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## Insights and experiences of students about the factors that enhance relational pedagogy in higher education

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# Insights and experiences of students about the factors that enhance relational pedagogy in higher education

## Abstract

This study examines the insights and experiences of students about the factors that enhance relational pedagogy in a South African university. To provide empirical explanations as to how these insights could be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 1087 participants using a survey that also required them to complete an open-ended section. The quantitative data was analysed using Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process, while the qualitative data was evaluated using thematic analysis. An analysis of the quantitative data revealed that the most significant factors that enhance relational pedagogy were, ethical care, interpersonal communication, natural care, respect, and mattering. Conversely, factors such as academic achievement support, trust, and teacher responsiveness showed comparatively weak effects on students' perceptions of relational pedagogy. Similarly, the qualitative data analysed revealed that participants perceived teacher-student interaction and communication, mattering and teacher immediacy, and the ethics of care as the most significant themes that serve to enhance relational pedagogy in the learning environment. The study concludes by highlighting the implications of using relational pedagogy as a tool to address the social, cognitive, and cultural gaps in the teaching and learning processes.

## Practitioner Notes

1. Students acknowledge and understand the importance of relational pedagogy in higher education.
2. Insights and experiences of students based on Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process show that ethical care, interpersonal communication, natural care, respect, and mattering serve as most significant factors that enhance relational pedagogy in the university.
3. Based on the written narratives, participants perceived teacher-student interaction and communication, and the ethics of care as the most significant themes that enhance relational pedagogy.
4. When teachers demonstrate ethical care, natural care, respect, mattering and also, promote interpersonal communication with students, they [students] derive maximum benefits from the teaching and learning processes.
5. By using an empirical approach universities could prioritise the most significant factors that enhance relational pedagogies in the learning environment.

## Keywords

Relational pedagogy, Ethics of care, Teacher-student interaction, Mattering, Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process

## Introduction

Relational pedagogy has been linked with the expansive discussions on pedagogy (Ford 2019; Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Ljungblad, 2021) and teachers' market orientation to the importance of developing positive interactive relationships with student in the learning environment (Küster-Boluda & Vila-López, 2021). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine education at all levels without relationships because in practice, the responsibilities of teachers include the need for them to know about the history, background and, identity of their students as well as their sense of self to be able to teach them successfully (Biesta, 2019). Therefore, the absence of developmental relationships between teachers and learners that include express care and continued support in the learning setting could negatively affect students' motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Scales et al., 2020). Also, inadequate academic support for students from teachers, social distance between teachers and students, and teachers' limited knowledge about the backgrounds of students have further given rise to the concept of relational pedagogy in educational settings (Ljungblad, 2021). While pleasant relationships between teachers and learners are associated with mutual understanding, respect, and other coexisting characteristics (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2021), any social distance and ruptures in such relationships could adversely affect quality teaching and learning (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Suciu, 2014). Relational pedagogy has evolved as part of a drive to enhance effective teaching and learning in educational settings and to ensure that learners are recognised as active participants in the knowledge creation process across different countries. For instance, prior study in Sweden has shown increased individualisation in the teaching process with enhanced relationality and mutual respect among learners and between teachers and students (Aspelin, 2014). Similar study in Denmark revealed that the advantages of supportive relationship between teachers and students include students' social development, students' subject/module-specific performance, satisfaction, well-being, and motivation to learn (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019).

Although some studies have highlighted the importance of relational pedagogy in higher education settings (Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020; Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Taylor, 2019), very few have focused on using an empirically informed process to explain how students perceive relational pedagogies in the learning setting. The questions that have arisen in previous studies pertain to the vulnerability of liability that comes up due to the gaps, interruptions distance and disconnections in the social relationships between teachers and learners (Biesta, 2012; Suciu, 2014). Similarly, Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019) have questioned the paucity of research in the field of teacher-student relationship in educational settings. Even in cases where there exist some form of social relationships between teachers and learners, such pedagogical relationships could be constrained by inconsistencies in interactions, alienation, and non-self-transparency (Friesen, 2017). The aim of

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the current study is to advance this conversation by examining students' perceptions about the factors that enhance relational pedagogy in higher education, and to provide empirical explanations to how these perceptions could be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning. Consequently, the current study was underpinned by two research questions (RQ). RQ1: What factors influence students' perceptions of relational pedagogy in higher education? RQ2: How can students' perceptions of relational pedagogy be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning? To provide answers to these questions, the next section discusses the theoretical underpinning of the current study by highlighting recent conversations around relational pedagogy and how the theory is shaping teaching and learning in higher education. This is followed by a discussion of the research methods which include the application of fuzzy analytical hierarchy process to examine the perceptions of students concerning the factors that enhance relational pedagogies in the study setting. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered are analysed and discussed to reveal the hierarchy structure of students' conceptions regarding relational pedagogy.

