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Safe teaching as compensatory practice: relational potential and barriers for vulnerable students in European classrooms

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This study investigates how teachers across six European countries understand and practise Safe Teaching — a set of pedagogical actions rooted in attachment theory designed to foster secure teacher-student relationships. Conducted with 90 teachers from 13 schools in Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, the research employed focus groups and two-tier content analysis within a Participatory Action Research framework. Findings indicate that teachers understand Safe Teaching as a multidimensional practice encompassing open communication, trust, structure, and individualisation, and suggest its particular compensatory potential for vulnerable students: when teachers function as secure attachment figures, the school may partially offset the absence of relational security in students' home environments. However, the study also identifies a structural obstacle to this compensatory function — a negative feedback loop in which the students who would benefit most from Safe Teaching are precisely those whose histories of insecure attachment make them most difficult to bond with. Additional findings include the centrality of teacher authenticity and socio-emotional competence as internal drivers, and the indispensable role of collegial, family, and institutional support as external conditions. The results underscore the need for targeted professional development and school cultures that deliberately sustain teachers' capacity to provide relational security, particularly where that capacity is most tested.

KEYWORDS

attachment theory, focus groups, relational pedagogy, safe teaching, teacher-student relationships, vulnerable students

Introduction

The research reported here is part of the Let's Care Project (Horizon EU)¹ and explores the concept of Safe Teaching. We define Safe Teaching as the set of intentional teaching practices — encompassing open communication, trust-building, individualisation, provision of structure, and autonomy support — through which teachers cultivate secure, attachment-like relationships with their students. Safe Teaching draws on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978) and its educational applications (Berástegui and Pitillas, 2021; Bergin and Bergin, 2009) to articulate what teachers *do* when they act as caring adults whom students can trust to provide emotional

¹Progress on this research can be found at: <https://letscaresproject.eu/hub/>.

regulation, relatedness, and challenge in their learning. While teacher-student relationships (TSR) denote the relational quality that emerges between the two parties, and attachment theory provides the theoretical lens through which that quality is interpreted, Safe Teaching refers specifically to the pedagogical actions and dispositions through which teachers foster such relationships. This distinction is essential: Safe Teaching is not synonymous with a positive TSR but rather constitutes the intentional practice through which teachers work to build one.

The Let's Care project focuses on preventing early school leaving among vulnerable students, those from minority or migrant backgrounds, low socio-economic status, or with learning disabilities (DeKlyen and Greenberg, 2016), by creating emotionally safe and inclusive educational environments (Sabol and Pianta, 2012). The concept of Safe Teaching responds to accumulated evidence that the quality of the TSR is significantly associated with behavioural outcomes, academic achievement, self-concept, emotional regulation and school engagement (Dias et al., 2024; Osher et al., 2020; Quin, 2017; Spilt et al., 2022). Within the attachment framework, the TSR has been conceptualised through two key dimensions: "Safe Haven" (the teacher as a source of emotional support and comfort) and "Secure Base" (the teacher as an encourager of exploration and autonomy) (Berástegui et al., 2021). These dimensions have been shown to be particularly consequential for vulnerable students, for whom a secure attachment to teachers can serve as a resilience factor that compensates for adverse conditions at home or in the community (Berástegui and Pitillas, 2021; Di Lisio et al., 2025).

However, most empirical work on the TSR has relied on quantitative designs and has centred on early childhood education (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; García-Rodríguez et al., 2023). The conceptualisation and measurement of TSR across developmental stages remains variable, and harmonising teacher and student perspectives is still needed (García-Rodríguez et al., 2023). Furthermore, contextual factors beyond the teacher-student dyad — relationships with family members and peers, socio-economic conditions, and systemic stressors such as poverty and discrimination — exert substantial influence on educational outcomes (Osher et al., 2020; Ramsdal et al., 2015; Sansanwal, 2019; Tarabini, 2018). Education is a collective effort requiring cooperation between the school, family, and local community (Sansanwal, 2019), and any account of Safe Teaching must acknowledge these systemic influences. Recent work in relational pedagogy has begun to address this gap by positioning teaching as an inherently relational act, what Aspelin, 2021 terms "teaching as a way of bonding", yet the specific practices through which teachers enact relational bonds with students, particularly with vulnerable populations, remain underexplored.

Given the current state of research, it is necessary to explore teachers' understanding and enactment of Safe Teaching in greater depth. In this way, subsequent research, such as the quantitative studies currently being conducted within the Let's Care project, will be able to develop its instruments on the basis of a rich, practice-grounded description of the phenomenon. As a contribution to this aim, this paper presents the results of focus groups conducted with 90 teachers from six European countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland,

Portugal and Spain). These focus groups provided a collaborative platform where teachers could articulate how they practise Safe Teaching, as defined above, identify what enables and hinders it, and reflect on its relevance for vulnerable students. The study addresses the following research question: How do teachers across diverse European educational contexts understand and describe Safe Teaching as a set of practices for building secure attachment-like relationships with their students?

