

Article

Democratic School Culture and Student–Teacher Relationships: Insights from Native and Immigrant-Background Students

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Abstract

This paper examines how various dimensions of democratic school and classroom culture—openness in classroom discussions, peer interactions, civic learning, influence on decision-making, and civic participation—relate to perceptions of student–teacher relationships of two distinct groups of students (native and immigrant-background students) in Slovenia. Using representative data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022 cycle), analyses revealed that student-perceived positive peer interactions and decision-making influence were consistent, strong predictors of positive student–teacher relationships for both groups of students. However, open classroom discussions and civic learning at school were only significant for native students, suggesting that these aspects of classroom life may not resonate uniformly with all students. Moreover, participation in civic activities, although often seen as an integral part of democratic school culture, emerged as a significant negative predictor of student–teacher relationships only among students with an immigrant background, indicating that these activities may inadvertently highlight barriers or differences rather than promote inclusive engagement. Results are discussed through the lens of fostering positive student–teacher relationships for all students.

Keywords: democratic school culture; student–teacher relationships; students; immigrant background; civic and citizenship education



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1. Introduction

The dynamics of student–teacher relationships are important for school practice and educational systems, as they are central to students’ academic success and well-being (Endedijk et al. 2022; Murray-Harvey 2010; Roorda et al. 2011). From a psychological perspective, they can be seen as a cornerstone for positive outcomes. A positive student–teacher relationship supports students’ academic engagement, trust, and emotional security, whereas negative perceptions may contribute to disengagement and social exclusion. However, students do not perceive these relationships in the same way. Survey data indicates that students in Slovenia generally report significantly lower quality of relationships with their teachers compared to international averages (European Commission 2024; Klemenčič Mirazchiyski 2023). This is not to be taken lightly, as student–teacher relationships can be considered an indicator of students’ wellbeing. For example, in increasingly multicultural societies, where immigration reshapes the composition of classrooms, relationships in school and their perceptions may also be related to differences in cultural background, language proficiency, and prior schooling experiences (Chiu et al. 2012; Den Brok et al. 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009), which shapes the wellbeing of students. All this points to

the necessity of thoroughly understanding similarities and perceptions of student–teacher relationships for all students in order to foster more positive outcomes and wellbeing.

As learning is an inherently social process (Vygotsky 1978), student–teacher relationships do not develop in isolation but are embedded within a broader school and classroom context. Teachers and students collectively shape the learning process. For this reason, a democratic school and classroom culture, which includes elements such as openness in classroom discussions, student participation in decision-making, supportive peer relationships and respect for diverse perspectives, are usually linked to, but not limited to, civic and citizenship education, which may be beneficial in fostering positive social dynamics and student–teacher relations (Dežan and Sedmak 2023; Heinla and Kuurme 2024; Munniksmä et al. 2022; Wanders et al. 2020). In such environments, students may perceive their teachers as more approachable, fair, and responsive, fostering trust and mutual respect (Peguero and Bondy 2011; Rutkowski et al. 2014), enabling them to develop positive perceptions about student–teacher relationships. Thus, by using elements of democratic school and classroom culture in their teaching practice, teachers can establish a foundation for forming relationships with their students that are beneficial to academic, as well as social outcomes.

Given that students in Slovenia report below-average perceptions of their relationships with teachers compared to peers in other countries (Klemenčič Mirazchiyski 2023), it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to positive student–teacher relationships and to explore effective strategies for strengthening them. Elements of democratic school and classroom culture may offer a promising and contextually relevant approach to fostering these relationships, particularly in increasingly diverse classroom settings. However, any such analysis must consider the specific characteristics of the Slovenian educational context. Compulsory basic education in Slovenia follows a single-structure system that integrates ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 levels, encompassing nine years of schooling for students aged 6 to 15. Furthermore, according to ICCS 2022 data, approximately 21% of Slovenian eighth-grade students reported having an immigrant background—a proportion among the highest reported across participating countries (Klemenčič Mirazchiyski 2023). Slovenia’s unique demographic landscape, shaped by traditional immigration from the former Yugoslav republics (Vižintin 2014) as well as more recent migration from a broader range of countries, is increasingly reflected in culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse classrooms. As classrooms are becoming heterogenous, more has to be done to tailor to the specific needs of students. While policies emphasize inclusive education, not much is known whether factors contributing to perceptions of student–teacher relationships differ among native and immigrant-background students. Previous studies on student–teacher relationships in the Slovenian context (Košir and Tement 2014; Kozina et al. 2023) have focused only on individual or general school factors in combination with typical psychological constructs without distinguishing between native and immigrant students’ experiences or specifically focusing on aspects of democratic school and classroom culture. Thus, this study provides a novel approach by examining specific elements of democratic classroom culture in relation to student–teacher relationships for native and immigrant-background students, a distinction largely unexplored in Slovenian educational research. In order to provide inclusive and equitable education for all students, it is essential to understand whether specific factors contribute to variations in how native and immigrant-background students perceive their relationships with teachers as their experiences may vary.

