The challenge and importance of creating emotional boundaries in relationships with students is discussed, along with perspectives from students and teachers about how they see the relationships being defined.

Establishing and maintaining boundaries in teacher-student relationships

Claire, a fifty-year-old social studies teacher at a small charter school, is invited to a student’s quinceañera. At first, she is flattered by the invitation and decides to accept and attend. She brings a small gift to the event and even dances with some of the kids. Then other invitations come as word gets out. The teacher is overwhelmed and can neither fit these events into her schedule nor purchase gifts for all of the young women who invite her.

Joe, an English teacher, knows that a student has intractable problems at home and has had frequent interaction with law enforcement. He believes she is a bright girl, and he has a good rapport with her. Still, her grades and attendance are poor, and she is caught stealing. When the administrators move to expel the girl, the teacher comes to her defense, based on his understanding of the student’s home life, and promises to take responsibility for the student’s behavior.

Celia, a young teacher, is asked to confirm students’ requests to become her Facebook friend. She initially allows students to friend
her, then realizes that she has blurred lines between her school life and her personal life by allowing students to see her personal postings. She tries to “unfriend” them, but the students do not understand and feel hurt.

Laura, an English teacher, gives out her cell phone number in case her students have an emergency. One night she receives a call from a student hoping to get a ride home from a party. Because she lives in the same neighborhood as her students, her advisees (whom she has advised for four full years) are extremely close to her. She has been to their homes and has relationships with their parents. Still she feels this request will lead to others like it.

Joni, a math teacher who has been teaching for ten years, offers to tutor a student in her home. Before this transpires, she calls the parents so they are fully aware of the depth of the relationship and the scope of the activity. She says that if the relationship is going to go beyond the classroom, she has to be sure that parents know where their child is so there are no problems or suspicions.

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**The challenge of teacher-student relationships**

How do teachers establish, communicate, and maintain clear boundaries in their close relationships with students? Why are these boundaries important for both teachers and students? How can teachers learn to navigate through the many important dilemmas that face them as they are asked to become more personal and more informal in their relationships with students? How do students see the boundary issue, and what types of lines do they expect teachers to draw?

Most teachers who desire positive or close relationships with students will face difficult decisions about how to conduct and maintain these connections and draw boundaries. But with few clear policies or guidelines regarding relationships, many will struggle and perhaps fail before arriving at a positive balance. While the relationships can be fulfilling and stimulating, they can also be confusing, draining, and overwhelming. Teachers
must determine how their own emotional lives figure into their relationships and how much energy they can devote to students.

Many issues arise: How much of one’s private life should be divulged to students? How much or which student information should be kept confidential? How might a close relationship with a student influence a teacher’s ability to be fair in grading or classroom conduct? How can teachers maintain enough personal distance to be able to be whole as adults? How can teachers who are not disposed to close relationships with students create a warm classroom atmosphere?

The concept of boundaries has a long tradition in clinical theory and research. It is closely connected to Erik Erikson’s theory of identity. During adolescence Erikson posits that the psychosocial task is to individuate from one’s family of origin and to choose what one wants to be in life. The process of gaining autonomy goes hand in hand with creating a new set of boundaries, a transition he describes as moving from identifications to identity. In this process, group norms and wishes to be part of a collective continue, but the self creates boundaries to protect itself from all of the expectations of others in order to figure out what one stands for and what one wants the future to bring.

Of course, boundaries exist much earlier and are part of the early era of life when attachment to the primary caretaker becomes essential for psychological survival. The terrible twos are a time of boundary setting; the toddler has a strong will and wants to prove agency and purpose. Of course this is not a conscious plan, but it is a significant way of feeling and proving boundaries between the self and attachment figures. Whether these boundaries become rigid, ambivalent, or chaotic has a lot to do with the relationship between parent and child. A parent who reacts anxiously and forbids an exploration of the world can easily create serious boundary problems with related frustration.

New boundaries get set in the context of school, where the child needs to separate from home and take on a different role. Learning how to function in different settings has a lot to do with healthy boundaries, and the reluctance of children to report to parents
about their school day is often related to practicing boundaries and privacy.

For this reason, healthy boundaries in school between teachers and students, and youth development practitioners and adolescents, are essential. They help students learn how to function with other adults outside the home and create trust in the ability to forge an academic and professional future. Conversely, boundary transgressions can have detrimental effects as the student can feel betrayed and lose a sense of competency and agency. Clinicians often have to deal with the aftermath of traumatic experiences in youth when adults inside or outside the family have abused their position of power, respect, and trust, have exploited the relationship. However, it is not only the serious transgressions that matter and have to be prevented, but also the well-meaning minor transgressions, such as inappropriate comments about how a student looks or too much interest in a student’s personal life, that rob the student of his or her autonomy and add confusion to an already confusing period of life.

