swedish (two years).

The purpose of the Danish project was to develop 'attentive presence and empathy as components of relational competence' (Skibsted and Matthiesen 2016b, 14, our translation). The project was conducted at Aarhus University in 2012–2016, with participating researchers from Danish School of Education and VIA University College. Two groups of preservice teachers participated, together with 14 teacher educators and 18 teachers in primary school. Reports from the project (e.g. Herskind, Fibaek Laursen, and Nielsen 2014; Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015; Nielsen and Fibaek Laursen 2016) suggest that:

- Teacher education does not adequately prepare preservice teachers for the relational challenges that they experience during their practicum (and, later, as in-service teachers).
- During their practicum, preservice teachers almost entirely focus on didactics and classroom management.
- With a systematic approach, it is possible to support the development of relational competence during teacher education.

Findings from the Danish project also include critical remarks. Building on interviews with, and observations of, students who participated, Matthiesen (2016) argue that the project mainly directed the preservice teachers toward a 'reflective domain'. Matthiesen (2016) develops the critique and argues that the concept of relational competence, as used in the project, belongs to an individualistic discourse, focusing more on the preservice teachers' understanding of themselves than on their relationships with the

students. These observations are taken into account in the Swedish project, known as the LÄRK project,[1] which is introduced in this article. The design is rooted in a relational perspective, which means that the gaze is directed 'outward', toward interpersonal communication between teacher and student, rather than 'inward', toward self-reflection by teachers/preservice teachers.

It has also been suggested that there is a lack of theoretical studies in the field (Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015; Nordenbo et al. 2008). Within the Swedish project, preparatory theoretical studies have been conducted to conceptualize relational competence as an inter-human phenomenon, through the philosophical work by Martin Buber and Nel Noddings (Aspelin 2015, 2017). The current article will take yet another step in this direction, by adopting a social psychological framework. This point of departure implies that teachers and students often meet in challenging and unpredictable relationships, and that a significant purpose of teacher education is to prepare for such situations.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to contribute to educational research about relational competence in teacher education by introducing a Swedish project which focuses on interpersonal aspects. The study has three parts. In the theoretical part, a conceptualization of teachers' relational competence using Thomas Scheff's theory of interpersonal relationships will be outlined. In the empirical (pilot) part, a methodology for prompting preservice teachers' analyses of teacher–student relationships will be described, as well as a thematic analysis of their responses. The theoretical conceptualization is then used together with the empirical data in the third part, in order to identify development needs of preservice teachers in terms of relational competence.

2. A project about preservice teachers' relational competence

The LÄRK project focuses on how the development of preservice teachers' relational competence can be supported by the use of digital video recordings. The use of digital video is sustained by research showing that this medium may have beneficial effects in various regards and contexts, such as: teachers' relational abilities (Pianta, Stuhlman, and Hamre 2002; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2003; Sabol and Pianta 2012), teachers' professional development in a broad sense (Harlin 2011, 2013), and in the context of professional education (Jonsson 2014). This design is also supported by John Hattie's well-known meta-meta-analysis (2009), in which 'micro-teaching' is highlighted as a highly successful teaching method.[2]

Three relational theories are used to support the project: Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, Nel Noddings' care philosophy, and Thomas Scheff's social psychological theory. The theories by Buber and Noddings (Aspelin 2015, 2017) suggest a two-dimensional conception of teachers' relational competence as: (i) an immanent phenomenon, implying that the teacher is directly involved in an inter-human relationship, with an attitude of natural care and (ii) a transcendent phenomenon, meaning that the teacher manages social relationships with an attitude of ethical care. The first aspect is existential; being an immanent part of all authentic encounters. This attitude is not something that the teacher can learn in a conventional sense; however, it is more or less cultivated in pedagogical practice, as well as in teacher education. The second aspect of

relational competence is socially constructed. As teachers, and teacher educators, we can work actively and purposely to cultivate such an attitude.

The present article relates to construction of the theory by examining the preservice teachers' relational competence with support from Scheff's theory.

3. Conceptualization with support from Scheff's theory[3]

This section addresses the first question of the article: how teachers' relational competence can be conceptualized with support from Thomas Scheff's social psychology.

As stated, the article is based on the assumption that the teachers' relational competence is rooted in the teacher–student relationship. A credible discourse on this subject, therefore, requires a reliable concept of relationships. We hold that Scheff has developed just such a concept. The theory is eclectic since concepts from different disciplines and theories are merged, albeit in an innovative manner, with a particular focus on the level of interpersonal analysis. Below is a presentation of some of the central concepts in Scheff's main work *Microsociology* (1990).

