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Developing and Maintaining Teacher-Student Relationships in Primary School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

A positive teacher-student relationship (TSR) is dyadic in nature and associated with positive outcomes for both teachers and students. Despite its importance, less is known about the lived experience and nuances of the TSR particularly among teachers of primary aged students. In the present study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to explore the experiences of three primary school teachers. IPA explored the development and maintenance of TSR, through semi-structured interviews, focusing on individuals' own values and beliefs and how this impacted their relationships. The study found five subordinate themes: the role of the teacher; the importance of an individualized ideology; teachers own core values and belief systems; teachers support, enjoyment, and job satisfaction; and teachers as students: then and now. The findings have important implications for educators and researchers seeking to understand how best to support the development and maintenance of positive TSR in early years education.

Keywords: Attachment; IPA; Primary school; Support; Teacher-student relationship (TSR)

Introduction

It is well documented that positive teacher-student relationships (TSR) are associated with positive outcomes for both teachers and students involved [1-6]. However, less is known about what constitutes a positive TSR (i.e., its components, complexities, and dynamics). Moreover, prior research that has explored the importance of TSR, has typically focused on secondary aged students and/or those receiving alternative provision schooling [4] therefore, the importance of TSR within a mainstream, primary environment, remains relatively unexplored. This is problematic, given the importance of early intervention in the development of positive TSR [6,7]. To fill the gap, the present study explores the lived experiences of three primary school teachers who were interviewed about the development and maintenance of TSR and the consequences of this, through their own eyes, for those involved.

Teacher-student relationship (TSR)

The TSR is dyadic in nature; both rely upon it, respond to it, and require it for positive outcomes academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviourally [5,6]. Conflict free relationships with students is the main factor for increased work enthusiasm and reduced burnout and anger in teachers [1-3]. Auger and Jeffrey [8] also argue that positive TSR among secondary aged students promote success academically and emotionally. Conversely, negative TSR reduces teacher wellbeing and lowers students' academic success and happiness [3,7]. Moreover, in adherence with Maslow's hierarchy of needs [9], physical needs and safety connected to the TSR are regarded as an important foundation for later growth and development [4]. Taken together, the available evidence highlights the importance of a positive TSR for teacher satisfaction and longevity and student success; although, it should be noted, that effective relationships take time, patience, and repetition to form, and can be more challenging and extensive for some students [6].

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TSR: Implications for teachers and students

Koenen et al., [10] discuss the mental representations negative relationships can form between teacher and student. Certain individuals may activate negative affect for teachers, influencing their cognition. Dependent on the student age, a teacher may spend five years working with a student they struggle to connect with, or more condensed, but intense periods in the primary sector. This impact on teacher cognition could have serious implications towards teachers' wellbeing and job satisfaction. Reio et al., [11] conducted a study focusing on TSR and attachment style among secondary aged students to school completion. It was concluded that teachers' self-reflection is vital for challenging students' inclusion rates within school and that a self-reflective teacher who develops positive TSR can improve students' engagement, achievements, attainments, and outcomes. However, it is noteworthy that the students involved in this study were secondary aged, and therefore, it is possible that beliefs regarding school may be engrained; thus, signifying the need for research (and interventions) at earlier stages of child development [6,7]. Nemer et al., [7] postulate that teachers may react to certain situations and behaviours due to past experiences; therefore, it is easy to understand the importance of teachers being self-reflective regarding their reactions and feelings to situations or behaviours.

This area has been minimally researched. Acer and Akgun [12] note a lack of studies, focusing on pre-service teachers and their attachment styles, observing the need for such research to support teachers to develop positive TSR, essential for teacher wellbeing and satisfaction and student success. Kim et al., [13] conducted a study with teachers using the Big 5 Personality Types [14] and concluded that teachers who scored higher on conscientiousness and agreeableness had more key skills to be affective teachers than those who scored higher on neuroticism. Nemer et al., [7] concur, discussing how teachers enter the profession with stable attributions; however, these can be adapted over time through self-reflection and support [15]. It is paramount therefore, that school leaders, policy makers, and teachers are aware of the importance of positive TSR and how they can be effectively built, broken, and what tools and support are required for teachers to build positive relationships both physically and emotionally [8,16,17]. Auger and Jeffrey [8] led a qualitative study, focusing on caring TSR within secondary school.