Specifically, the following paper aims to fill this research gap by examining how various factors contribute to perceptions of student–teacher relationships of native and immigrant-background students. In particular, it uses data from the ICCS 2022 student questionnaire to explore these relationships from the perspective of five within-school factors of democratic school and classroom culture: openness in classroom discussions, student interactions, partici-

pation at school, decision-making and learning about civic and citizenship education-related topics. Moving beyond individual-level student characteristics, the study focuses on the broader educational environment to address these research questions:

- What factors of democratic school and classroom culture are associated with students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships?
- How do these predictors vary among native students and students with an immigrant background?

Based on the above, this study contributes to the existing literature by (1) examining the unique role of elements of democratic school and classroom culture shaping perceptions of student–teacher relationships, and (2) identifying potential differences between native and immigrant-background students, by offering insights for inclusive educational practice. As this study is explorative in nature, we opted not to pose specific hypothesis related to the research questions. This is also done because of the novelty of applying elements of democratic school and classroom culture to the study of students' perceptions about student–teacher relationships for two distinct groups of students. Additionally, the study provides practical implications for both teachers and schools to inform practices on developing positive student–teacher relations for native and immigrant-background students based on developing democratic school and classroom culture practices.

1.1. The Importance of Student–Teacher Relationships in Schools

Student–teacher relationships are essential for students' school experiences, academic performance, social development, and emotional health (Endedijk et al. 2022). Empirical studies and meta-analyses consistently find both direct and indirect effects of teacher–student relationship quality on academic achievement. When teachers fulfil students' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy—for example, by showing personal interest, providing structure, and granting appropriate choices—students become more motivated in their schoolwork (Roorda et al. 2011). As classrooms are, by definition, social contexts, students' positive interactions with teachers and classmates are related to students' academic self-efficacy as well (Hughes and Chen 2011). On the contrary, students who perceive their relationship with teachers negatively demonstrate less intrinsic motivation for learning (Zou et al. 2024). Therefore, the social and emotional climate is important as a warm and low-conflict relationship with their teachers helps students to engage more fully in classroom activities and to explore learning materials with confidence (Roorda et al. 2011). In short, when students perceive their teachers as caring and supportive, they tend to have better learning attitudes and learn more effectively.

Positive student–teacher interactions characterized by instructional and emotional support can be particularly rewarding for at-risk students (Hamre and Pianta 2005). Students with an immigrant background, especially if they have recently arrived in the host country, may face several acculturative challenges in new educational environments, including difficulties with language acquisition, cultural adjustment, navigating new social norms (Ialuna et al. 2024a; Wanders et al. 2020) as well as prejudices, stereotyped attitudes and discrimination from the school community and other students (Ortega et al. 2020; Peguero and Bondy 2011). As these kinds of challenges can affect their academic engagement and achievements, well-being, social integration, and interactions with others (Dežan and Sedmak 2023; Veiga et al. 2023; Vigren et al. 2022), they can be considered at-risk students. From a psychological perspective, regardless of when they arrived in the host country, students with an immigrant background may thus face chronic experiences of being or feeling stereotyped due to their background and identity as schools can be considered an always evaluating environment (Weber et al. 2018). In this regard, positive relationships with their teachers may act as a protective factor for students with an immigrant background (Archambault et al. 2024; Ialuna et al. 2024b; Velasquez et al. 2013).

In addition to academic outcomes, the quality of students' relationships with their teachers has been identified as an essential factor influencing their social development, prosocial behaviour and societal involvement (Peguero and Bondy 2011; Wanders et al. 2020; Wu and Zhang 2022). Therefore, schools can be viewed as essential integration milieus for students with an immigrant background, providing socialisation opportunities that shape students' identities, trust in school institutions and their sense of belonging within schools and society (He and Fischer 2020; Hughes and Chen 2011; Ninković et al. 2022; Rutkowski et al. 2014; Štremfel et al. 2024; Wang 2024). With regard to expected outcomes, supportive teacher–student relationships can give students with an immigrant background empowerment towards becoming active citizens in a democratic society and enabling them to mitigate the negative effects of being stereotyped due to their migrant background (Weber et al. 2018).

While native students generally tend to have weaker attitudes toward school (cognitive engagement) and higher sense of belonging at school (emotional engagement) than students with an immigrant background, an analysis of data from 41 countries showed that positive relations with teachers were associated with students feeling more connected to school and holding more positive attitudes toward schooling (Chiu et al. 2012). Thus, a sense of belonging to school is not just a pleasant emotion of being accepted, included, and valued in one's school community; it has concrete effects on student outcomes and social engagement. Feeling connected to school is linked with higher academic motivation and lower dropout rates, and supportive teachers are a key predictor of that connectedness (Chiu et al. 2012; Roorda et al. 2011; Wang 2024). From this perspective, supportive student–teacher relationships are sometimes even more important for students with an immigrant background than for native students (Den Brok et al. 2010; Peguero and Bondy 2011), especially when they experience low peer acceptance (Archambault et al. 2024; Dežan and Sedmak 2023). Positive student–teacher relationships might be a possible reason as to why students with an immigrant background feel school belonging even if they experience less connectedness to their peers.

