



Pre-Service Special Educators' Understandings of Relational Competence

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Research demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship is essential for students with special educational needs. This article investigates how pre-service special educators ($n = 74$) perceive teachers' relational competence, as manifested in their relations with students exhibiting behavioral difficulties. The data comprises educators' written analyses of teacher-student interactions simulated through digital video, both before and after being provided with explicit criteria on teachers' relational competence. The findings reveal a change in the educators' perceptions as they shift from a focus on teaching strategies and the learning environment toward an awareness of teacher-student interaction, and from the teacher's management of problematic student behavior toward an acknowledgment of the communicative and socio-emotional challenges in contexts involving students with different needs.

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INTRODUCTION

International research demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship plays a crucial role in education (Sabol and Pianta, 2012), particularly for students with special educational needs (Lopez and Corcoran, 2014). Still, at-risk students have a greater risk than other students of developing negative relationships with their teachers (Ewe, 2019), and many teachers find the diversity in students' characteristics and learning needs to be challenging (McWhirter, 2016). Nevertheless, supportive, positive teacher-student relationships can function as a "protective shield" for students and reduce the amount of problematic behavior (Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Consequently, there is a need for research that focuses on the teacher-student relationship—particularly on relationships that are somewhat problematic (Hughes, 2012)—by exploring, for example, how relationships between teachers and students with disabilities can be promoted (Murray and Pianta, 2007). Furthermore, as the professional development of relational capacities has mainly focused on in-service teachers, it may be important for future research to focus on pre-service teachers (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003; Sabol and Pianta, 2012). The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by focusing on how pre-service special educators' understanding of relational competence can be improved, and by making a contribution to two research fields: 1) research on pedagogical relational competence, which has rarely considered pre-service special educators; and 2) research on the special educator's role and on special-education teacher training (SETT), in which interpersonal skills play a minor role. In other words, this article's purpose is to contribute knowledge of how pre-service special educators perceive relational competence, as manifested in teaching that involves students with behavioral difficulties. This purpose is divided into the following research questions (RQs), which will be analyzed separately:

RQ 1: How do pre-service special educators perceive relational (in)competence, as manifested in teaching?

RQ 2: How do pre-service special educators perceive relational (in)competence, as manifested in relation to students with behavioral difficulties?

In addition, we will discuss how video-based reflection, as used in this study, could contribute to the professional development of special educators.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Teachers' Relational Competence

Based on a comprehensive and systematic review, Nordenbo et al. (2008) propose that relational competence is a cornerstone of teacher professionalism, along with didactic/instructional and classroom management/leadership competences. According to Jensen et al. (2015), relational competence is the teacher's ability to "meet students and parents with openness and respect, to show empathy and to be able to take responsibility for one's own part of the relationship as an educator" (p. 206). The center of the concept of relational competence is thus the teacher's position vis-à-vis the student, as expressed with verbs such as "activate," "motivate," and "take responsibility." Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2003) discuss teachers' relational skills in terms of "sensitivity" and "responsivity," such as in terms of deciding when children need extensive, moderate, or no assistance, while Sabol and Pianta (2012) claim that the formation of teacher-child relationships depends on "the temporal interactions between children and teachers" (p. 222). A consistent feature in research is that teachers' relational competence is primarily realized in one-to-one situations with students.

A Danish research and development project took place over 4 years, with the aim of developing and investigating pre-service teachers' relational competence (Skibsted and Matthiesen, 2016). Two groups of pre-service teachers participated: 14 teacher educators and 18 teachers in primary school. One of the main purposes of this project was to cultivate the student teachers' attentive presence and empathy, based on the assumption that they need to be acquainted with their personal reaction patterns in order to function well as teachers. The findings showed that the pre-service teachers focused almost entirely on didactics and classroom management during the first period of their teacher education, while their relational capacities gradually developed through extensive education within the project (Jensen et al., 2015; Nielsen and Fibaek Laursen, 2016).

In a critical report, Matthiesen (2016) asserts that the Danish project was mainly directed at a "reflective domain," meaning that it was focused on how to develop pre-service teachers' self-understanding. In contrast, several Swedish studies focus specifically on the interpersonal level. In particular, two minor case studies conducted in 2016–2017 investigated compulsory school pre-service teachers' ($n = 16$) developmental needs regarding relational competence and how their competence could be enhanced. In the first study, the pre-service teachers watched and analyzed teacher-student relationships depicted on video. The study showed that the pre-service teachers mainly understood relational

competence from frameworks that either focused on "internal" factors (e.g., teachers' personal characteristics) or "external" factors (e.g., curricula and group structures); however, they did not pay much attention to teacher-student interactions (Aspelin and Jonsson, 2019). The second study was an intervention study in which the pre-service teachers first analyzed the videos without prior training, and then analyzed them again using explicit criteria to guide their attention. The findings showed that the pre-service teachers managed to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the interpersonal relationships the second time, which suggests that it is possible to support teachers in perceiving and paying attention to aspects of teacher-student interactions (Holmstedt et al., 2018). The results from another study with a similar purpose and design but a focus on experienced teachers ($n = 53$) showed that the participants, with the support of the intervention, shifted from making assertions about relational qualities solely on the basis of the teachers' behavior to acknowledging the students' perspectives. The teachers also shifted from making unsupported claims about relationships to supporting their interpretations with behavioral markers, and from an everyday discourse on interpersonal relationships to a more precise relational discourse (Ewe and Aspelin, 2021).

