The 'balancing acts' of building positive relationships with students: Secondary school teachers' perspectives in England and Spain

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Relationship building is not unambiguously seen as a central aspect of effective teaching.
- Teachers mostly frame relationship building as each teacher's personal choice.
- Teachers feel they need to juggle conflicting elements in their relationships with students.
- Teachers experience challenges in managing authority and relationships, especially with behaviourally challenging students.
- Strengthening teachers' skills to build relationships while protecting their well-being should be a priority.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores teachers' views on the salience of relationships with students in their professional roles, and the benefits and potential tensions associated with relationship building. Thematic analyses of semi-structured interviews conducted in England and Spain with 20 secondary school teachers show an ambiguous status of relationship building, with diverse views on its centrality in teachers' professional roles. Teachers also describe the complex balancing acts they perform in relationships with students and express difficulties and uncertainties around well-being, authority, and student behaviour.

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Despite teachers' legal duty of care towards students, relational pedagogy still receives less attention than subject content knowledge and didactics in teacher training. The current policy context with the salience of performativity in educational discourse (Ball, 2003; Meng, 2009; Sachs, 2016) and an emphasis on disciplinary expertise or subject-matter knowledge as defining the teaching profession (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009) may be inadvertently relegating relationships to a lower-priority position.

Learner-centred approaches have criticised the excessive emphasis on technical issues and advocated for putting learners' personal needs and student-teacher interpersonal relationships at the centre of education (Cornelius-White, 2007; McCombs, 2001). Indeed, educational and teaching research is clear that positive student-teacher relationships are fundamental for students' learning and well-being (Cornelius-White, 2007; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Roorda, Koomen, & Oort, 2011; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005).

In contrast, we know comparatively little about the importance of student-teacher relationships for teachers and the salience of relationships with students in their professional role (Aldrup, Klusmann, Lüdtke, Göllner, & Trautwein, 2018; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Furthermore, research on how teachers negotiate relationships in their day-to-day life can contribute to expanding the valuable though still limited evidence on teachers' struggles and hesitations around managing relationships and boundaries in their interactions with students (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schultz, 2009; Laletas & Reupert, 2016). Therefore, in response to calls for

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research that can provide additional insights on teachers' perspectives about student-teacher relationships and on how teachers in different contexts perceive care in teaching practice (Laletas & Reupert, 2016; Velasquez, West, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013), this study aims to explore (1) the salience of relationships with students in how teachers define their professional roles and (2) teachers' views about the benefits and potential tensions associated with relationship building, in two different cultural settings: England and Spain.

1. Teaching and relationships with students

Compared to the numerous studies on the importance of relationships with teachers for students' outcomes (e.g. McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), much less is known about the impact of such relationships on teachers' lives. There is increasing evidence that managing students' disruptive behaviour is a significant source of teachers' stress and burn-out (e.g. Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014), but a sole reliance on this approach would provide an incomplete view of the reality of student-teacher relationships. Aldrup et al. (2018) explained that the quality of student-teacher relationships is a key mediating factor for the effects of students' disruptive behaviour on teachers' occupational well-being. Furthermore, recent works have emphasised that relationships with students can promote teachers' well-being because they meet the teacher's need for relatedness (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011). Therefore, relationships can be as important a source of well-being for teachers as they are for students, which past research has frequently neglected.

As noted by Spilt et al. (2011), teachers can vary in the extent to which they feel responsible for developing close relationships with students or in their understanding of the potential benefits of positive student-teacher relationships. This can result in some teachers disregarding the importance of the relational aspects of teaching. This situation seems to be more prevalent in secondary education. Compared to their primary school colleagues, secondary school teachers have been characterised by an increased professional and physical distance in their interactions with students and less attention to emotional aspects (Hargreaves, 2000). Students also describe connectedness with teachers as a low-prevalence phenomenon in secondary school, and they are of the opinion that the majority of their teachers are not interested in building relationships with students (García-Moya, Brooks & Moreno, 2019).

2. Qualitative studies on the relational experiences of teachers: insights and pending questions

Grossman et al. (2009, p. 273) stated that teaching is 'complex work that looks deceptively simple', which can certainly be applied to relationship building in teaching. Qualitative research on teachers' views about relationships with students can significantly contribute to providing a deeper understanding of teachers' positive experiences and potential challenges in the realm of relationships with students.

The paradox that relationships with students can be both a main reason to enter the profession and one of the most important sources of teaching stress (Klassen et al., 2012) needs additional attention, and examining teachers' views can shed light on this important matter. For example, in O'Connor's (2008) phenomenological study, humanities teachers saw caring about students as a deliberate personal choice, which was not generally externally rewarded. This finding calls for an examination of the teachers' views on their professional role. Given the somewhat ambiguous definition of teachers' professional roles and the increasing demands on teachers, teachers may see caring about students outside of their in-role performance as more of a voluntary involvement that benefits the students but is not formally rewarded, what Somech (2016) referred to as *organisational citizenship behaviour*.

Qualitative studies including pre-service and in-service secondary teachers in the US and Australia have also suggested that teachers may struggle in negotiating relationships with students; they feel that they are not adequately trained to do so and may end up trying to set and adjust boundaries based on their own experiences while teaching (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Laletas & Reupert, 2016). Some teachers prioritise instructional aspects over interpersonal aspects of classroom management, which disregards the complementarity of emotional and instrumental dimensions in student-teacher relationships (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Krane, Karlsson, Ness, & Binder, 2016). An emphasis on control as a standard for effective class management can also lead to perceiving caring student-centred approaches as in conflict with classroom management goals, resulting in decisions to choose one to the exclusion of the other (Kunter et al., 2013; Weinstein, 1998). Teachers' conceptions about both caring and control in relationships with students can be influenced by context and culture; thus, additional studies, and especially cross-cultural studies, would be highly beneficial.