1.2. The Role of Democratic School and Classroom Culture

School and classroom culture generally refers to shared policies, norms, values, beliefs, practices and interactions within the school or classroom settings (Yavuz Tabak and Karip 2022). When they are based on democratic principles such as fairness, inclusiveness, respect for diverse perspectives, and opportunities for student participation, we can say they are democratic (Angell 1991; Maurissen et al. 2018; Pažur et al. 2021). This concept aligns with inclusive education, which emphasizes creating an open, safe, and welcoming environment that supports all students, particularly those at risk of marginalisation (Rutkowski et al. 2014).

In schools, democratic culture is typically promoted through civic and citizenship education, by teaching civic knowledge and providing opportunities for participation, but above all, by learning to become citizens (Tzankova et al. 2021). As schools are expected to prepare students for participation in democratic societies (Yavuz Tabak and Karip 2022), they can be seen as small communities where students can learn and practice civic and citizenship engagement and attitudes, including dealing with differences and diversity, taking responsibilities, making shared decisions, increasing a sense of belonging, and establishing relationships with others, both with other students and with their teachers (Rutkowski et al. 2014; Wanders et al. 2020). Therefore, this type of culture is promoted when students perceive “that there are opportunities for open discussions in the classroom, that they can take part in school decision-making and that they are treated fairly at schools” (Tzankova et al. 2021).

Research suggests that schools and classrooms with a democratic culture tend to have higher levels of student engagement, positive teacher–student interactions, and collaboration among peers (Heinla and Kuurme 2024; Maurissen et al. 2018; Wanders et al. 2020). Thus, fostering democratic school and classroom culture can enhance the perception of student–teacher relationships. For students with an immigrant background, a democratic school culture may be particularly relevant, as immigrant students who are actively involved in school and community life report more positive attitudes toward their host country, greater trust in civic institutions, and stronger commitment to citizenship engagement (Rutkowski et al. 2014). Therefore, democratic culture promoted through civic and citizenship education may have a role in establishing trust and collaboration between teachers and students. While some specific features of the democratic school and classroom culture, such as open classroom discussions on political issues (Maurissen et al. 2018) or societal involvement and participation of students (Wanders et al. 2020), have already been shown to be positively connected to student–teacher relationships, there remains a limited understanding of which specific aspects of democratic school culture are the most significant predictors of student–teacher relationship.

By focusing on students' perceptions, this paper examines how five various features of democratic school and classroom culture relate to student–teacher relationships, considering potential differences between native students and students with an immigrant background.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The present study uses data from IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2022 study, specifically data from the student-background questionnaire. ICCS is an international large-scale assessment that is conducted in participating countries in regular cycles. This study collected data by sampling students in 8th grade (approximately 13.5 years of age). The ICCS study incorporates complex sampling and assessment designs to provide representative population estimates (Schulz et al. 2025).

The Slovenian ICCS 2022 student data used in the present study included 3456 students (50.56% boys). Concerning immigrant status, 79% came from a non-immigrant background (native students with at least one parent born in the country of assessment) and 21% came from an immigrant background (students born in the country of assessment but with parents born abroad or both students and parents born abroad).

2.2. Measures

To assess how the predictors related to democratic school and classroom culture are connected to student–teacher relationships, we opted to use scales available in the international ICCS database (Afana et al. 2024). The scales were developed using the Item Response Theory (IRT) model. The scales are rescaled to have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 points (Schulz et al. 2025). The primary outcome variable in this study is the students' perceptions of student–teacher relations at school scale, which serves as an indicator of the perceived quality of student–teacher relationships. The selection of predictor variables was informed by established theoretical frameworks of democratic school and classroom culture (e.g., Maurissen et al. 2018; Wanders et al. 2020). Each selected variable represents a core aspect of this construct: *openness in classroom discussions* reflects the extent of deliberative dialogue on political and social issues; *peer interactions* indicate having supportive peer relationships; *civic learning* captures students' exposure to civic knowledge; *influence on decision-making* represents students' perceived participatory agency; and *participation in civic activities* reflects the participation of students. Collectively, these

variables operationalize key aspects of democratic school and classroom culture, drawing on the full range of conceptually relevant indicators available in the ICCS 2022 dataset.

Thus, the following scales/variables were used in the present study:

Students' perceptions of student–teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL). Students responded to five items about their relationships with teachers, using a four-point scale (ranging from “1—strongly disagree” to “4—strongly agree”). Example item: “Most of my teachers treat me fairly”. Higher scores on this scale indicate more positive perceptions of student–teacher relations. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.84.

Students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC). Students answered six items focusing on discussing political or social issues during regular lessons on a four-point scale (ranging from “1—never” to “4—often”). Example item: “Teachers encourage students to make up their own minds”. Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of openness in classroom discussions. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.83.

Students' perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT). Students assessed the quality of interactions among students at their school by answering three items on a four-point scale (ranging from “1—strongly disagree” to “4—strongly agree”). Example item: “Most students at my school treat each other with respect”. Higher scores on this scale reflect stronger agreement, indicating a more positive perception of peer interactions and the school environment. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.74.

