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Article

Close and Conflictual: How Pupil–Teacher Relationships Can Contribute to the Alienation of Pupils from Secondary School

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Abstract: This article presents previously unreported findings from a larger grounded theory study which explored the intersection between pupil–teacher relationships and secondary pupils who are experiencing school alienation. Mixed data were gathered, using a questionnaire exploring teachers' perceptions of their relationships with their students, alongside semi-structured, exploratory interviews with teachers and alienated pupils. A critical realist grounded theory design was employed, identifying closeness and conflict as causative mechanisms contributing new insights into the phenomena of school alienation. This approach allowed for data to be triangulated, constantly compared, and used to verify findings. This study discovered some pupils experience a more pronounced subset of alienation, where teachers perceive their relationships with such pupils as being less close and more conflictual when compared to their peers. It also identified that these pupils place an emphasis on negative experiences early into the formation of relationships with their teachers. Such experiences are viewed as critical incidents which are difficult to forget by alienated pupils. A diagram summarising this mechanism is presented, and the paper concludes with some professional strategies for teachers to help repair the relationship and reduce pupils' feelings of alienation.

Keywords: pupil–teacher relationships; alienation; social psychology of education; critical realism; grounded theory; critical incidents

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1. Introduction

Pupil–teacher relationships have been widely researched, reaching the consensus that they have a significant impact on an individual's development throughout their education [1–3]. Research by Kington [4] reported that positive teacher–pupil relationships centre on five key areas; namely, interaction, behaviour, expectations, proximity, and control. Findings indicated that teachers experience a series of "relationship transitions" (p. 189) in relation to the five areas, and that these transitions can often present teachers with "conflicting views of positive teacher-pupil relationships, creating personal dissonance as they try to make sense of their role in these relationships" [4]. The study concluded that, as teachers develop through their career, there are areas of tension which may have an impact on their future relationships with pupils. A subsequent study [5] found that teacher–pupil relationships evident in primary classrooms contribute to the overall learning environment particularly in relation to interactions, routines, and activities. In addition, there was found to be a statistical association between pupils' views of their relationships with teachers and their self-reported satisfaction with school. Furthermore, the research demonstrated variations in perceptions of teacher–pupil relationships in relation to pupil year group, school context, and length of experience of the teacher.

Studies have shown that adolescents are more likely to lose enjoyment and interest at the start of the transition to secondary school [6], with suggestions that effective pupil–teacher relationships can have a protective effect against disengagement [7–10].

There is limited research regarding the association between pupils experiencing alienation and their academic progress. Despite this, the literature which does exist suggests pupils who experience alienation-like characteristics, such as disaffection and lack of engagement, are less likely to make significant academic progress when compared to their non-alienated peers [11–13]. Additionally, positive relationships between pupils and teachers have been shown to reduce rates of pupil dropout [14–16]. However, there remains limited research exploring how pupils experience these relationships with reference to alienation from their learning.

The findings presented in this paper are taken from a larger, grounded theory study that sought to explore the important overlap between the phenomena of alienation and pupil–teacher relationships. This grounded theory study adopted a critical realist philosophy underpinned by a classic grounded theory methodology [17]. The critical realist approach to grounded theory considers critical realism's emphasis on being and provides a framework where epistemologically framed experiences are worked backwards to establish the social, ontologically framed mechanism which led to the action [17]. The research sought to understand the intersection between pupil–teacher relationships and the experience of pupil alienation from secondary school education. Mixed data were collected to deepen the understanding of these concepts and to give the opportunity to compare and integrate qualitative and quantitative data. All data were collected from a mixed comprehensive (comprehensive schools in the UK do not select their intake based on academic performance and account for the majority of secondary schools) secondary school in England. Data were generated via (i) a teacher questionnaire focused on teachers' perceptions of their relationships with pupils, (ii) interviews with teachers, and (iii) interviews with pupils who were identified as alienated. This paper reports specifically on the findings from the teacher questionnaire and interviews with pupils (see Looker [18] for the findings which also include interviews with teachers).

This study focused on the exploration and identification of mechanism(s) that lead to pupils experiencing alienation from school. The research was guided by three research aims:

1. To understand pupils' perceptions of the mechanisms and barriers for forming positive pupil–teacher relationships;
2. To give voice to pupils' perceptions of their experiences of alienation and pupil–teacher relationships;
3. To measure teachers' perceptions of their relationships with pupils.

1.1. Alienation

As a concept, alienation was first described in 1844 by Karl Marx as a way of being estranged from the reality of labour [19]. Marx described this lack of connectedness as an ongoing cycle of making oneself alien to the products formed from labour, the products of labour, and their associated reality. The term alienation was later refined by Seeman [20,21] into an empirical concept [22], bringing its study to prominence in the social sciences. Seeman's work on alienation aimed to unify the concept [20], which identified five ways in which the term alienation had been used. These have since been refined into the four accepted categories for the study of school alienation; powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and social estrangement [22,23].

Seeman's [20,21] descriptions of alienation are still used and have been applied to various research areas. This is not surprising, as although Seeman's lens is sociologically oriented, his definitions are psychological [22], focusing on how individuals interact and interpret their situations. Eccles and Roeser's review of the research explored the impact schools have on pupil development during adolescence [6] and suggested that pupils' initial disengagement with school is psychological, followed by observable, behavioural actions. The use of the term "disengagement" is not to be understood as a direct replacement for alienation. Archambault et al. [24] make a clear distinction between the terminologies by stressing that engagement and alienation are not to be understood as antonyms. They, instead, suggest that a decrease in school interest and motivation, observed as disengagement,

are precursors to pupil alienation. That is to say that a lack of engagement is antecedent to alienation, not synonymous with it.

