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Why does the media often report on teachers transgressing professional boundaries with students? What does research reveal about the true extent of this problem and what steps can be taken to minimise this behaviour?

The teaching profession is held in high regard in Australian society and fortunately, the number of Queensland teachers who significantly breach their professional boundaries is small compared to the number of registered teachers. However, even one teacher doing this is too many.

A recent literature review commissioned by the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) and undertaken by Southern Cross University, about the extent to which teachers significantly violate professional boundaries, found it was not possible to draw definitive demographic conclusions from existing data but the following trends were evident:

- Younger teachers may experience more errors of judgement.
- Most professional boundary transgressions are perpetrated by males.
- More sexual misconduct happens at secondary school level – most victims are female students.
- Age seems relevant for female teachers, with female teachers more likely to engage in sexual misconduct with students relatively close to their age.
- Male perpetrators vary in age.

Recent QCT analysis of 119 cases involving teachers who significantly transgressed professional boundaries between 2006 and 2017 supports the trends mentioned above. The analysis excluded criminal behaviour, such as indecently dealing with children. It included sexual, physical and verbal misconduct with students, and grooming-type behaviours towards children. Eighty-two per cent of cases involved male teachers. This is a significant over-representation of males as only 24 per cent of registered teachers in Queensland are male.

Age of Teacher	Male	Female	Total
22-30	28%	60%	34%
31-40	35%	18%	32%
41-50	24%	22%	24%
51-62	13%	0%	10%
>62	0%	0%	0%

Table 1: Age of Queensland teachers significantly violating professional boundaries between 2006 and 2017, excluding criminal behaviour

A point of interest is that 34 per cent of teachers who transgressed their boundaries were aged 30 or under, yet only 13 per cent of registered teachers are aged 30 or under. Sixty per cent of female teachers who significantly transgressed boundaries were aged 30 or under.

More illuminating is the length of time these teachers had been registered. The most common category is teachers who are in their first five years of registration (48 per cent), and the majority (63 per cent) of those who transgress are in their first ten years.

Period of teacher registration (years)	M	F	T
1-5	41%	83%	48%
6-10	15%	14%	15%
11-15	19%	3%	17%
16-20	15%	0%	12%
21-25	5%	0%	4%
25-30	2%	0%	1%
30+	0%	0%	0%

Table 2: Period of registration of teachers significantly violating professional boundaries

The initial five to ten years of teaching is a critical time in the development of a teacher's professional identity. Professional identity stands at the core of the teaching profession and it influences teachers' behaviours and decision-making.

But initial teacher education is not sufficient to develop professional identity – teachers' identities are deeply implicated in their teaching practice and therefore need to be supported on entry into the profession through effective induction programs.

The 2014 TEMAG Report noted induction programs need improvement. It recommended a national approach to support beginning teachers for successful transition to classroom teaching practice. An ideal induction program would contain structured mentoring, and observation and feedback that builds and sustains teachers' professional identity as part of a wider culture of collective responsibility. Strengthening professional identity will assist in creating a child-safe environment and support a teacher's well-being and career progression.