When personal becomes relational

Investigating the role of personality traits in affective student-teacher relationships

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Chapter 6

General Discussion

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In any given classroom, individual students differ markedly from one another. One way to describe these differences is through personality traits — characteristic patterns of behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that are relatively stable across time and context (Shiner & Caspi, 2003). Personality traits have been recognized to play an important role in academic outcomes, such as academic performance, absenteeism, and academic dishonesty (see Cuadrado et al., 2021; Hessen & Kuncel, 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Mammadov, 2022 for reviews). Yet, despite their relevance, these stable individual dispositions have received considerably less attention in research on the affective quality of dyadic student–teacher relationships, or the emotional bond between individual students and teachers (Pancorbo et al., 2022; Zee et al., 2013).

To address this lacuna, this dissertation contributed to this area of research by investigating the role of personality traits in the affective quality of student–teacher relationships. It comprised one systematic review of the personality-relationship link and three empirical studies using a large longitudinal dataset of upper elementary school students ($N_{\text{time 1}}$ = 4638, $N_{\text{time 2}}$ = 3696) and their teachers ($N_{\text{time 1}}$ = 104, $N_{\text{time 2}}$ = 77). Across these four studies, four specific research aims were addressed. The first aim was to develop and validate a personality questionnaire for upper elementary students. The second aim was to investigate the role of students' personality traits in the affective quality of the relationships with their teachers. The third aim was to explore how teachers' personality traits, as well as personality similarity and dissimilarity between teachers and students, contribute to these relationships. Finally, the fourth aim was to expand the existing evidence base by examining these associations in an Eastern context, specifically China.

Development and Validation of a Personality Questionnaire for Upper Elementary Students

In Chapter 1, several issues regarding the personality measurement for upper elementary students were highlighted, such as the lengthy questionnaires and their inclusion of difficult items (Barbaranelli et al., 2003; De Fruyt et al., 2009). These methodological issues may not only prevent accurate assessment of students' personality traits, but also the understanding of the roles in important developmental outcomes such as student–teacher relationships. To address these issues, Chapter 3 developed and evaluated a brief personality questionnaire for this younger population (Aim 1). Employing the widely used Big Five Inventory (BFI; Soto & John, 2017a;

Zhang et al., 2022) as a baseline, this questionnaire included 33 items and sought to assess five personality traits: Agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness. This questionnaire was then piloted with the first wave of data. Contrary to expectations (Barbaranelli et al., 2003; John, 2021), Chapter 3 revealed a suboptimal fit for the hypothesized five-factor model. Closer inspection revealed that some items had low or even negative loadings. This was particularly true for Extraversion, where two of six items did not load on the factor as expected. Regarding reliability, acceptable internal consistencies were found for agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness (αs range from .63 to .73), suggesting that students can coherently respond to items for these traits. Unfortunately, the Extraversion subscale had a low internal consistency (α = .33). Considering the low or negative loadings on Extraversion items and the relatively low reliability of this subscale, a model excluding Extraversion was then tested. CFA results indicated that this model with four traits yielded an acceptable fit and each subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency.

Evidently, these results may raise issues with respect to the construct validity and reliability of this questionnaire. Yet, there are some factors that may explain these unexpected results. First, CFA may be overly stringent for personality measures as it does not permit nontrivial cross-loadings (Barbaranelli et al., 2003; Morizot, 2014). This strictness may result in lower model fit indices, particularly in large samples where minor deviations may lead to a significant mismatch between the hypothesized model and the data (Barbaranelli et al., 2003). Second, the broader conceptual breadth of the questionnaire, developed based on the BFI framework, may be attributed to the lower model fit (Morizot, 2014). The BFI framework assumes a hierarchical personality structure with multiple facets contributing to each trait (Soto & John, 2017), potentially reducing item cohesion within each scale. Lastly, the relatively young sample may also play a role. Prior research has shown that the BFI intended five-factor structure appeared to be less clearly recovered among the younger population in their middle childhood than in late adolescence (e.g., Soto et al., 2008). This is because, for younger students, broad personality dimensions remain slightly diffuse, with some behaviors (e.g., energy level) that form a single trait (e.g., extraversion) may still function as separate, narrower constructs (Soto et al., 2008). Their developing ability to provide coherent self-reports may further diminish scale coherence (Eaton, 1994; Soto et al., 2008). This seems to be particularly the case for the subscale of Extraversion, with

which several studies have noted a low coherence among the younger population (Eaton, 1994; Soto et al., 2008).