3.1. Social bonds

The most central concept of the theory is the 'social bond', which Scheff borrowed from John Bowlby (1969). Scheff (1990) states that: 'The theory asserts that social bonds generate the primary motives in human conduct...' (xv). Scheff holds that the social sciences are based on a more or less unspoken fundamental assumption that people are interdependent and strive to achieve good relations with the environment. However, he also holds that there is great uncertainty about how social cohesion actually occurs and is maintained. The theory of social bonds helps to clarify this and in that sense constitutes a micro-sociological equivalent to Emile Durkheim's macro-sociological theory on social integration. Simply stated, social bonds can be defined as the forces that hold people and groups in the community together. The bonds between people often appear to be established, lasting relationships, thereby making it feasible to discuss relational patterns, conditions or structures. However, in reality these bonds are temporary, dynamic, and unpredictable phenomena. Humans can never be completely sure that relationships will have a certain character. Moreover, according to Scheff, this assertion becomes increasingly viable from a historical perspective. In post-modern society, social bonds are more or less *constantly* tested. The quality of such bonds ranges from fragile and uncertain to strong and secure. The bonds can be built, repaired, threatened or even cut off. What is crucial for the quality of the bonds is how participants communicate with each other and how well they are attuned, which brings us to the next concept.

3.2. Attunement

Scheff borrows the concept of 'attunement' from Stern et al. (1985) and reinterprets it to describe how social bonds are built in interpersonal communication. People who meet take each other's roles (Mead [1934] 1947) and through this process a degree of cognitive and emotional attunement emerges. Social bonds are built in and through

verbal and non-verbal communication, and the quality of these bonds is dependent on the degree of attunement that arises. Verbal communication concerns *what* is said, the content of the communication, while non-verbal communication concerns *how* it is said and expressed, i.e. a person's 'manner' (Goffman [1959] 1990). The degree of attunement is dependent on how well individuals understand each other and the extent to which they show each other adequate and due respect. In contrast to conventional communication research, which focuses on cognition and the verbal level, and where consensus is understood as an implicit ideal, Scheff emphasizes non-verbal communication, emotionality, and the unpredictable character of communication. The degree of mutual understanding, both cognitive and emotional, is assumed to shift in an ongoing process of communication. The meaning of social action is never given; individuals who meet are able to 'read' each other's thoughts and emotions to a greater or lesser extent. Misunderstandings are sometimes just as common as mutual understanding. When individuals understand each other well, we speak of a high degree of cognitive attunement. If individuals share each other's feelings and show each other adequate respect, we speak of a high degree of emotional attunement.

3.3. Differentiation

Scheff borrows the concept of differentiation from Bowen's (1978) family systems theory. In Scheff's social psychology version, the concept specifically refers to the degree of closeness and distance in interpersonal relations. As in many other theories (cf. Retzinger 1991),[4] Scheff's theory assumes that the degree of closeness and distance is a fundamental dilemma in human relationships. When two people become so close that they can experience each other's side of the relationship, yet are distanced enough from each other that they perceive themselves as unique, individual entities, we speak of optimal differentiation. Neither individual components nor social components are overemphasized in such a relationship; instead, a balance is achieved between closeness and distance. However, should one or the other, or both parties, experience excessive distance – that is, if direct contact with the other is absent and the importance of the self is overemphasized – we speak of *over-differentiation* or *isolation*. Similarly, when individuals experience excessive closeness – lose contact with vital aspects of themselves and when the importance of the other person/group is overemphasized – we speak of *under-differentiation* or *engulfment*.[5]

3.4. Shame and pride

Emotions play a vital role in Scheff's theory.[6] Stable social bonds imply lasting and relatively deep emotional ties. Supported in part by Cooley's concept of 'the looking-glass self' ([1922] 1992), Scheff defines shame and pride as fundamental social emotions with the purpose of providing direct information to individuals about the status of the social bond. Shame and pride are awakened in a context where the individual visualizes how he/she behaves and is valued in the eyes of the other. Positive role-taking is initiated by and leads to feelings of pride, while negative role-taking is associated with feelings of shame. Therefore, stable bonds are signaled by feelings of pride and unstable bonds by feelings of shame. Shame and pride are technical terms and umbrella concepts

for a range of emotions within each group. These emotions are not viewed as being inherently positive or negative, but rather as messengers reflecting the qualities of interpersonal relationships. In other words, they are functional and almost indispensable guides for the individual's understanding of relationships and how to act to improve relational qualities.

3.5. Conceptualization

The article's introduction provides a rather rough description of teachers' relational competence. The task at hand is to nuance this explanation based on Scheff's interpretation through an analysis of three competence areas.