School alienation, as a stressor in adolescent life, has been examined in attempts to understand the significant challenges it presents to schools [25,26]. The body of literature on school alienation has attempted to streamline the broad definitions offered by Seeman [20], but a consensus has yet to be achieved. For example, Hascher and Hadjar [22] highlight that most of the existing research can be sorted by the purpose of the study; that is, those that focus on the (i) various forms of alienation from schools, (ii) symptoms and indicators, and (iii) concepts which specify pupil alienation as an empirical construct. A recurring theme throughout much of the literature is the interconnectedness between relationships and pupil alienation from school, although whilst some studies approach this directly, others only feature it as a part of the analysis or context.

1.2. Approaching a Definition of Alienation in School

Seeman's attempts to add clarity to the term alienation resulted in the variety of categorisations identified above. In the years since these definitions were first suggested, educational researchers have carried out studies examining pupil alienation using a variety of different definitions. Hascher and Hadjar's comprehensive review of school alienation [22] characterises Seeman's approach to the conceptualisations of alienation as very broad. However, with much of the literature on alienation citing Seeman, it is understandable why subsequent attempts to define this concept lack homogeneity. It appears that, as a psychological construct, alienation either cannot easily be defined, or it is such a broad concept that it requires multiple, specific definitions.

Attempts to apply alienation to schools have ranged from using the term by relating it to atypical behaviour [27], equating it with estrangement [28], defining it in terms of intellectual alienation [29], and discussing alienation concerning marginalisation due to race [30]. In addition to those sources which use the terms disengagement [24,31] and disaffection [32], school alienation has also been described in terms of the relationship an individual has with the culture of the school [3].

For such a relationship to be classified as alienated, the individual must exhibit characteristics such as indifference or hostility which cause or lead to suffering [22]. Although attempts to provide clarity seem to have provided a broader understanding of the term, there is a degree of congruence running throughout all the studies, e.g., [29,33–36]; each use of the term fits into one of Seeman's [20,21] definitions. The themes of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and estrangement run strongly throughout other studies, whether explicitly or implicitly. Of the attempts to define alienation, Hascher and Hadjar's [22] reach the most inclusive definition. Their systematic analysis considers the many constructs which are accepted as being part of the concept and use these ideas to formulate a comprehensive definition of school alienation:

> *a specific set of negative attitudes towards social and academic domains of schooling comprising cognitive and affective elements. While the cognitive dimension relates to student appraisals of the school environment, the affective dimension relates to their feelings. These negative attitudes develop and change over time in terms of a state and can solidify into a disposition.*
>
> Hascher and Hadjar (p. 179) [22]

This definition, encompassing powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and social estrangement [20,21,23], captures the constructs and experiences of alienation. It also refers to a set of negative attitudes, which is also a recurring theme, and encompasses Morinaj et al.'s [37] understanding that socialisation agents can vary for alienated pupils across the domains of learning, teachers, and classmates. For these reasons, this definition of school alienation has been adopted for use in this paper.

1.3. Pupil–Teacher Relationships and Alienation

Strong, positive pupil–teacher relationships, characterised by mutual respect and pupil participation in the classroom [38], have been identified through both qualitative and quantitative studies as crucial to preventing school alienation [39–42]. Schultz and Rubel [42] identified, through qualitative enquiry, that alienated pupils can feel a sense of powerlessness when describing negative relationships with their teachers; however, findings also showed that young people were still able to form positive relationships with at least one teacher who they viewed as supportive and nurturing. These positive relationships are characterised by teachers who express concern for pupils' wellbeing in contrast to negative relationships which enhanced feelings of school alienation [42]. In a study following 178 pupils aged 5–13 years, it has been shown that strong, early, interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils play an important role in the social development of all pupils in a school [43]. Their study does not explicitly explore alienation. Instead, when discussing positive pupil–teacher relationships, references are made to "positive attachments", indicating that a sense of belonging, or being-with, helps pupils develop socially. Furthermore, although it has been shown that these relationships often vary according to teachers' career phase, they should be seen as dynamic, developing, and situated within the specific context of where they take place [44]. This supports the idea that relationships between pupils and teachers play an important role in feelings of alienation and are subject to changes throughout their progression.

Similarly, Amitay and Rahav's [45] grounded theory study identified that teachers showing care to pupils helped to create meaningful learning. They reported that pupils who had experienced alienating encounters with teachers in the past were able to talk about positive relationships they subsequently formed. Their theoretical model proposes that by achieving this level of professional attachment, the teachers have been able to counteract the feelings of alienation experienced by the pupils. This suggests that for attachment to occur, meaningful relationships must be present, supporting Seeman's description of meaninglessness as a construct of alienation [20,21]. Preston et al.'s review [31] of the extant literature further adds to the discourse, offering that feelings of powerlessness are relevant when conceptualising alienation and attachment. They suggest that attachment, engagement, and commitment are in direct opposition to alienation, defining attachment as the degree to which individuals feel part of their school community, including a sense of belonging.

Although research on alienation within education is a developing body of work, there remains a limited volume of literature exploring its intersection with pupil–teacher relationships [46]. Much of the work in this field has focused on either the alienation of educators [47–49] or of pupils from the practice of education, often in specific areas of the curriculum such as physical education [50–52]. However, it does seem to be clear that effective pupil–teacher relationships have a protective effect against school alienation [53], with emerging evidence suggesting pupil–pupil relationships also contribute to a protective effect [26].

2. Materials and Methods

The design for this study took a critical realist grounded theory methodology [17,18], using mixed data to triangulate the findings. This approach is underpinned by the use of an open coding modus to avoid epistemic fallacy, and retroduction within the constant comparison until theoretical saturation is achieved. Critical realism's emancipatory objective is described by Bhaskar [54,55] as the necessity to move people from demi-reality to the cosmic envelope. Bhaskar's [56] description of demi-reality includes exploitation, oppression, conflict, and alienation. He describes the cosmic envelope as a state of being where these characteristics are not present. This normative intent is further expanded on by Belfrage and Hauf [57] who state that the principal concern for critical realist research must be to enable social emancipation. The decision to take a critical realist grounded theory

approach not only facilitated exploration of the sociological aspects of inequality, but also the discovery of actions that can address this [58,59].

