

**Student-Teacher Relationships in University Settings: What Do Students Perceive as
Boundaries in Their Relationship With Their Teachers?**

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Abstract

The relationship between a student and a teacher was found to play a huge role in the development and success of a student. A good student-teacher relationship offers many opportunities, and while there are some indications of what aspects constitute a ‘good’ student-teacher relationship, there is less known about what the boundaries of a student-teacher relationship are. Especially in the university context, there is a knowledge gap regarding what students perceive as the boundaries of their relationships with their teachers. For this reason, this study aimed to investigate the boundaries of student-teacher relationships in the university context. It was further asked for characteristics that are likeable to be displayed by a teacher and what aspects determine the feeling of comfortableness around a teacher. The study included 18 bachelor students studying at the University of Twente. The qualitative study was implemented by conducting semi-structured interviews that were afterwards coded using an inductive, thematic approach. The study revealed that students have some variation in their perception of boundaries in a student-teacher relationship and preferred characteristics of a teacher. While some characteristics like empathy and enthusiasm were expected by almost every participant to be displayed by their teachers, showing humour and being on par with their teachers offered a broader range of preferences or reluctance. During the study, the question arose of what a ‘professional’ teacher role is, resulting in the definition formed by the students’ expectations as to be neutral, serious and keeping a healthy distance. What was mentioned most often by the participants as a boundary-crossing was asking too personal questions. In addition to that, crossing physical boundaries or getting feelings like love involved were brought up as relatively clear boundaries by the participants. While the students had similar perceptions regarding the aforementioned boundary-crossings of a student-teacher relationship, there was still quite some variation for example in other aspects like the perception of a teacher acting more out of a “friend”-role. The study offered an interesting insight into the perceptions and preferences of students regarding student-teacher relationships.

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Introduction

The student's relationship with their teachers poses an important influence on their education and the quality of the relationship can mould the success and satisfaction of the student's learning (Roorda et al., 2011). While there are some aspects known that students appreciate in their relationship with their teachers, there is less knowledge regarding the boundaries of this relationship. When is a teacher invading a student's personal space and crossing their boundaries? What behaviours and characteristics are liked by students, which are perceived as inappropriate? When is a student-teacher relationship going too far? These questions are important to ask if you consider that the relationship between a student and a teacher can have such a huge influence. Therefore, it needs to be investigated when the boundaries in a student-teacher relationship are crossed. Although there are some relevant studies available for example the one by Holmes et al. (1999) or Yamashiro and Noam (2013) regarding boundaries in student-teacher relationships of high-school students that already offer some insights into this topic, fewer studies are available when it comes to higher education.

During our educational pathway, we are shaped by many different environmental factors and importantly by the people that help us to pursue the development we make. Especially our teachers are the ones who possibly have a huge impact on how we grow and develop. We all had teachers we liked and some that we did not like that much, and this may have influenced our progress. Against the old-fashioned assumption that the task of the teacher is merely providing content and material for the students, purely acting out of a "delivery"-role (Haidet & Stein, 2006), it is well-known today that there are more aspects to teaching. What became more and more salient in the last decades is the importance of the student-teacher relationship in the learning environment. Contradicting the assumption of the "delivery"-role of the teacher, Tiberius (1994) claims that teaching is a process which depends on the interaction between student and teacher and not only on the teacher "filling" the students with knowledge. Therefore, he brings up the dynamic connection between a student and a teacher as a new facet in the educational context. He even goes as far as to state that "relationships are as essential to teaching as the flour in the cake" (Tiberius, 1994, p.2).

The emotional component in a student-teacher relationship critically influences the way in which learning occurs. A good relationship between a student and a teacher allows the students to disclose themselves, meaning for example being honest about a lack of understanding and asking questions (Tiberius, 1994). What becomes salient here, is that a good student-teacher relationship serves as a basis for fruitful learning to occur.

Consequently, learning processes can be facilitated if a student and a teacher are having a good relationship, therefore expediting the student's educational pathway.

In general, the student-teacher relationship should be treated as a multidimensional construct. Hagenauer & Volet (2014) have proposed two relationship dimensions that seem important, especially in higher education settings: the affective dimension and the support dimension. As can be derived from their names, the affective dimension refers to the bond formed between the student and the teacher, which serves as a secure basis for a positively experienced relationship. As a second factor, the support dimension describes the need for support in an educational sense, meaning to help the student to be successful at the university (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Similarly, in order to examine student-teacher relationships, attachment theory is often used. This theory emphasizes the importance of trustful, responsive and involved relationships with caregivers, promoting social and emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Behaviours that promote these positive developments include guiding students through conflict situations and acting as a role model who shows respectful and prosocial ways of acting (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Roorda et al. (2011) examined the association between affective student-teacher relationships and both the students' engagement and achievement. The study not only revealed a positive effect of a good student-teacher relationship on engagement and achievement, but also a negative effect of a poor relationship on engagement and achievement. These findings show that students are influenced by their relationship with their teachers, in both positive and negative directions. Despite all the positive effects of a good relationship with the teacher, students usually still have clear boundaries to this relationship in mind for when it becomes "too close", negatively impacting the relationship (Chory & Offstein, 2017).

Consequently, when we talk about a "good" student-teacher relationship, the question arises of what we mean by that. The impact of the student-teacher relationship on a student's educational pathway starts as early as in preschool, adding value to their education – at least as it is wished for. According to Anderson and Carta-Falsa (2010), students wish for an "open, supportive, comfortable, respectful, safe or nonthreatening, and enjoyable" (p. 136) relationship. Nevertheless, despite these expectations may sound feasible, teachers often struggle to implement these in their interactions. There are insecurities arising when it comes to students' demands and boundaries in the relationship with their teacher (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013), as there are often no clear boundaries communicated. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) interviewed American high school students and teachers to find out more about the facets of student-teacher relationships. During their interviews, it came out