Taken together, although Extraversion remains difficult to measure, Chapter 3 provides evidence that upper elementary students can reliably report their agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness using the brief measure. Therefore, this measure was then used in Chapters 4 and 5 to investigate the associations between personality traits and affective student–teacher relationships.

The Role of Students' Personality Traits in Affective Student-Teacher Relationships

The second aim of the dissertation was to advance the current understanding of how students' personality traits shape the affective quality of their dyadic relationships with teachers. To achieve this, a systematic review (Chapter 2) was conducted to synthesize the existing research about the role of personality traits in student–teacher relationships. As a comparison, students' relationships with parents were included in this review. This review showed that students who reported themselves to be high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness, and low in neuroticism, tended to have higher-quality relationships with their teachers. Extending the findings of Mammadov & Avci (2024), the meta-analysis in Chapter 2 demonstrated that these same associations hold for students' relationships with parents. This cross-domain consistency corroborates the stability of personality traits across contexts (John, 2021; McCrae & Costa, 2008). Personality traits describe a general tendency of how students interpret and respond to social cues, and therefore may shape the relationship bonds between students and different social others in similar ways (McAdams & Pals, 2006). This has been evident in studies that include different relationship domains. For instance, students who were more agreeable were found to perceive more support from different family members (Branje et al., 2004, 2005). In sum, the cross-domain consistency of the personality-relationship link suggests that personality traits are relevant across different types of close relationships in students' lives, highlighting their foundational role in students' social development.

Unlike the broader meta-analysis by Mammadov & Avci (2024), the systematic review in Chapter 2 focused specifically on dyadic student–teacher relationships and therefore included fewer studies: Five on positive relationship qualities (e.g., closeness, warmth) and only one on negative dimensions (i.e., conflict). Moreover, all studies included in this review were cross-sectional, limiting conclusions about directionality

or developmental processes. To build on these findings, subsequent empirical studies (Chapters 4 and 5) included both positive and negative aspects of student–teacher relationships and investigated these links using both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. In doing so, this dissertation contributes new insights into how students' personality traits are associated with affective relationships with teachers in four important ways.

First, this dissertation has provided insights into how specific traits are associated with student–teacher relationships by using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Overall, the personality-relationship link was found both cross-sectionally (Chapters 2 and 4) but also longitudinally (Chapter 5), providing support for the stability of the personality-relationship link over time. However, there is an inconsistency in how specific traits were linked with relationship quality. Specifically, in Chapters 2 and 4, students' agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness were found to be important for student–teacher relationships, whereas the longitudinal investigation in Chapter 5 provided support for only two of the four traits (i.e., agreeableness, neuroticism). Students who reported higher levels of agreeableness and lower levels of neuroticism appeared to experience higher-quality relationships with their teachers over the course of a year. The inconsistency may arise because the cross-sectional associations between personality traits and student–teacher relationships can be inflated by stable individual characteristics, whereas longitudinal designs control for those characteristics, which may provide more reliable estimates (Little, 2024). Another explanation is that the study described in Chapter 4 explored each personality trait separately, whereas the study in Chapter 5 extended this analysis by assessing the unique contribution of each personality trait within a comprehensive model that included all traits simultaneously. Regardless of the explanation, it seems that Chapter 5 has provided a more rigorous examination of the personality-relationship link and revealed that agreeableness and neuroticism may be more strongly associated with affective student–teacher relationships than conscientiousness and openness. This aligns with prior research (Back et al., 2023; Zee et al., 2013) that agreeableness and neuroticism tend to be seen as interpersonal traits that are more closely linked to affective processing and social relationships, whereas conscientiousness and openness are seen as cognitive traits which may be less susceptible to relationships. As this study (Chapter 5) is one of the first studies that

investigated the personality-relationship link with a longitudinal design, future research is recommended to replicate these results by including all five traits.