## **Literature**

### **The theory of relational pedagogy**

Relational pedagogy has been referred to as “a theoretical perspective based on the concept of human beings as relational beings and teaching as relational processes” (Ljungblad, 2021, p.4). Originally coined by German educationist Herman Nohl as pedagogical relation, the theory was defined based on two perspectives. First, “as a generative relationship that connects educators and learners and second, as a passionate or loving relationship between a mature and experienced individual and another person who learns from the former to enable him or her assume his or her life and form” (Friesen, 2017, p. 745). The second definition is foregrounded on the notion that education is “an intergenerational enterprise in which the older generation take care of, and prepare younger individuals for the future by drawing their attention to specific, predetermined goals that integrate the learners' experience with the educators' predetermined objectives and goals” (Friesen, 2017, p. 745). Consequently, the responsibility and commitment of the mature individual becomes ethical and is manifested through concrete and personal practice in the learning environment (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). Also, pedagogical relationship is characterised by “an association that is not based on a system of prevalent values but rather through a clear intention from a real person towards another real person for the purpose of accomplishing a learning objective and goal” (Nohl, 1933, p. 132). However, recent formulation has shown that relational pedagogy could involve different associations within the learning environment such as the relationship between students and their peers and between teachers, and spaces of learners (Hickey & Riddle, 2022).

The modern narrative of relational pedagogy in the teaching and learning setting emphasises the association between teachers and students as important to the attitude, knowledge, and skills development of learners (Ljungblad, 2021). For instance, Schick (2020, p.32-33) expands this narrative by arguing that:

A relational pedagogy turns traditional pedagogy on its head: it unsettles traditional binaries of teacher and student, knower and known, and it rejects the confident accumulation and dissemination of useful knowledge that seeks technical 'solutions' to complex and deeply rooted problems.

Thus, from a relational perspective, a teacher identifies his or her students as constantly becoming a unique individual and as a subject who is involved in an ongoing process with the teacher through relationships (Aspelin, 2014). The relational perspective further explains the systematic creation of appropriate relationships that emerges in the educational setting (Crowner & Jones, 2018) and which also serves as the strongest predictor of self-efficacy (McLennan et al., 2021). The theory of relational pedagogy is based on the ontological assumption that while human beings are born into relationships and live their lives within a community and among other individuals, they also share a social living environment with others (Crowner & Jones, 2018; Ljungblad, 2021; Aspelin 2014). A relational ontology and epistemology are grounded in pluralism and difference (Ljungblad, 2021). While difference explains the uniqueness of each student, pluralism suggests the importance of togetherness in the teaching and learning process

### **Relational pedagogy as a practice**

At the centre of relational pedagogy is the process of establishing and maintaining the climate and culture of trust, care, and autonomy in the classroom (Hollweck et al., 2019). The relationship that is established between teachers and learners in the learning environment include mutual understanding, respect and presence of friendship (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2021). These relationships are characterised by regular and unstructured social interactions, academic instruction and the construction and maintenance of positive teacher-student relationship (Crowner & Jones, 2018). The regular and unstructured social interactions define how relational pedagogy "treats the ordinary, day-to-day encounters between teachers and students as pivotal moments in the pedagogical act." (Hickey et al., 2021, p.5). Therefore, when teachers deliberately focus on the quality of their interaction with students, an organic relationship develops especially through the instructional methods adopted to create classroom communities that enhance students' academic, emotional, and social growth (Hollweck et al., 2019; Rees & Le Mare, 2017). This is synonymous with what Ljungblad (2019) describes as the relational ontology and epistemology of difference.

Another important feature of relational pedagogy is the ethics of care which has been described as a "moral obligation, a caring attitude, a long-term inclusive commitment, and a volitional act devoted to acting compassionately and responsively for the cared-for's growth" (Tang & Walker-Gleaves, 2022, p. 506). The ethics of care include teachers' demonstration of concern in the development of students as human beings, their ability to listen to students and observe their expressions during interactions and, their interpersonal communication and interaction with students (Chika-James, 2020). Although the concept of care is built on reciprocity (Walker & Gleaves, 2016), it need not be reciprocated in kind (Goralnik et al., 2012) which means that while a teacher's role includes providing ethical care to students, he or she need not anticipate same from the students. However, teacher demonstration of the ethics of care requires important competences in the learning environment. To this end, Chika-James (2020, p.271) argues that

the major attributes of teacher relational competence include: “care, empathy, appreciation, respect, trust, interpersonal communication, an attentive presence, creativity, flexibility, constructive sense of humour and taking responsibility as an educator.” Other formulation has emphasised two dimensional conceptions of the relational competences of teachers: 1) an immanent phenomenon that suggest that a teacher is directly involved in inter-human relationship by way of an attitude of natural care and; 2) a transcendent phenomenon that suggest that a teacher manages social relationship that is linked with an attitude of ethical care (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019). On their part, Walker and Gleaves (2016) argue that the concept of care consists of two pedagogical features: 1) continuous nurturing and maintenance of pedagogical relationships and; 2) the significance of trust, acceptance, diligence, teacher responsiveness and, individual attentiveness in the interaction between students and teachers.

Closely linked to the ethics of care are teacher immediacy and mattering that have also been highlighted as important features of relational pedagogy (Hickey et al., 2022; Taylor & Turner, 2019). Mattering refers to a feeling that “one is significant and is valued by others” (Strayhorn, 2016, p. 57). To the teacher, students should matter in the teaching and learning processes. When teachers pay attention to mattering, it motivates students to participate, learn and develop a sense of commitment to their programme and the institution (Taylor & Turner, 2019). Teacher immediacy on the other hand has been defined as consisting of the verbal and non-verbal cues that reduces the physical or psychological difference between teachers and their students in a learning setting (Estep and Roberts, 2015). However, while teacher immediacy enhances the needs satisfaction of students (Frymier, 2016; Taylor, 2019), instructor expertise is also important for promoting relational pedagogies between students and teachers (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Teachers could engage students using verbal and non-verbal immediacy cues (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). In a recent publication, Hickey et al (2022) argue that the link between immediacy and relational pedagogy includes the provocations for learning that emerges from the physical and psychological contacts between teachers and students and, the cognisant responsiveness of teachers to engage with students and activate learning.