In the present study, relational competence is conceptualized in terms of interpersonal communication by adopting the "relational competence model" (RCM), which has been demonstrated to be valid by the Swedish studies referred to above (and by other studies, e.g., Gidlund, 2020). This model originally stems from empirical studies on classroom interaction and theoretical studies on interpersonal relationships (Scheff, 1990; Aspelin, 2006).¹ It includes the following three sub-concepts for relational competence:

- Communicative competence: Teachers' skills in achieving a high degree of attunement in verbal and nonverbal communication with students;
- Differentiation competence: Teachers' skills in regulating the degree of (physical and mental) closeness and distance in relation to students;
- Socio-emotional competence: Teachers' skills in coping with the emotional indicators of ongoing relationships, including both their own and students' emotions (Aspelin and Jonsson, 2019).

In conclusion, research suggests that relational competence is a fundamental part of teacher professionalism and that it can be

¹Theoretically, RCM is based on Scheff (1990) theory of "the social bond", which includes the concepts of attunement, differentiation, pride, and shame. "Differentiation" concerns the regulation of togetherness and separateness in relationships. Scheff (1990) distinguishes between, on the one hand, "optimal differentiation", which refers to mutual understanding and behavioral interdependence, and, on the other hand, relationships where individuals either experience excessive distance (i.e., when the importance of the self is overemphasized), or excessive closeness (i.e., when the importance of the other individual or the group is overemphasized). Consequently, the concept of "differentiation competence" refers to an interpersonal phenomenon, to qualities of the teacher-student relationship. It should not be confused with the broader concept of "differentiated instruction" (Tomlinson, 2001).

enhanced in teacher education by the use of video-based reflection (also see below). The concept of relational competence includes sub-competences that focus on the teacher–student relationship. RCM is used in the analysis to explore how pre-service special educators perceive relational (in) competence, as manifested in teaching.

The Role of Special Educators

In Sweden, there are two university programs, one for special needs coordinators (specialpedagoger) and the other for special needs teachers (speciallärare), that provide schools with teachers that are competent in students' special educational needs and in developing inclusive and accessible learning environments. The programs are supplementary education for teachers with at least 3 years of teaching experience. The program for special-education teachers offers six different specializations: 1) language, writing, and reading; 2) mathematics; 3) intellectual disabilities; 4) visual impairment; 5) hearing impairment; and 6) severe language impairment. While special-education teachers are educated in working with students and supervising teachers, the education of special needs coordinators is more focused on the supervision of other teachers and on school development. In this article, we refer to both groups as “special educators,” as suggested by Göransson et al. (2015).

The assignments of special educators are not specified in legal documents or national curricula, even though other professions (e.g., principals) are mentioned in the guidelines for the multi-professional pupil welfare team. An international meta-analysis by Mathews et al. (2017) revealed tendencies similar to those found by Göransson et al. (2015) in a study of special educators in Sweden: Namely, the professional role is perceived as unclear, overloaded, and sometimes contradictory (see also Shepherd et al., 2016). Other studies (Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2013; Takala et al., 2020) have shown that the role of special educators is considered to be complex, as other school staff members often expect special educators to work individually with students in need of special support. Such expectations contrast with the tasks that special educators themselves report as being important, which include contributing to the school development and to an inclusive school environment (Göransson et al., 2015). A case study by Möllås et al. (2017) highlights the importance of special educators working through relationships, knowing the school's students and staff, and being known by them. The case study emphasizes that the work of building and maintaining interpersonal relations with and between the school's various actors is a central strategy for special educators.

A recent document analysis (Aspelin and Östlund, 2020) investigated how relational competence is described in course syllabi ($n = 142$) at all Swedish universities with programs in special education ($n = 11$), by focusing on the learning objectives ($n = 857$). The results indicate that relational competence is a neglected topic in the syllabi, and that it has only been vaguely defined. Furthermore, an interview study focusing on special educators' ($n = 21$) perceptions of the role of social relationships in successful work as a special educator showed that the informants perceived positive social relationships as the most fundamental part of their work and viewed relational competence

as particularly important in their profession (Aspelin et al., 2020). Moreover, special educators perceive relational competence as being realized in three ways: by an accepting attitude, by establishing personal connections with students, and by building trusting relationships over a longer period of time. However, even when special educators emphasize relational competence as fundamental for their profession, they rarely specify the meaning of this phenomenon or concept.

To summarize, the research reveals ambivalence regarding how the special educator role should be understood, and there are no relevant guidelines in legal documents or national curricula. According to course syllabi, special-education teacher programs contain limited content preparing special educators for work with interpersonal relationships, even though experienced special educators express that relational competence is fundamental for success in their profession.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this intervention study, pre-service special educators were asked to analyze a teacher–student relationship as depicted in a short video sequence. They analyzed the same video on two occasions, approximately 6 weeks apart. During the time period between these occasions, the pre-service special educators were provided with criteria for analyzing relational competence, as well as guidance on how to apply these criteria. The analyses made by the pre-service special educators were used as the data in this study. It should be noted that although this study uses a pre-, and post-test design, in order to analyze responses before and after the intervention, this is not an experimental study and there has been no aspirations to evaluate or make any general claims about the efficiency of the intervention.