3. Aims and context of the present study

Which views do teachers hold about the centrality of student-teacher relationships in teaching, and what are their experiences around relationship building? Guided by this research question, the aim of this study is to explore (1) how salient student–teacher relationships are in how teachers define their professional role and (2) teachers' views about the benefits and potential tensions associated with relationship building. Since the study of teachers' perspectives on closeness and care in their relationships with students has received more attention in early education (e.g. Goldstein & Lake, 2000; James, 2012; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Vogt, 2002), this study focuses on secondary school teachers. In addition, cultural beliefs have been considered to influence teachers' views on relatedness with students (Klassen et al., 2012), and conceptions of caring relationships are seen as context- and culturally dependent (Klassen et al., 2012; Laletas & Reupert, 2016), so we decided to conduct the present study in two different cultural settings: England and Spain.

English and Spanish education systems are characterised by a predominance of state schools, and their educational stages are roughly equivalent. In both countries, teaching in secondary schools involves specialist subject teachers who interact with different groups of students for the limited amount of time allocated to their subject.

However, there are marked differences when it comes to teacher policies. The model of teaching employment in Spain is career-based, whereas England's has been characterised as a position-based system (OECD, 2018). The implications are that secondary school teaching in Spain is mostly public service, with competitive entry exams to access the profession typically followed by lifelong employment. In contrast, secondary teachers in England do not become public servants. Multiple points of access to the profession exist, and employment depends on success when applying to specific positions; the prospective teacher needs to show that their competences match the job description. England is currently facing challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers, whereas Spain has experienced no problems in this regard.

The performativity phenomenon is much more salient in England, whose educational system relies heavily on regular school

and teacher assessments. Schools' league tables are produced on the basis of Ofsted results, and there is a strong emphasis on students' performance as a key indicator of teaching quality. According to TALIS 2013 (OECD, 2014), virtually all teachers in England have been formally appraised and received feedback following observations of their teaching (99%). In contrast, only 59.3% of teachers in Spain reported classroom observations (compared to the TALIS average of 92.5%), and 36.3% of teachers have never been appraised.

Finally, some differences around pastoral care may be worth noting. In England, pastoral care is more structured and tends to be organised around a network of different roles (form tutors, heads of year, student support staff, and counsellors) in a given school. Such a network of specialised support does not exist in Spain, where one teacher is assigned a tutor role, and the only specialised professional is the counsellor, who can work in a school or group of schools. An additional relevant feature in England is that teachers have explicit statutory guidance on safeguarding issued by the Department for Education (e.g. Department for Education, 2018). In addition to providing standards for safeguarding, the English guidelines include the teachers' obligation to adhere to an explicit code of conduct. The need to observe proper professional boundaries in relationships with students is one of the aspects of this code of personal and professional conduct emphasised in the teachers' standards in England (Department for Education, 2011).

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Twenty teachers were recruited for the present study, 11 from a southern county in England and nine from a city in the south of Spain. For recruitment, all teachers with students aged 11 to 18 working in the two study locations were considered eligible for the study, without any other *a-priori* requirements.

Information about the study was provided directly via email or phone to teachers when possible, or alternatively via schools. The study information was also distributed via university email, with colleagues being asked to forward the study information to any teachers they might know in secondary schools. The aforementioned strategies were combined with snowballing, meaning that participating teachers were asked to share the information about the study with other teachers who might be interested in

participating.

In addition to achieving a balanced number of participants from the two countries of interest, the procedure described above resulted in a diverse sample in terms of gender, school subjects, and years of teaching experience (see Table 1). Regarding their schools' characteristics, teachers in England worked in mixed state schools, the majority in non-religious schools (90.1%). Teachers in Spain worked in mixed non-religious (55.6%) and religious (44.4%) schools, mostly state or state-subsidised private schools (88.9%). According to school proxy information, approximately 10% of the teachers in each setting worked at socio-economically disadvantaged schools.

4.2. Data collection

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews that were conducted in a private room either at school or at the university campus, at the teachers' convenience. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, providing 'a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions' (Kvale, 2007, p. 9). The interviewers used the interview topic guide presented in Appendix 1. While providing a common general structure, the guide was used flexibly, with follow-up questions to further probe the views expressed by the participants being prioritised over covering each of the examples of questions in the guide. Interviews lasted 45−60 minutes on average.

4.3. Data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and subthemes that can provide a rich description of participants' views about their professional role and their relationships with students. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for this study because it focuses on individual lived experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Clarke & Braun, 2016) and allows for using an inductive approach to identify patterned meanings in participants' expressed views (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The analysis started with several readings of the first interviews to note the main topics discussed on the margins and proceeded to

Table 1
Study participants.

