

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Teachers' relational competence towards students with neurodevelopmental symptoms: A microscopic relational analysis

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**Abstract**

Teacher–student relationships (TSRs) are key factors for at-risk students. However, little is known regarding how TSRs are built through interactions with students with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs). This study provides an in-depth analysis of a teacher's relational competence in relation to a student with NDD symptoms. We used microscopic relational analysis to scrutinise a TSR, focusing on a brief classroom episode selected from a sample of seven video-recorded lessons set in an elementary school. Our findings demonstrate the critical role of teachers' relational competence in nurturing positive and supportive TSRs. Teachers' relational competence manifests through continuously reading, understanding, and empathising with students. Furthermore, teachers can promote mutual understanding and respect, regulate the degree of closeness and distance, and manage the emotional indicators of ongoing TSR. We propose that such microsocial artistry is an essential part of teachers' competencies when interacting with students with NDDs.

**KEY WORDS**

microscopic relational analysis (MRA), relational competence, relational competence model (RCM), students with NDDs, teacher–student relationship

**Key Points**

- *The Research Field:* There have been few in-depth studies on teachers' relational competence as manifested in their interactions with students with NDDs. This study provides insight into this aspect by microscopically examining relational competence in relation to a student with NDD symptoms.
- *Method:* This study demonstrates that microscopic relational analysis (MRA) can increase the understanding of teachers' relational competence in ongoing teacher–student interactions. MRA complements other approaches while focusing on situational inclusion/exclusion processes and emphasising both verbal and nonverbal interactions.
- *Theory:* This study demonstrated that the relational competence model is useful for understanding teacher–student interactions. Teachers promote mutual understanding and respect for students, regulate the degree of distance, and manage their students' and their own emotions. This is an important aspect of teacher competencies, particularly in relation to students with NDDs.
- *Pedagogical Practice:* This study underscores teachers' relational preparedness as vital for working with students with NDD. Relational preparedness requires teachers' comprehensive understanding of a student's diagnosis, as well as the

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ability to sensitively perceive and respond to students' situated cues while simultaneously identifying and acknowledging their own emotional reactions.

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research shows that positive and supportive teacher–student relationships (TSRs) are prerequisites for student development and learning (Allen et al., 2013; Ansari et al., 2020; Camp, 2011; Ettekal & Shi, 2020; Quin, 2017). Previous research has found that secure TSRs are essential for children (Downer et al., 2010; Sabol & Pianta, 2012); however, subsequent research suggests that TSRs are also significant for older students (Ansari et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2017), including those in higher education (Ewe & Fjelkner Pihl, 2024). TSRs are especially important for at-risk students, such as those with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) (Archambault & Dupéré, 2017). However, for these students, TSRs are generally more conflictual and less close than those neurotypical students have with their teachers (Caplan et al., 2016; Ewe, 2019; Nurmi, 2012).

Sabol and Pianta (2012) suggested that to improve their TSRs, teachers should primarily strengthen their interpersonal skills. In Scandinavia, the concept of relational competence is often used to describe the ability of teachers to develop positive and supportive relationships with students (Nordenbo et al., 2008; Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016). In Denmark, researchers have investigated ways to enhance relational competence in teacher education, focusing on developing pre-service teachers' attentive presence and empathy by drawing on cognitive and communicative practices (Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016). Studies conducted in Sweden have demonstrated that practicing and pre-service teachers can increase their understanding of relational competence through interventions focusing on video-based reflection (e.g., Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Ewe & Aspelin, 2021). Other studies have presented qualitative data and in-depth knowledge regarding how educators understand relational competence (Aspelin et al., 2020). Recently published findings (Ewe et al., 2023) indicate that an increased understanding of relational competence among practicing teachers can positively affect NDD students' perceptions of TSRs. However, although the field of teachers' relational competence is growing rapidly, the focus has been primarily on neurotypical students. Moreover, few detailed and in-depth studies have been conducted on TSRs and teachers' relational competence as manifested in their interactions with students with NDDs (Ewe, 2019). Thus, this study aimed to contribute insights into this aspect by microscopically examining a teacher's relational competence as manifested through interactions with a student with NDD symptoms.<sup>1</sup>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Relational perspective on education and special education

