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ROMANTIC BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS IN EDUCATION: POWER, VULNERABILITY AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the increasing concern about romantic boundary violations between educators and learners in both high schools and higher education settings. The aim is to develop a conceptual and analytical understanding of how power asymmetry, organisational culture, and social normalisation contribute to these relationships. The study is based solely on a qualitative document review of existing academic literature, policy reports, and legal frameworks. This approach provides a rigorous and ethically non-intrusive analysis that does not involve human participants. The article finds that educator–learner relationships remain a persistent problem because institutional cultures often blur boundaries, normalise inappropriate behaviour, and fail to enforce safeguarding policies consistently. Recent research also highlights that institutional silence, fear of reporting, and patriarchal norms often reproduce vulnerabilities that learners experience. The analysis in this article shows that the normalisation of boundary violations is not merely an individual behavioural issue but a systemic problem linked to organisational culture and weak accountability structures. The findings contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of educator misconduct and point to the need for more robust oversight, safeguarding mechanisms, and professional ethics training in schools and universities. The article concludes that addressing these violations

requires sustained institutional reform, a culture of accountability, and stronger preventative frameworks grounded in student protection and public trust.

KEYWORDS: Power asymmetry, Educator misconduct, Boundary violations, Institutional culture, Safeguarding.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Romantic relationships between educators and learners have become an increasing source of concern across both secondary and tertiary education systems. Although such relationships have long existed, contemporary scholarship shows a growing awareness of the risks they present to student wellbeing, professional ethics, and institutional integrity. These relationships raise intricate questions related to power, consent, vulnerability, and the responsibilities of educational institutions to safeguard learners. Despite the presence of formal codes of conduct in many countries, recent evidence shows that romantic and sexual boundary violations continue to surface across schools and universities, which indicates that policy frameworks alone are insufficient to prevent misconduct (De Wet, Botha and Ntloko, 2022). The persistence of these cases suggests that educator–learner dynamics are shaped not only by individual behaviour but also by broader structural and cultural systems within educational environments. Educational contexts naturally position teachers, lecturers, and supervisors in roles of authority that include academic evaluation, discipline, mentorship, and gatekeeping of future opportunities. This authority produces an uneven relational field where a learner's dependence becomes central. In such situations, genuine consent is compromised because the learner may be influenced by fear of retaliation, a desire for approval, or the belief that refusing advances could jeopardise their academic progress. Research shows that perceived or actual power imbalances reduce a learner's capacity to recognise coercion or manipulation, even in cases where the relationship appears voluntary on the surface (Dlamini, Sibanda and Zulu, 2023). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in higher education settings where lecturers supervise postgraduate research, control access to funding, and shape academic career trajectories.

The vulnerability of learners is also linked to developmental and psychological factors. Adolescents and young adults often seek affirmation from authority figures, which can blur their understanding of boundaries and appropriate professional relationships. Khoza and Maseko (2021) argue that learners who lack strong support systems may interpret attention from educators as validation, which increases their emotional dependence. This dependence,

combined with limited life experience, makes learners more susceptible to exploitation. Institutional culture plays a major role in shaping how boundary violations unfold and how they are managed. Some institutions unintentionally foster environments in which inappropriate behaviour is tolerated or overlooked. In schools and universities where leadership avoids confronting misconduct, reporting structures are unclear, or disciplinary procedures are inconsistently applied, a culture of silence emerges. Mlambo et al. (2023) note that such cultures normalise violations by treating them as personal or private matters rather than organisational risks. When misconduct is framed in this way, both students and staff may feel discouraged from reporting incidents due to fear of stigma, perceived futility, or possible retaliation.

Higher education institutions often face additional challenges due to large student populations, complex organisational structures, and blurred boundaries between professional and social spaces. For example, campus activities, residence environments, and student–staff engagements outside formal teaching hours may increase opportunities for boundary transgressions. Recent studies highlight that inadequate training on professional ethics and a lack of continuous monitoring contribute to persistent misconduct, particularly among early career academics who may not fully appreciate the implications of engaging romantically with students (Moyo and Chikoko, 2023). The digital environment has also reshaped the educator–learner relationship. Communication through emails, messaging platforms, and social media often reduces interpersonal distance. Although digital tools support learning, they can also create informal spaces where boundary violations may develop gradually. Sipho et al. (2022) emphasise that blurred digital boundaries increase the risk of inappropriate interactions that may escalate into romantic advances. These interactions are harder to detect and regulate, which complicates institutional efforts to protect learners.

The significance of this study lies in its synthetic examination of recent scholarship to identify the systemic drivers of romantic boundary violations in education. Instead of focusing solely on individual cases, the article examines the broader environment that enables misconduct. It responds to growing calls in the literature for more integrated analyses that consider power relations, institutional culture, and the social norms that shape perceptions of consent and vulnerability. By centering these concepts, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how structural factors influence personal behaviour. The main objective of this article is to explore how power asymmetry, organisational culture, and the normalisation of inappropriate conduct create conditions that enable educator–learner romantic relationships to emerge and persist. The guiding research question is: **How do power**

relations and institutional culture contribute to the normalisation of romantic boundary violations in secondary and tertiary educational institutions? Addressing this question is vital for strengthening safeguarding measures, improving accountability systems, and enhancing professional ethics training across educational sectors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research over the past decade has increasingly shown that romantic or sexual relationships between educators and learners are not simply interpersonal transgressions but symptoms of broader institutional vulnerabilities, cultural norms, and power structures that shape behaviour in schools and higher education institutions. These relationships are embedded within social contexts that shape perceptions of authority, gender roles, and accountability. More recent studies published within the last five years have strengthened the argument that educator–learner romantic relationships are part of a continuum of boundary violations rather than isolated incidents. The literature points to a multi-layered problem that involves organisational deficiencies, cultural factors, and societal power dynamics that continue to expose learners to exploitation.

Organisational Failures and Weak Accountability

Recent scholarship consistently demonstrates that organisational weaknesses, especially in the form of fragile accountability systems, play a central role in enabling educator misconduct across schooling and higher education environments. De Wet, Botha and Ntloko (2022) show that educator misconduct frequently escalates in institutions where disciplinary procedures are inconsistently applied, selectively enforced, or undermined by reluctant leadership. Their analysis of South African cases reveals a troubling pattern. Even when safeguarding policies and codes of professional conduct exist on paper, school managers often fail to implement them with the urgency and consistency required to protect learners. This gap between policy and practice is not merely administrative. It creates a permissive environment in which boundary violations can occur repeatedly, with little fear of sanction. The findings by De Wet et al. (2022) align with broader continental and international trends, where the institutional culture of silence is a recurring theme. School leaders in many contexts prioritise institutional reputation over learner protection, often fearing community backlash, negative publicity, or labour disputes. As a result, misconduct is managed quietly through internal negotiations or informal disciplinary approaches rather than through formal reporting structures. Scholars such as Moyo (2021) argue that this silence contributes to a

"hidden curriculum of impunity", where both educators and learners internalise the idea that reporting wrongdoing is futile or risky.

These concerns are reinforced by empirical evidence from the South African Council for Educators (SACE). The organisation's Teachers' Ethics and Misconduct Reports from 2020 to 2023 consistently document high numbers of reported cases involving inappropriate educator–learner contact, grooming, and sexual misconduct (SACE, 2021; SACE, 2022; SACE, 2023). The reports highlight several recurring institutional failures. Delayed reporting is common, often because school principals attempt to manage allegations internally rather than escalating them immediately to SACE or law enforcement. In many cases, educators accused of serious misconduct are quietly transferred to other schools rather than subjected to formal disciplinary processes. Underreporting also emerges as a pervasive challenge. Communities may discourage learners from reporting abuse, fearing reputational damage to the school or community, or because of entrenched hierarchical norms that position educators as authority figures who should not be questioned. SACE's imposition of strict sanctions, including educator deregistration, demonstrates that formal accountability mechanisms do exist at national level. However, the steady recurrence of cases over the past four years suggests that preventative oversight at school level remains inadequate. The problem is not the absence of rules, but the institutional unwillingness or inability to enforce them consistently. Similar challenges have been documented in South Africa's higher education sector. Mlambo, Nkosi, Hlophe and Sithole (2023) examined staff to student misconduct across universities and found that organisational fragmentation plays a significant role in perpetuating harm. Universities with ambiguous or outdated policies, unclear reporting mechanisms, and decentralised safeguarding responsibilities reported significantly higher incidences of misconduct. Many institutions lack dedicated units for handling gender-based violence or staff to student boundary violations. As a result, cases may be mishandled or lost within bureaucratic processes. Mlambo et al. (2023) also found that inconsistent follow-up on reported complaints exacerbates student vulnerability, as some complainants never receive feedback or support after submitting grievances.