We should be able to use Scheff's theory to understand teachers' relational competence in an overarching, non-situated context. In such a case, we could say that relational competence means that teachers know their students well, are in frequent communication with them and maintain dialogic communication patterns in their classrooms. Moreover, we could say that such a teacher makes an effort to establish a close relationship with students while protecting the integrity of each student. Finally, we could say that the teacher encourages a classroom environment in which each student receives positive reinforcement and is not belittled. However, such a description is relatively vague and abstract. Instead, in accordance with Scheff's theory, a situated, relational perspective is presented below. Three key building blocks of the concept of teachers' relational competence are identified, where each one is interpreted as an aspect of an ongoing process of communication.

Scheff's theory holds that the concept of attunement is crucial for understanding the quality of the social bond in interpersonal communication. As we have seen, it concerns the degree of mutual understanding and respect. This concept may serve as a building block in this conceptualization by illuminating the capability of teachers to communicate in such a way that they and the students form strong social bonds with each other. On the one hand, this means that teachers make themselves understood and understand – and demonstrate that they understand – the student. On the other hand, it means that teachers show respect for students while acting in a way that promotes students' respect for them. This first competence area can quite simply be called *communicative competence*. For this purpose, communicative competence reflects the capability of teachers to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in order to achieve a high degree of cognitive and emotional attunement in relation to students. In this regard, the actions of teachers who possess relational competence encourage mutual understanding and respect in their encounters with students. It can thereby be assumed that relationships will deepen over time, while the prospects for achieving the (other) educational goals are encouraged.

According to the theory, the quality of social bonds also depends on the degree of closeness and distance in relationships. Differentiation may serve as the second building block in this conceptualization by illuminating the capability of teachers to act in such a way that neither they nor the students become too close or too distant from each other. *Differentiation competence* is the second competence area. The term refers to the capability of teachers to regulate the degree of closeness and distance in relation to the students. Teachers possessing relational competence act so that the distance separating

teachers and students becomes neither too large nor too small. Space is created to allow both students and teachers to discern themselves as individuals, without jeopardizing social bonds.

Shame and pride are understood in the theory as fundamental social emotions and are assumed to play critical roles for the quality of social bonds by providing immediate feedback to the individual concerning the status of the bond. Shame/pride comprises the third building block in this conceptualization. This concept reflects the importance of teacher attunement to emotional signals in interpersonal communication. *Socio-emotional competence* is the third competence area. This term relates to the capability of the teacher to cope with emotional indicators concerning the status of social bonds in interpersonal communication. The actions of teachers possessing relational competence evoke and encourage feelings of pride, while acknowledging and channeling feelings of shame in a direction that is productive from the standpoint of educational goals.

The above conceptualization can be summarized as follows: the teachers' relational competence is an ongoing process of communication, in which the actions of the teacher foster the relationship to the student. This competence encompasses the capability to communicate in order to achieve an adequate degree of attunement and differentiation in such a way that the emotions of the students – and of the teachers – are channeled so as to promote the educational goals. These terms should be understood as analytical categories. We should, therefore, not interpret this to mean that competence areas can be separated from one another in real life. Communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socio-emotional competence, are theoretical tools that can help us to recognize important, rarely noted qualities of teachers' actions and interactions. And, as we will soon see, they may also help us to identify the development needs of preservice teachers in this area.

4. Methodology of the pilot study

The following section addresses the empirical part of the study, in which a methodology for prompting preservice teachers' analyses of teacher–student relationships will be described. The thematic analysis of preservice teachers' responses will be presented in the next section.

4.1. Purpose and sample

The purpose of the empirical study was to pilot a methodology for prompting preservice teachers' analyses of teacher–student relationships in order to identify development needs of preservice teachers concerning relational competence. The study was carried out under the auspices of the Kristianstad University basic teacher education program. The sample was a convenience sample consisting of a group of preservice teachers ($n = 6$) attending a teacher education program for teaching in grades 4–6. The study was performed during the sixth semester of the program (the entire program is eight semesters), when the preservice teachers attended a course on the professional work of teachers, where the focus of the study could connect to existing learning objectives. All preservice teachers participated in the study, which means that the low number of

participants is an effect of the low number of preservice teachers attending the specific course.

4.2. Procedure

The pilot study was conducted on two occasions of about three hours each and one week apart. During the first occasion, the preservice teachers watched two short video sequences, focusing on teacher–student interactions, where the teacher's relational competence was challenged (see Section 4.3. below). The preservice teachers analyzed the situations, using the following questions:

(a) Describe the situation: What do you notice?
(b) Analyze the teacher–student relationship: (a) In what way to you think the teacher acts to support a positive relationship with the students? and (b) In what way to you think the teacher counteracts a positive relationship with the students?
(c) Describe how you think the teacher should handle the situation?

The preservice teachers wrote their analyses on computers and emailed their responses to the researchers. Afterward, they were given access to explicit criteria for relational competence based on the above conceptualization (i.e. criteria for communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socio-emotional competence). The meanings of the criteria were explained to the preservice teachers by an expert in relational pedagogy. Finally, the preservice teachers were asked to use the criteria to provide peer feedback to each other for one of the analyses, which had been anonymized.