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Worcester's ethics panel and all participants engaged in this study voluntarily. For pupils who engaged in this study, consent was sought from both the pupil and their parent or carer, following the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association [60].

2.1. Sample

Participants were teachers (n = 21) and pupils (n = 12) based at a secondary school in the Midlands region of England. Teachers were recruited on a voluntary basis. Pupil participants were subject to inclusion criteria; they had been identified by pastoral leads in the school as previously demonstrating characteristics of alienation. They had all previously been placed on a reporting system due to displays of negative behaviour.

2.2. Student–Teacher Relationship Scale

Quantitative data were collected using Pianta's [61] Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (short form). The STRS is a questionnaire that measures two aspects of a teacher's perception of their relationship with a particular pupil: closeness and conflict. The closeness subscale measures the "degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth and open communication with a particular student" [61] (p. 11), and the conflict subscale measures the "degree to which a teacher perceives his or her relationship with a particular student as negative and conflictual" [53] (p.11). Although initially stated as being suitable for use with teachers of students aged four to eight years [53], it has since been accepted for use with children up to the age of twelve [62]. Knowing that the sample of participants would come from a secondary school, where pupils are aged between 11 and 16, some minor changes were made to the wording of the questionnaire, amending some of the language so it was more relevant to secondary school pupils, whilst maintaining the essence of the STRS. Teachers were given the opportunity to complete the STRS for pupils who participated in the study in the form of an online survey. In total, 55 questionnaires were completed by 18 teachers. Three teachers in the sample took part in interviews but did not answer the questionnaire whilst three teachers completed both the questionnaire and participated in interviews. The number of questionnaires returned per pupil participant ranged from three to seven.

2.3. Interviews

Face-to-face interviews with pupil participants lasted up to 60 min and were held either in the meeting room on the school site or in an empty classroom. Although interviews were semi-structured to help gain a deep understanding of the participant's experiences, various prompts were used to ensure the conversation remained relevant. Grounded theory methodology requires the researcher to approach the research question with "a priori assumptions" [63] (p. 3). The semi-structured interview was chosen as it is a useful tool when the researcher is unaware of what they do not know and wishes to gather in-depth information without pre-determining the results [64].

2.4. Analytical Approach

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed concurrently. The findings from the STRS survey were subjected to constant comparison to develop emergent properties. Emergent properties are similar to themes in that they arise from constant comparison and integration of initial codes (called conceptual categories, see Looker, Vickers, and Kington (2021) for a detailed explanation of this), which were then compared against the emergent properties from the analysis of interview data [17], resulting in the discovery of a subgroup of alienated pupils who had a conflict score greater than the mean and a closeness score lower than the mean. This is further explored in the results section.

2.5. Open Coding

All grounded theory approaches use a variety of coding methods to ensure data are interrogated thoroughly [65]. There are several accepted coding techniques, but the approach employed in this study followed the critical realist grounded theory coding methods outlined by Looker, Vickers, & Kington [17]. The first stage of data analysis adopted open coding. This is summarised in Figure 1.

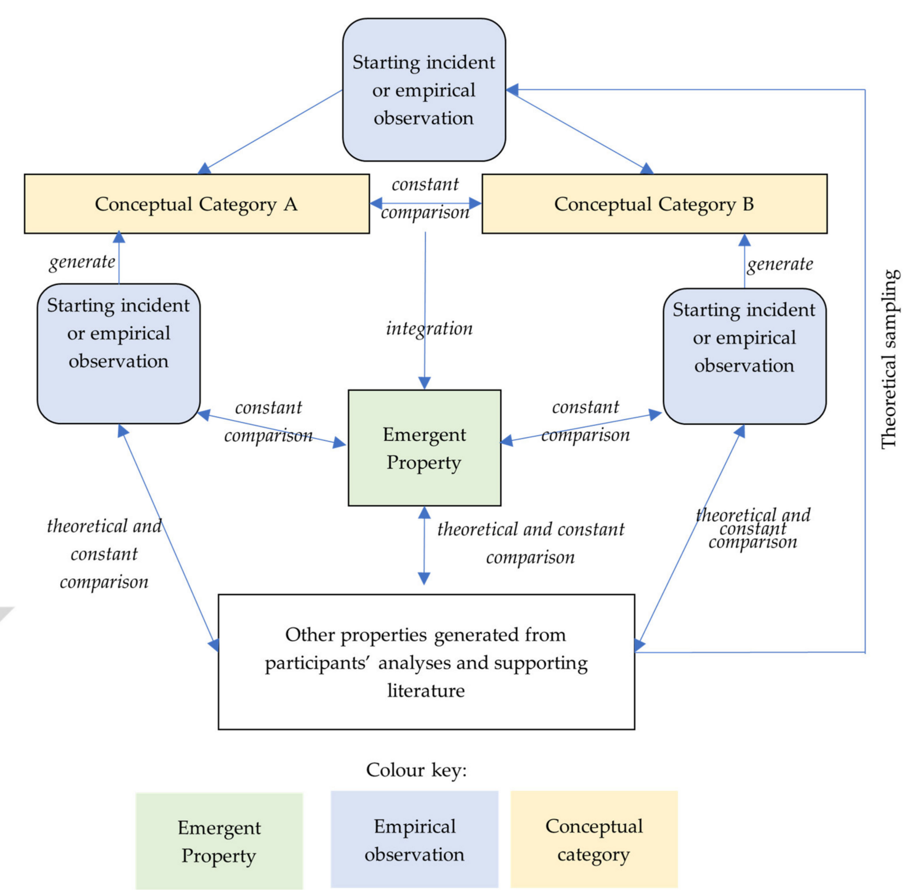

Figure 1. Open coding framework (Looker, 2022) [18].