that students indeed have ideas about how a teacher is supposed to behave in interaction with them. They communicated their preference for close relationships to be initiated by them and not their teachers, describing the feeling as “creepy or embarrassing” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p. 73) when a teacher shows specific interest in their life. This targeted interest in specific students is also disliked when it comes to obvious favouritism towards one or more students. The participants highlight that they do not expect these obvious intentions to reach out to them, but rather prefer smaller, symbolic gestures which indicate the teachers’ interest in the students’ individuality and potential. What the study captures is that students appreciate if they recognize that their teachers care, but they still value the teachers’ role as a professional. What subliminally also became clear in this research is however, that there is quite an amount of uncertainty and ambivalence in the perception of guidelines in student-teacher relationships. On the one hand, students like to disclose themselves in their relationship with their teachers and give them insights into their life for example to profit from the teachers’ more experienced standpoint in life (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). On the other hand, for the teacher, there is the risk of being perceived as invasive and inappropriate when boundaries are crossed. Holmes et al. (1999) conducted a study in which they asked 158 undergraduate students to rate 109 hypothetical relationships between a male faculty member and an undergraduate student including scenarios like “The faculty member drives the student home” or “The faculty member compliments a student on his or her clothes”. The participants usually rated sexually or financially exploitative situations as especially inappropriate. It is important to mention here, that sexual harassment is undoubtedly a problem in university settings (Klein & Martin, 2021), and that the incorporation of situations with a sexual overtone in their study does not represent unrealistic ideas, but rather reflects the reality. For situations with a sexual overtone, the participants shared a rather clear view of it being very inappropriate, however, regarding more friendship-like situations, the views differed. Holmes et al. (1999) speak of “dual roles of a relationship” when a teacher not only acts as a faculty member, but also for example as a friend. It is clear, that at some point these dual roles become incompatible, and that there are boundaries which if they are crossed, put these relationships at risk of being inappropriate. Nonetheless, these boundaries, in reality, are often blurred and unclear, which not only causes stress in students but also in teachers (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Although there are general guidelines for university teaching in the Netherlands, published by the European Commission (European Commission, 2022), these guidelines rather focus on academic guidelines regarding the teaching itself, than behavioural guidelines covering interactions with students

beyond teaching, as there are in the U.S. for example (University of Utah, 2022). Since there are often no clear behavioural guidelines stated somewhere, it can be difficult for students and teachers to appraise the appropriateness of their behaviour. As an additional factor, what is also worth consideration is the fact that the context of student-teacher relationships differs. Attachment theory sees the student-teacher relationship for younger children in elementary school, for example, as an extension of the child-parent relationship (Davis, 2003). However, this concept is not applicable anymore, when the child reaches puberty since in high school students tend to especially appreciate the aspects that distinguish the student-teacher relationship from their relationship with their parents (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). While they often perceive their parents as judgemental, lacking perspective and worried, they value the teachers' distance and perceived understanding of teenage activities (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). In their study, Roorda et al. (2011) gained an interesting insight when they found out that contrary to what one might expect, older students might gain more from their student-teacher relationships than younger children. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) also confirm these findings by stating that older students tend to become more open to closer student-teacher relationships and increasingly value the out-reaching of teachers to them. They propose that one factor might be that students, as they grow, tend to become increasingly self-confident, while Hamre and Pianta (2001) also name the increased appreciation of the teachers' support due to new academic challenges as an influence. It is important to shed light on the variety and differences in student-teacher relationships in different contexts since the aspects influencing the quality of the relationship might not be the same.

While much is known about the influence of the relationship between young children and their teachers, knowledge and studies are lacking in higher education (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). In university settings, the environment in which education takes place differs a lot from elementary schools and high schools since interactions between students and teachers tend to take place less frequently. Additionally, in comparison to earlier education, relationships are formed between two adults and not between an adult and a child (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The specific conditions under which university teaching takes place, create a necessity to investigate student-teacher relationships in this environment more in-depth. Since there are some indications that students gain more from their relationship with their teachers as they grow older, there needs to be more research on this proposal. Furthermore, during the research process, it became salient that there is still a huge amount of uncertainty about the perceived guidelines and boundaries of student-teacher relationships. There are studies

providing some insights into behaviours that are perceived as inappropriate by students. However, these studies are often not applicable to the university context since for example as in the study of Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013), high school students were targeted. In addition to that, although the study of Holmes et al. (1999) offered some insights into the perceived (in-)appropriate behaviour of a student and their teacher, the study was conducted 24 years ago and the outcomes could therefore be outdated today. In every study mentioned before, it also became salient that students have different boundaries and that some behaviours are perceived as appropriate by some of them, while for others they were perceived as inappropriate. It is therefore also interesting to investigate what aspects are influencing the comfortableness around a teacher and their behaviours.

This study aims at gaining new deep insights into students' perceptions of these aspects of student-teacher relationships. By interviewing university students studying at a Dutch university, therefore a European university, another research gap is filled since previous research on student-teacher relationships in university settings is mainly targeting the American university context (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The leading research question in this study will be: "What are the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship in a university setting?". The investigation will additionally be led by the sub-questions "What are aspects that students value and expect in their experienced relationships with their teachers?", as well as "What determines the feeling of comfortableness around a teacher?".

Methods

Design

This study was part of an extended research led by the question "How is the relationship with your teacher related to student well-being?". In total 5 researchers conducted individual studies, but the same interview scheme was used. For this study, only the interview questions relating to this research topic were relevant and analysed. The study aimed to gain insights into the participants' views and experiences therefore a qualitative approach was chosen. Ethical approval was provided by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Science of the University of Twente (request 230323).

Participants

The study was conducted in March and April of 2023 and included full-time bachelor students at the University of Twente. The participants needed to be at least 18 years old and be able to speak English. The sample included 9 female and 9 male students with ages ranging between 20 and 23 with a mean of 21.72 and a standard deviation of 0.96. Regarding

nationality, eight students were German, six Romanian, two Dutch, one was Greek and one was Armenian. Nine participants were studying Psychology, four Theoretical Computer Science, two International Business Administration, and three Civil Engineering, Creative Technology, and Management Society and Technology. Additionally, two were attending the second, 15 were attending the third, and one the fourth year of their bachelor studies. The participants were contacted via phone or personally, therefore convenience sampling was used. Before conducting the interview, all participants gave informed consent.

Material

To be able to answer the research questions, a semi-structured interview guide with 6 open and closed questions was developed for this study (Appendix A). Additionally, the interview guide started by asking 5 questions about the demographic background. A semi-structured approach was used to offer a certain amount of flexibility while still allowing the researcher to structure the interview to focus on relevant subtopics (Harrison & Rentzelas, 2021). This method is especially applicable in this study since it is aimed at investigating new aspects, therefore being able to ask spontaneous questions based on what the participant tells the interviewer. The interview questions explicitly asked for the boundaries of students, to get answers to the main research question and to determine what creates a feeling of (un)comfortableness, answering one of the sub-research-questions. It was also explicitly asked for the valued characteristics displayed by a teacher (Appendix A). Additionally, to get more insights into the student's perceptions and preferences, it was asked about their positive and negative experiences with teachers. In general, apart from the interview guide, follow-up questions that arose based on the answers of the participant were used to get a deeper insight into the experience or feelings of the person. These probes for example included questions like "How did you feel in this situation?" or "When and where did this happen?" and were asked to get a clearer overview of the experience of the interviewee. To be able to conduct the interview, the participant had to have a device with access to the internet and to Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Procedure