Country	Sex	Years of teaching experience[a]	Main subject/area of teaching	Pseudonym
England	Male	1−2 years	Maths	Mr. Jones
England	Female	21−30 years	English	Ms. Green
England	Female	3−5 years	Design & Technology	Ms. Wood
England	Female	11−20 years	Maths	Ms. Taylor
England	Female	6−10 years	Information and Communication Technology	Ms. Robinson
England	Male	1−2 years	Physical Education	Mr. Johnson
England	Male	21−30 years	Media communication	Mr. Walker
England	Female	6−10 years	Psychology	Ms. Evans
England	Female	6−10 years	Religion	Ms. Davies
England	Female	More than 30 years	Science	Ms. Wright
England	Female	3−5 years	Physical Education	Ms. Brown
Spain	Male	6−10 years	Spanish	Sergio
Spain	Female	1−2 years	Spanish and Latin	Cristina
Spain	Male	6−10 years	Science	Fernando
Spain	Female	1−2 years	Support in a variety of subjects	Margarita
Spain	Female	21−30 years	English	Lola
Spain	Female	11−20 years	Technology	Encarni
Spain	Male	11−20 years	English	Javier
Spain	Female	21−30 years	English	Carmen
Spain	Male	11−20 years	Philosophy	Pablo

[a] Exact years of experience are known but not provided to protect participants' anonymity.

use a constant comparative method with all the data, as recommended by Silverman (2006). After a phase of in-depth familiarisation with the data including broad structural coding linked to the main areas of interest for the study, collating relevant data from each participant in a table, and using memo noting to highlight important ideas and identify linkages and tensions in the views expressed, we proceeded with the usual steps in thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2013): we created a detailed coding framework in Nvivo Pro 11 and coded the 20 interviews, allowing for refining codes and adding new codes as the analyses progressed. One of the authors was the main person responsible for the work in all these stages, and she discussed the different steps and the initial and higher-level coding at different points of the process with another author who acted as an additional analytic auditor. This strategy facilitates a more in-depth engagement with the data, as well as increased openness to alternative interpretations and to the identification of complexities and inconsistencies in the data.

Our presentation of findings follows existing recommendations for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013): we sought a balance between analytic commentary on the organising concepts behind the themes and quotes that illustrate and support analytic claims; we ensured comprehensive data treatment during the analyses and made a conscious effort to balance clarity in the examples with representation of as many different participants as possible when selecting quotes; and we paid attention to deviant cases and discussed them in the presentation of our findings.

Regarding modifications to the presented material, we used pseudonyms instead of the real participants' names/surnames (the use of titles and surnames for English teachers and first names for Spanish teachers reflects the existing different conventions in the two examined settings). We also edited quotes to facilitate reading, with changes made consisting of deleting repetitions, hesitations, and fillers ('like', 'and so', etc.), or interviewers' humming in the middle of participants' discourse, where they did not add to the interpretation of the excerpts. Although the analyses were conducted with the transcripts in the participants' original language, quotes from interviews in Spain have been translated into English in the findings section.

Ethical approval

Similar ethical standards, in accordance with the Helsinki declaration for research with human participants, were used in both countries (University of Hertfordshire Ethics Committee for Health and Human Sciences, HSK/SF/UH/02456; Comité Coordinador de Ética de la Investigación Biomédica de Andalucía, PEIBA: 0188-N-17). Informed active consent was obtained from all participants, who could also withdraw from the study at any point without needing to provide a reason for it.

5. Findings

Findings are presented in two sections that correspond with the two aims of the study. Each section focuses on the identified themes (see Table 2), typically moving from a more descriptive level of analysis supported by illustrative quotes to a more interpretative analytical approach, where detailed comment on a specific quote/s is used to make additional analytical points (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

5.1. Student-teacher relationships and teachers' definitions of their professional role

Relationship building: a part and parcel of teaching vs a teacher's optional choice. All teachers mentioned that positive relationships with students were important, but their views on the centrality of relationship building in the teacher role were quite diverse, falling under two different themes in our analysis. On the one hand, there was a view that *relationship building is a part and parcel of good teaching*. The organising concept under this theme was an awareness of a bidirectional relationship between relationship building and learning and a view of instruction as a relational process, as therefore inseparable from relationship building. One of the clearest articulations of this view was that of Ms. Wright:

> I think if you haven't got both [*it refers to teaching your subject and building relationships*] firmly intertwined and enmeshed, then you're not doing your job properly. Which sounds a bit harsh and probably a bit rude, but it's not meant to. What I mean is the two go hand-in-hand, they're almost impossible to separate. Good relationships make good learning; good learning engenders good relationships; it's a positive spiral. When relationships are good, excellent, you know, you've got that rapport and the kids have got that rapport with each other, learning will happen so much more quickly. And if the learning is appropriate, and the kids are engaged in it and they are

Table 2
Names and definitions of the themes (overarching themes, themes and subthemes) identified in the present study.

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND TEACHERS' DEFINITIONS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLE (AIM 1)	
(T) Relationship building is a part and parcel of teaching	Views of teaching where relationship building is seen as an inherent part of teaching. Teaching is seen as a relational practice and learning and relationships are presented as inextricably linked and reinforcing each other
(T) Relationship building as a teacher's optional choice	Views of teaching where relationship building is seen as an optional aspect of teaching. Specific teachers may or may not prioritise relationship building, which results in different approaches to teaching in todays' schools
(T) The professional teacher	Views that emphasize the importance of professional standards in defining teachers' roles in the realm of student-teacher relationships
BENEFITS AND TENSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH RELATIONSHIPS BUILDING (AIM 2)	
(OT) The balancing acts of relationships	Overarching idea, which underpins the identified themes, that achieving positive relationships requires maintaining a difficult balance by juggling conflicting elements in student-teacher interactions
(T) Relationships favour and threaten teachers' well-being	Student-teacher relationships are linked to teachers' well-being and experienced as both a facilitator and a risk for teachers' well-being
(T) Relationships favour and threaten students' learning	Student-teacher relationships are linked to students' learning and experienced as both a facilitator and a risk for students' learning
(ST) The challenge of negotiating authority	Authority is seen as a prominent element in understanding the links between student-teacher relationships and students' learning, with teachers developing diverse strategies to navigate the experienced challenges in this area

OT = Overarching theme; T = Theme; ST = Subtheme.

learning to be learners, the reverse is true; the relationships get better as a result because they feel more confident in you, they feel more trusting in you, they feel more trusting in themselves.