Figure 1 shows how the starting incidents (coloured blue) generated conceptual categories (coloured yellow), which were refined through constant comparison into an emergent property. For illustrative purposes, the diagram shows three incidents, two conceptual categories, and one emergent property. The emergent property (green) is coded as a generative event that could have led to the experience. Finally, the white box demonstrates how other emergent properties and the supporting literature were used for theoretical comparisons.

Critical realism describes generative mechanisms where real structures are causative, generating empirical events [54,66,67]. The use of the word "generate" in the open coding framework (Figure 1) is deliberate and is used to illustrate how the generative mechanism driving the social process works in practice; coding an incident generates a conceptual category within which the incident fits. Although open coding can be either descriptive, conceptual, or theoretical [68,69], adhering to Glaser's [70] argument that classic grounded theory should avoid description where possible meant the conceptual categories were generated by conceptual or theoretical codes only. To avoid generating a conceptual category using description, care was taken to follow Glaser and Strauss' approach to coding [63], where in vivo codes, using the participant's own language and the researcher's own observations, are recommended for generating theory. An example of how mixed data were used to triangulate findings is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. An example of how mixed data were used to triangulate findings.

STRS Finding	Emergent Property	Quotes for Comparison
1. Teachers' perceptions of closeness with pupils tend to vary equally at all levels of closeness	A feeling that relationships are good	"So, I think he has quite a good relationship with me because I will listen to him and so by listening to him, he feels valued."—Teacher (pastoral lead)
2. There is no significant difference between how teachers perceive their relationships with pupils in Years 8 and 10		"I really genuinely believe that, because if you don't have a relationship with the children, you can't teach them. I firmly believe that."—Teacher (pastoral lead)
3. Teachers tend to perceive their relationships as more positive than negative		"I think I have built up a good relationship with them over the last few years"—Class teacher
		"You find out what their interests are and even further in you take them away on a school trip. That has all helped in my experience to build up a really good relationship with kids."—Class teacher
		"they feel safe and confident to work with one another and . . . there just doesn't seem to be barriers that get in the way of them being able to get cracking with a good lesson."—Class teacher
		"My year 10′s I think I have got a pretty good relationship with them. The reason why I know that is I've got them pretty much eating out of the palm of my hand in the lesson"—Class teacher

The comparison of data from the STRS and interviews reported in Table 1 shows high levels of similarity. Teachers speak positively about their relationships with pupils from all year groups, even with some of the children who display the most challenging behaviour. Teachers did not use the term "closeness" when describing their relationships with pupils, but there is a connection between their language and feelings of closeness measured using the STRS. This meant that the emergent property "a feeling that relationships are good" was able to remain, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data. This process was replicated with all findings from the STRS data and memos were written to explore, confirm, and make modifications to emergent properties as they continued to develop.

3. Results

3.1. Conflict and Closeness Scores: Results of the Analysis of the STRS Data

The questionnaire gave 2 subscale scores: a conflict and a closeness score for each of the 12 pupils. The subscale raw scores for closeness ranged from 8 to 40 with a higher score indicating a greater perception of closeness, and the subscale raw scores for conflict ranged from 7 to 35 with a high score indicating a greater perception of conflict. The means of the scores given by teachers on the STRS and the associated standard deviations were calculated. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of STRS data.

Pupil ID	Mean Closeness Score (Max = 40)	Mean Conflict Score (Max = 35)	Standard Deviation Closeness	Standard Deviation Conflict
S1	25.5	7.8	4.2	1.3
S2	29.4	11.0	3.4	3.3
S3	30.7	11.1	6.9	3.5
S4	19.5	15.3	5.4	6.7
S5	20.0	22.3	2.5	4.3
S6	23.6	15.8	6.7	5.7

Table 2. *Cont.*

Pupil ID	Mean Closeness Score (Max = 40)	Mean Conflict Score (Max = 35)	Standard Deviation Closeness	Standard Deviation Conflict
S7	29.0	7.0	6.7	0.0
S8	21.3	10.3	3.9	4.0
S9	27.5	9.0	4.4	3.5
S10	28.4	17.8	7.8	5.7
S11	23.8	24.8	5.8	10.4
S12	29.0	18.0	4.7	7.9

All columns are the calculated scores from the responses by teachers on the STRS forms. Comparing the means against the standard deviations gave an insight into how responses vary between teachers as the mean scores increase.

3.2. Comparing Standard Deviations and Means of Closeness and Conflict Scores

The mean closeness scores were plotted against the standard deviation of the closeness scores for the teachers completing the STRS (n = 18). This process was repeated for the conflict scores. If the standard deviation for the closeness score is high, the pupils within the group have a wider range of closeness scores than those in the group when the standard deviation is low. In other words, when the standard deviation for the closeness score is high, teachers disagree more on how close they feel to those pupils than when the standard deviation is low. Figure 2 shows the relationships between the standard deviation of the closeness scores and the mean closeness scores; it shows there is no correlation between the two and teachers vary equally in their perceptions of closeness for all pupils.