## **Method**

The current study used an explanatory research design to examine students’ perceptions and experiences about the factors that enhance relational pedagogies in higher education and also, to provide empirical explanations to how these perceptions could be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning. Consequently, a mixed method for gathering and analysing quantitative and qualitative data was used.

### **Participants and sample**

Participants for the current study were recruited from a population of 30,741 undergraduate contact students who were registered for the 2021/2022 academic year in a South African university. The current study formed part of an institution-wide study that required every student to complete a questionnaire. Out of the 30,741 students who were invited to participate in the study, 1208 representing 3.91 percent completed the study while the valid questionnaires completed was 1087 representing 3.54 percent of the total population of contact students. An

analysis of the data showed that those who were studying for various degree programmes in the Natural and Agricultural Sciences constituted 17.9%, Humanities (23.6%), Education (29.8%), Economic and Management Sciences (21.0%), Health Science (1.5%), Law (4.1%) and Theology (2.2%) of the total student population. Although the response rate of 3.91 percent is below the acceptable rate of 20% (Shih and Fan, 2009), the seeming low response could be explained as, i) the data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic period when most students were at home and were engaged in online teaching and learning and, 2) not every student could easily access the internet to complete the survey. The age range of participants was 18 to 57 years with 73.80 percent of participants aged between 18 and 22. The distribution of participants by campus of study were as follows: Campus B (58.8%); Campus Q (27.6%) and; South Campus (13.6%).

### **Procedure and measures**

A Formal invitation by way of an email was sent to registered students across all three campuses of the university to participate in the study which required participants to complete an online survey with an open-ended section. The email addresses of all student were formally obtained from the university. Seeing that the survey was deployed online, participants were requested to consent to their participation in the study before they completed the survey. The online survey was developed and administered to students between August and September 2021 through a university-based online portal called Evasys. In line with the institutional policy on research ethics, approval was secured from the university's Research Ethics Committee. The data that were collected from the online survey were analysed using STATISTICA software and NVivo. To measure the perceptions of students concerning the factors that enhance relational pedagogies in higher education and to provide empirical explanations to how these perceptions could be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning, the current study used validated scales on relational pedagogy (King & Chan, 2011), nurturing students' character (Gholami & Tirri, 2012) and, trust (Jääskelä et al., 2017) to develop the instrument. The instrument consisted of thirty items as shown in the hierarchy structure in table 2.

