



Relationality and student engagement in higher education: Towards enhanced students' learning experiences

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This study examines how student engagement and social relationships between teachers and students may enhance the learning experiences of students in a South African university. Two separate sets of semi-structured interviews were held with 27 university teachers and 51 students respectively. The findings revealed that the relationships between the behavioural and cognitive dimensions of student engagement and social relationships between teachers and students are motivated by good relational communication; relational pedagogy; good inter-relational culture; teacher relational competences (cognitive, behavioural and inter-cultural); and teacher demonstration of care. The current study adds to the literature on relational pedagogy and student engagement by highlighting the importance of inter-relational culture and teacher relational competences to the behavioural and cognitive development of university students. Moreover, when students and particularly, first generation students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from rural communities develop good relationships with their teachers, they are set to have positive learning experiences.

Keywords: Student engagement, learning experiences, social relationships, inter-relational culture, teacher competences

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Introduction

The experiences of students who enrol in universities are partly shaped by their previous and current socialisations (Reay et al., 2009), as well as their primary and secondary habitus (Threadgold, 2020). Habitus is linked to the history of an individual (Bourdieu, 1993) with its features consisting of immanent dispositions and an assembly of embodied affective charges (Threadgold, 2020). Therefore, as students engage with their

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peers and teachers in the learning setting they socialize and generate new ideas that are important for their academic and social development. However, while students interact with their colleagues and teachers in the learning environment, they experience perceived ruptures, tensions and non-human influences that could affect their learning experiences (Gravett et al., 2020).

Previous studies in South Africa have shown that student engagement is inextricably linked to retention and graduation rates, improved student success and effectiveness of the higher education system (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). Therefore, academics could become agents of educational change and social cohesion (Vandeyar, 2020) when they enhance student engagement and build good social relationships with students. In the current study, the use of the term disengagement does not necessarily imply a non-educational activity or a term that is synonymous to opposing educational development in the learning context. This deconstruction is consistent with previous studies that have argued that student disengagement cannot be viewed exclusively as an issue that is linked to nonconforming learners; that student engagement and disengagement are not mutually exclusive (Lawson & Lawson, 2020) - engagement and disengagement cannot be assumed and assessed as opposing concepts that belong to the same continuum, where disengagement suggests the absence of engagement (Santos et al., 2023). Again, other features such as institutional provision of resources and support systems are important elements for addressing some of the issues concerning student disengagement in the learning environment (Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

Although most South African universities have established policies and structures to address issues related to equity, equality and, transformation, the institutional cultures and the epistemological traditions have still not been transformed (Vandeyar, 2020). Resultantly, there have been complaints about social distance between teachers and learners (Heher, 2017). However, the social and academic culture elements could be better explained by the relationship formed between teachers and learners through engagement in the learning setting. Using social constructivism as the theoretical underpinning, the current study examines how the association between student engagement and social relationships could enhance teaching and learning in a university setting.

A social constructivist approach

Social constructivism explains how learners construct and reconstruct knowledge (Krahenbuhl, 2016) by integrating new information with previous knowledge through active processes of learning (O'Connor, 2020). In the learning context, teachers have important roles to play in shaping the learning experiences of learners especially through social and cultural processes (Lourenco, 2012). The social and cultural processes provide meaning to how student engagement in the learning environment could be enhanced among students through interaction, language, artefacts, social rituals and, symbolic behaviours (Lourenco, 2012; Taber, 2020). Notwithstanding its importance as a learning theory, social constructivism has been critiqued on the basis of its association with relativism which shows that knowledge in relation to a social and cultural context is not absolute (Fischer, 2019). Similarly, proponents of behaviourism have raised concerns about how constructivism is applied in the learning setting by arguing that the behaviours of learners should be directly

shaped by teachers (Stewart, 2013). The second critique is that the epistemological foundation of social constructivism is based on the assertion that knowledge is relative to social groups (Van Bergen & Parsell, 2019) and therefore cannot be generalised. However, social constructivism serves as an interpretive approach to understanding social phenomena, and it is also underpinned by sociological and historical study of social inquiry including how knowledge is created in the social world (Fischer, 2019; Shapiro, 2020) through interaction, experiences and reflection (O'Connor, 2022).