During the second occasion, the preservice teachers watched and analyzed a third video, but this time they had access to the criteria. These analyses were also submitted electronically to the researchers. The session ended with a group interview, recorded with an MP3 player, asking the preservice teachers about how they experienced participating in the study. The analyses from the second occasion, or the group interview data, are, however, not part of the current study.

4.3. Video cases

The research team wrote scripts for three short skits recorded in the school environment. The videos were to be authentic (taken from research or personal experience) and were to be set in a sixth-grade classroom. Moreover, the focus of the videos was to be on verbal and non-verbal communication between teacher and student. Finally, the videos were to include some kind of dilemma, while maintaining a more or less open format as to how the teacher could and should act (i.e. not present any 'solutions'). The plots of the videos are of some importance to the understanding of the following analysis and are, therefore, briefly presented below.

Video 1:   *The lesson begins. The teacher presents an assignment and tells the students to work in pairs with the classmate sitting next to them. One student demonstratively leans back and sits with her arms crossed and exclaims: 'No way am I going to work with her, I refuse!'*

Video 2:   *A parent–teacher conference. A teacher, a student and the student's mother are present. The teacher reads the assessments from various teachers and comments that the girl is too quiet and should speak up more in the classroom. The student looks more and more dejected. The parent becomes upset and angrily says that the teachers don't seem to accept the student for who she is.*

Video 3:   *Dialogue with the whole class. The subject deals with mathematics and probability. The teacher holds a review and asks the students questions. One student makes disruptive noises and calls out the answers. The teacher addresses the situation with the question: 'If I were to close my eyes and point at one of you, is it more likely that I would point to a girl or a boy?' One student answers 'girl', after which the teacher confirms that there are more girls than boys in the class and that it is therefore most probable that the teacher would point to a girl. The 'disruptive' student goads the teacher to test the hypothesis. Students are asked to switch places in the classroom. The teacher closes his eyes and spins around. Meanwhile, the 'disruptive' student sneaks up and stands right in front of the teacher. As the teacher points into the classroom, he bumps into the student.[7]*

A professional video company was engaged to edit the scripts, hire actors and extras, and arrange the sets where the videos were recorded. The video company then recorded the skits, edited the videos, and digitized them.

4.4. Data and analysis

Data for this study were pre-service teachers' written analyses of teacher–student interactions, simulated through digital video *before* the access to explicit criteria about teachers' relational competence. The preservice teachers' responses were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Bryman 2008) based on the following steps: (a) repeated reading of the responses; (b) categorization of typical and atypical patterns in the responses; and (c) selection of quotes that are indicative of the identified patterns. The categories were then converted into themes, which are presented in the next section.

5. Thematic analysis of preservice teacher responses in the pilot study

The thematization below consists of statements formulated to express how the actions of teachers in regard to relationships – how relationships are encouraged, discouraged, and can/should be handled – are presented in the responses. Two main themes are presented along with significant quotes. The quotes have been translated from Swedish by the authors.

5.1. General explanations rather than concrete understanding

The responses mainly contain general explanations and solutions concerning what is happening in the videos, while concrete interpretations and suggestions are uncommon.

In video 1, many remark on how the teachers *group the class*:

> I think it's a good idea for the teacher to divide the students into groups of two … What the teacher could have done to improve the situation is to more precisely select students for the groups to avoid such problems. (Sarah[8] about video 1)

> First of all, the students are seated in rigid rows, not the optimal environment for creating relationships. (Liza about video 1)

> I think that the teacher could have handled grouping the students differently. (Tina about video 1)

The responses also largely address different *didactic choices* that teachers make or should have made to avoid ending up in these situations, such as the teacher's use of information and assessments, as well as the nature of the task at hand.

> To begin with, I don't think that the teacher provided sufficient information about what was to be done. What is the goal? How should it be presented? (Rita about video 1)

> Finally, I'd like to say that both videos show unprepared teachers and students. Preparatory work is incredibly important and it's missing here. (Liza about videos 1 and 2)

In several places, events in the videos are explained by referring to the *teacher's qualities*; for example, the teacher is 'unskilled', 'new to the job', or 'lacks confidence'.