Video-Based Reflection as a Tool for Professional Development

As emphasized by Sabol and Pianta (2012), teacher–student interaction ultimately depends on the teacher being able to “read a child's social and emotional cues, respond to a child's signals appropriately, and offer emotional support or limits when needed” (p. 222). Consequently, if the quality of this relationship is to be improved, the focus needs to be on improving the interpersonal skills of the teacher. This understanding has led to an interest in professional development that can provide experiences more closely associated with the professional context than formal education, thereby facilitating skill acquisition and improving professional practices (see, e.g., Sheridan et al., 2009).

The use of video sequences as a basis for reflection is part of the process-oriented professional development paradigm outlined above. Instead of situating professional development in the individual's personal workplace, and thereby making the experiences idiosyncratic, video is used to simulate the professional context and provide a common ground for discussion and reflection. Even though professional learning (just like any other learning) is situated and experiential, it

does not have to involve direct participation. Practical situations can also be experienced vicariously, for example by reflecting on case studies and/or discussing different ways to act in relation to simulation exercises.

Based on a systematic review of 255 studies, Gaudin and Chaliès (2015) describe video as a “unique and potentially powerful tool” (p. 59), which has the potential to improve the quality of instruction. These conclusions are reinforced in a later review by Major and Watson (2018), covering 82 studies, which shows that the reviewed studies consistently find the use of video to be effective as part of teacher professional development. Furthermore, the most common focus in these studies is on eliciting teachers' reflection on teaching.

In the present work, however, only a few selected studies that have had a significant influence on the design of the intervention in this study will be discussed. First, the movie used for the intervention displays a complex, professional situation without a clear or single solution. Instead of providing a correct answer, the pre-service special educators have to analyze the situation and consider different alternatives. This analysis is guided by questions, asking them to 1) describe the situation, 2) analyze the situation from different perspectives, and 3) suggest actions to be taken. This methodology has been successfully tested with both dental students and pre-service teachers (Jönsson et al., 2007). Second, in some studies (e.g., Holmstedt et al., 2018), preservice teachers have been given access to explicit criteria in order to further support their analysis. Such criteria typically help the preservice teachers to focus on important aspects of the situation, without giving away any answers or removing the complexity of the task. The present study provided criteria focusing on teachers' relational competence. Following the procedure presented in a study by Holmstedt et al. (2018), the criteria were provided to the student teachers and explained after the student teachers' first attempt to analyze the movie, in order to evaluate the support provided by the criteria.

Sample

The participants were one cohort of pre-service special educators ($n = 109$) at a University in Sweden. The study was performed during the first semester of the three-semester program, during which the pre-service special educators attended courses on special-education perspectives on learning and development. Only the analyses of the educators that attended both occasions of data collection were included in the study ($n = 74$).

Procedure

The procedure can be divided into three distinct steps: pre-test, intervention, and post-test. During the first step, the pre-service special educators watched a short digital video sequence, focusing on teacher–student interactions, where the teacher's relational competence was challenged. The movie was recorded by professional filmmakers using professional actors for the leading characters, in order to make it seem authentic and encourage the pre-service special educators to engage with the situation (see below for more information about the video). The pre-service special educators analyzed the situation, using the following questions:

- (1) In what way do you think the teacher acts to support a positive relationship with the students?
- (2) In what way do you think the teacher counteracts a positive relationship with the students?
- (3) Describe how you think the teacher should handle the situation.

The pre-service special educators wrote their analyses on computers and submitted their responses to the researchers through a Google form.

During the intervention, the pre-service special educators were given access to explicit criteria for relational competence based on the above conceptualization (i.e., criteria for communicative competence, differentiation competence, and socio-emotional competence). The meanings of the criteria were explained to the preservice teachers by an expert in relational pedagogy, who also modeled how to use the criteria by analyzing a short sequence of the commercial movie “Precious” (directed by Lee Daniels, starring Gabourey Sidibe). This was done to acknowledge that the criteria are contextually situated and the need for students to be familiar with the practice to which the criteria belong.

During the final step, the pre-service special educators watched and analyzed the video sequence once more, with the support of the criteria. Similar to the pre-test, the pre-service special educators wrote their analyses on computers and submitted their responses to the researchers through a Google form.

The Video

The video is approximately 2 min long and shows an ordinary year six Swedish classroom (students aged 11–12). The storyline revolves around the (female) teacher and two students with different special-education needs, named Kim and Charlie. The first student displays a behavior often associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), such as restlessness and edginess, as well as speaking out of turn and difficulty keeping quiet. The other student is quiet and withdrawn. In this particular sequence, the teacher attempts to have a whole-class lesson on the Solar System, but is repeatedly being interrupted by the hyperactive student. The movie shows how the teacher tries to balance her attention between this student and the rest of the class, including the withdrawn student. For example, on one occasion, the teacher approaches the hyperactive student, puts her hand on the student's shoulder, squats down to the same level as the student, and, with a lowered voice, asks the student to continue the conversation during recess instead. The movie is deliberately made to be ambiguous in the sense that the teacher does not handle every situation perfectly. Instead, she is constantly balancing between meeting the needs of individual students and the needs of the whole class. As a result, there is room for multiple interpretations of the situation and different solutions may be seen as appropriate, depending on which, or whose, perspective is taken.

