Structural Explanation of Social Competence Based on Teacher-Student Interaction Styles with the Mediation of Basic Psychological Needs

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to examine the structural relationships between teacher-student interaction styles, the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, and students' social competence among female middle school students in Lahijan city.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive-correlational research design was employed, involving 203 female middle school students selected through cluster random sampling from two schools in Lahijan city during the 2023-2024 academic year. Data were collected using standard questionnaires: the Teacher-Student Interaction Questionnaire by Murray and Zvoch (2011), the Basic Psychological Needs Scale by Guardia, Deci, and Ryan (2000), and the Social Competence Questionnaire by Parandin (2006). Structural equation modeling (SEM) using Smart PLS software was utilized for data analysis to explore the hypothesized relationships.

Findings: The study revealed significant positive relationships between teacher-student interaction styles and the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs. Additionally, the fulfillment of these needs significantly mediated the relationship between teacher-student interactions and students' social competence. Positive interaction styles characterized by effective communication and trust were found to directly enhance students' social competence. The structural model fit indices indicated that the proposed model adequately explained the data, highlighting the critical role of supportive teacher-student interactions in promoting social competence.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of teacher-student interaction styles in fulfilling students' basic psychological needs, which in turn, enhances their social competence. Effective communication, trust, and support for autonomy are pivotal in creating a conducive learning environment. These results have significant implications for teacher training and professional development programs, emphasizing the need for strategies that foster positive interactions and support students' psychological needs to improve social and academic outcomes.

Keywords: Teacher-student interaction, basic psychological needs, social competence, middle school students, structural equation modeling.

1. Introduction

The increasing focus on educational quality and student outcomes has led to extensive research on the factors influencing social competence and academic performance in students. One critical area of investigation is the interaction between teachers and students, which plays a significant role in shaping the educational experience and outcomes. Teacher-student interaction styles, teacher competencies, and the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs have been identified as crucial determinants of students' social competence (Adri et al., 2021; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

Teacher-student interaction is a dynamic process that significantly impacts students' academic and social development. Effective interaction styles can enhance student engagement, motivation, and overall well-being (Adri et al., 2021; Ivanova et al., 2019). Murray and Zvoch (2011) developed a framework for assessing teacher-student interaction, highlighting three subscales: communication, trust, and alienation. These subscales measure the quality of the relational aspects between teachers and students, which are critical for fostering a supportive learning environment (Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

Studies have shown that positive interaction styles, characterized by open communication and trust, can lead to higher levels of student motivation and engagement (Keerthigha & Singh, 2023; Suleimenova & Ivanova, 2018). Conversely, negative interaction styles, marked by alienation and lack of trust, can result in disengagement and poor academic outcomes (Demir & Şad, 2019). The quality of teacher-student interactions has also been linked to students' social competence, which encompasses skills such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Gabrijelčič et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2016).

Teacher competencies are multi-faceted, involving pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and the ability to foster positive social interactions. Professional development programs aimed at enhancing teachers' social competencies have shown promising results in improving student outcomes (Asriati et al., 2022; Nathan et al., 2023). Social competence in teachers is essential for creating a classroom environment that supports students' social and emotional development (Bhaskaran & Portia, 2019; Zulkipli et al., 2022).

Teachers' ability to adapt their interaction styles to meet the diverse needs of students is crucial. Mutual adaptation technology, which involves adjusting teaching strategies to align with students' individual activity styles, has been shown to improve learning outcomes (Artyomovna, 2021). This approach underscores the importance of teacher flexibility and responsiveness in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, fulfilling students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is vital for their motivation and well-being (Babakhanlou, 2023; Enayati Shabkolai et al., 2023; Ghahremani et al., 2022; Joormann & Stanton, 2016; Roghani & Afrokhte, 2023; Vaziri et al., 2021). These needs are closely tied to the quality of teacher-student interactions. When teachers support students' autonomy, provide constructive feedback to enhance their competence, and create a sense of belonging, students are more likely to thrive both academically and socially (He et al., 2017; Noels, 2001).

Research has demonstrated that meeting students' basic psychological needs can lead to increased social competence, which in turn, positively influences academic performance (Auliana et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2022). For instance, students who feel competent and connected are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors and exhibit higher levels of social-emotional competence (Junker, 2023).

