

DEVELOPMENT OF A CARING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article aims to summarize the current state of understanding on a development of a caring teacher-student relationship in higher education context, grounded in relational pedagogy. Also, it provides critical reflection on the data from available literature.

Methods. The development of a caring teacher-student relationship was presented using the method of description, based on the review of relevant literature.

Results. The development of a caring relationship between students and higher education teachers can be monitored in stages. At first, there is the introductory meeting with the students when a teacher with his personality, authenticity, and approach lays the foundations for the development of a caring relationship. During further meetings, the teacher encourages mutual trust, respect, and appreciation and deepens the relationship by adapting the teaching process to the needs, interests, and affinities of students, until the formal completion of their cooperation.

Conclusion. In order to achieve a caring relationship with students in higher education, a teacher needs to approach it consciously, intentionally, thoughtfully and to plan it well from the very beginning. It is crucial to get to know the students as real persons, and accordingly, continuously adapt the teaching process to their needs and interests, allowing them to express themselves freely in a safe, accepting, and encouraging environment.

Cognitive value. By presenting the stages of a development of the caring relationship between students and higher education teachers and the synthesis of their characteristics, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Key words: care, student-teacher relationship, upbringing, relational pedagogy, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In today's time of rapid changes, virus pandemics, and uncertainty, more than ever before, man's need to belong or connect with others in his environment comes to the fore. It is one of the fundamental human needs, influencing human



behaviour (Maslow, 1968; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In other words, each person has an innate urge to establish, develop, and maintain lasting, positive relationships with other people around them. To achieve this, there must be frequent, affectively pleasant interaction, in a stable and sustainable context in which mutual concern is expressed. Satisfying this basic human need and achieving close and significant relationships contributes to the motivation and engagement of the individual in accomplishing their goals and developing social competencies, i.e. a general well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

The importance of a caring relationship between students and teachers for the overall development of students has so far been explored in great detail, ranging from preschool to high school level (e.g. Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). However, the relationship between students and teachers in higher education is still insufficiently researched. The relationship between higher education teachers and students differs significantly from the relationship between students and teachers at lower levels of education. First of all, in higher education, a relationship is not formed between an adult and a child, but between two adults (Halx, 2010), which implies the autonomy and independence of students in the process of their development and learning. Furthermore, the teacher-student interactions are fragmented and significantly less frequent than in primary or secondary school. It should also be considered that the teaching activities of higher education teachers are only one part of their responsibilities because they should also deal with academic work. In doing so, their scientific and research interests are more often recognised and valued in the academic community than quality teaching (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The approach to teaching and the approach to students also differs in various scientific disciplines. Thus, in the natural and technical sciences, a teacher-centred approach and teaching content are mostly represented, while teachers of social sciences and humanities are mostly focused on students and their needs (Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006). Consequently, if relations in higher education develop between adults, and if the importance of the student autonomy and independence is considered, it is justified to ask the following questions - Do higher education teachers have any obligation to care for students and develop a caring relationship? If so, what does it mean to show concern for students in higher education, or how can it be defined, how close should these relationships be, giving the desired independence of the students at the same time (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014)? Reflection on these issues is grounded in relational pedagogy (Sidorkin, 2000), which places the relationship between its stakeholders at the heart of education.

This article aims to summarize the current state of understanding on a development of a caring teacher-student relationship in higher education context, using method of description based on relevant literature. Also, it provides critical reflection on the data from available literature, especially on the developmental stages of caring relationship, i.e. how it can be realised in practice, how it can be defined, and how close should this relationship be, given the asked students their autonomy and independence. Lastly, article identifies potential areas to be further explored.

RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the last decade, especially in the last five years, more and more thought has been given to the importance of relational pedagogy in higher education. The increased number of studies prove the importance of close, positive, and fulfilling relationships in higher education (e.g., Bethere, Pavitola, & Ulman-Ozolina, 2014; Hagenauer & Volet, 2016; Larsen, 2015; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Universities and colleges around the world deal with the problem of students dropping out of higher education, resulting in financial and other losses (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). However, with the experience of positive relationships, students adapt more easily to academic life (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), and positive relationships also contribute to their learning process (Bergin, C. & Bergin, D., 2009; Deakin Crick et al., 2008). Students who attend college today and those who are just enrolling in it mostly belong to millennials or the Y-generation (born in the period from 1978 to 2000) and the so-called Z-generation (born in the 2000s). Their daily lives are inseparable from technology, and the rapid changes and diversity of opportunities offered to them is their zone of comfort and habit. They rarely encounter failures at lower levels of education, which is why they have high levels of optimism, but also a low level of psychological resilience that allows them to recover relatively quickly from their mistakes and failures and further invest in the efforts to achieve their goals. Their attention and concentration are very short and they expect quick answers and information (Shatto & Erwin, according to Miller & Mills, 2019). In education, they expect an open, accessible, supportive, practical environment, which will enable them to successfully pursue future careers (Miller & Mills, 2019). But during the transition from high school to higher education, they often face personal, social, and academic challenges that they did not anticipate. They enter a context where they are expected to be autonomous and independent, there is less teacher leadership and parental involvement than there was in high school, and there is a greater chance of failure and error. In such an environment, they desperately need the care and support of higher education teachers to be successful (Therrell & Dunneback, 2015). Therefore, since excellence in teaching and learning is required of the faculty, a positive, caring relationship between students and teachers should be understood as an important, if not a crucial key for excellence (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Reflections on the nurturing role of higher education teachers have long been suppressed and neglected; are almost non-existent. In the academic world, there is a common understanding that nurture is not the job of the university and that it is a matter of the family, primary and secondary school, while colleges should deal exclusively with education (Bognar, 2011). However, if education is understood as the development of the individual's personality and its realisation of autonomously chosen values (Polić, 2001), and if we take into account that "man as a person develops throughout his life, especially during studying" (Bognar, 2011, p. 165), then higher education teachers have a very important nurturing role. They guide students in the process of adopt-

ing the value system of the profession they have chosen and help them in their self-actualisation and socialisation, thus becoming “personalisation of the profession they have chosen as a life vocation” and “role models and persons to identify with” (Bognar, 2011, p. 165). In doing so, they pay special attention to interpersonal relationships, which contain conditions for optimal development of the individual (Bognar, 1999). Such an approach is grounded in relational pedagogy, which involves the conscious, intentional, and purposeful action of teachers who “interact with students to build and develop positive relationships that support them cognitively and emotionally during their journey together” (Adams, 2018, p. 1). In relational pedagogy the emphasis is on building such relationships that support the self-actualisation of all participants in the educational process, and, therefore, the teacher’s care is extremely important, as an “act of relationality” (Waghid, 2019, p. 14).

In the context of relational pedagogy, a caring relationship involves developing trust, nurturing relationships, paying attention to, and responding to the needs of students (Noddings, 2005). It is crucial for the teacher to be the initiator of such a relationship because students are less likely to initiate it given a subordinate hierarchical position. The teachers have a dual role – they are both a teacher and a student because they must learn and develop together with their students to achieve a relationship based on trust, which will overcome the unequal relationship of power imposed by the educational structure (Noddings, 2005). Although there is no universal recipe for developing a caring relationship, there are certain features in a teacher’s approach and behaviour that may indicate his or her care, and that students recognise as such.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF A CARING RELATIONSHIP

For the relationship between students and higher education teachers to be truly described and understood, it needs to be approached from different perspectives, all of which are involved in that relationship. It is possible that teachers consider themselves caring, but that students do not perceive their behaviour and actions as such. To avoid this, research can focus on perceived caring (McCroskey, according to Larsen, 2015), that is, how students recognise and experience it. It is very important that the teachers care about their students, but it is even more important that they know how to express that care through their approach and behaviour, so that the students experience it as well. This in turn means that caring should primarily be explored from the student’s perspective. But this does not mean that the perspective of teachers should be neglected, but should be observed in their interaction.