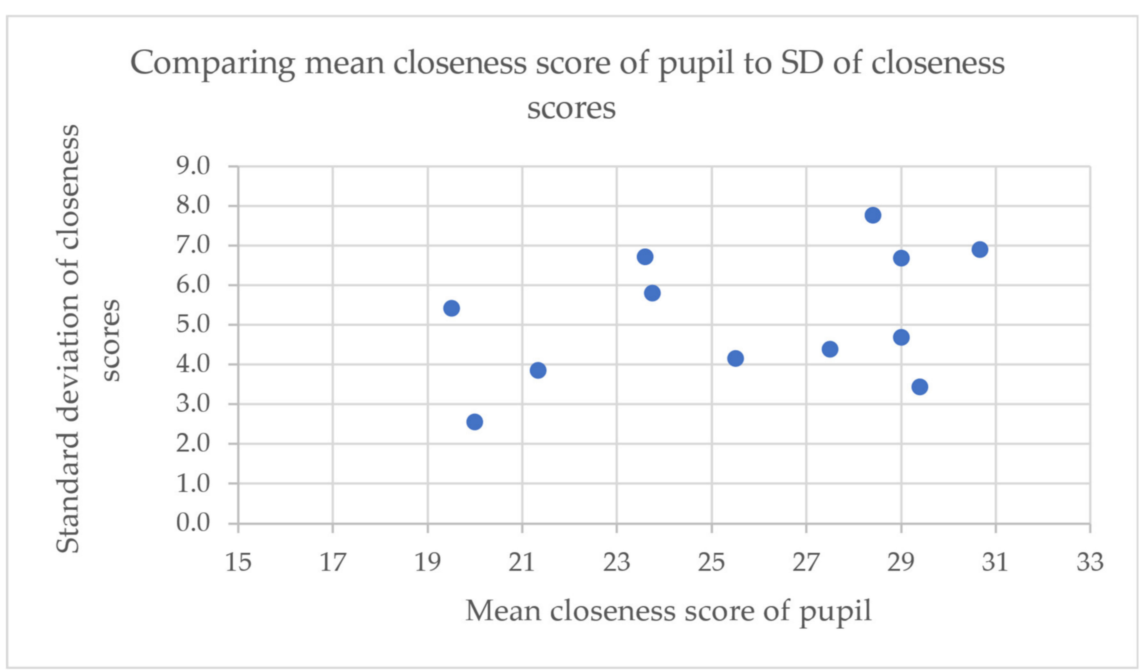

Figure 2. Comparing mean closeness scores of pupils to SD of closeness scores.

This contrasts with Figure 3, which shows the relationships between the standard deviation and mean conflict scores. A positive correlation is seen between the mean conflict and the standard deviation scores. This shows that as the mean conflict scores increase, so does the range around the mean; pupils who are seen, on average, as more conflictual have a larger range in scores than those who are seen as less conflictual.

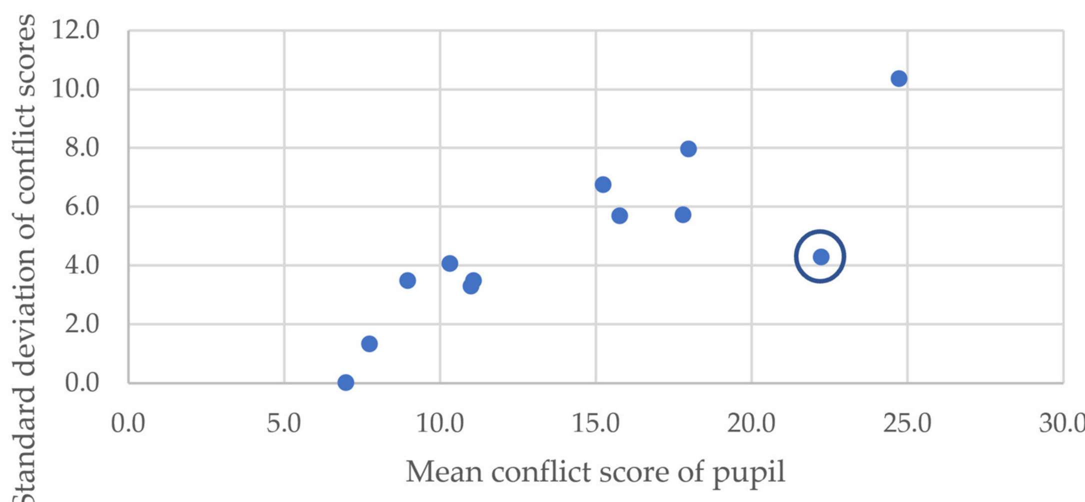

Figure 3. Comparing mean conflict score of pupils to SD of conflict scores.

This variation is highlighted when considering one pupil (circled on Figure 3). They have a mean conflict score of 24.8, and a standard deviation of 10.4. This participant is seen, on average, as having highly conflictual relationships, but this is not the perception of all members of staff who completed the STRS. On examination of the individual conflict scores, Table 3 shows that teachers 1 and 4 have indicated a very high conflict score, whereas teacher 2 has indicated a very low conflict score.

Table 3. Conflict scores of highlighted Year 8 participant.

Teacher	Conflict Score
1	33
2	9
3	22
4	35

This degree of variability (Figure 3) increases as the mean conflict score increases. This suggests that as a pupil is increasingly perceived as having a more turbulent relationship with members of staff, there is less congruence between how staff perceive their relationship as conflictual. This phenomenon is not replicated in the closeness scores where there is no clear trend between the mean scores and the standard deviation between these scores. Teachers are as likely to perceive variations in their closeness with pupils who, on average, have a low mean closeness score compared to those who have a high mean closeness score.

3.3. Item-Level Statistics

The STRS professional manual [61] shows how item-level statistics can identify variability across the scale. Table 4 presents the analysis of the item-level statistics including the means and standard deviations for each of the 15 items.

Generally, all items showed comparable variability; the standard deviations for most items were similar. Items 5, 6, 8, and 9 show a lower standard deviation than the other items, indicating teachers' perceptions related to these items vary the most for the sample. The items reflecting a positive relationship (shaded in blue) tend to demonstrate a negative skew, whilst the items reflecting a negative relationship (shaded in grey) tend to demonstrate a positive skew. This shows that teachers in this sample tend to view their relationships as more positive than negative.

Table 4. Item-level statistics.