Data and Analysis

The data for this study comprises the pre-service special educators' written analyses of the videoed teacher–student interactions, both before and after being provided with explicit

TABLE 1 | An overview of the themes and subthemes.

Main themes	Pre-test subthemes	Post-test subthemes
Perceptions of relational (in)competence shift from teaching strategies and the teacher's attitude to interpersonal relationships between teacher and students	Relational competence is manifested by teaching strategies Relational (in)competence is manifested by the teacher's attitude	Relational (in)competence is manifested through the teacher's communication with individual students Relational (in)competence is manifested through the teacher's way of regulating closeness and distance in relation to individual students Relational (in)competence is manifested through the teacher's management of her own- and her students' emotions
Perceptions of relational competence in relation to students with behavioral difficulties shift from the educational environment to teacher-student relationships	Relational competence is manifested by strategies and support structures Relational competence is manifested by responding to neurodiversity	Relational competence is manifested in interpersonal communication Relational competence is manifested by acknowledging group needs as well as individual needs

criteria on teachers' relational competence. The responses of the pre-service special educators were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and the responses before and after the provision of explicit criteria were compared. This analysis is based on the repeated reading of the informants' analyses in search of themes transcending the material. The analysis followed the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which, in this case, means that the following steps were taken: 1) The pre-service teachers' analyses were read through and initial ideas were noted down; 2) Interesting features of the data were coded across the dataset; 3) Codes were assembled into initial themes, gathering data relevant to each initial theme; 4) Themes were checked against coded extracts and the dataset as a whole; 5) The specifics of each theme were refined; 6) A selection of compelling extract examples for this article was made; and 7) The extracts were translated into English by the authors. Steps 1–3 were first performed individually by all researchers, then shared and compared. Initial themes were negotiated and decision on final themes were made collectively. Steps 4–7 were also performed collectively in an interactive process, as a way to ensure credibility of the interpretations.

RESULTS

The findings are presented below in two main themes, along with associated sub-themes (see **Table 1** for an overview). Quotes that exemplify the central patterns distinguished in the analysis are included under each sub-theme. We first present the results from before the intervention, followed by those from after the intervention. Although this is not an experimental study, for convenience we will refer to these occasions as “pre-test” and “post-test.”

Theme 1: Perceptions of Relational (In) Competence Shift From Teaching Strategies and the Teacher's Attitude to Interpersonal Relationships Between Teacher and Students

This theme responds to RQ1: How do pre-service special educators perceive relational (in)competence, as manifested in

teaching? Findings from the pre-test are presented in two sub-themes, while findings from the post-test are presented in three sub-themes.

Pre-Test, Sub-Theme 1: Relational Competence is Manifested by Teaching Strategies

Several informants write that the teacher (in the movie) skillfully delegates tasks and distributes the opportunity to speak among the students, and see these actions as examples of relational competence:

The teacher tries to look at all the students and she distributes the opportunity to speak in the classroom. The teacher finally tries to let Kim help her. Some other students also get opportunities to help by searching for information (18).

Many informants perceive the teacher's ability to create conditions for learning as an indicator of relational competence:

The teacher admits that she does not know how cold it is on Pluto and asks a student to find out, which makes him feel important and participate in the creation of knowledge. The teacher isn't omniscient but takes advantage of their curiosity and knowledge (75).

When it comes to the teacher's relational incompetence, many informants point out shortcomings in the teaching. For example, they claim that the teaching has a monological character: “The teacher keeps strictly to her planning and to the knowledge she wants to convey” (17); “The teacher keeps strictly to her subject and moves from A to B. This prevents her from starting from the students, who have something they want to tell” (54).

Moreover, some of the informants exemplify relational incompetence with the observation that the teacher does not consider the students' knowledge and experience: “The teacher goes straight to what is to be done, without exploring the students' experiences of the topic” (3); “The teacher does not explore the students' prior knowledge” (28).

Some of the informants describe the teacher's relational incompetence in terms of being unable to maintain a clear interaction order: “She deviates from the rule that you should

raise your hand when you want to talk, in order to give someone else space or perform a task" (9); "Before the lesson starts, it is important to talk about goals, purposes, and procedures" (16).

Pre-Test, Sub-Theme 2: Relational (In)Competence is Manifested by the Teacher's Attitude

Many of the informants describe relational competence in terms of the teacher responding positively to students:

She notices and confirms that a student feels bad and cannot focus due to something that has happened before the lesson, by patting on her shoulder and saying that they will talk about it later during the break (73).

When it comes to relational incompetence, many of the informants write about the teacher's shortcomings in distributing her attention among the students. Many emphasize that the teacher pays too much positive attention to one student at the expense of the others: "The teacher gives more attention to one student who often requires her attention, instead of giving the floor to someone who really wants to answer and who waits for her turn" (42).

Moreover, many informants claim that the teacher gives one student too little positive attention: "On the other hand, the girl by the window is overlooked when she raises her hand and wants to help" (17).

A smaller group write that the teacher gives one student too much negative attention: "When the teacher tries to get Charlie's attention, it is very authoritative. Also, it didn't lead to any reaction, which made it completely pointless" (29).

