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'You notice that there is something positive about going to school': how teachers' kindness can promote positive teacher–student relationships in upper secondary school

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to obtain students' first-person perspectives of their experience of positive teacher–student relationships (TSRs) in upper secondary school. We also explored their experiences of qualities of TSRs concerning students' mental health and dropout from upper secondary school. We used a qualitative and participative approach, whereby key stakeholders were included as co-researchers. Seventeen students participated in semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups. Interview data were analysed via thematic analysis. Participants' experiences were clustered around five themes: (1) it takes two: mutual responsibility in TSRs, (2) don't be unfair: negative experiences challenge TSRs, (3) talk to us: bonding and problem solving through conversation, (4) help us: adapting to students' academic and personal needs, and (5) we need kind teachers: the importance of teachers' demeanour. The findings demonstrated the value of positive TSRs and illustrated the ways in which they promote students' well-being at school.

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KEYWORDS

Teacher–student relationship; dropout; mental health; upper secondary school

Background

This study explored students' experience of teacher–student relationships (TSRs) in upper secondary school. Qualities of TSR concerning students' mental health and dropout have also been explored. Positive relationships between adolescents and adults are perhaps the single most important ingredient in the promotion of positive youth development. As schooling is central to adolescents' lives, previous studies have highlighted the crucial role played by TSRs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Pianta & Allen, 2008). TSRs have also been recognized as pivotal to students' motivation and learning (Hattie, 2009; Nordenbo, Larsen, Tiftikçi, Wendt, & Østergaard, 2008).

The TSR

The conceptual framework for understanding TSRs has roots in numerous traditions within the fields of education and psychology. The original framework was most strongly influenced by attachment theory, which emphasizes the attachment between parents and children and its influence on children's other relationships later in life (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Positive TSRs are characterized by a high degree of warmth, open communication, and support from teachers (Drugli, 2013). Teachers' tolerance, empathy,

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interest and respect for students have been identified as positive aspects of TSRs (Nordenbo et al., 2008), and students' perception of teachers' support is frequently identified as a key ingredient of TSRs (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Teachers' support is often categorized into instrumental support and emotional support and care. Instrumental support is related to the practical assistance and subject-related guidance that teachers provide for individual students. Emotional support is related to students' perceptions of the extent to which teachers value, accept and respect them as people (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Studsrød & Bru, 2011). However, these concepts are intertwined and interact in numerous ways (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006). Negative TSRs are characterized by high levels of conflict and negative emotions, with discord in interactions between teachers and students (Drugli, 2013). In negative TSRs, students frequently believe that teachers do not care about them and are not interested in their success or willing to help them with problems (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

TSRs in upper secondary school

The quality of TSRs changes and develops over time as students grow older and adapt to upper secondary school. It has been assumed that they perceive relationships with peers as more valuable than those with adults, as they develop towards adulthood (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Schall, Wallace, & Chhuon, 2014). Several studies have reported declining quality and positivity in relationships between older students and their teachers (Cattley, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). However, paradoxically, the importance of TSRs in learning and achievement has been shown to increase as students grow older (Roorda et al., 2011). The power of TSRs, with respect to students' mental health and dropout from upper secondary school, has also been emphasized (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007; Frostad, Pijl, & Mjaavatn, 2015; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Wang, Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013).

The importance of students' well-being in positive youth development is widely accepted (Soutter, O'Steen, & Gilmore, 2014). Schooling is central to not only youth development and growth but also development of mental health problems. Adolescence is a vulnerable time, characterized by major developmental transition points, and several students develop mental health problems during upper secondary school (Garvik, Idsoe, & Bru, 2014). The most common mental health problems during adolescence are depression and anxiety, but severe mental health problems also occur (Garvik et al., 2014; Rutter, 2007). Mental health problems influence students' quality of life, learning, and school results. (Bergeron, Chouinard, & Janosz, 2011; Frostad et al., 2015; McGrath, 2009; Muller, 2001). TSRs may serve as both risk and protective factors in students' mental health. Several findings have reported that positive TSRs were associated with positive outcomes, such as reduced depression and improved self-esteem, in students (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Wang et al., 2013). In contrast, negative TSRs could serve as a risk factor for poor mental health in students by decreasing self-esteem and increasing depression (De Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). Several studies have reported an association between students' mental health problems and dropout from upper secondary school (Garvik et al., 2014; Vander Stoep, Weiss, & Kuo, 2003). A growing body of research has begun to explore TSRs' contribution to school dropout. Positive and negative TSRs have been positively associated with lower and higher dropout rates, respectively (Barile et al., 2012; Cornelius-White, 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014; Strand, 2014).