Students’ perspective on boundaries in relationships

For students, close relationships with teachers are pivotal. They can turn a difficult high school experience into a positive and successful one and can lead to more relationships with teachers and other nonfamilial adults in the future. Certain students are very specific about their needs in the relationships (see the second article) and are clear on how far these relationships can go. Listening to students’ understanding of boundaries can inform how far teachers can or should go in these relationships. For teachers, the temptation to let themselves become overly involved in students’ lives is gravitational. Learning to resist this pull requires maturity and understanding of students’ needs for dispassionate support.

In order to have close relationships with students while maintaining positive personal boundaries and staying energized for
teaching, teachers should consider the following issues that students tend to describe about their feelings about relationships with teachers.

_Allow relationships to emerge organically_

For the most part, students prefer that they initiate these close relationships with their teachers. Either as an outgrowth of an after-school activity or lunchtime tutoring session, or as a result of discussing a mutual interest, students want the relationship to start because they approach the teacher, not the other way around. Somehow the targeted attention of a teacher can feel creepy or embarrassing. Still, teachers must sometimes make it clear that they are interested in students as individuals to allow for the possibility of a closer connection, explains Lilian: “I’d had Chris as a freshman, but now he’d become this big guitar player. So I did a little research and found out about this summer program at USC. So I took a little time for him.”

_{Be cautious when asking about students’ personal lives}_

While students want teachers to be willing to hear about students’ personal lives, many dislike when teachers are “all in our business,” or ask invasive questions, especially if a teacher’s motives are unclear, as these two students explain: “Teachers can’t just go butting into things and assuming things. The students should go first,” and, “If they want help, I think the teacher should be there for them; but if a student doesn’t want help, it might be like, ‘What are you doing in my life?’”

More appropriately, teachers might try to ask more general personal questions as a way of letting students know they are interested, as Maralee, a tenth grader, explains: “Little things matter when it comes to teachers being personal, like if they know you had a cheerleading competition on the weekend and they say, ‘So how did you do? How did you place?’ It doesn’t have to be, ‘So how’s your family life?’ Little things matter.”
Make self-disclosure intentional

Although a few students will always want to hear about teachers’ personal lives, for the most part, students find this information difficult to process. Some students are neither interested in nor equipped to play adult roles in teachers’ lives:

I think there are points when a teacher shouldn’t share too much of their personal life. Like, I don’t think problems with their fiancée or their significant other should come up in the classroom. … I think I’d feel a little uncomfortable if they shared problems because—just because of the position. They’re the teacher, they’re supposed to be the one to look up to, the one to respect. Suddenly it’s a role reversal and I wouldn’t know what to do. But if they’re talking about their family, their children, that’s different, as long as it’s not a major problem.—Lauren, grade 11

Students do in fact want to hear about appropriate information from teachers that might help them understand themselves. They are interested in teachers’ beliefs and reactions and are struck by teachers’ courage when they are honest with their classes:

He was really open about the fact that he was gay, he just told us that in class one day, and I thought that was really cool of him to do that. If he’s going to tell us something that big to a bunch of high school kids, then that’s really good. So I thought I could tell him things, you know.—Christian, grade 12

It makes you feel like they’re human too. I mean if they talk about their lives I mean it’s kind of like you get to know them on a one on one basis. Kind of like a friendship kind of thing. Instead of them getting to know everything about you but you don’t get to know about them.—Christina, grade 12

Teachers wrestle with the question of how much of their own lives to divulge and how to appropriately express inevitable feelings of warmth toward students. Belinda, an English teacher, feels that students should not be burdened with her personal concerns:
They ask a lot of questions, but I don’t really talk a lot about my own life. You know, if they see that I’m in a bad mood, they’ll want to know why I’m in a bad mood. I don’t want them to have to worry about my life, or worry about me in any way. So it is kind of one-sided, and I think would be kind of hard for them in some ways. I think that they want to know, and some teachers talk quite a bit about their lives.

Still, sometimes students want to understand how teachers feel about particular issues because they are looking for role models for their own behavior, explains Lisa, a history teacher:

When I was teaching about the Holocaust, some of my students knew that I was Jewish and wanted to know how teaching about it affected me. I was so startled that they even saw me as a person separately from who I was as their teacher. I think they wanted to know if I had a personal reaction, and I thought it was important to share that with them so they would know that yes, I was their teacher, but also, I’m a person, with feelings.