Student engagement as a concept has evolved over the years because of its importance in educational settings especially as a tool for supporting teaching and learning activities that could lead to student success, increased student retention and academic achievement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Snijders et al., 2020). The literature on student engagement suggests that it represents a multidimensional and contested set of theories (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) that also serve to explore how students could be assisted to adjust to the learning environment (Quaye et al., 2019); resolve educational concerns regarding high dropout rates and low achievement rates (Ajjawi et al., 2020); enhance institutional support systems and quality interaction between staff and students (Li & Xue, 2023; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020); and improve student retention (Tight, 2020). Although student engagement could lead to student success (Bowden et al., 2021; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), teacher-student relationships are particularly necessary for promoting student academic success (Parnes et al., 2020). The advantages of supportive relationships between teachers and students include students' social development, students' subject-specific performance, satisfaction, well-being, and motivation to learn (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). To conceptualise the opinions of teachers and students concerning how engagement interacts with formed social relationships between teachers and students, the current study examines behavioural and cognitive features of student engagement in a university setting.

The cognitive dimension of student engagement represents a psychological activity that includes the application of deeper knowledge, skills acquisition (Newmann et al., 1992), intrinsic motivation and goal orientation in a learning setting (van Uden et al., 2013). Likewise, it is experienced by students when they endure and actively participate in mental activities (Bowden, 2022) that include willingness to comprehend and master complex actions (Fredricks et al., 2004). In practice, learners who experience the cognitive dimension of engagement demonstrate higher order thinking and deeper knowledge of the importance and value of their learning activities, especially how they perceive issues, process their thoughts and respond to different tasks (Bowden et al., 2021). Recent study has explained how the cognitive dimension of engagement enable learners to reflect on and, integrate different perspectives including cultures in the learning environment (Poort et al., 2022). Institutional culture is important in the learning environment because it creates the conditions necessary for students to build their confidence while maintaining healthy relationships with their teachers (Kimbark et al., 2017). However, not much is known about how inter-relational culture that is embedded in the institutional culture of universities enhances social relationships.

The behavioural dimension of engagement on the other hand, explains how university students participate in academic and social activities based on accepted rules, norms, practices (van Uden et al., 2013) and the absence of disruptive behaviours (Fredricks et al., 2004). Again, the behavioural dimension of student

engagement includes students' participation in academic and social activities that could lead to good academic outcomes (Zhang, 2022). Although literature on student engagement continues to evolve, it has been critiqued on the basis that most empirical studies and definitions do not address issues concerning the ethical and political dimensions of student engagement (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). Notwithstanding these apparent shortcomings, the current study identifies the behavioural and cognitive dimensions of student engagement as important to relationality in higher education.

The literature on student engagement and social relationships in higher education settings cannot be explained without interrogating the concept of relational competences of teachers. This also follows the argument that social relationships in the learning environment are characterised by regular and unstructured social interactions, academic instruction, the construction and maintenance of positive teacher-student relationship (Caires et al., 2023; Crownover & Jones, 2018) and teacher relational competences. The latter refer to teachers' ability to engage with students based on openness, respect, compassion, attentive presence and, to respond to the social and academic needs of learners (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). Previous research has shown that teacher relational competences consist of respect, trust, care, empathy, interpersonal communication, an attentive presence and, creativity (Chika-James 2020, p.271). An organic relationship is developed when teachers interact with students and use different pedagogical approaches to create classroom communities aimed at enhancing students' academic, emotional and social growth (Rees & Le Mare, 2017). This is synonymous with what Ljungblad (2021) describes as the relational ontology and epistemology of difference. However, prevailing hierarchies, power structures and institutional cultures could negatively affect the development of any meaningful social relationships between teachers and students (Marquis et al., 2017).

Methodology

The current study seeks answers to three research questions: RQ1 – What features are necessary to enhance student engagement and formed social relationships between teachers and students? RQ2 - How can student engagement and formed social relationships between teachers and students enhance the learning experiences of students? RQ3: How can teacher relational competences promote social relationships between teachers and students?

The current study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine how student engagement and formed social relationships between teachers and students could enhance the learning experiences of students in a South African university. An important feature of qualitative research is that it enables researchers to appreciate events that occur within their natural environment while they seek to explore the opinions of individuals that cannot be gathered and explained by way of objective evaluation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Participants

The total student population of the study setting is 41,169 while the total staff population is 2,521 located in three different campuses across one of the provinces in South Africa. Respondents for the study were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The University teachers who participated in the study were

made up of 12 males and 15 females. The distribution of teachers based on their faculty are as follows: Humanities (7); Education (5); Law (2); Natural and Agricultural Sciences (6); Economic and Management Sciences (1); and Health Sciences (6). The student-participants consisted of 23 males and 28 females. The distribution of students based on their faculty are as follows: Humanities (16); Education (5); Law (3); Natural and Agricultural Sciences (14); Economic and Management Sciences (6); and Health Sciences (7). All the participants were de-identified by allocating them pseudonyms.