Second, as most existing studies have focused on positive relationships, the present dissertation examined not only positive (i.e., closeness) but also negative relationship aspects (e.g., conflict). Findings across chapters indicate that the personality–relationship link applies to both dimensions. Specifically, in line with previous research (see Mammadov & Avci, 2024 for a review) and Chapter 2, higher levels of students' agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low levels of neuroticism appear to foster greater closeness between students and teachers. Moreover, findings in Chapters 4 and 5 extend the limited empirical evidence on negative relationship aspects (e.g., Zee et al., 2013) by demonstrating that students' personality traits are linked not only to closeness but also to conflict. This may be because students who score high on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness and low on neuroticism tend to handle conflicts in a more appropriate way. A recent meta-analysis has found that higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness are associated with more constructive conflict resolution styles (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Therefore, these students are likely to adopt open communication to resolve conflicts, leading to less conflictual relationships than their peers. In contrast, neuroticism has been found to be associated with more passive resolution styles, and thus, students who are high in neuroticism are likely to leave conflicts unresolved and reduces relationship quality (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Taken together, these results highlight the role of students' personality traits in shaping both closeness and conflict within teacher–student relationships. Moving forward, future research is suggested to include both positive and negative relationship aspects when investigating the personality-relationship link. Additionally, it will be intriguing to investigate the mechanisms through which specific personality traits shape closeness and conflict.

Third, this dissertation also contributes to the field by including both student-reported and teacher-reported relationship quality in the same study. Students and teachers each seem to have their own unique perspectives about their mutual relationship (e.g., Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Zee & Koomen, 2017), yet existing studies tend to include one of the relationship reports (see Zee et al., 2013 for an exception). To address this, Chapters 4 and 5 included both student-reported and teacher-reported relationship quality and explored whether the personality-relationship link holds for both students' and teachers' relationship perceptions. These two chapters seem to

suggest that students' perceptions are more strongly associated with student-reported relationships than teacher-reported relationships. Specifically, findings in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 suggest that students' personality traits may shape not only their own relationship perceptions but also their teachers' relationship perceptions. In Chapter 5, however, the associations of students' personality traits were found with students' but not teachers' relationship perceptions in the subsequent year. These findings seem to align with prior research that students' social-emotional development may be most closely related to their individual interpretations of the social environment (Lüdtke et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2016; Zurbriggen et al., 2023), thereby the personality-relationship can be found concurrently and across time for student-reported relationships. Another plausible explanation would be that because over the course of a year, teachers may learn to understand their students better and adapt their interactions accordingly (Pennings et al., 2018). Their efforts in fostering student–teacher relationships may bias their relationship perceptions (Wettstein et al., 2021), and hence weaken the direct association between students' personality traits and teachers' relationship perceptions.

Lastly, spurred by the finding that personality traits are likely to play a role in student–teacher relationships (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4), these traits were investigated even further in Chapter 5. Here, the quality of student–teacher relationships was explored as an intermediary mechanism by which the association between students' personality traits and school engagement could be explained. Chapter 5 revealed that students high in agreeableness reported more positive student–teacher relationship quality (i.e., higher closeness and lower conflict), which, in turn, promoted their emotional engagement. In addition, students scoring high on neuroticism reported lower closeness and greater relational conflict, which was associated with a decrease in their emotional engagement in the following year. These findings, aligning with prior research (Charalampous & Kokkinos, 2014; Chen et al., 2021), support the notion that the affective quality of student–teacher relationships may serve as a mediating mechanism between personality traits and school outcomes. The mediation we observed bridges two lines of research: one suggesting that student–teacher relationship quality may contribute to students' school engagement (e.g., Roorda et al., 2011, 2017) and the other indicating that student–teacher relationship quality may be shaped by individual characteristics (e.g., Mammadov & Avci, 2024; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). By revealing this pathway, our findings contribute to a

more holistic understanding of how personal and proximal social factors jointly shape students' engagement. To continue this line of research, it would be interesting to examine other subsequent outcomes, such as behavioral problems, and see whether personality traits may indirectly shape other developmental outcomes through student–teacher relationships.