They discovered, through focus groups, that students wanted teachers to be encouraging, to listen, to support and scaffold their learning, to set high expectations and to have an individualized attitude. It was noted that students care when teachers understand them as individuals; empathetically supporting them. Empathy, defined as the ability to understand what others are thinking and feeling [18] is an important characteristic for teachers, promoting positive TSR [16,17]. Auger and Jeffrey [8] emphasize empathy as a crucial area of development to best support teachers, and students. Poulou [19] expand, stating teachers with higher emotional intelligence competently deal with negative situations, resulting in positive TSR.

An individual's behaviour or mood can affect others [16,17] identifying the importance of a teachers' smile on positive relationships. Happy teachers appear warmer and more open, making them more approachable to students [16]. Krane

et al., [17] further discuss the importance of mutual respect for a positive TSR, also noting a variation of support students discuss: emotional and instrumental. This identifies their need for teachers to be empathetic and listen to them, recognizing their desire for a competent, highly affective teacher that sets high academic expectations and scaffolds the content, enabling them to learn. Auger and Jeffrey [8] concur, with key themes from both groups involving boundaries, general interest in students, and good teaching. This poses an interesting addition to the discussion of TSR, adding a layer of competency for the teacher and the impact upon students. Recent studies [20,21] did not discuss instrumental support as a contributing factor to TSR, thus creating a gap in current research as, evidenced by [8] students want their teachers to be competent and support their wellbeing.

TSR: The role of attachment experience

For some students, a positive relationship with their teachers and a safe schooling environment can provide an emotional buffer absent at home [5,21]. Attachment research such as the seminal work of [22,23] among others has shown that children develop attachment styles that are relatively stable over time and may impact upon their ability to develop and maintain positive relations (thus, likely connected with development and maintenance of the TSR).

Further, [5] notes insecurely attached teachers may fear rejection, leading to less warmth and trust, or unrealistic expectations, damaging students' self-esteem. Kennedy and Kennedy [24] comment on the difficulty avoidant students (one attachment style) find in developing relationships, posing issues for teachers due to their passive aggressive, withdrawn, and uncooperative manner. Acer and Akgun [12] identify that further research is required to explore the importance of teacher attachment style and their relationships with students. Sher-Censor et al., [25] concur, adding exploration of teachers' perceptions of their school experiences.

Summary, Rationale, and Research Questions

Prior research [4,7,8] has highlighted the importance of a positive TSR. However, much of the research has been conducted with secondary aged students and/or with those receiving alternative provision. The importance of TSR within a mainstream, primary environment, remains relatively unexplored, and this is problematic, given the importance of early intervention in the development of positive TSR [6,7]. Inspired by the work of [4], the present study was conducted within a mainstream, primary setting, interviewing teachers within year groups 1-3 (ages 5-8, respectively). It adopts a qualitative epistemological approach using IPA, as it is congruent with the focus on exploring, in detail, how teachers make sense of TSR via their own lived experiences [26]. There were three principal research questions:

- How does a positive TSR affect both teacher and student?
- Do teachers' past experiences affect their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships with some, or all of their students?
- Is there a requirement for further training and/or support for teachers to enable them to self-reflect regarding their ability to develop and maintain positive TSR?

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Methodology

Design

This study took a qualitative epistemological approach, collecting rich data which provided a deeper understanding of teachers' own experiences [27]. IPA was used as it is congruent with the focus on exploring, in detail, how teachers make sense of TSR via their own lived experiences [26]. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, using an interview schedule (See Appendix One) inspired by prior work with secondary aged teachers [4].

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N=3$) were recruited from purposive sampling: targeting individuals from family and friends of the researcher who were known to meet the inclusion criteria and have experience in the area under exploration. Three participants were recruited due to the rich data collected through IPA; therefore, no greater sample size was required. The sample included three in-service teachers working within Years 1-3 (5-8 years old), with varying years of experience (1-7 years): Two females and one male with an age range between 25-35. The interviews took 30-50 minutes to complete.

Measures

A short questionnaire was sent to participants alongside the information sheet and consent form, which provided the researcher with useful information about the participating teachers (age, gender, year group taught, years of teaching experience, additional needs in their class etc). Semi-structured interviews via an online platform were conducted to gain insight into teachers' own experiences of their relationships with students.