On the other hand, *relationship building as a teacher's optional choice* groups perspectives that share the common principle that how much to invest in student-teacher relationships is a choice that each teacher makes. The discourse tended to present relationship building and no relationship building as characterising different approaches to teaching:

Ms. Wood: I think it is very much about the person that you are because some teachers won't leave their area; they're just interested in getting teaching and learning done and achieving as much as that group can achieve by being results-driven, but I don't think that is sustainable for teaching, that you can't continue through like that without having some social interaction outside of a classroom; you need to understand them as individuals, and I find that there are a lot of teachers that possibly butt heads with students because they don't understand or there's a personality conflict. But, you know, each person I suppose is an individual in themselves again, but it's finding the right balance between knowing how to talk to them and there being a mutual respect between student and teacher.

Javier (translated): I think you have to be open to these things. There are people who don't want to; they come and want to teach their subject and leave, but I think that's too cold a relationship. I think it has to be different to that; you have to talk to them, to know what their interests are, to plan the doubts they are going to ask … I think having a good relationship with them is going to help in every aspect of teaching. That's my opinion.

As is apparent in the examples, there was some hinted criticism towards colleagues who do not pay much attention to relationship building, but overall there was some acknowledgement that efforts to build positive relationships with students are optional, a teacher's choice. There was also a tendency to legitimise not paying attention to relationships as an alternative valid approach to teaching, which some of our participants even described as excellent teaching:

Ms. Taylor: I think you can be an excellent teacher who doesn't have a good relationship, but you will lose some people along the way, so there are plenty of absolutely lovely students who will learn a lot from a particular teacher who is very, very, very good at explaining but isn't friendly, but I think it will turn some people away.

Carmen (translated): Yes, in fact I have colleagues who do not pay any attention to the emotional aspects and they are magnificent teachers. And they also motivate students to work in their way. I don't know how they do it because I can't get it right [*laughs*]. I'm very maternal and so the emotional part is very important for me, to get along with my students, but with the subject only they [*refers to some of her teacher colleagues*] know how to give them enough so that they improve, and they don't pay attention to whether the student has problems at home or to the student's emotional situation … they want to know nothing about that. But they know how to give the student academically what they need so that they improve.

Carmen's view at different points of the interview reflects some ambivalence on whether a lack of attention to relational aspects results in a more restricted approach to teaching, but the 'teaching

your subject' element in defining the teacher's role seemed to prevail. Even more, unlike the rest of the teachers we interviewed, Carmen even presented building relationships as her way to compensate for what she framed as her limitations as a teacher. She saw paying attention to emotional aspects and building trust with students as being unnecessary for other (in her view, more competent) teachers, who have something innate in their character or some ability to make their teaching interesting that she and other colleagues lack:

Carmen (translated): And there are teachers that, in an innate way, get the students to pay attention to them. There also are teachers that are very charismatic and whatever they say students are spellbound [*laughs*] listening … you know? It depends on the person. And, for example, there are teachers that don't go into the emotional aspects at all … but when they give an explanation, they do it in such an interesting way that students love it. Everyone seeks their strategy to connect with students. Developing that trust … As I said, in my case and in others', in the case of the teachers that are less interesting and less charismatic, developing trust at a personal level, so that they feel comfortable with you and want to keep on working.

The professional teacher. Some spontaneous discussion of what is professional and unprofessional as a teacher provided complementary information on internal and external criteria of professionalism that can align or conflict with the teacher's own definition of their roles and views on relationship building.

Compared to good academic results and maintaining order in the class, personalised relationships with students (getting to know the students, taking an interest in their hobbies and outside of school life, etc.) had a more dubious status as a standard of good teaching. Teachers in England in particular articulated a need to set boundaries between the teacher and the student as a part of maintaining professionalism:

Mr. Jones: It's definitely about finding the right balance between being a friend and being a teacher. Because you can't be, and nobody would expect you to be their best friend in the world, and if you were, questions would probably be asked. But there it is, you have to be able to be trusted by them but also know that you have got an air of professionalism about it.

The use of external criteria in the definition of professional practice was more salient in England. For example, safeguarding guidelines were mentioned in almost every interview in England when discussing students' disclosures, whereas in Spain teachers' descriptions of those episodes focused on how that teacher usually approaches disclosure situations with no mention of external regulations.

In the example below, we can see how the conversation is framed and later reframed towards the more neutral established procedure that seems to represent professionalism for teachers in England. Specifically, we see safeguarding mentioned at the very beginning, followed by the metaphor of a 'surrogate mum' to describe how this teacher interacts with students who approach her with problems, but this is immediately toned down by clarifying that this is done 'in a professional way'. As we see in the second extract, when the teacher is asked about her mention of 'a professional way', professionalism is finally presented as evidenced by following a very rational process, and the metaphor of parenting is replaced by a client-counsellor model.

Ms. Wright: I do very often find students will talk to me or ask my opinion about something. Obviously with my safeguarding

head on I have to be very careful; however, even if you put safeguarding aside, they come and ask me about, you know, I've fallen out with so-and-so and I don't know what to do or something like that, then yeah, I will make time to sit and listen and I'm a parent, you know, I'm a mum. They tend to sort of use me as a sort of surrogate mum sometimes in a professional way but they will come and ask mum what she thinks type thing, and I'm quite happy to do that and yeah, if they approach me, if they ask me, of course I'll give them time.