Teachers' Personality Traits, Personality Similarity/Dissimilarity, and Affective Student-Teacher Relationships

The third aim of this dissertation was to investigate whether teachers' personality traits —and the similarity or dissimilarity between teachers' and students' traits—may play a role in affective student–teacher relationships (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4). As expected (e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Pancorbo et al., 2022), both chapters provided evidence that teachers' personality traits may contribute to the quality of affective student–teacher relationships. Specifically, the review study in Chapter 2 revealed that teachers who were high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low in neuroticism tended to experience more positive relationships with students. However, no studies were identified in this review addressing associations with negative dimensions (e.g., conflict), limiting conclusions in that regard. Chapter 4 expanded on these findings by showing that teachers' personality traits were not only associated with *positive* but also with *negative* student–teacher relationships. Specifically, teachers high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low in neuroticism were more likely to foster relational positivity and to experience less conflict with their students. Importantly, these patterns were found even when controlling for students' corresponding traits. Together, these findings extend prior research (e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Pancorbo et al., 2022) and Chapter 2 by demonstrating that, regardless of students' personality traits, teachers' personality traits seem to play a unique role in shaping affective relationship outcomes. This may be explained by students' expectations of their teachers' personal qualities (Arnon & Reichel, 2007). Teachers who demonstrate socially desirable traits—high agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low neuroticism—may closely match these expectations, making it easier for such "ideal-type" teachers to establish emotional bonds with their students (Kim & MacCann, 2016). These results highlight the necessity of considering teachers' personality traits, alongside students' traits, when forming high-quality student–teacher relationships.

Additionally, an interesting phenomenon emerging from Chapters 2 and 4 is that informant seems to play a role in the associations between teachers' personality traits and affective student–teacher relationship quality. Specifically, in the literature review reported in Chapter 2, it was found that among the included studies, the associations reported by the same informant are more likely to be significant than those reported by different informants. Chapter 4 echoed this pattern. That is, teachers' neuroticism was found to be associated with student–teacher relationships when employing the same-informant approach but not the different-informant approach. Specifically, teachers' self-reported neuroticism was associated with their own ratings of closeness and conflict, but not with students' ratings. This could be explained by teachers' tendency to regulate their behavior and emotions to meet professional standards and job expectations (Burić & Mornar, 2023; Diefendorff et al., 2005). Consequently, teachers' observable behaviors and responses may not fully reflect their underlying personality, and hence explaining a lack of association between teachers' self-reported neuroticism and students' reports of student–teacher relationship quality.

Regarding personality similarity, Chapter 2 identified only one relevant study (i.e., Pancorbo et al., 2022), which offered preliminary support for the role of personality similarity in student–teacher relationships. To advance the research about personality match, Chapter 4 investigated two different conceptualizations: Personality similarity and personality dissimilarity. The results of Chapter 4 painted a more nuanced picture. Personality similarity was found to be relevant only when students and teachers were similarly high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low in neuroticism. Such inconsistent findings between Pancorbo et al. (2022) and Chapter 4 can be attributed to two key methodological differences. The first is that personality similarity was measured at the profile-level without differentiating specific traits (Pancorbo et al., 2022), whereas personality similarity was measured at the trait level in Chapter 4, allowing for a more fine-grained analysis (Harris & Vazire, 2016). Second, Chapter 2 investigated both actual and perceptual similarity, with stronger associations found for perceptual similarity than for actual similarity (Pancorbo et al., 2022). Chapter 4, by contrast, specifically focused on actual personality similarity, leaving the association between perceptual similarity and affective student–teacher relationships unexplored. To better understand how personality similarity shapes affective student–teacher relationships, future research

