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Partnership in the Classroom: Engaging Students Through Inclusive Student-Teacher Relationships to Advance Social Justice

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Abstract: Student-teacher relationships matter in creating inclusive student engagement opportunities in higher education. Student engagement is a wide-ranging topic, and much of the existing literature discusses student course representation (where student leaders gather feedback and work with staff to enhance the quality of courses) and curriculum co-creation (where students and teachers partner in decision-making regarding aspects of a course) as two distinct approaches. However, there is a notable paucity of prior empirical research comparing the ways that student representation and curriculum co-creation can lead to different forms of relationship-building. Therefore, this qualitative study first examined student course representatives' and co-creators' perceptions of effective student-teacher relationships in courses, followed by an analysis of the differences in those relationships between teachers and (a) course representatives and (b) curriculum co-creators. We identified five elements of effective student-teacher relationships within the classroom context that help students feel included, connected, respected, valued, and inspired. We found that different communication structures inherent in course representation and curriculum co-creation yielded distinct contributions and risks in building inclusive student-teacher relationships. To deepen understanding of inclusive student engagement, we explore opportunities to enhance these relationships and work towards meaningful partnerships between students and teachers that can advance social justice.

Keywords: inclusion; student engagement; student representation; curriculum co-creation; student partnership; social justice

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1. Introduction

There has been a significant focus on student engagement in higher education globally in the last 30 years (Kuh 2008; Bryson 2014; Dai and Matthews 2023). Kuh (2009, p. 683) defines student engagement as 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college [or university] and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities'. In this way, learning is seen as a joint proposition that is the responsibility of both students and staff. The benefits of student engagement are wide-ranging for both students and their institutions, since it positively impacts student wellbeing, the development of self-efficacy and self-confidence, transformative learning, satisfaction with their higher education experience, success and retention, as well as institutional reputation, as seen in the United States (Kuh 2008), the United Kingdom (Trowler 2010), Australia (Bowden et al. 2019), South Africa (Schreiber and Yu 2016), China (Hu et al. 2015), Thailand (Hallinger and Lu 2013), and Malaysia (Chong

and Soo 2021) amongst many other countries. In these studies, many have spotlighted the complex identities, interactions, and working relationships existing between teachers and students, which directly impact or mediate students' engagement and their higher education experience (Cook-Sather et al. 2018; Matthews et al. 2018). For students, these relationships can 'make or break' their experience of student engagement (Chadwick 2014, p. 112). Therefore, we have been compelled to build on previous studies (many of which were large-scale, quantitative studies) to further examine student-teacher relationships in depth in one specific educational context.

We are particularly interested in student representation and curriculum co-creation, which are two different approaches for promoting high levels of student engagement to advance learning. Student representatives are usually democratically-selected student leaders who are involved in university committees to enhance the quality of student experience broadly. They include course representatives who focus on enhancing students' academic experience in class. Curriculum co-creation 'implies students and academic staff working in partnership to create some or all aspects of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the learning experience' (Bovill et al. 2011, p. 137). Whole-cohort curriculum co-creation initiatives give all students in a class the opportunity to work as co-creators alongside staff to enhance their own learning and teaching experience (Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2023). This 'grassroots' form of student engagement can co-exist with student representation as a 'top-down' approach to engagement via formal committees, which is embedded in quality assurance and enhancement structures and processes (Bols 2020; Varwell 2021).

In our study, we focus on two different dimensions of student engagement by examining student course representation and curriculum co-creation in the Scottish context to explore the types of effective student-staff relationships that can manifest, the extent to which they advance partnership working, and their impact on the student experience to advance inclusion and social justice in classrooms. Student-teacher partnerships tend to promote extremely high levels of student engagement. Only a limited number of valuable papers, such as Matthews and Dollinger's (2022) and Patrick's (2022), highlight the distinctions between student representation and student-teacher partnerships. For example, Matthews and Dollinger (2022) warn against the potential risks of conflating these different forms of engagement since not all examples of student representation promote working in partnership. They also suggest that it would be valuable to expand exploration of student engagement to compare multiple approaches to enrich the strategies of maintaining highly engaged students' enthusiasm in different student engagement approaches. Therefore, in this publication we examine students' perspectives on and experiences of student representation and curriculum co-creation.

Building on previous research, our study focuses on understanding how different approaches to fostering student engagement can promote inclusion in different ways in the classroom, which may influence and/or be impacted by student-teacher relationships. In doing so, this study firstly echoes previous scholarship that has celebrated student engagement, including student representation and partnerships in co-creating curricula. Then, we explore engaged students' perceptions of effective student-teacher relationships at the classroom level and how the elements of these relationships manifest in different contexts such as student course representation and curriculum co-creation. Both student course representatives and co-creators tend to be highly engaged students, but they take up different opportunities to enhance the academic experience. The student course representative role often draws on similar principles to curriculum co-creation, but, depending on the values shared and the relationships developed with teachers, their opportunities to work in partnership with teachers can differ. We also critically analyse effective student-teacher

relationships in the contexts of course representation and curriculum co-creation with respect to how they may promote equity and social justice in learning.

2. Context: Engaging with the Literature

2.1. Student Engagement

To contextualise our study, focusing on effective relationships between students and teachers (generally, and then within the contexts of student representation and curriculum co-creation), it is first important to look closely at the topic of student engagement. The wide-ranging literature on student engagement shows how broad this concept is, varying by researchers' and practitioners' schools of thought and context (Trowler 2010). In an international literature review of student engagement, Trowler (2010) emphasises the importance of those researching student engagement to pay attention to how students are engaging. For example, Fredricks et al. (2004) in the US developed a well-known, three-pronged framework for student engagement, showing that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement can be either positive, 'neutral', or negative. Positive engagement is understood as engaging with desired learning opportunities and activities, while negative engagement is active resistance to them, for whatever reason. Behavioural engagement includes dimensions such as attendance and participation. Cognitive engagement with educationally purposeful activities deepens students' understanding of the academic subject. Lastly, students' emotional engagement includes their motivation and having a 'will to learn' (Barnett 2007, p. 1). Bowden et al. (2019) expanded their analysis to focus on four pillars of student engagement and success: affective, social, cognitive, and behavioural engagement; they showed that, at a major Australian tertiary institution, affective engagement strongly influenced not only institutional reputation but also student wellbeing and transformative learning.