This study is based on relational pedagogy, which is an approach that considers relationships to be a basic fact of human existence and education to be a relational process. From this perspective, educational situations are essentially processes between teachers and students through which caring, trustworthy, and respectful relationships are built (Hickey & Riddle, 2023; Sidorkin, 2022). Researchers in this field assume that human subjectivity is founded on inter-subjectivity and that education is essentially a process between individuals (Biesta & Stengel, 2016; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Relational perspectives are elaborated in several behavioural sciences and are typically contrasted with radically different conceptions. For instance, Gergen (2009) distinguishes between 'the relational being' and 'the bounded being', and von Wright (2006) distinguishes between a 'relational perspective' and 'a punctual perspective'. According to Sidorkin (2000), the origin of relational ontology can be traced to Buber's philosophy. Buber (2002) developed the concept of 'the sphere of "between"' (p. 241) in contrast with 'individualism', which 'sees man only in relation to himself', and 'collectivism', which 'does not see *man* at all [but] sees only "society"' (p. 237). Hence, Buber's relational philosophy does not focus on internal or external factors but on what occurs when one person turns to another as 'this particular other being' (p. 241).

In research on special education needs, relational frameworks are often defined as alternatives or analytical supplements to other frameworks. Skidmore (2004) discussed three main paradigms in research on students' learning difficulties: psycho-medical, sociological, and organisational. Skidmore stated that these three perspectives are reductionist insofar as learning difficulties are viewed as consequences of substances existing within and/or outside individuals. Persson (2019) provided an analytical distinction between two main perspectives on special education needs: a categorical perspective, according to which students' difficulties stem from their inner (genetic, physical, psychological, or psychosocial) constitution, and a relational perspective, which emphasises influences from the educational environment. Building on Gergen (2009), Aspelin (2013) suggested that the dominant paradigms on special education research could be supplemented by an interhuman perspective, focusing on the ongoing processes of interactions and relationships between teachers and students.

Hence, several scholars have elaborated on relational perspectives in contrast to, or as a complement to, theoretical perspectives, in which internal or external factors are assumed to lie behind, within, or under social life. This study is based on Buber's (2002) general idea of 'the sphere of between' as the core of human life, and thus of education. This relational framework places the concepts of interaction and relation as the focus of the analysis. Specifically, we adopted the theory developed by Scheff (1990, 1997), a sociologist from the United States (for an introduction, see Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Aspelin, 2022). Scheff (1990) assumed that social bonds are the primary motive for human action and secure bonds are built through communication involving cognitive and emotional 'attunement' (i.e., mutual understanding and respect). Scheff (1990) stated that 'each new situation becomes an arena for an exploration of the nature and degree of the bond' (p. 9). He also proposed 'the need for a new language, based on models of bond-relevant behaviour' (p. 19). However, this relational perspective does not imply that 'individual' or 'collective' perspectives are ignored. In an ideal case, the researcher has the resources to broaden the scope to aspects of the educational environment and narrow the scope to aspects that concern the individual. For example, in studies involving students with disabilities or diagnoses, other characteristics may influence their behaviour. We address this issue further in the next section.

### Students with special education needs

NDD is an umbrella term used to refer to diagnoses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5; APA, 2013). It includes several specific diagnoses, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disabilities, communication disorders, specific learning disorders, and motor disorders, with ADHD and ASD being the two most common. As this study focuses on a student under assessment for ADHD and ASD, these diagnoses are explained in detail below.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 1 in 100 children is diagnosed with ASD worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024). Distinctive features of these diagnoses include difficulties in reciprocal social interactions, stereotypical or repetitive behaviour, and obsessive interests. Individuals with ADHD present a persistent pattern of hyperactivity and/or inattention together with impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Difficulties in social interactions are common to both diagnoses. ADHD is among the most observed childhood NDDs (Hinshaw, 2018). According to the DSM-5, approximately 5%–7% of all school-aged children have ADHD.

Hence, the question is no longer whether teachers will encounter students with these diagnoses in their classrooms but how they support them.