These findings mirror global research emphasising the centrality of institutional structures in preventing misconduct. UNESCO's 2021 report on school-related gender-based violence notes that institutions with clear whistleblower protection policies, transparent investigation procedures, and specialised safeguarding personnel consistently demonstrate lower rates of educator to learner boundary violations. The presence of well-trained safeguarding officers and mandatory reporting policies strengthens accountability and reduces opportunities for

abuse. UNESCO (2021) also stresses that confidentiality in reporting mechanisms is essential. Without it, learners and students face intimidation, social retaliation, or victim-blaming, all of which discourage them from coming forward. Another organisational weakness shaping educator misconduct is the limited availability of sustained professional training. Many institutions circulate policies or codes of conduct without offering meaningful capacity building. This leaves educators uncertain about how to interpret safeguarding expectations, identify grooming behaviours, or manage professional boundaries when interacting with learners. UNESCO's findings in its 2021 School-Related Gender-Based Violence Report indicate that educators commonly lack awareness of their legal obligations regarding boundary management and mandatory reporting, particularly in low-resource environments. Training gaps are especially evident in schools where educators simultaneously fill teaching and pastoral roles. Without continuous professional development, the risk of blurred boundaries increases, particularly when educators serve as counsellors, mentors, or advisors.

Furthermore, organisational failures often intersect with broader systemic pressures. Understaffing, inadequate supervision structures, and unclear job descriptions can intensify vulnerability. In some schools, for example, educators are left alone with learners in unmonitored spaces, or mentorship programs in universities run without oversight or ethical training. These structural shortcomings introduce opportunities for misconduct while limiting the institution's capacity to detect early warning signs. Overall, the literature demonstrates that organisational failures, particularly weak accountability systems, leadership inaction, inconsistent policy implementation, fragmented reporting mechanisms, and a lack of professional training, create a context in which educator misconduct can occur and persist. Addressing these failures is therefore essential for building safer and ethically grounded learning environments.

Cultural Norms and Social Narratives that Normalise Abuse

While organisational failures create structural conditions for boundary violations, cultural norms and social narratives play an equally powerful role in shaping how these violations are interpreted, tolerated, or dismissed within communities. Recent scholarship underscores that cultural values, gender expectations, and social hierarchies often interact in ways that obscure the seriousness of educator to learner misconduct. These cultural factors not only influence the behaviour of educators but also shape the responses of learners, parents, and community members. Dlamini, Sibanda and Zulu (2023) argue that patriarchal attitudes embedded in

many African societies reinforce unequal power relations between adults and young people. In such contexts, educators are frequently positioned as unquestionable authority figures whose actions are seldom challenged, even when they cross professional boundaries. Their study highlights that romantic or sexual advances by educators may be viewed as legitimate expressions of interest rather than forms of exploitation. This cultural framing encourages silence, compliance and self-blame among learners. Adolescents internalise the idea that rejection is inappropriate or disrespectful, especially when directed toward an older authority figure. Dlamini et al. (2023) further note that age-disparate relationships are often perceived as offering economic or social benefits to the younger partner, reducing the likelihood that learners will recognise, resist or report harmful behaviour.

This normalisation of age-disparate relationships is not unique to schooling contexts. UNICEF's *Global Report on Harmful Gender Norms* (2022) documents widespread acceptance of relationships between older adults and adolescents across several low and middle-income countries. According to the report, in many communities' romantic involvement with an older, financially independent adult is framed as an opportunity rather than a threat. When the adult holds an influential role, such as a teacher, coach or mentor, the community may perceive the relationship as desirable or even aspirational. This social climate makes it challenging for learners to identify inappropriate conduct, since cultural narratives distort their understanding of consent and relational power. UNICEF (2022) also highlights that adolescents often internalise these cultural scripts because they lack access to alternative narratives about healthy relationships and personal agency. As a result, young people may interpret grooming behaviours, such as excessive personal attention, gifts or special treatment, as signs of affection or mentorship. This internalisation obscures the educator's abuse of authority and reinforces the unequal power dynamic that defines these interactions. South African evidence echoes these findings. Human Rights Watch (2020), in a comprehensive study of school-related sexual exploitation, reports that cultural silence around adult–child relationships persists in many communities, particularly in rural areas. Learners frequently avoid reporting harmful experiences due to fear of social backlash, stigma or disbelief. In some cases, families discourage learners from disclosing misconduct because educators are held in high esteem or because reporting may disrupt established community relationships. Human Rights Watch (2020) found that community members sometimes minimise the seriousness of the misconduct, framing the learner as a willing participant even when coercive power dynamics are present.

Patriarchal norms further exacerbate the problem. Gender scholars consistently find that societal expectations around masculinity and femininity shape how misconduct is framed and who is held responsible. Chisango, Mayekiso and Kauer-Sant'Anna (2021), in their study of gender norms and power dynamics in Southern African schools, illustrate how male educators often benefit from a culture that celebrates male sexual dominance. In contrast, female learners are frequently blamed for "tempting" educators or disrupting the moral order. This victim-blaming culture is deeply rooted in broader societal beliefs about female sexuality, purity and respectability. It undermines safeguarding efforts by shifting attention away from the actions of the perpetrator and placing undue responsibility on the learner. These cultural narratives contribute to a pervasive sense of impunity. When male educators are excused or valorised for pursuing younger partners, the institutional and community response becomes compromised. Educators may perceive such behaviour as socially acceptable or unlikely to result in consequences. This perception erodes the deterrent effect of safeguarding policies and weakens the culture of accountability that is necessary to prevent boundary violations. Chisango et al. (2021) argue that transforming these norms requires not only institutional intervention but also community-wide shifts in understanding gender, power and consent.

Additionally, cultural norms intersect with economic vulnerabilities. In low-income communities, relationships with educators may be perceived as pathways to material support. The exchange of financial assistance, school supplies or academic advantages can mask coercion by creating the appearance of mutual benefit. UNICEF (2022) notes that this dynamic often blurs the line between consensual relationships and exploitation, especially when learners fear losing financial support if they resist or report the relationship. The influence of cultural norms is also evident in how disciplinary authorities respond to misconduct. When community expectations normalise age-disparate or authority-disparate relationships, institutional leaders may hesitate to act decisively. Leadership inaction reinforces the belief that such relationships are culturally acceptable. Without explicit efforts to challenge these norms, safeguarding strategies remain superficial and ineffective. Taken together, the literature demonstrates that cultural norms and social narratives play a central role in shaping learner vulnerability, educator behaviour and institutional responses. These norms normalise abuse, silence victims and create systemic barriers to accountability. Addressing boundary violations therefore requires more than policy reform. It demands a transformation of the cultural ideas that shape how relationships, power and sexuality are understood within schools and communities.

Power Asymmetry and Learner Vulnerability

Power asymmetry remains one of the most consistently cited factors in explaining why romantic or sexual boundary violations occur in educational settings. Educators, mentors, lecturers, and supervisors occupy positions of authority that grant them influence over learners' grades, progression, access to opportunities, and emotional development. This authority is not simply symbolic; it has material consequences for learners, who may attach significant value to approval, praise, or personalised attention from an educator. As Khoza and Maseko (2021) observe, many learners interpret educator attention as validation, especially when they come from households or communities with limited emotional support. In such cases, interactions that appear innocuous can take on profound emotional meaning, creating dependence and increasing susceptibility to manipulation. Khoza and Maseko's (2021) findings align with broader developmental psychology research indicating that adolescents and young adults experience heightened sensitivity to praise, criticism, and interpersonal cues from authority figures. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) reports that individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 are still in a critical stage of neurological and emotional development. They are more responsive to social approval and more vulnerable to persuasive or coercive behaviour from adults. This vulnerability is not a reflection of incompetence but a developmental reality. When educators exploit these tendencies, the resulting relationship cannot reasonably be viewed as consensual. The power imbalance distorts the learner's ability to evaluate the situation critically or withdraw from the interaction without fear of academic or social consequences.

In many school contexts, power asymmetry is compounded by socioeconomic vulnerability. Learners from low-income households may perceive educators as sources of stability, guidance, or opportunity. As Dlamini et al. (2023) note, young people who view educators as gatekeepers to future possibilities may feel obligated to comply with attention or advances. This perceived obligation functions as a form of coercive pressure, even when the educator does not issue overt threats. The learner's consent becomes compromised by their dependency on the educator's goodwill. Power asymmetry becomes even more complex in higher education settings, where supervisory relationships often carry high stakes. Research supervision, funding allocation, and academic progression place supervisors in a powerful position relative to students. A scoping review by Jones and Young (2022) in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy* found that supervisory environments present elevated risks for romantic or sexual misconduct because students fear negative academic consequences if they decline advances. For postgraduate students, the supervisor's influence extends beyond

grading to letters of recommendation, co-authorship opportunities, conference participation, and career pathways. This influence creates a context in which students may feel unable to clearly assert boundaries or report violations.