Social competence is a critical outcome of effective education, encompassing the ability to interact positively with others, manage emotions, and navigate social situations (Martínez et al., 2016; Sokhranov-Preobrazhensky, 2019). It is influenced by various factors, including teacher-student interactions, teacher competencies, and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs. Socially competent students are better equipped to handle the demands of school and life, demonstrating higher levels of resilience and academic achievement (Winalda & Ristiono, 2022; Yimer, 2022).

Building on the existing literature, this study aims to examine the structural relationships between teacher-student interaction styles, the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, and students' social competence. The study focuses on female students in middle schools in Lahijan city, providing a unique context for exploring these dynamics.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study, in terms of data collection method, is descriptive-correlational and applied in terms of its goal. The statistical population consisted of 1,885 female students in

middle schools of Lahijan city, studying in the academic year 2023-2024. A cluster random sampling method was used for data collection; thus, given the large statistical population, 2 schools were randomly selected, and one class from each of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades was chosen. In total, 6 classes with 203 students were selected. Data collection was performed using both library and field methods and standard questionnaires.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Teacher-Student Interaction

This questionnaire was developed by Murray and Zvoch in 2011, adopting 19 items from the Parent and Peer Attachment Questionnaire for use in teacher-student relationship contexts. The revised form contains 17 items and has three subscales: communication, trust, and alienation. Scoring is based on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating better relationship quality. The validity of the questionnaires was confirmed by university professors. In the study by Murray and Zvoch (2011), Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the communication, trust, and alienation subscales were 0.81, 0.76, and 0.72, respectively, indicating good internal consistency. In Iran, Birami et al. (2012) reported satisfactory validity and reliability for the scale (Karimi et al., 2023; Rahmati et al., 2024; Russell & Qiu, 2024).

2.2.2. Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction

This scale, developed by Guardia, Deci, and Ryan (2000), measures support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. It was translated into Persian by Dafachi (2010) for use in the Iranian community. The scale includes 21 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Basharat and Ranjbar (2013) used exploratory factor analysis with principal component analysis for 584 participants to assess construct validity. The results indicated three factors—autonomy,

competence, and relatedness—explaining 60% of the total variance. Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients for autonomy, competence, and relatedness being 0.77, 0.75, and 0.86 in the first round and 0.76, 0.75, and 0.83 in the second round (Jobehdari et al., 2018; Kaya et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Social Competence

This questionnaire, developed by Parandin (2006) based on Felner's (1990) four-dimensional model, measures behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and motivational skills. It consists of 47 items designed for adolescents. Parandin (2006) validated and normed the scale on 450 students in Tehran province. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and test-retest methods, with Cronbach's alpha indicating satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.884$) (Enayati Shabkolai et al., 2023; Kahaki, 2024; McDonnell et al., 2024).

2.3. Data Analysis

Face and content validity were used to determine the validity of the research tools, and Cronbach's alpha was used to confirm the reliability of the questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze the collected data. To test the research hypotheses, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was initially used to examine the normality of the data distribution, followed by structural equation modeling with Smart PLS software to assess the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable.

3. Findings and Results

Descriptive statistics of the demographic information showed that among 203 students, 67 (33%) were in the seventh grade, 61 (30%) in the eighth grade, and 75 (37%) in the ninth grade. Descriptive statistics of the variables and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Results

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min	Max	K-S	p-value	Status
Communication	16.90	4.162	0.128	-1.045	9	25	0.138	0.001	Non-normal
Trust	16.63	4.259	0.282	-0.783	9	25			
Alienation	18.89	6.084	-0.092	-1.316	7	29			
Teacher-Student Interaction	56.64	13.689	0.083	-1.230	32	83			
Behavioral Skill	122.58	21.973	-0.428	-0.509	69	163	0.064	0.042	Non-normal
Motivational Skill	24.75	5.239	-0.476	-0.212	10	34			