The student-teacher relationship is a dynamic process that is gradually changing and evolving. Like any other relationship, it goes through different stages and depends on several different factors, such as the personality of teachers and students, previous experiences of the relationship (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018), and their values, beliefs, and attitudes (Granitz, Koernig,

& Harich, 2009). There is a consensus that the teacher is the one who initiates and encourages the development of relationships with students, but the role of the students is equally important. In other words, it is a mutual, reciprocal process that cannot be realised if there is no mutual desire for a close and positive relationship and if its value and importance are not recognised. To achieve a caring relationship between students and teachers, it needs to be approached consciously, intentionally, thoughtfully, and well planned from the very beginning: from the introductory meeting of teachers and students, through further meetings to develop and deepen relations until the formal end of their cooperation (end of the semester or academic year) (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018). Each of these stages has some specific features that are important for its development and realisation.

Introductory encounters of students and higher education teachers

The introductory, first meeting of the higher education teacher and the students is extremely important for the development of their caring relationship because it determines the tone and atmosphere in which further cooperation will take place. A higher education teacher can build a foundation for the development of a quality, caring relationship with certain procedures, which derive from their authentic, personal approach to students, already at the first meeting. These procedures refer, for example, to the mutual acquaintance of students and teachers, and the acquaintance of students with the teaching content and obligations.

Although the initial interaction between students and teachers is mostly related to the discussion of the teaching content and obligations of students, this stage is extremely important. During this interaction, the teacher determines the rules and boundaries of the relationship, and through their attitude and approach encourages or does not encourage its further development - depending on whether they allow students to express themselves freely during the teaching process (Karpouzi & Emvalotis, 2018). In addition to clarifying the teaching content and obligations of students, the teacher should take time to get to know the students: find out and remember their names, as well as their previous experiences, needs, and interests (Iannarelli, Bardsley, & Foote, 2010). When the teacher makes an effort to remember the names of the students (no matter how many there are) they feel noticed, real people in that interaction, not just another generation of numbers in the eyes of the teacher. This encourages them to truly engage in developing a further relationship, to ask the teacher various questions, and to want to get to know this teacher better (Straits, 2007; Larsen, 2015). It is also important that the teacher finds out the expectations of the students so that he can harmonise them with the structure of the subject itself. Expectations, from both students and teachers, are an important contextual factor that affects the quality of further encounters and interactions. The relationship is built from encounter to encounter, from moment to moment, and mutual trust, as one of the catalysts of a caring relationship, develops precisely under the influence of the interplay of expectations and experienced reality (Kim & Schallert, 2011).

It is very important for the development of a caring relationship that the higher education teacher from the first introductory meeting expresses their authentic and personal approach to students, where they freely express enthusiasm and love for their field of study as a scientist and teacher (Straits, 2007). That is, they should be accessible, open, direct, transparent and treat students with respect and appreciation. In addition, they need to show objectivity, that is, treating all students equally and understand their potential problems. (Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009; Iannarelli, Bardsley, & Foote, 2010; Wadsorn, 2017; Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018; Miller & Mills, 2019). Teachers can show their transparency and authenticity in the introductory presentation to students, and by explaining their approach and educational philosophy in its foundation, teaching methods, and their purposes. Only when students believe that the teacher is sincere in the desire to make a connection with them, it is more likely that such a caring relationship will develop (Urso, 2012). Students will care about the subject, learning, and the relationship with the teacher only if the teacher also cares (Giles, 2008; Larsen, 2015; Miller & Mills, 2019). Students certainly need the teacher to notice, respect and accept them as they are, and it is important to them that their thoughts and actions are respected in the learning process. Therefore, they value teachers who strive to establish and develop a relationship with them, while on the other hand, they feel frustration and longing when they notice a lack of the same. Furthermore, teachers have to discuss their availability with students outside of regular classes because in this way they let them know that they can contact him whenever there is a need for it (Miller & Mills, 2019). Ultimately, such a more personal introductory presentation provides an example to the students and thus enables the creation of a learning community in which individual differences, specificities and particularities are respected and nurtured (Iannarelli, Bardsley, & Foote, 2010).