Methodology

Study design

This study is situated within the broader framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR) adopted by the Let's Care Project (Bisquerra, 2004; Martí Olive, 2000). PAR is characterised by its emphasis on praxis — an imperative connection between action and reflection — and by its critical orientation towards transforming educational practice. Within this framework, teachers are positioned as co-researchers whose professional knowledge is integral to the investigative process. The PAR approach has guided the overall project design, including the iterative development of observation tools for Safe Teaching that were subsequently trialled and refined by participating teachers. Within the focus-group component reported here specifically, teachers' co-researcher role took the form of contributing the primary experiential data as the acknowledged experts on the teaching-learning relationship, and receiving a synthesised report of the findings following analysis; the focus-group script itself was developed deductively by the research team from the project's pre-established analytic dimensions, rather than iteratively co-designed with participating teachers.

However, the specific component reported in this paper is an exploratory qualitative study using focus groups as the data collection method. Its purpose was to capture teachers' understanding and enactment of Safe Teaching across six European countries, generating a rich, practice-grounded description that could inform both the project's theoretical framework and its ongoing quantitative research. The focus group technique was selected for two reasons: it allows teachers to articulate their views through guided discussion using open questions, and the interactive setting fosters authentic collective discourse in which participants co-construct meanings and refine concepts, a process aligned with symbolic interactionism and particularly suited to analysing relational phenomena (Flick, 2015).

Participants

A total of 90 teachers from 13 schools in Bulgaria (BG), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT) and Spain (ES) participated. One focus group was conducted per school, comprising between four and ten teachers (see Table 1). These countries were selected based on a high prevalence of academic underachievement and/or early school leaving exceeding the European 2020 target, and for belonging to two distinct

TABLE 1 Characteristics of participating schools as reported by facilitators.

School FG code	No. of FG participants	Location	Ownership	Education levels	Size (no. students)	Student profile
BG-FG1	5	Suburban	Public	Pre-school, primary, secondary	1,080	Presence of Roma, migrant and refugee students
BG-FG2	8	Rural	Public	Primary	101	100% Roma, low SES, 60% residential
BG-FG3	5	Urban (small town)	Public	Pre-school, primary, secondary	562	Presence of various ethnicities, low SES and disabilities
ES-FG1	10	Urban (small town)	Public	Pre-school, primary	458	Large % of migrants, specially from Romania
ES-FG2	5	Urban (mid-sized city)	Public	Secondary	Around 900	Representative of area
IT-FG1	4	Rural	Public	Primary	60	No SES disadvantage or migrants, 1 student with non-parental care, 4 with disabilities
IT-FG2	6	Urban (large city)	Public	Pre-school, primary, secondary	Around 700	Representative of area (mixed SES, presence of other disadvantages)
LT-FG1	7	Urban (mid-sized city)	Public	Secondary	529	25% low SES, 6% Ukrainian refugees
LT-FG2	8	Rural	Public	Pre-school, primary, secondary	209	35% low SES, 4% Ukrainian refugees
PL-FG1	7	Urban (small town)	Public	Secondary	390	Presence of migrants; 9 students with disabilities
PL-FG2	6	Urban (large city)	Public	Primary, Second Chance	N/A	Children at risk of social maladjustment, (non)parental care, migrant background
PT-FG1	10	Suburban	Public	Pre-school, primary, secondary (general and vocational)	Over 1,500	Presence of students from low SES, with disabilities, non-parental care
PT-FG2	9	Urban (large city)	Private	Pre-school, primary, secondary	Around 1,600	Most high SES, few with disabilities, some non-parental care

European areas sharing socio-demographic constraints: Southern and Eastern Europe. Poland was included as a point of contrast, given its comparatively strong performance on both indicators (OECD, 2019a; OECD, 2019b).

The sampling was purposive: participating schools belonged to the Community of Schools in each country, meaning they had expressed interest in the project. This constitutes a limitation, as teachers already engaged with the Let's Care project may hold more favourable views towards relational approaches than the wider teaching population. Schools represented different levels of pre-university education, public and private ownership, rural and urban contexts, and diverse student profiles, including schools serving predominantly vulnerable populations (see Table 1). Teacher participation was voluntary.

The majority of participants were women (81%), over 40 years of age (79%), and taught in primary (60%) or secondary (39%) schools. The most numerous group had between 20 and 30 years of experience (38%). Ninety per cent taught in public schools and 78% in urban settings. This demographic information is summarised in Table 2.

Data collection

The focus groups were conducted alongside project partners active in educational administration, teacher training or professional networking in each country. Each partner designated one or two facilitators, who received training from the research team at Fundación Promaestro, a facilitator's dossier containing instructions, the focus group script and reporting templates. The script was developed deductively from the project's theoretical framework and addressed three dimensions: (i) the relationship between attachment and learning, (ii) the definition of Safe Teaching, and (iii) the barriers to and enablers of Safe Teaching. The guiding questions were:

- How does the quality of the teacher-student bond influence students' learning and well-being?
- What does Safe Teaching look like in your practice? What do you do to build secure relationships with students?

TABLE 2 Demographic characteristics of focus group participants ($N = 90$).

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Women	73	81
	Men	17	19
Age	Under 30	8	7,8
	30–40	12	13,3
	Over 40	70	78,9
Educational level taught*	Pre-school	6	6,6
	Primary	54	60
	Secondary	35	39
	Special education	1	1,1
Years of teaching experience	Under 10	21	23,3
	10–20	16	17,7
	20–30	34	38
	Over 30	19	21,1
School ownership	Public	12	90
	Private	1	10
School location	Urban	10	78
	Suburban/Rural	3	22

Percentages for educational level taught exceed 100% because four teachers reported teaching at more than one level.