Finally, a few informants write about relational competence as manifested in the communication between the teacher and individual students:

She leaves the student alone when she [the student] expresses dissatisfaction by commenting or by breaking a pencil. Looks at the student at regular intervals with a friendly face. It's good because the student can participate on her own terms and not feel unsuccessful. This seems to result in the student not giving up, but continuing to participate (22).

Post-Test, Sub-theme 1: Relational (In)Competence is Manifested Through the Teacher's Communication With Individual Students

The teaching strategies that the informants discussed in the pre-test are mentioned significantly less in the post-test. Instead, virtually all of the informants interpret the teacher's relational competence in a communicative context: "She gives feedback to and validates Kim. She walks up to her and put her hand on Kim's shoulder when she is worried" (28); "The teacher has a good verbal and nonverbal communication mainly with Kim, but also with Karl. She shows this by answering Kim's question and by interacting verbally with her" (35).

Many informants also describe relational incompetence in terms of the teacher's verbal and nonverbal behavior in relation to the students:

Shows with facial expressions and tone of voice that she finds it disturbing to be interrupted and that the students' comments aren't appropriate. Walks up to the student, but the physical contact doesn't feel "honest" and it doesn't seem like the student experiences it positively. Tries to invite the silent student, but instead she seems to make the student feel lost and embarrassed, considering her body language and facial expressions (29).

Post-Test, Sub-Theme 2: Relational (In)Competence is Manifested Through the Teacher's Way of Regulating Closeness and Distance in Relation to Individual Students

In the post-test, several informants—albeit clearly fewer than in sub-theme 1—interpret the teacher's relational competence in terms of regulating closeness and distance in relation to individual students. Many of the interpretations include behavioral markers for the competence: "The teacher shows good differentiation competence in contact with Kim by sometimes being close and sometimes being at some distance from her" (35); "She touches Kim's shoulder, squats down to her level, looks her in the eyes, which shows that she [the teacher] has the competence of adjusting the distance specifically for the situation" (73).

A few informants acknowledge the student's response when describing the teacher's differentiation competence:

Later, when Kim wants to continue discussing her experiences, the teacher approaches her, positions herself close to Kim and puts a hand on her shoulder. This is probably something that the teacher knows calms Kim down, which is also visible in Kim's reaction (49).

When writing about the teacher's relational incompetence, many of the informants discuss the teacher's shortcomings in regulating the degree of closeness and distance in relation to the students:

The teacher thus keeps too great a distance from Charlie, both mentally and physically, when she remains in front of the classroom. She should have walked down to Charlie and got close to her when responding to her question (24).

Post-Test, Sub-Theme 3: Relational (In)Competence is Manifested Through the Teacher's Management of Her Own- and Her Students' Emotions

A number of informants, although clearly fewer than in sub-theme 1, interpret the teacher's relational competence in terms of emotions. Some of the informants point to the teacher's management of her own feelings in relation to the students: "Despite Kim's questions and interruptions, the teacher constantly acts sensitively to her own feelings and thus shows good socio-emotional competence" (35).

Other informants emphasize the teacher's management of the students' emotions:

The teacher is skilled in managing her own and the students' feelings. She is sensitive to the student's emotional expressions and responds so that the relationship is strengthened by walking up to the student and confirming that she [the teacher] has understood that she [the student] wants to say something that is important to her (41).

Regarding the teacher's relational incompetence, many of the informants write about the teacher's way of managing emotions:

She tries to fix the situation in which the student gets annoyed by approaching her and calmly saying that we can talk about it during the break. When the student gets angry, because the teacher didn't choose her when she raised her hand, the teacher says "yes" a bit condescendingly and then puts her hand on the student's back (54).

Theme 2: Perceptions of Relational Competence in Relation to Students With Behavioral Difficulties Shift From the Educational Environment to Teacher-Student Relationships

This theme addresses RQ2: How do pre-service special educators perceive relational (in)competence, as manifested in relation to students with behavioral difficulties? The results from both the pre-test and post-test include two sub-themes.

Pre-Test, Sub-theme 1: Relational Competence is Manifested by Strategies and Support Structures

In the pre-test, the informants address the use of different types of artifacts and discuss what adjustments the teacher should have made—on both a group and individual level—to increase accessibility and student participation. The informants also provide a number of different proposals regarding how general support structures can engage students at a group level:

Capture the students' prior knowledge. Engage with them through interaction between the students using different methods and strategies. Start from what the students already know . . . Let the students reflect on the new knowledge they have acquired during the lesson (8).

The informants also proposed specific models to help the teacher involve and engage students in classroom discussions:

Students should answer questions, offer to help in a "random" way, for example, via lottery popsicle sticks. Then the distribution of the opportunity to speak becomes more random, and the girls and boys get an equal percentage of speaking time (57).

On an individual level, specific advice is given to the teacher on how to support the student Kim in adjusting to behavioral expectations in the classroom:

If Kim has difficulties with his impulse control, Kim may need additional support through a stop signal from the teacher, a stop word, red light, something on the bench that reminds Kim not to shout straight out and interrupt (33).

Pre-test, Sub-theme 2: Relational Competence is Manifested by Responding to Neurodiversity

The informants point out the importance of the teacher being aware of the neurodiversity and different needs within the group. Explicit and practical suggestions about different ways of managing the students' behavior are given in the pre-test; for example, the informants suggest that the teacher should neglect or regulate bad behavior and confirm good behavior:

She could have acknowledged the girl by the window by giving her the floor when she raised her hand. Taking advantage of her initiative and, in this way, building confidence in her, instead of, as in the current situation, perhaps signaling to her [the student] that she [the teacher] did not want anything good for her. (2)

Strong focus is put on the teacher's way of handling the interaction order: "She should ask Kim to raise her hand and help her wait for her turn" (15).