Several studies have identified TSRs as a potential source of resilience and a promotional factor for students' mental health and students at risk of dropout (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Davis & Dupper, 2004). Adolescents' TSRs are more negative, relative to those of younger students, and can be stable (Hamre & Pianta, 2001); therefore, it is important to determine how to avoid negative TSRs in upper secondary school. Most studies examining TSRs, youth mental health, and dropout have involved quantitative data and correlation and explored the qualities of TSRs rather than the relational processes between teachers and students. To gain a deeper understanding of these processes, exploration and understanding of the characteristics of positive TSRs in upper secondary school are required. Students' perspectives of the importance, development, and experience of TSRs are essential to this understanding. This study aimed to obtain students' first-person perspectives of their experience of

TSRs in upper secondary school. The specific research questions were as follows: How do students experience that positive TSRs are developed and promoted in upper secondary school? What do students experience as important relational qualities concerning their mental health and dropout in upper secondary school?

Method

A qualitative methodology was chosen as a means of acquiring a deeper understanding of students' perspectives of their experience of TSRs. Data were collected via focus groups and individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1994; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Malterud, 2012). We emphasized the adoption of a reflexive stance towards our own pre-understanding and the interview setting (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Binder, Holgersen, & Moltu, 2012).

The study was inspired by the concept of participatory research. This tradition is often described as a means of conducting research 'with people' rather than 'on people' (Borg, Karlsson, Kim, & McCormack, 2012). As a part of this approach, a young woman with lived experience of dropout from upper secondary school worked as a co-researcher; she participated in the development of the interview guide, attended eight out of ten interviews, and assisted in the data analysis. In accordance with the participatory approach, a competence group of nine key stakeholders (three students, two teachers, two parents, a school nurse, and a school psychologist) was established and contributed to discussions concerning the conduct of the study, development of the interview guide, and data analysis.

Participants

School advisers and a school nurse from three upper secondary schools in the eastern part of Norway recruited 17 participants (five boys and twelve girls). The inclusion criteria were as follows: being at risk of dropping out of school or knowing someone who had been at risk of dropping out. Eleven participants had lived experience of dropout risk, and six knew someone who had been at risk of dropping out of school. Participants' mean age was 17.9 years. Eleven participants were undertaking general studies, and six were enrolled in vocational programmes.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. All participants received a written description of the study and provided written informed consent. Participants were assured of confidentiality.

Data collection

Data were obtained via focus groups and semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Malterud, 2012). The interview guide was developed and revised in collaboration with the co-researcher and the competence group. The first author, a clinical social worker, interviewed nine students in the two focus groups and eight students individually. The co-researcher attended eight of the ten interviews, asked follow-up questions, and engaged in post-interview discussions with the first author.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the material according to the research questions and aim of the study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were imported into the NVivo software program for organization and analysis. In the first step of the analysis, the first author listened to the audiotapes, read the interview transcripts, and noted her initial thoughts and

Table 1. Themes.

It takes two: mutual responsibility in TSRs	Don't be unfair: negative experiences challenge TSRs	Talk to us: bonding and problem-solving through conversation	Help us: adapting to students' academic and personal needs	We need kind teachers: the importance of teachers' demeanour
TSR development is based on mutuality	Conflict can create lasting negative patterns	Meetings can contribute to TSR development	Teachers who address students' personal needs are helpful	Kind and smiling teachers are appreciated
Respect is a key ingredient	Unfair approaches affect the entire class	Casual conversations promote personal relationships	Building relationships through teaching	Care and trustworthiness promote positive TSRs

reflections, to obtain an initial impression of the material. In the second step, the first author coded the material, line by line, into 63 initial codes. She presented transcripts of meaningful units; and discussed preliminary themes with the competence group, to obtain feedback. Following this discussion, the first author arranged the material into 10 preliminary themes. These themes and associated codes were discussed and rearranged in collaboration with the co-researcher, resulting in the identification of five main themes, which were then discussed and revised in collaboration with the other authors (Table 1).