[*After the interviewer asks her about her mention of a professional way*] By just treating them as though they're not your own child clearly because you have a different relationship there, but just being aware they're someone's child and thinking how would their parent want that response to be, if you see what I mean. And also just by, rather than doling out advice, by just reflecting back what the problem is, listening actively and then summarising their problems and I think I've heard, what I think you've heard from me, or I've heard from you is that this is what's happening and you're not sure because …, and they go, yeah, and so okay, let's work together, let's think together, what possible actions could you take that would help this situation? So it's sort of like a, almost like a counsellor, like a sort of professional side-by-side with that child, helping them to rationalise, process what's happened and think of the next step but in a safe way. They don't feel judged, belittled, fobbed off, patronised or anything like that. It's just got to be very, almost client-counsellor type thing if that makes, yeah.

Instead of professionalism as an element to temper or set limits for relationships, the clearest explicit mention of professionalism among Spanish teachers presented the building of psychological closeness with students as one of this teacher's personal standards for doing a good job. The analysis of the whole interview suggests that this is a very solid conviction in Pablo, but he is aware that his view in this regard does not match the prevailing external standards in education policy, as represented by the exclusive focus on academic content and the neglect of a holistic approach to learning that includes students' personal development and well-being.

Pablo (translated): The kid does not come to you for no reason; you have to open the door, you have to foster empathy and a psychological closeness environment. If, and only if, like in a double condition, that will happen. If it does not happen, you will assess them as everybody else, and that kid will be at disadvantage, so I think I'm not doing my work properly, because I would be only assessing academic outcomes. […] The system wants us to become knowledge deliverers, but for that we have Wikipedia and encyclopaedias like Encarta or the traditional Larousse. I think the teacher's role is to adapt knowledge to the circumstances and possibilities.

5.2. Benefits and tensions associated with relationship building

The balancing acts of relationships. An overarching theme in teachers' accounts was that relationship building was a very complex process with continuous balancing acts required on the part of teachers. Teachers elaborated on how the same personalised type of interaction that serves to connect with students can be damaging in specific situations, such as dealing with problem behaviour, in which a difficult exercise of de-personalising was seen as being fundamental to protect relationships. Pablo described this as the challenge 'to bring to order without confrontation' and stressed the

importance of avoiding 'creating emotional tension'. Ms. Wright characterised teachers' appropriate response to disruptive behaviour in similar terms (a 'de-personalised', 'very calm', 'not confrontational' type of interaction) and stressed the importance of this ability when it came to the so-called difficult students:

You may have a … particular student; perhaps the relationship isn't good to start with, perhaps you get off on the wrong foot or you don't 'get' each other [*laughs*]. However, your job as the adult is to persevere with that and to find a way around it and to find a way in, until it works and okay, yeah, student x might have been <u>extremely</u> irritating; however, they're the child, you're the adult. You need to be able to step back, de-personalise, analyse, reflect. 'What was the trigger that caused his or her behaviour? Was it something I did or said, what could I do or say that's different that will not happen again?' […] and accept that they will test the boundaries, they will try you out, they will test you, that's what kids do, it's normal, it's part of development. So it's not personal, it's just them learning and growing, so stop, take a step back, and then try again.

Despite being convinced of the benefits of having positive relationships with students, teachers clearly saw relationship building as a double-edged sword. When approaching relationships with students, teachers were wary of several risks, which mirrored to some extent the very same areas they mentioned when talking about benefits of positive student-teacher relationships: teachers' well-being and students' learning. A more detailed presentation on these two themes, which share the common denominator of teachers feeling that they need to juggle somewhat conflicting elements, follows.

Relationships favour and threaten teachers' well-being. All the teachers who participated in this study considered that having positive relationships with students was important for their well-being. Relationships were seen as an essential and, for some, the main source of joy and job satisfaction for the teacher.

Mr. Walker: You build up this relationship with them and they trust you and that's really nice. I think that's one of the most positive aspects of the work.

Ms. Evans: I think that's the bit I really enjoy and otherwise I would have been out the door a long time ago. I love the relationships.

However, the well-being of teachers with a strong investment in relationships with students was perceived as being compromised at some points, especially when, as a result of that closer student-teacher relationship, students confided in them some of their out-of-school problems or worries:

Ms. Davies: If you have a good relationship with students, that's when it happens more. My husband's a teacher as well and he's not a build a relationship type teacher, he's a 'you come into my classroom, we'll have fun learning but at the end then you leave, and you do not come back unless it's lesson time again'. And so he doesn't get this as much as I do, but you'll have a few disclosures of sensitive events and things like that, and I suppose you probably do, you do definitely get it more when you have a good relationship with a child because they trust you and they feel like if they have to talk to an adult about something that they'd rather it was you than somebody else, and actually that's really lovely. Obviously, you can hear some really harrowing things and it can be quite distressing for you as a person, but you know that you're really helping that child out, eventually.

In some cases, teachers used de-personalising or marking distances with students as a way to protect themselves, to minimise stress and the potential negative impact on their well-being:

Mr. Jones: I think one of the important things that you have to realise as a teacher is that you have to make sure you don't draw on the problems from them, like a student might tell me about a problem they have at home and I won't, and this might sound a bit heartless, but I won't spend all night thinking about it and worrying about it because if I did that every time someone came to me with a problem I would never sleep *[laughs]*.