### **Analysis**

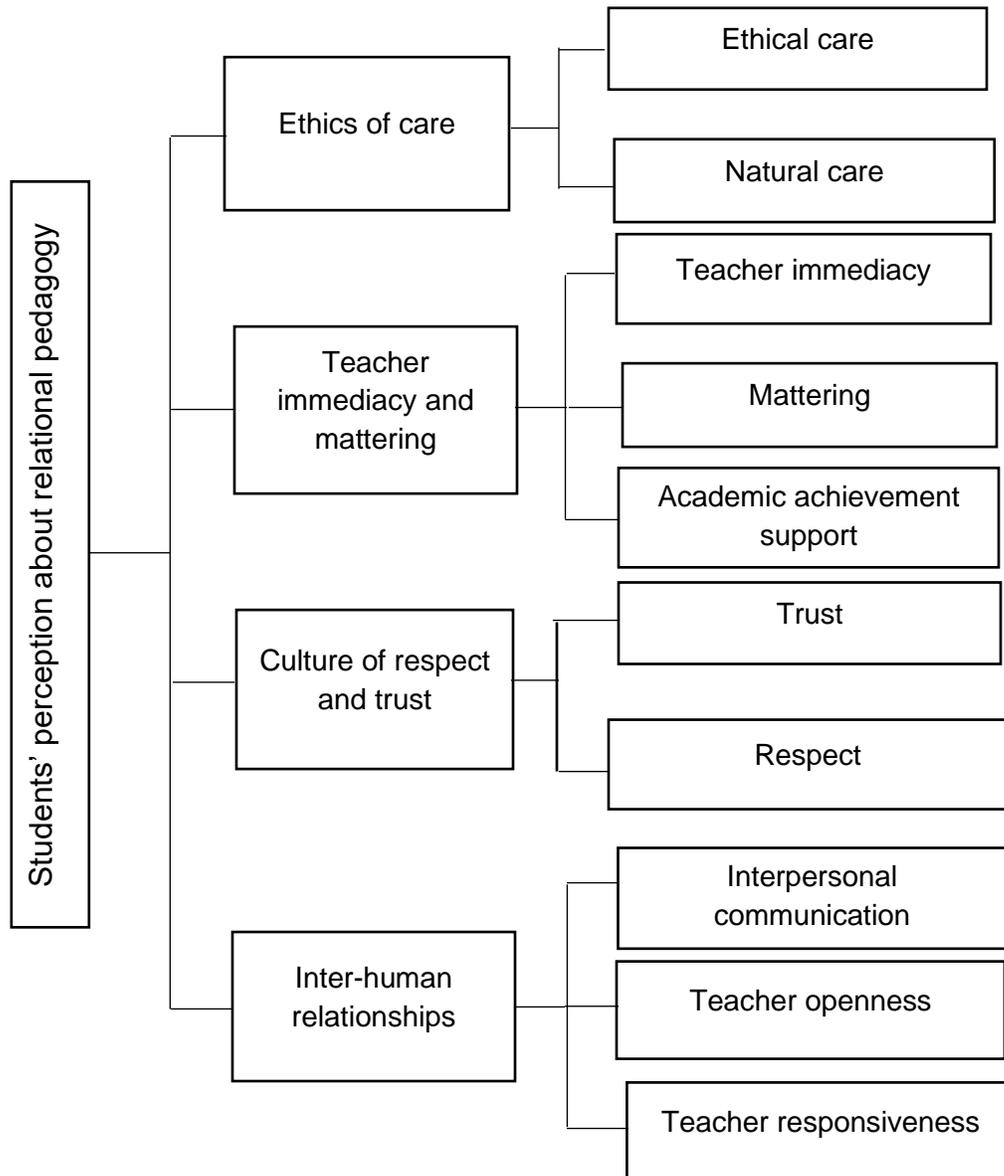
#### *Analytic Hierarchy Process*

The analytic hierarchy process refers to a multi-criteria decision making (MCDM) method that is used to define the weights of criteria and priorities of alternatives (Liu et al., 2020) based on a structured approach with ratio scales from a set of paired comparisons. One of the important features of analytic hierarchy process is the easy prioritization and ranking of the criteria, sub-criteria, and alternatives (Gupta et al., 2023). When developing a hierarchy structure, the analytic hierarchy process could be applied in different decision-making processes including an arranged assessment of components to provide explanations to different phenomenon (Saaty, 2012). For the current study, the following procedure was used to perform the analytic hierarchy process: a) designing a model and a hierarchical structure; b) constructing the pairwise comparison matrix based on linguistic interpretations and; c) performing a consistency test by computing the consistency index and consistency ratio. The first phase of the analytic hierarchy process was the design of a model and a hierarchical structure as shown in figure 1. As shown in figure 1, the model for the decision with a hierarchical structure are grouped into 4 categories, 10 criteria and

30 sub-criteria. The categories consist of “ethics of care”, “teacher immediacy and mattering”, “culture of respect and trust” and, “inter-human relationships”. Next are the 10-item criteria.

**Figure 1**

*Hierarchy model of students’ perspectives about relational pedagogy*



The second procedure under the analytic hierarchy process involved constructing the pairwise comparison matrix which shows how the different criteria are structured based on the analytic hierarchy process scale (Tripathi et al., 2022). For the current study, the pairwise comparison matrix was constructed based on the linguistic interpretations and relative intensities denoted by

absolute importance to weak importance. This procedure was followed by performing a consistency test to ascertain whether the constructed pair wise comparison matrix demonstrated the consistency of confidence in decision making regarding students' perception of relational pedagogy in the university. Previous study has shown that a value of consistency ratio  $CR \leq 0.1$  is acceptable to establish consistency in pair-wise comparisons (Saaty, 1980). Prior to computing the consistency ratio, the consistency index was calculated to ascertain the reliability of the ordered structure. The ratio scales are often calculated from the principal Eigen vectors while the consistency index is calculated from the principal Eigen value. Following the computation of consistency index, the consistency ratio was calculated using the random consistency index which serves as the basis for determining the comparison matrix's dimensions ( $n$ ) as demonstrated in table 1. Again, the consistency ratio was computed to confirm data reliability as well as to avoid inconsistency in the pairwise comparison matrix (Saaty, 1980; Gupta et al., 2023).

**Table 1**

*Average Random Consistency Index (R.I.) Values (Saaty, 1980)*

N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
R.I.	0	0	0.58	0.90	1.12	1.24	1.32	1.41	1.45	1.49

Table 1 illustrates the random consistency index for the various models. For the current study, the computed consistency ratio is 0.0857 which is below 0.10 and show that comparisons made in the current study has an acceptable degree of inconsistency based on the use of eigenvector as a priority weight (Zamani-Sabzi et al., 2016).

### **Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process**

While the analytic hierarchy process is an important tool for making decisions, it has limitations and biases which arise due to its subjective judgements especially during comparisons which further results in imprecise output (Liu et al., 2020). To address the imprecision of the analytic hierarchy process, the fuzzy sets have been embedded in the analytic hierarchy process. Historically, the fuzzy set theory was introduced by Zadeh in 1965 and further developed by scholars such as Van Laarhoven and Pedrcyz (1983). To Zadeh (1965), fuzzy logic enables decision-makers to identify the weaknesses of traditional decision-making tools and provide strong solutions. Also, the use of binary logic and fuzzy systems allow decision-makers to define different phenomena that other analyses are unable to show. For the current study, five important broad steps for performing the fuzzy analytical hierarchy process was followed: a) establishing the fuzzy pairwise comparison matrix; b) synthesising the judgements (based on the views of colleagues); c) calculating the fuzzy weights of the criteria; d) defuzzifying the fuzzy weights and; e) checking the consistency (Liu et al., 2020). In particular, the defuzzification was performed to: 1) ease computation; 2) enhance rationality and; 3) enhance continuous search for a suitable point to represent the fuzzy number. There are different methods for performing defuzzification and these include the mean of maximum method, the center of area method and, the center of gravity method (Liu et al., 2020; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2021). The current study adopted the triangular fuzzy numbers to demonstrate the linguistic judgment values that are relevant in arriving

at a decision on students' perceptions about the relative importance of relational pedagogies in the learning environment. Furthermore, Relativity was computed using a 9-point scale (Huang, 2012).