Data Analysis

IPA was used to analyse the data as the study was interested in teachers' own lived experiences of TSR, thus IPA allowed for such rich data [26]. The researcher followed the analysis process highlighted by [28] initially reading each transcription separately, noting any descriptive, and then linguistic concepts. Any theoretical meanings were written down the right-hand margin. After each transcript was read several times, the left-hand margin was used to note any emergent theme headings: the initial notes were converted into succinct phrases which aimed to capture the quality and essence of the narratives. This was repeated throughout each transcript and subordinate themes became apparent through repetition within transcripts, or across the sample. Finally, the emergent themes, from all transcripts, were written and grouped together, to identify connections between them be it similar or differing in some way. From this, a table was created which clearly highlighted the clusters of emergent themes which, together, form the subordinate themes. At this point, some themes were dropped as they did not fit in the emerging structure.

Analysis And Discussion

Analytical overview

The interview data produced five themes related to teachers' own experiences of developing and maintaining TSR. These five themes were labelled as: the role of the teacher; the importance of

an individualized ideology; teachers own core values and belief systems; teachers support, enjoyment and job satisfaction; and teachers as students: then and now.

• Theme 1: The role of the teacher

All participants agreed that developing and maintaining positive TSR is important for both themselves and their students. Although how this is achieved or experienced may be individual to each participant. For me that's one of the most fundamental aspects because, basically a teacher is imparting knowledge to a child in terms of the theory. **(Bobby)**.

It's fundamental to build positive relationships with the children that you work with in my opinion that's what allows pupils to achieve or try harder at something. **(Logan)**.

Both Logan and Bobby use the word 'fundamental' to describe the importance of forming positive TSR, highlighting their focus: both sharing mutual thoughts regarding developing a positive TSR to positively enhance academic focus and drive. Nemer et al., [7] discuss the holistic effects of a positive TSR for students: lowering anxiety; increasing social skills; and peer interactions. Bobby discusses a teachers' role as 'imparting knowledge' and Logan explains how a positive TSR 'allows pupils to achieve'. These views demonstrate the participant's beliefs of their role. Logan later explains 'most of the time is about teaching and learning and that's the most important' which further supports her focus on academic drive which is supported by [17] who too discuss the need for instrumental support from teachers, as well as emotional. Auger and Jeffrey [8] identified good teaching as key within their study involving secondary aged students. Contrastingly, Nessie views her job role from a different perspective:

You have to remember that you're the teacher and this child is looking up to you for guidance and advice I need to be that person I need to be the bigger person as well. **(Nessie)**.

Nessie appears to be applying a great deal of pressure and responsibility on herself and the role she plays within student's lives. There is no discussion of academia, unlike Bobby and Logan, but instead Nessie believes she is responsible for guiding and advising her students. The repetition of the word 'need' could imply a fear of failure if Nessie does not believe she has successfully carried out her subjective role of teacher. 'Have to' further indicates an element of need and a desire to perform successfully. Ahmad and Sahak [1] discuss the importance of teachers being a supporter as well as an educator for students; however, [19] note how teachers' social and emotional skills were important for students, and teachers with a higher EQ were considered more affective at their job. Due to the pressure Nessie appears to place on herself, this could negatively influence her own social and emotional wellbeing.

A polarising theme is apparent here: Logan and Bobby believe their role is to impart knowledge and support academic achievement, whereas Nessie appears to follow a more pastoral role where she guides her students, befriending them because '*I (she) just want the children to like me (laughs)*'. Nessie's laugh could suggest she is uncomfortable. It could be she is concerned her response may be judged as unprofessional or incorrect. Nessie appears to follow a more humanistic approach within her role [29] believing the relationship between herself and her students

is dyadic and mutual. Noteworthy here, is research suggesting students find humour in teachers a positive trait, as well as smiling more [8,13]. This would suggest a friendly approach is affective when developing and maintaining TSR.

- He (a pupil) had no respect for me even though I tried and tried and tried with him. **(Nessie)**.
- We want to help but if you're (the pupil) not meeting me halfway then there's a certain amount of accountability on the child. **(Bobby)**.

Nessie believes that, as a teacher, you should initiate the relationship and build trust with students. Her repetition of 'I tried' shows her intention to form positive TSR; she believes it is her responsibility to do so. Through her use of 'even though', it could be implied she struggled with the lack of respect and inability to form a positive TSR, indicating usually this would be enough. Nessie later identifies herself as a 'people pleaser' implying she is uncomfortable when she feels she cannot please people. She comments on her ability to manage confrontation too by saying 'I just...I don't like confrontation. Aldrup et al. [2] researched misbehaviour in students and evidenced this as the greatest teacher stressor.