Findings

It takes two: mutual responsibility in TSRs

Students described TSRs as mutual relationships and emphasized their own roles and responsibility for positive development and interaction within the relationships. They also stated that TSRs could develop through common interests and activities. Respect was described as a key ingredient in mutual relationships.

TSR development is based on mutuality

The interaction between teachers and students was described as that of mutual responsibility. Students emphasized that, to develop positive relationships, they were required to be willing to give and take and make themselves available for teachers; one student stated, 'To build a positive relationship, we have to be rather open to what they have to offer'. They also stated that negative relationships were difficult to change and noted the power of the class as a group. Several students described how the class could turn against the teacher and make it difficult to establish positive relationships between teachers and students. A student in one of the focus groups exemplified this by saying, '... and I think that teacher really has improved. But it doesn't really work when the students just go on in the same way'.

Some students, particularly those enrolled in sports programmes, described positive relationships with teachers with whom they shared common interests and experiences. They discussed a common interest in sports and joint tours as an experience that exerted a positive influence on TSRs. One of these students said, 'I think we in the sports program have a better relationship with the teachers because of all the trips and the sports events we join together ...'. They explained that they felt that relationships changed as they went on trips together; one student stated, 'we go on all these trips, and you get to know a different side of the teachers, besides the teaching. It's like we are friends when we go on a trip together ...'.

Respect is a key ingredient

Students highlighted respect as a key ingredient in mutual TSRs. Several students emphasized the importance of showing respect for each other. One student explained this by saying, '... it is all about respect ... mutual respect is what makes it go round'. Several students described a lack of respect between teachers and students as a core problem in negative TSRs, as follows:

I think it is a problem that the students don't show the teachers enough respect. If they had listened to the teachers and had a little more respect, the teachers would have shown them respect in return ... and then the school environment would have been much better ...

Students described lack of respect in situations in which teachers and students did not listen to each other or talked to each other negatively in front of the class. Some of these students called for stricter rules and further action from teachers, and believed that this would promote respectful relationships. Others emphasized students' own responsibility for relationships and believed that students should work on being more polite and respectful towards teachers.

Don't be unfair: negative experiences challenge TSRs

Students described several challenging, negative experiences with teachers. They mentioned situations involving not only open conflict and quarrels but also subtle comments and approaches from teachers, which made them feel unhappy. They explained that they could feel that they were stigmatized and treated unfairly. They reflected upon the influence of negative experiences on individual students and the class environment.

Conflict can create lasting negative patterns

Students described several situations in which they had experienced conflicts with teachers. These conflicts involved arguments and quarrels. One student stated that she had observed that conflict influenced TSRs in various ways, as follows:

... some students develop really negative relationships with teachers if they have had a conflict with a teacher, then the atmosphere gets really bad between them. Others try to fix it and talk about the problem. Whereas others, they just let it go ... but it is still there and they keep on arguing.

Students also emphasized students' and teachers' responsibility for negative relationships. They were concerned that negative relationships and patterns could be difficult to change, and one student stated, '... if we have an argument ... I feel like there's always something bad between us'. They described some teachers as unwilling or uninterested in changing negative situations. In contrast, they discussed the class environment and how it had influenced TSRs, and one student said, 'If the class is negative, the relationship develops negatively'.

Unfair approaches affect the entire class

Students explained that they felt that some students were treated unfairly and stigmatized by some teachers. Some students said that they felt unhappy because they did not receive recognition from certain teachers, as other students were favoured; one of the students said, 'It affects me in a negative way, it makes me feel that whatever I do, it's not good enough for that teacher ... and I never get appreciated'. They also described how unfairness could lead to negative patterns, whereby some students felt that they had been labelled as 'always late for school' or 'bad at schoolwork' by teachers. One student explained that he felt that he was labelled as bad at school, saying, 'I felt that I got attention just because I was a bad at school, and not because I knew anything. I never got praised for what I did. It made me feel like a loser'. Students described how some teachers acted negatively towards certain students and treated them as scapegoats. They said that these approaches affected the atmosphere in class, and one student stated, 'The class was scared to death ... She thought she could discipline them by purposely making the students look bad in front of the class ... but it made us all scared'.