**Behave in age-appropriate ways**

Another important boundary for students is that teachers act like adults and not attempt to act like kids in order to curry students’ favor. By not trying to be like students, teachers show they respect the territory that students occupy as kids. These sophomores suggest that there is comfort in staying on either side of the boundary line:

For me, teachers that I tend to like more, instead of coming all the way down to our level, or expecting us to come all the way up to their level, it’s when they can meet somewhere between us and them. So they don’t overdo acting like us and we don’t have to act like them because we’re from different generations.—Alex, grade 10

There was a teacher in middle school who tried to act too young. And students didn’t respect him. If they go overboard in their openness, they act like a teenager. They try to use certain words or talk about certain music. They try too hard.—Kris, grade 10
Students reveal that they prefer their teachers act like adults. It is important to students that teachers are able to establish themselves as professionals. Interestingly, students often state that they want to see that teachers are good teachers first before making attempts to get to know teachers more personally.

**Do not play favorites**

Uniformly, students cannot tolerate teachers’ favoritism or their singling students out as a result of a more personal relationship. This student was made to feel uncomfortable in class by a teacher with whom she had a close relationship:

I know he doesn’t single out other students, just me. And they notice sometimes. A good example is when he’ll let me go to the bathroom and he doesn’t let anybody else. … I don’t know what it is that he likes about me. Maybe it’s just my personality. But, sometimes I feel he—in a way he lets me get away with things, sometimes I feel like it’s not fair. Sometimes I feel like I’m not deserving of the grade that I got. It makes me feel down on myself. It’s good to get that grade. It’s nice that they like you. But it’s also nice to know that you worked for it.—Mariana, grade 10

Her comments prove how complicated and potentially stressful such a relationship is for a student and how much students need teachers to understand and respect appropriate limits. Students need to see that their teachers can be fair to all students, even if they have closer relationships with some. A teacher who knows how to treat all students with equal respect, despite having closer relationships with some, demonstrates an understanding of students’ overriding needs for acceptance in the eyes of their peers.

**Draw clear boundaries in close relationships**

It’s very hard to draw the line because I don’t know where it’s supposed to be. … So then what do you do when you know all this stuff about their personal life and you know what’s going on and they didn’t get their homework done. So, do you say, “Too bad, I’m your teacher and you’ve
got to get your work done, no exceptions”? It’s hard to do that when you’re their friend, too. [Students] don’t blur those lines at all.—Linda, English teacher

Teachers’ individual and sometimes isolated efforts to shape a comfortable role for themselves in relation to students may reflect the personal development necessary to become and be a teacher—understanding one’s self enough to decide how much “self” belongs in teacher-student interactions. Often teachers themselves are still in the latter stages of their own adolescences and might not have the foresight to understand the ramifications of boundary blurring or the maturity to not answer prying questions.

While understanding one’s self in relation to others is a common developmental challenge at any age, this task may be complicated for teachers as they spend their days with developing adolescents. Students can push them every which way, and it is often difficult to create distance. Sometimes blurrier boundaries cause teachers to feel stress, while clearer lines allow them to maximize what they can give within those boundaries. It is therefore critical that teachers reflect on these issues and develop guidelines for themselves if they plan to engage in such relationships.

**Maintain objectivity**

In addition to worrying that students might become overly dependent, some teachers say that they draw lines so that they themselves can stay objective. To achieve this perspective, some teachers draw lines at the school grounds and with the years students are in school:

Once they graduate I don’t have anything to do with kids. I don’t go places with them. I never do even when they’re here; that’s a line. I walk out of the door and that’s my personal life. I don’t want to have—I don’t think that I could be as objective and as helpful. I think that I could get stuck in with them and their problems and side with them rather than help them.—Kerry, physical education teacher

I don’t take it home. When I leave school, I am done. And then I go on to another life. I have a different—I have a life outside of school. And that’s
I guess probably why I’m able to stay in it as long as I am.—Belinda, English teacher

Joni, the math teacher, relates that her boundaries are blurred a bit when she knows the real-life challenges that students are facing:

I have a student whose mom was deported and who has had to pick up the whole family and she’s so far behind and I’ve had to bend it. We’ll find a way for her to graduate. I guess that’s not fair but I’m not planning on changing that anytime soon. If things are really out of control in the outside world, I will do what I can to get them through it. It can be a fuzzy boundary, but it’s one that I’m willing to live with.