Procedure

Respondents in the current study were formally invited to participate in the study through emails that were sent to teachers and students at the university. The researchers then contacted those teachers and students who consented to participate in the study to set the dates and venues for the interviews. Two sets of semi-structured interview schedules were designed to gather data from students and teachers respectively. Sample questions for teachers included *How can the social relationships between you and your students enhance effective engagement in the learning environment?* and *In your opinion, how can teacher relational competences promote social relationships between teachers and students?* A sample question for students included *How can the social relationships between you and your teachers enhance your ability to apply deeper knowledge to the learning context?* The interviews were conducted between June and August 2021 across three campuses of the university using Microsoft teams due to social distancing regulations at the time. Voice recorders were used to record the interviews. Before the start of each interview session, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and a consent form was sent to them to read and sign. The duration of each interview lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. The interviews were transcribed and later cross-checked with the voice recording of respondents to ensure that the narratives of respondents were accurately transcribed on the transcripts.

Research ethics

Approval for the current study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the university in line with the rules of ethical consideration. Other research and ethics protocols followed included informing all respondents about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from the interview if they thought that they could not continue due to personal reasons. Furthermore, prior to the commencement of the interviews, all respondents were informed about the potential risks and benefits associated with the study.

Analysis of data

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study examined the multifarious and rich datasets (Neuendorf, 2019) and made use of the theoretical freedom and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that is associated with thematic analysis. The first step was to read the transcripts thoroughly to ensure that there were no language ambiguities. Secondly, the data were read to identify important phrases and sentences provided

by participants on issues concerning how formed social relationships between teachers and students improve student engagement and their learning experiences. Phrases that appeared at least more than eight times were highlighted and named through an iterative process. The third step involved assembling observations gathered from the different codes into categories. The fourth step entailed constructing the themes and drawing conclusions using the patterns that were generated from the codes and categories (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the interview data analysed: the link between social relationships and cognitive engagement; the association between social relationships and behavioural engagement; inter-relational culture and behavioural and cognitive engagement; and teacher relational competences and student engagement.

Narratives of students

The link between social relationships and cognitive engagement

The quality of social relationships between teachers and students is dependent on a deeper understanding of the learning environment by teachers and students and how they create meanings of such relationships (Ford 2019; Hickey et al., 2022). The narratives of some participants revealed that social relationships between teachers and students could enhance student cognitive engagement:

If the social relationships between students and teachers are good, students would listen to the teachers, work hard, and perform well academically. Also, if a teacher gets to know about the background of students, get down to their level, and break down complex words and avoid straight face then he or she can develop a good social relationship with students [Prince].

Teachers should show interest in what they teach us and also, relate well with us. During the COVID pandemic, we had to move our anatomy lectures online and even though it was very challenging, our teacher made the module interesting by engaging us individually and in groups online. Because of her approach, I developed interest in the course and did my best during the examinations [Nokuthula].

The feedback from participants suggest that teachers could identify and address the cognitive needs of students through interactive teaching and learning processes that are informed by good social relationships with students. Also, the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom setting and online influence student academic and motivational outcomes (Robinson et al., 2019).

The association between social relationships and behavioural engagement

Social relationships between teachers and learners are particularly important to enhance students' behavioural engagement. Some student participants highlighted the instrumental outcome of behavioural engagement and good social relationships, such as the active participation of students in academic and social activities:

Teachers must provide good responses to questions asked by students in class. I think that building a good relationship with students especially by providing answers to their questions in a decorous way is very important in the teaching process [Amizwa].

Teachers should initiate conversations and must accommodate the differing opinions of students. On the part of students, we must recognize and appreciate the professional interaction we have with teachers [Emmanuel – Medicine, 1st generation student].

Having a good social relationship with students also involves understanding their background and understanding their learning needs. Excerpts below reflect the views of some participants:

I expect my teacher to greet when he enters the lecture room, recap previous lessons and, allow us to ask questions. I must also add that students have responsibilities like respecting the teachers and using formal language when sending emails to our teachers [Charles – 1st generation student].