Jones and Young (2022) also highlight that many staff–student romantic relationships begin with emotional dependency rather than explicit coercion. Supervisors often play mentorship roles that involve frequent one-on-one interactions, feedback, and intellectual support. These interactions can foster trust and admiration, which some supervisors exploit. The review shows that relationships emerging from these dynamics tend to involve subtle grooming behaviours, including excessive personal contact, emotional boundary crossing, and the gradual introduction of romantic undertones. Such grooming is possible precisely because the supervisor holds institutional power that the student depends on for academic success. International research reflects similar concerns. A large-scale study by O'Callaghan et al. (2022) in the *International Journal of Educational Integrity* concluded that students often misunderstand the intentions of educators because of the inherent ambiguity in mentor-like relationships. Educators who exploit this ambiguity create relational confusion, making it difficult for students to distinguish between professional support and romantic interest. The study found that students rarely initiate these relationships; rather, they respond to relational cues shaped by power structures in which the educator sets the tone and pace of interactions.

Power asymmetry also affects reporting behaviour. When learners perceive educators as powerful figures capable of influencing their academic futures, they may remain silent out of fear. Human Rights Watch (2020) documents numerous cases where learners refrained from reporting misconduct because they believed it would jeopardise their grades, scholarships, or school standing. This dynamic applies equally in universities, where postgraduate students depend heavily on supervisors for funding, publications, and access to research networks. Fear of academic retaliation, whether explicit or implied, makes reporting riskier than enduring the misconduct. Furthermore, social hierarchies within institutions can reinforce power asymmetry. In many settings, educators are perceived as untouchable professionals who deserve respect and loyalty. Learners who challenge them risk social isolation, stigma, or disbelief. Chisango et al. (2021) argue that when hierarchical relationships are deeply embedded in institutional culture, learners internalise their subordinate role. This internalisation greatly reduces the likelihood that they will recognise grooming or exploitation while it is occurring. Taken together, these findings illustrate that power asymmetry is not incidental; it is structural and woven into the fabric of educational environments. It shapes how learners interpret educator behaviour, how they respond to

advances, and whether they feel safe reporting violations. As a result, romantic or sexual relationships between educators and learners cannot be understood through the lens of individual attraction alone. They are shaped by systemic power structures that place the learner at a disadvantage from the outset. Addressing these vulnerabilities therefore requires not only policy reform but also a fundamental rethinking of how power operates within educational relationships.

Underreporting and the Culture of Silence

Underreporting remains one of the most persistent and complex barriers to addressing educator misconduct in both basic and higher education systems. Although policies exist in many countries to prohibit inappropriate educator–learner relationships, empirical studies consistently show that most incidents never reach formal reporting platforms. UNESCO's (2021) global review on school-related sexual misconduct highlights that only a minority of learners who experience inappropriate advances or boundary violations report the incidents. The review attributes this trend to a combination of structural, cultural, and psychological factors that converge to suppress disclosure. Learners often fear retaliation, anticipate disbelief, or lack confidence in institutional responses, resulting in a climate where silence becomes the norm. Fear of retaliation is frequently identified as a primary deterrent to reporting. In many educational environments, educators hold significant authority over learners' progression, evaluations, and everyday experiences (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2022). This authority creates an inherent power imbalance that shapes learners' perceptions of risk. Learners worry that reporting misconduct may lead to academic penalties, victimisation, or subtle forms of exclusion, such as being denied learning support or facing hostile treatment from peers loyal to the educator. This fear is compounded when perpetrators occupy senior or well-respected positions within institutions, making learners feel further disempowered to challenge them.

Institutional mistrust also plays a central role in perpetuating a culture of silence. Even where reporting mechanisms exist, learners often doubt the impartiality and confidentiality of the procedures. Mlambo et al. (2023) report that university students in Southern Africa frequently perceive institutional reporting systems as symbolic measures rather than functional support structures. Students expressed concern that complaints would be minimised, mishandled, or dismissed altogether, especially if the implicated staff member holds influence within the institution. This mistrust is reinforced by past experiences or stories from peers where allegations led to no meaningful accountability. Higher education settings introduce an

additional layer of complexity. Graduate students, interns, and work-integrated learning (WIL) participants often depend heavily on academic supervisors, mentors, and senior staff for assessment, funding, references, and career progression. Jones and Young (2022) emphasise that such environments are particularly prone to underreporting because students fear that lodging formal complaints may jeopardise their research trajectories or professional futures. For many, maintaining access to academic resources, fieldwork opportunities, or laboratory spaces becomes more urgent than challenging unethical behaviour. As a result, learners may choose to endure boundary violations rather than risk long-term consequences.

Confidentiality concerns further reinforce silence. Many students believe that reporting systems fail to protect their identities, especially in small departments or rural institutions (Kekana & Motsoeneng, 2021). Instances where staff informally discuss allegations with colleagues or where complainants become identifiable through procedural processes discourage learners from coming forward. This perception is prominent in cases of romantic or sexual misconduct, where victim-blaming remains widespread. Survivors often fear being labelled as complicit, promiscuous, or responsible for the situation, especially where patriarchal norms dominate. At the school level, sociocultural norms and community pressures significantly shape the reporting landscape. Human Rights Watch (2020) documented multiple cases in which school leadership and community members discouraged learners from reporting sexual or romantic advances by educators, arguing that exposing such misconduct would "bring shame" to the school or disrupt community stability. In tight-knit communities, where educators may be respected figures, learners face pressure to remain silent rather than challenge social hierarchies. Parents may also advise learners not to pursue complaints out of fear that the educator's dismissal could result in community conflict, stigmatisation, or economic repercussions. Institutional inaction contributes meaningfully to the problem. Several studies show that when learners witness previous cases being ignored or quietly resolved without consequences for perpetrators, they internalise the belief that reporting is futile (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Some schools and universities prioritise protecting institutional reputation over confronting the issue directly. This tendency to avoid public scandal reinforces a cycle in which misconduct is concealed, survivors are silenced, and abusive practices persist.

Psychological barriers also exacerbate underreporting. Adolescents and young adults often struggle to interpret inappropriate behaviour, especially when perpetrators frame their actions as mentorship, special attention, or emotional support (APA, 2021). Learners may initially feel confused, flattered, or ashamed, delaying recognition of the behaviour as misconduct. By

the time they recognise the violation, they may believe reporting is no longer viable or fear being blamed for not acting sooner. Digital communication has introduced new challenges. Boundary violations often begin with private messages, compliments, or grooming through social media platforms. These interactions are harder to document and easier to deny, making learners uncertain about whether their experiences constitute reportable misconduct (Kekana & Motsoeneng, 2021). This ambiguity further discourages disclosure. Overall, the culture of silence surrounding educator misconduct is not merely an individual decision but a systemic outcome shaped by power relations, institutional weaknesses, and sociocultural norms. Addressing underreporting requires more than policy reform; it demands a cultural shift in how schools and universities respond to misconduct, protect complainants, and hold staff accountable. Strengthening reporting systems, ensuring confidentiality, publicly sanctioning perpetrators, and promoting student-centred support structures are crucial steps toward dismantling entrenched silence and fostering safer learning environments.

Digital Spaces and Emerging Forms of Boundary Violations

The rapid integration of digital communication into teaching and learning environments has reshaped the boundaries between educators and learners. While technology offers considerable benefits for instruction, supervision, and support, it has also introduced new and complex risks for boundary violations. Increasingly, interactions that once took place in controlled physical spaces are migrating to private digital platforms, where oversight is limited and behavioural expectations may be less clearly defined. As digital communication becomes embedded in everyday educational practice, researchers warn that these environments can facilitate inappropriate contact and create conditions for misconduct to unfold unnoticed (Sipho et al., 2022). Messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger have become the primary channels for educators to communicate with learners, particularly in contexts where institutional email systems are underutilised or inaccessible. Sipho, Banda, and Hadebe (2022) argue that these platforms blur professional boundaries by creating spaces that feel informal, immediate, and personal. Unlike formal school communication channels, messaging apps operate in a private sphere that can easily shift from academic discussion to personal conversation. Their study highlights that many cases of educator misconduct begin with seemingly innocuous digital interactions, such as checking on a learner's well-being or offering academic support, which progressively evolve into emotionally charged or romantic exchanges.

The privacy inherent in digital communication contributes significantly to the risk. WhatsApp messages, disappearing chats, and encrypted platforms protect conversations from external scrutiny. Institutions often lack the technical capacity or legal mandate to monitor digital interactions unless a complaint is lodged, which means that misconduct frequently remains invisible until significant harm occurs. In some cases, educators deliberately exploit these gaps by initiating inappropriate conversations late at night or framing personal contact as mentorship or pastoral care (Kriel & Motaung, 2023). Learners, especially adolescents, may struggle to recognise these behaviours as boundary violations because the communication appears friendly or supportive. The shift to remote and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these risks. With physical oversight diminished, educators and learners relied heavily on video conferencing platforms, learning management systems, and social media groups to maintain academic continuity. UNESCO's (2022) global report on remote learning and online safety found a notable rise in cases where educators used digital platforms to initiate personal conversations unrelated to academic work. These interactions often occurred in breakout rooms, private chats, or direct messages within online learning tools. The report highlights that digital communication created an environment where educators gained unregulated access to learners' personal spaces, both virtually and psychologically, making boundary violations easier to conceal.

