Boundary dilemmas in teacher–student relationships: Struggling with “the line”

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A B S T R A C T

The teacher–student relationship is viewed as integral to successful teaching and learning but, outside of a few exceptions, ethical boundary issues in this relationship have not been explored. The purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ perspectives of their relationships with their students as well as how they described and negotiated relationship boundaries. Findings were organised into a typology of 11 categories of boundaries. The balance between demonstrating care while maintaining a healthy, productive level of control in the classroom was a recurring theme when discussing the boundaries.

1. Introduction

The school environment creates the context for a variety of emotional experiences that have the potential to influence teaching, learning, and motivational processes (Goldstein, 1999; Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Meyer & Turner, 2002; Sutton, 2004; Zembylas, 2005). As such, emotions are an integral part of educational activity settings, which makes the understanding of the nature of emotions in the school context an important goal. One purpose of our research was to develop an understanding of teachers’ perspectives of teacher–student emotional involvement and emotional interactions in the classroom. The literature on the ethic of care and the emotional dimensions of teaching provided much of the framework of our research (see Hargreaves, 1998, 2000, 2001; Noddings, 1984, 1995). In this study, one of the major themes that emerged from initial analysis of our interviews with teachers was their struggle with relationship boundaries as part of their emotional interactions with students; therefore, we chose to expand our literature search to explore the boundary theme in more depth.

We found that, running parallel to the past two decades of research on emotions and pedagogical caring, there has been increased interest in the professional status of teaching (Barrett, Headley, Stovall, & Witte, 2006; Carr, 2005). Less attention, however, has been devoted to examining codes of conduct that constitute ethical professional behaviour (Barrett et al., 2006). Many of the codes of conduct in other helping professions deal with boundaries in the practitioner–client relationship (see Holmes, Rupert, Ross, & Shapera, 1999; Reamer, 2003; Wright, 2004). Boundaries exist to distinguish between what is appropriate and inappropriate in relationships. They “act to constrain, constrict, and limit” and involve issues of power, control, and influence (Austin, Bergum, Nuttgens, & Peternej-Taylor, 2006, pp. 77–78). In the field of education, the teacher–student relationship is a central component in successful teaching and learning but, outside of a few exceptions (e.g., Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008), ethical boundary issues have not been explored. Thus, in this article, we examine teachers’ perspectives of teacher–student relationships and explore how teachers talk about the negotiation of relationship boundaries.

In the next section, we begin by discussing the importance of teacher–student relationships to a productive classroom climate and to individual student success. We then move to some of the viewpoints on the ethic of care in teacher–student relationships and demonstrating caring while still maintaining control in the classroom. Finally, we explore literature that focuses on boundaries in helping professions.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Teacher–student relationships

Teacher–student relationships are widely recognised as being important to student motivation (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Davis, 2003;
Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Noddings, 1992), intellectual development (Goldstein, 1999), and achievement (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999; Nieto, 1996) as well as to an overall supportive, safe classroom environment that encourages learning (Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006; Lomax, 2007). Additionally, the importance teachers place on developing positive personal relationships with their students has been suggested as one aspect of effectiveness and expertise in teaching (Carr, 2005; Cothran & Ennis, 1997; Davis, 2003; Smith & Strahan, 2004). Effective teacher–student relationships cultivate engaging pedagogical conversations that “hold the interest and imagination of young people” and serve to enhance students’ lives (Carr, 2005, p. 265). It is often through personal interest in students that teachers find ways to bring students into these important conversations.

Much of the recent literature on teacher–student relationships has focused on the role of caring (Noblit, 1993; Noddings, 1984, 1995; O’Connor, 2008; Wright, 2004). An ethic of care privileges the emotional connections between teacher and student and emphasises the significance of the reciprocal nature and “synergistic power” of the relationships between teachers and students (Marrow, 2006, p. 94). Thus, caring and the resulting shared “power” can manifest itself in student success and teacher satisfaction (Graham, West, & Schaller, 1992).

2.2. The ethic of care

Teachers and students have characterised caring relationships as being composed of several different basic concepts: time, talking, sensitivity, respect, acting in the best interest of the other, being there, caring as feeling and doing, and reciprocity (Gomez, Allen, & Clinton, 2004; Tarlow, 1996; Terry, 2006). Researchers suggest that engaging in the process of establishing and maintaining caring relationships requires considerable emotional work and investment of self (Hargreaves, 2000; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Schutz, Cross, Hong, & Osborn, 2007; Williams et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2003). For example, teachers may choose to display motivational enthusiasm and excitement when teaching, spend personal time on behalf of a student, or even mask anger when upset with a student. Some teachers find their work and investment of self emotionally and physically draining, leading to fatigue and frustration with their careers (Hargreaves, 2000, 2001; Sutton, 2004). Because of that, they may create their own boundaries that help them deal with situations in the classroom while limiting their emotional involvement and feelings of burnout (Hargreaves, 2001).

2.3. Balancing care and control

Gomez et al. (2004, p. 483) suggest, “The caring work of teaching is premised upon having a reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. Reciprocity entails teachers and students continually developing, negotiating, and maintaining a social connection.” Teachers’ commitment to social and emotional connections with students naturally brings with it relational tensions (McBride & Wahl, 2005; Muller et al., 1999) that have to be negotiated—sometimes daily. These relational tensions often include issues of conflict, balancing care and control, and the reality of vacillating power between students and teachers (Cothran & Ennis, 1997; McLaughlin, 1991).

