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Supporting teacher-student relationships in secondary education: a comprehensive framework and tool for teacher professional development

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High-quality teacher–student relationships are essential for the wellbeing and effective functioning of both teachers and students in secondary education. Despite their importance, no comprehensive tool currently exists to support teachers in purposefully developing these relationships with young adolescents. To address this gap, this design paper presents an in-service professional development tool for early secondary school teachers. The tool is grounded in a conceptual framework of teacher–student relationships, informed by attachment theory. The framework was adapted into a pedagogical model that positions teachers as agents of change in the development of their relationships with students. Based on this model, broad teacher competencies could be specified into practical, relationship-building capacities. To strengthen these competencies, targeted learning materials were developed, including a theoretical guide and three sets of exercises. These materials are designed to enhance affiliative teacher behaviors in daily classroom interactions, while also promoting teachers' reflective practice on teacher-student relational representations, teacher characteristics, and systemic influences—acknowledging the complexity of relationship building in classrooms. So far, the plausible effectiveness of the VIP Toolkit is supported, setting the stage for future empirical effectiveness research. By centering relational practices within professional development, this approach potentially expands traditional conceptions of teacher learning and may empower educators as key agents in shaping supportive classroom dynamics.

KEYWORDS

affiliative practices, in-service training tool, secondary education, teacher professional development, teacher-student relationships

1 Introduction

There is ample evidence that supportive teacher–student relationships (TSRs) positively influence both adolescent development and teacher wellbeing in secondary education (e.g., Di Lisio et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, professional development programs rarely address TSRs explicitly (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

One reason may be the persistent belief among educators that the capacity to build strong relationships is a fixed personal trait or simply “a way of being a teacher” (Borremans et al., 2025).

However, as in other care-oriented professions, the ability to establish and maintain high-quality TSRs can be understood as a professional competence (Borremans et al., 2024; Aspelin and Jönsson, 2019). Accordingly, this practice-oriented study aimed to design an in-service professional development tool that supports secondary school teachers in systematically strengthening their relationships with students. The tool, called the VIP Toolkit—with VIP as a Dutch acronym for “Verbondenheid In Praktijk” (“connections in practice”)—is grounded in the idea that every student and teacher is a “Very Important Person” in the classroom. It underscores the importance of building meaningful connections in the classroom practice through intentional, relational teacher behaviors.

Section 1.1 outlines the significance of investing in TSRs, followed by an introduction to the conceptual framework underpinning the VIP Toolkit in Section 1.2. Section 2 translates this framework into a pedagogical model and corresponding teacher competencies. Section 3 details the toolkit’s components and their operationalizations, integrating models of TSRs and professional teacher competencies. Section 4 describes the pedagogical format for implementation of the VIP Toolkit, and distinguishes the (potential) stages of evidence and effectiveness of the intervention. Section 5 concludes with a discussion of implications and future directions.

1.1 Why should secondary school teachers invest in their relationships with students?

Supportive TSRs represent the affective-relational dimension of teaching—a core element emphasized in major educational theories. The key role of affective TSRs in promoting students’ wellbeing, engagement, motivation, exploration, and learning is particularly highlighted within the attachment perspective on TSRs (Pianta, 1999; Verschueren and Koomen, 2012). Empirical studies in secondary education consistently confirm that supportive TSRs foster students’ socio-emotional development, academic motivation, engagement, and achievement, while reducing behavioral and emotional problems. In contrast, negative or conflictual TSRs can hinder these outcomes (e.g., Di Lisio et al., 2025; Lei et al., 2016; Quin, 2017; Roorda et al., 2017; Salter et al., 2024).

Positive TSRs also support teachers’ professional functioning, motivation, and wellbeing (e.g., Klassen et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2022; Zee et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2023). Teachers may benefit indirectly as well, since emotionally secure and engaged students contribute to more constructive classroom dynamics, which in turn promote effective teaching (Pianta, 2006). Conversely, strained relationships with students are associated with higher teacher stress, increased risk of burnout, and reduced professional efficacy (e.g., Corbin et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2014; Spilt et al., 2011; Zee et al., 2017).

1.2 How can secondary school teachers invest in their relationships with students?

As investing in TSRs benefits both students and teachers in secondary education, what teachers can *do* to foster such relationships in daily practice, emerges as a pivotal question. Rooted in attachment theory, Pianta et al. (2003) proposed a conceptual model emphasizing everyday teacher–student interactions as central to shaping TSR quality. These interactions are understood as continuous exchanges of information that influence relationship development. On the teacher’s side, these are expressed through affiliative practices, including both proactive and reactive strategies (Kincade et al., 2020; Shvidko, 2021). Proactive behaviors—such as greeting students at the door, using a warm tone of voice, and maintaining eye contact—strengthen TSRs preventively. Reactive behaviors—such as providing supportive feedback in response to student behavior—help maintain or restore TSR quality (Kincade et al., 2020). Teacher affiliative practices serve as the cornerstone of dyadic relationship-building, positioning teachers as agents of change in building strong TSRs. Therefore, enhancing the quality of these behavioral skills in teachers could yield a direct pathway to support TSRs. To our knowledge, only one intervention targeting these skills in secondary school teachers has been developed, that is the Establish-Maintain-Restore Program (EMR, Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019; Gaias et al., 2020). For younger children—ranging from preK to sixth grade—crucial affiliative practices are well documented (for a meta-analysis, see Kincade et al., 2020). Little is however known about the specific teacher behaviors that effectively address the relational needs of young adolescents, which may differ substantially from those of younger children (De Laet et al., 2014).