The geometric mean method which is also referred to as the "Buckley's method" (Buckley, 1985) and is used for aggregating group decisions (Gupta et al., 2023) and the computation of the fuzzy analytical hierarchy process was adopted for the current study. This process consisted of the following: i) computing the positive fuzzy reciprocal matrix; ii) applying the geometric means process to explain the views of participants concerning relational pedagogies in the university based on the triangular fuzzy numbers; iii) calculating the fuzzy weights using the column geometric mean iv) performing the defuzzification of the fuzzy weights into non-fuzzy values; v) computing the normal weighted vector using the normalization procedure to derive the weights of the criteria and sub-criteria and vi) calculating the global weights for each factor by way of a fuzzy hierarchical structure (Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2021).

## **Results**

The results section is presented in two parts; the quantitative analysis showing results of the fuzzy analytical hierarchy process and the qualitative analysis of the written feedback from participants.

### **Quantitative data analysis**

#### *Weight Calculation*

The weights of the 10-item criteria and 30-item sub-criteria of students' perspectives about the factors that enhance relational pedagogies in the study setting were computed using the Buckley's method. Based on the local weights computed as shown in table 2, the highly ranked criteria are: "Ethical care"; "Interpersonal communication"; "Natural care"; "Respect"; and "Mattering". Also, "Ethical care" which was the highest ranked criterion contained three of the four sub-criteria with the highest ranked global weights namely: "Demonstrate care about students' behaviours outside classroom"; "Demonstrate care concerning students' non-academic matters" and; "Demonstrate care about students' social skills". Consistent with the findings of previous study, the ethics of care is important in relational pedagogies because it involves teachers' demonstration of concern for the development of students as human beings, their interactions with the students and, their ability to listen to and observe students in the learning environment (Chika-James, 2020). It is however not surprising that the participants considered the criteria "Ethical care" as the most important criterion under relational pedagogies in the study context.

The second highest ranked criterion, "Interpersonal communication" also contained the third and ninth highest ranked sub-criteria in terms of global weights which are: "Create a supportive learning climate" and "Engage students in discussions concerning their academic activities". The third highest ranked criterion, "Natural care" contained the seventh and fifteenth highest ranked sub-criteria in terms of global weights which are: "Demonstrate care about the dignity of students" and "Demonstrate care about the personal character of students". Also, the fourth highest ranked criterion, "Respect" included the eighth and thirteenth highest ranked sub-criteria in terms of global weights which are: "Greet students when they enter the classroom" and "Request students'

opinion in class". The results also revealed that, "Take personal interest in what students do outside their class" which is ranked fifth and "Call students by their names in class" which is ranked sixteenth are under the criterion, "Mattering" was highly rated by the students.

Table 2 shows the resultant weights and structures of the criteria and sub-criteria. Consistent with the findings of a prior study, the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom setting is a major predictor of student academic and motivational outcomes (Robinson et al., 2019). Similarly, "Maintain eye contact with students" which is ranked tenth and "Be approachable" which is ranked fourteenth are under the criterion "Teacher immediacy". The results also show that "Openly show interest in students' viewpoints" which is under the criterion "Teacher openness" ranked sixth. What the result suggests is that students expect their teachers to show interest in their viewpoints especially when they contribute to discussions in class. As shown in table 2, "Teacher responsiveness" was the least ranked criterion. The sub-criteria were: "Provide students with clear feedback"; "Provide students with timely feedback" and; "Make time for students before and after each lecture". What the results mean is that although teacher responsiveness is important to the knowledge and skills development of students in the learning setting, the participants do not consider it as their topmost priority under relational pedagogy.

### **Qualitative data analysis**

The data gathered from the written responses of participants were evaluated using thematic analysis. Prior studies have shown that qualitative data across different epistemologies could be evaluated using thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) which involves a process of identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes that are generated from a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the current study, the written comments of participants in the open-ended section of the questionnaire were imported from the Evasys software in the form of an excel spreadsheet. The large datasets were then entered in the NVivo software for the purposes of organising the data for easy analysis. Also, the feedback of participants were organised based on campus location (3 sub-groups) and faculty (seven sub-groups). Data from participants in the largest campus were first analysed to show patterns in their responses. Resultantly, the patterns revealed multiple codes that were initially put under 15 categories. The categories that were initially developed included, "student-lecturer interaction", "provision of feedback to students", "teacher openness" and "teacher immediacy". Subsequently, the data from participants in the two remaining campuses were analysed using the same coding process after which an additional category – "trust" was included. The 16 categories were then collapsed into 5 main themes, "teacher-student interaction and communication", "respect and trust", "mattering and teacher immediacy", "teacher pedagogical approach" and the "ethics of care" as shown in table 3.