Reciprocity also means that not only do teachers influence students, but students also influence teachers. When teachers speak of “losing control,” the flip side of that perception is that the students have “gained control” in the classroom (Schlechty & Atwood, 1977). Not surprisingly, questions such as “How much caring is too much?” and “Where do I draw the line between a relationship that promotes or hinders motivation and learning?” are implicit in this relationship negotiation. Drawing upon literatures related to teaching, counseling psychology, psychiatry, and social work, we found a variety of possible issues that may provoke boundary questions—such as inappropriate self-disclosure, misuse of power or authority, and ignoring institutional policies (For example, Austin et al., 2006; Barnett, Lazarus, Vasquez, Moorehead-Slaughter, & Johnson, 2007; Reamer, 2003).

Demonstrating an “ethic of care” in teaching explicitly suggests ethical behaviour in the act of caring. Ethical behaviour can be construed as acting conscientiously within appropriate boundaries. Barnett et al., (2007) argue for gradations in boundaries, distinguishing between boundary crossings and boundary violations in the counselor–client relationship. There are times when boundary crossings are in the best interest of the client, such as when refusing to touch an upset client might have an adverse effect on the relationship. “Determining when crossing a boundary becomes a boundary violation may pose a more difficult challenge for well-intentioned clinicians” (p. 403). One of the current litmus tests is if the client perceives the action as harmful, the act is considered a boundary violation.

To date, little empirical research has been conducted on what caring means to teachers, how caring relationships are created and maintained, and what outcomes result from its practice (Alder, 2002; Gomez et al., 2004). In addition, boundaries associated with those relationships have also received little attention. Individuals within professional fields develop their own behavioural norms and, subsequently, their own code of ethics (Barrett et al., 2006). Thus, it is necessary to examine teachers’ own views of their profession, teacher–student relationships, and ultimately what constitutes ethical, caring behaviour in the teaching profession.

3. Methods

We approached this study from a phenomenological perspective. Using a phenomenological perspective allows us to investigate new, unanticipated themes and understandings to emerge by exploring a small number of cases in great depth and rich detail (de Marrais, 2004; Smith, 2004). Specifically, we were interested in, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002, p. 104). In applying that phenomenological question to this study, we asked: (1) how do teachers experience their relationships with students? (2) How do teachers construct meaning related to their interactions with students? (3) How do they talk about this experience with others?

We bracketed, or set aside as much as possible, our own experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about emotions and teacher–student relationships to transcend our perceptions of the nature of the phenomenon (de Marrais, 2004). Our ultimate goal in bracketing was to look at the data with fresh eyes. Using a phenomenological perspective also facilitated our attempt to answer the more specific questions we asked of our data: how do teachers define their relationship boundaries in dealing with emotions in the classroom? With what types of issues do teachers typically have difficulty? How do teachers make decisions regarding relationship boundaries?

3.1. Participants

Thirteen in-service teachers from both graduate education courses at a large southeastern university in the United States and a local school system in the same area volunteered for a sequence of two, semi-structured interviews. The third author was the instructor of the education courses. The first group of volunteers from one of the education courses was composed exclusively of women. To bring in a male perspective, we used purposeful network sampling in a second course and the local school system.
In the end, the group of participants was predominantly female (10 females and 3 males) and represented a range of years of teaching experience, subject matter expertise, and grade levels (See Table 1).

### 3.2. Procedures

We interviewed each teacher using a semi-structured protocol that was designed to explore the teachers' beliefs about building and maintaining relationships with their students. After the first round of interviews, the authors analysed the data to develop potential themes and chose to create interview questions for a second interview to pursue the emerging emotional themes in more depth. After the first interview, we sent the verbatim-transcribed interview to each participant to review for accuracy. All participants agreed to a second interview. The second interviews provided an opportunity for the respondents to offer additional insights into their teaching methods and strategies for dealing with student emotions. Furthermore, the second interview focused on emotional involvement and boundaries between the teachers and their students, a theme developed from the first interview. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min.

Interview questions included: (1) tell me how you went about building rapport with your students? (2) What types of things do you share with your students? (3) What do you think that “getting too involved with students” means? (4) How do teachers talk about teacher–student emotional involvement or “emotional distance” from students?

### 3.3. Data analysis

We adapted Strauss and Corbin's (1999) open coding as a technique to analyse participants' statements relevant to teacher–student relationships and emotional interactions in the classroom. Each transcript was simultaneously coded by all the researchers. We then compared and discussed our decisions among the research group. Several passes were made over the transcripts, and the development of categories was an ongoing, iterative process, based on common codes across transcripts. We reevaluated and refined both the codes and the categories to mirror participants' descriptions of teacher–student relationships. Then we began looking for patterns in the data across all participants. We allowed the boundary themes to emerge inductively from the data, but subsequently went through a second process of comparing the data deductively to the relevant literature on professional boundaries. We then compared and discussed our decisions among the research group. Several passes were made over the transcripts, and the development of categories was an ongoing, iterative process, based on common codes across transcripts. We reevaluated and refined both the codes and the categories to mirror participants' descriptions of teacher–student relationships. Then we began looking for patterns in the data across all participants. We allowed the boundary themes to emerge inductively from the data, but subsequently went through a second process of comparing the data deductively to the relevant literature on professional boundaries. We deliberately sought to let the teachers' voices explain and structure the essence of the phenomenon. Accordingly, we present portions of the teacher responses to illustrate our results related to teacher–student relationships, the care with which teachers go about their work and, finally, the boundaries that emerged as teachers talked about their relationships.

### 4. Results

Our findings confirmed several of the ideas in current literature, but also added to knowledge gained from extant research. For example, previous conceptualisations combined all teacher–student boundary violations and compared them to careless behaviour and subjectivity in grading (Barrett et al., 2006) or categorized boundaries according to the type of relationship: professional, social, sexual, religious, or business (Reamer, 2003). We found finer distinctions in teacher–student boundaries that should be more useful in helping to educate teachers about ethical professional behaviour. Our work here endeavored to move existing ideas about issues in teacher–student relationships forward into more fully contextualised boundaries. Table 2 presents our conceptualisation of teacher–student boundaries as they were represented in our data. The table displays examples from the literature as well as our data, providing a more holistic typology of boundaries in the educational context.