Furthermore, relationship-building is complex and extends beyond observable teacher behaviors. Pianta et al. (2003) identified three additional components that shape TSRs, that is, teachers’ and students’ representations of the relationship; individual characteristics of both relational partners; and broader contextual systems. First, rooted in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), representations of the relationship refer to the cognitions and emotions each partner holds about the relationship and about one another in that relationship (Bretherton and Munholland, 1999; Pietromonaco and Barrett, 2000). These mental models influence expectations and behaviors in everyday interactions. Second, various individual characteristics of teachers and students further affect TSRs. Cognitive and affective-motivational factors—such as knowledge and performance levels, emotional patterns, stress, attitudes, and beliefs—as well as structural characteristics—like gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background—shape relational dynamics (Liu et al., 2018; Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Finally, broader systems—including family, school culture, and societal contexts—also impact TSR development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Lerner, 1998).

In conclusion, fostering high-quality TSRs requires an integrated understanding of how behavioral exchanges, internal representations, individual characteristics, and systemic contexts interact. These interdependent elements must all be considered in efforts to support relationship-building. While the EMR Program primarily targets teachers’ behavioral skills, to our knowledge, no

TABLE 1 Linking a conceptual and pedagogical framework to teacher professional competencies and the materials in the VIP Toolkit.

Conceptual framework ^a	Pedagogical framework ^b	Teacher professional competencies ^c	Materials VIP Toolkit ^d
Behavioral exchanges	Teacher affiliative practices	Performance and situation-specific cognitive skills	Part 2. Proactive affiliative practices Part 3.1. Reactive affiliative practices
Representations of the relationship	Relationship representations of the teacher	Situation-specific cognitive skills	Part 3.2. Relationship-oriented reflection
Individual characteristics	Cognitive teacher factors - knowledge	Dispositions: professional knowledge	Theoretical guide
	Affective-motivational teacher factors - (negative) emotions and relational stress - attitudes and beliefs	Dispositions: affect-motivation	Part 3.3. Coping in relationships Part 1. Attitudes and beliefs on teachers' professional role
Contextual systems	School and societal contexts - implicit bias toward groups of students - school culture	(Reflection on) Generic attributes	Part 3.4. Contextual reflection

VIP Toolkit = a comprehensive toolkit for professional development of teachers on teacher-student relationships in secondary education. VIP is a Dutch acronym for "Verbondenheid In Praktijk", that is, "connections in practice".

^aElements in the conceptual framework refer to the model on teacher-student relationships, extensively described in Pianta et al. (2003).

^bThe pedagogical framework is a specific translation of the conceptual framework, focusing on the teacher as change agent.

^cTeacher professional competencies refer to the model of Blömeke and Kaiser (2017) on general professional competencies in teachers.

^dThe specific materials in the VIP Toolkit support the learning objectives, as operationalizations of the relational competencies. Alongside the specific materials in the VIP Toolkit in three parts, a theoretical guide was provided to meet the objective of knowledge building. It is advised to work through Part 1, 2 and 3 subsequently. Part 3 contains four exercises on teacher-student relationship challenges (on indication, no specific sequence within Part 3).

comprehensive professional development tool explicitly addressing all facets of TSRs currently exists for secondary education.

2 Building teacher-student relationships: from concepts to competencies

Building on Pianta et al.'s. (2003) conceptual model, a pedagogical framework was developed (2.1), to guide the practical orientation of the VIP Toolkit and to strengthen teachers' TSR competencies (2.2).

2.1 From a conceptual to a pedagogical framework

To support teacher professional development, the pedagogical framework emphasizes elements of the conceptual model in which teachers act as change agents and relational aspects are considered malleable. Table 1 provides an overview, with Column 1 and 2 corresponding to the conceptual and pedagogical framework respectively.

2.1.1 Teacher affiliative practices

Teachers shape TSRs at the behavioral level through everyday affiliative practices. While the EMR Program (Cook et al., 2018)

describes valuable behavioral skills to establish, maintain and restore TSRs, few empirical studies have systematically identified distinct affiliative behaviors in secondary schools (Henry and Thorsen, 2018; Kincade et al., 2020). To address this gap, prior to the development of the VIP Toolkit, we conducted a study with seventh- and eighth-grade students in which they reflected on teacher practices they perceived as shaping relationship quality (Buyse et al., 2026). A two-step thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted on focus group interviews with 48 students, who were asked what teachers with whom they have a good relationship, do in their daily interactions. First, following a bottom-up approach and closely adhering to students' accounts, 10 lower-order themes of teacher behavior fostering relational connection were identified. Next, in a top-down step, these themes were iteratively compared with relevant literature and conceptually grouped into five higher-order themes. The resulting structure is presented in Table 2.

Overall, *Approachability* lowers the threshold for students to approach the teacher and reduces formality in teacher-student interactions (e.g., Krane et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2018). *Sensitive care* involves noticing and responding to students' emotional and behavioral cues, offering help or support accordingly (e.g., Cook et al., 2018; Dever et al., 2022). *Motivational teaching* combines clear structure, didactic support, and space for students' voice, supporting students' needs for competence and autonomy, and indirectly enhancing relatedness (Ryan et al., 2023). *Personal attention* signals a teacher's genuine interest in and appreciation for each student, both as a learner and as an individual (García-Moya, 2020). *Righteous authority* balances fairness and consistency in setting boundaries while demonstrating respect

TABLE 2 Matching 10 lower-order themes to five higher-order themes of teacher affiliative practices.