Express care appropriately

Teachers also struggle over how to communicate warm feelings for students. Several teachers mention college recommendations as appropriate opportunities to express their feelings about students; others show their respect and trust by letting students use classroom phones or occasionally lending them money. Some are adamant that touching a student on the shoulder or giving hugs should not be off-limits:

I’ll give hugs and touch people on the shoulder and say, “Good job,” or “Wait a minute, you need to calm down.” That human contact, it is so important.—Jim, science teacher

I’m not afraid to hug. I mean, it doesn’t bother me, I’m not afraid of that. I’m not afraid to touch them on the shoulder or give them a compliment.—Alice, history teacher

Teachers’ defensiveness about touching students partially reflects the fact that there are often no explicit schoolwide conversations about relationships and appropriate interactions with students. Much of what can inspire fears may be influenced by recent revelations throughout the United States of teachers who have transgressed boundaries.
Self-care and distance

When asked whether they feel any guilt over setting and maintaining boundaries or creating emotional distance from students, many teachers assert that at a certain point, for their own mental health, they have to accept that they cannot save every student. Finding a balance between their commitments to students and their emotional reserves seems vital to being able to continue to engage with students:

I couldn’t [leave school baggage at school] at first and it was exhausting. Weekends weren’t even weekends. I mean you’re tripping all weekend: “What’s going to happen when I get there? Is he going to show up? Is he going to be alive?” Yeah. That was hard. But I’ve learned. Now that I’ve got a baby especially. There’s a time and a place and you have to let those things go. You have to leave your baggage here just like I suggest to the kids that they leave their baggage at home. It’s hard. It’s a skill and it doesn’t happen overnight.—Kerry, physical education teacher

There are some things that you can do with kids, and obviously there are some things that you cannot do. It’s really easy for me to make that distinction. When I can make a determination that this is beyond anything that I can do for them, then it is really easy for me to let go of it. My conscience is clear on that.—Greg, social studies teacher

For these teachers, acknowledging their limitations enabled them to be more available to students. In this process, teachers must accept who they are and what roles they can reasonably play for students. It seems that many teachers pass through a period of wanting to be saviors for students before eventually learning to be realistic caretakers. All seem to struggle with the demands of the students and the real reserves within them to find comfortable ways to work with and for students.

Create clear expectations

Joni, the math teacher, makes clear her intentions to parents as a means of avoiding confusion for students, parents, and herself:
That’s something that’s really important too. If I let a relationship get to where it’s a mentoring relationship, I always insist that I know the parents too and the parents know that I’m having this interaction with their child, because I would never want it to be weird. So the first time I had Elena over to my house, I was on the phone with her mom letting her know this is happening, because they lived down the street from where I was living. Any relationship happening off campus, I wouldn’t consider it without having a parent involved.

The demarcation of boundaries helps teachers define who they want to be with students and what their strengths and limitations are. Some teachers can respond to students’ needs as long as such encounters themselves are delimited by borders such as the school grounds. Recognizing and struggling with this process is vital to teachers as they continue to develop as adults and professionals. Those who are able to use this challenge to grow and give to students appear to find some balance between the sometimes overwhelming demands students make on teachers for time, care, and understanding.

Often teachers can be nervous about explicitly communicating boundaries to students. Celia, a young teacher at a charter school, explained that she did not enjoy listening to students discussing illicit activities in between classes within her earshot. She did not want to hear them using foul language in her classroom. Still, she was not sure how to approach this dilemma in her classroom. Part of communicating with students is simply part of classroom management, but communicating personal boundaries of comfort is more challenging.

Teachers, though, can and should tell students, either at the beginning of the year or throughout the year, what is comfortable and uncomfortable for them. Part of the job of being a teacher is helping students learn what is possible and condoned in public discourse. Students need boundaries to help them judge their own behavior. In a one-on-one relationship, if information is shared too freely, a teacher can easily say, “I am not comfortable discussing these topics.” Hearing these responses can be extremely helpful to students, who must also navigate the boundaries of these relationships.
Social media, networking, cell phones, and school intranet have brought teachers and students together in unprecedented ways over the past five to ten years. Teachers can post assignments and links. Students can e-mail questions about homework and receive answers from their teachers. All the while, teachers and students are communicating in the often informal, staccato, and much more personal vernacular of the Internet. How do these new forms of communication affect relationships between teachers and students? How might teachers need to think through their social media sites? How are school districts, administrators, and parents helping to monitor or regulate these extracurricular web-based relationships?