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### 4.1. Teacher–student relationships

Ann, a veteran math teacher, began the process of relationship building with her students before the school year even commenced. When Ann was informed that she would be teaching an inclusion class of students repeating Algebra I, she sought the help of one of the inclusion teachers who knew the students' history of conflict. Ann remarked,

> We tried to get it [a seating chart] where it looked like it would make for fairly good interchanges in the classroom...I must say I feel like we do have a pretty good rapport now, but it has taken a lot of talking with them. Not just walk in, start doing math, and walk out.

Ann's willingness to engage in conversations with her students about their issues was done in the interest of the students. “The tradeoff is supposed to be that they'll do something that I have chosen, which is the math problems.” Getting to know their

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th># Years teaching</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Demographics of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rural, homogeneous, K-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>6–8</td>
<td>Very poor school, 80% free lunch, “not a lot of parental involvement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>Small city school, growing, diverse, no tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>Large public school, combination of rural and affluent families in county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>K-5–1400 students, Predominantly white middle class, but a school in transition to more diversity, 2000 students, becoming more diverse each year, 40% African American, 30% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>K-5–1400 students, suburban middle class, moving toward increased diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>K-5–1400 students, middle to upper class, scholarships offered to create more diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherrie</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>Motessori–250 students, middle to upper class, scholarships offered to create more diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>2600 students, very diverse, lower and middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristie</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>2400 students, county school in small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Gifted</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>PK-12–570 students, only school in rural county, 90% white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Social science &amp; Broadcast media</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>1600 student, rural county, predominantly white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>K-5, Very diverse, working class school population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students by making individual contact and talking with them to find out about their interests were common goals among the participants.

Theresa, an elementary teacher, created “Let’s Get Acquainted” sheets to obtain information from her 4th graders and their parents at the beginning of the school year. This assignment served multiple purposes. Theresa was able to begin the relationship building process with the information from the questionnaire, but she also tied the students’ interests to the curriculum, making the academic process with the information from the questionnaire, but she also tied the students’ interests to the curriculum, making the academic process more motivating for her students throughout the year. Theresa was able to begin the relationship building process with the information from the questionnaire, but she also tied the students’ interests to the curriculum, making the academic process more motivating for her students throughout the year.

Janet, who teaches high school biology, reflects on the teacher–student relationship on the classroom level as well as the individual level. She stated, “I think that students have to feel like they are in a positive environment...that they have an environment that they feel willing to open up in.” Having a safe, supportive environment provides a foundation for maintaining the productive relationships she has with students.

Rapport is often built and maintained in the small daily school acts. For example, Jack makes sure he calls roll in the first days of school by asking students which name they prefer to be called and then asking where they are from. The high school at which he teaches has students from many areas of the United States and 50 foreign countries, so the act of calling roll leads to both the students and Jack himself recognizing the scope of the diversity in each class.

The context in which the participants teach greatly affects the type of relationship that is possible with students. Those teachers who teach gifted, special education, and resource reading work with smaller groups of students. Donna, who team teaches, shared, “I can walk around and have some contact with each student that I wouldn’t be able to do in a large class setting. I probably call home more than most.”

Melissa has found that dealing with her curriculum in a deep and meaningful way increases student openness and enhances her relationships.

We’ll sit down and start out talking about a novel. I learn how they feel about things and that helps me to deal with them...
a little bit better, too, because I do know something about them. I think it's made me a little bit better teacher.

Melissa, the only gifted teacher in a small community with only one k-12 school, essentially has the same students three years in a row. "I care about them and [I know] that there's more to it than they are just a kid that comes in my room for an hour every day."

### 4.2. Ethic of care in teacher–student relationships

The basic concepts of care mentioned in the literature review are evident in the actions of our participants. In establishing rapport with his students, Dan said he wants the students to know "we're just a kid that comes in my room for an hour every day." "I care about them and [I know] that there's more to it than one k-12 school, essentially has the same students three years in a row. "I care about them and [I know] that there's more to it than they are just a kid that comes in my room for an hour every day."

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### 4.3. Boundaries in teacher–student relationships

As our participants shared stories about their relationships with students, their ideas about relationship boundaries emerged. We present the boundaries, derived both inductively and deductively from our data, in 11 different categories (See Table 2); however, the categories cannot be considered mutually exclusive as they often blurred when examining specific transactions between teachers and students. Communication, emotions, and relationship boundaries were the most salient in the interviews, but that was to be expected, in part due to the focus of our interview questions on teacher–student relationships and the emotional involvement inherent in those relationships.

4.3.1. Communication boundaries

Communication boundaries seemed to centre most often on issues of self-disclosure to students. Participants frequently shared basic information about their families, where they had lived, and their past teaching experience. While initial information was shared at the beginning of the year, self-disclosure continued at various times during the school year. For example, the majority of these teachers wanted their students to perceive them as "real." Palmer stated, "I think you want a real good line of communication with them, I think the main issue is trust. Trust and respect." Janet, like Ann, believes that the positive classroom environment is the product of taking the time to talk with the students in her classes about things in which they are interested whether it is a current event or an ethical dilemma.

Care is also demonstrated in Bonnie's endeavor to help her 6th grade students understand a botany lesson. When her students were totally confused by diagrams in their science text, she was determined to rectify the problem. "I went to the grocery store and try to get some lilies that showed the parts [of the flower] well enough that you could dissect them." Spending her own time and money was something she did not hesitate to do to further student learning.

Monica's approach to caring is fueled by her high expectations for her 4th graders. With her no nonsense persona, Monica admitted that her students' first impression may be that she is a "mean" teacher. "They realise later that I do those things because I care about their educational needs, and I want them to have a future one day." Caring in the context of teaching was often expressed as caring about students beyond their school years, encouraging them to be good citizens of the world in addition to learning domain knowledge in each classroom.