<p>1. Approachability <i>Can I come to you?</i></p> <p><i>The teacher lowers the threshold for students to approach them, ease interactions, and promote less formal relationships.</i></p> <p>[1] The teacher engages in informal conversations with students about everyday life. [2] The teacher shares personal anecdotes. [3] The teacher uses humor and playfulness in class. [4] The teacher communicates in a friendly, kind, and positive manner.</p>
<p>2. Sensitive care <i>Do you care for me?</i></p> <p><i>The teacher shows sensitivity to students' signals and responds with support or help.</i></p> <p>[5] The teacher notices students' needs and demonstrates care and concern.</p>
<p>3. Motivational teaching <i>Do you care about teaching me?</i></p> <p><i>The teacher provides clarity, didactic support, structure, and room for student voice.</i></p> <p>[6] The teacher creates a motivating and supportive learning environment.</p>
<p>4. Personal attention <i>Do you see me?</i></p> <p><i>The teacher knows and acknowledges each student as a person and learner.</i></p> <p>[7] The teacher shows personal interest and appreciation for each student. [8] The teacher expresses genuine interest in each student's learning.</p>
<p>5. Righteous authority <i>Are you with me?</i></p> <p><i>The teacher asserts authority respectfully, sets clear expectations and treats all students fairly.</i></p> <p>[9] The teacher uses authority as a quality, leading with confidence and respect. [10] The teacher acts fairly and equitably toward all students.</p>

The theoretical structure, based on a thematic analysis on student interviews, matches the structure of Part 2 of the VIP Toolkit on proactive affiliative practices, including 10 "focus areas for action", spread over five theoretical dimensions (see Buyse et al., 2026).

and equity (Gregory and Ripski, 2008; Pirrie and Rafanell, 2017). Interestingly, our study findings suggest that young adolescents especially value teacher behaviors that *indirectly* foster TSR quality through addressing students' needs for fairness, righteousness, clarity, competence and autonomy—that is, behaviors illustrative of Righteous authority and Motivational teaching (Buyse et al., 2026). For younger children, Kincade et al. (2020) concluded in their meta-analysis that *direct* proactive practices—that is, aspects of emotional supportive behavior—are most crucial in building close relationships.

2.1.2 Relationship representations of the teacher

Beyond observable behavior, TSR quality is shaped by teachers' internal representations—the emotions, beliefs, and expectations they hold about themselves, individual students, and their mutual relationships (Pianta et al., 2003). These mental models influence, either explicitly or implicitly, how teachers perceive and respond to students (Bosman et al., 2021).

2.1.3 Teacher factors

Teachers' broader cognitive, affective and motivational dispositions also influence TSRs. As these features are responsive

to change to some extent, they represent potential targets for professional development. First, teachers require sufficient conceptual knowledge to understand and value the importance of TSRs for student and teacher development, and to foster high-quality relationships (Aspelin et al., 2021; Borremans et al., 2024). Second, teachers' emotions directly affect relational engagement: emotionally exhausted teachers experiencing relational stress are less likely to interact supportively (e.g., Yoon, 2002). Third, teachers' attitudes and beliefs about TSRs shape their willingness and perceived responsibility to invest in these relationships (Borremans et al., 2025; McGrath and Van Bergen, 2019). These beliefs are closely linked to teachers' professional identity and perceived role in fostering relationships (García-Moya et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2008).

2.1.4 School and societal contexts

TSRs are embedded in wider systems, ranging from student groups to school culture and societal structures. Although often beyond a teacher's direct control, these contexts shape relational opportunities and constraints, which teachers should be aware of. For example, studies on the Pygmalion effect show that implicit biases can influence teacher expectations and behaviors toward specific student groups—such as boys, ethnic minority students, or students with lower academic performance—potentially undermining TSR quality (Gast, 2018; Liu et al., 2018; López, 2017; Reyes, 2021). Similarly, institutional routines and dominant narratives within schools and broader societal contexts may subtly affect everyday interactions (Blommaert, 2005).

2.2 From a pedagogical framework to competencies

The pedagogical framework defines the key building blocks for strengthening teachers' competencies in TSRs. Proposing a general model on teacher professional competencies, Blömeke and Kaiser (2017) distinguished four interrelated elements relevant for teacher professional development, that is, (1) performance, referring to observable behavioral skills; (2) situation-specific cognitive skills, involving context-dependent reflection and decision-making; (3) teacher dispositions, encompassing professional knowledge and affective-motivational characteristics; and (4) generic attributes, which stem from professional contexts surrounding the teacher, including the educational system, school, and broader societal structures. Column 2 and 3 in Table 1 provide an overview of how the pedagogical framework aligns with this model of professional competencies, further outlined below.

2.2.1 Teacher affiliative practices

At the behavioral level, teacher affiliative practices are observable in day-to-day classroom exchanges. These practices correspond to the *performance* domain in Blömeke and Kaiser's

model. Translating the five theoretical dimensions of affiliative practices into specific, actionable behaviors is essential for training these skills. As these dimensions correspond to five higher-order themes and cover 10 lower-order themes, both retrieved through thematic analysis, 10 so-called “focus areas for action” can be distinguished, mirroring these themes (see Table 2; Buyse et al., 2026).

In addition to observable performance, affiliative behaviors involve *situation-specific cognitive skills* (Blömeke and Kaiser, 2017), such as reflecting on ongoing practices and identifying areas for improvement. This is particularly relevant when teachers face relational challenges with specific students. In such cases, proactive strategies may be insufficient, and teachers may need to adopt reactive practices to maintain or restore relationship quality (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019; Kincade et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Relationship representations of the teacher

Situation-specific cognitive skills in a challenging TSR can be strengthened by reflecting on the emotions and cognitions a teacher holds about the relationship and the individuals involved. Narrative-based reflection methods, grounded in attachment theory, support teachers in examining their own perspectives while taking students’ needs into account (Bosman et al., 2021). Research suggests that engaging in such reflective practices can substantially enhance teachers’ TSR competencies (Spilt et al., 2025; Stuhlman and Pianta, 2002).