Other students explained how deliberate instructional methods used by teachers could enhance good social relationships: “*in our ENGE160 module, the lecturer broke us into groups and that really helped us because there were different submissions from my colleagues which did not form part of my original ideas*” [Annika]. However, other respondents like Morongwa explained how situational factors such as fear or shyness could affect students’ behavioural engagement especially in the absence of formed social relationships:

Some teachers create an atmosphere of fear in class so students are not able to ask questions. As a student who sometimes may not understand certain concepts, what I do is to send an email to my teacher after class to inform him or her that I didn’t understand the topic because I was scared to raise my hand in class.

The feedback from Morongwa suggests that teachers need to understand the differences in learners’ habitus and how it affects their learning engagement. Other participants also shared their opinions regarding the developmental outcomes of good social relationships: “*when my teacher develops a good social relationship with me, I become more proactive in class and engage more in class*” [Thabisa] and “*when I have a good social relationship with my teacher, it is easy for me to ask questions, get the needed feedback and help me improve my academic performance*” [Iviwe]. The data indicates that the outcomes of good social relationships include positive learning experience and academic performance on the part of students and improved teacher feedback.

Inter-relational culture and behavioural and cognitive engagement

One of the gaps in the engagement literature is how inter-relational culture enhances behavioural and cognitive engagement. Participants shared their experiences on how inter-relational culture could either enhance or adversely affect student engagement and formed social relationships with teachers:

Language, race and other cultural factors influence how social relationships between teachers and students are formed. For instance, some of the Black students especially those who live in the townships find it difficult to engage their White teachers. Also, gender plays a role because female teachers tend to be more sociable than their male colleagues [Segal]

There are some students who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and who need more support through good social relationships to study better. I come from a rural high school where it is difficult to access a computer, so I struggle to type my work and to use the technology available. However, having a good social relationship with a teacher who understands my background would enable me to share my challenges and if possible, seek assistance [Maralize].

The feedback from Segal illustrates how institutional culture features influence the inter-relational culture that exist between teachers and students. Similarly, the narrative of Maralize suggests that students from low socio-economic backgrounds who may experience transition challenges need to be identified and supported by teachers. Some participants like Teboho argued on the contrary that “*I think that teachers and students should keep their relationship professional. I do not see the need to build a social relationship with my teachers.... for what? It is not necessary*”.

Previous studies have shown that communication is important to the development of a good social relationship between teachers and students (Suciu, 2014). Participants also identified communication through verbal and electronic modes as very important to developing a good inter-relational culture in the learning environment: “*what I expect from my lecturers is that they develop a culture of tolerance and patience with us especially via the online system which is new to some of us.*” [Teboho] and; “*I expect my teachers to be open, treat every student equally without demonstrating favouritism. Also, they should care about our welfare as students*” [Thulani]. The feedback from participants further revealed the need for a culture of tolerance and patience for students to adjust to the learning environment and the need for teachers to adopt a culture of openness, approachability, fairness and the ethics of care.

Narratives of teachers

The link between social relationships and cognitive engagement

Teachers play important roles in promoting, maintaining and improving students’ academic performance through good pedagogical approaches and student engagement (Wong & Chiu, 2019). Some teacher participants explained how social relationships between teachers and students could enhance cognitive engagement in the learning environment:

I encourage students to ask questions while I also demonstrate my commitment to assist them to understand the concepts and theories I teach. I applaud their contributions when necessary and also get the entire class to acknowledge brilliant contributions in class. Resultantly, they open up easily and engage in the discourse [Richard].

I engage with students as individuals and in smaller groups which obviously include creating time for interaction through consultations. There is also the online session where I engage my students by interacting with them and addressing their questions [Michael]

Some participants like Lethabo explained how she draws on the prior learning experiences of students to enhance their cognitive development by identifying students by their names:

I teach disaster management and in my modules what I do is to provide students with examples of disasters that are happening all around. I call the students by their names to contribute, and they give me feedback in relation to their experiences on the field.

The importance of timely feedback was also highlighted by some participants, “*I ensure that students receive timely feedback from me. I always remind students to also answer questions in a timely and respectful way. In this way we can maintain good social relationships in the classroom*” [Heinu]. The feedback from participants revealed that when teachers provide students with timely feedback, draw on the prior learning

experiences of students, identify students by their names, allow students to ask questions in class and stimulate discussions in class, they promote social relationships and cognitive engagement.