Several studies undertaken after the pandemic echo these concerns. A South African study by Motaung and Dube (2023) found that educators increasingly used online learning platforms as a gateway for inappropriate intimacy, often beginning with personalised academic assistance, which then shifted toward compliments, emotional grooming, or invitations to communicate outside formal platforms. The authors note that learners felt increased pressure to comply with digital communication because their academic progress depended heavily on online engagement. This sense of dependency deepened learners' vulnerability and made it difficult to resist or question inappropriate contact. In higher education, digital supervision practices have created additional challenges. Supervisors frequently communicate with postgraduate students through email, messaging applications, and virtual meeting platforms. While this improves accessibility, it also introduces grey areas where professional boundaries can become compromised. Jones and Young (2022) emphasise that digital supervision often extends into after-hours communication, creating conditions where personal disclosures may develop into emotional dependence. In such cases, romantic or sexual boundary violations may emerge subtly, under the guise of academic mentorship.

Digital spaces have also facilitated new forms of sexual harassment and misconduct, including unsolicited messages, inappropriate video calls, and the sharing of sexual content. Mlambo et al. (2023) report that university students increasingly experience harassment through direct messages on social media, sometimes from staff who use personal accounts to contact students. Learners often feel uncertain about how to report such violations because they occur outside institutional platforms, creating ambiguity regarding jurisdiction and institutional responsibility. The architecture of digital platforms further complicates reporting. Many learners feel intimidated by the prospect of capturing screenshots or saving conversations as evidence, especially when educators use disappearing messages or encrypted tools (Kekana & Motsoeneng, 2021). This technological asymmetry reinforces the culture of silence and contributes to the underreporting of digital misconduct. Despite these concerns, institutional responses remain limited. Many schools and universities have digital communication policies, but these often focus on cybersecurity rather than interpersonal boundaries (Kriel & Motaung, 2023). Without clear guidelines on appropriate digital behaviour, both educators and learners navigate these spaces with uncertainty. This regulatory gap underscores the need for updated policies that explicitly address digital boundary violations, reporting mechanisms, and expectations for ethical online conduct. In summary, the rise of digital communication has broadened the landscape of educator–learner boundary violations. Private messaging platforms, remote learning technologies, and social media interactions have created environments where misconduct can emerge subtly and persist undetected. As educational systems continue to rely on digital tools, institutions must adopt proactive strategies, including training, digital communication protocols, and strengthened reporting systems, to safeguard learners and uphold professional boundaries in online spaces.

Fragmented Policy Frameworks and Limited Safeguarding Capacity

While most education systems formally prohibit romantic or sexual relationships between educators and learners, the effectiveness of these policies remains uneven and often inadequate. Scholars increasingly note that the existence of a policy alone does not guarantee meaningful protection; safeguarding relies on clarity, institutional capacity, and enforcement. Fragmented policy frameworks, limited implementation capacity, and weak monitoring systems continue to undermine efforts to prevent staff to student boundary violations. A major global review conducted by UNESCO (2020) on child protection and school safeguarding frameworks found that many countries lack coherent national policies explicitly

addressing educator to learner sexual misconduct. Even where national regulations exist, they often fail to provide operational detail regarding reporting duties, investigation procedures, escalation pathways, or support for affected learners. This policy deficiency results in significant variability between schools and provinces, with many institutions left to create their own ad hoc procedures. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that inconsistent national guidance results in "patchwork safeguarding," where learners' protection depends largely on institutional willingness rather than system-wide standards.

A similar pattern has been observed in African education systems. Mthethwa and Chikoko (2022) argue that the lack of harmonised safeguarding policies across ministries of education, school governing bodies, and teacher regulatory councils leaves gaps that educators can exploit. Their research shows that schools often depend on informal cultural norms rather than clear protocols to decide how to handle allegations of misconduct. This ambiguity heightens the risk of decisions influenced by personal loyalties, institutional reputation concerns, or fear of community backlash. In the South African context, the regulatory environment is relatively comprehensive on paper, with several statutory instruments, including the South African Council for Educators (SACE) Code of Professional Ethics, the Children's Act 38 of 2005, and the Employment of Educators Act, prohibiting educator misconduct. However, implementation remains uneven. SACE disciplinary reports (2021, 2022, 2023) consistently show repeated cases of inappropriate relationships despite the existence of strict sanctions such as deregistration. According to these reports, gaps persist in school-level reporting, with many cases only reaching SACE once they have escalated significantly. Weak internal accountability mechanisms mean that misconduct is often not intercepted early. Higher education institutions face similar challenges, though with distinct complexities. Historically, safeguarding in universities has been treated as peripheral to academic governance. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2020) noted that before the rise of sexual harassment debates and #MeToo movements on campuses, many South African universities lacked integrated safeguarding frameworks capable of addressing staff to student misconduct. Instead, institutions often relied on broad codes of conduct that addressed professional behaviour in general terms but did not tackle the specific risks presented by academic power hierarchies, supervision relationships, or postgraduate mentorship dynamics.

Recent studies confirm that this fragmented approach still affects institutional responses. Mlambo, Sithole, and Mthethwa (2023) found that universities with weak or ambiguous safeguarding structures, such as unclear reporting lines, lack of dedicated safeguarding officers, or inadequate training for managers, reported higher incidences of staff to student

romantic or sexual misconduct. Students interviewed in their study noted that institutional documents were often confusing, scattered, and difficult to interpret, which discouraged reporting and weakened trust in the system.A crucial challenge is the limited safeguarding capacity within institutions. Many schools and universities operate without trained safeguarding specialists. Instead, responsibility is often assigned to principals, human resource officers, or faculty managers who may lack the expertise needed to handle sensitive disclosures, protect evidence, or support survivors (Kriel & Motaung, 2023). In some cases, these individuals are simultaneously responsible for institutional reputation management, creating a conflict of interest that may bias their responses to allegations. Training gaps further undermine policy effectiveness. UNESCO's (2021) report on school-related gender-based violence highlights that many educators, school leaders, and university staff have never received formal training in safeguarding, ethical boundaries, or trauma-informed responses. Without such training, policies remain largely symbolic, present in institutional manuals but not embedded in everyday practice. This lack of capacity contributes to inconsistent interpretations of misconduct, delays in reporting, and inappropriate or insensitive handling of disclosures.

Another challenge is the uneven alignment between institutional policies and national legislation. A study by Chabaya and Sola (2022) found that school-level policies often omit key legal obligations, such as mandatory reporting of suspected abuse to child protection authorities. As a result, some schools attempt to resolve cases internally rather than referring them to external mechanisms, which increases the likelihood of concealment. In universities, internal legal frameworks often do not address the complexities of postgraduate supervision relationships, leaving gaps that can be exploited within academic hierarchies. Furthermore, whistleblower protections are frequently inadequate. Learners and students who wish to report educator misconduct often lack assurance that they will be protected from retaliation, stigma, or academic disadvantage. This fear is amplified by institutional cultures where policy enforcement has historically been weak. A 2022 study by Dube and Moyo found that students were reluctant to use university reporting systems because previous cases had been mishandled or ignored, reinforcing perceptions that institutions prioritised reputation over student safety. Overall, the persistence of fragmented policy frameworks and limited safeguarding capacity suggests that meaningful protection requires more than formal rules. Effective safeguarding demands system-wide coherence, dedicated expertise, clear reporting pathways, robust training programs, and institutional cultures that prioritise learner and student welfare over reputational concerns. Without these components, policies remain

reactive rather than preventative, allowing educator–learner boundary violations to continue despite formal prohibitions.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research, gaps remain. Many studies focus on individual cases of misconduct or document the failures of specific institutions. What is missing is an integrated theoretical framework that connects power asymmetry, institutional culture, and social norms as interconnected drivers of educator–learner romantic relationships. This article responds to that gap by synthesising recent research to provide a multifaceted conceptual explanation of how boundary violations are sustained.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the persistence of romantic relationships between educators and learners requires a framework that recognises both the interpersonal and systemic dimensions of misconduct. This study is guided by two complementary theoretical lenses: power asymmetry theory and institutional culture theory. These perspectives provide an integrated explanation of why boundary violations occur despite the existence of formal rules, ethical codes, and disciplinary procedures.