2.2.3 Teacher factors

Teachers’ reflections on their cognitions and emotions in relation to TSRs can reveal *affects and motivations of the teacher*, extending beyond a particular (challenging) relationship. Consequently, professional development should address the emotional labor in relating, and provide strategies for coping with relational stress (Ansari et al., 2020; Koenen et al., 2019).

Additionally, teachers’ beliefs about the value of TSRs and their perceived professional responsibility to foster them vary widely. Some view it as a moral imperative or recognize its benefits for smoother classroom management (Pianta, 2006; Hoste and Depoorter, 2020), while others struggle to balance emotional closeness with maintaining authority (García-Moya, 2020). Furthermore, teachers often report difficulty guarding their emotional boundaries in TSR-building, particularly when confronted with negative relational experiences (García-Moya et al., 2019). A vicious cycle may occur, as negative emotions and self-perceptions in the relationship may undermine teachers’ sense of self-efficacy (Spilt et al., 2011; Zee et al., 2017).

Shedding light on these affective–motivational factors as part of *teachers’ dispositions* should be an integral focus of TSR-related professional development. Equally important is supporting teachers’ professional knowledge building regarding TSRs—a second key component of teachers’ dispositions (Blömeke and Kaiser, 2017; Borremans and Spilt, 2022).

2.2.4 School and societal contexts

As postulated in the pedagogical framework, TSRs are also shaped by broader contextual systems—student groups, school policy, societal norms—which correspond to Blömeke and Kaiser’s concept of *generic attributes*. Although these factors are not easily altered, *reflecting* on them can support (challenging) TSR professional development. Especially when biases occur, guided reflection can serve as a first step toward more equitable and inclusive relationships (Gaias et al., 2020).

3 The VIP Toolkit: an in-service teacher-oriented tool for professional development

The VIP Toolkit is designed for teams of in-service educators teaching young adolescents in the first years of secondary school. The TSR competencies outlined in Section 2.2 provide the foundation for the toolkit’s learning objectives. These objectives are translated into three sets of materials and a theoretical guide (see Column 4 of Table 1), further described below.

3.1 Part 1: attitudes and beliefs on teachers’ professional role

In the first part, teachers are invited to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs about TSRs as central to their professional identity. A selection of 16 teacher quotes, portraying a range of professional attitudes and beliefs, is provided to stimulate group reflection. To ensure contextual relevance and ecological validity, these quotes were extracted from empirical research publications and recognized mainstream media sources covering educational practice in Flanders. For example, Liesbeth (pseudonym) expresses that educators should be approachable and attentive to students’ wellbeing and identity development:

“A student confided in me about their sexuality. To a certain extent, I consider it my duty to listen to my students about what goes on in their minds or troubles them.” (based on Hoste and Depoorter, 2020)

Teachers are asked whether and why they (dis)agree with each quote. Discussions typically take place in small groups, and participants are encouraged to take notes during the reflection.

3.2 Part 2: proactive affiliative practices

This part focuses on proactive affiliative practices, covering the five dimensions Approachability, Sensitive care, Motivational teaching, Personal attention, and Righteous authority—further specified into the 10 “focus areas for action” (Table 2). On a

Theoretical dimension	PERSONAL ATTENTION
Focus area for action	<i>The teacher shows personal interest and appreciation for each student.</i>
Day-to-day behaviors (examples)	<input type="checkbox"/> I welcome the student when class begins, for example when they enter the door or as part of a check-in. <input type="checkbox"/> I greet the student outside class, for example in the hallway. <input type="checkbox"/> I make use of the student's first name or a well-chosen nickname to welcome the student, greet them and address them for answering or letting them say something. <input type="checkbox"/> I make eye contact with the student. <input type="checkbox"/> I address the student with encouraging words, at the end of class or in between.

FIGURE 1
Excerpt from Part 2 of the VIP Toolkit.

more concrete level, suggestions are provided for integrating each focus area into day-to-day classroom behaviors, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

The concrete suggestions for behavior are equally based on the thematic analysis of the student interviews, and are further specifications of the five higher-order and 10 lower-order themes (Buyse et al., 2026). In [Figure 1](#), compared to [Table 2](#), the theoretical dimension Personal attention matches higher-order theme 4, and the focus area for action matches lower-order theme 7. A student quote assigned to this theme in the thematic analysis goes as follows:

“When you run into this teacher, he always says good morning and even addresses you by your name! [...]”

Together with other quotes assigned to this theme and with information from the literature review in step 2 of the thematic analysis, this particular quote for example gave rise to the first three exemplar suggestions for day-to-day affiliative teacher behavior as mentioned in [Figure 1](#).

Teachers implementing the VIP Toolkit are asked to screen these practices and select a few to implement with a specific class or student. They apply the selected behaviors over a defined period, recording the start and end dates. Teachers can rate their use of each practice on a 7-point scale at the beginning and end of this period, and establish a desired outcome score beforehand. Guiding questions include:

“Where do I position myself on this particular affiliative practice?” and “Where do I want to go from here?”

This approach intends to align teachers' actions with their personal learning objectives, reinforcing behavioral changes and promoting sustained professional growth.

3.3 Part 3: relationship challenges

The exercises in Part 3 are particularly supportive when TSRs present challenges for the teacher (team). Depending on the nature of the challenge and related learning objective, four specific exercises can be indicated.