4.3.2. Cultural boundaries

Self-disclosure can also be construed as a vehicle for cultural sharing. When Jack's students asked about his marital status, Jack suggested that some of his Hispanic students seemed upset to find participants expressed as important to learning. However, a teacher's occasional bad mood can lead them to give students fair warning. Bonnie said,

Sometimes if I am having a bad day I will tell them when they first get in there. I will say this is not the day to push me. I guess kind of an ice breaker in case I lose it with somebody.

Many participants talked about disclosing information in connection with content they were teaching at the time. Dan explained, "I'll stay within certain parameters. If I can apply something to me, like Adler's inferiority complex, we kind of go into that, and I use me as an example." Donna shared information about her ethnic background and family holidays while tying it into the curriculum. Jack's students were curious about his age, so he turned their question into a math problem to promote logic and math skills.

Most of our participants were decisive in saying they had very specific self-disclosure boundaries. Monica stated, "Usually I don't talk much about my private, personal life. I basically tell them that I'm very serious about education and I have high expectations for them." Ann added,

You can't bring your highly personal problems or things into class. Like this [teacher] who cried all the time. She would tell them how many miscarriages her daughter had because it was very upsetting. They shouldn't have to handle that kind of information.

Bonnie, whose self-disclosure changed fairly drastically between her first and second years of teaching, learned self-disclosure lessons the hard way.

In middle school the girls especially want to know about my personal life. Like do you have boyfriend, are you married, what are you doing this weekend? This year, if they ask me as far as relationships go, I would let them know if I'm married or not. But I don't go into details of my personal life, like [I did] my first year. You've got to leave some mystery there.

Bonnie's self-disclosure boundary only became apparent to her after the experience of being the subject of student rumors warranted "drawing the line." This experience suggests how Bonnie constructed meaning about transacting with her students, an issue related to our second research question.

As part of the reciprocal nature teacher–student relationship, teachers engaged students by asking for basic information as well. Often students volunteered information about their extracurricular activities at school or home, and teachers made sure to follow up with questions about the events. Teachers found this conversational effort helped maintain productive relationships with students. On the other hand, there were times when participants expressed discomfort with student self-disclosure or disclosure through others. Ann described her relationship with one student and his family. "I'm uncomfortable having to know so much personal information about the situation. I tried to keep myself focused on just the boy and the class. But, I felt like, "I can get too involved here."

Ann, Melissa, and other teachers who live in rural areas are often privy to more personal information than they would like about families in the community simply because of the nature of small towns. They may socialise with their students' parents, attend church with their students' families, and encounter each other in the grocery store. In that circumstance, it is difficult not to know more about your students than you would like to.

4.3.2. Cultural boundaries

Self-disclosure can also be construed as a vehicle for cultural sharing. When Jack's students asked about his marital status, Jack suggested that some of his Hispanic students seemed upset to find
out that he had been married seven years, but had no children yet. "You’re married seven years, and you don’t have a baby. Don’t you like your wife?" To Jack, their questioning indicated a curiosity about the culture in which they were now living and learning.

Most of our participants stated that their school districts were transitioning to a higher level of diversity as students of various ethnic backgrounds moved into their areas. Donna’s willingness to discuss her personal background and celebration of family holidays with her students suggests the importance of individual openness to different cultural backgrounds in the classroom. Helping students understand the various influences on not only the teachers, but also on their peers, may lead to better understanding, communication, and cooperation in the classroom as students respect cultural differences.

4.3.3. Emotional boundaries

Emotional boundaries can be among the most sensitive for teachers. Patterns of emotional boundaries fell along several dimensions. Emotional regulation, appropriate levels of emotion shared in the classroom, and comfort levels with others’ emotions were among the responses we encountered.

Jack discussed the importance of emotional regulation as he reminisced about his first year of teaching. Jack’s experience now serves as the basis for his advice to new teachers.

First, they’ve got to get their own emotions in check. I’m sure I was the same way, running around here and there and anxious and stressed, worried about getting observed and “am I going to have a job next year?” I think the first thing I tell them is “just calm down. We’re all here to help you.”

Keeping emotions “in control” seems to be a common theme in teachers’ talk about interactions in the classroom. What are sometimes perceived as “unpleasant” emotions: anger, frustration, and even hate were mentioned as emotions that should be masked or expressed with care. Monica cautioned, “I think that words can really hurt. Think about what you say and how you say it. You treat these kids like you would treat your own.” The well-being of their students is a standard by which our participants seemed to construct meaning in the emotions they expressed with students.

Melissa discussed her comfort levels with different types of student emotions. “Now if they’re mad about something I can deal with that. No trouble. But that wanting to cry, I’m like ‘why don’t you go see somebody else and let them deal with it?’ That makes me very uncomfortable.” Conversely, Janet is most uncomfortable with students’ anger. When describing a situation where two students were verbally sparring, Janet said, “I didn’t really know how to solve the problem. Kids who come in angry at each other is very uncomfortable to me.” Melissa’s and Janet’s statements suggest that teacher’s prior experiences and/or own personalities influence their comfort level with students as well as the support they give students in certain emotional situations.

Participants also talked about boundaries of emotional intensity. Many thought they could share a wide range of emotions with their students, but it was a matter of the level or intensity of emotion shared, not the emotion itself. Theresa was cognizant of this as she interacted and conversed with her students. “There are levels of emotions you shouldn’t share. And what’s appropriate for one child might totally be inappropriate for another.” Donna was aware of her propensity to show anger. “I don’t want to get angry. I have a real hot temper. I’ve never said or done something that I thought hurt a child, but I’m close, and I don’t ever want to do that.” Even veteran teachers like Ann expressed similar ideas.