Teachers' own emotional and affective engagement has a strong influence on students' engagement, since 'The message from students is clear: if we want to engage them, then subject expertise is far less important than enthusiasm, passion, and authentic engagement' (Foster and Southwell-Sander 2014, p. 150). Similarly, in this study we are particularly interested in what staff do to engage students. Emotional engagement also appears to be correlated with feelings of belonging within a learning community since positive working relationships and feeling that others care can affect engagement, as found by various researchers in the UK (Chadwick 2014; Foster and Southwell-Sander 2014; Furlonger et al. 2014). In addition, the role of learning communities and relationships amongst peers and between students and teachers has been increasingly recognised in enhancing not only emotional engagement but also behavioural and cognitive engagement in the UK and Australia (Bryson 2014; Matthews et al. 2018). These are important areas of engagement that advance effective student-teacher relationships, which we explore in our study.

2.2. Student Representation

Student engagement has evolved in different ways across the world over time, with Bols (2020) noting that American universities have tended to focus on student engagement with learning in the classroom, whereas universities in the UK have traditionally focused on collective student engagement in relation to student voice and representation in governance. Student representation has been widely employed in UK universities since it was embedded in higher education quality assurance in the 1990s (HEQC 1996).

A common conception shows student representatives as democratically-elected agents working between the wider student cohort and staff to enhance the quality of the academic experience for all students (Cornelius-Bell et al. 2023). Student representation is embedded in the Quality Code for Higher Education as one form of student engagement, with student

representation embedded across the UK in quality assurance and enhancement structures (QAA 2024). Student representatives tend to be engaged students who, at the level of the course, department/faculty, or across the whole university, collect feedback, work with staff to improve academic and student life, and respond to proposals from staff (Cornelius-Bell et al. 2023; sparqs n.d.a). Therefore, student representatives sit on committees with staff to enhance each of their courses and programmes, as well as the wider student experience. It is important to note these various forms of student representation, and in this paper, we refer to student representatives broadly, but we focus on those who are course representatives.

In our study, we are particularly interested in how student-teacher relationships can help them advance social justice in higher education. Key aims of student representation are the democratic inclusion of student voices in university decision-making and the promotion of equity to enhance the student experience for all students, particularly those from traditionally marginalised backgrounds (Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Matthews and Dollinger 2022). Another aspect of the student representative role is closing the feedback loop in which they facilitate information moving between the class, student representatives, and staff (Matthews and Dollinger 2022). Student representation is a process of listening and 're-listening' amongst students and staff, adjusting and re-adjusting learning and teaching (Geurts et al. 2023, p. 4). As such, student representatives are recognised as relationship managers between the whole student cohort, staff, and the institution (Lizzio and Wilson 2009; sparqs n.d.a). They need to honestly share feedback with staff while maintaining good relationships with staff and other students, although many studies found varied challenges in doing so (Zuo and Ratsoy 1999; Geurts et al. 2023).

However, depending on the institution's involvement and the level of support received from staff, students could be positioned as patronised, peripheral, pioneered, or partnered in Cadogan's Matrix (Cadogan 1998). Therefore, we can see that some student representatives are consulted on student perspectives, but they can be patronised if their input is ignored or positioned as peripheral to decision-making. Other student representatives are involved in opportunities to take more active roles in enhancing the student experience, and some are able to work in partnership with staff to collaborate with joint ownership and decision-making (Cadogan 1998; Varwell 2021). We also look at the extent to which student representatives have opportunities to work in partnership with teachers.

2.3. Curriculum Co-Creation

Curriculum co-creation promotes high levels of student engagement within courses, but its collaborative ethos—with students and staff working in partnership with shared responsibility—makes it distinct from other forms of engagement, such as active learning, student-centred learning, and inquiry-based learning (Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022). Furthermore, Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014, p. 1) work was influential in emphasising that partnerships such as curriculum co-creation 'are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty [or staff]', and these are building blocks for equity and social justice in learning. A newer definition developed by the first author (Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022) further clarifies what this form of student engagement looks and feels like:

> *Curriculum co-creation is a relational way of working underpinned by shared responsibility, reciprocity in learning from each other, mutual respect, care, trust, and empathy. This values-based, creative process helps staff and students work together to share and negotiate decision-making about aspects of curricula, which often leads to mutual benefits for learners and teachers.*

A recent systematic literature review shows how curriculum co-creation has risen dramatically in recent years globally, with initiatives cited in nearly 40 countries, although

most predominantly in the UK, the US, Australia, and Malaysia (Zarandi et al. 2024). Curriculum co-creation has been found to enhance student-teacher relationships, communication, and enjoyment of learning and teaching (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2021; Zarandi et al. 2024). Building relationships via curriculum co-creation tends to promote an open dialogue between the whole cohort of students and teachers regarding meaningful teaching and learning, which helps both students and staff to promote social justice and equity by working to balance power between them (Cook-Sather et al. 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022; Zarandi et al. 2024). Beyond a focus on dramatically increasing student satisfaction (Dollinger et al. 2018), curriculum co-creation can be seen as a pedagogy that can promote positive disruption and transformation for both students and teachers, since it promotes inclusion, equity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al. 2019; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2021; Masuku et al. 2025). This is an area we return to throughout our paper.