Talk to us: bonding and problem-solving through conversation

Students described both formal and informal conversations and meetings with teachers as valuable experiences that were helpful in getting to know each other. The conversations could also be helpful in resolving conflict and difficult situations.

Meetings can contribute to TSR development

Students explained that they had formal one-on-one meetings with their primary contact teachers each term. In these meetings, they talked systematically about how they were coping, both socially and academically, at school. Many students talked about these meetings as positive experiences, as described by one student:

I think it is positive to have these one-on-one meetings twice a year ... to really talk about how the relationship between teacher and student is going. If the teacher feels that something is negative in the classroom ... I think it helps that she talks to all students one-on-one, because then you can tell her what you find problematic ...

Students also described other types of meeting arranged by the school. Some were initiated because the students were perceived to be at risk of dropping out or had other psychosocial problems. One student talked about a helpful meeting with a teacher with whom she had experienced conflict, and said, '... and we had some problems ... I told the school advisor. The three of us had a conversation together, and things got better ... because then I could talk about what I found difficult ...'

Casual conversations promote personal relationships

Students also highlighted the value of casual conversations with teachers. These conversations were informal and occurred in class, during recess, or after school. Students described conversations about not only school subjects but also private issues. In these casual conversations, teachers explained academic issues in informal and practical ways. Several students highlighted the importance of humour. They also stated that they appreciated teachers showing an interest in how they were on a personal level. One student summed up his experiences with the teacher whom he referred to as his favourite, as follows:

... and he talks more to his students than the other teachers. He talks to us one-on-one and he talks while he is teaching in class. We talk about school subjects, but he does it in such an amusing way. He can always tell a joke. We talk about more serious and private things too: how we are doing and stuff like that. I think the whole class loves him!

Students described positive experiences involving resolution of conflict and difficult situations through informal conversations with teachers. One student mentioned her faith in informal conversations, saying, 'Personally, I would really advise everyone to tell their teachers if they feel that they are being treated unfairly or being discriminated against or have another problem. So one should really bring it up.'

Help us: adapting to students' academic and personal needs

Students reflected upon personal and academic situations and how teachers who adapted to their needs were appreciated. They stated that they felt that teachers who helped them with academic issues and personal problems made a difference and contributed to their well-being. They explained that they felt recognized by teachers who made small adjustments to accommodate them. They also stated that school could be a safe haven when TSRs were positive.

Teachers who address students' personal needs are helpful

Students reflected upon the ways in which young people's situations could be challenging; they talked about students with mental health problems and other personal problems such as challenging living conditions and problems at home. They emphasized the importance of teachers noticing and adapting to students' needs. One student said, 'I think a teacher notices when a student has problems at home or has mental health problems; the teachers notice because they see that the student acts differently from other students ...'

Several students stated that students' mental health problems, TSRs, and dropout were connected; one student said, 'Some of my friends have a hard time at home ... and mental health problems ... and that is why some of them drop out. The relationships with teachers and how they thrive at school also affect how they are doing.'

They explained that mental health problems could influence their motivation and performance in school, and vice versa. They also stated that negative aspects of TSRs could make students feel unhappy and positive aspects of TSRs could be helpful. One student expressed his opinion as follows:

I think a teacher can prevent students' performance anxiety. When the student is doing well in school, it is important that the teacher gives positive feedback. In this way, the students with anxiety can feel valued. Negative comments and things like that will only make it worse.

Students highlighted the importance of having positive relationships with their teachers as motivation for staying in school despite mental health problems and difficult conditions. One student said, '... because then you notice that there is something positive about going to school. If you have a problem or something is hard, you don't have to be afraid to talk about it or express it'. Another student said, 'I was not recognized at home. It feels good when someone at school recognize you'.