One characteristic of individuals with ASD and ADHD symptoms is difficulty in building positive and long-lasting social relationships. These difficulties lead to loneliness, peer rejection, and problematic relationships (Beristain & Wiener, 2020; Lyons et al., 2011). Mikami et al. (2019) indicated that teachers feel frustrated with students' disruptive behaviours and will increase the use of punitive strategies to reduce them. This phenomenon is concerning because low-quality TSRs are associated with increased externalising behaviours and attention problems among these students (Zeedyk et al., 2016), thereby further hampering TSRs. Consequently, relationships between teachers and students with NDD symptoms often become strained, leading to high levels of frustration on both sides (Eisenhower et al., 2015; Ewe, 2019). Blacher et al. (2014) confirmed this phenomenon by demonstrating negative differences, such as higher levels of conflict in TSRs for students with ASD compared to those for other student groups. The situation is similar in TSRs for students with ADHD (Rogers et al., 2015). ASD or ADHD diagnoses negatively affect students' academic and social experiences in school, leading to poor academic, socioemotional, and behavioural outcomes throughout their lifespan (Hinshaw, 2018). Portilla et al. (2014) highlighted the need for further research to examine the characteristics of teachers who successfully and competently connect with these students. Ewe (2022) emphasised teachers' 'relational preparedness' as a critical aspect of successful TSRs for students with NDDs. In addition to a general understanding of the diagnosis, this attitude includes the ability to sensitively acknowledge and respond to students' cues while reflecting on what these signals indicate about their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, this attitude involves teachers having the ability to identify and acknowledge their emotional reactions to student cues. Such preparedness may avert potentially problematic social situations and increase opportunities for building stable social bonds between teachers and students.

### Teachers' relational competence

Scandinavian research on teachers' relational competence has been developing over the past few decades (e.g., Jensen et al., 2015; Juul & Jensen, 2003; Nielsen & Fibaek Laursen, 2016; Nordenbo et al., 2008; Segerby, 2022; Wiklund-Engblom, 2018). In a research review, Nordenbo et al. (2008) stated that in addition to didactic and leadership competencies, competent teachers can build high-quality TSRs with their students. Relational competence is generally defined as a teacher's ability to meet students with respect, show empathy, and take responsibility for TSRs (Jensen

et al., 2015). In this study, we apply a precise definition tested in the literature, such as research on pre-service special educators' perceptions of relational competence (Aspelin et al., 2021), teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions of relational pedagogy in a vocational programme (Gidlund, 2020), and teachers' relational work in online teaching (Bergroth & Haagensen, 2022). The relational competence model (RCM) is designed to explore relational competence as manifested in ongoing interaction processes and includes the following three sub-concepts:

1. *Communicative competence*: the teacher's capability to communicate verbally and nonverbally to achieve a high degree of mutual understanding and respect for students.
2. *Differentiation competence*: the teacher's capability to regulate the degree of closeness and distance in relation to students.
3. *Socioemotional competence*: the teacher's capability to cope with emotional indicators of ongoing relationships, both theirs and those of students (Aspelin et al., 2021).

Hence, research has grown steadily on both teachers' relational competence and students with NDDs. However, studies combining the two are rare (Ewe, 2019). Furthermore, in both fields, few studies are available on TSRs as built in situ (i.e., in authentic teaching processes). Therefore, this study aims to microscopically examine teachers' relational competence in relation to students with NDD symptoms. We propose that microscopic relational analysis (MRA) is an appropriate approach for this study and will contribute new knowledge on this subject.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Microscopic relational analysis

Our methodological approach, MRA, is based on Scheff's (1990, 1997) assumption of a microworld underlying social interactions that connects individuals to each other and social structures. Every second of a social gathering is loaded with meaning; every exchange—one individual's action plus another individual's response—can be regarded as a 'microcosm' (Scheff, 1997, p. 203). Scheff's methodology involves a meticulous and detailed analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication, highlighting the building of social bonds between people who meet face-to-face in authentic contexts. This approach also includes interpretations of interactors' internal processes, in terms of individuals' rapid search for what words and gestures in an interaction mean and imply. Researchers should not aim to make categorical claims about internal processes. According to Scheff (1990), the

meanings of words and gestures are always ambiguous, and signs and symbols need to be interpreted considering context on different analytical levels. However, the researcher should aim to make statements about 'the implications of the words and gestures which were not expressed in words by the interactants' (p. 41).

In MRA (Aspelin, 2022), the qualities of TSRs in the ongoing interaction processes are analysed. This approach aims to achieve precision in analysing TSRs and includes the following five themes:

1. Relational framework: MRA understands the TSR as a dynamic phenomenon, a social bond that exists and continuously changes over interactions.
2. TSR and the microworld: MRA relates TSRs to the subtle flow of behaviours, thoughts, and emotions in classroom interactions.
3. Parts and wholes: MRA includes meticulous transcriptions and interpretations of interactions and conclusions about implications for social bonds; the researcher oscillates between microscopic details and their relational context (e.g., the present TSR).
4. Individual perspective: MRA acknowledges participants' subjective experiences, intentions, motives, emotions, and strategies at virtually every moment of an interaction.
5. Video and TSR: MRA considers video observation to be the most appropriate data collection method, enabling detailed transcriptions and interpretations of TSRs built sequence-by-sequence in the interaction.