Five themes that were generated from the written feedback of the participants (see Table 3). The total number of written comments under all the five themes as shown in table 3 was 206 with teacher-student interaction and communication 61 (29.61%) and, mattering and teacher immediacy 48 (23.30%) showing the highest frequency while respect and trust 21 (10.19%) revealed the least frequency.

**Table 2***Local weights and global weights for relational pedagogy criteria*

Items	Item titles/sub-item titles	Local Weights <sup>a</sup>	Ranking	Indicators	Local Weights	Ranking	Global Weights <sup>b</sup>	Ranking
<b>Natural care</b>								
R1	Demonstrate care about the moral development of students.	0.1022	3	R1-1	0.079	2	0.1373	22
	Demonstrate care about the personal character of students.			R1-2	0.082	1	0.1553	15
	Demonstrate care about the dignity of students.			R1-3	0.078	3	0.1674	7
<b>Ethical care</b>								
R2	Demonstrate care concerning students' non-academic matters.	0.1191	1	R2-1	0.082	2	0.1787	2
	Demonstrate care about students' social skills.			R2-2	0.079	3	0.1773	4
	Demonstrate care about students' behaviours outside classroom.			R2-3	0.086	1	0.1800	1
<b>Respect</b>								
R3	Greet students when they enter the classroom	0.0990	4	R3-1	0.073	2	0.1661	8
	Request students' opinion in class.			R3-2	0.068	3	0.1575	13
	Welcome students to a course or module			R3-3	0.077	1	0.1219	27
<b>Trust</b>								
R4	Create an environment for students to share their opinion.	0.0884	9	R4-1	0.067	2	0.1418	19
	Show interest in students' academic development			R4-2	0.071	1	0.1458	17
	Resolve differences between students in class.			R4-3	0.065	3	0.1103	30
<b>Teacher immediacy</b>								
R5	Be approachable	0.0984	6	R5-1	0.081	1	0.1557	14
	Continuously engage students about their academic progress.			R5-2	0.077	2	0.1260	26
	Maintain eye contact with students			R5-3	0.072	3	0.1611	10
<b>Mattering</b>								
R6	Take a personal interest in what students do outside their class	0.0986	5	R6-1	0.069	3	0.1773	5
	Call students by their names in class			R6-2	0.079	1	0.1472	16
	Recognise students for extra-curricular achievement.			R6-3	0.075	2	0.1193	29
<b>Academic achievement support</b>								

R7	Set high standards for student achievement in class.	0.0977	8	R7-1	0.065	1	0.1377	21
	Acknowledge the academic achievements of students.			R7-2	0.061	2	0.1418	20
	Display exceptional work done by students.			R7-3	0.055	3	0.1602	11
<b>Teacher responsiveness</b>								
R8	Provide students with timely feedback	0.0867	10	R8-1	0.066	2	0.1341	24
	Provide students with clear feedback			R8-2	0.067	1	0.1359	23
	Make time for students before and after each lecture.			R8-3	0.058	3	0.1202	28
<b>Teacher openness</b>								
R9	Enforce same rules for all students.	0.0984	6	R9-1	0.053	3	0.1323	25
	Openly show interest in students' viewpoints.			R9-2	0.062	1	0.1683	6
	Provide students positive feedback for good behaviour			R9-3	0.058	2	0.1422	18
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>								
R10	Create a supportive learning climate	0.1115	2	R10-1	0.078	3	0.1782	3
	Interact with students concerning each topic			R10-2	0.085	2	0.1579	12
	Engage students in discussions concerning their academic activities			R10-3	0.088	1	0.1656	9

a. Local weight is determined based on judgments of a single criterion.

0 b. Global weight is determined by multiplying the weight of the parent criterion.

**Table 3**

*Responses of participants on relational pedagogy delineated to the various themes, categories and sample quotes*

Themes	Number of categories	Number of responses	Sample quotes
Teacher-student interaction and communication	4	61 (29.61%)	“There should be clear communication. Good teacher-student relationships should be prioritised and maintained so that we students would always know that we can approach our teachers whenever we need them [EMSB84].
Respect and trust	2	21 (10.19%)	“Respect between lecturers and students should be reciprocal” [EDUB19].
Mattering and teacher immediacy	4	48 (23.31%)	“Teachers should prioritise asking questions after each lecture to make sure that no student is left behind. Also, they must not ignore our emails when we ask for help.” [EDUB195]
Teacher pedagogical approach	2	33 (16.02%)	“Teachers should make teaching more relational and engaging so that we [students] can enjoy the modules. I cannot even remember some of the content I was taught last semester because of how some teachers taught.” [EDUB72]
Ethics of care	4	43 (20.87%)	“There should be occasions where teachers could open up and interact with us [students]. During such occasions, teachers should ask us questions concerning our future careers, life at the residences, our morals and beliefs. This practice would enhance our sense of belonging. [EDUQ6]. ”

Notes: The number of responses represents the number of participants (frequency) who provided comments under the designated themes. The number of responses are denoted by the frequency and percentages n (percentages) with n=206.

## Findings

The written feedback of participants are discussed in this section based on the five main themes: “teacher-student interaction and communication”, “respect and trust”, “mattering and teacher immediacy”, “teacher pedagogical approach” and the “ethics of care” that were developed.