Before the actual interviews were conducted, a pilot study with two interviews was implemented to find out about possible improvements in the interview guide that need to be made before conducting the study. The pilot tests each took 45 minutes and revealed that some questions had to be edited to make them more understandable. Additionally, optional probes were added, if the participant needed more clarification about the question or to ask for more detailed information. The interviews were conducted one-on-one on the days between

the 29.03.2023 and the 11.04.2023. Before the interview was started, each participant was sent an informed consent which had to be signed by them, where they were informed that the data will be stored until 6 months after the interview took place. It also contained the contact information of the researchers. The participants were also informed at the beginning of the interview that they can withdraw at any time and that they do not have to disclose something if they do not want to. The participants were also told that the interviews are going to be recorded. The interviews were conducted online using Zoom or Microsoft Teams where the videos were recorded and saved using the recording function. The interviews took between 32 and 70 minutes. In the beginning, the students were asked about their demographic background for example their age, gender and nationality. After this information was collected, all the interview questions included in the shared interview scheme were asked to the participant. In the end, the participant was thanked for his/her participation and asked if there are any questions or remarks that he/she would like to pose.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by using otter.ai. Mistakes that arose in the transcribing process were corrected. After that, the final transcripts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti in order to facilitate the coding process. The codes were created based on the content of the interview which was relevant to the research questions. The approach to the coding process was inductive, therefore, a bottom-up design was implemented. For this study, this approach was the most suitable since it was aimed at finding new aspects and exploring the topic without any clear theoretical guideline, although the publications mentioned in the introduction provided previous knowledge of student-teacher relationships in general. To be more specific, a thematic approach was used for the coding process, which includes six steps. First, familiarization with your data is important to create a better basis for further work with the outcomes. After that, the coding process is started and when codes for specific parts of the interviews have been created, themes are generated that re-occur in the codes. This step unites some codes under a certain broader theme. After reviewing these themes, they are given names that define them. In the last step, the outcomes of the thematic coding process are written down in the results section. Using the “constant comparison” method (Boeije, 2010), the codes were constantly re-examined with every new interview, to see commonalities and differences between the content on which the codes are based. The aim of using codes in this study was to be able to identify aspects mentioned by the participants that would help answer the research questions. Creating codes that assign broader terms to statements made by participants gave a clear structure to the occurring aspects that were mentioned and re-

occurred. During the coding process of the different interviews, the coding scheme was revised several times, resulting in a coding scheme that could be applied to all interviews. The final coding scheme then provided a final overview of relevant aspects to answer the research questions. As an addition, the researchers collaborated during the coding process, using inter-coder reliability. By independently coding 2 identical interviews and discussing misunderstandings and disagreements in the coding process, the best-fitting coding scheme could be developed and therefore the inter-subjectivity was increased.

Results

During the coding process, three interrelated themes emerged from the participants' narratives. First of all, the participants talked a lot about their expectations and preferences regarding the teacher's role and behaviour, therefore 'Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role' made up one theme. Additionally, the participants evaluated a lot about their opinions regarding keeping distance in a student-teacher relationship, resulting in the theme 'Preferred Distance in the Student-Teacher Relationship'. As opposed to the first theme, participants also mentioned negative behaviours they would not like to be displayed by their teachers, which could be summarized by the theme 'Need for Control'. In the following, sorted by themes, the codes are described in detail including a short description of the theme, the definition of the codes and variations in the codes. To give an overview of the coding scheme, Table 1 was created.

Table 1.

Coding Scheme Sorted by Themes

Code	Theme	Definition	Frequency	Example Quote
Age	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Age of the teacher and how it influenced the interaction between students and the teacher	2	"I think one of the main things I also saw in the last few years is being too close to students [...] I think maybe

Authenticity	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Trait of a teacher of being sincere to their students, creating the image of being approachable	11	it's because we're a bit closer in age sometimes.” “So, if they're having a bad day, you can see it if they... I mean you can all see it which is good, but on the same... at the same time it's a bit frustrating for students to see such an imbalance and emotions on the teacher.”
Competence	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Knowing about the content of their subject and being prepared for the lessons, including being able to answer students' questions	19	“I just had a teacher who didn't really seem like they knew what they were talking about. Every time you went to them and asked a question, they just ... didn't like ... they always just

Empathy	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Being there for students and being able to see the student's point of view and take it into account	60	<p>needed to say I will look it up. I will send you an e-mail later or I will ask somebody else. And then you feel like that person might not be the best person to to ask any questions. And then you can feel helpless because of that. Because you don't know who to ask when you have questions.”</p> <p>“I would say empathy or like understanding for the, for the student role, like someone who can envision okay, like, how it is to be a student, like</p>
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Enthusiasm	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Showing passion in their job	50	from the other side.” “It's motivating if the teacher is also like yeah kind of energetic about what they teach.”
Humour	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Using jokes in lessons; making students laugh	9	“Humour can also be important, can also be too much, so you have to strike the right balance there.”
Professionalism	Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role	Being neutral, serious at least to some extent and behaving in line with the role of a teacher	49	“If the teacher is not serious enough, because I think, in the relationship between the student and the teacher, it's important to just like behave, in line, this kind of role that you don't get

Being on Par	Preferred Distance in a Student-Teacher Relationship	Teacher acting in some kind of 'friend role' towards the student, therefore being at eye level	15	<p>over this kind of line.”</p> <p>“Oversharing their own feelings would also be like crossing the boundary. Because we are not their therapists or family or friends or something like this.”</p>
Asking Inappropriate Questions	Preferred Distance in a Student-Teacher Relationship	Asking questions usually concerning private life	17	<p>“That there is not just a strict relationship where you have to deliver something.”</p> <p>“There were like a lot of instances where she asked a bit too personal questions, or too interested in the topic or like what we thought especially.</p>

Crossing Physical Boundaries	Preferred Distance in a Student-Teacher Relationship	Becoming too close in a physical sense	8	And I think in very, like sensitive topics, it was a bit too much.” “I mean, invading personal space like touching, like touching me.”
Students’ Initiative	Preferred Distance in a Student-Teacher Relationship	Personal Interactions are initiated by the student	6	“That should come from the student side to talk about personal matters.”
Anger	Need for Control	Acting out angrily at students	14	“Emotions like anger shouldn’t have room in such a relationship, I think. Or, yeah, I mean, they could be mad or so. But they shouldn’t act out angry at the students. Or show it to an extent that’s not appropriate.”

Strictness	Need for Control	Being uncompromising and rigorous	2	“If you are way too strict, that won't make students try to open up to you and they will be right to ask you questions or ask for help.”
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Preferred Qualities of the Teacher Role

This code theme includes behaviours and traits that the participants valued in their teachers. The presence of the following characteristics improved their experiences with their teachers and facilitated the educational pathway of the students.