- What enables and what prevents you from practising Safe Teaching?

The focus groups took place between April and June 2023. Sessions in Bulgaria, Spain, Poland and Portugal were conducted on-site; those in Italy and Lithuania were online. All sessions were conducted in the local language, lasted approximately one hour, and were audio-recorded. Informed consent was obtained from all participants regarding the project aims and the recording of sessions.

Data analysis

Following each focus group, facilitators transcribed and translated the conversations into English — using DeepL Pro to support translation — and completed standardised reporting templates integrating session notes and transcriptions. These templates contained prompts to summarise, extract keywords, and select representative testimonies for each question posed. Participant and school names were anonymised.

A three-member research team at Fundación Promaestro conducted a secondary analysis of these templates, coding the material using Google Sheets. This analytical design, whereby the research team worked from facilitators' synthesised reports rather than from raw transcripts or recordings, is consistent with established practices of qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) in multi-site collaborative research (Heaton, 2004). QSA involves the further analysis of existing qualitative data, often collected within a broader project, to extend or refine the original inquiry (Ruggiano and Perry, 2019). In team-based

research, it is common for data to be prepared by fieldwork researchers and analysed by others (Guest et al., 2017); the epistemological objection that only those who collected data can interpret it overlooks this standard practice (Long-Sutehall et al., 2011). In the present study, several features mitigated the risks associated with QSA: the facilitators were embedded in the local educational context, the reporting templates were standardised and aligned with the project's theoretical framework, and the research team maintained continuous contact with facilitators throughout the process. The coding was subsequently cross-checked by a three-member team of researchers at Universidad Pontificia Comillas, who lead the project's quantitative strand and the development of its theoretical framework, in order to validate the coding and verify its consistency with that framework.

The information was categorised using content analysis. First, a deductive categorisation was carried out based on the dimensions of the focus group script. This was followed by an inductive categorisation, from which new subcategories emerged (see Table 3). Keywords were extracted, and representative quotations were selected to capture the essence of the teachers' voices. Two reports were prepared and shared with the project partners and participating teachers, constituting a feedback loop consistent with the broader PAR framework.

Results

Relevance of safe teaching for students

To set out, the participating teachers were given a definition of secure attachment, which is mirrored by them when discussing the implications of attachment. The teacher becomes the reference point that children can rely on, who provides support, stimulation, encouragement and help. Through Safe Teaching, the relationship between teachers and children is strengthened, and students' socio-emotional skills are enhanced. The participants say Safe Teaching develops self-confidence and self-esteem, boosts students' resilience, independence and self-control, mediates the management of fear and anxiety, and improves interpersonal skills. Overall, participants agreed that this is critical for students' educational success and emotional well-being. Several participants shared the view that "Secure attachment is the basis for any learning" (IT-FG1).

In the first instance, positive TSRs increase motivation to learn and participate in class, which can increase academic performance. Students are more open to change, more willing to navigate the uncertainties that learning creates, to experiment and take intellectual risks:

If a student feels accepted, he is not afraid of making a mistake, that he does not know something, he is not afraid to speak out openly, because he feels comfortable, safe; acceptance allows him to accept his failures (PL-FG1).

In addition, teachers described how the quality of the relationship directly mediates students' willingness to engage with subject matter, even when the content itself is perceived as difficult. One teacher illustrated this by explaining how investing in the relationship with a student led that student to persevere

TABLE 3 Category tree and keywords selected for analysis.

Categories	Subcategories	Keywords
1. Implications of attachment and bonding dimension at school	1.1 Relevance of Secure Attachment in school 1.1.1 Relationship with school dropout/failure 1.2 School culture for Secure Attachment 1.3 Educational actors involved	Academic performance, belonging, bonding, compensating inequalities, dropout, emotional well-being, motivation, resilience, self-confidence, vulnerability.
2. Definition of Safe Teaching	2.1 Definition of Safe Teaching 2.2 Relevance of Safe Teaching 2.1.1 Impact of Safe Teaching 2.3 Teacher competences	Acceptance, attention, collaboration/ cooperation, comfort, communication, dialogue, emotional and physical environment, empathy, feedback, individual approach, listening, mutual trust, respect, shared, time, support, tolerance, understanding, welcoming
3. Safe Teaching enablers	3.1 Facilitative educational practice 3.1.1 Facilitative classroom situation 3.2.1 Teacher emotions when implementing Safe Teaching 3.2 Stakeholder actions and facilitative school culture 3.2.1 Family 3.2.2 Faculty 3.2.3 Management teams 3.2.4 Administration (public policies)	Acceptance, communication, empathy, materials/resources, parents/family, respect, security, trust
4. Safe Teaching barriers	4.1 Educational practice inhibitor 4.1.1 Inhibitory classroom situation 4.2.1 Teacher emotions in the face of Safe Teaching inhibition 4.2 Stakeholders 4.2.1 Inhibiting actions of stakeholders and school culture 4.2.1.1 Families 4.2.1.2 Faculty 4.2.1.3 Management teams 4.2.1.4 Administration (public policies) 4.2.2 Stakeholders needs 4.2.1.1 Families 4.2.1.2 Faculty 4.2.1.3 Management teams 4.2.1.4 Administration (public policies)	Communication, complex academic programs/ curriculum, complicated character of children, difficult relationships, family structure/ parental style, individualisation in large groups, lack of trust, student time

with chemistry despite finding it challenging, not because the subject became easier, but because the bond with the teacher sustained the student's effort:

If I have a bad relationship with a student, it automatically translates into the subject I teach, which is chemistry, a difficult subject... I admit that I am working very hard to build a good relationship with the student, because even if he does not like this chemistry, he tries to learn it because he likes you (PL-FG2).