is recommended to examine both actual and perceived similarity at trait and profile levels. Chapter 5 extended this line of inquiry by exploring personality dissimilarity. It was found that the degree of dissimilarity was generally not associated with the quality of student–teacher relationships, except for openness. Specifically, when students and teachers were more dissimilar in openness, teachers tended to perceive the relationship with this student as less conflictual. One explanation for the negative association between dissimilarity and conflict is that greater dissimilarity allows both relationship partners to contribute to the relationship in complementary ways (Tett & Murphy, 2002). Specifically, the one who is high on openness may value novelty and new experiences, while the one who is low in openness may offer a preference for structure, consistency, and practical decision-making. As each person's tendencies fill gaps in the other's approach, minimizing opportunities for disagreement or conflict. To summarize, although this analysis is still exploratory and requires replication, this study extends the limited research in this area (Pancorbo et al., 2022) by including not only personality similarity but also personality dissimilarity. This has both scientific and practical implications. For research, the findings facilitate more fine-grained, in-depth discussions that consider different conceptualizations of personality match in affective student–teacher relationships. For practice, it reminds teachers and practitioners that student–teacher relationships are fundamentally dyadic—they emerge from the interplay of students and teachers, not just the sum of their parts. Therefore, when addressing relational issues, it may be important to focus not only on individual traits but also on the fit between students and teachers.

Investigating the Personality-Relationship Link in the Chinese Context

The fourth aim of this dissertation was to contribute to the knowledge of personality traits and student–teacher relationship quality with a perspective from China. Guided by developmental systems theory (Pianta et al., 2003), it appears important to consider the cultural and educational context when exploring the role of personality traits in student–teacher relationships. Below, three contextually relevant considerations are discussed. First, when developing the personality questionnaire for upper elementary students (Chapter 3), the BFI was chosen for its extensive use in the existing research (John, 2021). However, given that BFI was originally developed in the Western context, some items that are included in the BFI may be conceptualized differently in the Chinese context (De Fruyt et al., 2009; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Rollock & Lui, 2016), leading to low or negative factor loadings for some of the items

in the present study. For instance, it is surprising to find that items of Extraversion subscale failed to load as expected, given that extraversion is typically found to be a robust and replicable trait across both Western and Eastern populations (Allik et al., 2013; Church, 2016). However, most evidence for trait universality stems from adult participants (see De Fruyt et al., 2009 for an exception using adolescent samples), raising questions about whether extraversion is conceptualized similarly or differently among younger students across cultures. Thus far, there are some preliminary findings that extraversion at least may not be conceptualized similarly across cultures for the young population. Specifically, one study that included both European American and Asian international students has found that the items for Extraversion were not invariant across these two groups of students (Rollock & Lui, 2016). Future research is needed to explore whether the construct of extraversion (as well as other traits) is conceptualized similarly and can be reliably measured in the younger population across cultural contexts.

Second, similar to what was found in the Western context (see the review in Chapter 2), higher levels of students' agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and lower levels of neuroticism were found to be linked to better student–teacher relationships in China. Interestingly, the correlation magnitudes (small to moderate) were somewhat larger than those reported in several studies conducted in the Western context (e.g., Pancorbo et al., 2022; Zee et al., 2013). This difference in the effect sizes seems to corroborate prior cross-cultural findings showing stronger associations between individual characteristics and student–teacher relationships in China than in the Netherlands (Chen et al., 2021). One plausible explanation is that China has a typical collectivistic culture emphasizing harmonious relationships, in contrast to the individualistic cultures of most European countries (Chen et al., 2019; Matsumoto et al., 2008). The emphasis on relational harmony may strengthen the link between personality traits and student–teacher relationships in China. For instance, agreeableness often manifests as being friendly and considerate (John, 2021). As these behaviors are closely in line with harmony-oriented cultural values, they tend to elicit more positive feelings, which in turn foster more positive student–teacher relationships (Chen et al., 2021). To verify this, future studies are therefore suggested to measure relevant cultural values and investigate whether they indeed play a role in the associations between personality traits and relationship quality to mitigate potential biases and gain a more accurate understanding of these associations.