Building relationships through teaching

Students emphasized the academic aspect of TSRs as the core of the relationships between teachers and students. They explained how TSRs developed through teaching and collaboration on school subjects. They stated that they valued teachers who were good at teaching and explained that the quality of teaching affected the relationship, as follows:

... one of the teachers is much better at engaging us. She uses examples when she teaches, and she knows us much better than the other teacher. Therefore, the relationship with that teacher is much better than that with the other teacher, even though the school subject is the same ...

They explained that they sometimes felt undervalued and did not receive help with school subjects. Several students explained that teachers that told them that they were required to manage on their own, and they stated that it made them feel demotivated and could even lead to skipping classes and dropout. One student described her experience with her former Spanish teacher, saying, 'I said: "I don't get this" and the teacher said, "Then I can't help you" and she didn't help me. So then I gave up and just skipped the classes ...'

In contrast, they described teachers who were really engaged in school subjects and how this influenced TSRs in positive ways; one student said, 'I really like my geography teacher, and that is because he helps us a lot and he is really serious about his subject'.

Several students stated that they viewed customized teaching as important, and customization could be arranged as 'small adjustments'. These adjustments included helping students cram for tests, avoiding asking students with anxiety questions in class, or postponing tests when students were exhausted.

We need kind teachers: the importance of teachers' demeanour

Students emphasized the teacher's way of being as important in TSRs. They described numerous situations in which they were personally affected by teachers' different approaches and how they could influence the class atmosphere.

Kind and smiling teachers are appreciated

All the students stated that the teacher's way of being was important in the development of TSRs. They emphasized that they valued teachers who smiled and exhibited a happy demeanour in class. One student explained that he believed that teachers should begin classes in a positive manner and said, 'I think it is important that the teacher smiles when he enters the classroom. He must greet the students and ask us how we are doing, and then the class can begin'.

Another student explained how she felt good and more positive towards school when she was around her favourite teachers, whom she perceived as happy, saying 'I get in a good mood when others are ... so that teacher makes schooling easier by smiling and being happy in class'.

Teachers' kindness was described as particularly important and a positive personal trait in all interviews. Students described kindness by recalling various situations in which teachers had been helpful

or flexible or had done something extraordinary for students. Students from one of the focus groups described a teacher whom they valued because he helped them with school subjects; one student said, 'Sometimes he comes to the library and helps us cram for a test. He has really helped us with the tests, written down topics, and helped us. He is very kind!'

Some students explained that they felt that they could talk about personal problems to teachers whom they perceived as kind. One student expressed how she appreciated being able to talk to her teacher about her problems, saying, 'That teacher, she is very kind ... I tell her everything ... if I have a hard time, I tell her ...'

Care and trustworthiness promote positive TSRs

The students said that it was important that they could trust their teachers in the development of positive TSRs. They also described teachers whom they did not trust. They explained that they felt closer to certain teachers and stated that teachers' care had been valuable when they had experienced difficulties.

One student who had struggled with anxiety and difficulty attending school highlighted the importance of having a teacher to rely on, saying, 'You can't trust all friends, and you need a teacher you can trust. You need a teacher you can trust when things are difficult'. This student stated that he felt that one of his teachers was available for conversation, and he described how he talked to this teacher about his problems. He said that the relationship with this teacher made him want to go to school, even when things were difficult.

In contrast, several students mentioned that they had lost trust in some teachers, and this could hinder positive TSR development; one student said, 'the teacher talked to me about other students' problems ... that teacher violated confidentiality ... and I didn't want to be open or share my problems with her ...'

Students described teachers' care as an important aspect of TSRs. They reflected upon the ways in which some teachers made them feel appreciated and valued, and this made them feel that the teachers cared about them. They explained that these teachers showed students that they valued spending time with them and were interested in them as people. One student stated, 'It is important that the teacher appreciates your presence. That the teacher cares and has faith in you'. Another student felt that caring teachers acknowledged students' needs, saying, 'some teachers are very sensitive to students and how they are doing mentally'.