One of the most important features of caring higher education teachers is precisely that they base their approach to teaching on a positive, close relationship with their students (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). In other words, the teacher believes that significant learning, which has the power and strength to change an individual's personality and behaviour, can only be achieved in an atmosphere of mutual trust, openness and reciprocity. They understand that the learning process is inseparable from students' emotions and emotional states. Such a way of thinking of a higher education teacher in which the primary emphasis is on developing a caring relationship is called relational thinking (Adams, 2018). However, this, with the pedagogical competencies of teachers, is not enough for close, caring relationships to be truly realised in higher education. Many teachers think in this way and possess pedagogical competencies that engage students in teaching in different ways, but still do not have a caring relationship with them. What makes the difference is the relational intention, which implies a clear purpose of teaching and time devoted to getting to know the students during regular classes or outside of them (Adams, 2018). However, such a relationship is not easy to achieve.

It is unrealistic to expect students and teachers to start exclusively from the same or similar values, attitudes and thinking in developing their relationship. Students initially come to class with their previous pleasant and unpleasant life experiences. It would be wrong to interpret their non-cooperation, irony, and sarcasm as a rejection of relationships, an unsolvable problem, and to give up trying to develop relationships with such students. Learning that involves questioning one's own values and attitudes and changes on a personal level can be perceived by students as threatening and can therefore be resisted. The teacher should create such conditions in which students will feel free enough to reject their defensive reactions, or inappropriate and undesirable reactions and behaviour, and this can be achieved by creating an atmosphere in which the individual feels noticed, accepted, respected and safe. Students will feel this way if the teacher really realises a value like freedom in their practice, in a way that allows the students to feel free, to freely express their views and thoughts, and the values at their core. This does not mean that the teacher always has to agree with them and their thoughts, but it is important that they can understand them and empathise with their students (Rogers, 1969). Thus, different initial value starting points do not necessarily represent an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a caring student-teacher relationship but can be an excellent opportunity to realise values that the teacher cares about, such as freedom, independence and the like. But for this, the teacher needs courage because such educational action brings with it a constant uncertainty of discovery, risk-taking, and research in creating the conditions for student development (Rogers, 1969). This courage also implies that the teacher needs to accept their vulnerability in the process, which inevitably arises due to the unpredictability of the development of the relationship. It is important for them to be open to experiencing and accepting the potential failures and challenges that are a part of the development of any relationship, because only in this way can they experience those inspiring moments that make their calling as a teacher truly meaningful (Bollough, 2005).

Developing and deepening a caring relationship in further encounters

During further meetings, based on the introductory meeting, the teacher develops a deeper relationship with students through further expression of mutual respect and appreciation, understanding and trust, transparency, a sense of equality, respect for agreed rules of conduct and boundaries in the relationship (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018; Giles, 2008), but also through verbal and non-verbal expressions of care, authentic and appropriate expression of emotions and the design and implementation of teaching that will engage and involve all students (Straits, 2007; Larsen, 2015). The basic feature of this phase of relationship development is reciprocity (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018).

The care of the teacher can be reflected, for example, in their understanding and approach to the student after a challenging lesson, or when they notice that a student has some personal difficulties (Giles, 2008). Although students can feel the care and warmth of teachers, sometimes they need to really hear

that - that the teacher really cares for them as a person, and for their personal development and academic success. From a teacher's perspective, clearly verbalising care to students helps them in a way that their other actions are then also perceived as caring (Larsen, 2015). Teacher's non-verbal communication is also important to students, such as smile, eye contact during interaction, tone of speech and gestures.

While smiling and making eye contact, teachers express to students their positive emotions that they feel because of the act of teaching, because of the pleasure of meeting students, mutual cooperation and interaction, and show a desire to develop and deepen relationships. Students feel more comfortable in such an environment, and perceive it as a teacher's care. The teacher's positive emotions can also be seen in the changes in the tone and dynamics of their speech, because it is important to the students how something is said, and not just the content that is shared with them. Non-verbal signs of care include gestures and moving around the classroom and physically approaching students, which indicates the teacher's relaxation. In this phase of establishing a relationship, it is still important to consider the boundaries, i.e. the agreed rules of conduct. Unlike the introductory meeting, their relationship is now less formal and they work together within the agreed framework. This makes them less likely to have a certain misunderstanding in communication or, for example, a lack of understanding of their sense of humour because they know each other well enough (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018). All of this contributes to creating a positive and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom and in the teaching and learning process.