However, stepping back was not easy for many of these teachers with close relationships with their students, who tended to put their students first. While they were aware of the costs for their well-being, this kind of stress was sometimes seen as an inevitable or an inherent part of the job:

Ms. Robinson: Sometimes we actually forget about ourselves, to be honest, it's like you're looking after your own children; in a way sometimes we become it because by law, to be honest, we are taking certain responsibility of the parents, so we do treat the young people like our own even if there are hundreds of them that we teach, so you can imagine … And this is why we shouldn't take things personally; everything that's happening is not personal, but at the same time we want them as individuals to be well looked after.

Even when teachers actively tried taking a step back, this was described as a difficult process that took time to master, as explained by Sergio. On several occasions during the interview, Sergio had stressed that for him relationships were at the heart of teaching and that teaching was a very important part of his life, and we see how he struggles here when making a conscious effort to maintain a distance, moving from the metaphor of teaching as a parent-child relationship to the more emotionally neutral service-provider and customer scenario:

Sergio (translated): Many [*talking about students coming to him with problems*]. And I'm learning how not to take them home. Because, besides, I think the service is better. My service is better since I've stopped, I was going to say I've stopped but I haven't stopped yet; I still take stuff home. But since I separated, since I'm starting to separate, since I see that "well, it is your life and you have to learn to …", since I've stopped being a father. I've reached the point where I'm the father to my children and that's it. But to my students, I'm not, and that is an important change. Very important. It is a process, but it is a very important change.

Relationships favour and threaten students' learning. Building positive relationships with students was considered beneficial for the students' learning as well. Positive relationships were frequently described as being strategic to achieve the teachers' goals, since they foster learning and can help reduce problem behaviour.

Mr. Jones: I think you can be a good teacher without a good relationship with the students but I think it's significantly harder. I think if you have a good relationship with students, they're more likely to behave, which means that they will learn. Whereas you don't want to spend 40 minutes of your lesson trying to get them to settle down and the other 20 minutes actually learning.

Lola (translated). Connecting is gaining their trust. If they don't trust you, if there is not complicity at some time, there is going to be a … they are going to close themselves up, and then if they completely close themselves up, they are closed to receive anything you may transmit to them.

Nevertheless, coexisting with a view that positive relationships are helpful for better management of the class and reduced problem behaviour, close relationships with students were also seen as posing a potential risk for students' engagement with academic work. Teachers talked about a delicate balance between maintaining closeness with students and being perceived as an authoritative figure who engages students in school work, with some flagging this as one of the most difficult parts of the job:

Mr. Johnson: I like to consider myself as always a teacher, but I think with the students, they like to know that you can have a bit of fun with them and a bit of a laugh, and I think if you're too strict and too … have the mindset of just a teacher, they don't respect you, from my personal opinion. I think that they want you to kind of open up and see your personality and ask questions about, personal questions, and to a certain extent, I don't have a problem with that as long as they always know, and I'll always make sure if it gets … if they start to think I'm a friend, I'll always make sure that I come back with an authoritative kind of answer or try and make them remember that I am in charge of the lesson. So I think I've got that balance quite well, and they know not to push me and not to challenge me, but they know that they can talk to me and have a laugh and speak to me a bit more informally.

Margarita (translated): To me it is so difficult, I try to do it [*laughs*] as well as I can, but to me it is so difficult because I want them to trust me completely; I want to give them all my love so that they know I'm there, not only as a teacher but to support them in what they need, in whatever I can help you with, but I also have to be careful in how I relate to them so that they understand that I still am their teacher and when it's time to do work and we have to […] And then there is where I have more conflicts, you know? "Because you are the cool teacher, now I don't feel like working." I don't know whether you understand [*laughs*].

In the previous examples, we can see how authority features as an important aspect for teachers, who reflected on *the challenge of negotiating authority* in the context of close relationships with students. Difficulties in this area were navigated in different ways, which frequently involved a teacher's decision to limit their closeness in relationships with students to some extent. This typically appeared in two forms, which we illustrate with Carmen and Ms. Davies:

Carmen (translated): That boundary that if we go personal, if we can be at ease, you'll be able to tell me your things at a personal level, it does not mean that if you don't work, you'll pass. When they have tried that, that because they get along with me that equals having passed, then I have to make a clean break, and I restrict myself to my academic role and that's it.

My relationships with students [*laughs*] are too relaxed sometimes … there is a Spanish saying, "where there is trust, it sucks". I mean that when they see a more relaxed environment, that I'm not an authoritarian person and I'm not serious and I'm usually smiling because it's how I am, I don't know. Then, sometimes, I have to take my controlling role so that things don't go out wild.

Ms. Davies: I think it's easier to have a positive relationship when the behaviour is better because you can have a joke with them more without it all falling into chaos. I think it's quite important to maintain discipline, but there is this thing that I don't know if they even do it with the Teacher Training anymore, but certainly when I trained there was a piece of advice, and it was kind of laughed about but it was on its way out, but I actually do agree with it, which is that you don't smile until Christmas. Now I don't actually not smile 'til Christmas, but you know, certainly in the first few lessons you have to be strict; you have to be firm and then depend … when you've got the lay of the class, are they, you know, generally a well-behaved class or are there a few characters in there, or is it actually the whole class that are quite vibrant, and when you've understood that, then you can alter your behaviour to suit what they need. So for example, I've got a very, very well-behaved and receptive Year 8 class and so, with them, I can have a joke, we can go off topic and discuss other things because I know that the moment I say 'right OK, let's get back to work now', they will.