Age

The code ‘Age’ includes quotes that address age in the context of their experiences with teachers and how it influenced the interactions between them. Although the code was not used very often, one participant stated that some teachers are very close to the students, because of their age. She hypothesized that the teachers closer to the ages of the students also tend to be closer to the students in general, or at least feel and act in that way. She described this behaviour of younger teachers as being “too close to students”, by for example asking too personal questions. Another participant mentioned in one sentence that she enjoyed one learning experience with a teacher as he was older and therefore had “more experience than the others”, indicating that she preferred an older teacher to a younger one. This quote also emphasizes that an older teacher in this case was perceived as more competent, therefore a connection to the code ‘Competence’ can be made here. It can be seen that there is a risk for teachers being closer in age to students of becoming too close, making the students feel more uncomfortable as potentially opposed to older teachers. Additionally, there are indications that students value more experience in a teacher, as the learning experience can be enhanced.

Authenticity

The code ‘Authenticity’ describes the trait of a teacher of being sincere to their students, creating the image of being themselves. Students often mentioned their preference

for teachers who are genuine and present themselves as they are. Some participants valued teachers who also show their emotions, at least to some extent. One participant stated that teachers can display sadness, but the quote

So, if they're having a bad day, you can see it if they... I mean you can all see it which is good, but on the same... at the same time it's a bit frustrating for students to see such an imbalance and emotions in the teacher

also shows that there seems to be a limit to the amount of emotions that teachers can display. Authenticity was also relevant when participants talked about honesty displayed by teachers. Situations where teachers are perceived as not being authentic are represented by this quote from a participant:

This feels like really unauthentic if they just read down some slides of someone else. We had that and I didn't like that. I feel like you know what this lecture is like we had those and I felt like those lectures I did not follow them like personally because I was like, Yeah, I can just read the slides myself.

However, in general, honesty displayed by teachers does have its limitations as emphasized when one participant stated that teachers should not always say what is on their mind, because that can be too much and inappropriate. Although it might have limitations, authenticity still seems to be a trait that is valued by students.

Competence

Competence was defined as knowing about the content of their subject and being prepared for the lessons, including being able to answer students' questions as a teacher. The participants often talked about the competence of a teacher as an important basic skill that a teacher should display. Students expect their teachers to be prepared for the lessons, as they also prepare for the lessons. One participant summarized it like this:

I don't really like maybe when teachers are not well prepared for lessons because I think I also spend time studying and I go to uni, and then I think it's fair enough, when the teachers just also prepared for the lesson and that I don't waste my time.

Consequently, students expect teachers to put some effort into their lessons to be perceived as competent. Creating the image of being competent was also mentioned by the participants in connection with seeming confident. The confidence displayed by teachers was said to create the impression of being competent in their subject. In addition to that, the participants disliked it when teachers were not able to answer their questions. In this case, the expectation of a teacher being competent is not being fulfilled, leading to disappointment, as described by a participant like that: "And then you can feel helpless because of that. Because you don't know

whom to ask when you have questions”. What students also valued was experience. As shortly mentioned before, a teacher that already has had some experience in their job seems to be perceived as being more competent, also described as “wisdom” by one participant. In general, competence seems to be a clear expectation students have for their teachers which leads to uncomfortableness and disappointment if it is not fulfilled.

Empathy

The code ‘Empathy’ is defined as being there for students and being able to see the student’s point of view and take it into account. The participants often told the interviewer about situations where they were in some kind of problematic situation, and the teacher was involved or interacted with the student in this situation. For example, one participant mentioned a situation where she started to cry during an exam due to her exam anxiety and her teacher then calmed her down and encouraged her, which she appreciated very much. Opposing this situation, another participant told the interviewer about situations in which teachers were not showing empathy:

So, if situations happened that were out of their hands, like other needs of them, like in the group work would just leave, and you don't know where they went or why they won't do their work, their teachers just were not very understanding. And just were like: “Yeah, then you have to do the work in the same amount of time and I won't give you any more time. It's your problem, not my problem”. So, I think, yeah, a lot of teachers seem to be not that understanding of things that are out of the other people's hand.

In general, students would like to have a teacher “who is involved and is looking always to check on you whether you need help or not”. Being empathetic also means not only having their own point of view, but also being able to “envision okay, like, how it is to be a student, like from the other side”. This is also shown by teachers when they are patient with the students and show tolerance, as explained by some participants. The term of ‘being understanding’ was also often used when students perceived their teachers as being empathetic. To summarize, students usually value empathy in a teacher and this also contributes to feeling more comfortable around a teacher.

Enthusiasm

Being enthusiastic as summarized by this code emphasizes the passion the teacher should display in their role as a teacher. ‘Liking what they are doing’ was often described by the participants as a characteristic and behaviour they liked in teachers. Students stated that they value it when they perceive a teacher enjoying what they are doing, as it is shown by this

quote, where a student talks about a specific teacher: “and she took it very seriously, and you could really see that she's enjoying what she's doing, and really cares about students, and really wants to give them good feedback”. What you can see in this quote is also that being enthusiastic about their topic also goes hand-in-hand with being there for students. In general, many quotes were coded as representing ‘Empathy’ and ‘Enthusiasm’ as it also becomes salient in this quote: “We want them to be involved. Involved and involving of the students”, where being involved relates to being involved in the topic they teach and enjoying teaching it, but also being involved in the student’s learning process, wanting to help them. In addition to that, enthusiasm seems to play a big role when it comes to motivation. If a teacher shows interest in their own topic, the students are often influenced by that and are therefore more motivated. This was also shown when one participant described a situation where she was not very motivated because of the behaviour of the teacher: “He also wasn't really interested in the topic, so in the whole class, and then obviously, he wasn't interested in the work we did”. This disinterest in his own topic can be labelled as being unenthusiastic. Students perceived teachers as being enthusiastic if they were “energetic about what they teach” and also if “they are in a good mood”, which both seem to be indicators of the teacher’s motivation for their job. It became salient that students expect their teachers to show their passion regarding their topic, therefore being enthusiastic. They also value it since it motivates them more to stay engaged.

Humour

Applying humour in their lessons, for example by making jokes, was mentioned a lot as a preference by students. They describe it as being important that there are moments one can laugh in the lesson. It also “makes it more pleasant to just go for the material”, when humour is used while teaching. However, the participants often restricted their preference for the use of humour to jokes which are “also appropriate to the material that you’re presenting”. Some students emphasized their reluctance towards “telling weird jokes about someone’s situation” and it also became salient that there can be too much humour, for example when the relevance and context of the joke does not seem clear. One participant summarized it by saying:

Too much humour. Yes, like at some point I am, I am still there to learn and not listen to your stand-up comedy but also, because very few teachers are actually that funny cause, well, very few people are good comedians.

While some students value the use of humour in teachers’ lessons, some perceive it as too much, for example when the joke does not fit the material or is aimed at one specific student.