Secondly, bonding in the classroom can have a significant impact on students' emotional well-being, especially during transitions to new educational levels or institutions. The participants stated that students who experience positive relationships feel more welcome and protected at school. The

school becomes a "tamed" space, "their space". There are implications for the emotional climate of the group, as well as the incidence of conflicts and breaches of classroom rules, since it is perceived that these could damage relationships. Once a "special connection" has been established with the group, students "... are able to function together, they are open to dialogue and contacts with others" (PL-FG2). This affects how students accept criticism and whether they open, creating a propensity towards mutual understanding and cooperation:

The microclimate is very important, when the children get to know each other, (...) they live like at home. Like the classroom is a small family. And they help each other and take care of each other and watch out for each other's troubles (LT-FG1).

Establishing a secure attachment is particularly consequential for vulnerable students: migrant students, students who are severely withdrawn, those with special educational needs, and those from family contexts where their affective needs are not met. For these students, the teacher's role as a Safe Haven is especially critical: when the home environment does not provide a reliable source of comfort and regulation, the teacher may become the primary adult who fulfils this function. As one participant stated: "A safe school is a refuge for our students" (ES-FG1). Teachers described how bonding with vulnerable students can compensate for inequalities by providing access to the emotional security that is a precondition for engagement with learning. However, participants also acknowledged the difficulty of building such bonds. Vulnerable students may exhibit aggressive behaviour, defensiveness, shyness, or difficulty following rules, responses that are themselves manifestations of insecure attachment, making it harder for teachers to connect with them. This creates a risk: the students who would benefit most from the protective effects of Safe Teaching may be the least likely to receive it.

Conversely, the effects are negative for students who lack secure attachment to teachers. Often, they feel isolated and unmotivated. They may be uncooperative, rebellious or engage in truancy. Some groups of participants asserted that this translates into poor results and may result in dropping out. While participants across countries agree that there is a link between attachment quality, achievement, and early school leaving, most are cautious, acknowledging that the influence is indirect and that many factors, including family intervention, mediate outcomes. This viewpoint is illustrated by the following testimony:

If we are considering school success as academic achievement, it might have an influence, but I have some reluctance with this idea. When considering school success more widely, the growth as a student and as a person, I think there is a direct path that connects attachment to success (PT-FG2).

Relevance of safe teaching for teachers

The participants expressed that their sense of efficacy and fulfilment in their role is strongly impacted by whether they succeed in forming positive connections with students and colleagues. Seeing that what they do helps children to express themselves freely and makes them feel supported is a source of great satisfaction and motivation, helping them to overcome the difficult moments encountered along the way. Positive responses from students bring them joy, improving their performance and creativity in their daily work:

I feel supported by my colleagues and supported by the children and this makes me feel good, it makes me work well: it's a [virtuous] circle that makes you do activities that otherwise would not have been thought of and implemented, I feel free (IT-FG1).

On the other hand, teachers said that they feel insecure, anxious and vulnerable when they encounter relational difficulties. In other cases, they said they feel angry, apathetic or indifferent. Such situations bring feelings of frustration and demotivation, arising from a perceived inability to meet students' needs despite considerable effort: "The day I was supposed to have a lesson with this class was the worst day of the week, (...) all the methods I know that I have used up to this point have failed" (PL-FG1). Nevertheless, teachers persevere: "I had the experience of having to rebuild trust. With time and my authenticity, I managed to be a safe place for the child" (IT-FG2).

Definition of safe teaching

The participating teachers provided several intertwined definitions of Safe Teaching. Safe Teaching is characterised by open communication, sharing, and active listening between teachers and students. These interactions are mediated by relationships founded on mutual trust, respect and relatedness. One participant described this approach as follows: "a partner relationship allows students to trust teachers and become attached to them, because they see in them people, someone to talk to and it works both ways" (PL-FG2). In order to teach safely, it is important for teachers to demonstrate to their students that they like and care about them. As one participant shares: "When we see that a student is crestfallen, ask if everything is ok. Sometimes it is enough" (PT-FG2). Students need to feel seen and know that teachers are doing their best for them, as another teacher suggested: "Detect the invisible children. I make an effort to make these children visible" (ES-FG1). One way to achieve this is for teachers to show their availability, invest time and attention in learning about students, and approach them as individuals. Safe Teaching also entails providing validation in times of hardship and reassuring students when they make mistakes.

These relational elements, open communication, closeness, trust, and a caring attitude correspond to the Safe Haven dimension of attachment, in which the teacher provides emotional accessibility and responsiveness. The elements described in the following paragraphs, structure, autonomy support, and the incorporation of student perspectives map more closely onto the Secure Base dimension, in which the teacher encourages exploration and independence while maintaining clear expectations.

