The Queensland College of Teachers recently commissioned a comprehensive scoping review of factors related to teachers transgressing their professional boundaries. The review was undertaken by researchers at the Centre for Children and Young People in the School of Education at Southern Cross University.

Method
The review systematically analysed 57 academic articles, a wide range of state and sector documentation from seven English-speaking countries, and data from 99 QCT disciplinary cases relating to teacher sexual misconduct.

What constitutes a breach of teachers’ professional boundaries?

The Australasian Teacher Regulation Authorities (2015)\(^1\) state that: ‘Professional boundaries are breached when a teacher misuses the power imbalance in the teacher-student relationship such that the student's welfare is compromised’ (p.2).

Certain acts, most notably grooming and child sexual or physical abuse, represent a clear violation of boundaries. However, in everyday school life some situations arise where teacher-student relational boundaries are blurred and may require close consideration of contextual factors in determining whether a breach has occurred.


Documents from other Australian states include financial and physical boundary transgressions.

Social media has created increasing complexity around boundaries and teachers' 'duty of care'.

Grooming

Sexual abuse in school settings usually occurs in the context of a 'special relationship' and is facilitated through a process of grooming. Grooming usually involves multiple boundary transgressions across the categories above, often prior to, during and following abuse. Grooming (even if this does not eventuate in sexual abuse) is an offence in all Australian states.

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Factors influencing teachers’ boundary transgressions

Influencing factors cluster into three general areas, which can interact to further increase risk:

**Teacher Factors**
- Demographic characteristics such as gender, age and teaching level (primary or secondary), teaching context (e.g. rurality; dual roles as a coach or tutor), teaching experience, understandings about pedagogy, ideas about love, teachers’ own mental health and personal morals

**Student Factors**
- Behaviour that is flirtatious, provocative or students who are vulnerable

**Institutional Factors**
- The physical environment, policies and practice, and school culture

A closer look at teacher demographic factors

It is not possible to draw definitive demographic conclusions from existing data but the following trends are evident:

- Younger teachers may experience more errors of judgement
- The majority of professional boundary transgressions (all forms) are perpetrated by males
- The majority of child sexual abuse in schools is perpetrated by males
- More sexual misconduct happens at the secondary school level - the majority of victims are female secondary school students
- Age seems relevant for female teachers, with female teachers most likely to be convicted of sexual misconduct with (male or female) students relatively close to their age (i.e. teachers under 30 and secondary school students)
- Male perpetrators vary in age

A useful typology of perpetrators of institutional sexual abuse, highlighted by O’Leary, Koh and Dare (2017)\(^3\) indicates that they typically fall into one of three categories:

- **Predatory**
  - Individuals who are sexually attracted to children and/or young people, and who use grooming in an intentional, premeditative way

- **Opportunistic**
  - Individuals who have poor impulse control, lack social boundaries or social conformity

- **Situational**
  - Individuals who are not specifically attracted to children and tend to be otherwise law abiding

Predatory individuals are most likely to be highly-regarded male teachers working in the primary school context. Although these perpetrators loom large in the media, this form of perpetrator is rare.

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Existing mechanisms for supporting teachers with professional boundaries

The review identified a wide range of mechanisms, although these tended to exist in a quite ad hoc way across states, sectors or jurisdictions. Largely, existing mechanisms fall into the following categories:

- **Policy / Policy-related guidance** such as specific professional boundaries guidance, social media policies, general teacher codes of conduct / ethics codes, child protection policies and mandatory reporting systems
- **Teacher training / Professional development** in ethics and child protection issues
- **Safety training for children and parents** – most Australian states have adopted a compulsory program or curriculum component incorporating protective behaviours / personal safety in relational and on-line contexts
- **Advice / support systems** – some international jurisdictions have a confidential support line available to advise teachers (regarding the behaviour of colleagues, or concerns about their own thoughts / actions)

Improving policy and practice

The above typology of offenders provides a useful framework for directing improvements in policy and practice:

![Improving policy and practice diagram]

**Reducing Predatory Misconduct**
- Improve screening mechanisms;
- Improve reporting mechanisms and training/education for children;
- Implement strategies to reduce human reasoning error of colleagues.

**Reducing Opportunistic Misconduct**
- Tighten child safe policies and practices;
- Improve reporting mechanisms and training/education for students and staff;
- Conduct on-going professional learning around ethical practice.

**Reducing Situational Misconduct (and blurred boundary issues)**
- Provide clear guidance on professional boundaries and social media usage;
- Improve pre-service training on ethics and the emotional labour of teaching;
- Provide explicit professional learning and wellbeing support for new teachers;
- Foster a more open culture of discussion.

**Overall**

- Polices must keep apace with technological and societal changes and be as unambiguous as possible.
- Care must be taken not to overly rely on Working with Children Checks – most perpetrators do not have prior relevant convictions.
- Explicit focus needs to be on creating child safe schools that uphold the Royal Commission’s child safe standards.
- Schools need to be encouraged to provide formal opportunities for professional, reflective dialogue around boundaries and ethical practice, including how to navigate ‘messier’ grey areas, access deeply held values, beliefs and assumptions about children and childhood, improve personal engagement with professional ethics and promote community learning around safe school environments.

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