Professionalism

Being professional was described by students as being neutral, serious at least to some extent and behaving in line with the role of a teacher. The participants had clear perceptions of a professional teacher role, and it often concerns the expectation for a teacher to not show behaviours or attitudes that distract too much from the primary goal of a lesson which is teaching. The participants wanted teachers to be relatively neutral and neither show strong opinions, nor strong emotions. Furthermore, they expected them to be open to other opinions, therefore presenting an unbiased attitude. Being neutral was also mentioned as an expectation regarding emotions. Although, as explained in the part of ‘Authenticity’, students value if the teacher shows some emotions, they do not wish their teacher to make it obvious that they are in a bad mood. Students expect teachers to not project their bad feelings onto them. One participant had the perception that emotions or behaviours that are shown to a strong extent in general, are always inappropriate:

Now I guess every behaviour or characteristic, if it's too much it's suboptimal because at some point it will always distract from the lesson and the information you should or plan to spread. And I mean that's still the end goal of teaching is to teach something so.

What was also considered unprofessional by the participants was talking too much about their personal life. One participant used these words to describe how she perceives teachers talking about their personal life in their lectures:

I feel like ... if they talk too much about their family and their private stuff, I feel that this is a little bit inappropriate, I feel like. Because it's okay if they have mentioned it or give an example or something. But if they only talk about their children or wife and I'm like okay, we get it but can we go on with lecture now?”

This quote also links back to the code ‘Being on Par’ and ‘Students’ Initiative’, since talking about their personal life, could be seen as inappropriate, especially when it comes from their side. It was also perceived as crossing the boundaries of their teacher role when a teacher breaks confidentiality rules, for example, “if the teacher would talk about personal stuff, about students with other students or persons that it doesn't concern”. In addition to that, another behaviour that did not fit the teacher-role was giving preferential treatment to some students, as can be seen by this quote: “Like there are the kind of students that always answer questions and giving preferential treatment to those students would be also I feel it would be inappropriate”. The preference of students for teachers to stay professional is a clear expectation and also enhances the comfortableness around a teacher.

Preferred Distance in the Student-Teacher Relationship

This theme includes codes that address the distance between a student and a teacher. To be more specific, it discusses the codes that examine the amount of closeness present between a student and a teacher and what a healthy distance looks like.

Being on Par

‘Being on Par’ also refers to the student-teacher relationship in the sense that some students like their teachers to be on par with themselves, while others wish for a more distant relationship with clear roles as a student and teacher. Being on par in this coding process was used as a description for a teacher to act in some kind of ‘friend role’ towards the student, therefore being at eye level. There were different perceptions about a teacher acting as a ‘friend’. While some explicitly wished for “not just a strict relationship where you have to deliver something”, some others emphasized that a teacher is ‘only’ a teacher and not a friend.

The participants in general showed some reluctance towards talking about matters that do not concern the university context, for example after the lesson. Situations where a teacher comes up to a student and asked about their personal life were perceived as likeable by some participants as shown by this quote: “And they would always ask me, like how I was, how the weekend was and stuff like that. So that was great. They actually, it feels, it felt like they actually cared, right? So that was nice”. In contrast, another participant stated “I wouldn't like a teacher just to come up and say ‘Hi. How are you? Is everything good?’ I mean, as long as we don't have a very close connection”. As the participant mentioned a ‘close connection’ as a basis to form a stronger bond with their teachers, it might be important to mention here that the possibilities to build such a connection with a teacher can be limited in the university context. The following quote emphasizes how one participant perceives the university context regarding this matter:

I feel like the student-teacher relationships here are not that common, so a lot of people go to the university without having any kind of relationships with the teachers and just listen to the lectures go home, maybe even not going to the lectures and just learning from the summaries. So yeah, relationships are not that frequent here, I would say.

The relationship between a student and a teacher at the university seems to often stay very superficial, since even if the students would like to have a closer bond with their teachers, the possibilities for that are limited due to the structure of university life.

What participants were clear about in their statements was the inappropriateness of feelings between a student and a teacher. One student for example stated that “emotions, the

direction of like, love or something like that shouldn't be there". While participants had different opinions regarding a 'friend-role' of a teacher, the perception that relationships that go beyond this role, involving feelings like for example love, are highly inappropriate was shared by the participants. Therefore, being on par, as in a 'friend role' was perceived differently by participants, while having feelings for each other, was seen as definitely inappropriate.

What is also important to mention here is although some students seem to wish to build up some connection with their teachers, the possibilities for that are described as being very limited in the university setting.

Asking inappropriate questions

Questions that were perceived as inappropriate by students usually concerned their private life. The participants mentioned very often that they perceive asking too personal questions as intrusive. They did not want teachers to ask them very personal questions, for example regarding their personal history and family. It was also perceived as inappropriate when teachers were very persistent, for example, by keep asking questions although students make it obvious they do not feel comfortable with it. One participant did not want a teacher to ask her about her private life, because she was worried the teacher would then try to form an opinion about her, even though they do not know her. Another participant also explained how he perceives teachers asking personal questions: "Like they can ask like something personal, but if I say 'No', and then they're like: 'No, no, but really tell me it helps for the lecture for the meeting', then that will be like invading". This quote also shows what students often stressed: that they perceived it as especially intrusive if the teacher kept asking about their well-being or their life and although the student once denied their help or clearly told them they do not want to talk about personal matters with them, they kept asking, as also shown by this quote:

But when you then don't proceed to tell them what's wrong, but just say I'm tired or whatever and they keep on going into it and asking further. Oh, you can always go to me. You can always text me blah blah blah. That's meant friendly and I can imagine that some people would enjoy that. But me personally I wouldn't because I feel like when there is a problem I would like to talk to you, I would. And when I say I don't want to talk about it, then please leave me alone.

The persistence of the teacher here is perceived as highly inappropriate. The student also stresses that if something would come up that he would like to talk about with the teacher, he would come to them, but not vice versa, which will also be addressed by the code 'Students'

Initiative'. In general, asking questions that concern the student's personal life was disliked by the participants, especially when the teachers were persistent in asking them.

Crossing Physical Boundaries

The participants perceived it as intrusive, when their personal physical boundaries were crossed. Becoming too close in a physical sense was described differently by the participants. Some participants described it generally as being inappropriate to be "too touchy", while others defined it more specifically for themselves, when their boundaries are crossed:

Invading personal space would be like, I guess, like accidental touches can be accidental. But like, if, like the forearm to forearm would happen rather frequently, that could be like a bit invasive. But like legs hitting, I wouldn't care. Because it was like close fitting, you know, so then maybe like, not, not feet, but like the legs like knees. And then on the outer thighs? I mean, if that would touch.