> Even though the teacher asks questions and the students answer them, it doesn't feel as though he is well-versed in the subject. (Rita about video 3)

> The teacher appears to be new to the job and demonstrates a lack of confidence in both speech and body language…. The teacher's lack of confidence may be due to poor knowledge of the subject, planning, or that he is 'filling in as a substitute teacher'…. The teacher seems to have a goal for the lesson, but lacks knowledge about how to achieve it. (Sarah about video 3)

Finally, there are a few examples in which the preservice teachers go into detail about the events in the videos and discuss the importance of the *teacher's communication skills* in forming relationships:

> In every subject that the teacher addresses she begins by saying that the student is doing well but adds a 'but' … for example, you are too quiet, etc. … The dejection of the student is apparent and this discourages the student–teacher relationship … (Tina about video 2)

> The teacher hasn't shown any interest in letting the student express how she thinks and feels, but instead the teacher both asks and answers the questions for the student. (Nick about video 2)

> The teacher's body language is directed towards different students the entire time. The teacher meets some students on their own terms … but not all of them. The teacher is attuned to the behaviour of the students, but does too much to adapt to it … (Liza about video 3)

In summary, the theme addresses how teachers, in general, could and should act rather than how teachers actually act and interact in the situations portrayed in the videos. The preservice teachers propose reasons for the problems they identify. The discussion about groups and didactic planning can be attributed to an *external model*, in which the quality of relationships is seen as dependent on certain social structures, teacher planning, lesson plans, etc. The discussion about individual characteristics can be

attributed to an *internal model*, in which the quality of relationships is seen as dependent on factors such as teacher education, knowledge, confidence, and experience. An *interpersonal model*, where the ongoing communication process and the thoughts and emotions of the participants in this process are taken into account, is seldom cited. Thus, the focus is on surrounding factors and/or separate individuals, rather than on the teacher–student relationship.

5.2. Framework and handiwork rather than professional judgment

The responses portray an ideal in which the teacher acts deliberately and uses various types of frameworks and tools to gain control of the situation.

Valuation and cooperation exercises are tools that are repeatedly used:

> Working with valuation issues … can be useful to begin with to discourage such situations from arising. (Tina about video 1)

> When such behaviour is present in the classroom, teachers should work on the classroom climate and conduct, for example, valuation exercises to discourage such a situation from arising again. (Rita about video 1)

> To promote cooperation, the teacher should work with various cooperation exercises…. As a preventive measure, the teacher, along with the class, can work with cooperation exercises. (Jordan about video 1)

Explicit rules of conduct and reprimands comprise yet another tool:

> The teacher should … clarify that everyone should be able to work with everyone else and show zero tolerance for such behaviour in the classroom. (Rita about video 1)

> The teacher does not reprimand the students when they cross the line of what is considered to be a good classroom climate, which means that the students just end up testing the limits of what is acceptable. (Sarah about video 3)

What is mainly cited are *formal writings*, such as guidelines, learning objectives, and various types of criteria:

> The teacher does not seem to have established criteria for how to work in groups…. The teacher should have provided them with tools that enhance the classroom milieu…. The teacher … never should have put himself and his students in this situation … he himself needs tools to develop relationships with his students … Are there any criteria relating to group work … can he refer to them? Regarding the girl who complained about the partner she was assigned, the teacher should have referred to the criteria. And say that this … is non-negotiable. In the absence of such criteria, he should establish them as soon as possible, preferably together with the students, so that everyone knows the rules and no one would be able to object when similar situations arise in the future. Students need to know what is expected of them, in regard to both school work and relationships. (Liza about video 1)

> The teacher should explain the guidelines and WHY it is important to be more active and voice an opinion … explain why the teachers wrote the assessment … clarify the learning objectives … provide examples to the student on how they can improve and what is required to achieve higher grades … (Rita about video 2)

> To promote good relationships in the classroom the students should be informed about the various grading criteria for the different components … (Sarah about video 2)

Several responses refer to the events in the third video as a failure to establish limits and feel that the teacher allows the 'disruptive' student too much leeway. It can be inferred from the responses that there should not be room for unpredictable events in the classroom since they may lead to loss of power, authority, and respect for the teacher. Teachers should instead plan and manage their lessons based on established learning objectives, avoid risk taking, and avert unexpected events.

> If the teacher had had a plan, the students would have listened to the information and then asked their questions. … To avoid such situations the teacher needs to be prepared and have a goal for the lesson so everyone knows where they are headed. (Sarah about video 3)

> He attempts to foster a dialogical classroom and be flexible, but falls short when he fails to establish rules … If I had … ended up in this situation, I would have immediately expressed my disapproval … and started a discussion in which we establish common criteria for how to achieve a good classroom climate. (Liza about video 3)

In summary, the actions of teachers are to a large extent linked to the use of tools, rules, criteria, requirements, etc. The ideal teacher handles relationships and their duties based on established frameworks and objectives. The teacher uses various (ready-made) tools to ensure that situations such as this do not occur and also corrects relational problems should they arise despite such efforts. Overall, the image of the teacher is portrayed as a craftsman, but also as an engineer of relationships, someone who designs and maintains a building rather than being involved in dynamic relationship building. As with the first theme, relatively little is said about how teachers actually interact in the videos, nor about how a more sensible approach to the concrete situations could play out. The responses mainly use an external model: there are a variety of collective constructions – cooperation exercises, rules of conduct, guidelines, learning objectives, evaluation criteria, etc. – that teachers, more or less immediately, can apply in the classroom to manage relationships. The notion that teachers inevitably face unexpected and unpredictable situations in the classroom is more or less absent (see also next section).