Cognitive Skill	9.82	2.457	-0.195	-0.585	4	15		
Emotional Competence	10.63	2.595	-0.497	-0.183	3	15		
Social Competence	167.79	29.178	-0.346	-0.507	99	223		
Autonomy	23.21	5.912	-0.001	-0.858	11	35	0.072	0.013	Non-normal
Competence	19.41	5.153	-0.017	-0.755	9	29		
Relatedness	26.20	6.859	0.295	-0.861	14	40		
Basic Psychological Needs	68.83	15.155	0.245	-0.768	40	103		

As indicated in Table 1, among the teacher-student interaction components, the highest score was for alienation (M = 18.89, SD = 6.084), and the lowest was for trust (M = 16.63, SD = 4.259). Among the social competence components, the highest score was for behavioral skill (M = 122.58, SD = 21.973), and the lowest was for cognitive skill (M = 9.82, SD = 2.457). Among the basic psychological needs components, relatedness had the highest score (M = 26.20, SD = 6.859), and competence had the lowest (M = 19.41, SD = 5.153). The significance level of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all research variables was less than 0.05, indicating that all variables had non-normal distribution. Thus, the Smart PLS software was used for data analysis.

Given that the research variables consist of several dimensions (components), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used. Initially, the KMO index and Bartlett's test were utilized to ensure the adequacy of data for analysis. The KMO value in this study was 0.761, which is above the acceptable threshold of 0.6, indicating that the sample size was sufficient for factor analysis. Bartlett's test was significant at P ≤ 0.01, suggesting that the matrix was adequate and the data could be factored.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis for the questionnaire items are presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were above 0.7, indicating high convergent validity. The constructs (latent variables) showed high validity for model fit. Composite reliability values for all constructs were above 0.7, indicating adequate composite reliability. Convergent validity is confirmed when composite reliability is above 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) is above 0.5. Both conditions were met, confirming the convergent validity of the questionnaire.

Table 2

Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Communication	0.662	0.907	0.872
Trust	0.713	0.925	0.899
Alienation	0.671	0.934	0.918
Autonomy	0.676	0.936	0.919
Competence	0.691	0.930	0.909
Relatedness	0.603	0.924	0.906
Behavioral Skill	0.520	0.960	0.957
Motivational Skill	0.574	0.904	0.875
Cognitive Skill	0.652	0.849	0.733
Emotional Competence	0.746	0.898	0.829

The structural model of the research is presented below.
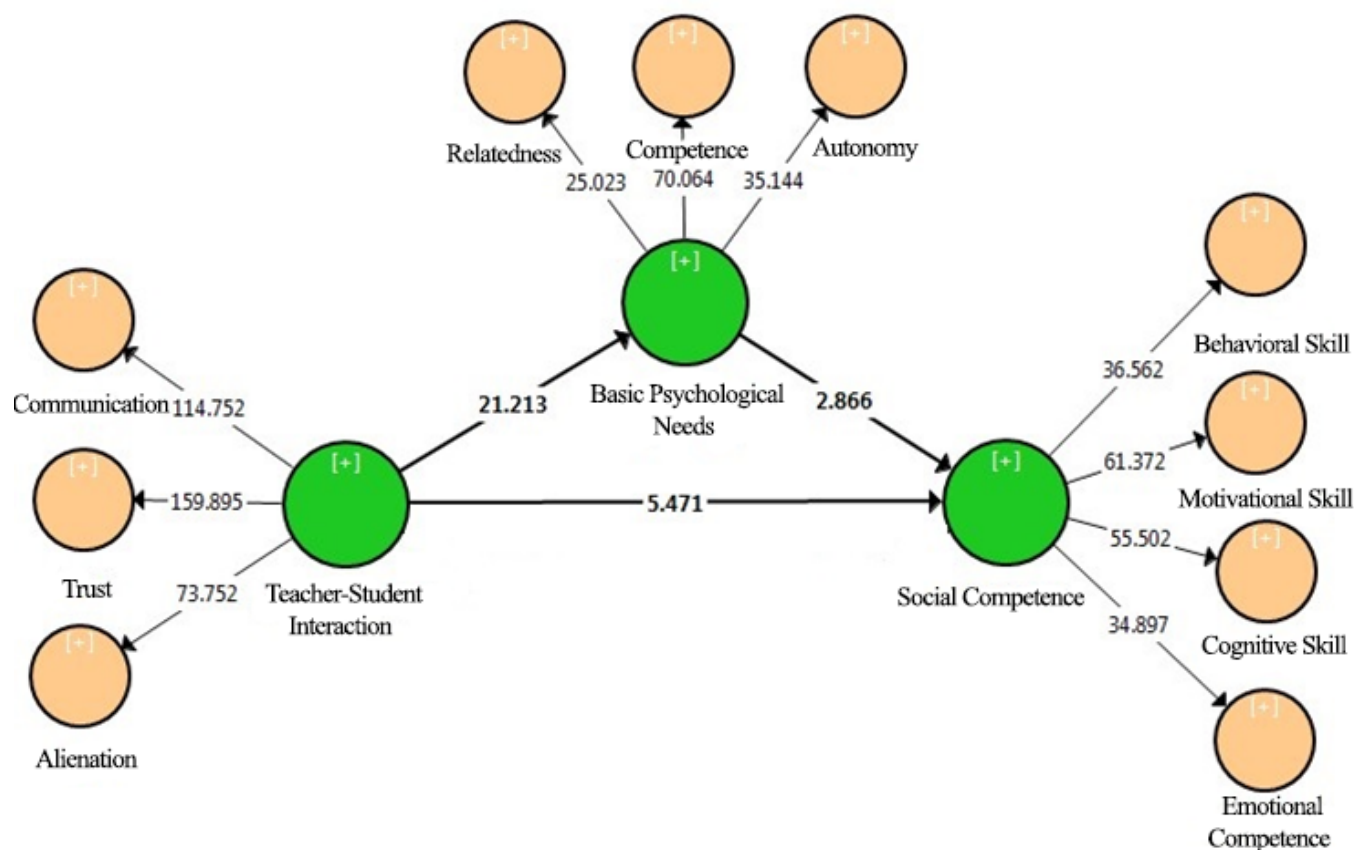
Figure 1