Besides these specific ideas of what kind of touches could be invasive, the aspect of persistence was also mentioned when talking about touches. One student said that he definitely feels his boundaries crossed when a teacher continues to be physically close to him, although he mentioned his discomfort about that to them. It could be summarised that touches from the teacher's side in general were perceived as uncomfortable by the participants.

Students' Initiative

As brought up before, there are indications that students prefer interactions going beyond the professional student-teacher relationship to come from the student side. These interactions usually include talking about personal matters. Students wish for the possibility of reaching out to teachers when there are personal circumstances, "but not vice versa". Another student also phrases it like this: "That should come from the student side to talk about personal matters". There seems to be a clear notion that it is the student's decision if they want to talk about their problem. One participant summarizes a connection between a student and a teacher as not just coming out of nowhere, but that a student has to actively seek and intend to build a connection with a teacher, otherwise it would not emerge. This emphasizes that he made the experience that usually his teachers do not try to build a connection unless a student intends to. While many participants stressed their preference for teachers to let students reach out to them and not vice versa, another participant stated that a teacher should "first try to build up a relationship with a certain student before trying to, I don't know, talk about their social lives". This quote also gives an indication that there can be a wish for a teacher to somehow try to build a connection from their initiative. However, the majority

expect their teacher to wait for the student to make a closer connection or to talk about personal matters.

Need for Control

This theme covers codes that address the need for control in a person, for example, if a person acts out in an inappropriate way and cannot control it. On the other hand, it also covers the need for control over another person or group.

Anger

‘Anger’ was referred to as acting out angrily at students. Showing anger as an emotion towards the student was perceived as inappropriate in most cases. One participant stated that “emotions like anger shouldn’t have room in such a relationship”, although she added that teachers can be mad in general, “but they shouldn’t act out angry at the students. Or to an extent that’s not appropriate”. Another participant had the opinion that a teacher should not become a teacher if they cannot control their anger. As an example, one participant told the interviewer about one situation, where a teacher could not control their anger and frustration:

Where one teacher, just for some reason apparently couldn't handle the character, one of the students, I guess because the situation was that the student was just kept on asking questions. Um and the teachers kept saying, like: ‘You know, we have to move on. We have to move on’. And she kept asking questions and ended with the teacher actually just screaming at the students, saying ‘if you're asking this many questions, maybe you're just too dumb to study.’

Situations like this were perceived as highly inappropriate by most participants. Some others had specific notions of what they still find okay for a teacher to do. One student, for example, stated that he is okay with a teacher swearing and using words like “Fuck” and “Shit”, if it is not against one specific student. In general, however, students expected their teachers to be able to control their frustration and not show it to students in the way of escalating and reflecting it on them.

Strictness

‘Strictness’ as a meaning of being uncompromising and rigorous was perceived by students as inappropriate. One participant stated that punishing somebody for doing something wrong is not a good solution to making students learn. Another student also mentioned this: “If you are way too strict, that won't make students try to open up to you and they will be afraid to ask you questions or ask for help”. As can be seen, students did not like strictness, not just because it made them feel uncomfortable, but also because they did not perceive it as a productive teaching method.

Main Findings

It became salient that students have some clear notions of what they appreciate or dislike in a student-teacher relationship. Especially when it comes to the qualities of a teacher that they expect a teacher to display, there were many overlaps between participants. Empathy, Enthusiasm and Professionalism were qualities the participants mentioned most in their description of preferences for a teacher's behaviour. In general, there were codes that were perceived as having a good impact on a student-teacher relationship, to be specific Empathy, Enthusiasm, Authenticity, Competence and Professionalism were perceived as positive by the participants. In contrast to that, Anger, Crossing Physical Boundaries, Asking Inappropriate Questions and Strictness were connoted negatively. In addition to these codes, there were codes that were not clearly perceived as exclusively positive or negative. The codes Being on Par and Humour offered very different perceptions of the participants, including negative and positive statements. During the coding process, it became salient that some codes are related to each other. Being on Par, Students' Initiative and Asking Inappropriate Questions, for example, showed some overlaps in the sense that talking about private life seems to be relevant for all three codes. Competence demonstrated connections to the codes Empathy and Enthusiasm. Being helpful seems to play a role in all three codes forming an association between them.

Many students used experiences they made as explanations for why they like specific behaviours or attitudes of teachers. Furthermore, they also used examples when talking about their perceived personal boundaries in a student-teacher relationship. Regarding the right amount of distance in a student-teacher relationship, the participants had different perceptions, however, most students liked the relationship to stay professional, at least to some extent. What the professional role of a teacher looks like was mostly described as being "neutral" and "serious".

Discussion

The aim of this study was to find out about the boundaries of a student-teacher relationship and furthermore to find out which aspects students appreciate and expect in their relationship with their teachers and what determines the feeling of comfortableness around a teacher. The research revealed that students have some boundaries in mind when it comes to student-teacher relationships. The main research question "What are the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship in a university setting?" could be answered with behaviours like mainly asking too personal questions, but also with crossing physical boundaries and

displaying too many aspects of a friend role or an even more intimate role. Moreover, the sub-research-questions also offered some interesting insights. Regarding the research question “What are aspects that students value and expect in their experienced relationships with their teachers?”, it was found that students especially value teachers showing empathy, enthusiasm, but also professionalism. The third research question “What determines the feeling of comfortableness around a teacher?” was connected to the main research question and therefore could be answered with similar aspects. Feeling uncomfortable around a teacher was more likely when too personal questions were asked, or physical boundaries were crossed. As long as a healthy distance is kept, the comfortableness around a teacher is increased. In general, however, the perceived boundaries were not necessarily the same between the participants. Asking personal questions about the student’s life was the boundary-crossing that was mentioned most often as an example. However, it did not become clear which kind of personal questions are perceived as “too much”, since questions like “How are you?” and “How was your weekend?” were also mentioned by one participant as likeable. Nonetheless, it still needs to be kept in mind that participants and students in general, might simply have different opinions and perceptions regarding too personal questions. Questions that concern private matters like their family life or their mental state, were perceived by most students as intrusive.