Scheff (1990, 1997) described his methodology as research between qualitative exploration and quantitative verification. Researchers can microscopically examine the relational patterns discovered in qualitative studies or present hypotheses rooted in the microworld that can be tested through surveys. Regardless of the approach selected, the relevance of MRA should be substantiated and discussed, such as by comparing the findings with results from other studies and/or adopting theories proven to be adequate in previous research (Aspelin, 2022).

### Video documentation

An ordinary school lesson involves an extreme number of subtle social utterances and interactions (e.g., Aspelin & Eklöf, 2022). However, as these events often escape participants' notice, 'observing the microworld requires a microscope' (Scheff, 1990, p. 28). Video recordings enable researchers to better understand what occurs beneath the surface of classroom interactions. Another advantage of using video recordings is that complex and multifaceted phenomena can be scrutinised in greater detail (Blikstad-Balas & Sørvik, 2015). Video recordings enable researchers to study nonverbal signs and verbal utterances, both of which are crucial for interpreting

complex interpersonal phenomena (Blikstad-Balas & Sørvik, 2015; Simpson et al., 2013).

## Participants and materials

As part of a larger research project on teachers' relational competence for students with ADHD (Ewe, 2022), seven video observations were conducted in seven classrooms with students in Grades 6–9 at a Swedish elementary school (where students aged 6–16 years were educated). For this study, we selected one lesson from the larger video dataset. To choose the lesson to use, we followed purpose sampling (Bryman, 2018). As explained below, we selected a lesson, an episode, and an excerpt relevant to the purpose of the study.

Video observations were documented in their entirety using two camcorders with built-in microphones. Additionally, two audio recorders were employed to capture dialogues between teachers and students. One audio recorder was placed near the students to ensure high-quality sound, and the other was attached to the teacher's shirt to allow for mobility. All video observations conducted in the seven classrooms were reviewed repeatedly to discover patterns in interactions in which positive and supportive TSRs were built. In addition, all video-recorded verbal interactions between the teachers and students were transcribed. By studying the transcriptions repeatedly, we could outline the interactions between teachers and students with NDDs in which positive and supportive TSRs were built. We found that one lesson in particular contained a sufficient amount of such interactions. Our selection of the lesson was also informed by in-depth interviews conducted with 10 students with NDDs who participated in the seven video-recorded lessons. Students were asked to describe their relationships with their teachers, and all interviews were transcribed and interpreted. We subsequently identified one teacher who received the highest appreciation from all students. This teacher was a lead teacher<sup>2</sup> in her mid-40s with several years of teaching experience. Therefore, the MRA below focuses on that teacher and the class she taught during the video-observed lesson.

We selected an eighth-grade class<sup>3</sup> with just over 20 students, two of whom exhibited parent-reported NDD symptoms. Permission was obtained from the parents of all the students to participate in this study. We selected one of the two students with NDD symptoms as the target student for MRA. This student was undergoing an assessment for ADHD and ASD at the child and adolescent psychiatry institution in their municipality.

## MRA of the lesson and episode

The MRA in this study focuses on the status of social bonds (Scheff, 1990) between the target teacher and

student. Focusing on one or a few episodes is usually necessary to present a detailed and thorough MRA (Aspelin, 2022). Accordingly, the following steps were performed:

1. The first step consisted of repeatedly watching the selected video and refining the transcriptions of the entire lesson by focusing on verbal and nonverbal interactions between the teacher and the student with NDD symptoms.
2. The second step involved conducting a positive selection of episodes in which the teacher's relational competence manifested in interactions with the student and meticulously transcribing the verbal and nonverbal interactions in the episodes.
3. The third step involved selecting an excerpt that highlighted key events in the microscopically transcribed episodes. This excerpt is presented and analysed in detail below.

## RESULTS

Approximately 20 students were present in the classroom in which the episode occurred. The subject was art, and the lesson involved a substantial amount of interaction between the teacher and students as well as between students. The teacher moved continuously throughout the classroom during the lesson. The target student had problematic school attendance, and for long periods she either did not attend school or was taught outside the classroom. When the study was conducted, the student had recently returned to class after a period of absence. For most of the lesson, the student appeared anxious and unable to concentrate; however, when the teacher was nearby, she became calmer and began to concentrate on the task.