Standardized Path Coefficients of the Research Conceptual Model
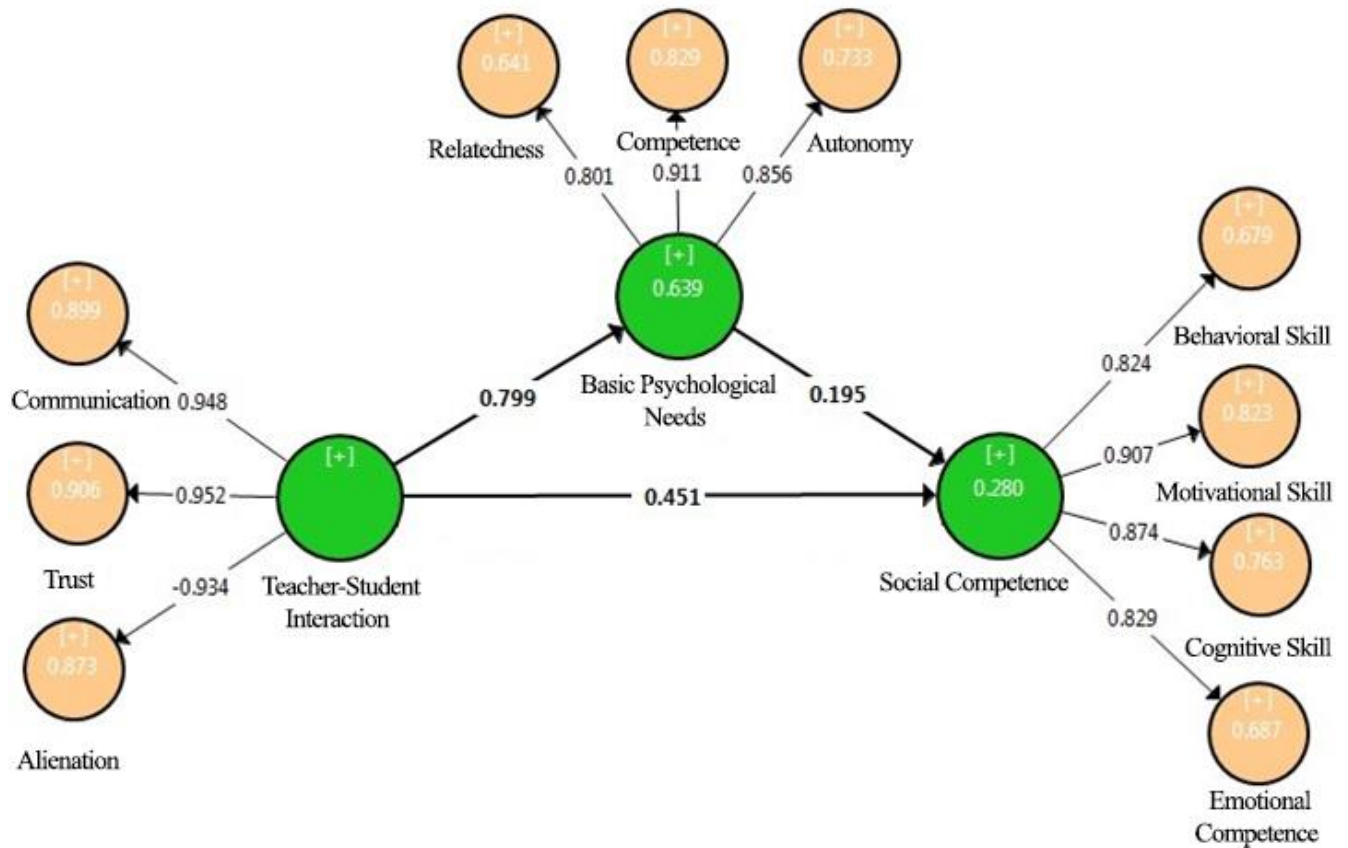
Figure 2