I can get angry with my students. I try very hard not to show frustration. I try to stay as even as I can. I feel like [students] would say that I had good humor. That helps any situation, and in your classroom, if they see that you can joke about something, that just relaxes everything.

Ann, who admitted she is a fairly emotional person, said the ability to regulate her emotions did not happen overnight.

It has taken me a long time to try to have control over that part of my emotions—the frustration/patience level. I have a kid who has failed twice, and he’s sitting there with his head on his desk. You just want to shake him up against the wall. I’ve had to work on that and still do.

Some of our participants shared times of failure in regulating their emotions. Melissa stated, “They’re going to tick you off at some point in time. You need to be real controlled, and sometimes it’s hard.” She went on to comment there are times when “we can’t leave our personal problems at home. We do the best we can, but we’re human.”

Janet shared multiple times when she struggled with the emotional boundary. On one such occasion, students were supposed to be completing seatwork.

Slowly, I saw one girl put her head down. I saw one kid put it in his book and close his book. He did about half of it. It makes me so angry that I can hardly control what comes out of my mouth sometimes.

At the root of this anger is Janet’s perception of the level of effort she invests in keeping her students motivated and engaged compared to the students’ seeming lack of effort to stay on task. Janet constructs meaning in this situation by seeing the student–teacher relationship as reciprocal, with both parties putting forth effort to maximise learning. Blatant disrespect is also a difficult issue for Janet. “That just really pushes my buttons. I remember being so angry at one of my classes one time that I just cursed at them. I was so mad, it was awful. I probably could have lost my job.”

One lesson that can be challenging for teachers is the realisation that there is a boundary between acting in the best interest of the student and letting go when that may be the best choice in the situation. Ann expressed frustration at not getting through to a student who was upset with his grade in calculus.

When someone gets as agitated as he got, you want to do something because words weren’t sufficient. I tried to talk to him after class, but it didn’t go well, because everything I tried to say about what he had accomplished, he just had an answer. And so I finally…we finally just halted…just walked away.

4.3.4. Personal boundaries

Participants talked of investing a great deal of effort and emotion into teaching. Theresa said, “I put emotion into everything I do during the day. You leave kind of drained at the end. You’re wondering where it all went, and it goes into everything you do.” Donna found that to be especially true at the beginning of her first year. “I was very emotional at first. I used to come home and sob and be so upset, and I’ve had to distance myself. I just had to because I had to protect myself. I was just too upset.”

Monica finds that teaching consumes her day. She finally decided on a strategy of taking a break from anything related to school over her lunch hour, though sometimes she finds herself grading papers to catch up on work. However, she still struggles with mentally leaving work at work. Theresa has similar feelings about teaching. She has been admonished by both friends and family to separate herself from student issues at school, but Theresa admits she is still “too involved.”

You can’t let their personal life affect yours. But, if you know your child’s going home to an abusive environment, you’re going to worry about them. I just think that’s human nature.
When asked what her perception of “too involved” was, Theresa replied,

Some line...I don’t know. [laughter] Um...but I guess the line most people draw is—is it interfering with your teaching? Is it interfering with what you do when you leave the building? And, I don’t necessarily think it does for me. Everyone says, “Don’t take your work home with you.” That’s just not an option for many people, and for me it’s like, you just can’t turn off emotional switches, you know? But there are days where I wish that I wasn’t so involved because it starts to affect your own life.

Other participants had various comments on trying to keep personal time free for themselves and their families. The more veteran teachers seem to keep that boundary sacred. Dan said, “I don’t bring it home. It’s pointless.” Sherrie stated, “I’m not their mom, counselor, friend. I’m here for them but not in that capacity, and that’s partly self-preservation. I can’t do that. It wears me out.” Ann enjoys attending occasional extracurricular activities, especially since her children are attending the same school at which she teaches, but she has sought a balance between supporting students and spending time with her family. On the other hand, she has noticed “there is a teacher that goes to everything. And she has three or four children. I’m thinking, ‘Who’s with her children?’ That strikes me as not right.” These comments point to the necessity for boundaries between the personal and professional. Not having boundaries may lead to burnout and neglect of other important areas of a teacher’s life.

4.3.5. Relationship boundaries

By and large the boundaries surrounding the teacher–student relationship have received the most press and notoriety in the United States. Stories in the news of intimate teacher–student relationships have increased over the last several years. Some of our participants had knowledge of this type of boundary violation occurring in their school or school system. Palmer explained,

When you think about older students you can see how that could be romantically involved. I think if it got to the point where the teacher’s emotions depended on a student that could be pretty dangerous. It’s a real delicate balance because you have to care and be genuine but at the same time you can’t let yourself get carried away. You have to have stability of your own personal life and not put that into a student. That would be where you would be crossing the line and getting too involved.

Despite stories in the media, there are many other relationship boundaries more common to the teacher–student experience than those broadcast in the media. Sherrie’s previous statement, “I’m not their mom, counselor, friend” typified the way teachers tried to draw the line or articulate their boundaries. Dan said some of his students may see him in a paternal role or as a friend, but “I’m their mentor.” Teachers in this study most often used different types of roles as descriptors of what teacher–student relationships are, rather than what they are. They also frequently used role description to make sense of their relationships with students.

The idea of being “friends” versus “being friendly” was a prevalent theme in participants’ talk. Kristie stated, “I think giving up a little too much personal information may be going past the adult/student relationship and being more of a friend than an adult figure. I think you can be friendly with your students, but you don’t need to be one of their friends.” Jack knew he had crossed the line when his students started talking about him as a friend.

Sometimes I’m probably too friendly because they think we’re friends. I have to tell them I’m the teacher. They’re the student. We’re not friends. Friends come over to my house and we play pool or we go out to a movie or go to concerts or go out to dinner together. That’s friends. You and I aren’t going to do that.

