



Minoritized pupils' reflections on their student-teacher relationship in mainstream and supplementary schools

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Abstract

This paper investigates the student-teacher relationship among minoritized primary school pupils in Flanders, Belgium, who attend both mainstream and supplementary schools, educational initiatives organized by their communities in the weekend. Despite the recognized significance of this relationship, research often overlooks the experiences of students with migration backgrounds, and especially those of primary school pupils. This study aims to comprehensively understand the student-teacher dynamic by exploring both the academic and the affective side of the relationship from the perspective of the children. While prior research mainly focuses on secondary school students and mainly uses quantitative data, this qualitative study delves into the primary school context. Minoritized pupils, who attend supplementary schools in addition to their mainstream schools, provide a unique opportunity to examine student-teacher relationships across varied educational settings. Through 13 open ended in-depth interviews with a total of 29 pupils aged 9 to 12 attending both types of schools, the study uncovers which aspects of their student-teacher relationships the pupils perceive as supportive, in each setting. The findings reveal both shared and distinct experiences within different contexts, shedding light on the intricate interplay of expectations, teacher attitudes, and relationships. By investigating affective and academic dimensions of the student-teacher relationship from the experience of minoritized pupils, this paper adds to our understanding of the student teacher relationship. The insights emphasize the need to support the diverse needs of minoritized pupils in complex educational environments, offering recommendations for policymakers and suggesting future research directions.

Keywords Student-teacher relationship · Minoritized students · Supplementary schooling · Interviewing children

1 Introduction

The student-teacher relationship has long been recognized as a crucial factor influencing students' academic achievement, social adjustment, and overall well-being (Bosman et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2009). However, existing research has predominantly quantitatively focused on the general aspects of student-teacher relationship, overlooking the specific experiences of students with migration backgrounds while they often perceive their relationships with teachers as more negative. This low-quality student-teacher relationship may be attributed to the increasing diversity of classrooms juxtaposed with the low representation of teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds (Nouwen & Clycq, 2019; Kleen & Glock, 2018; Lorenz, 2021) yet, in depth qualitative explorations of the nuanced experience of these students remains lacking. Research in the US indicates that ethnic congruence between students and teachers positively impacts various educational, social, and personal outcomes and the incongruence between teachers' and students' ethnic backgrounds has been posited to adversely impact the student-teacher relationship (Redding, 2019; Thijs et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, several unanswered questions remain in the current context. For instance, the existing literature on student-teacher relationship predominantly focuses on the perspectives of teachers or secondary school students. While secondary school students have several teachers throughout the day, primary school pupils usually spend their school days with one classroom teacher which makes the student-teacher relationship especially intensive. Yet, there is little research exploring the perspectives of minoritized pupils in primary schools on their student teacher relationship. Furthermore, a significant part of minoritized children attend supplementary schools in the weekend in addition to their mainstream schools. Supplementary schools are usually organized by volunteers in minoritized communities, they often, but not always, teach heritage languages and they mirror mainstream schools in the ways they are structured and make use of curricula and timetables (Simon, 2018; Steenwegen et al., 2023). In these schools the mainstream ethnic hegemony is displaced, and teachers have minoritized backgrounds, like their pupils (Mirza & Reay, 2000). There has been no research, to our knowledge, investigating how minoritized pupils perceive the relationship to their teachers while navigating from a mainstream to a community educational school context.

To address these gaps, this study focuses on the views of minoritized primary school pupils in Flanders who attend supplementary schools in their communities in addition to their mainstream schools. In Flanders, the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium, a small percentage of the teachers in mainstream schools has an ethnic minority background (Overheid, 2021) and teachers from majority backgrounds express a lack of preparedness in building strong relationships with students from ethnic minority backgrounds (Benoliel & Berkovich, 2021). Meanwhile, research in Flanders has shown that minoritized students experience the relationship to their teachers more negative overall, which is especially deplorable since a strong student-teacher relationship can limit the effects of stereotype threat on the academic self-concept of students (Nouwen & Clycq, 2019). Simultaneously, almost half of minoritized pupils attend supplementary schooling in which they share their ethnic

minority background with their teachers, making it an interesting context from which to study the student teacher relationships in different educational contexts from minoritized children's perspectives.

In our approach we consider both the academic dimension and the affective dimension of the student-teacher relationship. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of this relationship, we consider insights from two different bodies of literature. First, we build on social psychology research on the affective aspects of student-teacher relationships and explore the concepts of emotional bonding and security (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015a). Furthermore, we draw on educational research that emphasizes academic aspects of student-teacher relationship and focus on the academic support and affirmation that pupils receive from their teachers (Agirdag et al., 2012; Reddy et al., 2003). Through in-depth interviews with 29 minoritized pupils between the age 9 and 12, attending both mainstream and supplementary schools, the study explores the perceptions of minoritized students regarding supportive aspects of student-teacher relationship. This approach does not only center the experience of the pupils, but it also offers the opportunity to investigate the nuances that quantitative studies might overlook. The findings shed light on the commonalities and differences in student-teacher relationship experiences across both contexts. This paper provides an overview of supplementary schooling, clarifies the conceptualization of student-teacher relationship, presents the interview findings from elementary school pupils, and concludes with key insights for further research and recommendations for policymakers.