Third, this dissertation specifically focused on class teachers in China. In Chinese elementary schools, class teachers serve dual roles: They are responsible for classroom issues such as tracking attendance and providing first-line counseling for students' wellbeing while being responsible for teaching certain subjects. Their frequent interactions span both academic and socio-emotional domains, distinguishing them from subject teachers who focus on instruction and typically interact with students only during class time. To our best knowledge, one study (Wettstein et al., 2021) examined this distinction: in a Swiss sample, class teachers' neuroticism was found to be negatively associated with student-reported relationship quality, whereas subject teachers' neuroticism did not. This suggests that teachers' role (e.g., class teachers vs subject teachers) may play a role in how teachers' personality traits shape affective relationship outcomes. Future research in China should similarly compare class and subject teachers to determine whether this role-based difference holds in a context where class teachers maintain especially close ties with students.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation is among the first to comprehensively investigate the associations between personality traits and affective student–teacher relationship quality in the upper elementary school stage. The current dissertation has several key strengths. First, this dissertation used a large-scale, multi-informant, longitudinal dataset to rigorously examine the links between personality traits and the affective quality of dyadic student–teacher relationships. Second, this comprehensive investigation included students' personality traits, teachers' personality traits, personality similarity, and personality dissimilarity. Third, both positive (i.e., closeness) and negative (i.e., conflict) relationship aspects and both students' and teachers' relationship perceptions were considered in this dissertation.

This dissertation has several limitations. First, we followed the conceptualization with five core traits describing the individual differences in students' (and teachers') personality traits. Focusing on the five core personality traits allowed us to integrate our findings with existing research on student–teacher relationships as well as other relational domains, such as parent–child relationships (see Chapter 2). However, there are other personality traits important to investigate in student–teacher relationships (Jach et al., 2023). One such trait is honesty-humility, which describes the extent to which individuals are honest, sincere, fair, and modest (Ashton et al., 2014). Studies have found the association between honesty-humility and relationship

outcomes (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Reinhardt & Reinhard, 2023). Moreover, this trait is intriguing to investigate in Eastern countries such as China, as it aligns well with the ideology of being humble and being modest rooted in Confucianism. Therefore, future studies are recommended to investigate both these five core traits as well as traits beyond the five-factor structure (e.g., honesty-humility) to have a better understanding of the role of personality traits in student–teacher relationships.

Second, this dissertation only employed a variable-centered approach, examining the links between personality trait and affective relationship quality. This approach enabled us to pinpoint which traits are most salient traits of closeness and conflict between students and teachers. However, by focusing on traits in isolation, it remains unknown how combinations of traits may be associated with affective student–teacher relationships (Mammadov & Avci, 2024). A person-centered approach (e.g., personality types) could thus be valuable for identifying whether trait constellations may differentially shape the quality of student–teacher relationships (Meeus et al., 2011).

Third, for Chapters 4 and 5, the subscale of Extraversion was removed from further analyses due to methodological concerns, which limits our understanding of how extraversion is associated with the affective quality of dyadic student–teacher relationships. Future studies are suggested to replicate our findings with a personality questionnaire that can reliably measure all five traits.

Lastly, this dissertation relied exclusively on self-reports of personality from students and teachers. Yet, research indicates that students' perceptions of their teachers' personalities can meaningfully predict the level of support teachers provide (Kim et al., 2018). Also, perceptual personality similarity has been found to be more strongly associated with relationship quality compared with actual personality similarity (Pancorbo et al., 2022). Capturing these effects requires multi-informant data, that is, student-reported teachers' personality traits or/and teacher-reported students' personality traits. It is then recommended that future research incorporate multiple informants when investigating the personality link.