Power asymmetry theory focuses on the structural and relational differences between individuals who occupy unequal positions within an institution. In the context of education, teachers and lecturers hold formal authority over learners through their roles in assessment, classroom management, and academic progression. This authority extends beyond administrative duties; it often shapes learners' emotional and cognitive responses to educators. Dlamini, Sibanda, and Zulu (2023) argue that power in educational settings operates through a mix of disciplinary control, professional credibility, and psychological influence. Even when an educator does not explicitly exert coercion, their position produces an inherent imbalance that affects how learners interpret interactions, including those framed as "romantic." Within this theoretical lens, power is not viewed merely as hierarchical dominance but also as a cultural and symbolic resource that shapes relational boundaries. Studies in both secondary and tertiary education show that learners may struggle to differentiate between legitimate academic attention and personal advances from educators (Moyo & Hadebe, 2022). The educator's influence is often magnified by age difference, academic expertise, social reputation, and perceived authority. These elements combine to reduce the learner's capacity to give meaningful consent. Moreover, perceived or real

consequences, such as fear of academic penalties, reputation loss, or social judgement, further narrow the learner's autonomy (Dlamini et al., 2023). Power asymmetry theory therefore highlights how seemingly voluntary relationships can mask deeper coercive dynamics.

Institutional culture theory complements this by explaining why such relationships persist at the organisational level. Institutional culture refers to shared norms, assumptions, and habitual practices that govern everyday behaviour within an organisation. Mlambo and colleagues (2023) note that institutional cultures in many schools and universities are shaped by long-standing traditions, informal norms, and unwritten expectations that influence how policy violations are interpreted and addressed. When organisational culture normalises silence, minimises harm, or discourages reporting, it creates fertile ground for boundary violations to occur. A critical insight from institutional culture theory is that formal policies cannot function effectively without cultural reinforcement. Many educational institutions have clear policies that prohibit romantic relationships between educators and learners, yet enforcement remains inconsistent. Research shows that in settings where leaders avoid confronting misconduct or frame it as a "private matter," staff members internalise the idea that boundary violations are tolerable or inconsequential (Kunene & Maseko, 2021). This signals to both educators and learners that reporting will not result in decisive action, leading to chronic underreporting. Institutional cultures that lack transparency or have fragmented reporting systems further complicate accountability. For example, universities with unclear guidelines on handling misconduct or with weak student support mechanisms tend to experience higher rates of educator to student relationship cases (Mlambo et al., 2023). In such contexts, learners often do not know where or how to report concerns, and they may fear retaliation, social stigma, or disbelief. These cultural dynamics reinforce patterns of silence and compliance that enable misconduct to remain hidden.

The intersection between power asymmetry and institutional culture offers a deeper understanding of why educator to learner romantic relationships are difficult to eliminate. Power asymmetry explains the interpersonal dimension: learners' vulnerability, perceived or real dependence on educators, and the psychological barriers that hinder resistance. Institutional culture explains the systemic dimension: the organisational environment that shapes behaviour, determines the meaning of boundaries, and influences whether reporting mechanisms function effectively. Together, these theories show that romantic boundary violations are not isolated acts of individual misconduct but symptoms of broader structural conditions. Educators operate within authority structures that grant them influence, and institutions operate within cultural frameworks that may unintentionally tolerate misconduct.

When these two layers converge, high personal power combined with weak cultural accountability, the likelihood of boundary violations increases. Even policies with strict prohibitions may fail if the institutional culture does not support ethical leadership, transparent communication, and consistent enforcement.

This integrated theoretical approach underscores that addressing educator to learner romantic relationships requires more than punitive measures. It requires transforming the institutional culture to promote ethical behaviour, encourage reporting, and reinforce the protective role of leadership. It also requires recognising the profound psychological impact of power asymmetry on learners. By understanding how personal vulnerability intersects with systemic permissiveness, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical grounding for preventing boundary violations in educational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis (QDA) approach to explore the systemic factors that contribute to the normalisation of romantic boundary violations between educators and learners. QDA is increasingly recognised as a rigorous method for synthesising information from existing texts in order to generate conceptual insights, especially in fields where ethical, legal, or practical constraints limit primary data collection (Bowen, 2020). Because educator to learner romantic relationships raise sensitive issues involving minors, power abuse, and institutional misconduct, document analysis offers a methodologically appropriate pathway for examining the phenomenon without compromising the safety or privacy of individuals.

The study focuses on secondary sources published between 2020 and 2025, including peer-reviewed journal articles, legislative frameworks, government guidelines, institutional policies, and reports from oversight bodies. Restricting sources to this period ensures that the analysis reflects current debates and emerging patterns in both secondary and tertiary education. Recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to power dynamics, consent challenges, and institutional responsibility, making this timeframe especially valuable for the study's conceptual orientation (Dlamini et al., 2023; Mlambo et al., 2023). Document analysis is particularly suitable for a conceptual study of this nature because it enables the systematic examination of meaning, context, and assumptions embedded within texts. As Bowen (2020) notes, QDA allows researchers to interrogate documents not only for their explicit content but also for their underlying discourses, institutional logics, and cultural framings. This aligns with the study's interest in understanding how power asymmetry and

institutional culture interact to shape educator–learner relationships. Since the study does not involve direct engagement with human participants, the method is ethically low-risk and exempt from human-subject ethical clearance requirements. Many recent conceptual and policy-oriented studies adopt similar approaches when dealing with sensitive subjects such as workplace harassment, school misconduct, or organisational ethics (Khumalo & Baloyi, 2022).

The analytical process followed a structured and iterative set of steps. First, relevant documents were identified through database searches, institutional repositories, and policy archives. Selection criteria included relevance to educator misconduct, organisational ethics, power relations, safeguarding frameworks, or institutional responses to boundary violations. Once selected, documents were subjected to a preliminary review to determine key concepts and recurring issues. This initial reading informed the development of a coding framework. Second, thematic coding was conducted manually. Codes included categories such as *power imbalance*, *consent challenges*, *institutional silence*, *policy ambiguity*, *reporting mechanisms*, and *cultural normalisation*. Similar coding strategies are recommended in qualitative document research because they allow the aggregation of ideas across diverse textual sources (Kibore & Odhiambo, 2021). As coding progressed, new sub-themes emerged, such as victim-blaming tendencies, patriarchal interpretations of authority, and fragmented institutional accountability. These sub-themes were incorporated into the coding matrix to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced analysis. Third, themes were synthesised across documents to build a coherent conceptual argument. Synthesis involved comparing patterns across policy texts, academic literature, and institutional reports to identify convergences and contradictions. For example, while many institutional policies formally prohibit romantic relationships with learners, implementation reports frequently highlight inconsistencies in enforcement. This synthesis process helped reveal the gap between formal policy and lived institutional culture, a gap emphasised in recent research on misconduct in educational settings (Kunene & Maseko, 2021). Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to contextual variation. Although the study focuses broadly on secondary and tertiary institutions, it recognises that the cultural and organisational environments of schools and universities differ. These contextual differences were considered when interpreting findings, particularly concerning reporting systems and student protection mechanisms.

Finally, the document analysis approach supported the study's overarching aim of developing a theoretically grounded conceptual explanation. Because the research does not generate empirical data from learners or educators, but rather relies on existing evidence, the findings

remain interpretive and analytical rather than statistical. This aligns with best practices for conceptual work that seeks to explain complex organisational phenomena by drawing connections between theory, policy, and documented patterns of behaviour. In summary, qualitative document analysis provided a robust and ethically appropriate methodology for examining the interplay of power asymmetry and institutional culture in enabling educator–learner romantic relationships. By integrating insights from recent scholarship and policy documents, the study offers a theoretically informed interpretation that contributes to ongoing debates about safeguarding, professional ethics, and institutional accountability in education.

RESULTS

The document analysis generated three major findings that collectively illustrate the systemic nature of romantic boundary violations in educational settings. These findings relate to power asymmetry, institutional culture, and societal norms that shape vulnerability and silence. While each theme appears distinct, the analysis shows that they are interconnected and reinforce one another in subtle and overt ways. The findings point toward a structural and cultural landscape that allows educator to learner romantic relationships to persist despite formal policy prohibitions.

Power Asymmetry as the Central Driver of Boundary Violations

Across the reviewed literature, the most consistent finding is that romantic boundary violations between educators and learners are deeply rooted in unequal power relations. The relationship between an educator and a learner is fundamentally hierarchical. Educators control access to academic evaluation, discipline, mentorship, and institutional recognition. This structural power shapes the interactions that occur between the two parties in ways that limit the learner's autonomy and capacity for meaningful refusal. Dlamini, Sibanda and Zulu (2023) show that power asymmetry operates on multiple dimensions. First, structural power emerges from the educator's formal authority. Teachers and lecturers are responsible for grading, classroom management, disciplinary processes, and academic progression. This authority makes learners highly dependent on educators for educational success. Second, psychological power arises from the trust and admiration that learners often have for their teachers. Adolescents and young adults frequently view educators as role models, mentors, and gatekeepers of future opportunities. This psychological dynamic increases the likelihood of emotional dependence. Third, relational power emerges from the daily interaction between teachers and learners, which can create familiarity that is easily exploited.