6. Analysis from the conceptualization

At this point, we will summarize how the development needs of preservice teachers with respect to relational competence can be understood from the pilot study and our conceptualization.

The instructions that served as the basis for the analyses provided by the preservice teachers included three questions (see Section 4.2. Procedure). The instructions – like the criteria that were provided prior to the peer feedback from classmates and the analysis of the third video – focused on relational competence as situated practice. For example, references were made to 'the teacher' and 'the students' in the definite form, and the words 'support', 'counteracts', and 'handle' refer to processes in specific situations. The formulation 'the situation' also refers to a certain time and place, specifically those portrayed in the videos. Meanwhile, the preservice teachers' responses clearly were more concerned with teaching and teachers, in general, than with what is actually happening in the videos. Moreover, the teacher–student relationship was central to the instructions, and of course to the project as a whole. Judging from the preservice teachers' responses, relational competence does not seem to be perceived as a specific

type of competence. Instead, priority is given to words and phrases associated with other competences, such as didactic competence and leadership competence.

Two major themes emerged in the analysis of the preservice teachers' responses: first of all, the responses largely contain abstract explanations for the quality of the teacher–student relationship and, second, the responses present relational competence as a type of craftsmanship and social engineering. Common to these themes is that they refer to relatively static frameworks, general situations, and conveyance of bodies of knowledge. Few descriptions and interpretations are expressed regarding how teachers and students communicate in the videos, or regarding how they interpret and are influenced by each other's actions in a continuously changing situation. In summary, the responses pay little attention to specific actions, or to spatial and temporal contexts and situations, but instead focus more on the general circumstances pertaining to interactions.

How then can the outlined need for development be understood from the standpoint of the conceptualization? In general, the analysis suggests that the preservice teachers need a more specific and nuanced approach to relationships: the conceptualization is about viewing the teacher–student relationship as constructed in and through communication processes and viewing relational competence as situated practice. Finally, let us interpret the need for development in terms of the three competence areas that have been outlined.

First, preservice teachers presumably need to better understand the aspect of relational competence termed 'communicative competence'. On the one hand, this means noting that the teachers, through verbal communication, always make themselves more or less well understood and more or less show the students that they understand them. On the other hand, the point is to note how the teacher's way of communicating – observable, e.g. through facial expression, body position, body movements, and through tone of voice – influences the students' perception of the situation. Teachers who possess relational competence make themselves understood, while showing their students that they understand them and that they respect them – as well as themselves. Simply put, such teachers are skilled at coordinating their speech and gestures with those of the students. Video 2 portrays a parent–teacher conference in which the teacher reviews the student's performance while repeatedly pointing out that the student needs to show a stronger presence in the classroom. The teacher in question seems to focus completely on conveying the assessments from fellow teachers. She communicates without being sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of the child (or the parent); she expresses no concern either verbally or non-verbally that the participants be on the same 'channel'. As we saw in the thematic analysis, a couple of preservice teachers referred to the monological nature of this skit. For example, Nick wrote: 'The teacher hasn't shown any interest in letting the student express how she thinks and feels, but instead the teacher both asks and answers the questions for the student'. But this is actually one of few exceptions. A clearly predominant portion of the responses address issues other than communication.

Second, preservice teachers presumably need to better understand the aspect of relational competence termed 'differentiation competence'. This entails noting that teachers always maintain a certain degree of closeness and distance in relation to their students. Teachers possessing relational competence proactively ensure an adequate distance between themselves and their students – as well as between the students – thereby creating a productive state of tension that vitalizes relationships.

A few preservice teachers commented on video 3 in this regard, noting that the teacher allows the 'disruptive' student too much leeway. For example, Liza writes: 'The teacher is attuned to the behaviour of the students, but does too much to adapt to it'. Whether this interpretation is plausible is open to question, but the point here is that the preservice teachers did consider the question of closeness and distance in the relationship. However, such comments are exceptions.

Third, preservice teachers presumably need to better understand the aspect of relational competence termed 'socio-emotional competence'.[9] Teachers possessing relational competence respond in a way that encourages feelings of pride or addresses feelings of shame in a productive manner. Here the point is to note how the teachers, in and through their verbal and non-verbal communication, more or less effectively interpret the students' as well as their own emotional responses. The actions of the teacher in video 2, the parent–teacher conference, cause the student to become more and more discouraged, which becomes apparent as among other things the student blushes, stares at the desk, and becomes reluctant to speak. Simply put, the teacher causes the student to feel ashamed. The teacher does not seem to acknowledge the student's emotional responses. The preservice teachers' responses include some isolated examples noting this central theme – Tina writes that: 'The dejection of the student is apparent and this discourages the student–teacher relationship…', but otherwise these events seem to go unnoticed.