First, when a teacher struggles with a student's behavioral response during the interaction, pedagogical touchpoints focused on *reactive affiliative practices* may support the teacher. Similar to the approach in Part 2, suggestions for practice are offered to choose from for implementation. An example is provided in [Figure 2](#).

The exercises in this part of the toolkit are primarily grounded in the principles of restorative communication from the EMR Program (Cook et al., 2018). However, these suggestions may sometimes have counterproductive effects, as the teacher may know what to do, but still feels ineffective in changing the situation. Such suboptimal conditions may harm a teacher's self-efficacy and impair their ability to perceive situations clearly, potentially leading to tunnel vision or stereotypical thinking (Primack et al., 2023). Building on the examples in [Figure 2](#), a teacher may struggle to take ownership in a negative interaction with a student and become trapped in generalized thoughts such as

“this student always causes trouble, I did not expect anything different”.

Focus area for action	<i>The teacher restores a negative interaction with the student.</i>
Day-to-day behaviors (examples)	<input type="checkbox"/> I express care by clearly separating the deed from the doer. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I communicate to the student that I condemn their behavior, but not the student as a person. - When the behavior is unacceptable in terms of school or subject expectations, I clearly explain the sanction following the deed. <input type="checkbox"/> I take ownership in the negative interaction. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I admit my own mistake or missed opportunity in relation with the student. - I can do this for myself and act upon it in the future or communicate it explicitly towards the student. <input type="checkbox"/> I explore whether no win-win solution is possible in the interaction between me and the student. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I discuss this with the student. - I talk through both of our arguments and perspectives to find a common ground.

FIGURE 2

Excerpt from Part 3.1 of the VIP Toolkit. Exercises in Part 3.1 of the toolkit in this example are mainly based on the principles of restorative communication of the Establish-Maintain-Restore Program (Cook et al., 2018).

In such cases, exercises that go beyond the behavioral level may provide additional support.

It might be indicated to shift the focus to the relationship itself, using so-called *relationship-oriented reflection*. In this second exercise of Part 3, teachers work through situation-specific narratives, inspired by reflection tools developed for primary school teachers (Bosman et al., 2021; Spilt et al., 2012). For example, they may recall one moment of strong connection and one of disconnection with a specific student. By articulating the situation from a relationship perspective and reflecting on cognitions and emotions at the representational level, teachers can identify potential starting points for change.

Third, the focus can shift to teachers' emotions in TSRs. To address challenges that impose an emotional burden or to preventively manage potential relational stressors, exercises on *coping in relationships* may be indicated. Accordingly, Part 3 includes exercises on maintaining emotional boundaries, cognitive reframing and (self) compassion—strategies shown to be adaptive in managing stressors, opposed to approaches such as avoidance or suppression of negative emotions (Horowitz and Znoj, 1999; Taxer and Gross, 2018).

Finally, increasing awareness of generic attributes, external influences, and biases in TSRs may be indicated. Therefore, Part 3 includes exercises on *contextual reflection*. One exercise prompts reflection on differences and similarities between a teacher and specific student groups, to identify potential sources of bias (based on Greater Good Science Center, 2019). To address the school context, another exercise examines TSR-related school narratives to raise awareness of implicit TSR attitudes and beliefs within school

teams, which may subtly influence individual teachers' behavior (based on Blommaert, 2005).

3.4 Theoretical guide

To expand teachers' general knowledge regarding TSRs, the VIP Toolkit includes a theoretical guide. This guide presents key concepts from Pianta et al.'s (2003) conceptual model that are relevant for professional learning, as described in Section 2.1. In the Toolkit Manual, the theoretical content is introduced incrementally, serving as a unifying text that contextualizes and reinforces the exercises provided in Part 1, 2, and 3.

4 Evaluation of the VIP Toolkit

In practice, the materials described in Section 3 were delivered to 41 teachers through a structured format, outlined in Section 4.1. To shed light on the effectiveness of the intervention, different evaluation stages are described in Section 4.2, based on the model of Veerman and van Yperen (2007) and Van Yperen et al. (2017).

4.1 Delivered pedagogical format

Implementing the intervention, teachers received the VIP Toolkit according to the format outlined in Figure 3. To achieve