2 Student-teacher relationship: the affective and academic dimension

Many studies have found beneficial effects of positive student-teacher relationships on students' educational trajectories. A strong student-teacher relationship benefits pupils' self-esteem (Agirdag et al., 2012), well-being (Suldo et al., 2009), mental health (Joyce & Early, 2014), goal orientation (Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015), sense of belonging (D'hondt et al., 2015; Gummadam et al., 2016) and overall engagement and achievement (Bosman et al., 2018; Davis, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011). Previous research has highlighted that for minoritized pupils the student-teacher relationship is under stress both affectively, with pupils indicating that they feel treated unfairly, and academically, with minoritized pupils achieving less than their majority peers. Student-teacher relationship has long been the subject of research in educational and psychological studies (Lee, 2012; Thijs et al., 2011; Zee et al., 2012), and in the current study, we draw on insights from both bodies of literature. We lean into the works on psychology for our understanding of the affective dimension, but we want to expand on it as it tends to overlook the academic side of the relationship or neglect to consider the instructional quality of the teacher. Educational sciences, on the other hand, tend to take a more quantitative approach towards the student teacher relationship but leave little room for the complexities of pupils' experience. We build on this to conceptualize the academic dimension for pupils' educational pathways.

Within these two dimensions (affective and academic), we distinguish four features that describe the quality of student-teacher relationship *from the students' perspective* and that have been shown to be under duress for minoritized pupils: (1) closeness and emotional support; (2) conflict and negative experiences, both related to the affective dimension; and (3) academic support and (4) teacher affirmation, both related to the academic dimension of teacher support.

2.1 Affective dimension

Aligned with the research in the field of psychology, which examines student-teacher relationship from the students' perspective (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Charki et al., 2022; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012), we draw from identified two characteristics that are crucial for the affective dimension of student-teacher relationship: *closeness and emotional support*, and *negative experiences and conflict*. First, *closeness* refers to how emotionally available the student perceives the teacher to be. Students with a migration background have lower trust in their teachers than their majority counterparts (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Therefore, we explicitly included *emotional support* to reflect the student's confidence level in receiving the teacher's emotional support when needed (Ruzek et al., 2016). *Negative experiences* refer to how the teacher responds to pupils' negative experiences in the school context. *Negative experiences* also represent the student's concern that the teacher is not emotionally available or responsive. Finally, *conflict* signifies the ability to overcome conflict in the relationship. In other words, conflicts between pupils and teachers need not negatively impact the relationship (Zee et al., 2017).

2.2 Academic dimension

As posited earlier, our exploration of student-teacher relationships encompasses not only the affective component but also an academic dimension. This academic facet is rooted in the support necessary for the development of individual competencies (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and it is related to the ways in which the teacher can support the pupils in their academic growth. Within the academic dimension, two main features are considered. The first pertains to the academic support students receive from their teachers, encompassing assistance provided in their academic progression. This involves gauging how students perceive the availability of teachers to offer support in their work. For instance, it delves into whether students feel that teachers provide the necessary support to fulfil their tasks effectively. Additionally, teacher affirmation is a crucial component influencing the student-teacher relationship within the academic dimension. This extends to how students feel validated as learners and whether they perceive a challenge in their academic endeavors posed by their teachers (Reddy et al., 2003). Teacher affirmation is intertwined with teachers' implicit attitudes, which, in turn, manifest in their classroom practices (Agirdag et al., 2012; Denessen et al., 2020, 2022; Thijs et al., 2012). Implicit attitudes often become evident in teachers' responses to their pupils throughout the school day, whether through praise or validation.

It is noteworthy that our study does not directly assess teachers' implicit attitudes; instead, we rely on the perceptions of students regarding their student-teacher relationships. The rationale behind this approach lies in the belief that students' perceptions are likely to influence how they evaluate the relationship. By examining students' perspectives on their relationships with teachers in both mainstream and supplementary schools, incorporating both affective and academic dimensions, we aim to present a comprehensive depiction of the vital aspects of student-teacher relationships for minoritized pupils.

2.3 The specificity of supplementary schooling in relation to mainstream schools

Minoritized communities have a rich tradition of organizing community education or self-organized schooling to address the educational needs of their youth. These initiatives align with the educational aspirations and goals of community members, including parents. Community education manifests in diverse formats, ranging from informal learning sessions to full-time substitute schooling (Steenwegen et al., 2023). Typically occurring after regular school hours or on weekends, these grassroots initiatives complement mainstream education by offering a curriculum often unavailable in traditional schools.

The objectives of community education are multifaceted, spanning from academic support through tutoring and the preservation of heritage language and culture to providing a safe space to shield students from social stigma and racism (Baldrige et al., 2017; Burman & Miles, 2018; Mirza & Reay, 2000).