Several students described situations that demonstrated that some teachers were perceived as more informal and closer to the students, relative to other teachers. Some students stated that some teachers did not know their names or greet them in the corridors, while others developed close, personal TSRs. One student who had dropped out of school explained that she felt much better and had more positive TSRs in her new school: 'The teachers in this school allowed me to really get to know them. I think that's why I feel comfortable around them'.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to obtain students' first-person perspectives of the development of positive TSRs in upper secondary school. We also wanted to explore their experiences of qualities of TSR in relation to mental health and dropout. The students in this study described how teachers influenced them through not only what and how they taught but also their demeanour and how they related to students. Teachers' kindness was described as particularly important in the development of positive TSRs. Students stated that positive TSRs were represented by facial expressions, such as smiling, in interactions, such as conversations, and concrete actions, such as helpfulness. We present our discussion around teachers' smiles, helpfulness, and care and how these qualities could be interpreted as forms of recognition.

Students' appreciation of smiling in teachers could be understood as a rather trivial and simple finding. However, a strong and surprising finding aroused our curiosity concerning the notion of smiling. Various facial expressions convey information regarding others' internal states and emotions (Thomas,

De Bellis, Graham, & LaBar, 2007), and facial expressions are crucial to the development of attachment and relationships from infancy (Stern, 2000). Negative and positive experiences based on communication via facial expressions are regarded as essential to social interactions. The human smile is a facial expression of positive emotion. In our study, students explained how teachers' smiles influenced them and contributed to positive TSRs. The student's statement indicating that her mood improved when others were happy could be understood via the discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain (Mukamel, Ekstrom, Kaplan, Iacoboni, & Fried, 2010). The mirror neurons could explain how emotions are transmitted between people, as exemplified in this statement. Mirror neurons could play a crucial role in interpersonal relationships and social interaction, as they mirror others' body language, facial expressions and emotions (Schober & Sabitzer, 2013). From this perspective, teachers' moods and facial expressions could have contributed to interactive processes involved in positive or negative development and reinforcement of TSRs. As a smile signals positive emotion, smiling in teachers could reflect how they are on a personal level.

Other studies examining TSRs have reported that stressed and depressed teachers tended to develop negative TSRs (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Yoon, 2002). A happy and smiling demeanour in teachers could represent their joy, excitement, happiness and well-being, which could generate a positive atmosphere in class and positive TSRs (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). When a teacher smiles in class, students might assume that he or she is thriving in their company; this could contribute to a warm atmosphere, which is associated with positive TSRs (Drugli, 2013). Some of the students in our study said that happy teachers made them feel happy and develop more positive feelings towards school. In contrast, in another study, students who had dropped out of school reported negative experiences of TSRs, whereby they felt humiliated by teachers and pushed out of school (McGrath, 2009). Teachers often emphasize the importance of regulating their emotions and keep feelings hidden from students. However, students are aware of teachers' emotions, and teachers are often more transparent than they imagine (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). This is supported by our findings, which suggest that students are aware of, sensitive to, and influenced by teachers' emotion and demeanour. In addition, studies examining relationships between therapists and clients have reported that genuineness and authenticity in therapists are essential to clients' trust and the development of these relationships (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). From this perspective, it is important to note that students would probably have reacted negatively to teachers whose smiles and happiness were not genuine.

In our study, students described helpfulness, care, and support as representative of teachers' kindness. The analysis showed that students appreciated teachers who not only supported their emotional needs but also helped them with academic issues. This finding is consistent with those of other studies emphasizing the importance of teachers' support and care with respect to students' academic and emotional needs (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006; Studsrød & Bru, 2011). In our study, emotional support and care were described as particularly helpful for students with mental health problems. Students stated that they valued teachers who recognized them and the challenging situations that they faced. Students considered caring teachers who enjoyed spending time with and talking to them as particularly important when they were experiencing personal problems. Students described conversations with teachers and a casual and humorous approach as means of promoting positive TSRs. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Croninger and Lee (2001), in which casual conversations with students were considered favourable to students at risk of dropout. In our study, students described conversation as a means of not only getting to know their teachers but also mentioning personal problems, conflict, and academic challenges. In other studies, teachers expressed joy, satisfaction and pleasure associated with teaching, particularly if they experienced growth in students who had initially been struggling (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). One-on-one conversations could constitute a means of helping struggling students and benefit both students and teachers.