The data suggests that there seems to be a range of how much displaying a “friend-role” by a teacher is perceived as appropriate or inappropriate. Some participants perceived it as preferable if a teacher stays in their professional teacher role, emphasized by the fact that some students even wished their conversations with their teachers to be solely about the content of class and university. The requirement for the teacher to stay somehow professional in the teacher role raised the question of what ‘being professional’ is in the view of the participants. The interviews revealed a picture of what might be some aspects representing the ‘professional’ teacher role. Being serious, neutral and keeping a healthy distance were the characteristics brought up by the participants that seem to make up a ‘professional’ teacher role. Crossing the limitations of this professional teacher role, for example, by acting more out of a ‘friend’ role was evaluated differently by the participants, as it was already the case in the study conducted by Holmes et al. (1999). Acting as a teacher and a friend at the same time represents the “dual roles” in a relationship between a student and a teacher that Holmes et al. (1999) brought up. He acknowledges that there can be an incompatibility between these two roles in a teacher, as also shown by the raised concerns of students in this study towards a teacher acting out of a ‘friend’ role. The ‘friend’ role of a teacher would for example include

being on an eye level with the student, therefore reducing the professional gap between them. It might also include being there for the student whenever they want to talk about their personal life and problems. However, the 'friend' role of a teacher might be limited since although some students valued some friendship-like interactions with their teachers, they mostly liked themselves to initiate these interactions. As the research outcomes demonstrate, most participants preferred reaching out to their teacher, and not the other way around as also found by Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013). The perception of seeming "creepy or embarrassing" as a teacher when reaching out to a student, was confirmed by this study. The students seem to have the teacher role in mind as being there for them, because it is included in their role expectations. Nonetheless, the professional role of a teacher suggests that they themselves should refrain from reaching out to students, as it could complicate the professional relationship and authority dynamics. Furthermore, the participants did not like their teachers to talk about their personal life, unless it contributed to the content of the lesson, which would also object to a bi-directional 'friend'-like relationship. What the participants were relatively clear about was the wish for an absence of feelings between a student and a teacher. Any relationship that goes beyond a friend role was seen as highly inappropriate. In addition to that, the students did not want their physical boundaries crossed. Being touched was, if mentioned, disliked and decreased the feeling of comfortableness around a teacher. In contrast to these relatively clear boundaries regarding romantic feelings involved or crossing physical boundaries, the friend-like behaviour of a teacher remained a rather blurred aspect. The data did not offer a clear direction in this field, which could be due to the limited data, but also simply due to the naturally different perceptions of every student regarding this topic.

There were many characteristics and behaviours in a teacher stated that were liked and expected by the participants. Showing empathy came up most often as a highly valued behaviour in a teacher. If a teacher is there for the students when they need them, the students appreciated it very much. They wanted their teachers to see their point of view, being understanding of their situation. The participants used examples where they needed their teachers to take their perspectives and show empathy. If the teacher did not show any of these behaviours, the students tended to dislike this teacher. It is interesting to see here that the students build on their teachers' support, highlighting the trust that students usually have in their teachers. If a teacher shows some unempathetic behaviour, it seems like it decreased the trust in the teacher. In addition to empathy, enthusiasm was also an important aspect that the students valued in their teachers. Enthusiasm was mostly mentioned in the context of teaching itself, meaning that students appreciate seeing the teacher doing what they like. Displaying

passion in their job, leads to increased motivation in their students and in general to a more positive picture of the teacher. This was also found by a study conducted by Blašková (2014) who found that showing effort and enthusiasm as a teacher increased the students' motivation. In addition to that, Kendall and Schussler (2013) suggested that being enthusiastic as a teacher is often connected to a more interactive teaching style, which could be a reason for students to prefer enthusiastic teachers. What students also valued in the teacher's lesson was showing competence. Recognizing incompetence in a teacher triggered disappointment in the students, and also anxiety since they did not know whom to ask, if the teacher cannot answer a question. These findings are confirmed by the study of Mazer et al. (2014) who found that a lack of competence can "trigger emotional processes that heighten students' anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness and boredom in a class" (p. 163). Enthusiasm and competence were important aspects that students mentioned when talking about their preferences for teachers. Although it was mainly mentioned in the teaching context and not beyond an in-lesson context, it still became salient that these characteristics were basic expectations the students had for their teachers. Since the students naturally expect their teachers to display competence and enthusiasm, it causes uncomfortableness and disappointment in the students if the teachers do not fit these expectations. However, one still has to keep in mind that students may also differ in their preferences here. Blašková (2014) found that the appreciation of competence in a teacher was for example higher if the student's general achievement motivation was high. This implication also raised the question if in general, the students might care more about a teacher's characteristics if they are striving more to achieve much in their education.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics of a teacher, authenticity was also liked by participants. They expected their teachers to be genuine, implying that they try to see their teachers as they truly are. Here, it is interesting to see that being authentic is valued by the students, while students also ask their teachers to stay professional. Being authentic and showing who they really are, contradicts the expectation for a teacher to not show too many emotions or too distracting behaviours. Fulfilling the requirements of a professional teacher role, as defined by the participants in the study, is becoming a challenge, since being neutral and serious seems to be hard to combine with being authentic. However, this contradiction might also solely be an indication that there are limits to both aspects of the teacher's role and again, that students' perceptions might differ and variate. Being too authentic might create a picture of the teacher as being too unprofessional, while trying to be as professional as possible might also not be favourable for a teacher. Although one might think that staying as

professional as possible sounds like a good solution, the students' answers still indicated that a certain amount of for example humour and interest in their life displayed by a teacher was preferred instead of staying strictly in their professional role. This was also confirmed by the study of Kendall and Schussler (2013) who found that students ask for more than just adequate teaching to be perceived as a 'good' teacher. They also expect their teachers to engage in more personal interactions displaying empathy and care for their students. In spite of that, the present study also demonstrates that humour, as an example for a more personal behaviour, can be hard to combine with the strict, professional teacher role. The expectation for a teacher to stay serious, seems to imply that humour in any kind is unprofessional. Although some students indeed perceived humour as distracting from the lesson, others, however, valued some amount of humour used by the teacher to make the learning more approachable and attractive.

Notably, the variation and differences in students' preferences regarding boundaries and teacher characteristics came up several times in the analysis of the data. The fact that perceptions differ is not surprising since variations in preferences are natural in all kinds of fields of life. Felder and Brent (2005) suggest that teachers can meet the varying needs and expectations of their students best if they apply a balanced teaching style and behaviour. Furthermore, Kendall and Schussler (2013) elaborate on the so-called 'Reflective Teaching', summarizing the method of constantly reflecting on their own teaching style, requesting feedback on it from their students and adjusting their methods based on the feedback. Reflective Teaching would therefore be a possibility of adapting the own teaching style to the preferences of the students. This feedback procedure could potentially also be applied to the behaviour of the teachers that is not necessarily related to the teaching itself.

Regarding the university setting, there were no significant differences found in the preferences for the teacher role. Although it was mentioned that the university setting offered fewer possibilities to form student-teacher relationships in general, the preferences and boundaries did not differ much from the evaluations of the high school students in the study of Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013). Therefore, the perception that older students show a more open-minded attitude towards closer relationships with their teachers could not be confirmed.