Two pivotal mechanisms drive the establishment of supplementary schools. Firstly, there are the high educational expectations prevalent in minoritized communities. Secondly, parents and key stakeholders are acutely aware that minoritized youth face structural inequalities hindering their academic progress (Salikutluk, 2016). These schools predominantly rely on volunteers for teaching and organizing, including the active involvement of students' parents.

Despite a significant portion of minoritized youth, such as 25% in the UK (Maylor et al., 2013) and 45% in Flanders (Coudenys et al., 2023), attending supplementary schools at some point in their educational trajectories, the educational processes within these schools remain relatively enigmatic.

Research on community-organized schools is limited. While students often express more positive attitudes towards their supplementary schools compared to mainstream schools, the reasons for this phenomenon remain unclear (Strand, 2007). Interviews with students attending supplementary schools suggest that they do so to connect with peers, explore their heritage, or enhance their academic trajectories in mainstream schools (Francis et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2006; Tereshchenko & Archer, 2015).

2.4 The (Un)importance of ethnic matching in student-teacher relations

Researchers investigating the disparities in the quality of student-teacher relationships for minoritized students have put forth a hypothesis suggesting that incongruence in the ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students may be a contributing factor.

While the conclusions of these studies remain somewhat inconclusive, our paper adds a new perspective to this domain. Indeed, what makes this dynamic particularly intriguing is that, in contrast to mainstream schools, teachers in supplementary schools often share a migration or language background with their students.

The prevalence of ethnic incongruence in mainstream schooling is notable, with research in Flanders revealing that teachers frequently harbor negative stereotypes and lower expectations of ethnic minority pupils (Clycq et al., 2014). One hypothesis posits that the disparity in the quality of student-teacher relationships between minority and majority students may stem from ethnic incongruence in these relationships (Charki et al., 2022; Spilt et al., 2012). Quantitative studies conducted in mainstream education have identified positive effects when teachers' ethnicity aligns with that of their students (Redding, 2019). However, the impact varies among different minority groups, with Black students seemingly benefiting the most from having Black teachers. Conversely, this effect is more modest or even nonexistent for Latinx students in the United States.

Contrary to the ethnic matching hypothesis, recent research on full-time Islamic schools in the Netherlands discovered no significant differences in students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers of Islamic background versus teachers from the majority population, when both groups worked in an Islamic school (Charki et al., 2022). An exploratory approach is pertinent to enhance our understanding of the core elements influencing minority pupils' perceptions of student-teacher relationships in each context.

3 Current study

We conducted interviews to explore the perceptions of minoritized primary school students about their student-teacher relationship both in their mainstream school and in their supplementary school. We selected two supplementary schools in Antwerp, an urban and highly diverse city in Flanders, Belgium. The city's diversity is reflected in its student population but not its teachers. Less than 5% of teachers in Flanders have a migration background, and an even smaller percentage have a non-Western background (Overheid, 2021). This situation is quite different from community schools, where all teachers have ethnically diverse backgrounds, as do their students. The two cases we selected are diverse supplementary schools, where the students do not necessarily have the same ethnicity as their teachers. However, they share a migration background and linguistic and cultural commonalities that are not prevalent in mainstream schools. We interviewed the pupils in their supplementary schools. We interviewed 13 children in the Russian school (6 boys and 7 girls) and 16 in the Syrian school (11 boys and 5 girls). These interviews were part of a larger research project for which the researcher spend time in the schools for a two-year period including interviews with teachers and principals. The pupils attended different mainstream schools, most of them in Antwerp, though some of them lived in other cities and travelled to Antwerp weekly to attend the supplementary school. The interviews took place during the school hours, as preferred by the supplementary

school principals. The researcher spend time at these schools over the course of two years getting acquainted with the schools and the schools' principal.

3.1 Russian language school

The Russian language school is an established school in Antwerp founded about 25 years ago. The school has approximately 150 pupils aged between 3 and 14. The students and teachers have various ethnic backgrounds but share the same Russian language heritage. The pupils identify as Ukrainian, Russian, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Belarusian and Uzbekistani. Most teachers are first-generation migrants, while the students are mostly second-generation (with some exceptions). Most of the students and teachers identify as Catholic, and a minority of the students are Muslim. Classes are held every Saturday morning between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Classes include the Russian language, history, geography, and classes on cultural differences. Volunteers also offer dance lessons, arts and crafts and music classes in the afternoon. The teachers in the Russian language school are either of Russian, Ukrainian, Azerbaijani and/or Belarussian background, and all of them are women. Some of them were teachers in the heritage country other have no teaching experience or certificate.

3.2 Arabic language school

Syrian refugees first organized the Arabic language in 2015 to help Syrian children keep up their Arabic language skills to facilitate a return to Syria. However, over time, more and more students from different backgrounds came to the school, and the purpose changed to learning and maintaining the Arabic language. Currently, the school hosts around 150 children. The students are of Syrian, Moroccan, Yemeni and Somalian backgrounds. Half of the students are first-generation migrants who came to Flanders from Syria. The other students are primarily third-generation migrants. Almost all pupils are Muslims, with a few exceptions. The school offers language classes for beginners and more advanced levels, homework support from volunteers and arts and crafts for children. The teachers in the Arabic language school are all of Syrian background. Most of them are women wearing a hijab, which in most Flemish mainstream schools is prohibited for teachers and pupils alike.