Student reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN). Students reported on the extent to which they have learned about various civic topics in school, assessing nine items on a four-point scale (ranging from “1—not at all” to “4—to a large extent”). Example item: “How citizens can vote in local or national elections”. Higher scores on this scale reflect a greater reported extent of learning about civic topics at school. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.88.

Students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC). Students assessed six items about their participation in decision-making at school, using a four-point scale (ranging from “1—strongly disagree” to “4—strongly agree”). Example item: “Students' participation in decision-making contributes to making my school better”. Higher scores on this scale reflect greater perceived influence in decision-making processes at school. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.86.

Students' participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART). Students indicated whether they had participated in civic-related activities at school by assessing seven items on a three-point scale (“1—no, I have never done this”; 2—“yes, I have done this but more than a year ago”; 3—“yes, I have done this within the last twelve months”). Example activity: “Taking part in decision-making about how the school is run”. Higher scores on this scale show greater frequencies of participation in civic activities at school. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.76.

Index of immigrant family background (S_IMMBGR). Students were asked to indicate their country of birth and the birth country of each parent. Using this information, an index of immigrant family background (S_IMMBGR) was derived, categorizing students into two groups: native students (at least one parent born in the country of assessment) and students with an immigrant background (consisting of students whose parents were born in another country with students born in the country of assessment; and students in which both parents and they were born outside the country of assessment).

Student gender (S_GENDER). The variable S_GENDER was used to distinguish between male and female students.

2.3. Analysis and Procedure

The analysis was performed in the R package RALSA (version 1.5.5) (Mirazchiyski 2021), specifically designed to analyse international large-scale assessment data. The package can automatically handle issues related to data from international large-scale assessments (e.g., sampling, using appropriate weights). The data were downloaded directly into RALSA from the IEA Data Repository. Only data for Slovenia were used. Descriptive statistics, correlational analysis and linear regressions were performed to analyse the data according to the research questions. The analyses performed utilized the student estimation weights (TOTWGTS) employing jackknife replication to ensure population-representative estimates, as prescribed in the ICCS 2022 technical documentation. The immigration status variable (S_IMMBGR) was used to distinguish between native students and students with an immigrant background. The linear regressions were calculated using the following procedure: the variable S_STUTREL was entered as the dependent variable, and all other variables listed were entered as independent variables. Specifically, independent variables were simultaneously entered into the linear regression model using the enter method (the method used within RALSA), allowing for the assessment of their unique contributions to the variance of the dependent variable. Gender was used as a control variable in the linear regression model. The data met the assumptions required for linear regression analysis.

3. Results

Firstly, we present descriptive statistics and the results of the correlational analysis. This is followed by the results of the linear regression models. The results are separated according to the two groups of students (native students and students with an immigrant background).

Table 1 displays the means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) for variables related to democratic school culture and student–teacher relations, comparing native students and students with an immigrant background. Overall, the means are similar across both groups, with slightly higher scores for immigrant-background students on student interaction at school (S_INTACT), influence on decision-making (S_INFDEC), and student–teacher relations (S_STUTREL). Native students scored marginally higher on civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN) and participation in civic activities (S_SCHPART), but the differences are minimal, suggesting comparable perceptions across the groups.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for native students and students with an immigrant background.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	Native Students		Immigrant Background	
S_OPDISC	46.30	11.28	46.02	11.84
S_INTACT	45.69	9.97	46.23	10.72
S_CIVLRN	51.95	10.97	51.17	12.32
S_INFDEC	47.90	9.88	49.26	10.28
S_SCHPART	48.74	9.91	48.49	11.11
S_STUTREL	46.79	9.95	47.03	10.72

Notes. S_OPDISC—students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students’ perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students’ participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations at school.

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients showing associations between the variables for native students. We focus on the correlations between students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations (S_STUTREL) and other included variables. The strongest positive correlation is observed with students’ perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT). Similarly, a strong positive correlation is seen with students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC).

Table 2. Correlational analysis for native students.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. S_OPDISC	1.00						
2. S_INTACT	0.13 **	1.00					
3. S_CIVLRN	0.32 **	0.16 **	1.00				
4. S_INFDEC	0.28 **	0.43 **	0.31 **	1.00			
5. S_SCHPART	0.22 **	0.05 *	0.23 **	0.13 **	1.00		
6. S_GENDER	0.21 **	−0.06 **	0.03	0.00	0.06 **	1.00	
7. S_STUTREL	0.24 **	0.58 **	0.23 *	0.54 **	0.06 **	−0.01 *	1.00

Notes. S_OPDISC—students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students' perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students' participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students' perceptions of student–teacher relations at school; **— $p < 0.01$; *— $p < 0.05$.

Moderate correlations are found with students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC) and student reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN). A weaker correlation is noted with students' participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART). Lastly, there is a negligible negative correlation with students' gender (S_GENDER), indicating minimal differences in student–teacher relationships based on gender. The correlation coefficients between the independent variables indicated no substantial collinearity, as none of the values suggested strong intercorrelations ($r < 0.80$).

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients showing associations between the variables for students with an immigrant background. We focus on the correlations between students' perceptions of student–teacher relations and other included variables. The strongest positive correlation is observed with students' perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT). Similarly, a strong positive correlation is found with students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC).