This subjective misbehaviour can affect teachers' ability to develop positive TSR. With attachment theory in mind, this difficulty to connect could be due to a clash in attachment styles. Bobby, on the other hand, has a differing approach to developing relationships with students. He acknowledges he wants to help; however, expects students to 'meet him halfway'. He does not believe he has sole responsibility in the TSR. Bobby believes his role is to 'help' students who invest in the relationship for gain a contrasting viewpoint from [29] who discuss the importance of a humanistic framework in schools, commenting on behaviourism being outdated. This idea may clash with Bobby's philosophy of forming relationships due to the 'one size fits all' approach; however, similarly to [29], he does appear to value congruency within his TSR. This could relate to levels of expectation teachers hold. Logan and Bobby both talk about high levels of expectation.

- You need to have high expectations because as soon as you let the expectations drop...there will be children who perhaps will not reach their full potential. **(Logan)**.

It is clear Logan feels high expectations are needed for students to 'reach their full potential', implying a lack of trust between her and her students: she feels without high expectations students may become less focused. Her use of 'as soon as' indicates this happens almost innately and thus a teachers' role is to constantly push students; a similar view to Bobby and further debating the notion of humanistic and behaviourist approaches. Kazanjian and Choi [29] argue individuals should be viewed as a gestalt, with the whole being of greater importance than the sum of their parts. It could be considered Bobby and Logan focus less on the individual as a whole, but more on the parts they perceive as valuable and necessary. Nessie, however, comments:

- I like my pupils to relax and open up a bit more to me and know that I'm going to help them. **(Nessie)**.

This indicates that, conversely, she does not place so much value on high expectations as Bobby and Logan, instead wishing, even needing students to know she can be trusted to support them arguable as gestalt. Her desire for children to 'relax' could suggest she focuses heavily on overall enjoyment.

• **Theme 2: The importance of an individualized ideology**

It was unanimously discussed how an individualized, tailored approach was crucial for the development and maintenance of a positive TSR.

- If we focused more on differentiation in student relationships and getting all students engaged and enjoying their learning you are far more likely to succeed. **(Bobby)**.
- Your relationship will differ based on individuals. **(Logan)**.

Bobby's use of the pronoun 'we' identifies a unity with his colleagues and teaching community; identifying the value and importance he places on this belief. 'Succeed' could be used as an umbrella term for academic success or social and emotional success for developing TSR. Bobby and Logan use words meaning difference, suggesting how one size fits all is just not achievable, an opposing thought regarding Bobby's previous comments. Auger and Jeffrey [8] comment on how teachers should be encouraged to work within an individualized approach as the school environment can too influence students' experiences. Nessie discusses an individualized approach when working with differing personalities:

I have allowed...all children to have their own personality and be themselves and not try to make them the same.

She states she lets children 'be themselves' and show their individuality, and by doing so, she too is arguing the need for a humanistic approach where one size does not fit all [29]. It was agreed that, without a positive TSR and an individualized approach, students and teachers' jobs will be 'tougher'. Williford et al., [6] notes how time is needed for positive relationships to form—alongside teacher sensitivity and a shared emotional engagement, further suggesting the dyadic nature of such a relationship, as well as the need for patience and flexibility.

Both Bobby and Logan use the word 'different' to enforce the importance of individuality, not just for students, but also for school staff, further reiterating the value of an individualized ideology. This could be due to individuals feeling understood, valued, and trusted to have 'flexibility and individuality and what works best using your own professional judgement' as deliberated by Logan. Claessens et al. [3] discuss the importance of communion as agency which highlights the importance of teaching staff and their Senior Leadership Team (SLT) being one and having the ability to be flexible and adaptable when working with individuals. The importance of this differentiated approach seemed unanimously fundamental when considering behaviour management and the adherence to behaviour policies.

- It can't be a one size fits all and I think it should be down to the teachers' initiative and knowing the children. **(Nessie)**.
- A clear and consistent approach for all but it can be moulded and suited for a particular person. **(Bobby)**.

Bobby is making it clear that fairness is crucial, and the overarching policy should be the same for all students; however, he also understands and agrees with the need, on times, for this to be tailored to support certain students. He talks regularly about ‘understanding’ individuals which emphasises his desire to be supportive. Nessie indicates her thoughts towards an individualized approach, commenting again on the outdated reductionist system [29], and the above extract enforces her desire for trust regarding her ‘*teacher initiative*’.

• **Theme 3: Teachers own core values and belief systems**

All three participants had strong values which were apparent within their teaching ethos and used in developing and maintaining TSR. Some values and beliefs were unanimous; however, some were individual, further reiterating the need for individualization within schools[8]. A very interesting belief was showing your true self to students.