Safe Teaching is about encouraging dialogue, both one-to-one and in classroom discussions, on both the subject matter and informal non-academic topics. To facilitate this, teachers need to ask the right questions, invite all students to participate, show curiosity about what matters to students, and emphasise that they have the right to their own opinions, which should be respected. Students will then feel free to express their thoughts and feelings. The classroom becomes "a space for students to express themselves, ask about what interests them, say what worries them, talk about their problems with experienced adults" (PL-FG1). Additionally, dialogue enables teachers to stay attuned to students' needs and identify warning signs of unsafe situations inside and outside school. A special mention is given

to the role of the teacher as a role model, a mediator in peer interactions and a supporting figure for emotional management. When conflicts arise, teachers should talk individually with the students to understand different perspectives, deconstruct the situation and scaffold problem-solving.

According to the participants, Safe Teaching also manifests as customisation of teaching and learning, grounded on empathy and acceptance of the individual student. It means “not throwing everyone into one bag” because everyone comes to school with a different baggage of experience and needs. The individualised approach translates into setting objectives adapted to children’s starting points and providing adequate support to ensure that success is achievable and that students feel respected for their own pace of learning. Teachers need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each student and plan instruction to work from their strengths. Others mention the constant search for channels and strategies to ensure that they reach students, to facilitate access to the curricular content, as well as making teaching more attractive and experiential. In a complementary manner, the teacher conveys to the students a sense of possibility, showing them that they believe in their abilities to overcome challenges if they try hard:

I often come across children who come to us and are crushed by mathematics, and I tell them: you have a problem because you have deficiencies, but we will compensate for them soon, I will help you with this. And it happens that we go back a few years with the material and get to work. After some time, it turns out that the child achieves success (...) and he starts to work more willingly and does not notice when he jumps to the right level (PL-FG2).

The participants placed Safe Teaching at the intersection of providing students with structure and fostering their independence. On the one hand, Safe Teaching means building predictability, consistency and clarity in the lesson sequence, classroom instructions and behaviour norms. In this sense, check-ins, positive reinforcement and constant feedback emerge as key elements in guiding the learning process. Corrections are necessary to communicate limits and expectations: “At the same time, [Safe Teaching] is to know how to sign incorrect or less desirable behaviours, so students know the better way to grow at different levels” (PT-FG2). Regarding praise, punishments and assessments, teachers must be fair and avoid showing favouritism. Students need to know that they are allowed to struggle and fail without their character being judged. However, the teachers warned that academic expectations must be kept high, as “[some students may] think proximity means better grades with less effort” (BG-FG1).

On the other hand, Safe Teaching requires involving students in the construction of the lesson and incorporating their viewpoints, for instance, by using their interests to provide examples or relating content to issues that matter to them. Assigning students responsibilities in the classroom and seeking to reach agreements with them also falls into this definition. As one participant explained: “The active involvement of students makes them feel important” (ES-FG1). The balance between structure and independence is exemplified in this testimony:

A child is probably safe in a classroom when the teacher’s assessment criteria are very clear, the structure of the lesson is very clear, the students are consulted, asked their opinions, decisions are made together, there is some kind of a dialogue. The teacher is not [an] officer with a stick who directs the whole process. When compromises are sought, (...) when their thoughts and wishes are taken into account (LT-FG1).

In a broader characterisation, there is a connection to the social aims of education: achieving autonomous, competent citizens, and providing a secure physical and emotional environment for the development of students’ individuality. This vision is sometimes described as being in opposition to a narrow focus on academic achievement.

Teacher competences for safe teaching

Firstly, the participants stressed that the character of the teacher is paramount, in particular being confident, close to people, kind and authentic: “definitely stronger bonds are created when you are a ‘nice person’ for a student than when you are just a professional, competent and demanding teacher” (PL-FG2). Developing what the participants described as Safe Teaching hinges on the teacher’s vision of their role as an educator who contributes to students’ personal development. At times, this involves shifting the focus from the subject matter to socio-emotional aspects and personal values. This reflects on their motivations, priorities and attitudes towards students. The participants expressed the need to have a strong personal and professional commitment.

Secondly, the teacher’s socio-emotional competence was highlighted, with interpersonal awareness and relational skills at the forefront. Among these, the teachers cited the ability to listen actively, a vigilant attitude, being a good observer, empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to solve conflicts. In addition, teachers need to manage their discourse and ensure they are well interpreted. Intrapersonal skills, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, displaying resilience and a critical spirit, were mentioned too. Teachers need to know their limits because they are always responding to hard-to-predict stimuli.

Thirdly, the participants spoke of professional skills that enable them to practise Safe Teaching. The foundation is didactic knowledge, the ability to explain school contents in a clear and accessible way and to differentiate, that is, to deploy a variety of methodologies depending on children’s needs. These are complemented by classroom management and leadership skills, such as knowing how to motivate students, how to react to improper behaviour, and how to “use appropriate techniques that will force interactions between participants, [so] children begin to feel as a community” (PL-FG2). Counselling skills are also considered essential, for instance knowledge of child psychology, an understanding of each student’s situation, and knowing how to intervene when faced with specific problems.