The analysis shows that these forms of power do not operate in isolation. Instead, they interact to create a relational environment in which learners may misinterpret educator attention as affection, guidance, or affirmation. Khoza and Maseko (2021) argue that many learners interpret educator interest as validation of their worth or academic potential, which can heighten emotional vulnerability. The reviewed literature indicates that this sense of validation may make learners more susceptible to manipulation, grooming, or coercive affection. The notion of consent also appears repeatedly across the sources as an area of conceptual ambiguity. While some contexts legally define learners above a certain age as capable of consensual relationships, the literature emphasises that true consent is compromised by the power imbalance inherent in the educator to learner relationship. According to Lebepe and Hlalele (2022), even if a learner appears willing, the presence of authority fundamentally undermines their capacity to make an independent decision. Many cases that appear consensual on the surface are later revealed to involve subtle forms of manipulation, grooming, or promises of academic support.

The analysis also highlights gendered dimensions of power. Many studies conducted in African and global contexts show that female learners are more likely to be targeted by male educators. Ncube and Jita (2021) argue that the intersection of gender and authority heightens vulnerability, especially in patriarchal contexts where male dominance is socially reinforced. These gendered power dynamics appear consistently in both secondary and tertiary settings, although the nature of the misconduct varies across contexts. Overall, the reviewed documents confirm that power asymmetry is not just a contributing factor but the central mechanism enabling romantic boundary violations. Without this imbalance, many of these relationships would not occur, nor would they persist under the guise of affection or mentorship.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AS AN ENABLER OF MISCONDUCT

The second major finding is that institutional culture plays a critical role in either preventing or enabling boundary violations. The analysis indicates that educator misconduct does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it is shaped by the organisational norms, reporting systems, disciplinary structures, and leadership practices that define the educational environment. Mlambo, Khumalo and Ndlovu (2023) report that universities and colleges with weak reporting mechanisms experience higher numbers of misconduct cases. Their findings show that when students are unaware of where or how to report concerns, or when reporting channels are fragmented across different administrative units, incidents of misconduct often

go unreported. Several documents analysed in this study highlight that the absence of clear, confidential, and student-centred reporting systems significantly contributes to institutional inaction. Weak disciplinary enforcement also emerged as a recurring issue. De Wet, Botha and Ntloko (2022) show that even when policies clearly prohibit relationships between educators and learners, institutional responses are often inconsistent. In some cases, educators receive only mild warnings or are transferred to another department rather than facing formal disciplinary proceedings. This inconsistency sends a signal that the institution does not take the misconduct seriously, thereby normalising violations.

Another important issue identified in the analysis was leadership silence. Numerous sources indicate that educational leaders frequently avoid taking decisive action due to concerns about reputational damage, legal consequences, or potential backlash from powerful staff members. Kunene and Maseko (2021) argue that leadership silence creates an environment where inappropriate relationships are tolerated, ignored, or reframed as personal matters. This pattern discourages learners from reporting incidents and reinforces the idea that educators are immune to accountability. In some cases, institutional culture is marked by protectionism. This involves prioritising the reputation of the institution or the careers of senior educators over the safety and wellbeing of learners. Moyo and Chikafu (2023) note that in universities, particularly in departments dominated by senior male academics, colleagues sometimes protect one another by dismissing allegations, intimidating complainants, or framing the issue as an interpersonal conflict rather than misconduct. This institutional protectionism contributes directly to the recurrence of romantic boundary violations.

The analysis further shows that institutional culture also shapes how learners interpret misconduct. In environments where educators are widely regarded as figures of authority, learners may internalise the belief that questioning or reporting misconduct is disrespectful or risky. If other students have observed teachers pursuing romantic relationships without facing consequences, they may come to view such conduct as normal or inevitable. At both secondary and tertiary levels, the findings show that institutional cultures characterised by silence, weak leadership, and poor enforcement create conditions where misconduct can thrive. These cultural elements combine with power asymmetry to reinforce the vulnerability of learners and the impunity of educators.

Societal Norms and the Normalisation of Age-Disparate Relationships

The third major finding of the analysis relates to the role of societal norms in shaping learner vulnerability and influencing the reporting of misconduct. While institutions are important,

the broader cultural context cannot be ignored. Many studies show that societal attitudes toward age-disparate relationships, patriarchy, and gender roles influence how learners perceive their interactions with educators. Khoza and Maseko (2021) highlight the influence of cultural beliefs that romanticise relationships between younger individuals and older authority figures. In many communities, older men pursuing younger women is interpreted as a sign of status or maturity. When such beliefs are widespread, learners may lack the critical tools to recognise coercive behaviour. They may see educator attention as flattering rather than concerning. Another aspect of societal norms identified in the analysis is the stigma associated with reporting misconduct. Dlamini et al. (2023) note that learners who report boundary violations often face blame or social ostracism. Their peers may accuse them of exaggerating, seeking attention, or trying to destroy an educator's reputation. This social pressure discourages reporting and reinforces silence.

A significant finding across the literature is that some learners internalise societal narratives about romantic relationships, believing that relationships with educators may improve their academic or economic prospects. This belief is particularly prevalent in communities where teaching is viewed as a respected and stable profession. According to Lebepe and Hlalele (2022), economic vulnerability may make learners susceptible to relationships that promise support, mentorship, or material benefits. The analysis also indicates that societal norms influence how parents respond to educator misconduct. Some parents may be unwilling to challenge educators due to respect for the teaching profession or fear of jeopardising their child's academic progress. Moyo and Chikafu (2023) argue that this parental hesitance reinforces institutional cultures of silence. Together, these societal norms create a cultural landscape in which boundary violations are neither easily recognised nor readily reported. This makes learners more vulnerable and educators more confident that their actions will go unpunished.

Interconnectedness of Findings

While the findings have been presented as separate categories, the analysis shows that power asymmetry, institutional culture, and societal norms reinforce one another. For example, power imbalance is intensified when institutional culture fails to protect learners. Similarly, societal norms that normalise age-disparate relationships weaken the effectiveness of institutional policies. The interplay of these factors creates a cycle in which misconduct is normalised and learners lack both the institutional and cultural resources to challenge it. The findings therefore indicate that romantic boundary violations are not merely the result of

individual misconduct. They arise from a combination of structural, cultural, and societal factors that converge to create unsafe educational environments. Understanding these interconnections is essential for designing interventions that address the root causes of misconduct rather than merely its symptoms.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the document analysis reveal that romantic boundary violations between educators and learners are deeply embedded within structural, cultural, and societal contexts rather than being isolated interpersonal issues. This section interprets the results through the theoretical lenses outlined earlier and situates them within current scholarly debates on safeguarding, ethics, and educational governance. The discussion highlights how power asymmetry, institutional culture, and socio-cultural norms intersect to create environments that enable romantic misconduct. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on how educational institutions can better protect learners and strengthen ethical accountability.

Interpreting the Results Through Power Asymmetry Theory

The results strongly support the argument that educator–learner romantic relationships are best understood through the dynamics of power asymmetry. Power asymmetry theory emphasises that authority structures create relational inequality, shaping not only behaviour but also perception, vulnerability, and the capacity for consent. In educational settings, teachers and lecturers possess a level of authority that inherently places learners in subordinate positions.The findings reinforce what Dlamini, Sibanda and Zulu (2023) argue: learners often comply with advances not because they are freely consenting but because they operate within a system where educators control academic outcomes, disciplinary processes, and social recognition. The educator's authority can foster emotional dependence, leading learners to interpret attention as affirming or aspirational. The analysis shows that many learners, especially adolescents and first-year tertiary students, lack the developmental and emotional resources to interpret this attention as potential manipulation.

This interpretation aligns with research by Lebepe and Hlalele (2022), who argue that educator authority complicates the idea of free consent. Even in cases involving adult students, power imbalances persist because lecturers influence academic progress and access to resources. The findings confirm that the educator's structural, psychological, and relational power collectively diminish the learner's ability to recognise coercion or to refuse engagement. Moreover, the gendered dimensions of this imbalance cannot be ignored.

Several studies analysed, including Ncube and Jita (2021), highlight that female learners are disproportionately targeted. Socialised gender norms, combined with educator authority, increase the risk of exploitation. This pattern mirrors global research on workplace harassment, where power imbalances frequently intersect with gender vulnerability (Miller & Jones, 2022). In this context, the results validate De Wet, Botha and Ntloko's (2022) argument that romantic relationships between educators and learners cannot be regarded as consensual in any meaningful sense. While learners may believe they are making autonomous choices, their decisions occur within highly unequal power relations that distort their ability to act freely. This reinforces the conclusion that safeguards must treat any educator–learner romantic involvement as a violation of professional ethics and learner protection standards.