However, there are also suggestions saying that the students' unwanted behavior should be neglected, and their positive behavior should be encouraged: "The teacher could try to ignore the talkative girl" (4); "She could have given positive feedback to Kim when she raised her hand, explained that other students also raised their hands, and let the student who had the floor answer" (41).

Post-Test, Sub-Theme 1: Relational Competence is Manifested in Interpersonal Communication

In the post-test, the informants give new types of descriptions of how the teacher should handle neurodiversity in the classroom. In addition to stating that there are behaviors that should be neglected, regulated, and confirmed, the informants highlight communicative and socio-emotional aspects:

The teacher should treat all students equally and with respect by displaying commitment and warmth, by being responsive and showing interest in all students' thoughts and willingness to participate . . . The teacher should deal with her own emotional expressions and not place herself over Kim and Charlie to promote a positive relationship. She should show respect by keeping a proper physical distance from Kim (18).

Several of the informants are now critical regarding how the teacher is managing the diversity within the classroom, and emphasize her relational (in)competence:

[The teacher should] hide her feelings of frustration when being interrupted and instead show interest in the first student and what is being said. Show that it is interesting and that it is worth listening to. Be sensitive to when the silent student is actually involved and shows interest, in order to encourage such behavior (29).

The informants also point out the importance of the teacher's body language, tone of voice, and position in the classroom to regulate and confirm the students' behaviors:

The teacher might be able to move around more in the classroom and try to engage more students and then also be able to pay more attention to Charlie with eye contact and the other students who may not be fully involved in the teaching. . . . The teacher could put down the papers and then be more open in her body language and use her body more (67).

Post-Test, Sub-Theme 2: Relational Competence is Manifested by Acknowledging Group Needs as Well as Individual Needs

In the post-test, the informants present more developed reasoning about the dilemmas and challenges in a diverse classroom. This is a shift from the pre-test, in which they gave more explicit and concrete advice about support structures and strategies:

If it is the case that they have an established relationship and therefore that she knows the students, she could have given the girl a few minutes to tell the class about her experience with the helium balloon and, in this way, possibly prevented the girl from feeling neglected (2).

In the post-test, the informants place an emphasis on relationships, indicating an increased awareness of how the teacher handles the at-risk students:

It is super difficult in a situation like this. Quite spontaneously, I think that she should pay attention to the girl by the window when she actually raises her hand; at the same time, it may prevent a forthcoming explosion in Kim when she is chosen to do the task . . . She could also have divided the task between the girls, one doing something and another doing the rest (14).

DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings from RQ 1 and RQ 2 are summarized and discussed, followed by a discussion of implications for special-education teacher preparation.

Pre-Service Special Educators' Relational Competence

This study contributes knowledge on how pre-service special educators perceive relational (in)competence, as manifested in

teaching, before and after an intervention. In a general sense, this study supports research on relational competence as a central part of (special) pedagogical professionalism.

In the pre-test, many informants tended to focus on the teacher's teaching strategies and on her ability to create a positive learning environment. Of course, such factors are relevant for relational competence; however, they are not part of the core of the concept, as defined in the introduction. Another significant pattern in the pre-test was that the informants associated relational competence with the teacher's positive attitude. Similarly, many informants viewed the degree of attention that the teacher showed the students as an indicator for relational competence. Of course, such perspectives and terms are relevant. However, in the pre-test, most of the informants simply said that the teacher had provided the students with confirmation but did not really discuss how this confirmation was manifested or what it meant for the relationship. Thus, the special educators' interpretations were lacking in terms of interpersonal encounters. This picture changed significantly in the post-test. First, the aspects that were less relevant in the pre-test, that is, the teacher's strategy and individual attitude, were virtually unmentioned in the post-test. Second, the educators' focus had clearly shifted to the interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students. Third, most of the informants—whether implicitly or explicitly—used the concepts they had learned from the intervention. Many of the informants described and interpreted the teacher's relational competence in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication in which the students' perspectives are acknowledged. Furthermore, a number of informants commented on the teacher's differentiation competence and socio-emotional competence, although significantly more commented on her communicative competence. An interesting difference between the results of the present study and those of another Swedish study (Aspelin and Jonsson, 2019) is that the pre-service special educators in this study were already focusing on pedagogical practice in their first analysis, whereas the pre-service teachers in the other study focused on applying "external" and "internal" explanatory models, for example explained the activity in terms of curricula or the teacher's personal characteristics. Another Swedish study (Ewe and Aspelin, 2021) showed that in-service teachers had an initial focus similar to that of the pre-service special educators. These findings indicate that experienced educators focus more on actual teaching processes, while pre-service teachers tend to seek more abstract explanations. However, all three groups largely focused on competencies other than relational competence in the pre-tests (even when asked to focus on interpersonal relationships). Similar to findings from Danish studies with other research designs on relational competence (e.g., Nielsen and Fibaek Laursen, 2016), the participants in the Swedish studies initially applied perspectives that concerned didactics and classroom management. However, after the intervention, the participants provided relatively nuanced analyses of teachers' relational competence. For example, the pre-service special educators acknowledged verbal and nonverbal communication

in the post-test, not just by noting that the teachers acted in a certain way, but also by discussing the implications for students and for relationships.