Implications for School Practice

The current dissertation may yield important insights into how to foster close and conflict-free relationships between elementary students and teachers with a focus on personality traits. First, teachers and school psychologists ought to be aware of the role of personality traits in student–teacher relationships. Both the literature review

and empirical studies in this dissertation demonstrate that higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and lower levels of neuroticism in students are likely to have closer and less conflictual relationships. This implies that, in practice, brief, validated assessment of personality traits can serve as an "anchor" for recognizing the trait-relevant behavioral and interactive patterns that recur in student–teacher relationships. Equipped with this knowledge, teachers and school psychologists are more likely to anticipate students' relational needs and tailor their communication and support strategies accordingly. For instance, with students who display high levels of neuroticism, offering extra reassurance and guiding them in regulating negative emotions may foster greater closeness and reduce conflict. It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that personality traits describe tendencies rather than serve as fixed labels. Only with this appropriate use can teachers and school psychologists ensure that the trait information enriches mutual understanding without constraining or defining students (Jach et al., 2023).

Second, it seems important for the teachers to recognize that their personality traits matter for affective relationships as well. To be specific, this dissertation suggests that teachers' personality traits are important for student–teacher relationships, independent of students' personality traits. Importantly, both interpersonal and cognitive traits seem to play a role. This resonates with my experience in the data collection for this dissertation. Students told me that they would like the teachers more if teachers are able to, for instance, keep their promises (i.e., high conscientiousness) and can friendly and supportive (i.e., high agreeableness). Practically, this means that teachers who wish to foster more closeness and reduce conflicts with individual students can display behaviors that reflect different personality traits (e.g., creating new experiences, sticking to the plan, being organized and persistent, showing caring for students).

Third, the component of personality traits and personality similarity may be integrated into existing relationship interventions (see Poling et al., 2022 for a review of available relationship interventions) as well. For instance, Teacher-Student Interaction Coaching (Bosman et al., 2021) aims to enhance student–teacher relationships by targeting teachers' mental representation of relationships with individual students. Given the personality–relationship link found in this dissertation, it may be useful to integrate reflection on personality traits into this intervention. Guiding teachers to reflect on both their own and their students' personality profiles

may enrich their understanding of specific relationship experiences and promote more flexible mental representations of those relationships. For instance, teachers may struggle with students who display externalizing behaviors. Their relationship mental representation may guide them to selectively focus on students' disruptive behaviors without recognizing these students' uniqueness and strengths. By guiding teachers to reflect upon a wide range of behavioral patterns and underlying personality traits, teachers may develop a less biased image of these students, potentially enhancing their relationships. Likewise, another relationship intervention seeks to enhance student–teacher relationships by leveraging the level of similarity between students and teachers (Gehlbach et al., 2016). As this dissertation suggests that being similar on "positive" personality traits appears to be important for affective student–teacher relationships, providing feedback to teachers (and, where appropriate, to students) about the shared "positive" traits they have in common may contribute to building positive relationships.

Concluding Remarks

Personality traits offer a concise framework to capture psychological variations across students and thus bear important implications for students' school functioning and social development. This dissertation focused on one important yet relatively neglected outcome, namely, affective student–teacher relationships. To examine this link, this dissertation progressed from synthesizing existing research, to developing an age-appropriate questionnaire, and further to rigorous empirical investigation. Overall, the dissertation highlights the importance of personality traits in shaping student–teacher relationships. That is, higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and lower levels of neuroticism may contribute to higher relationship quality. Importantly, not only students' but also teachers' personality traits matter. In addition to the individual traits, this dissertation points out that personality match may play a role in student–teacher relationships as well, and thus is worth further investigation. Taken together, by bridging personality research and student–teacher relationship research, this dissertation contributed to a deeper understanding of how individual dispositions shape relational outcomes in school. Looking ahead, I invite researchers to continue investigating how individual differences ripple outward to shape relationship dynamics in schools and to deepen our understanding of "when personal becomes relational".