Carmen describes a reactive approach, in which there is a change towards a less nurturing and more controlling or authoritarian style in response to a perception that the focus on relationships does not result in good management of the class in specific groups. Another pattern, illustrated by Ms. Davies's words, was a somewhat preventive strategy adopted at the beginning of the year, which involved an initial self-imposed neutral approach with a narrower focus on learning that can later be broadened to incorporate relationship building when a good class management has been achieved and the teacher is confident that good behaviour will be maintained; teachers in England related this to the 'don't smile before Christmas' piece of advice that many had been given during their teacher training. Alternation between the more open and personalised style and the more controlling authoritarian style to bring to order or direct to learning during a lesson was also mentioned.

In contrast to the aforementioned reactive and preventive strategies, Fernando emphasised the importance of showing affection to tackle behaviour problems ('very loving, kids need to feel you love them'). He saw caring loving relationships as a tool for changing the dynamics of low engagement in learning or little respect for teachers, 'to break with that ball of everything is bad, you are the worst class, this is unbearable and coming into class angry and serious'. While it would appear that some of the previous teachers used students' behaviour as a thermometer to decide how much to affirm control, Fernando emphasised building on one's self-confidence to create a perception of control in the class. Building on his internal confidence made it possible for him to handle situations in which the order may have been threatened by radiating a pretended sense of control. That way, he avoided the potentially damaging effects of an authoritarian intervention that would perpetuate the negative student-teacher dynamic in challenging groups in terms of behaviour:

There still are teachers that come into class angry, in a bad mood, because they think that is the way to maintain order. And in that class [*he's talking about a specific class which is considered to be one of the most disruptive*], I maintain order, right? I also tell you that I make them think that they work well in my lessons, you know? When I see that they are thinking, "Uh, you are losing control of the class", I think "No, no, me losing control? Not at all." And that is what I mean: that attitude, even if it is pretend, of control, do you know? "That is not it, let's see, you

are talking because I'm letting you talk, now we are going to start …", you know?

6. Discussion

One of the aims of this study was to explore the degree to which secondary school teachers perceived building positive relationships with their students as an inherent part of their professional role. As hypothesised by Spilt et al. (2011), we found variability among teachers: a few teachers saw teaching and building relationships as being impossible to separate; others expressed the view that approaches that disregard relationships with students can be effective too. Investing in relationships with students was most often framed as a personal choice our participants had made, which chimes with O'Connor's (2008) conclusion that teachers *choose* to care. If interpreted in the light of existing discourses of professionalism and teachers' identity (for a review, see Day, 2007), these two different views may reflect a distinction between a broader professional teacher identity (which includes responsibilities for caring for the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in teaching students) and a more instrumental or technical identity, whose main focus is on instructing students to meet academic targets.

In addition, teachers in England seemed to occasionally catch themselves trespassing a line when describing their relationships with students and tended to retreat to safest neutral stances; they seemingly feared that close relationships might jeopardise or put into question their professionalism as teachers. This is in line with formal conceptions of professionalism (Carr, 2005), according to which professional relationships should be of an impersonal and formal nature. Especially when elaborating about students confiding out-of-school problems, teachers in England stressed their attention to safeguarding guidelines and referred to the need for boundaries that restrict levels of closeness in their relationships with students. Teachers in Spain did not spontaneously engage in these kinds of elaborations around professionalism.

These differences may be seen as a natural result of the explicit guidelines and standards on safeguarding and teacher conduct issued by the Department for Education in England (2011, 2018). Managerial discourses in educational policy in England may contribute to an expression of so-called *entrepreneurial* professional identities, with teachers' behaviour being primarily led by compliance with externally defined standards in some contexts (Day, 2007; Sachs, 2001). It may also be that higher levels of involvement in response to students' out-of-school-problem disclosures are more likely to be interpreted as uncalled for in England, because of the availability of a wider network of specialised support in schools. Cultural differences may play a role too, since societies in Mediterranean countries like Spain are considered to be *contact* societies where proximity is frequent and widely accepted as a natural part of social interactions, whereas northern societies including countries such as the United Kingdom are not (Field, 2014). These three between-country differences may result in teachers in England being more mindful of the potential risk that closeness in their student-teacher relationships can be misinterpreted as inappropriate and unprofessional practice (for an in-depth discussion about proximity and human contact being misconstrued as risky situations in today's school, see Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; McWilliam & Jones, 2005).

More broadly, our findings are in line with the dubious status of relationships in professional views of teaching. Performativity and the emphasis on students' achievement as a main indicator of

education quality in the current policy context (Ball, 2003; Meng, 2009; Sachs, 2016) may contribute to this, since they lead to an excessive focus on cognitive and instrumental dimensions of teaching, with the risk that affective and relational aspects are ignored (Day, 2007; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996). In light of our findings, it is fundamental that steps are taken so that policy and teachers' views align with existing scientific evidence, which clearly supports the importance of relational aspects for effective teaching that promotes students' learning and well-being (Cornelius-White, 2007; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011) and that has called into question the dichotomy between academic and relational aspects (Krane et al., 2016). Investment in relationships with students should be emphasised as an essential part of teaching in-role performance, since role ambiguity can lead to grey zones in the job of teachers (Somech, 2016).

Regarding the second aim of our study, teachers emphasised that student-teacher relationships in secondary school are complex, characterised by continuous 'balancing acts'.

First, while our findings support the view that relationships satisfy important needs of teachers and promote well-being and job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2011), teachers' perspectives also suggested that closeness requires additional investment on the part of the teacher. Relationship building is an emotional practice, and some teachers have described an inherent vulnerability linked to the process of building trusting interpersonal relationships with their students (Lasky, 2005). Teachers in our study explained that building close relationships may lead to a greater exposure to students' sensitive disclosures and negative emotions. Like the elementary teachers in Newberry and Davis' work (2008), some of our participants resorted to a more distant approach as a protective measure to avoid emotional costs, but others tended to put their students first and normalised the resulting emotional cost as an inherent part of the profession. These teachers disregarded their own well-being, or perceived their level of involvement as a source of distress, but struggled to break this dynamic. Further examination of supportive mechanisms that can minimise potential stress and emotional burden to teachers is needed to prevent damaging effects on teachers' well-being.