- I think every day when you are in the classroom it’s a bit of a show as a teacher. **(Logan)**.
- I like them to understand that I am a person too and just because I am a teacher, I still have feelings and family and friends. **(Nessie)**.

Logan and Nessie have opposing views regarding how much of yourself you should bring into the classroom. ‘*A bit of a show*’ would suggest Logan believes you should be an actor, concealing your true self. This could be due to the professional nature of the job, or perhaps a self-protection technique. She believes a teacher should:

Conceal how you are feeling **(Logan)**. Fitzsimmons et al., [4] discuss the importance of congruency and bringing your whole self to the relationship, when working with students in alternative provision. To develop positive relationships, the adult should initiate the interaction and do so in a congruent, genuine, and trustworthy manner, enhancing teachers’ ability to relationally connect with students. However, this study focused specifically on excluded students; therefore, is arguably not transferable to the experience of primary teachers working in mainstream settings, further supporting the rationale for this current study.

- I don’t think that their (pupils) mood should be dragged down by how a teacher is feeling. **(Logan)**.

‘*Dragged*’ is a powerful verb to use and implies teachers are choosing to impact their students’ moods and feelings. Contrastingly, Nessie states:

- I think they (children) can show empathy if I have been a bit sad one day they can be really lovely and they ask if you are okay. **(Nessie)**.

Nessie believes students are more understanding and adaptable to teachers’ moods and feelings than are given credit for and in being your true self, you are encouraging students to show empathy and compassion for others. Bobby has a similar philosophy:

- It’s important that pupils are able to adapt to other’s emotions as well because in the real world you have to be able to do that. **(Bobby)**.

He is expressing how showing congruency in your TSR allows students to practise adapting to others’ emotions; a key social skill in the ‘real world’; therefore, practising this in a safe learning environment is important for their development. This further supports the work of [17] who highlighted the need for instrumental support as well as academic.

The interview indicates a desire for control for Logan. Without this, she may feel uncomfortable, hence the need for a ‘*guard to be up*’. This was apparent in Logan’s own schooling with her enjoyment of ‘*really strict teachers*’. However, Nessie appears to want students to know she is more than just a teacher, implying she likes students to know her more deeply, not just superficially. She mentions she likes students to know she has ‘feelings’ indicating a desire to be understood and heard. Bobby’s belief encourages empathy within students:

I tend to use examples from my own life to build empathy you naturally have more empathy for people who have been on the same journey as you **(Bobby)**.

Bobby discusses empathy frequently, suggesting this is important for him to show, but also to develop within students. He mentions a lack of empathy from teachers when he was young and understands from personal experience this is not an effective way to develop positive relationships. He comments on people who ‘*have been on the same journey as you (him)*’, implying an appreciation and mutual respect for those like yourself. Koenen et al., [10] discussed the mental representations teachers can form, discovering more tolerance and empathy for students who teachers have formed a positive mental representation of. The teachers’ discussions regarding positive and negative relationships with students and past teachers could support this theory, providing further evidence for how similarity in personalities, or hobbies between teacher and student can support the development of a positive relationship [30].

- Mutual respect removes barriers to learning, so behaviour is good you know engagement is high you know enjoyment is high as well I think learning should be fun. **(Bobby)**.

Bobby discusses three of his core values here: mutual respect, engagement, and enjoyment; however mutual respect appears the most important as he feels it ‘removes barriers to learning’ and encourages ‘good behaviour’. Bobby describes mutual respect as a ‘crucial’ element to developing positive TSR that, if absent, could create greater challenges regarding learning and enjoyment [17].

• **Theme 4: Teachers support, enjoyment and job satisfaction**

The support provided for teachers weighted heavily with Nessie and Logan, discussing a significant lack of support in their roles.

- There is nothing absolutely nothing to show gratitude for the teachers. **(Nessie)**.
- I don’t think there is a lot of support in place at my school that’s the case for most schools unfortunately. **(Logan)**

Nessie and Logan feel they are not given the support, guidance, and appreciation they deserve. Nessie explains how she

would appreciate some gratitude, but her repetition of ‘nothing’ would suggest this is not apparent in her workplace. Logan too describes her workplace as not giving ‘a lot of support’, plus comments on other schools being very similar. This lack of support seems to have a negative impact with Nessie stating ‘Ummm (pause) probably everyday yes (I feel) physically and emotionally exhausted’. The exhaustion Nessie is describing could lead to a possible burnout [22]. If this is so, the TSR could be negatively impacted.