Further Research Recommendations

To find out more about the differences between younger and older students in their perceptions of their student-teacher relationships and their boundaries, a comparative study could offer more insights and clarification. Furthermore, it could facilitate the process to find

more specific guidelines for teachers, adapted to their target group, which would not only increase the teachers' skills, but also the students' development could be supported more effectively. It would be interesting to see if there is a correlation between age and appreciation of close student-teacher relationships. Moreover, to clarify the boundaries of student-teacher relationships today, a study as conducted by Holmes et al. (1999) could result in more detailed information on where the preferred teacher role ends. Although there are some indications that acting as a friend might be favourable in some situations, the boundaries of this "friend-like role" did not become completely clear in this study. Therefore, explicitly asking for specific situations between a student and a teacher might result in more distinct boundaries of the teacher's role.

Since this study also highlighted characteristics of a teacher that are valued by students, it would be interesting to investigate the role of some of these characteristics in student-teacher relationships in more detail. For example, it would be worth looking at teachers showing empathy and if showing empathy can also get too much. Although the participants in this study talked about showing empathy in a positive light, it would be interesting to see if there are also situations where showing empathy as a teacher can also negatively impact the student-teacher relationship. This could be applied to other characteristics or behaviours of a teacher as well.

During the study, the variation and differences between students were an interesting aspect that played an important role in finding out about boundaries and perceptions. It would be worthwhile to further investigate how to effectively address these variations in students' preferences in future guidelines for teachers in higher education. Creating generalised guidelines fulfilling every student's needs could possibly become a challenge, considering the differences between students' preferences.

Strengths

The study was conducted at an international university, which led to the sample offering some cultural diversity. The broader range of nationalities has enabled the study to cover different cultural values leading to a more diverse insight into the topic.

Additionally, the study was conducted by working in a research team where the observations could be constantly discussed, and the cooperation offered more possibilities to reach a solid quality for the study.

Limitations

This study offered some new insights into the topics relevant to answer the research questions. However, some knowledge gaps could not be filled by the study. Researchers often

talk about saturation when it comes to qualitative studies, meaning the point where the participants no longer add any new information to the developed theoretical implications (Malterud et al., 2016). However, although new information could be gathered during the interview study, at this point it cannot be ruled out that more participants would have added more information. Since only 18 participants took part in the study, there are implications that a bigger sample size would have improved the theoretical implications.

Furthermore, although the study participants showed some amount of cultural diversity, more than half of the sample were German or Dutch. These cultural backgrounds mostly inhabit Western cultural values and norms, meaning their perceptions and opinions may differ from other cultural backgrounds. In addition to that, the research team consisted of five researchers coming from Germany, so the interpretation of the data might also have been biased, because of the Western background. Therefore, the study might not represent different cultural values to a sufficient extent. Nevertheless, the research still contributed to the exploration of the topic and helped to provide insight into students' perceptions.

What also has to be highlighted is that the study only recruited participants from the University of Twente in the Netherlands, which is relevant since the study investigated a topic in the university environment. The inclusion of only one university only offers data from the student life at this specific university and cannot necessarily be generalized and applied to other universities. Although in general the gathered data is still relevant in investigating the topic, a bigger sample with more diverse cultural backgrounds and coming from different universities could result in more valid observations.

In addition to these limitations regarding the sample, some adjustments in the interview design are also suggested. The investigation of preferred characteristics in a teacher took up a huge part of the study. However, since the main research question aimed to find out about the boundaries of a student-teacher relationship, it would have been helpful to already try to draw connections between preferred characteristics and the boundaries of students in the interviews. The possible connection between characteristics like empathy and enthusiasm and boundaries in student-teacher relationships needs to be investigated in more detail already when conducting the interviews. For example, the interview question "What characteristics do you wish for in a teacher?" could have been followed by questions like "Do you think this character trait/behaviour can get 'too much'?" or "Can this character trait also impact your relationship with a teacher in a negative way in some situations?". The connection to the main research question is made more salient then and can be better analysed afterwards. The

assumption that a teacher's characteristics can be related to the boundaries that can be crossed is very interesting and this study made a well-thought-out start in including these aspects.

Final Conclusions

The outcomes of the study helped fill the rather unknown research gap, regarding the boundaries of student-teacher relationships in a university setting. It is important to investigate this topic since there is a lot of uncertainty regarding specific boundaries in this kind of relationship, leading to insecurity among students and teachers. Therefore, it was necessary to find out more about specific behaviours that teachers should avoid, to increase the student's feeling of comfortableness. In this study, especially asking too personal questions was mentioned conspicuously often as a boundary-crossing. Besides that, crossing physical boundaries and getting feelings involved came up as clearly inappropriate. The different participants however also had quite some variation in their perceptions. While some for example appreciated the teacher displaying humour, some disliked this behaviour. In addition, there was a range of different perceptions regarding more "friend-like"-behaviour that was liked by some participants, while others were rather reluctant towards it. The interviews offered an interesting insight into students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers. The participants formulated some expectations for the teacher role, that made a good start to find out about possible guidelines for teachers. The topic of boundaries in student-teacher relationships is important to investigate since minding others' boundaries needs to be a priority in those types of relationships, to be able to keep a healthy distance. This study provides an interesting insight into this topic and creates a basis for studies to investigate it more.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction

To start off, I would like to thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me today. But before we start, I want to give you some more information about the interview. The overall topic focuses on the effect of student-teacher relationships on student well-being in higher education. The interview is part of a research conducted by five students (Hanna, Lea, Linnea, Maike and Viola).

The aim of the interview is to gain new insights and to answer multiple research questions. According to the research questions, the interview is divided into the following subtopics: *Student-teacher relationship in distance learning, the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by students, students perception of teachers displaying emotions, the impact of short-term teacher relationships on student well-being, and the boundaries of student-teacher relationships*. I will tell you every time when we begin with a new topic.

In order to conduct the interview, we ask you to sign the informed consent which I will send you now. By giving your signature, you agree to all terms mentioned within the informed consent. The interview will be consequently recorded to later on transcribe and analyse the responses. The transcript can only be accessed by the research group and the two supervisors. Your data will be treated anonymously, meaning all information allowing to identify you as a person will be removed. In case that you feel uncomfortable with answering any questions or with your answers being used for this research, you can withdraw from the study at any point.

Please keep in mind that there are no correct or incorrect answers, as we are curious about your personal experience and thoughts. Do you have any questions regarding the information given verbally and written? If not, I would kindly ask you to send me the signed version of the informed consent form back. I will start the recording now.

Personal background:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your gender?
4. What do you study?

5. In which year of the study are you?

The next questions are aimed at finding out about what the boundaries of student-teacher relationships are.

1. What characteristics do you wish for in a teacher?
2. What behaviours do you think are “too much” for a teacher to do?
3. When do you think a teacher is invading the students’ personal space in an inappropriate manner?
4. Can you think of positive experiences you made with a teacher?
5. Can you think of negative experiences you had with a teacher?
6. Can you think of experiences, either negative or positive, that you heard of, for example, that a friend had told you about?