Item Description	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child. * this refers to a professional relationship	3.5818	1.11705	−0.668
2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.	2.0182	1.17837	1.021
3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.	2.4364	1.18265	0.192
4. This child is uncomfortable with physical contact from me.	2.7091	1.40992	0.254
5. This child values his/her professional relationship with me.	3.6000	1.04704	−1.129
6. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.	3.9273	0.93995	−0.684
7. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.	3.2000	1.37975	−0.374
8. This child easily becomes angry with me.	1.8364	1.03214	1.284
9. It is easy to be in tune with what this child is feeling.	3.3273	1.05505	−0.408
10. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.	2.0909	1.29490	1.153
11. Dealing with this child drains my energy.	2.1273	1.24803	1.056
12. When this child is in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult lesson.	2.1636	1.31605	0.901
13. This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.	1.8545	1.12905	1.338
14. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.	2.1091	1.31477	0.908
15. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.	2.9636	1.31886	−0.283

3.4. Handling of Closeness and Conflict Scores

To examine the degree to which teachers perceive their relationships with pupils as conflictual or close, the conflict scores and closeness scores were mathematically manipulated. Table 5 shows the values when the conflict scores are subtracted from the closeness scores. A low number indicates a troubling relationship, whereas a high number indicates that the closeness scores are high and the conflict scores are low. Participants S5 and S11 (circled on the table) had a negative closeness–conflict score, showing their teachers perceived having more of a conflicting than close relationship with these pupils.

Table 5. Closeness scores minus conflict scores.

Participant ID	Year Group	Mean Closeness Score of Pupil	Mean Conflict Score of Pupil	Closeness Conflict
S1	8	**25.5**	7.8	17.8
S2	10	29.4	11.0	18.4
S3	10	30.7	11.1	19.6
S4	10	**19.5**	**15.3**	4.3
S5	10	**20.0**	**22.3**	−2.3
S6	10	**23.6**	**15.8**	7.8
S7	10	29.0	7.0	22.0
S8	8	**21.3**	10.3	11.0
S9	8	27.5	9.0	18.5
S10	8	28.4	**17.8**	10.6
S11	8	**23.8**	**24.8**	−1.0
S12	8	29.0	**18.0**	11.0

To further investigate the relationships between the closeness and conflict scores, participants' scores were compared against the mean scores. The bold in these columns shows where participants received a closeness score lower than the mean closeness score (M = 26.25) and a conflict score higher than the mean conflict score (M = 14.20). These data show where the potentially most problematic relationships between the pupil and teacher exist. This is even greater when the closeness score is lower than the mean and the conflict score is greater. There are four occasions where this is the case (S4, S5, S6, and S11). These four participants are grouped as the "closeness low, conflict high" group (CLCH).

The STRS data identified that teachers from the sample were more likely to have disagreeing perceptions about conflict with pupils who were, on average, the most conflictual.

They did not appear to disagree greatly about their perceptions of closeness. A subgroup of pupils was identified; these pupils have a lower closeness score than the mean of the sample, and a greater conflict score than the mean. This provided a line of enquiry for further examination during the analysis of the interviews.

3.5. Development of Emergent Properties: Triangulation of STRS and Interview Data

The findings from the STRS survey were subjected to constant comparison to develop emergent properties [17], which were then compared against the emergent properties from the concurrent analysis of the interview data.

Table 6 shows the two conceptual categories which were generated from the discovery of the CLCH group and the emergent properties these findings were ascribed to. Pupils who formed the CLCH group were those who had a conflict score higher than the mean and a closeness score lower than the mean.

Table 6. Codes applied to STRS finding.

Finding	Conceptual Categories	Emergent Property
Four out of twelve pupils in the sample scored lower than the mean for closeness and higher than the mean for conflict. These were grouped as the CLCH group	CLCH group High conflict, low closeness	CLCH group have extreme feelings

3.6. Critical Incidents can Exaggerate Feelings of Alienation

The triangulation and constant comparison between both datasets led to the discovery of the CLCH group. This discovery prompted a revisit of the interview data and, through constant comparison, a possible causative mechanism concerning the CLCH group and critical incidents was identified. Table 7 shows pupils in the CLCH group had a disproportionately larger collection of conceptual categories from the "critical incidents can exaggerate feelings of alienation" theme (identified through interview data) assigned to them than those in the rest of the sample.

Table 7. Frequency of critical incident codes assigned to the CLCH group and remainder of the sample.

	Frequency of Codes	
Possible causative mechanism	CLCH group (n = 4)	Remainder of the sample (n = 8)
Critical incidents can exaggerate feelings of alienation	26 (81%)	6 (20%)

Each of the participants in the CLCH group referred to at least one critical incident which happened early into the formation of relationships. Only two participants from the remainder of the sample mentioned at least one critical incident. A critical incident, when experienced by pupils, was reported in detail; in these accounts, the events were spoken about using affective language, conveying feelings of injustice and powerlessness:

> *There were a few things, like I did this worksheet and instead of doing it on the worksheet I did it in a book and she put 'needs more work' with an exclamation mark. So, I said, "Miss why did you put this" and she said "can you put your hand up" so I put my hand up and I had my hand up for about 15 or 20 min and she just looked at me and ignored me.*
>
> *She wasn't doing anything, and my friend had to go up to Miss and say, "can you answer (name) please because he has had his hand up for 20 minutes and you have told him to put his hand up". Then a massive argument broke out about it and literally she started telling me off saying, it was hectic really.*
>
> *That's the one major thing I remember but there are lots of other things.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

The majority of critical incidents cited by pupils in the CLCH group occurred during the first encounters with teachers. These encounters usually happened in the first two weeks of the new school year starting, often taking place in the first or second lesson:

> *I remember when we first had her, she was, it felt like we were walking into the army. She was like a proper strict, she would tell you what to do and you had to do it and if you didn't, she would get quite mad.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