Bobby; however, seems to have a different experience:

- Generally, I get a lot of satisfaction out of my job. **(Bobby)**.
- Not often to be fair (emotional exhaustion) ... I really enjoy my job. **(Bobby)**.

Bobby’s representation is more positive, commenting on his job satisfaction and overall enjoyment. He highlights his school’s support programmes which are in place, including a ‘school counsellor, Chaplain and NQT mentor’, as well as having positive relationships with other staff members. Due to the support programme and overall satisfaction, it would appear Bobby is happier at work [3,7]; therefore, may have more energy for developing and maintaining crucial TSR. Nessie omits to mention within her interview if she does enjoy her job. It could be surmised that she enjoys the relationships with pupils, but this is subjective. Logan states:

- I definitely enjoy teaching; I wouldn’t say I always enjoy the paperwork and the stresses of deadlines. **(Logan)**.

This suggests she enjoys much of the job role and the relationships that can develop with students; however, not the additional responsibilities that go alongside teaching.

- If you take on the world and try to conquer it all the time, you are going to feel emotionally exhausted because you can’t win everything. **(Bobby)**.

Bobby’s attitude appears rational and logical and opposing to Nessie’s. It could be Bobby understands that ‘*you can’t win everything*’ and ‘*responsibilities are shared*’ whereas Nessie ‘*tries and tries and tries*’ to match her expectations of herself and her responsibilities without rationalising responsibilities are shared. This links back to teacher expectations and the pressure they put on themselves to ‘succeed’ within their own parameters of the job. Koenen et al., [10] comment on how teaching can be an intense and an emotionally tiring profession, causing stress and burnout if support is not available.

Two of the three teachers discussed feelings of stress and exhaustion on a regular basis and commented on the lack of support they felt was available, both at their workplace but also within the profession. Spilt et al., [21] comment on the need for more psychological support for teachers due to the demands the job entails with [17] concurring, discussing the need for teacher guidance to promote teacher wellbeing and increase overall job satisfaction. As noted, positive TSR are crucial for the success and happiness of both teachers and students; therefore, more focus is required on developing and maintaining these relationships within Initial Teacher Training, as well as regular Continual Professional Development (CPD) for in-service teachers [5,11,19]. Reflection is

evident within all three teachers’ experiences.

- I think I am a reflective teacher so if I feel like something is not working, I’m thinking how can I change that to make it different **(Nessie)**.
- I’ve learnt a lot from past experiences with other pupils and I draw back on them. **(Logan)**.

Self-reflection has been discussed as an important tool to utilize [6,7] with Nemer et al., [7] presenting the need for support for teachers to self-reflect as practitioners, focusing not just on their pedagogy but also themselves, exploring their interactions and difficult feelings, providing a safe place for emotional containment thus supporting them to develop positive relationships. Teachers’ ability to reflect upon their emotional functioning would support their ability to empathise with students’ own experiences and feelings’, referring back to the study conducted by [13], which focused on teachers’ scores within the Big 5 Personality Types [14]. Conscientiousness, which is defined as the state of being aware, supported teachers in their overall job performance, and agreeableness, defined as kindness and warmth, meant they appeared friendly to their students and understanding of their experiences.

• **Theme 5: Teachers as students: then and now**

The final theme is a link between the participants’ schooling, TSR they developed, them as teachers, and their own TSR. All participants discussed differing views of their schooling and the relationships they developed.

- I was one of the shyer girls who probably blended into the classroom I’m sure they (teachers) would have loved to have given me a bit more time. **(Logan)**.

Logan comments on being a ‘shyer’ girl, implying she was quiet and never outspoken. Her use of ‘blended’ would suggest she was forgotten at school due to her personality. Later she discusses her memories of school being enjoyable; however, ‘I (she) can’t remember having a strong relationship with the teachers’. Logan’s subjective TSR and her ‘guarded’ personality could be a result of the shy nature she discusses as a child. ‘Concealing’ herself in the classroom may be a self-protection technique which has developed from school as she did not feel understood or heard by her own teachers. Auger and Jeffrey [8] discuss the importance students place on fairness and being understood by their teachers. Logan may never have felt truly understood by her teachers, and due to her shy nature, she may have felt unfairly supported-both academically and instrumentally [17]. Logan explains her cohort at school as very challenging, totalling thirty-six children, including a few ‘challenging’ boys. She may feel, because of her personality, she was not given as much of teachers’ time and energy. Her comment regarding teachers wanting to provide her ‘a bit more time’ may be her way of rationalising her lack of support, or how she would feel if her own students were not given equal amounts of her time now. She highlights that, as a teacher, she ensures she ‘takes the time to listen to how the children are feeling’, indicating a desire for her students to feel heard. Nash et al., [20] comment on the importance of a nurturing and collaborative approach where students’ emotional needs are as important as their academic needs. They expand, explaining how students who do not feel heard are

more likely to display both internal and external behaviours. Logan is therefore, expressing a need to support her students holistically, ensuring they do feel 'listened to'.