The selected episode occurred 36 min into the lesson and lasted approximately 1 min. The verbal interaction from the entire episode is transcribed below. We use italic text to indicate emphasis, that is, that words in the interaction are emphasised.

36.11	Teacher:	So ... now we're back to that cat
36.18	Student:	<i>I hate</i> that cat
36.20	Teacher:	Well, if you already hate it, we shouldn't choose it
36.21	Student:	<i>I hate</i> to see it
36.22	Teacher:	Open a Google window ... and then search for black and white
		Photos, and then cats
36.31		Now, let's see, now let's find the cutest one
36.35	Student:	They're all ugly
36.36	Teacher:	Well, we only get black and white cats, that's the problem

36.40	Isn't this one cute; look how slim it is here.
36.42	Student: Mmm
36.45	Teacher: <i>This one</i> is cute, but someone had it before
36.48	Student: This one looks really homeless, look
36.50	Teacher: Well, yea, a bit
36.52	Student: I feel sorry for her
36.55	Teacher: But if you open this ... open it
36.59	Student: Mmm
37.01	Teacher: And then scroll here to see if we can find something fun
37.04	Student: <i>Oh, so cute</i>
37.06	Teacher: Yes, it is. The eyes really stand out in that picture
37.10	Student: I want, I want to save it
37.11	Teacher: Mm, yes, go ahead

## MRA of the teacher–student interaction

This section offers a detailed description and interpretation of the teacher–student interaction that occurred between 36.55 and 37.11 min into the lesson and lasted approximately 16 s (Table 1).

## Interpretation of the excerpt in terms of RCM

At the beginning of the episode (36.18–36.35), the student expressed dissatisfaction with the pictures. The teacher ignored these signals and continued to search for pictures. The duration from the student's last dissatisfied expression ('They're all ugly') to when she finds a picture she wants to use was approximately 25 s. We suggest that the teacher's relational competence is an important feature in this example, and in what follows, we apply the RCM (Aspelin et al., 2021) to substantiate this claim.

## Communicative competence

This interpretation shows that the teacher and student, turn by turn, understand and show respect for each other. In turn 1, the teacher instructs the student, who then follows the instructions. In turn 3, the teacher gives instructions that the student follows again. In turn 5, the teacher agrees with the student's positive utterance about the picture, and when the student says that she wants to work with it, the teacher confirms her choice. The teacher responded immediately to the student's utterances (e.g., in turn 5) and the student responded quickly to the teacher's verbal actions. Thus, the verbal

interaction was 'attuned' (Scheff, 1990). Furthermore, the teacher's nonverbal interaction (e.g., when she speaks softly and stands close to the student) promotes a respectful and trusting relationship with the student. We interpret this interaction as an exclusive human encounter because it was separate from the participants' social surroundings. In conclusion, the teacher's communication with the student promoted a high degree of mutual understanding and respect.

## Differentiation competence

The teacher stood close to the student throughout the episode. The student showed no signs that she found this connection bothersome. As mentioned above, an indirect physical connection occurred between the teacher and student when the teacher pointed to the computer screen that the student was controlling with the keyboard. The teacher's soft speech can be similarly understood. After having spoken quite loudly before the episode, she spoke quietly with the student, thereby promoting closeness with her, which is confirmed when the student answers in the same manner. However, in parallel, the teacher maintains pedagogical distance by guiding the student's actions throughout the episode. Supported using a sequence-by-sequence analysis, we interpret the relationship as adequately differentiated. The participants were close enough to understand each other properly but not so close that their subjective perspectives were blurred. In conclusion, the teacher constructively regulated the degree of closeness and distance in relation to the student.

## Socioemotional competence

Although the teacher perceived the student's negative feelings towards the pictures of cats ('They're all ugly'), her actions had a calming effect on the student. The teacher perceives students' resistance without responding. Instead, in turn 1, the teacher offered the student a step forward in the learning process and, indirectly, a path out of her negative emotional state. This process also implies that the teacher managed her own feelings so that she did not become overwhelmed by the students' negative emotions; thus, the teacher did not lose her professional distance in the relationship. The teacher and student responded to each other's utterances quickly and affirmatively, which we interpreted as a shared emotional flow. That they share a positive evaluation of a picture—Student: '*Oh, so cute*'—Teacher: '*Yes, it was*'—also likely stimulated the flow. In conclusion, the teacher managed the emotional indicators in the interaction (her own and those of the student) to build a stable social bond.