4 Method

4.1 Set-up

We conducted 13 open-ended (group) interviews with a total of 29 pupils in the supplementary school during class hours. The pupils were free to decide whether they to come to the interview alone or with peers if that make them feel more comfortable. In the end one child came alone, two groups of two came, one group of four and the rest came in groups of three. The pupils attended different mainstream schools except for a few children attending the same school, though not the same class. Their grades ranged from the 4th grade to the 6th grade. We conducted 5 group interviews

in the Arabic language school and 8 in the Russian language school. The fact that students could decide whether and in which constellation they wanted to participate was essential to ensure that they would feel comfortable. We used open-ended interviews led by a topic list. The topics included academic and affective elements of the relationship to their teachers. Rather than following a strictly structured interview questionnaire we introduced the different thematic topics organically in the conversations while making sure all themes were addressed. Such a flexible approach proved best when working with children to engage their nuanced perceptions. An exploratory qualitative approach is the most inclusive when working with minoritized pupils with different levels of Dutch language (reading) skills and it lends itself to investigate the experience of the pupils in their own words with the opportunity for new or unexpected topics to arise or also for other topics not to arise. The students were between 9 and 12 years old, and all attended a regular Flemish elementary school during the week and they did not receive a reward though biscuits and apple juice were offered during the interview. Some pupils were relatively new to the supplementary school; others had been coming for years. In the interviews, the students were asked about their experiences with and opinion of the teachers in the supplementary and mainstream schools. In addition, the interviewer asked the students various questions about the affective and academic aspects of their relationship with their teachers. The interviews took between 17 and 36 min. The interviews were transcribed, translated from Dutch and anonymized. Ethical approval was obtained, and teachers, parents and children were informed about the intent of the study.

4.2 Positionality

The interviews were all conducted by the principal investigator of the study, a Flemish woman with a background as primary school teacher. Interviewing ethnic minoritized children as a White majority researcher presents some ethical challenges (Swartz, 2011; Vanner, 2015) and in interviewing children there is an additional power imbalance which should be reflected upon (Kostet, 2023). It is possible that in discussions on sensitive topics like racism and exclusion the pupils held back in describing negative experiences because the interviewer is of majority background herself (Swartz, 2011; Vanner, 2015). However, the researcher also fell back on her experience as a primary school teacher to set the pupils at ease and ensuring every child in a group could speak and introduce themselves before formal interviews. Furthermore, the possibility to take part in group interviews with their peers helped the pupils to relax and invited them to recount shared experiences. After the interview the researcher also asked pupils how they experienced the interview and if they felt ok with it.

4.3 Coding

For our data analysis, we employed the thematic analysis codebook as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Our codebook was constructed deductively, aligning with our theoretical framework. Within this framework, we distinguished two dimensions of student-teacher relationships (STR)—two affective and two academic features. The children shared insights into their perceptions of student-teacher rela-

tionships in both their mainstream Flemish schools and supplementary heritage schools. During the reading and analysis of the interviews, we identified various themes within these four codes, which were subsequently added as subcodes. This coding and analysis process occurred iteratively, with regular discussions between the principal coder and the co-authors.

In the affective dimension, three subcodes emerged out of the interview data referring to Closeness and Emotional Support: *Availability*; *Openness*; and *Intervention*. Additionally, three subcodes were identified for Negative Experiences and Conflict: *Differentiation*; *Punishment*; and *Mistrust*.

Within the academic dimension, we annotated both Academic Support and Teacher Affirmation, categorizing responses as either positive or negative.

All quotes were flagged based on whether they referred to mainstream or supplementary schools. We systematically compared positive and negative phrases for each context. The primary emphasis of our analysis was to gain a nuanced understanding of the diverse ways in which students evaluated their relationships with their teachers. Instead of simply tallying positive and negative judgments, we delved into the data's nuanced context, facilitating a richer interpretation of the students' perspectives.

5 Results

In this section, we delve into the pupils' perceptions of different dimensions and characteristics of student-teacher relationships (STR). Our analysis begins by highlighting the similarities and differences that students experience in these relationships within the contexts of their mainstream and supplementary schools.

The overarching finding reveals that pupils did not distinctly separate their experiences in one context from the other. In their evaluations of the relationship with their teachers, students expressed an overall positive sentiment. While they acknowledged challenges in their relationships with mainstream schoolteachers, they were also resolute in offering context to elucidate why these teachers might appear less available to them.

Despite their relatively young age, students showcased a remarkable ability to critically reflect on the factors influencing their relationships with teachers in both contexts, underscoring their understanding of the complexities of these relationships. This dual perspective allowed them to navigate challenges and appreciate the contextual nuances that shaped their interactions with teachers in both mainstream and supplementary schools.