2.4. Student-Staff Partnerships in the Conext of Student Representation, Curriculum Co-Creation, and Social Justice

Many different types of student-staff partnerships have been developed globally (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Matthews et al. 2018; Zarandi et al. 2024). The Higher Education Academy (HEA, now Advance HE) and the National Union of Students based in the UK outline four stages of student engagement: consultation, involvement, participation, and partnership (Healey et al. 2014, p. 16). Therefore, not all forms of student engagement are considered to be student-staff partnerships (Healey et al. 2014; Matthews and Dollinger 2022). As described above, although the key aims of student representation are equity and the inclusion of diverse student voices, it is only those student representatives who are given appropriate opportunities and responsibilities who work in partnership with staff (Cadogan 1998; Varwell 2021). Student co-creators are generally seen to engage in partnerships with staff built on the foundation of shared responsibility, reciprocity, respect, care, trust, and empathy to work towards a sense of equity and inclusion in the classroom (Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022). These shared, foundational values help teachers share power in decision-making regarding aspects of curricula with students during curriculum co-creation, with outcomes often including students' increased agency, confidence, and self-efficacy (Dollinger and Lodge 2019; Moore-Cherry 2019; Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022), which can promote social justice in the classroom.

Partnerships, including curriculum co-creation, can advance social justice by counteracting the neoliberal values and culture of performativity prevalent in higher education (Gibson and Cook-Sather 2020; de Bie et al. 2021; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2023). For example, Gibson and Cook-Sather (2020, p. 22) stated:

> *Pedagogical partnerships support students and faculty [teachers] in embracing the vulnerability and transformative potential of collaborative work focused on working toward more equitable and inclusive practices.*

McArthur (2019) describes how social justice is innately social, emphasising how inclusive relationships and mutual recognition in higher education are central to helping students understand the value of their contributions. Furthermore, Masuku et al. (2025, p. 3) describe how partnerships underpinning curriculum co-creation:

> *provide social justice opportunities that can disrupt the power dynamics that exist between teachers and students through encouraging the equal distribution of agency and power. . . This disruption emphasises student voice and, in doing so, is an act of social justice, particularly in contexts where these same students have been historically marginalised.*

In these ways, partnerships can be transformational not only for students, but also for teachers and their institutions (Cook-Sather et al. 2019; de Bie et al. 2021; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2021). We explore this important theme further in our study.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Question

This research was part of a larger doctoral study led by the first author on the nature of effective student engagement in Scottish universities, focusing on curriculum co-creation and how it may advance individuals' aims for students in higher education. The aspect of the study explored here focuses on the research questions:

(1) What do effective relationships between teachers and students look like to students in courses from the perspective of student course representatives and co-creators?
(2) What are the differences in those relationships between teachers and (a) course representatives and (b) curriculum co-creators from these students' perspectives?

3.2. Positionality

It is important to recognise the positionality of the authors and its influence on the data collection and analysis presented. At the time the data were collected, the first author worked at a students' association in Scotland, supporting student course representatives' development, and she now works in academic development to enhance the educational experience for both staff and students.

The second author is a PhD student, focusing on student engagement and student learning experiences. She is a student representative at the school and national levels, working on enhancing student engagement through a partnership approach.

3.3. Methodological Approach to Data Collection

The research question lent itself to qualitative methods of exploring meaning-making in ways that are exploratory, reflexive, relational, and participatory (Punch 2006). This approach was well suited to help us understand the subjective and nuanced dynamic nature of student-teacher relationships in student engagement. The data collection focused on the perceptions of highly engaged students, with the first set of students participating in this research being engaged in curriculum co-creation initiatives and the second set of participants engaged in student representation.

Using criterion sampling focused on cases that fit Bovill et al.'s (2011) definition of curriculum co-creation (see p. 3), publications, conference presentations, and word of mouth helped identify 15 curriculum co-creation initiatives across 8 subject areas at 5 Scottish universities. The 15 initiatives included at least one—and potentially all—aspects of planning (10 instances), implementation (11 instances), and/or evaluation (7 instances) of students' learning experience. Examples included co-creation of:

- aspects of a course (such as content, peer teaching, marking criteria, and/or assessment)
- educational resources for other students
- community projects or research projects

Staff who led these initiatives identified student co-creators, with 11 engaged students participating in individual, semi-structured interviews over a period of four months. Two of these co-creators had previous experience as course representatives.

To identify the second set of participants, criterion sampling was used with a focus on engaged undergraduate students who were interested in learning and teaching but who had not participated in curriculum co-creation initiatives. One research-intensive university in Scotland was selected, and over 1000 course representatives received a newsletter from the Students' Association including an invitation to participate in a focus group discussion. Two focus groups were held several months after the interviews were conducted, with 16 course representatives participating.

The study received Level 1 ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education and Sport. All participants reviewed participant information sheets and signed consent forms. The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were held over a period of eight months (with the interviews taking place first), and they focused on similar questions on effective approaches to learning, what student engagement looks and feels like, and perceived benefits and challenges during their engagement. All interviews and the two focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the first author.

These participants were generally not aware that the interviewer worked at a students' association. The theme of student representation arose organically during seven of the semi-structured interviews with co-creators. The 16 course representatives participating in this study were aware that the first author leading the focus group discussions worked at a students' association, and the theme of student representation arose naturally during both focus groups.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed while drawing on a constructivist grounded theory approach, which is an 'inductive, iterative, interactive, and comparative method geared towards theory construction' (Thornberg and Charmaz 2012, p. 41). This approach was foundational to the textual analysis that helped the first author to identify themes. The NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate systematic coding and thematic analysis of the extensive data.

Following completion of the first author's PhD, the two authors decided to collaborate on this study to reanalyse the primary data relating to themes that had not featured prominently in the thesis. They independently re-evaluated data that had been coded as 'effective student-teacher relationships', 'student representation', and 'curriculum co-creation' to identify the themes presented below. The authors engaged in contextual interpretation to decode the context of the participants' quotations and interpret latent meanings.

4. Findings

In addressing our research questions, we first explore what effective relationships between teachers and students look like to students in courses before we analyse differences in those relationships between teachers and (a) course representatives and (b) curriculum co-creators. Our study reveals how effective student-teacher relationships can break down barriers, particularly for diverse students, to help them engage in classroom learning, creating more equitable opportunities in learning and teaching. Five elements of effective student-teacher relationships emerged from the data, as identified by both groups of student participants (course representatives and curriculum co-creators). These students independently highlighted how teachers supported them to engage with classroom learning by helping them feel included, connected, respected, valued, and inspired, as detailed below (Section 4.1). Subsequently, the findings shed light on students' nuanced experiences and perceptions of the five aforementioned elements in student representation and curriculum co-creation (Sections 4.2 and 4.3).