### ***Teacher-student interaction and communication***

An analysis of the data revealed that the majority of participants had concerns regarding student-teacher interaction and communication in the learning environment. For instance, a participant argued that “relationship between students and lecturers should be improved. If possible, lecturers should respond to the emails we send on weekends because some of them need urgent attention” [LAWB65]. Similar view was shared by another participant:

Teachers should have dedicated time for attending to student emails. Although I understand that there may be a number of students who are enrolled for a specific module, there should still be a way to address students’ concerns through emails. At times our emails are left unanswered for days or weeks [EMSQ177].

The written narratives of participants show that students expect teachers to communicate with them especially by responding to their emails. Prior study has revealed that effective communication between teachers and students could enhance students’ confidence in the learning setting (Kimbark et al., 2017).

### ***Teacher pedagogical approach***

Teacher pedagogical approach to teaching and learning has been highlighted by previous studies as important to building good teacher-student relationships (Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020; Taylor, 2019). The written narratives of participants show that teacher-student engagement is an essential component of relational pedagogies, “there should be more engagement between us and our teachers. The teachers should use different methods when teaching various modules to make us understand the content better” [HUMS181]. Likewise, a participant, stated that, “teachers should provide feedback to students when we complete our assignments. Also, if marks of the previous tests taken could be released before we take the next test, it could help us to identify our mistakes and improve on our performance” [HUMD22]. The feedback from HUMD22 suggest that not only do students anticipate feedback from their teachers, but importantly, they expect to receive prompt feedback in the learning setting. A recent study has revealed that the relational dimension of feedback in the learning environment include an interpersonal exchange between teachers and learners to enhance learning activities (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Another participant touched on what he/she termed as the need for a religion-free environment, “teachers should keep the classroom religion-free. There is a particular teacher who always refers to her beliefs and gives us testimonies in class. I do not think that teacher beliefs should form part of the teaching and learning process in class” [FHSB44]. Although students may not be able to express their concerns regarding the use of lecture time by teachers to discuss issues concerning religion and beliefs, it is important for teachers to avoid discussion issues that may create students’ disinterest in a course.

### ***Respect and trust***

Respect and trust are important features of relational pedagogies in higher education. A participant indicated that, “teachers must create a learning environment that is based on trust and understanding. Rather than always informing us to work hard and pointing the obstacles to us, I expect them to offer specific solutions such as one-on-one academic support and tutorial sessions with students” [EMS83]. Concerning trust, another participant stated that, “teachers should trust us as students. When we are not able to submit our assignments before the deadline, we expect our teachers to listen to our explanations and not judge us to be lazy students” [EDUQ12]. The demonstration of trust and respect by teachers and students in the learning environment are important to building good pedagogical relationships (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2021). Therefore, the development of strong relational pedagogies in the learning environment should include mutual respect and trust between teachers and students.

### ***Mattering and teacher immediacy***

The theme on mattering and teacher immediacy accounted for about 23.31 percent of the total written feedback from participants. Some participants highlighted the need for teachers to make them feel valued irrespective of their socio-economic background:

Some teachers do not make any attempt to address our concerns. For those of us who are from low socio-economic backgrounds and rural communities, funding is often a problem and so most of us do not have laptops and internet at home to learn. What we expect from our teachers is for them to understand our situation and give us some extended deadlines to submit our assignments [EDUQ172].

Other participants also provided written comments concerning how teacher immediacy could enhance the teaching and learning processes. For instance, NASB119 wrote that, “teachers should be always willing to help us during the online sessions. When we need clarification on the content online, there should be some feedback and not automatic replies.” Previous study has revealed that the cognisant responsiveness of teachers to engage with students and activate learning is essential for developing good relational pedagogy in the learning setting (Hickey et al., 2022). Also, when students feel that they are valued by their teachers, it could enhance their sense of belonging (Keyser et al., 2022; Taylor, 2019).

### ***Ethics of care***

As shown in table 3, 20.87 percent of participants provided written comments under the theme, ethics of care. The feedback from participants revealed mixed responses based on the faculty and discipline. For instance, a participant indicated that, “our B Nursing teachers and preceptors are remarkable. They are patient, kind, inclusive, and are always willing to listen and help us” [FHSB51]. Contrastingly, some participants stated that, “teachers should be flexible with the submission dates to cater for students who may have difficulties in meeting deadlines in courses that are delivered online” [EDUB60] and, “teachers should be able to relate and cater for the learning needs of students irrespective of our social and economic status” [HUMQ43]. The findings reveal that students expect their teachers to demonstrate care, empathy, compassion and show concern especially regarding their academic activities. When teachers develop a deep understanding of the backgrounds of students, make time to learn about the personal contexts of

students and, address the individual learning needs of students, they could develop a learning environment that enhance relational pedagogies in the learning setting (Meyers et al., 2019).

## **Discussions and conclusions**

The main aim of the current study was to examine students' perceptions about the factors that enhance relational pedagogies in a higher education setting and to provide empirical explanations to how these perceptions could be prioritised to enhance effective teaching and learning. An analysis of the data based on 10-point criteria, 30-item sub-criteria and the written experiences and opinions of participants pointed to differences in how students perceive relational pedagogies in the university. First, results from the data analysed by way of fuzzy analytical hierarchy process revealed that the factors that influence students' experiences and perceptions of relational pedagogy in the university are: ethical care; interpersonal communication; natural care; respect; mattering; teacher openness; teacher immediacy; academic achievement support; trust and; teacher responsiveness. However, the most significant factors based on the hierarchy structure are, ethical care, interpersonal communication, natural care, respect and, mattering. Distinctly, the ethics of care with the criteria - ethical care and natural care served as the most important factors of relational pedagogy to students in the university. Likewise, the concept of care relates to interpersonal attributes that enhance student learning and success (Strachan, 2020) and are characterised by a moral obligation, inclusive commitment, a caring attitude, compassion (Andrew et al., 2023; Tang & Walker-Gleaves, 2022) and empathy (Meyers et al., 2019).