5.1 The affective dimension of STR

Overall, the pupils described their relationship with their teachers in detail and could pinpoint the factors they perceived as conducive to a strong connection. In the following paragraphs, we report on students' perceptions and experiences of the affective dimension of their relationships with their teachers. Two themes stood out: *closeness and emotional support* and *negative experiences*.

5.1.1 Closeness and emotional support

Regarding perceived closeness and emotional support in STR, we distinguished three aspects important for pupils' experiences: the teacher's availability, the way the teacher intervened or did not intervene in conflict situations and the degree of openness towards students' experiences in the supplementary school.

5.1.2 Teacher availability

In the context of mainstream schools, students tend to perceive teachers as less available and more 'under pressure'. According to the pupils, there were two main reasons for this limited availability: lack of time and overall class size. The students referred to the teacher's availability in the classroom and others during recess. They described feeling left to their own devices when teachers said, 'Yes, well, you have to solve that on your own'.

Pupils perceive the teacher as emotionally unavailable because they seemed sad, anxious, or angry. On the other hand, the students perceived their teachers' emotional state and even adjusted their behavior, accordingly, as seen in the following comments:

Interviewer: What about the teacher in your regular (mainstream) school?

Pupil: She is sometimes very sweet when we work hard and when we are calm. But when someone does something wrong, she starts yelling, and then she yells at me and when she yells at me... I really can't stand it. Then I become... like... hmmm... I just really don't want to do it anymore.

Interviewer: How do you then feel?

Pupil: Kind of sad. I try not to let the tears come, but part of me is just really sad, and I don't like that.

Although at no point did the pupils say that they preferred their teachers in one school or the other, when asked, they indicated that their teachers seemed to be more available in the supplementary school. For example, one pupil said of her teachers at the Arabic school, '*When I ask them about something, they just answer straight away. When I have a problem, they help me solve it*'. Throughout the interviews, the students repeatedly remarked that the teachers in the supplementary school were more available for them and prepared to help. This perceived availability of the teacher is crucial to the student teacher relationship as it plays in into the support of needs of the self-determination theory. The pupils rely on their teachers to meet their needs in terms of relatedness support, they are dependent on their teachers for their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Regardless of the school, the emotional availability of teachers was an essential factor in the students' perceptions of emotional support from the teachers. Beyond availability, teachers in the supplementary school seemed more approachable to the pupils. While students in the mainstream school had inhibitions about approaching their teachers for help, they found it easier in the supplementary school. Although the pupils in the examples given saw a connection between the class size and the lack of

time, they also indicated that they were unsure about how their mainstream school-teachers would react.

5.1.3 Openness and interest in ethnic-cultural background

In both school settings, students discussed their experiences with teacher openness or lack thereof. They never explicitly mentioned how important a shared ethnic or cultural background was to their teachers. Still, they appreciated it when teachers expressed an interest in their cultural background. Many students said that the teachers in their mainstream schools did not know much about their experiences at the weekend school. One pupil commented, *'I just never feel like talking about it'*. At the same time, the pupils indicated that they appreciated it when teachers in the supplementary school were interested, as they understood this as an open and interested attitude on the part of their teachers. However, students usually preferred not to talk about it because they assumed the teacher would not welcome these comments. This could be because pupils in mainstream schools are frequently not permitted to speak in their native language. One student reported that she is prohibited from speaking Russian with her sister at school: *'Yes, but we are not allowed. We are not allowed to speak any other languages at school'*. The students did not refer to their home language in their evaluations of the student-teacher relationship, whereas it did emerge as a theme when children discuss their attitudes towards peers. There are two likely reasons for this. The children have internalized the mainstream Flemish school as monolingual and can therefore not even conceive of an alternative. Secondly, the sample of pupils was diverse with some of them speaking Arabic or Russian as their home language, but other spoke Dutch at home and attended the supplementary school to learn the heritage language as a second language, which meant that they had different attitudes towards the role of language in the relationship. There was a tension between the pupils' desire for openness and interest in their cultural background, while at the same time, the mainstream school forbade speaking their language of origin.

In the supplementary school, openness was also restricted. The pupils said they avoided discussing certain topics in the supplementary school. In the Russian language school, students described how they would steer clear of sensitive subjects. During the interviews, the Russian military invasion of Ukraine was ubiquitous in the media. The pupils recounted negative experiences of discrimination in their mainstream schools after the war because of their Russian heritage. When asked if they talked about such incidents in the supplementary school, they vehemently denied it, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

Interviewer: Do you share your experiences here?

Pupil 3: Most people here are from Ukraine, at least some. So yeah, I don't talk about it.

Pupil 2: Yes, because everyone has their own opinion.

Pupil 1: That is true.

Pupil 3: So, I rather just not talk about it.

In the supplementary school, the emphasis was on shared heritage; students avoided topics that would highlight potential conflicts and possibly lead to disagreements. However, the pupils did not perceive this as a lack of openness on the part of the teachers but rather as a practical necessity to ensure a pleasant day.

5.1.4 Intervening in conflict situations

In the interviews, students perceived the teacher as emotionally supportive when they quickly intervened in socially unpleasant situations. Several pupils noted that in their mainstream schools, they experienced uncomfortable situations because the teacher did not intervene or did not intervene promptly. This occurred less at their community school.