However, it is important to point out that higher education teachers not only experience positive emotions about students, but often also experience negative emotions. Their authentic and appropriate way of expression is extremely important in the development of a caring relationship. Teachers' positive emotions, such as enthusiasm and excitement, most often stem from their intrinsic motivation to teach and collaborate with students. However, what emotions the teacher will experience in the further relationship depends on the fulfilment of their expectations from students, but also on the realisation that the processes of teaching and learning can only be partially controlled, especially if students are co-creators of the educational process and if its quality depends on their engagement and cooperation (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014b). The ways in which teachers express their positive emotions significantly depend on the relationship with students and how close these relationships, according to higher education teachers, should be. Those teachers who emphasise a caring relationship with students are more likely to express their positive emotions more openly to students, through intense, emotional feedback, enthusiasm, and humour, not just through formal forms. Teacher's negative emotions, on the other hand, are expressed more often in an individual encounter with a student with whom there is a potential conflict, through a conversation of low emotional intensity and I-message, and the teacher shouldn't allow the problem to escalate. However, the cultural context should also be considered,

which significantly affects the perception of the appropriateness of expressing emotions (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014b).

In the teaching process, it is extremely important for students, along with a positive atmosphere, that the teacher respects and answers their questions and concerns. Students can very easily distinguish classes that are carefully designed to be useful, from those that are lifeless, emotionally neutral and irrelevant to them. They greatly appreciate the efforts of teachers who use their own life experience and examples from everyday life and popular culture in teaching, and active learning methods to engage students and provide them with experiential learning, appropriate to their different interests and ways of learning. This shows them that the teacher really cares about them being active, learning as much as possible in the classroom, treating them as adults (Straits, 2007; Giles, 2008; Larsen, 2015; Tett et al., 2017; Miller & Mills, 2019). When they notice such a teacher's effort, they perceive it as care, and are very often motivated to learn to reciprocate with the same effort (Straits, 2007). One of the ways how higher education teachers can monitor students' needs, their understanding of the teaching content and get to know them even better is for example by using evaluations at the end of each educational encounter, for which the teacher gives them clear and concrete written feedback (King, 2018). This can also be done through online communication outside of regular classes, i.e. diary entries in which students look back at the previous teaching encounter, their experiences, teaching content, or read material and discuss it with the teacher (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Kim & Schallert, 2011).

But the point is not only in the use of active learning methods, but that it should be an expression of the teacher's personality and who they truly are and what they believe in. It is also important that the teacher allows the teaching process to take place freely and creatively, because in this way they develop even greater confidence in themselves, in the students and in their mutual relationship. Students fondly remember those classroom experiences that were filled with stories, sharing ideas for the future and about the future, and interactions based on mutual respect (Giles, 2008).

Completion of a (formal) relationship

The caring relationship between students and teachers usually ends when the student completes his studies, i.e. graduates (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018), or when they successfully complete the certain course of that teacher. However, this relationship can continue even after that if both have the will and need to continue their cooperation. Teachers and students can stay in touch for personal reasons, to exchange news or if a student wishes to attend a workshop, lecture or book presentation by their (former) teacher. Also, students will potentially need help, advice or support such as a letter of recommendation. Sometimes their cooperation continues for academic reasons, when the student wants to participate in scientific conferences, publications, scientific project, or wants to enrol in a postgraduate doctoral programme (Karpouza &

Emvalotis, 2018). But even after the completion of the formal cooperation, the teacher-student relationship remains very valuable for both of them:

The student's relationship with the professor and vice versa is a bit like a tattoo. It doesn't go away so easily. That experience stays with you. As it is - and I can't say it's like a relationship with a mother or a father, because you only have one father and one mother, but similarly, the teachers you've worked with are also unique. The reverse is also true, and the students you've worked with are unique. (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018, p. 11)

CONCLUSION

A higher education teacher develops a caring relationship with his students, characterised by mutual trust, attention and respect and the teacher's response to the needs, interests and affinities of their students (Noddings, 2005), already at the first introductory encounter and during further encounters, all until the formal completion of the cooperation. They do this primarily with their personality and authenticity, unique approach to students, by designing and adapting the teaching process to their needs, interests and affinities, and through nurturing shared values. However, it is a challenging process for everyone participating. It should be considered that students are adults who come to study with different experiences during their previous education, both positive and negative, and with their own life stories that are not always pleasant. Therefore, there is a possibility that students initially show neither a desire nor a willingness to cooperate or to form a close relationship with the teacher. Thus, this does not mean that it is not achievable.