Results of the t-Test for Examining the Significance of Path Coefficients

To assess the model fit, R² and Q² criteria were used. The results indicated that the structural model fit was appropriate. The Q² values indicated a good predictive power of the model for the endogenous constructs, confirming the structural model fit.

Table 3

R² and Q² Values of Research Variables

Variable	R²	Q²
Basic Psychological Needs	0.639	0.391
Social Competence	0.280	0.166

Another criterion for model fit is the overall fit index (GOF). Based on the GOF formula and the results in Table 8, the GOF value was 0.421, which is greater than the benchmark value of 0.3, indicating an adequate model fit.

test the hypotheses and the significance of path coefficients between variables, the software output was used. The path coefficients and their significance are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Structural Model Evaluation for Hypothesis Testing

Path	Path Coefficient	t-value	Test Result
Teacher-Student Interaction → Basic Psychological Needs	0.799	21.213	Confirmed
Basic Psychological Needs → Social Competence	0.195	2.866	Confirmed
Teacher-Student Interaction → Social Competence	0.451	5.471	Confirmed

The bootstrap method was used to examine the mediating role. If the lower and upper bounds of the bootstrap confidence interval are both positive or both negative and do not include zero, the indirect path is significant, and the hypothesis is accepted. The significance level must be less

than 0.05 for the indirect effect to be accepted. The significance of the indirect path is presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Bootstrap Method Results for Examining Indirect Effect Significance

Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Indirect Effect	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	t-statistic	Standard Error	Significance Level
Teacher-Student Interaction	Basic Psychological Needs	Social Competence	0.156	0.281	0.049	3.356	0.061	0.001

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the structural relationships between teacher-student interaction styles, the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, and students' social competence among female middle school students in Lahijan city. The findings of this research revealed significant and positive relationships between these variables, highlighting the importance of effective teacher-student interactions and the satisfaction of students' psychological needs in fostering social competence.

The results indicated a significant positive relationship between teacher-student interaction styles and the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs. This finding aligns with previous research that underscores the critical role of teacher behavior in meeting students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Keerthigha & Singh, 2023; Noels, 2001). Effective communication and trust between teachers and students were particularly influential, as they create a supportive environment where students feel valued and understood (Ivanova et al., 2019). This supportive atmosphere is essential for fostering students' intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning activities (Codina et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study found that the fulfillment of basic psychological needs significantly mediated the relationship between teacher-student interaction styles and students' social competence. This mediation effect highlights the mechanism through which teacher behaviors impact student outcomes. When teachers provide autonomy support, offer constructive feedback, and establish a sense of relatedness, students are more likely to develop social skills such as effective communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Auliana et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which posits that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs is essential for optimal functioning and well-being

(Babakhanlou, 2023; Enayati Shabkolai et al., 2023; Ghahremani et al., 2022; Roghani & Afrokhte, 2023; Vaziri et al., 2021).