This notion of ‘intervening’ adds an extra element to the emotional dimension of student-teacher relationship and highlights the importance of a teacher being available and managing conflict situations, social interactions, and thus emotions. When students mentioned this, it was often in situations when they were bullied or witnessed bullying, and there were no teachers to stop it: *‘And even when children are like, fighting, even then... I once saw this, and the principal was talking to a mother, and a lot of children were fighting, and she [the principal] just didn’t do anything’*. In the classroom, some students felt that their teacher ignored inappropriate behavior and did not intervene, saying, *‘That teacher just always pretends not to hear it. I think that is a bit odd’*.

Although the lack of intervention in the mainstream school seemed to strain the students’ assessment of their relationship with their teachers, it neither destroyed nor improved the relationship. The pupils generally understood their teachers and acknowledged that they were under considerable pressure.

In contrast, in the supplementary school, students felt that teachers intervened much more quickly, as illustrated by one pupil:... And here [in the supplementary school], the teacher always sees, and that is why there is less conflict, I think?

The pupils did acknowledge that it seemed to be much easier for the teachers at the supplementary school to prevent such situations because there were differences in organization and class size, more breaks between classes and fewer students overall.

5.1.5 Negative experiences

After closeness and emotional support, the second main theme of the affective dimension is negative experiences. In the interviews, three main themes emerged that have a negative impact on the affective dimension of student-teacher relationship: *making sense of negative experiences* in the mainstream school, *punishment of pupils* and *mistrust of teachers*.

5.1.6 Making sense of negative experiences through differentiation

The pupils frequently reported fighting or bullying in their mainstream schools, noting that this occurred less in their supplementary schools. As mentioned above, the students reflected that the supplementary school was only once a week and that there

was not as much free time for fighting, but they also tried to make sense of this apparent difference. In explaining why there were more fights in their mainstream schools, the students pointed to differences in cultural expectations. The pupils felt that their teachers in the mainstream school were slow to intervene, while teachers in the supplementary school placed more emphasis on social interaction. They felt these teachers intervened more quickly in unpleasant situations because they had different expectations of the students' behavior. More specifically, teachers would not allow such behavior because of their background. For example, in the Arabic school, the students indicated that the teachers were strict about bullying and referred to their Muslim heritage. A pupil shared the following:

This is an Islamic school, and, in our faith, we are not allowed to call anyone names, so no one will. But in the mainstream school, most of them do. They are not allowed to either, but they do.

Meanwhile, in the Russian-speaking school, the pupils expressed that the children seemed to behave better: According to one pupil,

It is just like this; all the children in the Russian school are nice. In the Belgian [mainstream school], they look at you, and they say: 'You are just not pretty', and 'Your clothes are ugly'. The teachers, they don't do anything. The principal doesn't either.

In each supplementary school, students described that teachers emphasized how the children should behave. This was a crucial part of the supplementary school curriculum for these pupils. However, when asked where students who did not participate in the supplementary school learned how to behave, one pupil simply shrugged their shoulders as if they had no idea.

5.1.7 Punishment

The pupils reacted very strongly to measures of punishment. This is not surprising: children at this age respond strongly to punishment and even more strongly and positively to rewards. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these pupils' response to punishment directly influenced their assessment of the quality of student-teacher relationship. According to the students, the mainstream schoolteachers used punishment frequently (and quickly) to respond to their behavior: *'In the [mainstream] school they start yelling straight away, or they give you a note'*, or *'When we are whispering in the [mainstream] school, and the teacher sees, then she says, "Get out!" or "Stand behind your chair!"'*

Significantly, it is not the level of strictness with which the pupils take issue. On the contrary, pupils consistently stated in the interviews that they preferred their teachers to be strict and to take disciplinary action. In their opinion, it was the use of punitive measures that had a negative impact on student-teacher relationship.

The pupils also characterized the teachers in the supplementary school as strict, but they did not get angry as often and did not use as many punishments. Overall, the

children were positive about the use of reward systems, which were prevalent in the supplementary schools. For example, the pupil in the following quote compared her supplementary school with the mainstream school: *'They are much nicer here [in the supplementary school], and they explain everything really well, and they do not get angry when you don't understand something. And that is what I like about it here'*.

Other pupils described the reward system used in the supplementary school in detail:

They work with these points. When you do well on a test or something, you get points. And then, at the end of the year, there are these treats on the table, and you can get them with your points.

Of course, such pedagogical tools may be used differently in a more informal setting, such as a supplementary school. However, the immediate affective impact of punishments and rewards on students' assessments of the quality of the student-teacher relationship became clear in the interviews.

5.1.8 Mistrust

Some pupils reported negative experiences, indicating they could not trust their teachers. In both the mainstream and supplementary schools, some pupils witnessed or experienced a student asking the teachers for help. However, when the teachers called on other adults to get involved, the students felt this was a breach of trust. One pupil said that they would not ask their teacher for help in a difficult situation because they were afraid that the teacher would then alert other services:

Interviewer: And the teacher in your [mainstream] school, when you are sad, or you feel like crying. Could you ask her for help?