The association between social relationships and behavioural engagement

The quality of social relationships between teachers and students influences how a conducive learning environment could be created (Flanigan et al., 2021). Some participants underscored the importance of instructional methods with clear engagement processes as important to creating a good social relationship between teachers and students, “*I use the flipped classroom approach which allows students to learn lessons in advance. This affords me the space to engage with the students, listen to their voices and allow them to reflect on the subject*” [Keitumetse]. Akin to the narratives of some student participants, some teachers highlighted the importance of communication in enhancing behavioural engagement: “*I think that we [teachers] are losing a lot of the non-verbal communication and cues during learning. We must use clear communication and apply good teaching resources to support students*” [Marick] and; “*I communicate clearly to students and assume a non-intimidating posture especially when students ask or respond to questions. However, I expect students to be punctual in class, work hard, eschew cheating, provide me with feedback and, negotiate submission deadlines*” [Thomas].

Some participants also shared a number of the strategies they have adopted to develop good social relationships with their students, “*I always make sure that I know the academic and social backgrounds of my students, their prior learning experiences and, their future career goals while I help them to shape their future careers* [Palesa]”. The feedback from participants shows that when teachers communicate clearly with students, demonstrate ethics of care, use good teaching resources, develop a clear teaching strategy and, plan before teaching sessions, they engage better with their students.

The association between teacher relational competences and student engagement

Referring to the term relational proficiencies of teachers, Ljungblad (2021) argued that teacher knowledge and skills in developing relationships with students are important for successful education. Some participants explained how they maintain good social relationships with students through relational knowledge, skills, and attitudes:

I have always engaged my students beyond the classroom space, I have wanted to know what is going on in their lives because I am aware that I am teaching an embodied human being so I am not only teaching the mind, the spirit and, the heart [Lerato].

As a teacher, I always ensure that I develop good social relationships with my students. Consequently, learning takes place and it is accompanied by meaningful work, student involvement in classroom activities and their academic performance is enhanced [Nandipha].

Some participants also highlighted the importance of classroom discussion and other learning activities outside the classroom environment as strategies they have adopted to develop their relational competences. For instance, Thomas noted that, “*I value class discussions and debate and give students the*

opportunity to attend seminars. This is how students could build a good social relationship with me while I also develop what you may refer to as relational competences.” Some participants emphasised consistency, integrity, and fairness as important to maintaining a good social relationship:

As a lecturer, I am consistent in the way I conduct myself in class and uphold integrity in all my relationships with my students. Also, I communicate with students and create opportunities for them to interact with me. I also ensure that I am always fair to students [Arno].

To ensure a continuous cycle of relational bonding and to enhance effective teaching and learning, I often break my class into small groups. This enables my students to feel comfortable to ask questions, provide feedbacks and, understand the entire teaching and learning processes [Thembeke].

Similarly, Brunelda opined that:

To maintain good social relationship with students, I ensure that I am always open to new thoughts, new experiences, new emotions, have a diversity of thinking and encourage critical thought and questioning from students which is inclusive of teaching practices. I also provide students with feedback and encourage them to share their thoughts with me because I am committed to learning as well.

From a humanistic perspective, Natasha explained that:

I think that as a lecturer I should show respect to students, be open and honest in my engagement with students, assist student to understand the course, ensure that students prepare adequately for the class, maintain a good attitude with all my students, engage well with the students and challenge the students to be critical thinkers.

Another participant argued that:

Good social should be built on certain agreed principles such as punctuality, adequate preparedness by students and teacher, continuous engagement with students and vice-versa and, the avoidance of disengagement by students. Secondly, as a teacher, I must be professional and make my job interesting. This includes developing strategies that connect me with my students such as creating small groups, organizing workshops for them, taking them out for excursions and giving students good feedback on their assignment submissions [Agetha].

Discussion

The major question examined in this study was how student engagement and formed social relationships between teachers and students may enhance and the learning experiences of university students. Relationality has in recent years been linked to the broad discussions around pedagogy (Ford 2019; Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Ljungblad, 2021) and the development of good interpersonal relationship between teachers and students (Küster-Boluda & Vila-López, 2021) albeit with little emphasis on student engagement. Four main themes were developed from the data analysed: the link between social relationships and cognitive engagement; the association between social relationships and behavioural engagement; inter-relational culture and behavioural and cognitive engagement and teacher relational competences and student engagement.