**TABLE 1** Excerpt of teacher–student interaction.

Turn	Time	Participant	Verbal expressions	Teacher's nonverbal expressions	Student's nonverbal expressions
1	36.55	Teacher	But if you open this ... open it	Has one hand on the keyboard. Points to the computer screen when she says 'it'. Looks at the screen. Speaks relatively quietly (compared with how she generally speaks in the classroom during lessons)	Scratches her nose. Looks at the computer screen
<p>Interpretation: In this moment, and throughout the episode, the teacher stood close to the student, and their heads were at the same height. The teacher and student focused on the screen and acted to find an appropriate picture for the student's task. The teacher spoke quietly and softly. We interpret these observations as the initiation of a close, personal relationship</p>					
2	36.59	Student	Mm	Holds her hand above the keyboard. Looks at the screen	As soon as the teacher says 'open it' (in the previous turn), the student says 'Mm', followed by the student moving her hand to the keyboard. The student then starts typing on the keyboard. She looks at the screen. She says 'Mm' relatively quietly (compared with how she generally speaks in the classroom during lessons)
<p>Interpretation: Both the teacher and the student looked attentively and concentrated on the screen. The student responded quickly and positively to the teacher's actions. Even if this response was linguistically vague, it showed that the student understood and intended to follow the teacher's instructions. The student's response was expressed quietly and softly, as was the teacher's utterance in the previous turn. We interpret this exchange as the start of an exclusive social bond, meaning that the teacher and the student are connected to each other while simultaneously disconnected from other participants. The student showed goodwill towards the task and maintaining the relationship with the teacher. As in the previous turn, the teacher stood close to the student. The teacher held her hand above the student's keyboard, and the student pressed the keys, implying relational closeness in that sense as well</p>					
3	37.01	Teacher	And then scroll here to see if we can find something funny	Points to the computer screen while looking at it. Speaks relatively quietly	Looks at the screen. Has her hands on the keyboard
<p>Interpretation: There was continued shared attention and focus on the task. The teacher instructed the student, and the student showed that she is concentrating. The teacher's choice of the positive word 'funny' likely motivated the student in her search for a picture. The teacher's quiet, soft speech continued to contribute to closeness in the relationship</p>					
4	37.04	Student	<i>Oh, so cute</i>	Points to the computer screen and looks at it	Looks at the screen. Moves her head back and forth against the screen. Still has her hands on the keyboard. Speaks relatively quietly
<p>Interpretation: The teacher and the student remain focused on the same object. The student's verbal expression and emphasis on—'Oh, so cute'—expressed positive feelings towards the picture. The student said 'cute', a word the teacher used approximately 20s before (36.45: 'This one is cute'). Indirectly, the student's verbal action showed appreciation for the picture, the joint activity, and the TSR. The student and the teacher spoke relatively quietly and softly, and they had respectful physical contact, which we interpret as a high degree of closeness in the relationship</p>					
5	37.06	Teacher	Yes, it is. The eyes really stand out in that picture	Points to the screen when she says 'the eyes'. Looks at the screen. Speaks relatively quietly	Looks at the screen. Has her hands on the keyboard
<p>Interpretation: The teacher showed appreciation for the picture. Moreover, she reinforced the student's statement by drawing attention to a specific detail in the picture (the cat's eyes). The teacher and the student understood each other and were mutually committed to the task</p>					
6	37.10	Student	I want, I want to save it	Looks at the screen	Looks at the screen. Speaks relatively quietly. Hands on the keyboard
<p>Interpretation: The student reinforced her positive evaluation of the picture—and, indirectly, of the teacher and the activity. The teacher and the student continued to share a focus of attention. The student continued to speak relatively quietly in response to the teacher's corresponding tone, reinforcing the impression that the relationship is experienced as close and trusting</p>					
7	37.11	Teacher	Mm, yes, go ahead	Holds her right hand on the student's computer screen. Looks at the screen	Looks at the screen. Hands on the keyboard
<p>Interpretation: The teacher responded immediately to the student's request and approved it. In doing so, the teacher also confirmed that they reached their goal: The student found a picture that she can use further. They continued to share focus, be physically close, and be indirectly connected to each other via the computer, implying closeness, and trust in the relationship</p>					

## Concluding analysis

During most of the episode, the teacher and student interacted separately from the other students. Their interpersonal connection lasted until 37.50, when another student spoke to the teacher.