Caring relationship is a dynamic and complex process that has its own developmental stages, and requires the willingness of the higher education teacher to approach it consciously, intentionally, thoughtfully and patiently. The personality of the teacher, the values that lead them in their educational practice and their approach to students form the foundation of developing such relationships. Teachers who value human relationships, connectedness and freedom, who have such relational thinking (Adams, 2018) are approachable, cordial, kind, enthusiastic and empathetic. With their authenticity and openness, they show a sincere intention to achieve connections with students, as well as confidence in the development of all their abilities, potentials and talents. They continuously adapt the teaching process to students' needs and interests, and allow them to express themselves freely in a safe and warm environment, without fear of condemnation and ridicule. Only in this way they can encourage a sense of inner freedom in students (Rogers, 1969), necessary for their personal and professional development. A caring teacher understands initial defensive reactions of students that potentially arise from their different starting points in values and their resistance to personal change that comes with experiential learning. This can become an obstacle to a caring relationship. They allow students to gradually become more and more open to new experiences in teaching, to the teacher and to themselves.

There is no universal recipe for success in achieving a caring relationship between students and teachers, because such a life process cannot be standardised. Nevertheless, based on the previous discussion, it is possible to give suggestions to higher education teachers for the development of a caring relationship with students:

- *Show your sincere enthusiasm and joy of working with students right from the first introductory encounter!* From the first moment, include them in the teaching process by agreeing on the teaching content and the way of teaching, and their obligations. Be clear and transparent about your expectations and evaluation criteria, but be sure to find out their expectations as well. Take time to get to know each other: introduce yourself to them in your own, personal way, be imaginative and authentic, and explain to them your approach and the educational philosophy underlying it. Make an effort to find out both their names and their personal stories, hobbies and interests outside of classes and college. In communication, address them by their name. Allow yourself relaxation, cordiality, energy and immersion in the teaching process. Do not let yourself be discouraged by potential defensive reactions of students such as non-cooperation and withdrawal, but allow them to gradually open up to new experiences in teaching.
- *During further encounters, involve students in the process of designing, preparing, organising and evaluating the teaching process!* For example, use the information you have learned about your students (their interests, hobbies) to design activities in which students will be able to use their abilities, potentials and talents. In teaching, use active learning as much as possible, which will meaningfully engage all students to be able to see the benefits for their personal and professional development. Ask students regularly for feedback on their satisfaction with the teaching process and collect the ideas for improvement. If there are challenges and difficulties in student engagement and their participation in class, first of all, in a conversation with the student, try to find out the background to the problem and its context, in order to truly understand what happened. Make it clear to students, non-verbally and verbally, that you care about them and their success, and that you believe in them. Show them your emotions and feelings, both positive and negative, in an appropriate way. Learn from them, as they learn from you.
- *The end of your formal collaboration with students at the end of a semester or academic year does not necessarily mean the end of that relationship!* There are different ways and forms of further cooperation through which a caring relationship can continue - for personal reasons such as exchanging news and ideas, practical reasons such as further support in professional development or facing challenges in practice, or academic reasons such as continuing further education, collaborating on research, projects, or writing joint papers.

This article contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the caring teacher-student relationships in higher education and its impor-

tance for the personal and professional development of students, by reflecting on its developmental path and synthesis of the accompanying features. The presented guidelines can potentially serve as a framework for further research, but also as an incentive for higher education teachers to improve their own relationships with students. In further research, it would be particularly interesting to determine whether there are crucial critical moments or turning points in the development of a caring teacher-student relationship. Such knowledge would further contribute to understanding the process of establishing a caring relationship.

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