In summary, we propose that the development needs of the preservice teachers, seen from the standpoint of thematization and conceptualization, concern skills such as describing and interpreting (a) how teachers communicate verbally and non-verbally; (b) what teachers and students think and feel during communication; (c) how teachers can contribute to more effective communication by showing empathy for the student's side of the relationship; (d) how teachers can encourage an adequate degree of closeness and distance in relationships; (e) how teachers can encourage feelings of pride, avoid subjecting students to humiliating situations, and deal with feelings of shame experienced, both their students' and their own; and (f) how teacher–student communication affects their relationship, as well as other relationships and, especially, student learning and development in various regards.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to give a theoretical, as well as an empirical, contribution to the field of teachers' relational competence. The theoretical contribution was to conceptualize teachers' relational competence according to Thomas Scheff's theory of interpersonal relationships, including concepts such as social bonds, attunement, differentiation, and shame/pride. The main concept, social bonds, represents a temporary, dynamic, and unpredictable process of behavior and experience. Themes of specific importance for the quality of the bonds are how well individuals communicate, how they regulate the degree of closeness and distance in relationships, and how they manage emotions. These themes have been linked to three key building blocks of relational competence: communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socio-emotional competence.

The proposed conceptualization has several advantages. First, it turns the attention away from an interpretation of relational competence which emphasizes teachers' self-

reflection (cf. Matthiesen 2016; Matthiesen and Gottlieb 2016), focusing instead on the dynamic and sometimes unpredictable interactions between students and teachers. This view also implies that relational competence is a capability that can be learned and improved, which, in turn, highlights the need to support the development of relational competence for preservice teachers. Fibaek Laursen (2004), for instance, argues that relational competence could be developed, no matter what personality traits the (pre-service) teacher may have. Second, teachers' relational competence can be defined with greater precision, as compared to the conventional and more general interpretation of this competence, for instance in terms of meeting students and parents with openness and respect or showing empathy (Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015). This precision provides the possibility to identify potential strengths and/or development needs of teachers in relation to relational competence, which was the purpose of the empirical part of this study.

In the empirical study, a methodology involving authentic situations, simulated through digital video, was piloted as a means of investigating how preservice teachers analyze the teacher–student relationship. The responses produced by the preservice teachers were subjected to thematic analysis. This analysis suggested that the preservice teachers mainly focus on other aspects in the situations displayed, rather than the teacher–student inter-action. The findings could, therefore, indicate that the preservice teachers are not able to discern the teacher–student interaction in the situations (i.e. they do not see it, because they do not know what to look for) and/or do not have the appropriate professional language to communicate about teachers' relational competence.

By applying the conceptualization of relational competence according to Scheff's theory of interpersonal relationships, more specific development needs of these pre-service teachers could be identified in terms of communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socio-emotional competence. Once identified, measures can be taken in order to address these needs, which means that this methodology can have important implications for teacher education. Most importantly, since the findings suggest that the preservice teachers may not be able to discern the teacher–student interaction in the situations, the criteria for the three aspects of teacher competence can be used to guide the attention of preservice teachers and teacher educators. Using the criterion 'communicative competence', the preservice teachers could focus on how well teachers and students understand each other and show each other adequate respect. Through the criterion 'differentiation competence', the preservice teachers could focus on the degree of closeness and distance, i.e. the space between teacher and student, as well as on the teacher's responsibility for making this space productive. Finally, the criterion 'socio-emotional competence' allows the preservice teachers to observe and reflect on the teachers', as well as the students', emotions, and how emotions may promote (or counteract) educational purposes.

7.1. Limitations and conclusions

The main contribution of this study has been to develop a tripartite conceptualization of teachers' relational competence using Thomas Scheff's theory of interpersonal relation-ships. Furthermore, this theoretical conceptualization has been used in order to identify preservice teachers' development needs in terms of relational competence, which can

then be used to support their future development. It should be noted, in relation to the empirical findings, that this is a small-scale pilot study with a very limited number of participants. The findings may, therefore, depend on the specific individuals, and the development needs of the preservice teachers may not necessarily generalize to any other population of preservice teachers, not even at the same university. Also, the focus of this study was to investigate how preservice teachers analyze simulated situations. Consequently, no claims can be made regarding how the respondents act (or would act) in 'real situations'. Still, analyzing preservice teachers' responses to the simulated situations have provided important insights on how to make further developments of the methodology, which is also a significant contribution of this article.