Table 3. Correlational analysis for students with an immigrant background.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. S_OPDISC	1.00						
2. S_INTACT	0.15 **	1.00					
3. S_CIVLRN	0.27 **	0.23 **	1.00				
4. S_INFDEC	0.19 **	0.53 **	0.32 **	1.00			
5. S_SCHPART	0.21 **	0.08	0.14 *	0.12 *	1.00		
6. S_GENDER	0.25 **	−0.04	0.07 *	−0.04	0.05	1.00	
7. S_STUTREL	0.21 **	0.63 **	0.26 **	0.59 **	0.02	0.01	1.00

Notes. S_OPDISC—students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students' perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students' beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students' participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students' perceptions of student–teacher relations at school; **— $p < 0.01$; *— $p < 0.05$.

Moderate correlations are identified with students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC) and student reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN). A weaker correlation is noted with students' participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART), indicating a smaller association. Overall, the patterns observed in Table 3 are similar to those listed in Table 2, with comparable relationships between variables for native students and students with an immigrant background. Similarly, the correlation coefficients between the independent variables indicated no substantial collinearity, as none of the values suggested strong intercorrelations ($r < 0.80$).

The linear regression model presented in Table 4 examined predictors of students' perceptions of student–teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL) of native students, explaining 45% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 4. Regression analysis for native students predicting student–teacher relations.

	β	SE (β)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	7.56	1.17	6.47	0.00
S_OPDISC	0.08	0.02	4.52	0.00
S_INTACT	0.43	0.02	19.49	0.00
S_CIVLRN	0.04	0.01	2.49	0.01
S_INFDEC	0.32	0.02	13.89	0.00
S_SCHPART	−0.03	0.02	−1.66	0.10
S_GENDER	−0.06	0.32	−0.19	0.85
Adjusted R^2	0.45			
<i>F</i> -statistic	355.28			
DF	2600.00			

Notes. S_OPDISC—students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students’ perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students’ participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations at school; β = standardized regression coefficient; SE (β) = standard error of standardized regression coefficient.

Among the predictors, students’ perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT) were the strongest predictor, showing a significant positive association ($\beta = 0.43$; $p = 0.00$) with the dependent variable. This result suggests that higher perceptions of student interaction are strongly associated with better perceptions of student–teacher relations for native students.

Students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC) also demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.32$; $p = 0.00$) with the dependent variable, indicating that students who feel they have greater influence on decisions perceive stronger student–teacher relationships.

Similarly, students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC) ($\beta = 0.08$; $p = 0.00$) and student reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN) ($\beta = 0.04$; $p = 0.01$) were positive and significant predictors, though their effects were smaller.

In contrast, students’ participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART) was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.03$; $p = 0.10$), suggesting that participation in civic activities did not significantly affect students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations. Similarly, student gender was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.06$; $p = 0.85$).

The linear regression model presented in Table 5 examined predictors of students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations at school (S_STUTREL) for students with an immigrant background, explaining 50% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Among the predictors, students’ perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT) were the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.43$; $p = 0.00$), having a significant positive association with the dependent variable. This suggests that immigrant-background students who perceive better interaction among peers at school tend to report stronger student–teacher relations.

Students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC) also demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.36$; $p = 0.00$) with the dependent variable in the regression model, indicating that immigrant-background students who feel they have a greater influence on decision-making perceive stronger relationships with teachers.

In contrast, students’ participation in civic activities at school (S_SCHPART) was found to be a negative predictor for immigrant-background students ($\beta = -0.07$; $p = 0.01$), suggesting that greater participation in civic activities may be linked to slightly weaker perceptions of student–teacher relations.

Students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC) ($\beta = 0.07$; $p = 0.06$) and student reports about civic learning at school (S_CIVLRN) ($\beta = 0.04$; $p = 0.22$) were not significant predictors, suggesting no meaningful relationships between these variables and student–teacher relations for immigrant-background students.

Table 5. Regression analysis for students with an immigrant background predicting student–teacher relations.

	β	$SE(\beta)$	t	p
Intercept	7.48	2.32	3.23	0.00
S_OPDISC	0.07	0.04	1.88	0.06
S_INTACT	0.43	0.03	12.40	0.00
S_CIVLRN	0.04	0.03	1.24	0.22
S_INFDEC	0.36	0.03	11.10	0.00
S_SCHPART	−0.07	0.03	−2.54	0.01
S_GENDER	0.49	0.59	0.83	0.41
Adjusted R^2	0.50			
F -statistic	114.14			
DF	682.00			

Notes. S_OPDISC—students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions; S_INTACT—students’ perceptions of student interaction at school; S_CIVLRN—student reports about civic learning at school; S_INFDEC—students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school; S_SCHPART—students’ participation in civic activities at school; S_STUTREL—students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations at school; β = *standardized regression coefficient*; $SE(\beta)$ = *standard error of standardized regression coefficient*.

Finally, student gender (S_GENDER) also did not have a significant association ($\beta = 0.49$; $p = 0.41$) with the dependent variable in the regression model.