Pupil: (*shaking her head*)

Interviewer: No?

Pupil: No, because then they would get CLB [external services] involved and my parents too. I don't like that.

Interviewer: Has that happened before?

Pupil: It happened to one of my friends, which is why I cannot trust the teacher.

Interviewer: You do not trust her? Do you know why she got the CLB involved?

Pupil: Because there was something wrong with my friend. The teachers said they would not tell anyone. But then they got everyone involved. I didn't like that.

Similarly, the notion of trust in student-teacher relationship came up regarding the supplementary school. For example, one pupil explained how they would not approach their teachers in the supplementary school with a problem because they feared it might cause a fuss.

Pupil: When I tell them something here [in the supplementary school] about what is wrong, then they go and get all these people, and I don't like that.

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

Pupil: Once, I was crying, and I told the teacher, and then she got all the other teachers, and I really didn't like it.

These incidents, where teachers took the students' problems seriously and sought help to support them, were perceived by the pupils as a breach of trust. Although they were likely well-intentioned, they ensured that the pupils would no longer approach their teachers with concerns or problems. Even the students who observed this with their friends did not perceive their teachers as trustworthy.

Concerning the affective dimension, we found that the pupils had a nuanced view of what was supportive or disruptive to a strong student-teacher relationship. In the mainstream school, the students noted that the teachers seemed to have less time and attention for them, resulting in fewer interventions, less openness, and more punishment. In the supplementary school, significant emphasis was placed on managing the social interactions between the pupils, which the interviewees perceived as conducive to student-teacher relationship.

5.2 Academic dimension of the student-teacher relationship

In addition to the affective dimension, the second main dimension of student-teacher relationship is the academic dimension. Here, we distinguish between two features: the quality of academic support and the students' affirmation by teachers. The pupils indicated they felt affirmed by their teachers in both school contexts, as they received many compliments on their work. The teachers encouraged them and expected them to do well academically. Overall, the students seemed to feel less academically supported in the mainstream school, which, as we described above, was related to the lack of availability of teachers.

5.2.1 Academic support

Academic support refers to how teachers help their students academically. Unlike other aspects, our pupils clearly distinguished the academic support they received in the supplementary and mainstream schools. In the mainstream school, several students indicated that they felt uncomfortable asking the teacher for help, as seen below:

Interviewer: And the teacher in [mainstream] school, does she get angry when you don't understand something?

Pupil: Not really angry, but she looks like, 'okay, does anyone else know...' like, she doesn't like it. And then I feel so bad, and I say, 'Why am I so stupid?' and I don't like that.

Another pupil explained that they were afraid to ask their teachers in the mainstream school for help because they expected them to get angry and start shouting: *'In the [mainstream] school, we are even afraid to ask the teacher because then they always yell and say, "You don't understand anything!" or "You never listen!"'*

The pupils felt that the teachers in the mainstream school did not want to help because they had already explained everything. The teachers expected the students to be able to continue working on their own: *‘Or they say, “I already explained this”, and “Sorry, but you should have listened to my explanation”, but then I just did not understand the explanation, and it is not fair’*.

The pupils we interviewed did not always perceive their mainstream schoolteachers as academically supportive. In comparison, the supplementary schoolteachers were perceived as available and supportive. In general, pupils felt more supported in the supplementary school, and a key element was the additional help they could count on from their supplementary teachers. As the student in the following example clarified, they were confident that the teachers in the supplementary school would take the time to explain until they understood.

Interviewer: Is it different here in the Arabic [supplementary] school with the teacher?

Pupil: Yes, because here they do explain everything.

This perceived lack of availability of the mainstream teachers to provide academic support should especially be understood against a background of persistent inequality in educational outcomes among minoritized pupils. If pupils do not feel free to ask for the support they need, this will likely impede their academic progress.

5.2.2 Teacher affirmation

Teacher affirmation refers to how students believe their teacher evaluates them and the extent to which they feel academically validated by their teachers. The pupils were very perceptive in the interviews, including about the teachers’ implicit attitudes. For example, one pupil mentioned how even though their teacher tried to give them positive feedback, they felt that the teacher was preparing them to repeat the year:

Interviewer: What did the teacher say?

Pupil: ‘I want you with me in my class, and I don’t want you going to the fourth,’ [or] something like that.

Interviewer: Do you like it when she says that?

Pupil: No, (...) If I don’t go to the fourth, my parents will be angry.

Interviewer: Because the teacher means you have to repeat, you mean?

Pupil: Yes!

The second finding concerning teacher affirmation is that the pupils perceived the teachers as angry in both contexts. While this made them feel sad or insecure in the mainstream school, it did not seem to affect them emotionally in the supplementary school. Nevertheless, these emotions were often strong, and some children did not hesitate to describe their mainstream schoolteacher as ‘hateful’ or feeling that their teacher ‘hated’ them because *‘she never helps me and when I ask her, she says to find it out myself, and I really don’t like [that]’*.