> *When we first had her, she was really, really demanding.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

> *Well, she is newish, and she came this year and the first lesson with her she was just rude, to be honest and if she is going to be rude to me then I am going to be rude to her. I can hardly remember it was ages ago but ever since she is still rude. She has not liked me from that day because apparently, I have got a bad reputation from that first lesson.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

Participants from the CLCH group interpret such episodes as having long-ranging implications for relationships with their teachers; they express a perception that their teachers continue to feel negatively towards them due to the initial incident:

> *This was after my first or second lesson because we had a double and I walked in, and I just sat in the wrong place or something because she had a seating plan. I sat in the wrong place next to my mate, she then asked me to move, and I just didn't move, I said 'Miss, can I sit here please I am not going to cause any trouble'. She just didn't even know me, and I had never had her before, so I just sat with my mate and then she has never liked me since.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

> *We had gone to the lesson and had her for one lesson when she came back and then me and [name] were speaking and she was on us straight away, putting us on opposite sides of the room.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

> *It was like the first lesson she had us was like a demo lesson and [pupil] was sat at the back and we were talking doing nothing bad and stuff and she moved us straight away she said 'I am not going to stand for any of this' and it's been like this for the year, for that period of time, because she said she is going to make her mark.*
>
> (CLCH group pupil)

As a result, these pupils felt they were labelled as disruptive in their teachers' minds and subsequently developed a belief there was no way to escape the cyclical nature of negative relationships. As one pupil put it, "your card is marked" (CLCH group pupil).

Figure 4 summarises the relationships between the emergent properties (EPs) which form the possible causative mechanism. For context, the most commonly coded conceptual categories are shown in yellow, which are part of the "critical incidents" emergent property.

Figure 4 shows how pupils frequently related feelings of alienation from their teachers to an incident that occurred early into the formation of their pupil/teacher relationship. The arrows between the EP and the conceptual categories show how pupils with extreme feelings of alienation recall incidents that they often consider to be a major event that happened in an early lesson. Pupils in the CLCH group demonstrated more extreme feelings of alienation, and more frequently relate these to a critical incident than pupils in the remainder of the sample. As the critical incident occurred before the extreme feelings of alienation, the incident is the antecedent EP, suggesting a causative relationship between this and the extreme feelings. Again, the EP had more empirical conceptual categories assigned to it, showing how this is closer to the empirical domain of reality [55].

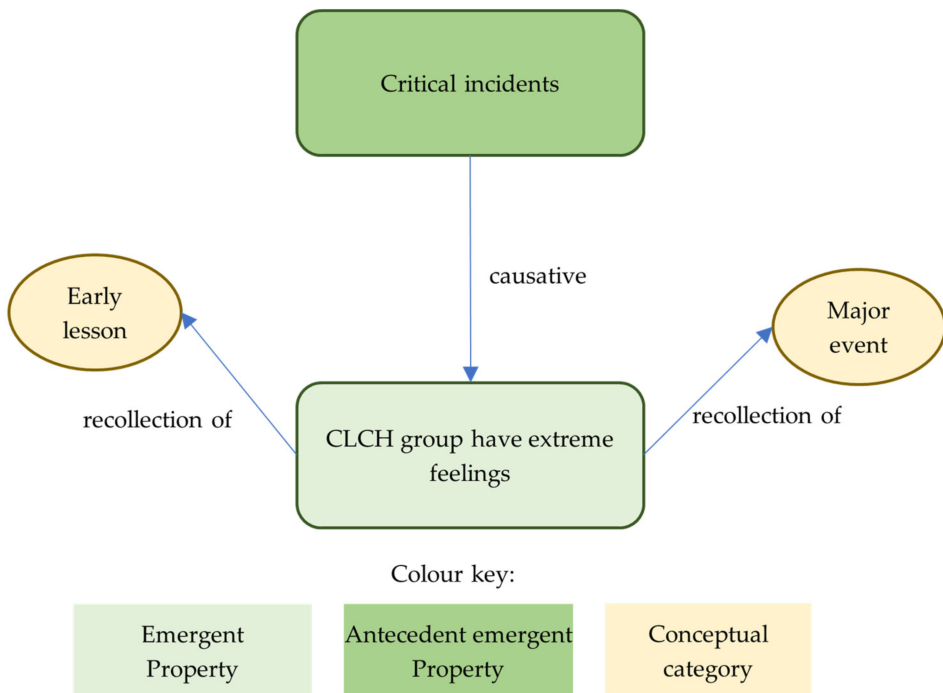

Figure 4. PCM: Critical incidents can exaggerate feelings of alienation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Teacher–Pupil Relationships and School Engagement

This paper has found that teachers tend to perceive their relationships with pupils as more positive than negative and identified that perceived levels of closeness is an important dimension of teacher/pupil relationships. Secondary school pupils typically have multiple teachers per day, yet there is limited research exploring the balance between the number of positive and negative relationships pupils have with these different teachers, and pupils' subsequent engagement in school. Of the studies that have been conducted, Martin and Collie [71] found a linear relationship between the increasing number of positive pupil–teacher relationships and pupil engagement in school. Furthermore, their findings suggest that the potentially detrimental effects of negative relationships can be offset by an increasing number of positive relationships. The study gave an additional dimension to an established body of research which has recognised that pupil–teacher relationships and engagement at school are associated [43,72,73]. The uncovering of the balance between positive and negative pupil–teacher relationships and the effect on engagement presented by Martin and Collie (2019) is consistent with the findings presented in this article; that is, when pupils have additional positive relationships with teachers, they are more likely to be engaged and achieve academic success.