- My experience was a little bit hit and miss. I went to a boarding school which had very poor pastoral support. **(Bobby)**.

The lack of pastoral support when Bobby was at school may suggest he does not feel he was looked after effectively. As he went to 'boarding school', this lack of pastoral support could have been more prominent than within a day school where parental support was wrap around. He later discusses his experiences as '*lacking empathy and understanding*' and uses a different approach with his students.

- I was very much a pupil that thrived under teachers that I had a positive relationship with and was probably quite destructive with teachers I viewed that I did not like or they did not like me. **(Bobby)**.

This extract shows the importance Bobby places on positive TSR, stating he 'thrived' with teachers he had a positive relationship with. However, he uses the word '*destructive*' to describe his feelings towards teachers where relationships had not developed, or he perceived '*did not like me (him)*'. This could refer to Bobby's core value of mutual respect and, if he felt a teacher did not like him or vice versa, there was no mutual respect, thus the relationship and Bobby's desire to 'thrive' was 'destroyed': evidence of mental representations forming, negatively [10] and the impact this can have on students' emotional wellbeing and academic success [5,8,10,11,20]. This can link to Bobby's teaching ethos, with a desire to understand and support his students, as long as they '*meet him halfway*' and show a level of mutual respect he requires to develop and maintain positive relationships.

- I absolutely loved my reception teacher. She was really creative and fun she was like a motherly figure. **(Nessie)**.

Nessie declares she 'loved' her reception teacher which evokes very deep feelings and a positive TSR. She describes her as 'creative and fun'; teaching values Nessie holds, depicting a student she has a strong relationship with as a 'creative student' and a 'fun personality'. A 'motherly figure' also evokes feelings of love and care, important traits to Nessie's in her own teaching. Nessie identifies herself as a 'people pleaser', suggesting she would 'thrive' in a caring environment where she feels mothered.

- The ones I didn't like so much were teachers who were really shout and strict. **(Nessie)**.

An opposing view to Logan: Nessie struggled to develop positive relationships with teachers who were more disciplined and 'strict'. When she had teachers like this, she 'wasn't really happy' and she 'was scared'. This correlates with her loving feelings towards her reception teacher as the two teaching styles are very different. When discussing her own discipline style, Nessie believes 'there is a way of disciplining children without shouting at them'. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [9] indicates a child must first feel safe within their environment before learning can take place. If Nessie were 'scared' whilst in school, her learning would have been affected. This feeling seems to have resonated with Nessie because, as a teacher, she believes shouting at students is not the best way to 'discipline' them; this could be due to her memories of feeling

frightened at school [4] discuss the importance of a humanistic approach when working with students within alternative provision, moving away from the behaviourist approaches that are currently seen so widely within schools, focussing on the child holistically and not a 'one size fits all' approach.

Teachers' past experiences impact upon on how they react to certain situations and students [7]. This highlights the role of attachment theory [22,23] and how this can influence interactions and relationships. Some teachers' and students' behaviours and actions could be misunderstood due to insecure attachment, damaging relationships.

- I really couldn't warm to him if I am being honest, and he couldn't warm to me either. There was just something stopping it...like a clash in personalities. He was just very angry **(Nessie)**.
- I think I may have more empathy for boys who are a little bit more gregarious, a little sportier, a little more out there because they remind me of myself. **(Bobby)**.

Nessie is discussing a child whom she struggled to develop a positive TSR with, commenting on how they 'clashed', affecting both hers and the child's ability to develop and maintain a positive relationship. She also adds he was '*very angry*' which, from previous comments, is an emotion Nessie struggles with. Bobby is discussing personality types and attachment theory, commenting on his increased empathy for like-minded students. This would suggest, students who are quieter and more closed off, or highly dependent: perhaps displaying an anxious-ambivalent attachment style [24] may receive less empathy from Bobby. Positive relationships seemed to develop through a mutual understanding or interest, whereas difficult relationships were due to a lack of trust or understanding. This will; therefore, affect relationship development and maintenance, both positively and negatively. All three participants identified students they struggled to connect with for reasons they could or could not explain, supporting the influence of attachment styles [4,22,23,31].