The direct relationship between teacher-student interaction styles and students' social competence was also significant, suggesting that the quality of these interactions has an immediate impact on students' social development. Positive interaction styles characterized by high levels of communication and trust directly contribute to students' ability to interact effectively with peers and adults (Gabrijelčič et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2016). These results are supported by previous studies that have demonstrated the importance of teacher-student relationships in promoting social and emotional competence (Bhaskaran & Portia, 2019; Gabrijelčič et al., 2021).

The findings of this study are supported by a substantial body of literature that highlights the importance of teacher-student interactions and the fulfillment of psychological needs in educational settings. For instance, Adri et al. (2021) emphasized the role of teacher competencies in enhancing student outcomes, noting that effective interaction styles are critical for meeting students' needs and promoting social competence (Adri et al., 2021). Similarly, Asriati et al. (2022) found that professional development programs aimed at improving teachers' social competencies positively impacted students' social skills and overall classroom climate (Asriati et al., 2022).

Research by Keerthigha and Singh (2023) also supports the notion that teacher-student interactions are pivotal for student motivation and engagement (Keerthigha & Singh, 2023). Their study highlighted that when teachers adopt interaction styles that support students' autonomy and competence, students are more likely to exhibit positive social behaviors and academic resilience. This is consistent with the findings of the present study, which showed that supportive teacher-student interactions lead to higher levels of social competence through the mediation of basic psychological needs.

Furthermore, the work of Ivanova et al. (2019) demonstrated the significant influence of teachers' communication styles on students' motivation to learn, particularly in the context of foreign language education (Ivanova et al., 2019). Their research underscores the importance of teachers' ability to adapt their communication to meet students' individual needs, which is crucial for fostering a positive learning environment. This aligns with the present study's findings that effective teacher-student interactions are essential for meeting students' psychological needs and promoting social competence.

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While the structural equation modeling approach provides a robust framework for examining relationships between variables, longitudinal data would be needed to establish causal links definitively. Second, the study's sample was limited to female middle school students in Lahijan city, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other populations and settings. Future research should consider including a more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures for assessing teacher-student interactions, psychological needs, and social competence may introduce response biases, as participants might provide socially desirable responses.

Future research should address the limitations mentioned above by employing longitudinal designs to explore the causal relationships between teacher-student interactions, psychological needs, and social competence. Such studies would provide more definitive evidence of the directionality and temporal dynamics of these relationships. Moreover, expanding the sample to include students of different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing social competence in diverse educational contexts.

Additionally, future studies could benefit from incorporating multi-method approaches, including observational and qualitative methods, to complement self-reported data. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the interaction processes and the contextual factors that influence the fulfillment of psychological needs and the development of social competence. Research could also explore the role of specific teacher behaviors and strategies in fostering different aspects of social competence, such as emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution skills.

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice. First, teacher training and professional development programs should emphasize the importance of effective interaction styles and the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs. Training programs should equip teachers with skills to communicate effectively, build trust, and provide autonomy support, which are crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Second, schools should implement policies and practices that promote positive teacher-student relationships. This could include regular professional development workshops, peer mentoring programs, and opportunities for teachers to reflect on their interaction styles and receive feedback. By creating a school culture that values and prioritizes positive teacher-student interactions, educational institutions can enhance students' social competence and overall well-being.

Lastly, educational practitioners should be encouraged to adopt a holistic approach to student development, recognizing the interconnectedness of academic and social-emotional competencies. By integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum, schools can provide students with opportunities to develop critical social skills in a structured and supportive environment. This approach not only supports students' social competence but also contributes to their academic success and long-term well-being.

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of teacher-student interactions and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs in promoting students' social competence. By understanding and addressing these factors, educators can create supportive and engaging learning environments that foster students' social and emotional development. Future research should continue to explore these relationships in diverse contexts, providing further insights into the mechanisms that support optimal student outcomes.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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