As a whole, the findings suggest that special-education teacher preparation should pay more attention to relational competence, in both its indirect sense, that is, concerning the ability to analyze relationships, and its direct sense, that is, concerning the actual ability to build and maintain real relationships with students face-to-face. Although the intervention reported here was short, it suggests that a longer program could have a significant impact on the student teachers' professional development.

Previous research has shown that relationships between teachers and at-risk students tend to be comparatively problematic. However, research has also shown that high-quality relationships with teachers are particularly important for these students (Ewe, 2019). Therefore, special educators—perhaps more than other educators—require the capability to quickly and adequately interpret and respond to students' cues in interaction, “for example, in deciding when children need extensive, moderate, or no assistance” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003, p. 151). The current study does not provide much basis for claiming that pre-service special educators are exceptionally skilled in this respect; however, it is reasonable to say that special educators tend to focus on teacher–student interaction.

Pre-Service Special Educators' Relational Competence in Encounters With Students With Behavioral Difficulties

In the descriptions from the pre-test, not much attention was explicitly paid to the recorded teacher's relational competence in relation to students with behavioral difficulties; instead, the informants highlighted the conditions for being able to work with relationships. The recommendations provided were very hands-on and there were no explicit statements about the various aspects of interpersonal communication. Descriptions of relational competence were limited to mentions of neglecting and regulating negative behaviors and confirming positive behavior. Moreover, the pre-test answers mainly concerned how the teacher should have acted, while not saying much about the actual course of events in the video episode. In the post-test, similar themes emerged; however, they now contained more nuanced descriptions of the complexity of teaching students who act in different ways. The dilemmas and challenges that arise in a context in which students have different needs were notably recognized. In addition to statements that there are behaviors that should be neglected, regulated, and confirmed, the informants also highlighted communicative and socio-emotional aspects. For example, some of the informants commented more on the teacher's body language, tone of voice, and position in the classroom, as well as on how she managed her emotions in relation to the students.

The results thus reveal a shift in how the informants interpreted the teacher's encounters with students with behavioral difficulties before and after the intervention. In the pre-test, the informants showed a strong focus on accessibility in

the classroom and on various teaching techniques. They pointed out the importance of designing productive learning environments for students with special-education needs (SEN). Such aspects of professional practice are also emphasized by in-service special educators (Göransson et al., 2015). When the informants gave advice in the pre-test about how the teacher should handle the problematic situation, they focused on the diversity in the group and stated that the situation could be handled through changes in the physical learning environment, such as different seating in the classroom, an increased use of pictures or graphic support, stress-reducing objects, and so forth. Thus, the analyses from the pre-test emphasized basic conditions in the classroom that would make teaching possible and would give the diverse group of students opportunities to learn. The informants particularly emphasized that the “design” of the lesson could be changed to better meet the differences and individual variations that existed within the group. An analysis of support needs, as perceived by teachers in Finnish and Swedish inclusive classrooms, has shown that a well-structured physical environment is important (Takala et al., 2020). In terms of instructional approaches, for example, it is suggested that the teacher should work with “cooperative learning” or a more “student-centered approach” (ibid.).

In the post-test, the informants discussed different techniques that the teacher could use to produce desirable behaviors in the classroom—that is, they described how a teacher can use voice, gaze, and posture to regulate students' behaviors. Although the informants provided more nuanced descriptions of the complexity of teaching diverse groups in the post-test, their portrayal of the teacher's interpersonal relationships with students with SEN was (still) rather poorly done. They largely reduced relational aspects to being a matter of regulating students' behavior, either by reinforcing or neglecting it. Takala et al. (2020) obtained similar results: Swedish and Finnish teachers highlighted behavioral regulation as an important principle in working with SEN students. However, in the present study, there was a shift from the pre-test, in which the informants' advice mainly referred to artifacts, placement, and so forth, to the post-test, in which they included more nuanced analyses of the complexity of the teacher's encounters with different students. This finding aligns with the various discourses that exist in the field of special education, where it is common to view students' needs through both individual and environmental perspectives (Hjörne, 2016). In the pre-test, the informants mainly provided explicit advice on the design of the learning environment; in the post-test, they focused more on how the teacher could handle (neuro) diversity in the classroom.

Pre-service special educators have begun their development in a new profession, which includes an advisory and supervisory function in relation to general education teachers. Studies (Lindqvist et al., 2020) have reported the presence of a pattern within in-service special educators' perceptions about their work: They develop from general education teachers to special-education teachers through a greater focus on the supervision of other teachers. In-service special educators strongly emphasize that a central task in their job is to work with supervision and consultation in relation to general education teachers. This

emphasis on supervision was explicit in the pre-test: The pre-service special educators gave very direct and concrete suggestions on how the teacher should act in relation to the SEN students.