Conclusion

The current study is novel in design, involving primary teachers and their lived experiences. Teachers within these year groups, have not been focused on previously when concentrating on the TSR; therefore, it is innovative in nature. Furthermore, being qualitative in design, using an IPA approach ensured rich data was collected and analysed. In line with previous studies, the results show similar findings regarding the importance of the TSR, as well as the need for improved support for teachers' wellbeing; however, due to the novelty of the current study, further research is required to gain additional insight and evidence into its generalisability and vitality. The study set out to gain further understanding regarding primary school teachers' lived experience of developing and maintaining student relationships. All teachers were unanimous in their beliefs that a positive TSR is crucial and dyadic in nature, understanding the relationship can improve students' overall attainment and progress, protecting them academically [5]. Teachers' feelings around developing strong relationships is supported by [3] who acknowledges a positive TSR can keep teachers in the profession, increasing their job satisfaction. Conversely, [10] note a poor TSR can lower teacher

morale and increase stress levels, leading to teacher burnout. It is evidenced an individualized approach towards student, but also teachers, is crucial to support the growth of positive relationships, with empathy being recognized as an important trait to practise. It was observed difficult relationships could be a result of individual differences and attachment styles, with teachers misunderstanding some students' behaviours due to insecure attachment themselves. The study also highlighted the potential lack of support available for teachers, subsequently affecting their wellbeing and job satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Directions

The data collected was analysed through a qualitative design, using an IPA methodology. This enabled rich, in-depth data regarding teachers' lived experiences of TSR to be collected and analysed; however, IPA analyses is time-consuming, limiting the sample size available [26]. In addition, due to the homogenous sample, generalisability of the results is somewhat limited [32]. Furthermore, due to the national lockdown during time of interviews, they were carried out virtually. This unfamiliar concept

may have impacted participants' responses. To overcome these limitations, future research requires a larger sample size within the homogenous inclusion criteria, preferably with optional face-to-face interviews to ensure participant comfort. It could also be insightful to collect data from different age, gender, or ethnic minority teachers, to explore the impact on ability to develop and maintain TSR.

Future research could consider the effects of teachers' attachment style and awareness of own emotional functioning, alongside a humanistic approach within mainstream settings, exploring how this may affect teachers' ability to develop and maintain relationships with a variety of students [19]. This study has highlighted the need to support teacher provision with findings suggesting some teachers feel a lack of emotional support, subsequently impacting their ability to develop and maintain positive TSR. Finally, further research is required to help teachers' autonomy of support. Some teachers feel too constricted within their role and would be happier with increased flexibility and adaptability. These future directions could further enhance teachers' self-awareness and job satisfaction, supporting their ability to develop and maintain positive TSR with all students.

Appendix One: Interview schedule

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your teaching experience thus far?
2. Do you feel it is important to develop a positive relationship with pupils you work with? Why is this? (Probe: Is it equally important with all pupils?)
3. Can you tell me about an experience when you have built a positive relationship with a pupil? Prompt: how did it make you/the child feel?
4. How flexible do you feel you should be as a teacher regarding behaviour policies? (Probe: Do you think it is important to consider that each child is individual?)
5. How much do you think your own personality and past experiences affect your ability to build positive relationships with some pupils? (Probe: do your experiences shape the teacher you are? Can these experiences be changed through teaching?)
6. Can you tell me about the level of support you received when you were in school yourself? (Probe: do you feel you had positive relationships with your teachers?)
7. Do you think you would have preferred a different type of relationship with your teachers and why? (Probe: do you feel like your teachers understood you? Did you seek reassurance or comfort from your teachers? Did you want to please them?)
8. Can you tell me about an experience when you have struggled to build a positive relationship with a child?
9. Can you tell me what you think the most important traits are for teaching and why? Prompt: empathy, high expectations, adaptability, organisation
10. Do you think that students can be affected by your own mood? (probe: if you are happy do you think your pupils are happier too?)
11. Explain how you may feel if a child in your class is regularly displaying challenging behaviour? prompt: They could be refusing to complete work and telling you they are not doing it because it is boring, and they do not need to know it.
12. Can you now explain how you may react to such a situation? Prompt: react with empathy and talk to child, give options, warnings, and consequences
13. How much of yourself and your own life do you think you should share with your pupils?
14. How often do you leave work feeling emotionally exhausted? (Probe: what support is in place at your school for you when you feel like this?)

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