4.1. Student Perceptions of Effective Student-Teacher Relationships

Highly engaged students in this study (course representatives and curriculum co-creators) underscored the importance of effective student-teacher relationships in creating a welcoming and engaging learning environment. To understand what constitutes effective relationships for these students, this section primarily presents their perspectives as a whole.

They suggested five interconnected elements, as discussed below, which highlight the importance of teachers working to meet students' different needs as learners and as human

beings. These five elements of effective student-teacher relationships can help alleviate potential barriers for student engagement.

4.1.1. Feeling Included

Students highlighted that effective teachers were inclusive of students' needs by being aware of and welcoming students' differences. A co-creator remarked:

> *. . .effective teaching is when the teacher is aware of students' different personalities and different ways of learning. . . .People learn in such different ways that being aware of that and trying to change up the activities so that it's different each time. . . [and] having more interactive activities. . . [since] obviously everybody has something to share and something to give, even if you don't realise it.*

Furthermore, participants emphasised that they felt included when teachers invited all types of students' questions and discussions, and student representatives particularly highlighted the importance of teachers' accessibility by being responsive and offering support where needed. Students commended teachers' inclusion of diversity, recognising when teachers taught flexibly and adaptively based on how students preferred to engage as well as their levels of understanding and energy. For example, one co-creator stated:

> *As the course was between 3 and 5 pm, as soon as she felt the energy dropping, she immediately changed tasks and... got students to discuss things.... I think the key to her effective teaching was... adapting to what was going on with the students. . . there were times when she lectured within it and times when she facilitated and there were times when she did question and answer. She constantly adapted. . . and she could do it because she knew her subject inside out. She clearly knew exactly the key points she wanted to get over. . . [She] came back to them at the end and it was just very impressive to see.*

This highly effective teacher demonstrates inclusive, student-centred teaching as she adapts flexibly while drawing on her subject knowledge and pedagogic expertise. This quotation exemplifies how students are more likely to engage in learning and develop good relationships with teachers when teachers are dynamic and responsive to include students.

4.1.2. Feeling Connected

Students acknowledged the importance of teachers' efforts in creating learning communities to improve their academic experience and help every student feel they belong, although participants from both cohorts (course representatives and curriculum co-creators) reflected on experiences when this did not happen due to a lack of communication. For example, student representatives described how they could be '*quite bogged down when someone is just literally reading a lecture slide to you*', but, instead, described the benefits of teachers who drew on and encouraged students to share '*the knowledge people bring into the class*'.

Furthermore, one co-creator described the positive impact of a learning community—an autonomous learning group—designed by their teacher:

> *It's a way to make friends, and it means when you go to the tutorial, you'll have people who you know, who you can sit with. You feel more comfortable because you're not the only person in the class. That was the best thing that they could have done for our degree because that really helped me build confidence. Whereas in courses where they didn't do that, you did feel a bit isolated in a tutorial so you might not be able to speak out.*

This means, for some students who may not be confident in speaking out, the effective design of collective learning experiences can enhance their engagement. Another co-creator also perceived how interpersonal relationships within learning communities positively impacted their learning in class:

> *...going to university is not just what you learn but it's an environment where you can develop personally and intellectually that is not solely something done by yourself. That is a very socially learned thing.*

This participant and others addressed students' social development as an important sphere in student engagement in higher education, alongside their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. Students in this research also reported that small classes facilitated communication and a sense of community, and they were more likely to develop a better relationship with teachers because students were '*able to talk to them or ask them for more advice*'. Students appreciated the effort of teachers who were approachable and created welcoming learning communities that connected and included different types of students.

4.1.3. Feeling Respected

Feeling respected denotes listening and being open to perspectives that may differ from one's own. Student participants noted that they felt respected when teachers were responsive and approachable. Four co-creators and one course representative highlighted this characteristic of effective teachers. For example, a course representative described:

> *She would do something straight away for anyone that brought feedback to her. She wouldn't just leave it till the end of the year. . . [and] she'd make changes as she went along.*

Respect is particularly addressed in students seeking support from teachers. In addition to taking student feedback seriously and responding to it, several co-creators discussed different ways that teachers demonstrated respect, including '*simple things like being good at responding to emails*', showing up '*regularly on the discussion forum and answering questions*', '*welcoming questions from everyone*', and also '*not critiquing you for asking for help*'. These approaches all point to the idea that students' feeling respected emerges from teachers' action on students' actions, particularly teachers' responsiveness towards students' different forms of engagement and asking for support. Notably, students could feel vulnerable in asking for help, but teachers' non-judgemental attitudes can cultivate a learning environment built on support and trust between students and teachers.

4.1.4. Feeling Valued

Based on the respect given by teachers, students felt that effective teachers valued their views as important ones, seriously considered students' perspectives, and always included students' perspectives in decision-making. Notably, three student co-creators addressed how they felt more engaged when teachers were open to learning from students. They described teachers' openness of sharing experiences, perspectives, and ideas as a sign of teachers showing empathy and care:

> *. . .[Effective teachers] really care. . . and would be very much invested in the work you are doing. I think it is about the teacher conveying interest to the student.*

One course representative further noted that teachers' interest in students' ideas not only developed their self-confidence, but this also could shift the power imbalance of knowledge between students and teachers:

> *...where the tutors are really interested [in] and they want to share knowledge with you. It lifts the dynamic and everyone seems to engage more. It's just so much more interesting and people want to engage.*

When feeling valued, students with different levels of knowledge were more likely to feel confident in communicating as equals with teachers. One co-creator stressed how they felt more connected with teachers who created positive, dialogic spaces that valued student contributions:

> *...often those lecturers that give a bit more personal touch are a lot more willing to meet with you to discuss ideas...some lecturers are far more approachable because you have seen their more human side, not just their crazy academic side.*

As such, feeling valued by teachers and seeing them as human helps participating students to build close student-teacher relationships that narrow the distance between them and facilitate student engagement in the learning community.