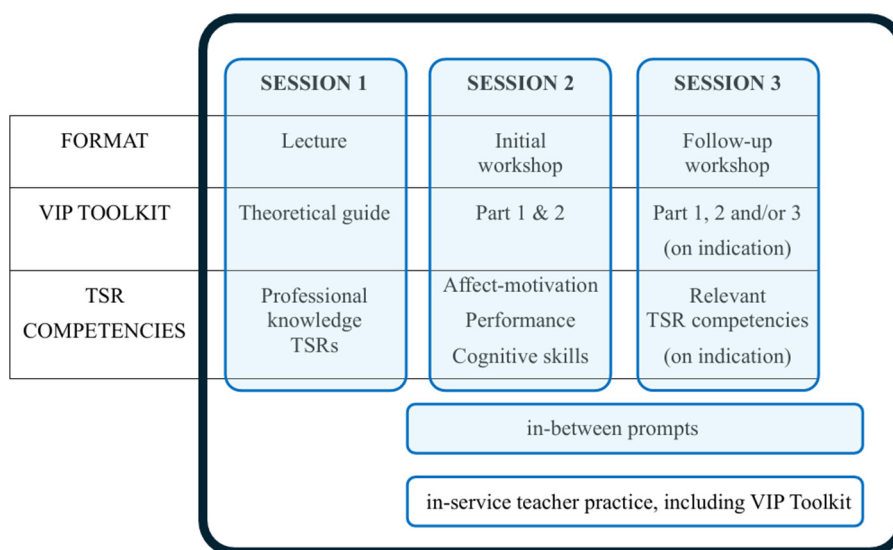


FIGURE 3

Delivered pedagogical format: implementation of the VIP Toolkit. VIP Toolkit = a comprehensive toolkit for professional development of teachers on teacher-student relationships in secondary education. VIP is a Dutch acronym for “Verbondenheid In Praktijk”, that is, “connections in practice”. TSR, Teacher-Student Relationship. The specific materials in the VIP Toolkit support the learning objectives, as operationalizations of the TSR competencies. Alongside the specific materials in the VIP Toolkit in three parts, a theoretical guide was provided to meet the objective of knowledge building. It is advised to work through Part 1, 2 and 3 subsequently. Therefore, in the delivered format, guided by an external coach, Part 1 and Part 2 are handled in Session 2. In Session 3, exercises are selected on indication, matching the learning goals and relevant TSR competencies of the teachers. This could imply a further elaboration on the exercises of Part 1 or 2, and/or exercises from Part 3 of the toolkit. Part 3 contains four exercises on teacher-student relationship challenges (with no advised sequence within Part 3). Between sessions, teachers are encouraged to practice what they learned, making use of the VIP Toolkit and receiving regular prompts from the coach.

the learning objectives, activities were facilitated by an external coach—the first author of this paper—bringing expertise in research, teaching, and coaching on the topic of TSRs. The coach played a central role in facilitating the practical application of acquired insights, guiding teachers in raising general awareness, developing knowledge and skills, and embedding these practices in real-life, day-to-day classroom interactions (Sheridan et al., 2009).

In Session 1 (1.5 h), the coach delivered a lecture, introducing the theoretical foundations of TSRs, with a primary focus on enhancing teachers’ professional knowledge. To support further knowledge development, participants received the theoretical guide, included in the Toolkit Manual (see 3.4).

In Session 2 (1.5 h), shortly after the lecture, the coach facilitated an initial workshop. The session began with the exercise in Part 1 of the VIP Toolkit, which encourages teachers to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs on TSRs, defining their role as educators. The workshop further focused on proactive affiliative practices, which form the behavioral core of everyday TSR building.

As a starting point, teachers received school-tailored feedback based on how students rated the teacher team on 32 teacher affiliative practices, corresponding to the themes in Table 2. To generate this feedback, students in the participating schools completed the 32-item TAP-S (Teacher Affiliative Practices—Student perspective) questionnaire approximately 5 months prior to the implementation trajectory. The TAP-S was developed in light of the second research goal of our prior study (Buyse et al., 2026), as no comprehensive student questionnaire existed to assess teacher affiliative behavior in secondary school. The items of the TAP-S are closely in line with findings from the thematic analysis (first research goal of the study), as are the suggestions for day-to-day

teacher behavior, spelled out in Section 3.2. Items for instance closely resembling the first two examples of concrete teacher behavior in Figure 1 are:

“My teacher welcomes me at the start of class” and “My teacher greets me when we meet in the hallway or outside.”

Students rated these items on a 5-point scale from “not at all applicable” to “completely applicable.” Additionally, students were asked whether they considered the described teacher behavior important for establishing a high-quality TSR (response options: yes/no).

Due to the close mapping between the items of the TAP-S and the suggestions for day-to-day behaviors in the VIP Toolkit, this student feedback was discussed collaboratively among colleagues and the coach: it provides an empirical basis for teachers to formulate concrete TSR goals and select relevant affiliative practices to implement in daily classroom interactions. To support active participation, a practice booklet accompanied the VIP Toolkit. This booklet included the school-tailored student feedback, key exercises from Parts 1 and 2, and structured reflection prompts for teachers to document their TSR-related experiences.

Between Sessions 2 and 3, teachers applied what they had learned in their daily teaching practice and were encouraged to use the practice booklet. During this period, teachers could contact the coach via email and received periodic prompts and reminders to boost ongoing engagement.

Session 3 (1.5 h) was scheduled 2 to 3 months after Session 2. This follow-up workshop allowed for reflection on the practical

implementation of affiliative behaviors. The session began with a round-up of Part 2 and included time for teachers to share their experiences. Based on the participants' questions and goals, the coach adapted the session content by drawing on relevant parts of the VIP Toolkit, including a deeper exploration of Parts 1 or 2 and/or a selection of exercises from Part 3, when indicated.

After Session 3, teachers were encouraged to continue practicing what they had learned by selecting exercises aligned with their personal learning goals. The coach remained available for follow-up questions and support until the end of the school year.

4.2 Different levels of evidence and effectiveness

Veerman and van Yperen (2007) distinguish different stages to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. According to the authors, theoretical evidence adds to the plausible effectiveness of interventions. The theoretical foundations of the toolkit's targeted content and related competencies are addressed extensively in Sections 1 and 2. Furthermore, theoretical evidence does not only involve theoretical justification of the intervention's content but also theory-driven principles for implementation. Two such principles are foundational for implementing the VIP Toolkit.

First, grounding tools for professional development in the daily teaching context of Flanders is expected to facilitate implementation (European Commission, 2021). For this reason, the exercise on attitudes and beliefs—incorporating real life teacher quotations—was deliberately placed at the start of the trajectory, as engaging teachers' perspectives within their specific school contexts supports the practical integration of the toolkit (Sheridan et al., 2009). Combined with the professional knowledge provided in the initial lecture session, this approach fosters a shared professional language around TSRs within the school team. Such a language can increase teacher motivation (Koenen et al., 2022) and serve as the foundation for a collective vision on TSRs within the school team (Di Lisio et al., 2025; Martin and Collie, 2019). In turn, a shared, theoretically grounded vision on TSRs paves the way for training teachers in effective relational practices (Quinlan, 2016).