Finally, several aspects of professional conduct were identified as required for Safe Teaching. The most prominent are reflexivity

and an orientation towards continuous learning. Teachers need to step back and rethink, challenge and question themselves, and constantly seek areas of improvement: “What helps me a lot is every night to review how my day at school has gone” (ES-FG1). Collaboration is underscored: communicating with parents, sharing practice, learning from other teachers, and seeking help from other professionals. An impartial attitude and respect for diversity complete the Safe Teaching puzzle. One participant summarised the competences for Safe Teaching as follows:

The teacher needs to continuously improve his qualification and exchange good practices with other teachers. (...), to love children, to work with parents. The appearance and behaviour of the teacher are important. To offer topics and activities according to the needs of the children. Teachers, children and parents speak one language (BG-FG2).

Barriers and enablers of safe teaching

School culture, understood as the norms, values and practices that govern how a school operates, can actively promote or hinder the development of Safe Teaching in the classroom. A facilitative school culture is one that fosters a sense of belonging, embraces diversity, and encourages collaboration between various stakeholders. This culture emerges from the actions and attitudes of all individuals who influence, directly or indirectly, the teaching and learning process. These stakeholders include the teaching faculty, families, the school administration and policymakers.

Starting with the teaching faculty, the teachers expressed that collegiality gives them security; thus, creating a harmonious, mutually supportive team of teachers is paramount. Teachers feel safer in the knowledge that others will be there to offer help when needed: “I want to have such a sense of security that if I fail, I will receive help from a friend, psychologist or pedagogue, and I will not be judged” (PL-FG2). The teachers also said that collegiality enriches their learning, through discussions and feedback. Exchanging perspectives is necessary, especially since students have greater compatibility with some teachers than with others. Additionally, it allows them to share responsibility for the students’ education.

The role of families is crucial, first and foremost by fulfilling the students’ physical and emotional needs: “Teachers find it difficult to get close to children who are neglected in the family. These children exhibit aggressive behaviour and mistrust of the teacher and other children” (BG-FG2). Nurturing a trusting relationship between families and teachers is also important, as it mediates the children’s own impressions of school and facilitates problem-solving. To achieve this, the teachers said that they should take the initiative in maintaining transparent communication and aligning goals: “What is important is that we, as teachers, are able to give [families] the answers they need, to explain the rationale behind our professional choices” (IT-FG1). Ideally, parents should support learning at home and participate in extracurricular activities alongside the rest of the school community.

School leadership plays a role in ensuring that the school has a clear and shared vision of Safe Teaching. They lead by setting priorities: “If closeness [with students], an individualised approach, is encouraged by the management, then everyone will strive [for it]” (BG-FG1). They have considerable power to shape how institutions function and are organised. The leadership team should also provide security to teachers by listening to and trusting their initiatives. The participating teachers demanded support, reassurance, understanding, advice, and consistency from their management. They requested that they allocate time in schedules for professionals to plan, share and reflect together, and provide updated training for a safe and effective educational environment.

In addition, teachers identified systemic barriers that limit the time they have to attend to children individually, shift priorities away from holistic education, and withhold the support they would need to provide Safe Teaching. Examples of these challenges include excessive bureaucratic commitments, extensive curricula, large class sizes and accountability measures for academic achievement: “Teachers are so fixated on the results because they are accountable for them that they do not have time to build relationships, (...) during the year I had so many students that I was not able to remember all their names” (PL-FG2). Another barrier highlighted was the shortage of specialists within schools to help teachers address diverse students’ needs: “[There are] too few pupil support specialists; more and more special needs children are coming in, and the number of posts remains the same” (LT-FG1). Finally, the instability of education laws and the poor economic recognition of teachers reflect a lack of regard for the profession, which weighs on teachers’ motivation.

Discussion

Safe teaching as relational practice: mapping teachers’ definitions onto the attachment framework

The focus group methodology proved effective for surfacing teachers’ subjective knowledge about relationality and offering insight into their lived experience. The interactivity of group reflection, the reappearance of themes across groups, the inclusion of diverse participant profiles, and the selection of organic groupings (staff from the same school) increased the validity of the information obtained (Bisquerra, 2004). Notably, the concept of secure attachment was found to be highly congruent with teachers’ experiences of positive and negative TSRs across all countries and educational levels. The categorical coding did not reveal systematic divergence in the substantive content of teachers’ definitions of Safe Teaching by country or educational level; where variation existed, it appeared to lie in emphasis and illustrative detail rather than in the categories themselves. However, the study’s cross-site synthetic coding approach (see Methodology) was not designed to detect or quantify such degree-level differences, a constraint already noted in the Limitations. A finding that is significant because the application of attachment theory in pedagogy has been predominantly restricted to early childhood education (Bergin

and Bergin 2009). Overall, the patterns identified were broadly consistent across the six participating countries: teachers in every national context converged on the same core categories in describing Safe Teaching, its enablers, and its barriers, and no country's data diverged from the others in ways that would suggest a fundamentally different conception of the construct. Where contrasts did emerge, they tended to track the demographic composition of participating schools rather than national or policy context *per se*. For instance, the shortage of specialist support staff was raised with particular urgency in schools serving larger proportions of migrant, refugee, or special-needs students, a concern that surfaced less prominently among teachers in more homogeneous or better-resourced settings — a pattern consistent with the school-level variation summarised in Table 1, rather than indicating divergent understandings of Safe Teaching itself across the six countries.