According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, 73 percent of twelve-to-seventeen-year-olds used social media in 2009 to communicate with friends and family as well as share photos, videos, links to information, and status updates. As computer use becomes more ubiquitous, teachers will be increasingly in a position to map out their stances regarding e-mail and social media communication with students. This phenomenon is posing a challenge that many teachers, administrators, district, and state policymakers are currently debating. The nature of relationships between teachers and students has, as a result, become a matter of public discourse, as this Manchester Guardian opinion piece explains:

In parallel with the steady erosion of formality in society as a whole, new ways of communicating including email, text messaging and social networking sites are radically altering the relationship between pupils and teachers. … Now, contact outside the classroom is not only easier but, in many schools, actively encouraged—school web portals on which teachers and students can upload and download assignments, email each other questions and answers, post announcements and sometimes even chat in real time, are increasingly becoming the norm. That fixed distance is shortening; those old boundaries—between professional and private, home and school, formal and informal—are blurring.
The relationships themselves, once public and bounded by the classroom or school walls, can now take place anytime and from multiple locations. School districts have already run into several problems regarding Internet use and relationships, and as a result, they have begun to intervene with policies surrounding teacher-student communication. New York City has a new policy for teachers: “Employees should treat professional social media space and communication like a classroom or professional workplace. … If a particular type of behavior is inappropriate in the classroom or a professional workplace, then that behavior is also inappropriate on the professional social media site.” Similarly, a new policy in Trenton, New Jersey, counsels teachers to use new statewide guidelines to avoid Facebook improprieties.

Teachers have a variety of reactions to social media. Joni, a math teacher at a small charter school, explains:

It gets a little fuzzy; kids see what your adult friends say. My friends know me well enough not to write something inappropriate. I’m always aware that this is a student-accessed page. If there’s something inappropriate, I just delete it. I have been noticing some of the photos that are posted. And I just see—at that point—that is a fuzzy area that I haven’t figured out and what do you do? Do you confront kids? What do you do when they are letting it all out and they don’t seem to care that anyone can see this? I’ve flirted with the idea of pulling my page down or having two separate pages.

Regardless of the outcome of these decisions, Facebook can cause teachers to reflect deeply on the boundaries of their relationships. If a teacher “friends” a student, that student may have access to the teacher’s personal life, photos, and thoughts. If the teacher does not confirm, a student may feel hurt or slighted. Many teachers have created separate pages that are for students only, so that lines are not blurred between personal and professional lives. Finally, some teachers find it valuable to have a bit of information about what students are going through in case they want to be more supportive toward students at school.
Other teachers see Facebook as a valuable tool for mentoring students once they leave for college:

The main reason I did it was to stay in touch with the college kids and it’s really excellent for that. Especially Jessica was shaky at the beginning; it was really helpful to know that. I sent them a little care package. The timing worked, and helped with her. It’s great for the kids who are in college.—Lillian, social studies teacher

Drawing boundaries in relationships with students is complicated in the classroom. In the world of social media, teachers will have to either subscribe to school or district guidelines, which may be helpful in drawing the line with students, or decide on their own how to use social media in an appropriate way with students. This new wrinkle in teachers’ dilemmas surrounding boundaries forces them to be even more considered about how they conduct themselves in the classroom as well as online.

Conclusion
As schools work to become more personal environments, school administrators will need to help teachers understand their roles as close advisors and mentors to students, and learn to draw clear and obvious boundaries within these relationships. They must help teachers understand the limits of school liability and how to make smart decisions about outside-of-school activities. Certain administrators do not see it as their role to circumscribe teacher-student relationships. Others map out specifically what is and is not okay when it comes to interacting with students. But certainly, given that small schools, charters, and small learning communities are now deliberately encouraging these relationships, it seems timely to explore the many challenging dynamics of the relationships so that teachers can maintain healthy and useful connections with their students.
Notes

2. Lightfoot, S. L. (1983). *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture*. New York, NY: Basic Books. As Lightfoot aptly notes in her study on effective high schools, adolescents “want relationships with faculty that underscore the teachers’ adulthood. In other words, students do not want adults to behave like peers or buddies. They want to be able to distinguish between their friends and their mentors. The need for underscoring differences in power, knowledge, and perspective between adults and adolescents in high schools does not mean that relationships between students and teachers cannot be intense and deep. It means that close relationships are rarely formed when adults assume the style of teenagers. Adolescents tend to distrust adult attempts at peer-like friendships. They want and need adults who will behave with maturity and confidence; who will define the traditions and standards of the institution; who will reach out to them, but not try to join their fragile and changing world” (p. 351).