It is worth mentioning that in both educational contexts, some of the students experienced their teachers as angry and felt that they did not value them. However, it was clear that when this happened in the supplementary school, it did not bother the students as much. They talked about it openly and even laughed about it:

Pupil 1: Here in the Russian [supplementary] school, there is this teacher from literature or something, and when you do something wrong that we learned long ago, she says, 'How can you not know this? Why don't you do this at home? Are you lazy?'

Pupil 2: Oh yes, she is annoying. Like, 'Do you have holes in your heads? Are you dumb?' (*laughs out loud*).

The disapproval of teachers in the mainstream school appeared to have a much greater impact on the pupils. This suggests that the students showed more respect for their mainstream schoolteachers. Possibly, this was because they perceived the supplementary school as less consequential.

6 Discussion

As highlighted earlier, the student-teacher relationship holds significant importance for the educational development of all students, with even greater implications for pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds (Burchinal et al., 2002; den Brok et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2008). Considering the ongoing debates regarding the significance of ethnic similarity between teachers and students, our study aimed to examine how ethnic minority pupils perceive their relationships with teachers in both mainstream and supplementary schools. We discuss the lack of importance the pupils showed for ethnic background, and we highlight some opportunities for bettering the quality of the relationship between minoritized pupils and their mainstream teachers. The draw of an explorative and open approach such as the one undertaken in the current paper consists also of the value of omission. The pupils in our study did not mention ethnicity or cultural background when assessing their relationship with their teachers, contrary to what may be expected from the ethnic incongruence hypothesis. There are two possible reasons for this. First, the children are too young to organize the world in ethnic categories as some qualitative studies with children suggest (Sedano, 2012; Kostet, 2023). Second, the children might not even consider the possibility of a teacher with a similar ethnic background in mainstream schooling as there are so few minoritized teachers in Flemish schools. We emphasize the need for a more inclusive and diverse teaching force in terms of role models and recognition both for pupils and their parents. Meanwhile, the pupils we interviewed expressed appreciation when their mainstream schoolteachers inquired about their cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of recognizing and valuing students' experiences in supplementary schools (Celeste et al., 2019; Okonofua et al., 2016). However, such instances were rare, possibly due to limited awareness among teachers about the existence and significance of supplementary schools in the educational paths of pupils. An attitude of cultural curiosity in teachers is likely to positively influence the quality of the

relationship from the pupils' perspective as well as countering (implicit) prejudices among teachers and should therefore be actively encouraged in teacher education.

The pupils' reflections, though nuanced, did reveal a notable difference between teacher availability in each school. In the mainstream school were less available and less likely to intervene in conflict situations, leading to a less pleasant atmosphere. Additionally, pupils found teachers in mainstream schools less approachable for academic support compared to teachers in supplementary schools. As such, these findings emphasize that children are susceptible to the pressures faced by teachers in mainstream schools (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), which affect the affective and academic support they provide to students. Some research seems to indicate that minoritized pupils especially fare better in smaller classrooms (BRON). Future research should look further into the effect of class size and teacher pressure on minoritized students specifically. In several instances the pupils indicated that they were distrustful towards their teachers, in each context. It is important to note how precarious the children's trust is and how possibly damaging breaking of their trust can be. On the other hand, even though the pupils were more critical of the relationship to the teachers in the mainstream schools it was also more important to them. When the children discussed conflict with their supplementary schoolteachers, they were not emotional. The conflicts with their mainstream schoolteachers had a more profound effect. Similarly, when the teachers in the mainstream school complemented them or showed cultural curiosity this had as strong positive impact on the children's experience.

This study has some limitations. First, the absence of detailed background information about the pupils meant that we could make no clear distinctions about possible variations. However, we wanted the pupils to define themselves and some pupils were unclear or unsure about the specificities of their ethnic background. Though the ethnic, socio-economic, and religious background of each pupil will likely affect their experience we also feared that they would add to many layers of complexity to this paper. Rather, we present their perceptions as those of knowledgeable respondents who evaluate the relationship to their teachers in two different educational settings. Second, the interviews took place in the supplementary schools with peers from that context. It would be an interesting addition if future research undertook a similar study in the mainstream setting. Nevertheless, this study underscores the capacity of minoritized children to reflect on various dimensions and contextual variables of the student-teacher relationship. By exploring the characteristics that minoritized students deem important in their relationships with teachers, this study can enhance teacher awareness and sensitivity to pupils' experiences and reflections, as well as the impact of their own behavior. Future research can build upon these findings to investigate the impact of relationships developed in supplementary schools on pupils' adjustment in mainstream schools. Specifically, a study including observations of the pupils as they move from one context to the other would add to our understanding of their social adjustment. Second, future research investigating the impact of class size should delve deeper in the importance of teacher availability for minoritized students specifically. Overall, this study highlights the voices of minoritized children, often absent in student-teacher relationship research, and provides valuable insights for improving educational experiences and outcomes.

Declarations

Ethical approval the authors obtained an approval of the ethics committee from their home University.

Consent for participation Was voluntary and a written consent was given by both the parents and the pupils.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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