Understandably, the desire to be liked and be friendly with students can backfire at times. Bonnie described the change in her approach over the last two years:

My first year, I knew you weren’t supposed to try to be friends with students, but there still was a part of me that wanted them to like me, I basically lost control near the beginning of the year. I got them back in, but the rest of the year was just like I can’t do anything fun with them, because you give them a little bit and they would go crazy.

Michelle’s mantra when discussing her relationships is “it depends on the student.” When asked if she sought out involvement with her students, she responded,

I guess it depends on the individual student because I feel like there are some students that I could probably get a little more involved with, and it would be okay. I guess there’s a line that students can cross or teachers can cross and things maybe you should know or you shouldn’t know about the student.

When asked to help us see “the line”, she explained,

I don’t know. I guess, like I said, it depends on the relationship with the student and the teacher. I had a girl, and we were on the bus on a field trip. I don’t know if she thought I would be okay with this or thought I would think she was cool, but I heard her talking about smoking pot. To me that is definitely crossing the line.

Michelle’s boundary was partially based on the topic of the student conversation.

For example, when a girl let me know that she was making out with a boy in the movie theater in 8th grade. I felt like there was no reason for me to know that. I quickly let her know “look we’re not going to have this conversation. I don’t want to hear this. Go away. Tell your friends; don’t tell me.”

Here, Michelle’s resistance to student self-disclosure is an explicit blurring of the distinctions between relationship and communication boundaries. Her sense-making with regard to student relationships was explicitly done on a case–case basis.

Jack, Bonnie, and Melissa had dual relationships with many students as both coaches and teachers. Melissa has observed this dual relationship push the lines of the teacher–student relationship boundary.

We have a coach here who is a wonderful person. He has a ball player but, because this young man’s family really just doesn’t do anything for him, he has basically become his father. I’m not saying that there’s anything wrong with that, but almost to the point that he has become so involved that I think it has too much of an effect on the adult’s life.

 Ironically, Melissa was cognizant of this same tendency in herself and shared a similar story of the relationship between herself and one of her athletes. “You get so involved, but where do you cut it off? I guess that’s what I mean by being too involved. When it starts to have an negative effect on your life as the teacher or the coach or whatever.”

Teachers with dual relationships have to be especially careful because multiple roles mean multiple types of boundaries associated with those roles. In this example, it is evident that teachers who are also coaches spend many more hours with a smaller number of students, and the possibilities for boundary crossings or violations may be more prevalent.
4.3.6. Temporal boundaries

Participants reported tensions between maintaining emotional connections with students and spending adequate time on academic work, balancing their time between the needs of one child versus the whole class, and frustration with the breadth of material the state mandates teachers’ cover in each semester. The tensions may arise during a variety of situations.

Monica shared how her view of time constraints changed over the course of her career. When she first started teaching she was so emotionally involved with her students, she would allow individual student’s problems to take over the whole morning, interfering with her teaching. Now, she says she is aware of her students’ emotions, but is much more academically focused. “When I walk into the classroom at the beginning of the year I’m like, ‘Look, we have goals and we have only a certain number of days to get it done. We have to take care of business and work.’” Jack agreed with Monica’s approach. “Once I’m in class I’ve got a job. I’m here to teach Algebra II. If you want to come talk to me, that’s fine but you have to do it before or after school.” Jack admitted he frequently referred students to the school counselors because of limited time to address student issues.

The needs of each child are recognized as being important, but teachers have to use their own judgment on a case-by-case basis as to who should best deal with the situation. Theresa had a strong bond and level of trust with one student along with extensive knowledge of the child’s history. On one occasion, Theresa sought the help of her paraprofessional to take care of the class while Theresa took the student to see the school counselor. “Many of my students don’t have that [level of trust] at home. So when someone comes to you and says, ‘I need you,’ it’s just instinct for me to say, ‘Well, let’s take care of this.’” On the other hand, Sherrie offered this point of view.

I got tired of going on all those roller coaster rides. I’m sorry if somebody’s upset and I’m sorry if they feel bad, and I’ll do what I can do to help them feel better. But I’m not going to spend my day doing that because I’m responsible for 38 other children, and I want to be fair to everyone.

There is certainly a level of care in each teacher’s response, yet the student, and the issue at hand, influences how teachers deal with each situation. The decision to address the needs of one student has to be weighed against meeting the needs of the other students in the class.

4.3.7. Institutional boundaries

School rules and regulations create boundaries in which teachers are required to function. However, there are times when those boundaries are ignored, crossed, and even violated. Participants in this study for the most part appeared to operate within institutional boundaries. Nevertheless, each participant knew of examples of institutional crossings or violations. A colleague of Janet’s put herself in the position of weighing the violation of an institutional boundary versus what she perceived as the welfare of a student.

This teacher took the student home after a school activity, and she knew the mother worked nights. The door was open and there were some other girls and boys at the house, and she told the student to pack a bag; that she was coming home to spend the night with her. Now, I would have felt like dirt had anything ever happened to that child, but I would have left her there. I just have that line that...When I think of teacher’s becoming too emotionally involved I think of teacher’s putting their own job on the line to meet the emotional needs of this student.

Dan confessed to taking a student home from school one time even though it was against school policy. The alternative was to leave the student at school without a ride home. Each of these two examples again begs the question: is this a boundary crossing or boundary violation? Furthermore, who makes that decision?

Janet and Donna both experienced boundary crossings related to the separation of church and state. Janet, although she knew she could be reprimanded, asked students to pray for a classmate who had a death in the family. As Donna reflected on her own actions during her teaching career, she admitted she is still not completely sure of the boundaries between church and state.

The culture of the school itself, along with the beliefs of the administration, can lead to individual school rules and norms. Dan stated he was better able to be himself and less on guard in the classroom and in his relationships with students after a certain principal retired. Teachers may feel that department chairs and other levels of administration impose boundaries on them that they would not necessarily have created for themselves.