Second, according to self-determination theory, addressing teachers' needs for competence and autonomy or self-direction, promotes their intrinsic motivation for the implementation of professional development tools (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Implementing the VIP Toolkit, teachers can set their own TSR learning goals, select which exercises to engage in, and decide which specific practices to implement in their classrooms. They can also self-evaluate the implementation of concrete affiliative behaviors, to consolidate professional growth. Combined with the modular design of the pedagogical format, teachers are maximally enabled to take ownership of their professional learning.

To progress beyond plausible effectiveness, empirical evidence is required, including explicit assessment of outcomes at a higher evaluation stage (Veerman and van Yperen, 2007). Therefore, a small-scale implementation study was conducted in six secondary schools in Flanders using a quasi-experimental pre-posttest design. Three schools in the experimental condition implemented the VIP Toolkit as described in Section 4.1. In the active control condition, teacher teams participated in the first session of the delivered

format only (theoretical foundations of TSRs), which was identical to the one in the experimental condition. Teachers in the control group continued their regular teaching practices without further intervention. In total, 80 teachers of seventh and eighth grade participated, 41 of whom implemented the VIP Toolkit in the experimental condition.

Pre- and post-measurements were conducted in both conditions, administered immediately before Session 1 and after Session 3. The effects of the VIP Toolkit will be examined across several student and teacher outcomes. For student-reported outcomes, a positive effect is anticipated on student ratings of teacher affiliative practices, as measured by the TAP-S. Additional expected effects include improvements in proximal student variables, that is, perceived TSR quality—measured through the subscales Affiliation and Dissatisfaction, derived from the People In My Life (Murray and Greenberg, 2000; Ridenour et al., 2006)—and more distal student variables, that is, student behavioral and emotional engagement, and academic self-concept—measured through the eponymous subscales developed by Skinner et al. (2008) and the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2021). For teacher-reported outcomes, a positive effect is expected on teachers' attitudes toward TSRs—measured through selected items of the COMMIT questionnaire (Borremans and Spilt, 2022)—reflecting increased awareness and valuation of the importance of TSRs. Evidence on the psychometric properties of the TAP-S is described in Buyse et al. (2026). Instruments on all other outcome variables have been well-validated for an adolescent population in Flanders (e.g., De Laet et al., 2016; Engels et al., 2016).

In addition to the quantitative data, focus group interviews were conducted with teachers in the experimental condition shortly after the post-measurements. The interviews, led by the second author of this paper, aimed to evaluate the content, form and implementation of the VIP Toolkit. Topics included perceived strengths and weaknesses, user satisfaction, and the perceived impact of the toolkit as reported by the participating teachers (Schultes, 2021).

In sum, this small-scale implementation study represents a feasibility trial designed to evaluate the implementation, acceptability, and preliminary signals of impact of the intervention, prior to a fully powered and randomized control efficacy trial, corresponding to the highest evaluation stage in the model of Veerman and van Yperen (2007).

5 Discussion

The VIP Toolkit was developed to support professional teacher development in TSRs during the first years of secondary education. Theoretical and practical implications of the tool are discussed in Section 5.1. Directions for future development and investigation are presented in Section 5.2.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

Taken together, the VIP Toolkit may support the development of TSR competencies by targeting teacher behavior, mental representations of TSRs, malleable teacher dispositions, and

broader systemic reflections. The toolkit aligns with an integrated perspective on TSRs (Pianta et al., 2003) as well as with a general model of professional teacher development (Blömeke and Kaiser, 2017). To our knowledge, no existing instrument provides such a comprehensive approach to support secondary teachers in building TSRs in a predominantly proactive, accessible, and flexible manner.

With its primary focus on everyday affiliative behaviors, the core components of the VIP Toolkit are easy to implement into teachers' day-to-day activities (Cook et al., 2018; McHugh et al., 2013). To strengthen this connection, specific measures have been embedded into the delivery format. First, the guidance of an external coach can motivate teachers to integrate selected affiliative behaviors into their daily teaching. Throughout the implementation process, the primary role of the coach is to encourage teachers to reflect on their current practices in light of the 'good practices' suggested in the VIP Toolkit, which are grounded in previous research (Buyse et al., 2026). It is precisely this bridging of prior research findings with teachers' everyday educational practice that facilitates successful implementation (Sheridan et al., 2009). Reflection activities designed to foster this nexus are particularly effective for engaging educational staff (Luccock et al., 2003). Second, the inclusion of school-specific TAP-S data can provide a valuable means to tailor TSR-related learning objectives to school-specific needs. The integration of these data into daily practice can also be guided by the external coach. More generally, linking research-based data to practice renders prior findings and their underlying frameworks more vivid and relevant for teachers, thereby increasing their motivation and sense of empowerment (Barkham and Mellor-Clark, 2003).

Empowering teachers is essential, as they inevitably come into the picture as crucial agents of change when implementing an in-service professional development tool for TSRs. When teachers are motivated and engaged, the VIP Toolkit provides an opportunity to shift the focus from students and their potential challenges in classroom interactions to the relationships in which these interactions are embedded, as well as to teachers' own professional roles and needs (Spilt et al., 2025). Teachers in the focus group interviews generally described the reflective nature of the implementation process as motivating. Balanced reflection—acknowledging both professional strengths and areas for development—appeared to support their sense of competence. Several teachers emphasized that identifying what was already working well was as important as pinpointing growth opportunities, as this prevented the reflection process from being experienced as evaluative or deficit-focused. With regard to autonomy and relatedness, participants highlighted the need for an emotionally safe, non-hierarchical, and non-evaluative environment as a precondition for engaging deeply with their affiliative practices towards students. Their accounts suggest that willingness to adjust and refine their teaching practices depended on feeling emotionally supported and approached as equals by colleagues and the coach. In this way, the social climate of the implementation process emerged as a key enabling condition for professional learning.