Table 6 provides a comparative overview of the predictors of students’ perceptions of student–teacher relations (S_STUTREL) for native students and students with an immigrant background. The results highlight both shared and unique predictors that shape these perceptions across the two groups of students.

Table 6. Summary of similarities and differences in predictors for native students and students with an immigrant background.

Predictor	Significant for Native Students	Significant for Immigrant-Background Students
Students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions	Yes	No
Students’ perceptions of student interaction at school	Yes	Yes
Student reports about civic learning at school	Yes	No
Students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school	Yes	Yes
Students’ participation in civic activities at school	No	Yes
Student gender	No	No

A key finding is the consistent significance of students’ perceptions of student interaction at school (S_INTACT), as well as being the strongest predictor for both groups. Similarly, students’ beliefs about their influence on decision-making at school (S_INFDEC) emerged as a significant positive predictor for both groups. Differences are observed in students’ reports about civic learning in school (S_CIVLRN), students’ participation in civic activities in school (S_SCHPART), and students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions (S_OPDISC).

4. Discussion

In this paper, we assessed how the elements of democratic school and classroom culture are associated with predicting students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships. Specifically, we were interested in the similarities and differences in the predictors for native students and immigrant-background students in Slovenia in order to have clear indications on how perceptions of student–teacher relationships can be fostered for different groups of students. Our findings indicate that not all aspects of democratic school and classroom culture contribute equally to shaping student–teacher relationships, and some notable variations emerge when comparing native students and students with an immigrant background. Overall, the results highlight the importance of peer connections and students' sense of having a voice in school decision-making for both groups. This is in line with some previous research highlighting the importance of peer interactions and student voice in students' academic adjustment (Gowing 2019; Quinn and Owen 2016). In contrast, certain classroom experiences—particularly openness in discussions and structured learning about civic topics—appear to be more salient for native students than for their peers with immigrant backgrounds.

One of the central implications of these results is that students' perceptions of student–student interaction, widely recognized in the literature as a critical component of school culture and climate (Bear 2020), 'spill over' into how they perceive their relationships with teachers. This aligns with the findings by Kiuru et al. (2015), who found that supportive peer interactions enhance the overall classroom environment, which in turn influences more positive dynamics between students and teachers. Therefore, these findings confirm that student–teacher relationships do not develop in isolation. Rather, they are deeply embedded within the broader social environment of the school, co-created by students and teachers alike. This is an important finding also in terms of students with an immigrant background who might feel like "outsiders" (Dežan and Sedmak 2023) as enabling them to have positive interactions with their peers can be considered an important protective factor in their school adjustment and development as well as reducing their perceived levels of discrimination (Schachner et al. 2021). Furthermore, Endedijk et al. (2022) point out the 'teacher's invisible hand', suggesting that teacher behaviour indirectly shapes peer relationships and students' school experiences for all students. Thus, even though in the current study we were interested in the predictors of student–teacher relationships, the association between peer interactions and the perceptions of relationships between students and teachers is bidirectional in nature and crucial for all students no matter their background.

The second universal predictor for both groups of students highlights the student voice. Simply put, students perceive better student–teacher relationships if they also positively perceive their own influence on decision-making at school. This finding shows the importance of students being actively involved in shaping their wider school environment and is also in line with previous findings related to student voice (Quinn and Owen 2016). For example, one of the defining features of a democratic school environment is the extent to which students perceive themselves as legitimate contributors to decision-making processes (Rutkowski et al. 2014). Our findings strongly show that when students believe their opinions and needs are taken seriously, they are more inclined to perceive more empowering relationships with teachers. Similarly, Conner et al. (2024) identified student voice, a practice in which students feel that their teachers value their voice, as an indicator of a positive student–teacher relationship. This is also supported by Mager and Nowak's (2012) review, which concluded that student participation in school decision-making processes is positively associated with improved student–teacher relationships, particularly through increased mutual respect and enhanced communication. Thus, promoting meaningful student participation can serve not only democratic aims but also relational ones, enhancing the quality of everyday interactions between students and teachers. This observation is

particularly relevant in the Slovenian context, where existing research shows that student participation in decision-making is still relatively limited in practice. Although students express a desire for more involvement, particularly in matters that directly concern them, the actual implementation of participatory practices remains largely dependent on teachers' willingness to share authority in the classroom (Mithans et al. 2017).