4.3.8. Financial boundaries

It is not uncommon for teachers to use their own financial resources to supplement school funds. The amount of money teachers provide out of their own income reportedly ranges from $400 to $1500 (Morton, 2007; Quinton, 2006; Whelan, 2007), depending on the area of the United States in which the teachers lived and the grade level taught. Elementary teachers provide higher out of pocket contributions than middle or high school teachers. However, teachers and their families should not have to bear a burden that would lead to neglect of family financial matters. One teacher admitted in a USA Today article (Rosenberg, 2008) that she routinely under-reports to her husband the amount she spends on her classroom because she knows he would disapprove.

Financial matters were only mentioned by one participant in Bonnie’s effort to supply her students with flowers to enhance a botany lesson. In this case, she did not necessarily speak of the situation as a boundary issue. Teachers’ subsidizing of school districts’ classroom allowance is posited as standard practice (Morton, 2007; Quinton, 2006) and may be one of the reasons teachers in this study did not see it as a boundary in their relationships with their students. However, we consider one of the contributions of this article to be the typology of boundaries contained in Table 2 and have included and addressed the financial boundary for that purpose.

4.3.9. Curricular boundaries

When dealing with vulnerable populations, curricular boundaries naturally come into play. Although participants shared that they took time to discuss topics of interest to students, at times related to content, they carefully approached this endeavor. Ann handled conversation time in the following way.

You could ask, “What do ya’ll want to talk about today”, and it could be something really off the wall, but to make sure we had a little control over [the topic], you know...say, “Well, do ya’ll want to talk about this today?”

Melissa concurred with Ann’s careful approach. “Whatever they’re talking about, if I have some big strong opinion about it, then I’ll tell them. I’m not afraid to do it unless it’s too radical now.”

Janet raised a curricular boundary as she facilitated students’ biology laboratory experiences. Despite the gratification she received from students’ excitement over academic activities, such as allowing the students to collect bacteria from various surfaces throughout the school, student behaviour and perception caused her to rethink her labs.

[Student excitement] is just the most rewarding part of my job. When I first started teaching, we did stuff like that all of the time. But it didn’t take long for the kids to say, “We get to
play a lot in here”. Then they would just start taking advantage of it, it seemed like.

In this situation, Janet raises the issue of caring about the students’ learning versus maintaining control of the classroom as well as student perception of her as a teacher.

4.3.10. Expertise boundaries

Despite the emotional nature of interactions in the classroom, participants were vocal about their lack of training and expertise in dealing with student emotion and emotional situations. On-the-job training seems to be the way these teachers learned effective management. Ann and her colleagues in the math department use their lunch time to touch base with each other about events of the day. There is daily discussion about emotional situations in the classroom. Here is one example that Ann shared:

One of the teachers came in at lunch and said, “Well, I almost had a fight in my last class.” She wanted to tell me about this. We’re always asking each other’s opinion. “Did I handle that right or should I have called an administrator?”

While some teachers might stay entrenched in the student problems to the extreme where, according to Ann, it “becomes a soap opera” for the teacher, most of these participants discussed using school and community resources to help students. Theresa and Ann called on special education teachers to aid some of their students. Others mentioned referrals to the Department of Family and Children’s Services. Most frequently, teachers refer to the school counselor. Palmer shared, “A lot of times we’ll just send them to the counselor because the [students] don’t know how to deal with their emotions. I just don’t feel qualified.” Jack talked about his philosophy of helping and his comfort level with this boundary.

Legally, if we suspect abuse, we have to inform. That’s where you have to know where the line is. I can’t call a parent and say “hey, I think you’re abusing your kid.” That would be over the line. That’s someone else’s job and you have to know that’s someone else’s job. That will just wear you out.

Donna is overwhelmed at times with the problems her students face. “I don’t have the expertise to deal with the problems that I encounter. It’s important that the students know that I care. Two of my students have been hospitalised this year. And I’ve two others that have tried to commit suicide.” Some teachers may personally take on more responsibility than circumstances warrant. Knowing resources are available, especially within the school, may alleviate some of the burden on the classroom teacher.

4.3.11. Power boundaries

Issues of power that emerged in participant responses dealt with control of the classroom, the possibility of subjective grading, and preferential treatment of certain students.

Ann spoke of working with a “suicidal” student. “This boy had around an 80 average. I had already made my mind up, there was no way—no matter what he made on that final—he was going to make an 80 or higher, if he did actually do better.” Michelle was also aware of this possibility.

If you’ve been too involved and you’re emotionally attached to this kid, that could kind of get in the way of maybe grading if they’re borderline. Another kid you wouldn’t give them the extra points, but this kid you might say “ah, let me go ahead and boost them up.”

Janet tied the notion of being too friendly with maintaining control. “I think there is a fine line. If I become too friendly I feel like they are going to feel like they run [the classroom], and I can’t get them back where I want them.” Bonnie’s comments echoed Janet’s. “If they get too comfortable with you, it’s hard to keep them focused. If they know they can start talking about whatever they want to talk about, you’ve lost control of them.” The balance of care and control are part of the daily negotiations that teachers encounter as they deal with several different boundaries that emerged in this study.