Second, teachers hesitated about relationships and class management. They considered that positive relationships reduced problem behaviour in the classroom, but also feared that close relationships with their students somehow reduced their authority. Teachers' doubts around authority may have to do with predominant conceptions on authority in the schools (Macleod, MacAllister, & Pirrie, 2012; Pirrie & Rafanell, 2017). Authority is frequently viewed as being possessed by the teacher by right and enforced in the classroom, a perspective that recent works have challenged in favour of views of authority as granted through social interactions with students in the classroom (Pirrie & Rafanell, 2017). In addition, dominant conceptions of authority in schools rely on an imbalance between teachers and their students, be it an imbalance of social status (legitimate authority), knowledge (competent authority), or power (coercive authority or authority by inducement). In contrast, personal authority is based on respect and reciprocity and is supported by more horizontal relationships (Macleod et al., 2012). Given that personal authority has a shorter tradition in our schools and that it involves redefining traditional roles, teachers' feelings of uncertainty and doubts on whether their efforts around relationships may have unintended effects on authority in the classroom are understandable. However, previous research indicates that secondary teachers who build close caring relationships are highly valued and respected by their adolescent students (e.g. García-Moya et al., 2019), suggesting that leaving the comfort zone may pay off in the long term.

Unfortunately, confronted with uncertainty, teachers may end up resorting to traditional approaches, especially in classes with challenging behaviour, which is an important stressor for teachers (e.g. Aloe et al., 2014). Our findings suggest that teachers self-regulated in response to students' behaviour, which resonates with research on students' evocative effect: the phenomenon by which students' characteristics such as problem behaviour evoke responses from teachers and have an impact on student-teacher relationships (Nurmi, 2012; Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015). With caring and control frequently seen as conflicting goals by teachers (Kunter et al., 2013; Weinstein, 1998), our teachers' self-regulation attempts seemed to be influenced by an unchallenged premise that feelings of reduced control are the consequence of too much closeness in relationships with students: they adopted a preventive approach (only pursuing closeness after coming to the conclusion that they had a behaviourally safe group of students) or reduced caring and shifted to their 'controlling role' in response to behavioural problems. These approaches are problematic because affirming control in response to problem behaviour can have the unintended negative consequence of reinforcing coercive interaction cycles (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Wrong, 2009; Sutherland & Oswald, 2005).

In contrast, one of our participants referred to closeness and affection as essential tools to reduce problem behaviour and break coercive cycles in the most challenging groups. He also stressed that remaining calm and not doubting himself was fundamental to regaining order when some impasses resulting from students' disruptive behaviour or inattention took place. This points to the importance of teachers' confidence in their approach to classroom management as a key aspect to understand how teachers react to behaviourally challenging groups. Teachers' self-efficacy and other characteristics important for effective classroom management (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Yoon, 2002; Zee & Koomen, 2016) deserve further examination in future studies.

6.1. Limitations, conclusions, and practical implications

This study has some limitations. Most notably, it is important to acknowledge that teachers in our study are probably a subsample of highly motivated teachers when it comes to relationships, since they voluntarily chose to participate in a study about student-teacher relationships with the final goal of improving well-being in the schools. Nevertheless, our aim is not generalisation but to provide some useful insights about the centrality of relationships in secondary school teachers' professional roles and the challenges and dilemmas teachers navigate when trying to build positive relationships with their students. Although additional studies of different teacher profiles would be undoubtedly interesting, if our sample of (most likely) highly motivated teachers who are convinced of the importance of student-teacher relationships still expressed ambivalent experiences and insecurities about relationship building, the need for support and training around relationship building may well be larger in the general teaching community.

Secondly, 'different approaches bring different views of the world to your attention' in qualitative research (Larkin, 2015, p. 249). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and discourse analysis (see e.g. Smith, 2015), which prioritise idiographic analysis and delve deeper into the latent meanings and functions of discursive devices such as metaphors, can offer complementary perspectives in future studies. However, thematic analysis is well-suited for this study's aims and proved useful to identify patterns of meanings across teachers' perspectives.

Indeed, this study adds to the understanding of teachers' perspectives about the relational aspects of their professional role and offers an interesting cross-cultural perspective on this matter. It

also provides valuable insights on teachers' experiences, which expand on previous qualitative work on teachers' hesitations in managing boundaries in their relationships with students (Aultman et al., 2009; Laletas & Reupert, 2016).

Our findings have important practical implications for teacher education and recruitment. Professional programmes should help teachers to develop the complex ability to personalise and de-personalise in their interactions with students to keep a healthy dynamic that does not deny students and teachers the benefits of close relationships for their well-being and learning goals. Boosting teachers' interpersonal skills and self-confidence to make sure investment in relationships does not result in teachers' exhaustion and burn-out is also fundamental for teacher recruitment and retention. Given the challenges around managing authority and relationships with behaviourally challenging students, pre-service and continuous professional development training should also raise awareness among teachers of transactional models of student-teacher relationships and the evocative impact of students' behaviour on teachers' affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses, an area in which interventions providing professional support have shown promising results in reducing the evocative impact of disruptive behaviour (Hafen, Ruzek, Allen, Gregory, & Mikami, 2015).

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The authors have no conflict of interest or competing interests to declare.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102883.

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