4.1.5. Feeling Inspired

When describing effective student-teacher relationships, four co-creators and two course representatives, unprompted, highlighted how teachers inspired them by sharing their passion for their subject. For example, one co-creator spoke excitedly about:

> *. . .lecturers who were absolutely fantastic and loved their subject; they were great lecturers. I think the passion really stands out. . . and they wanted you to be passionate about it [the subject] as well. That really came across and they wanted you to do well rather than people who were just there because that was what their job was or they had to teach on the side of research.*

Similarly, another co-creator reflected on teachers' *'enthusiasm and passion for the subject that will really captivate an audience of learners'*. This passion for the subject is vital for engaging diverse students in class, and teachers' passion for sharing that subject with students through their teaching. As a result of teachers sharing such passions, many students were likely to feel more motivated to engage with learning. For example, a course representative stated how effective teachers:

> *. . .really try to engage you, not just with their material but why it's important and of greater relevance. . . .[Then] I would then work harder... [and] be more inspired.*

This shows that passionate teachers have the power to inspire students, particularly those who may lack motivation or knowledge of the subject. In addition, discussing the wider context of students' experiences and the relevance of the subject for their future work is vital for inspiring students. A co-creator expanded on feeling inspired:

> *When we have a particularly good lecture, I walk out thinking 'hey I want to build that into my own work' or 'how can I build those ideas into what I want to do in my future?'. That drive and forward thinking is how I feel when things are going really well.*

Both cohorts of participants described the importance of effective staff nurturing students' future ambitions. Furthermore, students highlighted teachers who nurtured their curiosity rather than 'spoon-feeding' students, as a co-creator stated:

> *The most effective student/teacher relationship would be one that can take a student's current interests, help them develop further interests and finally project that into a career that is going to help them achieve what they want to achieve.*

As such, an effective student-teacher relationship may inspire students' long-term achievements and help them to develop personally and intellectually via interpersonal interactions with teachers.

4.2. Student-Teacher Relationships in Student Course Representation

In the representation system, course representatives are expected to democratically collect views from the whole cohort of students. Both course representatives and co-creators addressed how, in their experience, student representation tended to focus on '*something not working*', a '*problem*', '*complaints*', or aspects of teaching that students '*hated*'. These descriptions convey a focus on negative aspects that could be enhanced, although some participants also recognised that representatives should provide a balance of positive feedback to depict the whole picture of student perspectives. However, the focus on

negativity could also make the course representative role even more difficult in developing and maintaining good working relationships between course representatives and teachers. One student co-creator who is also a course representative reflected:

> *That's the thing about teaching: you are putting a lot into it and it's not always appreciated. I can see why people would be a bit sensitive about their teaching practices, because it could feel like an attack on them but it's not.*

Similar resistance to students' constructive views presented by course representatives was described by another co-creator, who was also a course representative:

> *...if there's any complaints they [teachers] get quite defensive just because they do put a lot of work into the courses... but they are willing to change things if people complain a lot and they are willing to address the courses. They are normally quite positive.*

These quotations emphasise the necessity of tact and diplomacy in how course representatives convey constructive feedback to teachers with a focus on respect and enhancement. This indicates that student representatives might feel respected by teachers in return for showing respect for teachers. In this sense, it is important to recognise the power that course representatives hold in presenting feedback to staff and how their communication and relationship-building with teachers may have an indirect influence on relationships with the wider student cohort.

Some student participants had conflicting views about student representation. One course representative reflected on the benefits of student voice:

> *I think the representative system is quite good... because some people are too shy to say stuff. . . [and] don't even realise that they can speak up. . .*

In contrast, a co-creator reflected:

> *I think open meetings for any students to come along to would be really good. Because if you're not a class rep, especially for first and second years, they might think 'I'm not important therefore I'm not allowed to have an opinion'. If there wasn't a class rep at all, it means that everyone would be equal. But I do see the value in class reps as well, so it is a difficult one.*

This student raised an important point about the indirect, hierarchical structure of student representation, which could pose a risk in unconsciously implying that students hold different levels of importance. Participants noted that course representatives conveyed and discussed the wider cohort's feedback with teachers, potentially creating indirect lines of communication between the student body and teachers. This indirectness means that the onus of implementing effective representation is likely to be on individual course representatives fulfilling the expectations of the role.

However, participants remarked on some representatives' lack of engagement with the role. For example, one co-creator described:

> *I think it's really great that there are reps. But... a lot of people do it to put it on their CV and they're encouraged to go to meetings but they're not required. I know some class reps that haven't even gone along to meetings. That means they represent all these students but then not once have they actually represented all students so we're not actually having a say.*

Another co-creator reflected:

> *I think when you have a class rep, it's just one person from the class and personal things might get in the way of it... [and] their opinions wouldn't always get passed on. Also I think there's more links in the chain that way so the class tells the class rep, the class rep goes to a meeting, whoever chairs meeting then passes it on. So you think, 'Well does*

my view actually get translated all the way through and heard?' Whereas things like co-creation are direct and it works a lot more efficiently I think.

The extent to which course representatives connect with their role and include and respect the full student cohort's voices can have an effect on their working relationships with other students and also teachers. Course representatives have the power to influence how students' voices are conveyed and heard by teachers. However, teachers also hold power in the student-teacher relationship. For example, one course representative highlighted:

When giving feedback as a class rep, I've had to give it so many times because I've felt like I've not been listened to and it makes it [the feedback process] so frustrating... when I went to staff and give feedback and it didn't feel like it was taken seriously.

This quotation shows how teachers can be gatekeepers in listening to, respecting, and responding to student feedback, which can affect the inclusion and equity in the student-teacher relationship when course representatives feel unsupported.

4.3. Student-Teacher Relationships During Curriculum Co-Creation

Individuals' aims, values, and priorities in higher education can influence the time and effort they are willing to dedicate to developing relationships that advance student engagement. Both course representatives and co-creators acknowledged that '*it depends on the course organiser*' whether they would be willing to engage in curriculum co-creation. Just as not all teachers are keen to engage, the same goes for students. Some students participating in curriculum co-creation could feel vulnerabilities when experiencing unfamiliar forms of teaching in which they were asked to take on more responsibility as active learners. One co-creator described how curriculum co-creation could be challenging since '*You have to be willing to put yourself out there*', but they attributed supportive relationships with teachers as the key to overcoming this challenge in the co-creation experience.