7.2. Further developments of the methodology

The shortcomings in the preservice teachers' responses can be used as a basis for developing the methodology further. As an example, the preservice teachers generally reacted to the situations portrayed in the videos as avoidable, or manageable, depending on how the lesson was organized. There appeared to be a shared understanding among the preservice teachers that certain strategies for organizing teaching provide predictable results, regardless of the specific situation, and that unexpected situations can be prevented by means of established criteria or collaborative exercises. To challenge such an understanding, the preservice teachers would have to encounter situations where the same (or similar) strategies for organizing lessons lead to different outcomes.

In the pilot study, the interpretations by the individual preservice teachers could have been challenged through a comparison with analyses made by their peers, who had analyzed the same situations. From the preservice teachers' analysis of the third video, which was undertaken following feedback from their peers, it is obvious that this feedback did not result in changes in how the preservice teachers analyzed the situations in the videos. A possible explanation for this is that the preservice teachers in the study group shared the same viewpoint (i.e. that certain strategies for organizing teaching provide predictable results and that unexpected situations can be prevented). Consequently, this viewpoint is not challenged by reviewing each other's responses. Possibly, it would, therefore, be better to allow the preservice teachers to engage with a more nuanced analysis, performed by a more skillful person, rather than the analysis of a peer.

Another possibility would be to work with simulated situations, such as role play, which can change dynamically in relation to how the preservice teachers act (cf. Lucander et al. 2012). Instead of just writing analyses, the preservice teachers could then be given the opportunity to test their proposed solutions, and the other preservice teachers/actors could react to the preservice teachers' actions, resulting in different outcomes depending on how the preservice teachers decide to act. In this way, the preservice teachers could also provide feedback and build on each other's actions.

Another aspect noted in the preservice teachers' responses in the pilot study was that they failed to pay attention to the specifics of the situation, including details that gave information about the relational competence of the teacher. Consequently, the way that the teachers adapted their communication and flexibility in reacting or interacting with the students was not observed. Instead, primarily organizational solutions emerged,

such as how the students were placed in the classroom or how they were divided into groups, but also opinions concerning the competence of the teachers. The preservice teachers would, therefore, benefit from support in discerning these details in the videos. The purpose of the pilot study was to have the preservice teachers receive such support through access to explicit criteria. Based on their analysis of the third video, which was conducted using the criteria, this support was clearly inadequate. A possible explanation for this is that the preservice teachers lacked a sufficient understanding of the criteria (cf. Carless 2006; Price et al. 2010). Future implementations, therefore, need to include ways for the preservice teachers to familiarize themselves with the criteria, for instance by using model answers or exemplars along with the criteria (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2002; Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003). Another possibility would be to allow the preservice teachers to actively interpret and use the criteria, for example, by creating their own videos in which they themselves exemplify and give concrete meaning to the criteria (cf. Rosaen et al. 2008; van Es and Sherin 2008).

In summary, we see several opportunities for future research where the current conceptualization of relational competence, as well as the methodology piloted, can be further developed. By allowing preservice teachers to engage with professional analyses, conducted by a more skillful person, rather than assessing analyses made by peers, the preservice teachers' interpretations of the situations displayed in the videos may be challenged by other perspectives. Model answers or exemplars, as well as creating own videos, may also aid in exemplifying and giving concrete meaning to the criteria, which may support the preservice teachers in discerning important aspects of the teacher–student interaction that, otherwise, go unnoticed. We also see opportunities for research that engages preservice teachers in role play, as one additional method of identifying various interpretations and responses.

Notes

1. LÄRK stands for 'lärarstudenters relationskompetens', which when translated into English reads 'preservice teachers' relational competence'.
2. Micro-teaching means that preservice teachers conduct and record mini-lessons and then engage in conversation about what is happening in the videos.
3. The presentation of Scheff's theory is partly based on Aspelin (1999, 2006).
4. Retzinger (1991, 30) writes that 'the regulation of togetherness and separateness is a life force – an existential fact of life'.
5. Over-differentiation and under-differentiation are thus two forms of alienation, while adequate regulation of closeness and distance is considered to be an ideal situation in interpersonal communication.
6. Scheff is considered to be a pioneer in the area of research 'the sociology of emotions' (see, e.g. Kemper 1990).
7. Video three is based on a classroom episode in Ann-Louise Ljungblad's (2016) doctoral dissertation.
8. All names are fictitious.
9. Concerning this point, please note that the questions, criteria, etc. distributed to the preservice teachers in the project did not focus on emotional aspects. We felt that such aspects require greater attention than the scope of this project allowed in order to become sufficiently meaningful. The development needs in question can, therefore, not be viewed as fundamental to the material in the same way as the other two aspects.

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