On the other hand, while openness in classroom discussions is associated with students feeling comfortable voicing their viewpoints, concerns, and debating differing perspectives, our findings suggest that this factor only significantly predicts positive student–teacher relationships for native students. Although an open-classroom discussion climate is positively affected by a context of good student–teacher relationship characterized by fairness and respect (Maurissen et al. 2018), research on ethnically diverse classrooms, where students may face more pronounced social adjustment difficulties, indicates that such openness does not necessarily moderate these challenges (Munniksma et al. 2022). As Schachner et al. (2021) suggest, students with an immigrant background may experience classroom climates differently, particularly when the pedagogical approach does not adequately consider their cultural perspectives. In such contexts, even well-intended open discussions can remain superficial or inaccessible to these students if their prior knowledge or communicative styles are not acknowledged. Furthermore, previous research on the impact of open discussions on tolerance toward immigrants shows that discussions alone do not predict greater inclusion or tolerance towards immigrants unless they are embedded in a broader democratic school culture that supports equitable and meaningful participation in which young people feel both heard and valued (Maurissen et al. 2020). Students with an immigrant background, who are often perceived or feel like “outsiders” (Dežan and Sedmak 2023), might hesitate to participate in discussions when their cultural or linguistic differences make them more vulnerable to social exclusion or misunderstanding. This suggests that open discussions may only benefit student–teacher relationships when embedded within broader inclusive and culturally responsive classroom climates. Prior research indicates that classroom climates characterised by equality and inclusion are positively related to immigrant students' psychological school adjustment (Schachner et al. 2016). This highlights the need for teachers to actively structure open discussions in a way that explicitly supports intercultural inclusion and encourages participation from all students. A recent finding by Ialuna et al. (2024a) shows that culturally responsive teaching, where instructional practices explicitly recognise and build on students' diverse cultural backgrounds, is associated with greater school belonging and more positive student–teacher relationships among immigrant-background students.

In addition to the structure of discussions themselves, the thematic contents of civic and citizenship education may not appeal as strongly to immigrant students if they predominantly reflect the experiences or socio-political structures of the host country without connecting to their backgrounds or culture. As highlighted by A. M. Banks (2024), civic education for immigrant or noncitizen students should move beyond assimilationist approaches, encouraging them to critically examine how membership boundaries are constructed and how these might be revised to better reflect democratic ideals. Failure to provide such inclusive schooling can leave significant portions of the student population without the skills and values necessary to participate fully, thereby undermining the promise of democracy itself (A. M. Banks 2024). This may help explain why openness in classroom discussion does not necessarily strengthen immigrant students' perceptions of student–teacher relationships as they might find it difficult to relate to the material discussed in the classroom.

It is important to stress, based on the above, that native students and students with an immigrant background perceive elements of democratic school and classroom culture differently with regard to their perceptions of student–teacher relationships. Furthermore,

our results show another important distinction concerning participation in civic activities at school. This variable did not significantly predict student–teacher relations among native students, but it emerged as a significant (negative) predictor for students with an immigrant background, showing that participating in civic activities might actually hinder perceptions of student–teacher relationships. Although the coefficient was small in magnitude, its significance shows that increased participation in school-organized civic or social initiatives may not be beneficial for students with an immigrant background. This is an interesting finding as it highlights how not all efforts related to democratic school and classroom culture in the school can foster a positive school adjustment for students with an immigrant background. Even though democratic culture in schools is promoted by teaching civic knowledge and providing opportunities for participation (Tzankova et al. 2021), more research is needed to understand why participating in civic activities in school might hinder perceptions of student–teacher relationships for immigrant-background students. From a psychological perspective, two possible explanations come to mind. The first one is connected to students feeling pressured to participate, while the second might be due to a clash of identity between their own perspective (ethnic identity) and the perspective of the host country (national identity) (Zhang et al. 2018). Another possible explanation lies in the structural fact that, rather than recognizing diversity and being multicultural and transformative in J. A. Banks’ (2011) sense of the word, curricular documents for civic and citizenship education in Slovenia are still very much grounded in activities such as learning facts about the constitution, legal documents and different branches of government (Šimenc 2012). This reflects broader historical patterns in many European nation-states, where education has traditionally been used as a tool of nation-building and cultural unification, often at the expense of acknowledging internal diversity (Castles 2009). In the case of Slovenia, the historical formation of national identity has been closely tied to cultural rather than political foundations, particularly through language and shared historical memory (Južnič 2014). In such contexts, civic education often tends to promote a dominant cultural narrative, which may feel exclusionary or irrelevant to students with immigrant backgrounds, whose cultural identities do not align with it (Castles 2009). The downside to this approach is that it can produce “failed citizens”, particularly among migrants and minorities with multiple identities and loyalties, who do not internalize the values and ethos of the nation-state, who feel structurally excluded from it, and who often develop ambivalent attitudes towards it (Starkey 2021).

In summary, our findings suggest that the differences in how students from native and immigrant backgrounds perceive elements of democratic school and classroom culture may stem not only from immediate classroom experiences but also from broader structural and socio-cultural factors. For students with an immigrant background, experiences of marginalization, lower prior civic knowledge, or a lack of multicultural representation in learning content may shape their engagement with democratic practices in schools. Participation in civic and citizenship activities, for example, might carry more emotional or identity-related weight for these students, especially when they are not perceived as inclusive. These structural considerations should be acknowledged in both policy and practice when designing civic and citizenship education and inclusive classroom strategies that resonate with all learners.