Many co-creators described the high levels of support and care that their teachers demonstrated, as one student pondered how these teachers differed from other teachers:

It didn't feel I was ever stuck... [or that] there was nobody I could go to for a question. I knew they wouldn't be critical of me for asking for help.

This, in and of itself, is surprising that students may feel that they can ask for help from all teachers.

Several co-creators and a course representative separately described the responsibility that co-creators took on when having open and honest discussions with staff to enhance teaching. Co-creators' increased responsibility for their feedback contrasts sharply with how students give anonymous feedback to staff in course evaluations or via course representatives. One co-creator described how co-creation is about '*taking responsibility for the impact of what you are saying to the staff member*'. Similarly, another co-creator said:

It is about engaging, not being afraid of saying what you have to say, trusting other people, [and] respecting other people.

As students gain confidence with taking on increased responsibility, they can benefit greatly from the curriculum co-creation experience. One co-creator described curriculum co-creation as saying:

It's a relationship which hasn't got a hierarchy. Rather than the teacher knowing everything, and the student doesn't know anything at all... the teacher was really open to learning from us as well as us learning from her, so it meant you felt...really engaged.

These three co-creators highlighted the inclusive and supportive nature of effective student-teacher relationships, particularly in curriculum co-creation initiatives. Co-creators

perceived their relationship with teachers as mutually beneficial when working on problems collaboratively to find solutions.

Furthermore, the connection that students and teachers felt in this non-hierarchical relationship could help different participating students to gain a sense of belonging based on empathy and care for teachers. One co-creator reflected that the experience helped them to '*realise that lecturers are human too. . . [and] sometimes you can learn from each other*'. In addition to the passion of their teachers that shone through, other co-creators described the long-term impact of these effective relationships when they were given autonomy that inspired personal growth, since these teachers:

> *. . .probed you to think for yourself. . . [and are] challenging you to think about things in a deeper way than telling you the information. . . and helped you to think critically.*

Furthermore, these teachers are:

> *. . .challenging you or engaging a bit more in discussion. . . and I would be listened to and considered, even if they're like 'actually, maybe not'. At least a conversation is possible. . . and your ideas have been taken on board.*

The theme of challenging students is interesting regarding respecting and valuing the diverse contributions of these highly engaged students. Building on the theme of trusting and respectful relationships, participating students felt supported and more confident knowing that it is natural for individuals to have different perspectives. A co-creator elaborated on the inspiration gained from being challenged:

> *. . .you feel inspired, and you feel connected with the people around you and with the lecturer because of the potential for future work. It is just the excitement you have for your subject, the enthusiasm you have and that drive.*

This feeling of inspiration could help students feel ready to push the boundaries in their personal and professional development. They could also feel they were making a direct and positive influence on the learning community through their engagement. Co-creators described:

> *I felt valued as a student because I wasn't just one in thousands [of students]. I felt that I could make a difference and I could leave something behind for other students.*

Similarly, a co-creator from another institution stated:

> *Being treated with respect gives students a kind of satisfaction from the course and know that their views are actually being listened to. . . [T]here's a sense of empowerment from it so you leave feeling that you can make a difference.*

Here, we see how feeling respected and valued can support co-creators to feel inspired and that they can contribute positively to enhancing the learning community and wider society.

5. Discussion

5.1. Embracing Differences in Effective Student-Teacher Relationships

The results of this study suggest that highly engaged students (both course representatives and curriculum co-creators) perceived effective student-teacher relationships to focus on how teachers help them feel included, connected, respected, valued, and inspired. As seen in the participants' quotations above, these five elements were interconnected.

As a foundation for effective student-teacher relationships, teachers working to help students feel included necessitates these teachers' awareness of differences among students whereby teachers flexibly adjust their support and teaching. Students praised examples demonstrating teachers' support to promote accessibility and inclusion, which chimes with

previous research on student perceptions of teaching excellence (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019).

The second foundational element focuses on teachers helping students to build connections within the learning community. Aligning with previous studies (Bryson 2014; Matthews et al. 2018; Zarandi et al. 2024), we also found that learning communities and relationships amongst peers and between students and teachers enabled the inclusion of different students in class. This enhanced students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004; Trowler 2010), and students with different needs and backgrounds were more likely to develop positive relationships with teachers who facilitate these connections.

Based on inclusive and socially connected relationships between students and teachers, students felt it was also key that teachers acted respectfully regarding students' feedback and valued their ideas. Many students felt respected by perceiving how teachers listen non-judgementally and respond to students, and students noted how this was lacking in ineffective student-teacher relationships. This finding resonates with the challenges in the massification of higher education systems that can increase hierarchies between students and teachers (Barnett and Coate 2004) and marginalise students who are easily impacted by the systemic hierarchies in HE. Students in our research were more willing to work with teachers who were approachable and open to different ideas, yet not all teachers exhibited these characteristics in their experiences. Teachers' approachability, respect, and care for students are important elements of teaching that students consistently recognise in student-led teaching awards (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019).

In addition to students feeling respected by effective teachers, many students also discussed the importance of feeling their voices were valued, which is vital to facilitating personal development. As Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest, student-teacher relationships—and, in particular, the attitude of teachers towards students—are likely to influence students' confidence and self-efficacy in learning. Valuing students' views and considering their perspectives can evoke teachers' empathy and care for students. When effective teachers understand and include diverse students, there is potential for mutual learning and development for both students and teachers to see each other as human (Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022). Empathetic teachers enable open dialogues that can help students and teachers connect closely and work effectively within a learning community.

Participants highlighted a fifth element: teachers who show passion for their subject and teaching inspire them. In addition to the short-term impact on the student experience, inspiration nurtures their long-term personal and professional development, particularly for those who may lack motivation or knowledge of the subject. Specifically, students noted that teachers' passion positively facilitates their emotional engagement in class by motivating their future success and ambitions within and beyond university, which connects well with others' findings (Kuh 2008; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022).