The rich testimonies gathered in the focus groups suggest that the framework of Safe Teaching is useful for teachers in recognising and articulating the pedagogical actions they take to foster secure attachment with their students. These actions can be mapped onto the two core dimensions of secure attachment. In the Safe Haven dimension, teachers described practices centred on emotional accessibility: open communication, active listening, displaying a caring attitude, seeking spaces to know students personally, and providing reassurance in times of hardship. The emphasis was less on the active provision of emotional regulation by the teacher and more on creating a safe environment for self-expression: a finding that may reflect teachers' perception of their role as facilitators of emotional safety rather than as therapeutic agents. In the Secure Base dimension, teachers described practices that provide structure (predictable routines, clear expectations, consistent feedback, fair corrections) alongside practices that foster autonomy (incorporating student perspectives, assigning responsibilities, reaching agreements, and limiting undue pressure).

An additional element that emerged from the teachers' discourse, respect for individual rhythms, tolerance, and the use of dialogue among diverse learners, suggests that Safe Teaching contributes not only to individual attachment but also to the development of attitudes and skills conducive to democratic citizenship (Lenz et al., 2021). This connection between relational practice and democratic education aligns with Aspelin' 2021 argument that teaching is fundamentally a relational act of bonding, in which the teacher's engagement with each student as a particular individual constitutes the ethical core of pedagogy. In this sense, Safe Teaching can be understood as one operationalisation of this broader relational-pedagogical orientation: it is grounded specifically in attachment theory and translates the general principle of teaching-as-bonding into a defined, project-specific set of observable practices.

Safe teaching and vulnerable students: compensatory potential and risks

Regarding the correlation between early school leaving and the quality of attachment to teachers, the participants' views were not uniform. While some see a direct link, others attribute greater influence to the home environment, the student's personality, or

prior achievement. This divergence is consistent with the literature, which describes TSRs as having an indirect impact on academic achievement mediated through cognitive and behavioural engagement (Di Lisio et al., 2025), which can indeed be influenced by other factors. Teachers' reluctance to claim a direct link may also reflect the social stigma associated with acknowledging responsibility for student dropout in a professional setting.

Nonetheless, teachers were emphatic that Safe Teaching has particular compensatory potential for vulnerable students. When students from minority backgrounds, low socio-economic status, or adverse family environments encounter a teacher who functions as a Safe Haven, the school can become a space that partially offsets the absence of secure attachment figures at home. This finding aligns with research positioning attachment as a resilience factor in the face of adversity (Berástegui and Pitillas, 2021). However, the data also revealed a troubling pattern: vulnerable students are often the most difficult to bond with. Teachers described encountering aggression, withdrawal, defensiveness, and mistrust, behaviours that are themselves symptomatic of insecure attachment histories. This creates a negative feedback loop in which the children who most need the protective effects of Safe Teaching are least likely to receive it. This phenomenon has been previously documented for students from minority ethnic groups, those from low socio-economic status, those with limited language proficiency, and those struggling academically (Di Lisio et al., 2025; Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Recognising this dynamic is a precondition for disrupting it, and it underscores the need for deliberate strategies and professional support to help teachers build relationships precisely where relational difficulty is greatest.

Safe teaching and teacher well-being: a virtuous circle

The participants indicated that positive relationships with students render their work more meaningful, enhance their sense of self-efficacy, and improve their resilience. This is consistent with research showing that TSRs are a primary source of job enjoyment and that they buffer teachers' emotional responses to pedagogical stressors (Spilt et al., 2011; Taxer et al., 2019). A positive feedback loop is established: positive TSRs increase the teacher's sense of purpose, which students perceive as greater caring, which in turn fosters further positive interactions (Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). Conversely, relational difficulties generate anxiety, frustration and demotivation, highlighting the need for institutional support structures that sustain teachers' emotional capacity to practise Safe Teaching.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Despite the advantages of richness and depth, focus groups carry a risk of conformity bias, particularly in hierarchical contexts. Online focus groups may reduce awareness of non-verbal cues. Despite identical training, facilitators varied in their ability to moderate

group dynamics and in the depth of their reports. The reliance on synthesised reports from facilitators, rather than raw transcripts, introduces the risk of interpretation bias and limits the granularity of the secondary analysis. While this approach is methodologically defensible within QSA practice (Heaton, 2004; Ruggiano and Perry, 2019), it constrains the extent to which nuanced data could be recovered: the analysis is best suited to identifying recurring themes across the dataset, and is less able to speak to micro-interactional or discursive features of the original focus group conversations, such as hesitations, disagreements, or the sequential unfolding of talk. Translation of participant interventions to English introduces a further layer of potential distortion. The self-selection of participating schools — all of which had already expressed interest in the Let's Care project — limits the transferability of these findings: the teachers' views may be more favourable towards relational approaches than those of the wider teaching population, particularly teachers in schools with no prior engagement in relational or attachment-informed initiatives. A related limitation concerns the fact that participants were given a definition of secure attachment at the start of each focus group (see Results); this prior framing may have predisposed teachers to interpret and describe their practice in terms congruent with the project's theoretical model, rather than independently of it. Finally, while the qualitative design provided rich insights, it does not allow for statistical generalisation. A comparative analysis of teachers' perceptions by educational level (early years vs. secondary), a potentially significant source of variation noted but not explored in this study, would be a valuable avenue for future research.