4.1. Theoretical Implications and Practical Relevance

The findings presented carry significant theoretical implications. Traditionally, democratic school and classroom culture has been primarily conceptualized within the context of civic and citizenship education, emphasizing students’ preparation for active citizenship (Tzankova et al. 2021). However, our results extend this perspective by demonstrating that

fostering democratic school and classroom culture is strongly associated with developing meaningful student–teacher relationships. Consequently, these practices hold a broader relevance beyond civic and citizenship education, significantly contributing to student well-being. Since perceptions of student–teacher relationships serve as an indicator of student wellbeing—which itself is a positive dimension of adolescent mental health—democratic school culture emerges as a promising, alternative pathway for supporting adolescents’ mental health in schools. Furthermore, our study bridges constructs from civic and citizenship education with educational psychology, highlighting a novel interdisciplinary approach. This connection, often overlooked theoretically but evident in practice, emphasizes that teachers can effectively use elements of democratic school culture across various subjects to strengthen their relationships with all students, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds.

Our findings carry strong practical relevance for teachers and schools. Understanding how democratic classroom practices affect native and immigrant-background students similarly and differently can inform instructional strategies, enabling teachers to adopt more specific and culturally sensitive classroom interactions ([J. A. Banks 2011](#); [Munniksmä et al. 2022](#)). While elements such as student voice and positive peer interactions appear beneficial for both groups of students, other aspects like openness in classroom discussion or civic participation require more nuanced teacher implementation for benefiting the students. To have the necessary knowledge and skills to support this, teachers need access to professional development in inclusive pedagogy and intercultural competence ([Romijn et al. 2021](#)). Moreover, in order to ensure equal opportunities for all students, mechanisms that implement a whole-school approach ([Cavanagh et al. 2024](#)) into the curricula should be encouraged. Such support on the school level would enable teachers to create learning environments that are more inclusive, empowering and build student–teacher relationships across diverse student populations (i.e., with an immigrant background). Thus, teacher professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy, intercultural competence, and the implementation of a whole-school approach can enable teachers to develop student participation in decision-making processes and foster positive peer relationships, both of which contribute to strengthening student–teacher relationships.

However, recognizing that certain practices related to democratic school and classroom culture—such as participation in civic activities—may negatively impact immigrant-background students’ perceptions of student–teacher relationships underscores the necessity for tailored, inclusive approaches. Schools should thus carefully consider how democratic practices are designed and implemented, ensuring these activities genuinely reflect, respect and recognize immigrant students’ diverse experiences and identities.

4.2. Limitations and Possible Further Research

This study has several limitations. Although the ICCS data are of high quality and representative across multiple countries and contexts, the scales utilized in the present research rely solely on student self-reports, potentially introducing response bias. Another important limitation concerns the selection of democratic school and classroom culture as predictor variables for student–teacher relationships. In this research, we differentiated between native students and students with an immigrant background to examine how their perceptions of student–teacher relationships vary according to democratic classroom practices. However, student–teacher relationships are inherently complex and are influenced by multiple psychological and educational factors beyond those captured by democratic classroom culture alone. While focusing on these variables offers a novel perspective for examining student–teacher relationships, it is certainly not the sole approach for fostering positive interactions in educational settings. Moreover, as this study involved secondary

data analysis based on the ICCS 2022 international dataset, the analysis was constrained by the predefined variables available in the database. As such, the operationalisation of democratic school and classroom culture was limited to the constructs and indicators included in the ICCS framework, which may not fully capture the contextual or nuanced aspects of school democratic practices. Furthermore, as the study was exploratory in nature based on assessing the predictors for different groups of students by using a specific statistical package that handles international-large scale assessments (i.e., RALSA), we opted not to include interaction effects. However, it would be advisable to extend the current findings by addressing interaction effects on data with robust measures of democratic school and classroom culture. Lastly, Slovenian students reported lower-than-average perceptions of student–teacher relations in the ICCS 2022 study. Thus, similar research conducted by using the international ICCS 2022 database might differ in countries where students reported higher average perceptions of student–teacher relationships or greater discrepancies between native and immigrant-background students. This consideration is particularly relevant given the specific characteristics of the Slovenian educational system, such as the integrated structure of basic education combining ISCED 1 and ISCED 2, as well as a relatively high proportion of students with an immigrant background. These contextual differences underscore the importance of interpreting the findings within their national setting and may not hold true for different countries. All mentioned limitations can be expanded upon in future studies of student–teacher relationships and democratic school and classroom culture.

5. Conclusions

Fostering positive student–teacher relationships involves navigating a complex interplay of factors. In practice, developing and sustaining positive perceptions of these relationships can be challenging. This study demonstrated that certain elements of democratic school and classroom culture—particularly peer interactions and student influence on school decision-making—serve as universal predictors of positive student–teacher relationships for both native and immigrant-background students. Nevertheless, notable differences emerged between these two groups. Importantly, student perceptions of their relationships with teachers are closely linked to teaching practices. Previous studies have found that teachers often interact less frequently or more critically with students from immigrant backgrounds compared to native students (Ortega et al. 2020). Teachers may also experience uncertainties, biases, or a lack of confidence in engaging effectively with immigrant-background students, negatively impacting their interactions and perceptions in the classroom (Munniksmä et al. 2022; Peguero and Bondy 2011; Vigren et al. 2022). Therefore, intentionally emphasizing aspects of democratic school culture—such as enhancing supportive peer interactions and amplifying student voices in decision-making—can provide teachers with valuable tools to better engage and connect with diverse student groups, including students with an immigrant background.

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