The main finding of the MRA is that the teacher's relational competence manifested through continuous 'reading', understanding, and emphasising in relation to the student. The student's sentences, manner of speaking, and gestures conveyed information about the status of her social bond with the teacher, which the teacher processed cognitively and emotionally, and then responded in ways that could promote a TSR characterised by cognitive and emotional attunement and adequate differentiation (Scheff, 1990). Notably, several interactions occurred within a short period. For example, the teacher and the student took turns speaking several times, and these changes were often rapid. Moreover, a high degree of mutual understanding and respect was momentarily observed. The teacher's immediate responses show the student that she cares about her, their TSR, and the direction that the interaction takes (i.e., towards a shared learning goal). In these hyper-fast exchanges, the teacher had little time to reflect on the student's behaviour, thoughts, or feelings. Instead, relational competence in the episode is a matter of implicit know-how practiced and developed intuitively in response to the present moment. We suggest that such microsocial artistry is an essential part of the teacher's relational competence in the episode and is particularly important in relation to students with NDDs.

## DISCUSSION

### Teachers' relational competence for students with NDDs

As mentioned in the literature review, further research is needed on social interactions in the fields of relational competence and students with NDDs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use MRA to explore teachers' relational competence when interacting with a student with NDD symptoms. Research on teachers' relational competence has focused on how competence is understood by practicing and pre-service teachers (Aspelin et al., 2021; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016) and how it can be enhanced in teaching, including teaching with students with NDDs (Ewe, 2022). This study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on how competence manifests in situ between a teacher and a student with NDD.

MRA provides a deep understanding of teachers' relational competence as a phenomenon dependent on the state of the social bond (Scheff, 1990) in each moment of an interaction. Thus, MRA offers a complementary

perspective on students' difficulties to the dominant 'psycho-medical', 'sociological', and 'organisational' perspectives (Skidmore, 2004), as well as 'the categorical' and 'the relational' viewpoints (Persson, 2019), by emphasising interpersonal encounters, verbal and non-verbal interactions, and the ongoing building of social bonds.

This study presents insight into how teachers' relational competence can be understood within the context of interactions situated in practice. The MRA exemplifies how teachers' immediate responses, caring approaches, and commitment to students' learning contribute to TSRs, which are characterised by cognitive and emotional attunement and adequate differentiation (Scheff, 1990). The MRA also demonstrates the critical role of teachers' relational competence in nurturing positive and supportive TSRs when interacting with students with NDDs. Specifically, the MRA shows how aspects of RCM, including communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socioemotional competence, manifest throughout interactions, thereby facilitating a beneficial educational environment for students with NDDs.

### Relational preparedness

Teachers' interactions in this study illustrate the importance of relational preparedness (Ewe, 2022) for students with NDDs. As delineated in the MRA, the teacher predicted and anticipated the student's behaviour at every moment of the interaction, considered how the student might respond to a particular behaviour, and acted so that the student's response could take a constructive direction. Teacher–student interaction occurred quickly, leading us to surmise that the teacher's actions were intuitive. The teacher also guided the interaction, demonstrating keen sensitivity and responsiveness to the student's signals while gently steering her towards the task. Thus, the teacher avoided being affected by the students' negative expressions and emotions. This teacher's attitude likely includes an awareness of and ability to identify her reactions to the student's behaviour. As visualised in the MRA, but also in the sequence between 36.48 and 36.55, the teacher moved the conversation forward, guiding the student from negative emotions towards the task at hand, thereby enabling an opportunity for the student to emerge from her negative emotions without feelings of failure. This scenario is the opposite of those in which teachers over-empathise with students and potentially exacerbate their negative emotions.

Moreover, the teacher's actions can be understood in terms of receiving, harbouring, and returning the student's emotions in a manageable state, offering the student a path towards resolution, and reducing the risk of the student becoming engulfed by her own emotions. Consequently, the teacher redirected the student's



negative attitude, enabling the student to shift focus without experiencing failure. This capability, which we label relational preparedness, is important in all TSRs. However, we argue that it holds particular importance in interactions with students who experience difficulties in social interactions, such as students with NDDs (APA, 2013), including students whose negative behaviours can be easily triggered if they feel rejected or criticised.