The written comments by some participants also revealed that students are motivated to study and improve their academic performance especially when they feel that their teachers demonstrate concern about their learning and provide the needed scaffolding support. On the contrary, students tend to feel neglected and socially distanced in the learning environment when teachers show very little empathy and concern for their academic development. While the results of the data analysed by way of fuzzy analytical hierarchy process revealed that interpersonal communication ranked second based on the hierarchy of relative importance, the theme, teacher-student interaction, and communication received the highest number of comments under the open-ended section. Consistent with the findings of previous study, social relationships between teachers and students are developed through communication that seek to address possible cognitive and cultural gaps that may arise in the learning environment (Suciu, 2014). However, the development of positive relationships between teachers and learners are not given, they should be deliberately constructed and nurtured through continuous interaction, good feedback mechanism and trust. Besides, the ability of teachers to listen to students and observe their expressions during interactions are important to maintaining good relationships (Chika-James, 2020). This is akin to what Boyd (2023) terms as response-able practices in the learning setting. The consistency in the results of the current study and the results of prior studies (Chika-James, 2020; Crownover & Jones, 2018) suggest that students appreciate good interaction and communication with their teachers in the learning environment.

The current study adds to the literature on relational pedagogies by showing that students prioritise respect and mattering in the learning environment. The results of the current study based on the global weights (table 2) demonstrate that students expect teachers to greet them when

they enter the lecture rooms and request the opinions of students on different issues during lecture sessions. Similarly, the written narratives of the participants showed that students perceived mattering and teacher immediacy as very important features of relational pedagogy in the study setting. When teachers demonstrate respect for students irrespective of their race, religion, ethnic background, socio-economic background, and academic performance, it gives students a sense of belonging and also enable the students to build their confidence. Moreover, every student would want to feel that he or she is significant and valued by teachers in the learning environment. Consistent with previous study, the concept of mattering is an important feature of relational pedagogy because it could serve as a source of students' motivation to participate, learn and develop a sense of commitment to their academic affairs and the institution (Taylor & Turner, 2019). The results revealed that students feel significantly valued by their teachers when they: 1) call them by their names in class; 2) respond promptly to their emails and provide them with prompt feedback concerning their tasks in class; 3) understand the challenges some of them [students] face concerning the learning resources and make the necessary adjustments in terms of submission deadlines and; 4) take personal interest in what students do outside the lecture rooms.

Although the least ranked factors - teacher openness, teacher immediacy, academic achievement support, trust and teacher responsiveness did not appear highly ranked based on the results of the analysis performed by way of fuzzy analytical hierarchy process, they are also important for enhancing teaching and learning in the university. For instance, under the criteria - teacher openness, participants highly ranked the sub-criteria, "openly show interest in students' viewpoints". What this means is that the university could prioritise teacher feedback as well as verbal and non-verbal cues in the learning setting. Again, there is the need for managers of the university to continuously provide training to teachers to enable them to develop their relational pedagogical skills.

### **Limitations and future research**

There are a few limitations in the current study that need to be highlighted. First is the use of students only as participants of the study. The inclusion of teachers could have provided additional insights into how teachers perceive relational pedagogies and how relationships between teacher and learners could be improved in the learning environment. Future studies could examine the hierarchy structure of relational pedagogies based on the input of teachers and students in a single study context. Secondly, the use of the theory of relational pedagogies meant that other important features such as power, institutional structures and culture that affect relational pedagogies could not be explored. Future studies could explore how different theories could expand the discourse on relational pedagogies in higher education with respect to power relations and institutional cultures. Lastly, results of the written feedback from students cannot be generalised because they are based on the subjective narratives of participants which could not be further interrogated through interviews.

### **Implications of study for research and practice**

Considering the growing importance of relational pedagogies in higher education settings and the need to place relationships at the centre of education provision (Ljungblad, 2021; Schick, 2020), it has become necessary for increased studies in the field to advance our understanding of how human relationships could serve to promote teaching and learning. The current study has shown that while the discourse and conversations around relational pedagogies have mostly centred on the perspectives of teachers, it is also important to draw on the views of students to understand their concerns regarding how social distance could adversely affect teaching and learning in the educational setting. Findings of the current study have also shown that students have better understanding of relational pedagogies and how they could be improved to enable them to derive maximum benefits from the teaching and learning processes. In relation to research, by adopting the fuzzy analytical hierarchy process, decision makers could address issues concerning the vagueness associated with human thinking especially during decision making processes (Jain et al., 2020). For instance, managers of universities could prioritise the most important factors of relational pedagogies that are required for addressing the social, cognitive, and cultural gaps within the learning setting and enhance teaching and learning. Therefore, instead of paying attention to all the features of relational pedagogies, resources could be channelled into important areas such providing resources that support effective teaching and learning and, providing training for teachers to enhance their teaching methods and to develop good communication techniques.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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