The students in our study emphasized the value of customized teaching and described the ways in which teachers supported students' individual academic needs. They reflected upon how 'small practical adjustments' could make them feel recognized and cared for. These findings indicate that emotional and academic support are intertwined (Suldo et al., 2006), and practical assistance, adjustments, and

customized approaches can be perceived as emotional support. In contrast, several students described lack of academic support and care as demotivating and stated that it could lead to students skip classes and drop out of school. These findings are consistent with those of other studies indicating that teachers support could be of particular importance to students who are at risk of dropping out or have mental health problems, while the absence of this support could push these students out of school (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Dods, 2013; Frostad et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013).

Recognition could be understood as a fundamental relational concept that includes not only respect for others but also understanding and acknowledgement of their situations (Schibbye, 1993). Our findings indicate that students appreciate different aspects of recognition from teachers in various ways; they described basic recognition in everyday life, personal recognition in individual conversations, and recognition through practical help and assistance. Students appreciated smiling, happy teachers who thrived in their company. This could be interpreted as teachers' basic recognition of students in everyday life and a foundation of positive TSR development. Smiling, happy teachers send a signal to students indicating that they enjoy spending time with them and thrive in their company. Students stated that they felt recognized in individual conversations with teachers and appreciated teachers who cared about them as people as well as learners. Students appreciated individual conversations as a means of not only getting to know one another but also resolving difficulties and challenges. These conversations could be understood as an arena in which teachers show students that they are interested in them and their well-being. Conversations could also be understood as a mutual and respectful means via which students and teachers recognize one another's views. Our findings also suggest that students' felt recognized by teachers who were helpful and provided practical assistance and support. Teachers' implementation of small individual adjustments based on students' individual needs could be interpreted as practical recognition and perceived as a small thing that makes a big difference, promoting positive TSRs at school.

Limitations and reflexivity

Using a participatory approach, we sought to ensure that the study was close to practice and contributed to reflexivity by allowing multiple voices to be heard during the research process (Borg et al., 2012). The competence group was constructed to facilitate the perspectives of professionals, students, and parents. One could argue that this method represented bias, as the researchers shaped and influenced the research process by planning, performing, and conducting the study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). However, the objective in a collaborative approach is to use co-researchers' subjective experiences as opportunities to gain a broader understanding of the issues explored (Veseth, Binder, Borg, & Davidson, 2012). By involving a young co-researcher with lived experiences of dropout, we sought to contribute to practical understanding and reflexivity in the study. She contributed to most interviews and reframed some of the questions in the interviews; this could have made it easier for students to relate to the interview topics. However, there was imbalance in the degree of involvement, educational background and perspectives between the professional researchers and co-researchers. This could have affected the co-researcher's influence in the study and hindered true participative involvement in the research process, which are pitfalls of participative research.

We believe that the practical approach, which was strengthened by the co-researcher's perspective, was the strength of this study. However, we acknowledge that researchers with greater distance from the field could have identified other important aspects of TSRs.

Conclusion

This study examined students' experiences of TSRs in everyday life. Our findings highlight the potential of TSRs and importance of small actions perceived as recognition and kindness in everyday life. When teachers promote a friendly, caring, helpful atmosphere, it is likely that students will develop positive TSRs and thrive at school.

Students' experiences of teachers' happiness emphasized the importance of teachers' awareness of their own demeanour, and its importance to the development of positive TSRs. Teachers should also be aware that students are sensitive to and affected by their demeanour. The findings of this study also suggest that school administrators should be aware of the importance of teachers' wellbeing in the development of positive TSRs and provide a supportive culture that promotes a positive work environment for teachers, to facilitate this development. Teachers' efforts in developing positive TSRs should be valued by their managers, and ample time, support and guidance should be provided. Teachers at upper secondary schools face considerable pressure to promote students' achievements and prevent dropout. They also experience increasing workloads and demand related to bureaucracy and documentation. The findings of this study indicated that school administrators and policymakers should value the relational work that teachers perform daily.

The findings also demonstrated how students who were at risk of dropping out or had mental health problems felt recognized in positive TSRs. Students' mental health problems are often regarded as something that should be treated outside the school context. Our findings emphasize the value of positive TSRs in everyday life and demonstrate how they can promote students' well-being and encourage them to attend school.

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