Negative remarks from a teacher tend to have a detrimental impact on NDD students' behaviour (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2016), increasing their hyperactivity and disruptive behaviour (Al-Yagon, 2016; Ewe, 2019). The findings of the MRA suggest that a teacher's relational preparedness can reduce their own and their students' negative feelings (cf. Zeedyk et al., 2016) and mitigate the risk of teachers using punitive strategies (Mikami et al., 2019). Teachers' awareness of their emotional reactions to students' actions is thus critical to relational preparedness because the likelihood that teachers will respond to affect decreases (Ewe, 2022). By gently guidance their students' focus away from negative emotions and towards class assignments, teachers can give them opportunities to manage their emotions without experiencing failure. Of course, teachers should not accept disrespectful behaviour from their students, but rather their relational preparedness should be underpinned by clear guidance regarding social interactions and students' learning. Thus, this study suggests that for students with NDDs, teachers should be skilled at improvising, anticipating and responding rapidly to students' behaviours to promote secure social bonds (Scheff, 1990).

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that microsocial artistry is at the heart of teachers' relational competence and may be particularly important when interacting with students with NDDs. The analysis exemplifies the construction, maintenance, and nurturance of secure and productive TSRs to promote a conducive learning environment. The importance of teachers' relational competence cannot be overstated, particularly when supporting students with special educational needs. This study demonstrates how teachers' relational competence is pivotal in building meaningful and positive TSRs. Our findings reinforce the idea that relational competence is a fundamental component of successful teaching, particularly in classrooms containing students with diverse needs.

## Implications for practice

The results of the MRA in this study have significant implications for teaching practices. Teachers' relational

competence, as demonstrated in the episode presented in this study, illustrates the importance of creating a supportive, positive learning environment for students with NDDs. By implementing RCM principles in teaching, educators can manage students' unique needs. In the words of Buber (2002), the study underscores the importance of teachers turning to their students as 'this particular other being' (p. 241). Teacher–student interactions encompass a multitude of exchanges, most of which occur rapidly and remain unnoticed. The volatile and elusive nature of each TSR forms a unique microcosm that must be scrutinised to comprehend the broad context of teaching.

Moreover, this study highlights the need for teacher training and professional development programmes to enhance teachers' relational competence in educating students with NDDs. Such education is not only a matter of understanding the diagnosis but also one of sensitively acknowledging and responding to individual students' cues while reflecting on their implications for students' learning and development. Such relational preparedness could avert conflicts and increase the potential for building stable TSRs.

## Limitations

MRA (Aspelin, 2022), and microanalyses in a wider sense (Scheff, 1990, 1997), should provide detailed and meticulous analyses of verbal and nonverbal communication and the building of relationships between teachers and students who meet face-to-face in authentic contexts. The emphasis on relational particularities is the main strength of MRA. The more in-depth the analysis of an interaction, the more plausible the interpretations of the TSR and teachers' relational competence will be. However, this study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, an obvious limitation is related to the presentation of the findings. Teaching occurs within complex institutional structures that frame the activity. Ideally, an MRA researcher collects data on interactions and relationships and data that enable discussions of institutional structures. However, the more space an MRA takes up, the less is left for discussion on other levels. MRA is primarily, but not solely, an approach for studying TSR in situated contexts. Thus, when the micro level is in focus, a risk of neglecting larger contexts often exists, which is partly the case in the present study.

Second, this MRA is based on a small amount of data. Expressions that occur in the social and natural world are ambiguous, meaning that the interpretations made in this study are approximations. As noted, MRA researchers are expected to provide rich, detailed descriptions and nuanced interpretations of TSRs in ongoing interactions; however, they should be careful when transferring findings to other settings. In the selection

process, we aimed to elucidate parts that were pivotal for larger wholes (Scheff, 1997), such as excerpts relevant beyond the present context. However, no claims have been made regarding generalisability; that is, we do not claim that the findings are representative of teachers' relational competence for students with NDD.

Third, although the MRA, following Scheff's (1990, 1997) approach, includes the perspectives of the interactors, the interpretations are based on descriptions of social interactions. Thus, interactors' versions of what occurred during the episode are not included. Consequently, further MRA research on teachers' relational competence in relation to students with NDDs could relate the findings to structural factors at different levels, focus on how common the findings are, and include teachers' and students' perceptions of interactions. For example, this MRA could be followed by studies using qualitative interviews with teachers and students or quantitative surveys to test the wider relevance of the findings (cf. Scheff, 1997).

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Board on October 30, 2019 (no: 2019-03533). Students with NDD symptoms were discerned based on guardians' statements in consent forms.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term 'NDD symptoms' refers to students undergoing assessment for potential diagnoses of ADHD and/or Autism, but who had not yet received a formal diagnosis.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, a lead teacher refers to an experienced primary or secondary school educator in Sweden who holds a specialised position based on their skills and expertise.

<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, students in eighth grade are 14–15 years old.

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