In highlighting the five key elements of effective student-teacher relationships, student narratives indicate that certain groups of students potentially derive particular benefits. For instance, students with dynamic modes of learning or fluctuating levels of concentration appear to benefit significantly from teachers demonstrating inclusivity. This benefit stems from teachers' inclusive and flexible teaching, tailoring their methods to suit the context at a particular moment. Moreover, students who lack confidence in class or feel vulnerable when seeking help appreciate teachers respecting and valuing students' views while helping them connect to others in the learning community. Lastly, teachers who inspire their students are seen as especially beneficial for those who struggle with learning motivation or possess limited background knowledge of the subject. As such, these elements help to remove barriers for classroom engagement and create a more equitable learning environment.

The five elements of effective student-teacher relationships articulate important dimensions to build positive relationships, which are often interconnected. While the first two elements (helping students feel included and connected within the learning community) are more fundamental, the following two elements (helping students feel respected and valued) build on these, and the fifth element (inspiration) encompasses long-term impact. The five elements represent five key areas where teachers can work to address students' personal and professional needs by building effective relationships. Based on the nature of these needs, these five elements relate closely to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1970). For example, student quotations about feeling included speak to students' physiological needs when teaching methods to engage students with learning match their energy levels (e.g., tiredness in the late afternoon). Furthermore, developing a sense of connection within the learning community can address students' needs regarding psychological safety, which includes being human and authentic when sharing their true selves and unique perspectives with teachers and peers (Helbig and Norman 2023). This resonates with a wide range of previous studies showing the importance of students developing a sense of belonging to support their engagement in learning (Chadwick 2014; Foster and Southwell-Sander 2014; Furlonger et al. 2014).

Building on feeling included and connected, students feeling their perspectives are valued helps students feel respected by teachers. Notably, participants highlighted instances where they did not feel respected or valued by teachers. Students feeling included, connected, respected, and valued resonate with other studies emphasising how student engagement—and, particularly, student-teacher partnerships—can enhance students' confidence and self-esteem (Dollinger and Lodge 2019; Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022). Lastly, feeling inspired to achieve future success relates closely to self-actualisation and student transformation (Moore-Cherry 2019; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2021).

It is important to point out that the five elements of effective student-teacher relationships found here are related to a certain extent to the five levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, although we found that these elements are not completely hierarchical. As discussed in the paragraphs above, these elements are interconnected and interdependent, with the first two being more fundamental. This is in alignment with the wider literature (e.g., King-Hill 2015) that criticises Maslow's theory by arguing that different needs may overlap depending on the dominant need at a given time, highlighting the dynamic nature of the hierarchy.

Notably, the five elements mainly focused on what teachers do, perhaps since students often felt that teachers were key to facilitating and fostering effective student-teacher relationships. Participating students indicated teachers are ultimately responsible for creating opportunities to develop an inclusive and equitable learning environment that can set the foundation for effective student-teacher relationships, and within this environment students are responsible for actively engaging and taking up opportunities for learning (Kuh 2008; Bryson 2014).

5.2. Hierarchy and Democracy of Relationships in Student Representation and Curriculum Co-Creation

Participants highlighted that the student representation system can create a hierarchical structure, although it did amplify diverse student voices via course representatives' communication with teachers. The resulting indirect communication between teachers and students in the rest of the class in relation to enhancing the student experience contrasts with the direct communication between students and staff co-creators. In the former, we saw in the findings (Section 4.2) a description of student representation, including '*more links in the chain*' and an underlying perception that all students did not feel '*everyone would be equal*' in having the agency to share their views with teachers. This contrasted with

findings (Section 4.3) that a participant described curriculum co-creation as '*a relationship which hasn't got a hierarchy*' that could promote mutual learning and collaboration in the enhancement of learning and teaching. We further discuss the implications for these different relationships in the sections below.

5.2.1. Student-Teacher Relationships in Student Representation

Some participants highlighted that having an indirect, hierarchical model for course representatives to relay feedback to teachers could be beneficial, especially when individual students might feel nervous in sharing constructive feedback. This chimes with the wider literature showing how course representatives can help in communicating and amplifying feedback from different types of students when advocating on behalf of a cohort (Lizzio and Wilson 2009; Bols 2020). When the student voice is amplified in this way, course representatives can make a powerful contribution to quality enhancement (Zuo and Ratsoy 1999).

However, course representatives must also recognise the responsibility and power that comes with this role (Matthews and Dollinger 2022; Patrick 2022; sparqs n.d.b). Since course representatives are seen as a lynchpin in the communication between the wider student cohort and the teacher, representatives' engagement with their role becomes particularly important for sharing feedback from the wider cohort, particularly including less vocal students. However, participants in this study noted challenges when some student representatives did not fully engage with their role by failing to attend meetings or not conveying student feedback with appropriate tact or diplomacy to maintain strong working relationships with teachers. This could be a significant barrier to creating an equitable classroom. Similarly, Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) and Patrick (2022) acknowledged that not all representatives fulfil their responsibilities, although they generally found many benefits to having a student representation system. Students' lack of engagement could stem from their extrinsic motivation of enhancing their CV rather than intrinsic motivation for improving education quality (Millican 2014), or they could lack confidence and partnership literacies if teachers assume that students' diverse backgrounds equalise their ability to engage (Bao 2024; Carey 2012).

Participants, both course representatives and co-creators, shared some examples of teachers not valuing course representatives' feedback, which raises a structural barrier for diverse voices being heard and for creating authentic partnerships. In these instances, teachers were perceived to include and connect with course representatives in a limited capacity to consult with them, but teachers did not always help representatives feel their contributions were respected or valued, which were barriers in achieving strong working relationships that could be characterised as partnerships. Drawing on Cadogan's (1998), we can see that these course representatives were positioned as peripheral or patronised in enhancing the quality of education, although there were also limited examples in this study of other staff choosing to treat course representatives more positively as partners. The power of staff to position course representatives in these ways is apparent. In the case of peripheral or patronised course representatives, this could be triggered by the lack of engagement from some representatives, as discussed in the previous paragraph, or from some teachers with the mandated student representation systems in UK higher education institutions (QAA 2012; Bols 2020). Similarly, Patrick (2022, p. 360) has described staff members' 'unhealthy lack of the general will in education micropolitics' and Zuo and Ratsoy (1999, p. 1) have described how 'Both environmental and personal factors affected the impact of student participation in university governance'.