The findings of the current study show that when teachers identify and address the cognitive needs of students through deliberate instructional methods such as interactive teaching and flipped classroom approach, the cognitive development of students improves. In practice, by stimulating discussions in class,

acknowledging students' effort in classroom activities, providing students with timely feedback, and allowing students to ask questions in class, teachers enrich the cognitive development of students. Prior studies have shown that, when teachers develop relational teaching approaches, it could lead to enriched student learning experiences (Hickey & Riddle, 2022), enhanced students' participation in the learning activities (Ljungblad, 2021) and interpersonal exchanges between teachers and learners which enhance learning (Caires et al., 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023).

The active participation of students in classroom activities could be improved when teachers and students develop good social relationships. Students are more likely to engage in classroom activities when teachers openly welcome their opinions, demonstrate care, use good teaching resources, adopt motivating teaching strategies, identify learners by their names, communicate with learners respectfully and, acknowledge the differences in learners' socio-economic backgrounds. While universities in South Africa continue to find ways to address issues related to equity, equality and transformation (Vandeyar, 2020), at the classroom level, it is important for teachers to develop strategies that would enable first generation students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from rural communities to have positive learning experiences. Again, when teachers develop good social relationships with students, students could overcome situational factors such as fear and shyness, feel a sense of belonging, and effectively participate in the classroom activities.

While situational factors may affect the social relationships that are developed between teachers and students, findings of the current study also revealed that the institutional culture could directly influence how student engagement links with the relationship formed between teachers and learners. In particular, institutional culture's features such as language, race and gender influence how social relationships between teachers and students are formed and how teachers and students engage in the learning environment. Likewise, the socio-economic background of students which include first generation students, students from rural high schools and students from low-income families influence how some students may respond to the cognitive and behavioural dimensions of engagement in the learning environment. The present findings suggest that the development of good social relationships between students and teachers could enhance the social and academic well-being of all categories of students. When teachers develop a deep understanding of the social and personal contexts of students and adopt a pedagogical approach that connects with the personal and social situations of students, they could enhance the learning experiences of students (Meyers et al., 2019). Similarly, when teachers develop a culture of tolerance and respect for students to adjust to the learning environment and, maintain a relationship that is based on openness, fairness, ethics of care and approachability, they could enhance student engagement in the learning setting.

While the expectations of students may be to experience continuous teacher engagement and good social relationships, it is important for teachers to develop their relational competences and explore effective approaches to student engagement. Findings of the current study revealed three important teacher relational competences: inter-cultural competences; behavioural engagement competences and cognitive engagement competences. First, teachers could develop good inter-cultural competences when they embrace diversity as

part of their pedagogical approach, engage with students to understand their backgrounds; appreciate different ways of emotional expression, especially from different cultures; respect the views of all students and; demonstrate fairness in all their engagement with students. Similarly, teachers could enhance their behavioural engagement competences when they are consistent in their teaching approaches and interactions in class, develop a continuous cycle of relational bonding with their students and demonstrate respect, honesty and, positive attitudes in the learning setting. Third, teacher cognitive engagement competences could be nurtured when teachers adequately prepare for each class, develop deeper understanding of the course or module they teach, provide students with timely and positive feedback and challenge the critical thinking abilities of students. These findings further highlight the importance of teacher relational proficiency (Ljungblad, 2021) in promoting student engagement.

Study limitations and future research

Findings of the current study should be interpreted in relation to some of its limitations. First, the study did not examine how the affective feature of student engagement enhance social relationships between teachers and students because the researchers focused only on the behavioural and cognitive aspects. Secondly, different disciplines and departments have their own approaches to relational teaching, but the current study could not examine the differences between the various disciplines and how they promote relational teaching and student engagement. Future studies could examine how good social relationships between teachers and students could enhance the affective feature of student engagement as well as the experiences of teachers and students in different disciplines and how they address issues related to student engagement and relational teaching.

Conclusion

As the demographic portrait of students in South Africa and other countries of the world continue to change, it has become important for providers of higher education to examine innovative pedagogical approaches that could enhance the knowledge and skills development of students. Findings of the current study show that features such as relational communication, relational pedagogy, inter-cultural relations, teacher inter-cultural competences, and teacher behavioural and cognitive engagement competences explain how student engagement is connected with the relationships between teachers and students. When teachers and students develop good social relationships and engage in the learning environment, students are set to achieve developmental outcomes such as active learning engagement, improved student confidence and academic performance and enhanced critical thinking skills. The current study adds to the literature on student engagement by highlighting the importance of an inter-relational culture between students and teachers and teachers' relational competences and behaviour and cognitive engagement competences in facilitating the cognitive and behavioural development of students amongst first generation students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from rural communities.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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