Institutional Culture and the Persistence of Violations

The results also show that institutional culture plays a central role in facilitating or preventing boundary violations. Institutional culture theory highlights how norms, values, leadership behaviour, and reporting systems influence outcomes within organisations. The findings demonstrate that institutions with weak reporting mechanisms, unclear policies, or inconsistent disciplinary enforcement create environments in which misconduct is more likely to occur and persist. The results strongly echo Mlambo, Khumalo and Ndlovu (2023), who show that universities with ambiguous reporting pathways record higher cases of misconduct. Students often lack information about where to report concerns, fear retaliation, or distrust internal systems. Such environments implicitly enable educators to exploit their authority with minimal accountability. Leadership behaviour emerged as an especially critical determinant of institutional culture. The analysis revealed that leadership silence, whether driven by fear of reputational harm, avoidance of conflict, or a desire to protect influential educators, creates an environment where misconduct becomes normalised. This silence is consistent with the findings of Kunene and Maseko (2021), who argue that when leaders do not publicly condemn misconduct, they send a symbolic message that such behaviour is tolerated or inconsequential.

This leadership silence often coexists with a form of institutional protectionism. As Moyo and Chikafu (2023) note, institutions sometimes prioritise their reputation over student safety. This tendency leads to minimising or reframing serious misconduct as interpersonal disputes rather than ethical violations. Such patterns were evident across many of the documents analysed. In some higher education institutions, allegations were handled informally or

quietly, often without transparent communication or formal investigation. The findings also highlight the role of unclear or inconsistent disciplinary enforcement. Many policies may prohibit educator to learner relationships, yet enforcement remains fragmented. De Wet et al. (2022) found that educators accused of misconduct are sometimes transferred rather than disciplined. This failure to impose consequences reinforces the belief that educators are insulated from accountability. It also makes learners less willing to report incidents, believing that doing so will be futile or harmful. The discussion of institutional culture therefore shows that safeguarding in educational settings cannot rely solely on policy documents. It requires a cultural transformation in which ethical leadership, transparency, and accountability are actively prioritised. Institutions must foster cultures where learners feel safe to report concerns and where educators understand that boundary violations will result in concrete consequences.

Societal Norms and the Normalisation of Age and Power Disparities

The third major aspect of the findings relates to societal norms that shape perceptions of educator–learner relationships. While institutions play a critical role, learners are also influenced by cultural narratives that exist outside the school or university context. These narratives often shape how learners interpret educator behaviour, how communities respond to allegations, and how society perceives power relations. The analysis supports Khoza and Maseko's (2021) argument that societal beliefs about age-disparate relationships contribute to learner vulnerability. In many communities, relationships between younger individuals and older authority figures are romanticised as signs of maturity or socio-economic advancement. When such norms are deeply embedded, learners may view educator attention as flattering or as an opportunity for upward mobility rather than as a boundary violation. This cultural framing aligns with the broader literature on gender and power in African contexts. For example, Ncube and Jita (2021) show that in some communities, older men pursuing younger women is normalised and even expected. When educators adopt these behaviours, they operate within cultural norms that minimise the perception of harm. As a result, learners may not recognise misconduct because their social environment does not frame it as problematic.

The analysis also suggests that economic vulnerability plays an influential role. In contexts where educators are financially secure relative to learners, material support may be used to initiate or maintain romantic involvement. Lebepe and Hlalele (2022) found that some learners believe relationships with educators may improve their academic or economic prospects. This belief is not only a reflection of individual perception but also a consequence

of broader socio-economic inequalities. Social stigma around reporting also emerged as an important societal factor. Dlamini et al. (2023) noted that learners who report misconduct often face blame, ostracism, or disbelief from peers, educators, or community members. Some are accused of seducing teachers, seeking attention, or attempting to ruin careers. Such narratives reinforce silence and prevent learners from accessing support. Parents and guardians are also influenced by societal norms. As the analysis shows, some parents are reluctant to challenge educators due to a deep cultural respect for the teaching profession or fear of jeopardising their child's academic future. Moyo and Chikafu (2023) argue that parental reluctance indirectly supports institutional cultures of silence by failing to validate learners' concerns. Overall, the findings illuminate the powerful role of societal norms in shaping how boundary violations unfold. These norms complicate safeguarding efforts because they operate outside institutional control and influence how learners interpret, internalise, and respond to misconduct.

Intersections Between Power, Culture, and Societal Norms

One of the most significant insights from the findings is the interconnectedness of the three dominant themes. Romantic boundary violations in educational settings are not simply the result of unethical behaviour by individual educators. Rather, they are produced and sustained through the interaction of power asymmetry, institutional culture, and societal norms. Power asymmetry influences institutional culture by shaping how educators exercise authority and how learners perceive their dependence. Institutional culture influences societal norms by reinforcing silence and complicity. Societal norms, in turn, shape how learners interpret educator behaviour and how communities respond to allegations. These elements form a mutually reinforcing system that normalises misconduct, weakens accountability, and leaves learners vulnerable. Understanding this interconnectedness is key for designing effective interventions. Efforts that address only one element, for example, introducing new policies without addressing institutional culture, are unlikely to produce meaningful change. Instead, safeguarding requires a holistic approach that tackles structural, cultural, and societal drivers simultaneously.

Implications for Policy, Leadership, and Practice

The findings suggest important implications for safeguarding practices in schools and universities. First, policies must be accompanied by robust implementation strategies. Clear reporting procedures, confidential channels, and protections against retaliation are essential

for encouraging learners to speak up. Second, leadership must adopt a visible role in promoting ethical conduct. Leaders who publicly condemn misconduct and enforce consequences signal that the institution values learner safety. Ethical leadership training may help institutions redefine organisational culture in ways that reinforce accountability. Third, institutions must engage communities in shifting harmful cultural norms. Awareness campaigns, parental engagement, and community education can help challenge the normalisation of age-disparate relationships and strengthen support for learners who report violations. Fourth, institutions should integrate safeguarding into curriculum and student orientation. Learners must be taught how to identify grooming behaviours, understand power imbalances, and access support. Collectively, these strategies can help break the cycle of silence, vulnerability, and impunity that currently characterises many educational environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study illustrate that educator to learner romantic relationships are rooted not only in individual misconduct but also in broader structural and cultural systems within educational institutions. The recommendations presented here are grounded in recent scholarship and are designed to address both behavioural and systemic contributors to boundary violations. Strengthening safeguarding mechanisms, enhancing professional ethics, establishing independent accountability structures, and reshaping institutional cultures are central to mitigating future incidents. Moreover, the recommendations emphasise the need for empirical inquiry that includes the voices of both learners and educators.

Strengthen safeguarding policies across schools and universities

The first recommendation underscores the need for comprehensive safeguarding policies that apply consistently across secondary and tertiary institutions. While many institutions have policies prohibiting educator to learner romantic relationships, recent studies show that these policies are often ambiguous, inconsistently implemented, or poorly communicated (Mlambo et al., 2023; Dlamini et al., 2023). Strengthening these policies involves several components. First, institutions must revise existing policies to explicitly define unacceptable conduct, including grooming behaviours, inappropriate communication, romantic advances, and boundary violations in both physical and digital spaces. Recent policy research highlights that violations increasingly occur through online communication channels, including instant messaging and social media, where monitoring is limited (Ngwenya & Moyo, 2022). Clear

definitions reduce subjective interpretation and provide concrete grounds for disciplinary processes. Second, safeguarding policies should establish simple, accessible reporting channels. Several studies indicate that learners are often confused about where and how to report misconduct, resulting in underreporting and silence (Mabuza & Myende, 2024). Reporting pathways should be publicised during student orientation, displayed on campus notice boards, and available through online platforms. Third, policies must include strong protections for whistle-blowers. Learners who report misconduct often fear retaliation, academic victimisation, or social stigma, which discourages them from speaking out (Mlambo et al., 2023). Institutions should incorporate anonymous reporting tools and outline explicit protections against retaliation. These protections should extend to peers who report concerns on behalf of affected learners. Finally, safeguarding policies must be reviewed regularly. Annual evaluations, informed by incident trends, staff feedback, and student experiences, help ensure that policies remain relevant and effective in changing contexts. Schools and universities should also benchmark their safeguarding frameworks against national and international best practice standards (UNESCO, 2021).

