


Identifying Professional Boundaries in the Professor-Student Relationship in the Academic Context

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Abstract

Aim: The present study aimed to identify professional boundaries in the relationship between professors and students through a qualitative content analysis. Hence, 36 (20 students and 16 faculty members) were selected using purposive sampling method with maximum variation. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and analyzed through inductive content analysis. The rigor of the findings was examined through member check, triangulation, and reflexivity. The results showed that the professional boundaries in the relationship between professors and students include: emotional boundaries (avoiding emotional and romantic relationships and maintaining respectful behavior), communication boundaries (transparency in communication and maintaining privacy), and power boundaries (transparency in power boundaries and avoiding discrimination and differentiation).

Keywords: Professional boundaries, Ethical boundaries, Professor and student relations, Professor, Student

Introduction

Interactions and communications between professors and students in academic environments are currently inevitable and necessary. Such a relationship is considered an effective part of the teaching-learning process. Nonetheless, neglecting the formation of appropriate communication and interaction between professors and students can not only create problems for both students and professors, but can also increase the level of anxiety in students. Thus, proper interaction and communication in the academic context require attention to ethical and professional principles and boundaries (Toulabi, 2017). The question is what is meant by professional boundaries in the academic context.

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe limitations in a relationship and interaction in which an individual entrusts their well-being and security to an expert and powerful person. This expert and powerful person is a teacher or a professor in the educational and academic system (Nazareth College, 2023, p.2). Dimensions of professional boundaries may be violated during relationships and interactions between professors and students. These dimensions include touch, location, gifts, expenses, and privacy (Barnett, 2008). Therefore, violations of professional boundaries may include ethical issues, romantic relationships, and private meetings between professors and students in coffee shops or offices. Accordingly, identifying professional boundaries in relationships between professors and students is aimed at avoiding a phenomenon that some call a "slippery slope" where crossing boundaries leads to boundary violations (Schwartz, 2011). Given that the existing literature has paid less attention to the framework of professional boundaries in professor-student

relationships and has emphasized more on violations that occur in these relationships, this study was conducted to identify professional boundaries in professor-student relationships.

The main research question: What are the professional boundaries in professor-student relationships in the academic context?

Methodology

This qualitative study used conventional content analysis. The participants included professors and students from Malayer University. As the researchers aimed to investigate the perspectives of individuals with different academic ranks, educational levels, and diverse fields of study, purposive sampling method with maximum variation was employed, and a total of 36 participants (20 students and 16 faculty members) were selected. The inclusion criteria included willingness to participate for all the participants, being an undergraduate, postgraduate, or Ph.D. student with at least one year of academic experience for students, and being an assistant professor, associate professor, or full professor with at least two years of teaching experience in an academic environment for professors. Semi-structured interviews were used as a research tool. Due to limited access to some of the professors and students, the interviews were conducted either by phone or face-to-face over a period of four months. After conducting the interviews, the researchers used the content analysis method based on Graneheim & Lundman (2004) inductive approach to analyze the interview transcripts, which involved the following steps: 1. Determining the unit of analysis, 2. Identifying explanatory units, 3. Conceptualizing the explanatory units, 4. Reviewing the codes based on the text, and 5. Categorizing the issues. In this study, the researchers used three strategies of member check, triangulation, and reflexivity to ensure the credibility of the findings. Ethical considerations were also observed, including voluntary participation in the interview process, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees, and obtaining their permission for recording the interviews.

Results

Based on the findings obtained, professional boundaries in the relationship between professors and students were divided into three main and six subcategories.

Emotional boundaries

According to the participating students and professors in the study, emotional boundaries in the relationship between professors and students consist of two subcategories: avoiding emotional and affectionate relationships and maintaining respectful behavior.

➤ ***Avoiding emotional and affectionate relationships***

The participants believe that not showing special attention to a student in the academic context, and refraining from exchanging special gifts between professors and students are among the behaviors that should be avoided.

➤ ***Maintaining respectful behavior***

The participants believe that refraining from showing demeaning behavior towards students in academic environments and respecting the opinions and feelings of students are among the behaviors that should be considered in maintaining respectful behavior.

Communicative boundaries

According to the participating students and professors, communicative boundaries consist of two subcategories: transparency in communication and privacy protection.

➤ ***Transparency in communication***

The participants in the study believe that refraining from intimate behaviors between professors and students and avoiding one-on-one meetings between professors and students outside the academic environment are among the behaviors that should be transparently defined within the communicative boundaries between professors and students.

➤ ***Privacy protection***

The participants believe that refraining from providing counseling to students on very personal issues, and avoiding the formation of relationships between professors and students on virtual networks around personal issues are among the behaviors that should be considered in maintaining privacy within the boundaries of the relationship between professors and students.

Power boundaries

According to the participating students and professors in the study, power boundaries consist of two subcategories: transparency in power boundaries and avoiding discrimination and differentiation.

➤ ***Transparency in the power boundaries and authority***

Participants in the study believe that refraining from using legal power to pressure students, avoiding using rewards or punishments based on the type of relationship between professors and students, and refraining from using their authority on non-academic issues are among the behaviors that should be transparently defined within the power and authority boundaries.

➤ ***Avoiding discrimination and differentiation***

The participants believe that refraining from having a gender and ethnic bias in evaluating student performance is among the behaviors that should be avoided within the power and authority boundaries.

Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, based on the results of this study, maintaining emotional, communicative, and power boundaries is very important in professional relationships between professors and students. Therefore, establishing emotional relationships between professors and students can question the professionalism of the relationship between them. Furthermore, since the relationships between professors and students are mostly based on professional communication, it is better that educational and research communications be transparent and clear. Moreover, maintaining privacy between professors and students is also very important. Finally, the professor must use their power within the legal framework and for providing education and guidance to students and should refrain from discrimination between their students. In general, observing professional boundaries in the relationship between professors and students helps not only maintain the dignity and protect the interests of both parties, but also create a professional, respectful, and effective learning and research environment within the academic context.

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