Given that these student teachers are in the beginning of their education, it is striking that very few of their analyses pointed to the difficulty of providing advice based only on a short video episode. For example, only a few informants mentioned the need for a pedagogical investigation before anything definitive could be said about the students' behavioral difficulties. Overall, the pre-test analyses showed a lack of nuanced reasoning about the complexities of pedagogical practice and encounters with students with behavioral difficulties. Hopefully, the student teachers will acquire such knowledge during their future education. As stated by Shepherd et al. (2016), the demands placed on special educators have changed through new policies and practices, while the goals and content of the education have not developed in the same direction. The work of Aspelin and Östlund (2020) reveals a similar tendency in the area of relational competence in Swedish pre-service special educators' programs, which largely lack explicit goals regarding special educators' relational competence.

Implications for Special-Education Teacher Preparation

This study contains interesting implications for special-education teacher preparation. As shown in the pre-service special educators' analyses, educators are generally capable of identifying both strengths and weaknesses in a teacher's actions in terms of relational competence. However, there are clearly different views on what these strengths and weaknesses are, and the student teachers sometimes had completely opposing views on the adequacy of the teacher's actions. Furthermore, in almost all cases, the student teachers provided only one interpretation of the situation, in which they expressed how the teacher should act or what they considered to be adequate/inadequate actions. For example, one of the pre-service special educators claimed that the teacher in the movie primarily focused on the subject matter, which did not benefit her relationship with the students:

The teacher focuses on the subject knowledge. The teacher's actions do not promote a good relationship with the students. She begins by quieting the student who talks a lot by getting close, putting her hand on the [student's] shoulder, answering briefly with disinterest to signal that it is time to listen and to be quiet (27).

This analysis clearly contrasts with the interpretation of a number of the other pre-service special educators, who saw both the physical closeness and the hand on the shoulder as a way for the teacher to strengthen the relationship with the student:

The classroom situation can be complex and, in the movie, you can see that the teacher validates the student who has difficulties waiting for her turn in several

different ways. She [i.e., the teacher] does this both verbally, by confirming that she hears and sees the student, and physically by approaching the student and placing a calm hand on the student, while she confirms that she knows that the student's experience has meant a lot to her and that they can talk about it at a later time, during the break. The teacher thus shows respect for the student's experiences and feelings (3).

The example above is only one of several instances in which the pre-service special educators had opposite views on how to interpret the situation. While some pre-service special educators perceived the teacher as calm, confident, and relaxed, others, such as Informant 30, claimed that the teacher had a "tense posture" due to being constantly interrupted. Still others disagreed on whether the teacher was genuinely interested in what the students had to say, or on whether or not she was being too permissive.

It is also noteworthy that the pre-service special educators did not make any attempts to evaluate the teacher's actions from different perspectives, such as by noting that the actions might be appropriate from one perspective, but less appropriate from another. Consequently, the educators did not fully acknowledge the complexity of the situation. Instead of considering the situation as a dilemma with multiple (but perhaps more or less adequate) solutions, they tended to convey a view that suggested that there was only one optimal solution.

Of course, these one-sided interpretations could be an artifact of the research design, in which the questions may have unintentionally encouraged the pre-service special educators to provide only a single perspective. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the situation reveals an untapped educational resource. Confronting the pre-service special educators with perspectives and solutions other than their own, such as the analyses by their peers, could potentially broaden their conceptions not only of the specific situation, but also of how to more comprehensively acknowledge the complexity of any teaching situation. While the current version of the intervention was designed to investigate pre-service special educators' perceptions of teacher-student relationships for research purposes, the intervention could easily be adjusted for teaching purposes by letting the pre-service special educators take part in the analyses made by peers. Challenging pre-service special educators' own views, and making them consider alternative perspectives and multiple solutions at an early point, may better prepare them to handle the complexity of teaching when analyzing such situations during the remaining parts of their education.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study has several important limitations, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. First, although the study includes a whole cohort of pre-service special educators, encompassing student teachers with a broad spectrum of different backgrounds and experiences, the sample is still relatively small, and most pre-service special educators come from within a

limited geographical and professional range. The findings may therefore depend on the specific individuals participating and may not necessarily be generalizable to any other population of pre-service teachers. Further research is thus needed in order to corroborate the findings.

Second, this study was performed during the first semester of the program, so the pre-service special educators had not yet been extensively exposed to different special-education perspectives and theories. This may have contributed to a greater variation in their analyses, but possibly at the expense of theoretical depth. It could therefore be expected that a similar intervention performed later during the program would yield quite different results.

Third, the focus of this study was to investigate how pre-service special educators analyze simulated situations. Consequently, no claims can be made regarding how pre-service special educators act (or would act) in “real-life” situations. Furthermore, the pre-service special educators only analyzed one simulated situation, which prevents us from making any general claims about their proficiency in applying knowledge about relational competence in other situations. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, future research could involve other samples of pre-service special educators, such as later during their education, in order to substantiate or complement both the findings reported here and a wider spectrum of situations. Moreover, it could be mentioned that we use RCM in a forthcoming study to promote in-service teachers' relational competence, with a focus on how the intervention influences the informants' pedagogical practice.

The current findings raise interesting questions on how to prepare pre-service special educators for the sensitive and complex situations that they will doubtless encounter in their professional roles as special educators. As the relatively simple intervention reported here was successful in engaging the pre-

service special educators in analyzing the simulated situation, a more frequent use of similar simulations during the program could be an area worth exploring in future research. Furthermore, current developments in digital simulations, such as the use of avatars, hold potential to provide even more authentic and engaging situations as a basis for analyses and professional development.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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