Through the TAP-S instrument, students too are offered an opportunity to voice their educational needs in shaping the class climate, as they are experts in perceiving whether and how the

classroom environment meets these needs (Grover, 2004; Salter et al., 2024). In this way, the VIP Toolkit has the potential to empower both teachers and students as equitable partners in co-constructing positive relational dynamics—recognizing each as “Very Important Persons” in the everyday reality of the classroom.

5.2 Suggestions for future research and development

Despite the merits of the two measures to support implementation described above, both also introduce potential limitations. First, although the TAP-S can serve as a starting point for reflection and coaching, and based on data of 496 seventh- and eighth-grade students, psychometric qualities are promising (Buyse et al., 2026), additional research on the validity of the questionnaire is warranted to determine whether it can function as a rigorous research instrument. To examine the predictive validity of the TAP-S for assessing the VIP Toolkit's effectiveness in particular, observations of affiliative teacher behavior (e.g., through video analysis of classroom interactions) could provide a valuable additional outcome measure for triangulation.

Second, notwithstanding the supportive role of an external coach, scaling up the implementation of the VIP Toolkit in schools may be limited, due to financial or logistical constraints. Providing the toolkit to individual teachers for self-assessment and professional development could minimize both constraints. Yet, guided reflection and sharing of thoughts are considered particular merits of the toolkit to foster implementation in daily practice. Therefore, the toolkit is designed to be used by teacher teams, under the guidance of a coach. Including three coaching sessions of 1.5 hours each—as implemented in the present study—is considered the minimum required to adequately cover all content elements. Future research could explore alternative implementation formats. It is however likely that certain exercises—such as relational reflection through teacher narratives—cannot be easily conducted without an external coach, who can provide timely prompts and the emotional security needed to share personal feelings and cognitions (Spilt et al., 2025).

An alternative option may consist of a “train-the-trainer” module for professionals already working in educational settings, such as internal school counselors. Research shows that train-the-trainer approaches support the progressive transfer of research-based expertise to local practitioners, enabling them to lead implementation in ways that fit their specific school context (Cockerill et al., 2025; Orfaly et al., 2005). This echoes findings from implementation research indicating that interventions are most effective when internal staff is empowered to embed evidence-based practices within their own settings (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005). Internal facilitators may also enhance sustainability, as teachers are more likely to maintain new practices when supported by trusted colleagues rather than by external experts (Neuman and Wright, 2010). In this way, a train-the-trainer approach can bridge research and practice by preparing local professionals to act as “knowledge brokers,” translating conceptual principles into practical strategies tailored

to real classroom contexts (Lomas, 2007). From an organizational perspective, engaging internal staff as coaches may further facilitate implementation, particularly regarding the scheduling and frequency of sessions. Preliminary feedback from participating teachers suggested that three guided reflection sessions (totaling 4.5 hours) may be insufficient to address the complexities of TSRs, especially with challenging students. Therefore, integrating guided reflection into existing consultation structures within the school may offer a more feasible and effective approach, enabling teachers to access internal coaching more flexibly and, when needed, more frequently. Continued research is needed to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of this alternative format for the VIP Toolkit in particular.

From a theoretical perspective, building TSR competencies is complex, as it requires an integrated focus on knowledge, skills, affective-motivational elements, and attention to contextual influences (Blömeke and Kaiser, 2017; Pianta et al., 2003). The results of the study described above will have to indicate whether the VIP Toolkit achieves the intended outcomes aligned with the multifaceted learning objectives related to TSRs. In the present study, entire schools were assigned to either the experimental or control condition, meaning that confounding variables at the school level (e.g., culture, leadership, demographics, concurrent initiatives) may obscure the specific effects attributable to the VIP Toolkit. Yet, for an intervention to be considered truly efficacious—corresponding to the highest effectiveness stage in Veerman and van Yperen's (2007) model—its effects must also be demonstrated under controlled or ideal conditions, for example in the context of a randomized controlled trial (RCT; Barkham and Mellor-Clark, 2003). To date, this design paper provides theoretical evidence for the plausible effectiveness of the VIP Toolkit, thereby laying the groundwork for future empirical research—particularly RCT designs—that can more rigorously test its impact.

As a substantive part of the VIP Toolkit is explicitly tailored to the needs of secondary school students in Flanders, it remains to be studied whether the toolkit would fit other educational levels, contexts, and countries. While the toolkit shows promise within the current context, its use in other regions may require careful adaptation to ensure contextual relevance and ecological validity. As the VIP Toolkit is explicitly designed to bridge the gap with local practice, differences in educational norms, teacher beliefs, and system-level structures across countries must be taken into account. Successful implementation elsewhere will likely depend on alignment with local practices and integration within existing teacher support or consultation systems. Either way, the current version of the VIP Toolkit seeks to translate TSR theory and research into the daily practice in secondary schools. Simultaneously, the presented design reframes teacher professional development by explicitly centering relational teacher–student practices at the heart of teacher learning, potentially empowering both secondary school teachers and students.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of the KU Leuven. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

EB: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. ML: Writing – review & editing. HC: Writing – review & editing. KV: Writing – review & editing. JS: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Supervision.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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