5. Discussion

In discussing their relationships, we found that our participants revealed their reflective practice as they described a wide range of possible boundaries in their interactions with students. The boundaries demonstrated that often the very actions that promote emotional involvement (for example, exhibiting interest in students or attempting to help students during a difficult time) are the ones teachers may feel students take advantage of or are called into question ethically and morally. Our participants frequently used the metaphor of the “line” to discuss the boundary they saw between useful involvement and becoming too involved. Many of our teachers discussed their previous or current difficulties with defining the boundary line and the dilemma of negotiating that line with students. This relationship conundrum teachers face weighs heavily on their perceived teacher identity and their path to building a beneficial relationship with their students. Theoretically, this mental debate questions the individual teachers’ professional identity, self efficacy, motivation, commitment, moral responsibility and closeness of relationship with the student (Day et al., 2006; Newberry & Davis, 2008). Therefore, how much a teacher becomes involved or withdraws is the extent to which teachers are able to maintain their existing teacher identity. As such, teachers’ beliefs about what is appropriate and beneficial are inherently tied to their teacher identities. Thus, the balance between demonstrating a caring teaching identity while maintaining a healthy, productive level of control in the classroom seemed to be a recurring theme with most of the boundaries.

One of these boundaries was the type of communication in which they engaged with students. A certain level of communication and self-disclosure was seen as useful, but several participants were open about boundaries raised after sharing too much personal information in the early years of teaching. For instance, Dan and others felt comfortable tying examples from their own lives into topics they were currently covering. That was not the case with other types of disclosure. Bonnie admitted she shared too much personal information with her students and felt taken advantage of because of the level of her self-disclosure.

Participants also divulged that different levels of student self-disclosure were subject to boundaries, where knowing too much created a sense of discomfort for some participants. At times, knowing too much may have led to increased subjectivity in grading of the student, blurring the lines between communication and power boundaries. Furthermore, the perception of the “line” was in different places for different teachers. For Michelle, the student who tried to tell her about “making out” with a boy demonstrated where that border existed for her. Regardless of the motives of that student, Michelle was not willing to engage in that type of conversation. However, she also shared that there were other students with whom she would feel comfortable engaging in conversation about their personal lives. Thus, the line may differ across teachers, but it may also differ with the same teacher across different individual students.

The reciprocal nature of teacher–student interactions was clearly manifested in our teachers’ talk of emotional boundaries. Extreme emotions in the classroom, either pleasant or unpleasant, were perceived by teachers as leading to a loss of control. For example, in her first interview, Theresa described her 4th graders’
expressed about the expertise boundaries and self-admitted frustration concerning her apathetic mathematics teaching. Teachers discussed how crossing involvement boundaries with their students caused personal problems, as they felt obligated to take their work home with them, eventually causing them to become worn down by the emotional overload. Many teachers in this study tended to make changes in their emotional and personal boundaries over time as a means of self-protection. On the other hand, some struggled with switching from their teaching role to the other roles in their lives, and some associated over-involvement with moving towards being “burned out” and leaving the teaching profession.

Teachers also revealed adaptations made over the years in relationship boundaries. The participants discussed instances where being “too friendly” caused them a perceived loss of control in their classroom. One possible explanation for crossing this boundary that veteran teachers broached was the significance of age at the onset of teaching. Their view, and the view of less experienced participants, was that there is often a need to be liked or to be friends with students—especially if you are young and in the first year of teaching. There are times when a smaller age gap between student and teacher can lead to loss of control, boundary crossing, or even boundary violations.

Experienced teachers tended to change their approaches to developing involvement and changed the parameters of various interaction boundaries as they gained confidence in their teaching role. The confidence gained through experience allowed them to more easily make decisions in this complicated negotiation process and develop their own balance between a sense of professionalism and a useful level of involvement. Yet, we must not forget that even veteran teachers such as Ann were still exposed to situations in which they had occasional struggles with boundaries, such as her self-admitted frustration concerning her apathetic mathematics teaching.

Part of the frustration may stem from feelings the participants expressed about the expertise boundaries—being unequipped to deal with many of the emotional experiences they encountered. These practicing teachers reported that they had received virtually no training related to students’ emotions or emotional development, and this gap was seen as an adverse oversight in their teacher education programs. It seemed the teachers felt “out there on their own” attempting to negotiate boundaries, though some teachers seemed to be more aware of and willing to use resources within and outside the school to support students or aid in their own decision-making regarding boundaries.

6. Implications

Being able to anticipate different types of boundary issues may help first year teachers in their transition to the profession. Preparing them to deal with feelings of vulnerability and being overwhelmed with student concerns, while at the same time helping them create a balance between caring and control in their teacher identity promotes a greater sense of stability for incoming teachers. Additionally, our research suggested that there were times when our participants struggled with the decision-making processes surrounding boundaries and recognized a significant lack of expertise in dealing with many issues their students faced. These points lead us to suggest that teacher education programmes and teachers’ professional development deal explicitly with boundaries in teacher–student relationships beyond a cursory introduction to the topic. Using teacher–student scenarios and focused observations of veteran teachers in the classroom encourages reflection on possible boundaries pre- and in-service teachers would raise and how the boundaries would impact their teaching in the future. This type of education would also serve as a basis for ongoing conversation and consultation between teachers about situations they encounter on a daily basis. Effective decision-making may lead to greater success in the classroom and lessen teacher burnout and drop out.

7. Limitations and future directions

We recognize certain limitations in this research. First, all the teachers in this study were from one region of the United States, so our findings must be viewed as being from this social historical context. To gain a better perspective of teacher boundaries, we must look further afield in the future to other areas of the United States and other social historical contexts in the world. The article was also limited to the teachers’ perspective based on self-report data. Adding the student perspective would give us a better understanding of the reciprocal nature of the teacher–student relationship and the boundaries that are negotiated. The student perspective would also create triangulation of the findings of our current research. Next, though our discussion alluded to a connection between teachers’ ideas about boundaries and their conception of their teacher role, a full discussion of the possibility of this relationship was beyond the scope of this article. Future research could be conducted to better elucidate this connection. Finally, this work opens the discussion to other useful topics. For example, teacher identity, emotions and boundaries when working with more racially and economically diverse students to describe the professional perplexities they may face. Future research on this topic is needed to better isolate and describe teacher emotions within this area.

References