Martin and Collie [71] found that pupils who have positive relationships with some teachers can tolerate negative relationships for longer before resulting in a change of engagement. This phenomenon was not explored explicitly during this study, but some findings seem to support this. For example, the CLCH subgroup contains four pupils who were identified as having fewer close relationships with teachers and an increased number of conflictual relationships. Martin and Collie's suggestion of the protective factor afforded by the presence of positive pupil–teacher relationships [71] could explain the additional associated feelings of alienation experienced by CLCH pupils. It is possible such pupils' ability to maintain high engagement levels has been eroded by a greater number of negative teacher relationships; the positive relationships they might experience are no longer a mediating factor for their negative experiences.

4.2. Teacher–Pupil Interactions and Conflict

This study has found that teachers' perceptions of conflict with pupils tend to vary more as a pupil is increasingly seen as more conflictual. The findings from this study are consistent with the literature already shared, suggesting that pupils are susceptible to variations in the ratio of positive to negative pupil–teacher relationships. The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) [61] required teachers to complete a questionnaire based on their relationships with pupil participants. A subgroup of pupils was identified as having the most problematic relationships with teachers; these pupils had a closeness score lower than the mean, and a conflict score greater than the mean. Findings demonstrated that CLCH pupils independently identified a critical incident that they believed was the source of the negative relationship. These incidents happened early into the formation of the relationship and were seen as significant by the pupils.

4.3. Critical Incidents and Pupil Alienation

The term ″critical incident″ has been used in several previous studies; in Flanagan's Critical Incident Technique [74] indicating a significant occurrence, by Edvardsson and Roos [75] to describe an event which stands out, by Schon [76] as a highly charged moment that holds significance for the individual, and by Miles and Huberman [77] as an event which is "important or crucial and/or limited to an immediate setting" (p. 113). More recently, Day et al. [78] describe the benefits of critical incidents in their longitudinal study of 300 teachers, explaining how the approach can be "tailored to the specific situations, contexts and concerns" of participants, ". . . in order to focus on developments. . . and also to allow reflection on such developments" [78] (p. 112). All these definitions indicate that a critical incident holds high personal importance to an individual, is an emotional event, and is not easily overcome. Tripp [79] adds a slightly different dimension to the definition by stating that critical incidents are "not 'things' that exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created" (p. 8).

Pupils were also all aware that the incident initially started as a minor event, but quickly escalated. Over time, this event's significance has increased so that when asked to reflect on what caused the relationship to become negative, a pupil attaches the bulk of the cause to a single event. Using Tripp's language [79], the event has been interpreted as significant and thus the critical event has been ″created″. Participants were frustrated about the critical incidents and felt that the implications of an event were not proportionate. Their ability to recollect them in detail suggests that participants have thought about these events on numerous occasions before being interviewed. Halquist and Musanti [80] proposed that actors, when rendering an event as critical, take time to explore the underlying meaning of the event, reflect on it, and analyse it. It is, therefore, probable that the participants had already relived the events they recalled and potentially added more meaning to them than initially ascribed. As none of the teachers interviewed felt they had negative relationships with pupils, it was not possible to check if similar incidents were as easily recalled by teachers.

It does, however, seem reasonable to assume that a contributory factor to CLCH pupils' increased sense of alienation can be attributed to their creation of critical incidents. CLCH pupils felt their teachers had devalued them by prioritising their own needs first. Whilst it is likely that these needs were to maintain control of the class, and not intended to be at the personal expense of the pupil, it was not received like that. Pupils in the CLCH group spoke about how the teacher does not see the situation from their perspective. By not having their interests or ″reasons″ accounted for, CLCH pupils do not feel a degree of respect for their values. Recently, there has been traction for using critical incidents to study education [80] but none have yet examined the finding which links critical incidents with pupil alienation and pupil–teacher relationships. Although not referring to critical incidents, Trotman, Tucker, and Martin [81] identify that negative behaviour can be related to transitions or key points in a pupil's time at school. There is a degree of overlap between

the findings, indicating that the interaction between critical incidents, poor behaviour, and pupil alienation from school is worthy of greater exploration.

5. Conclusions

Pupil participants in this study were alienated from school and experienced feelings of powerlessness. Additionally, these pupils also experienced a sense of injustice, where they believe teachers were treating them unfairly. They experienced negative pupil–teacher relationships with at least some of their teachers, and the feeling was reciprocated. The pupils and teachers involved entered a downwards spiral where relationships continued to deteriorate, with pupils intentionally aggravating those respective teachers, and the teachers tending to assume disruption begins with those pupils. Some alienated pupils entered a further subset of the demi-reality they experience; these pupils had a significantly higher degree of conflict and lower feeling of closeness with some of their teachers. Pupils in this group were found to have extreme feelings of alienation. They often attributed their experiences with teachers to a critical incident that occurred early in the formation of the pupil–teacher relationship, citing this as the moment their relationship became negative. It was found that these critical incidents featured heavily in pupils' understanding of their interactions with their teachers and, if not repaired early on, were difficult to overcome.

In terms of implications for professional practice, a key message from the study was that teachers should reflect on conflictual relationships they have with pupils, focusing on any past incidents that a pupil might have deemed critical. This would provide an opportunity for teachers to address this with pupils, with the aim of repairing the relationship and potentially reducing the alienation they are experiencing. In order to facilitate this, it is suggested that emphasis on the skills and understanding needed to identify potential conflictual relationships with pupils be built into initial teacher preparation programmes, the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019), as well as continuing, in-service, professional development opportunities. The implications for pupils experiencing these conflictual relationships can be wide-ranging, so it is vital that appropriate support be provided through the re-development of school behaviour policies to be research-informed, and pupil support systems be introduced to support alienated young people. This should be undertaken alongside a sustained and focused research agenda examining young peoples' perspectives of critical incidents and how they manifest at schools. This should be supported by further research into how best to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to interact more effectively with pupils experiencing alienation to bring them back to the cosmic envelope [55].

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