Implications and conclusions

This study set out to explore how teachers across diverse European contexts understand and describe Safe Teaching as a set of practices for building secure attachment-like relationships with their students. The findings indicate that teachers recognise Safe Teaching as a multidimensional practice encompassing open communication, closeness, trust, individualisation of teaching, provision of structure, and consideration of student perspectives. These practices map onto the Safe Haven and Secure Base dimensions of attachment theory, and teachers regard them as critical both for students' academic success and emotional well-being — particularly for vulnerable students — and for their own professional fulfilment. The study also reveals a tension between the compensatory potential of Safe Teaching for vulnerable students and the relational difficulties that make bonding with these students particularly challenging.

Several implications for research follow. First, future studies should incorporate longitudinal designs and mixed methods to examine the implementation and impact of Safe Teaching practices over time, including quantitative data on the relationship between reflective engagement with TSRs and the quality of attachment and student outcomes. Second, a comparative analysis of how teachers at different educational levels (early years vs. secondary) perceive and enact Safe Teaching would address a gap identified in this study, given that the application of attachment theory in pedagogy has been

largely confined to early childhood. Third, the influence of stakeholders — colleagues, families, school leaders, and policymakers — on teachers' ability to develop Safe Teaching emerged as a recurrent theme. It would be pertinent to create reflection spaces for these actors to explore their views on Safe Teaching, identify actions they can proactively undertake, and examine how these compare with the requests teachers make of them. Fourth, while teachers in this study tended to attribute barriers to external factors, future research should also explore the extent to which teachers' own expectations and practices may inadvertently hinder the development of secure attachment, particularly with vulnerable students whose behaviour challenges relational norms.

Regarding implications for practice, the insights from the focus groups were used to develop two observation tools, freely available on the Let's Care Project hub²: the Safe Teaching Observation Tool, an analytical grid for classroom observation, and the Pedagogical Reflection Tool, a discussion script for indirect observation of school culture and stakeholder participation. These tools were trialled and refined with participating teachers' feedback, constituting the most significant applied contribution of this work and a tangible output of the project's PAR framework.

More broadly, the findings indicate that professional development for Safe Teaching should be ongoing, responsive to perceived needs in student well-being, and centred on socio-emotional competences and reflective practice — areas that participants identified as insufficiently addressed in initial teacher education. Concretely, initial teacher education programmes could integrate Safe Teaching through supervised practicum reflection centred on relational incidents, case-based analysis of relational dilemmas, and structured use of the Safe Teaching Observation and Pedagogical Reflection tools developed in this project as training instruments. It is equally important that teachers feel valued, trusted, and supported by colleagues, school leadership, families, and policies. As the participants made clear, teachers cannot offer security to students if they are not secure themselves — a finding that resonates with the chains of security described by Berástegui et al., 2021. Achieving schools that function as places of belonging for all members of the educational community, including and especially vulnerable students, requires systemic commitment at every level.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the facilitator reporting templates that constitute the primary data source for this study contain anonymised but potentially identifiable information about teachers and schools. For this reason, the raw data cannot be made publicly available. The focus group script, reporting templates, and methodological reports are available at: <https://letscaresproject.eu/jresearchresults/focus-groups-and-peer-observation-with-teachers/>. Requests to

²The latest version of the tools can be found at: <https://letscaresproject.eu/hub/>.

access the datasets should be directed to Jorge Úbeda, jubeda@ucm.es.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted within the Let's Care Project (Horizon Europe, Grant Agreement No. 101059425), which received ethics clearance from the European Commission during the grant evaluation process [Ethics Summary Report, Ref. Ares(2022)615460, 26 January 2022]. As required by the Commission, an Independent Ethics Board (IEB) was established to provide robust ethics monitoring throughout the project, composed of Prof. Agustín Domingo Moratalla (University of Valencia), Prof. Johan de Tavernier (KU Leuven), and Prof. Antonio Da Re (University of Padua). The IEB reported periodically to the Commission on how ethics issues were monitored and handled, including data safety, pseudonymisation, and the protection of vulnerable participants against stigmatisation. The project's ethical compliance, data protection, and data management were governed by a dedicated Work Package (WP7), which produced a Legal and Ethical Guidance Report. All procedures involving human participants adhered to privacy-by-design and privacy-by-default principles, in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data processing agreements were signed between the coordinating institution (Fundación Promaestro, as data controller) and the partner organisations acting as data processors in each participating country. Participant and school identifiers were anonymised in all reporting and analysis, and no personal data was transferred outside the European Union. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

MT: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis. JU: Investigation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. KP: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation.

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Conflict of interest

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

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. During the revision of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (version claude-sonnet-4, Anthropic) to assist with restructuring the text, improving clarity of argumentation, and identifying relevant academic references. The AI tool was used under the direct supervision of the authors, who reviewed, verified, and edited all outputs. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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