Perhaps as a consequence of some course representatives in this study not tending to feel respected or valued, they did not appear to feel inspired since they did not feel that power had been shared with them in decision-making. They discussed how they could feel

discouraged to engage in interactions with teachers if they felt their feedback was ignored or the impact of their efforts was often indirect and more likely to benefit future student cohorts rather than their own class. The indirect and delayed benefits for representatives can highlight their university's interest in course representation as a mechanism for quality enhancement, which Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) have also discussed as a potential challenge for course representatives. Although a key aim of student representation is the inclusion of diverse student voices in university decision-making to enhance the student experience for all students (Matthews and Dollinger 2022), we found that unequal distributions of power and agency in practice can hinder opportunities for student representatives to work in partnership with teachers and enhance social justice.

5.2.2. Student-Teacher Relationships in Curriculum Co-Creation

Both course representatives and co-creators participating in this study tended to feel that all five elements of effective student-teacher relationships were more likely to occur during curriculum co-creation initiatives. Helping student co-creators feel included and connected seemed to be taken as a given, and participants particularly emphasised how teachers helped them feel respected, valued, and inspired when working in partnership. In parallel with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the widespread literature (Bovill et al. 2011; Matthews et al. 2018; Masuku et al. 2025), student co-creators in this study highlighted the sense of belonging and community where different students were included and welcomed. When feeling respected and valued, they also developed self-esteem and confidence while feeling proud of their achievements in co-creating aspects of curricula with teachers, which echoes the literature (Dollinger and Lodge 2019; Moore-Cherry 2019; Bovill 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2022). Furthermore, these students felt inspired through the experience of co-creating curricula when their efforts directly benefitted the wider student community and they saw how they were making a difference—this sense of self-actualisation is often transformational (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2021).

Students' greater feeling of the five elements can be explained by how curriculum co-creation is rooted in collaborative and partnership-based working relationships throughout a course. This means diverse student voices are involved in shared decision-making with teachers in various stages of planning, implementation, and/or evaluation of courses, which expands the lifecycle of working towards social justice for different students. There are also challenges and vulnerabilities in curriculum co-creation and partnership work (Matthews et al. 2018), which was also seen in this study with respect to the direct (rather than indirect and anonymised) feedback students gave to teachers that is associated with greater stress on students taking responsibility for their feedback. That said, our findings support those of Gibson and Cook-Sather (2020) and Masuku et al. (2025), since, in embracing and overcoming the vulnerabilities and changed power dynamics that curriculum co-creation can present to students and teachers, there is strong potential for this pedagogy to advance more inclusive practices that work towards realising social justice in higher education.

6. Conclusions

The results of this qualitative study have important implications for enhancing student engagement through developing effective student-teacher relationships in the classroom that advance equity, inclusion, and social justice. We analysed two distinct approaches to student engagement (student representation and curriculum co-creation) to examine how these approaches influence relationship-building between students and teachers to enhance learning and teaching. This is one of the few studies that considers in detail the intricacies of both student representation and partnerships such as curriculum co-creation, extending on from the work of Matthews and Dollinger (2022) and Patrick (2022). Notably,

differing from previous research, the comparison between student representation and curriculum co-creation in this study emerged naturally from data collected for a wider topic focusing on effective student engagement with an emphasis on curriculum co-creation, indicating a need for exploring how student engagement can be enhanced via various effective relationships developed in learning and teaching.

Highly engaged students, both course representatives and co-creators, in this study highlighted that they felt engaged when effective student-teacher relationships helped them feel included, connected, respected, valued, and inspired. These five elements of effective student-teacher relationships are interconnected yet independent. Together, they articulate methods to facilitate student engagement in learning and teaching and therefore work towards eliciting both short-term and long-term dimensions of students' personal and professional development. We note that these five elements are perceptions of students that focus on their teachers' actions, and they position the teacher as vital in setting the scene to build effective student-teacher relationships. However, this emphasis on teachers' actions also shows a risk that students more generally, even highly engaged students, can have limited power to influence these five elements.

Course representatives and co-creators share similarities in demonstrating that high levels of student engagement can potentially facilitate effective student-teacher relationships. However, these two approaches to student engagement manifest differently in building student-teacher relationships, with the potential for partnerships to be affected by the engagement and communication of both teachers and students. It is clear that communication is vital in developing effective student-teacher relationships. Specifically, participants suggested the different communication structures between teachers and students in student representation and curriculum co-creation initiatives can lead to differences in students' engagement and agency. In particular, the hierarchical, indirect communication between teachers and the student cohort mediated by course representatives contrasts with the direct interactions and relationships formed between students and teachers during curriculum co-creation. Further cross-context research would be beneficial to further explore the similarities and differences in student-teacher relationships in other forms of student engagement and different higher education contexts and, particularly, the extent to which they can advance socially just partnerships.

Student participants in this study described how course representatives' relationships with teachers could be enhanced if teachers could help them feel more respected, valued, and inspired. By contrast, student co-creators participating in this study tended to describe experiencing all five elements of effective student-teacher relationships, which often contributed to making their experiences of student engagement particularly inspiring and even transformational as examples of social justice. We have seen how, as in the work of McArthur (2019), social justice is innately social since it is advanced by strong relationships and communication between students and teachers. We have explored how teachers hold power in developing these relationships and, like Patrick (2022), we stress the importance of teachers sharing power with students in the classroom and in education decision-making. We hope that the complex relationships between students and teachers can be nurtured so that both curriculum co-creation and student representation initiatives can each meet their full potential to enhance the student experience by promoting equity and inclusion to work towards social justice in higher education.

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