Introduce mandatory ethics and professional conduct training for educators

The second recommendation calls for mandatory, ongoing training focused on professional ethics, power dynamics, and boundary management. Recent scholarship shows that many educators receive minimal training on relational ethics beyond brief induction sessions, which limits their understanding of the psychological and institutional implications of boundary violations (Khoza & Maseko, 2021). Effective ethics training should address several key areas. First, it must emphasise the nature of power asymmetry within educational environments. Educators need a clear understanding of how authority influences learners' perceptions of consent and compliance. Dlamini et al. (2023) note that some educators genuinely underestimate the extent to which students may feel coerced by their authority, even when advances are perceived as "mutual." Training should provide real-world case studies that illustrate how seemingly benign actions can escalate into harmful situations. Second, professional conduct training should address the emotional and psychological vulnerability of learners. Adolescents and young adults, especially in early university years, may misinterpret teacher attention as affection or mentorship (Ngcobo & Mkhize, 2022). Educators must be able to identify early signs of unhealthy relational dynamics and implement strategies to maintain professional distance. Third, training programmes must include digital ethics and appropriate communication guidelines. The rise of informal

communication through messaging apps has blurred boundaries between educators and students (Maduna & Shoba, 2023). Institutions should provide clear guidance on after-hours communication, social media interactions, and the confidentiality of academic information. Fourth, ethics training must be continuous. Annual refresher courses, scenario-based workshops, and reflective professional development sessions help reinforce ethical conduct. To ensure accountability, certification in professional ethics should be a requirement for annual performance evaluations and educator registration renewals.

Establish independent structures for confidential and transparent reporting

The third recommendation focuses on institutional accountability through independent safeguarding structures. Literature consistently shows that internal reporting systems within schools and universities often fail due to conflict of interest, fear of reputational harm, or administrative inefficiencies (Mlambo et al., 2023; De Wet et al., 2022). This contributes to a culture of silence and diminished trust among learners. Independent student protection units provide several advantages. First, they ensure impartiality. When reports are handled by individuals outside the institutional hierarchy, such as external safeguarding professionals, trained counsellors, or ombudspersons, learners are more likely to trust the process. Research shows that trust is a decisive factor in reporting decisions (Mabuza & Myende, 2024). Second, independent units offer confidentiality. Many learners hesitate to report misconduct because they fear disclosure to educators or administrative staff who may be directly or indirectly connected to the perpetrator (Ngwenya & Moyo, 2022). Confidential case management systems alleviate this fear and give learners greater confidence in seeking help. Third, transparency is essential. Independent bodies should publish annual safeguarding reports that include statistics, policy updates, and anonymised case outcomes. Transparent reporting promotes institutional accountability and encourages improvements in safeguarding practice. Finally, independent units should be available to both students and staff. Educators who witness boundary violations often avoid reporting due to fear of professional backlash. Providing them with a neutral reporting channel strengthens overall institutional integrity.

Promote institutional cultures that value accountability, healthy boundaries, and student wellbeing

Strengthening institutional culture is critical for preventing educator to learner romantic relationships. Policies and training alone are insufficient if organisational norms and everyday practices undermine ethical behaviour. Studies across several African and

international universities show that cultural tolerance of inappropriate relationships contributes significantly to their persistence (Dlamini et al., 2023; Mlambo et al., 2023). Institutions need to cultivate cultures that actively promote student protection. This begins with ethical leadership. Leaders who consistently communicate safeguarding values and demonstrate visible accountability create environments where misconduct is less likely to be ignored. Ethical leadership also involves modelling professional boundaries and responding swiftly and decisively to reported violations. Second, institutions must prioritise student wellbeing through support services such as counselling, peer-support networks, and mental health programmes. Research indicates that learners who feel supported are more likely to recognise inappropriate conduct and seek help (Ngcobo & Mkhize, 2022). Third, transparency and communication should be embedded into institutional culture. Regular dialogues, seminars, and campaigns on ethical relationships, consent, and professional boundaries help cultivate awareness across the campus community. Campaigns should be culturally sensitive and tailored to the developmental realities of learners. Fourth, institutions must challenge harmful socio-cultural norms that normalise age-disparate romantic relationships. Khoza and Maseko (2021) argue that such norms can shape learners' interpretations of educator behaviour. Through continuous education, institutions can dismantle these narratives and promote healthier understandings of power, mentorship, and respect. Finally, staff recruitment and promotion should incorporate ethical considerations. Institutions should prioritise educators with strong ethical records and provide pathways for recognising ethical excellence within professional evaluations.

Conduct future empirical studies involving learners and staff

The final recommendation emphasises the need for further empirical research to deepen understanding of the dynamics that shape educator to learner romantic relationships. Current literature, while expanding, remains limited in several areas. First, qualitative studies involving learners can provide insight into how they interpret educator behaviour, how they assess risk, and what barriers influence their reporting decisions. Understanding learners' lived experiences is crucial for designing effective safeguarding measures (Mabuza & Myende, 2024). Second, research should explore educators' perspectives. Some educators may unintentionally cross boundaries due to limited training, personal vulnerabilities, or misinterpretations of professional expectations. Examining their experiences can reveal gaps in professional development and institutional support systems. Third, comparative institutional studies may offer valuable insights. Universities and schools differ significantly

in culture, governance structures, and disciplinary processes. Multi-site research allows scholars to identify institutional characteristics that either minimise or increase the likelihood of misconduct. Fourth, intersectional perspectives should be incorporated. Learners' experiences of vulnerability can be shaped by gender, socioeconomic status, disability, or cultural background (UNESCO, 2021). Future studies should include these dimensions to develop more inclusive safeguarding frameworks. Lastly, researchers must ensure that all empirical studies receive appropriate ethical clearance. Safeguarding-sensitive research requires careful attention to confidentiality, informed consent, and psychological wellbeing. Ethical oversight protects participants while ensuring the credibility and sustainability of the research.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that romantic boundary violations between educators and learners are not isolated incidents of individual misconduct but rather complex phenomena shaped by intersecting structural, cultural, and social factors. Through the synthesis of recent literature, this study has illustrated how power asymmetry, institutional culture, and the social normalisation of inappropriate behaviour collectively create conditions in which learners are vulnerable, and educators may exploit their authority. These relationships compromise the safety, psychological wellbeing, and academic integrity of learners, and they pose a broader risk to the credibility and legitimacy of educational institutions. The analysis shows that power asymmetry is a foundational element in understanding why boundary violations persist. Educators possess structural authority over learners, which encompasses grading, access to academic resources, and disciplinary control. Beyond formal authority, educators hold psychological and relational power, rooted in learners' admiration, trust, and dependence. This imbalance undermines the possibility of freely given consent and often places learners in situations where refusal carries perceived risks of academic, social, or emotional consequences. The findings reinforce previous arguments that even ostensibly consensual relationships in educational contexts cannot be viewed as ethically defensible or truly voluntary (Dlamini, Sibanda & Zulu, 2023; De Wet, Botha & Ntloko, 2022). The implications are clear: safeguarding interventions must address the structural power dynamics inherent in educator–learner relationships to ensure meaningful protection.

Institutional culture is the second critical factor identified in this study. Schools and universities operate as organisations with norms, values, and practices that shape individual behaviour. When cultures prioritise reputational preservation, tolerate misconduct, or fail to

provide transparent reporting mechanisms, violations are more likely to continue unchecked. Leadership silence, inconsistent disciplinary measures, and informal handling of allegations all contribute to an environment in which learners feel unable to report or challenge boundary violations. The findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership and the establishment of organisational cultures that promote accountability, transparency, and student wellbeing (Mlambo, Dube & Mahlangu, 2023; Kunene & Maseko, 2021). Social and cultural norms also influence the persistence of boundary violations. In some contexts, age-disparate relationships or interactions between learners and authority figures may be romanticised, normalised, or viewed as culturally acceptable. Learners may interpret attention from educators as validation, mentorship, or a potential pathway to academic and economic advancement. Social pressures, stigma surrounding reporting, and parental reluctance to challenge educators further reinforce the silence surrounding these violations (Khoza & Maseko, 2021; Mabuza & Myende, 2024). The interplay of societal norms and institutional shortcomings creates a multi-layered environment in which learners' vulnerability is compounded, and institutional accountability is weakened.

The findings have practical implications for policy, professional development, and safeguarding practices. Strengthened safeguarding frameworks, including accessible reporting channels, whistle-blower protections, and clear behavioural guidelines, are essential. Professional ethics training must equip educators to recognise and manage power imbalances, maintain appropriate boundaries, and understand the psychological impact of their interactions. Independent oversight structures, student protection units, and transparent accountability mechanisms are equally necessary to ensure that misconduct is addressed promptly and fairly. Finally, the article emphasises the importance of ongoing research. While this study relied on document analysis and secondary sources, future research should explore the lived experiences of learners and educators, paying attention to how learners interpret educator behaviour, perceive power imbalances, and navigate reporting mechanisms. Empirical studies can illuminate the nuances of institutional culture and social norms, providing evidence-based strategies for creating safer, more responsive educational environments.

In conclusion, romantic boundary violations in educational settings are complex, systemic, and multi-dimensional. They are shaped by entrenched power relations, institutional practices, and social attitudes that collectively compromise learner wellbeing and public trust in education. Addressing these violations requires integrated strategies that combine ethical leadership, robust safeguarding policies, and cultural change. By recognising and responding

to the structural, organisational, and societal drivers of misconduct, educational institutions can work toward environments that protect learners, promote professional integrity, and reinforce public confidence in the role of education.

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