



Relationships play primary role in boys' learning

Positive relationships should come first in efforts to improve boys' learning and engagement with school. Teachers can make the difference.

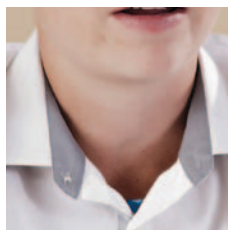
By Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley

We begin our discussion with three poignant and illustrative anecdotes:

Around a conference table with boys enrolled in an independent school in Toronto (a version of a private school in the U.S.), we are discussing when and how they respond positively to a teacher. Three of the boys, unlike physically or in their mannerisms, begin talking animatedly about their economics teacher who, one of them claims, "ignited" him. The boys speak of this man with something like reverence. They describe the atmosphere in his classroom as somehow charged with importance. "It's a class," one of them says, "where you wouldn't *think* of acting out." The teacher's presence, they explain, is not strict or commanding. The elevated seriousness of his class seems to stem from the teacher's own seriousness about his subject. The boys speak of his "passion" and the care he takes in responding to what they say and their written work. "There is just something *about* him," one of the boys says. "You would be ashamed not to do your work, your best work."

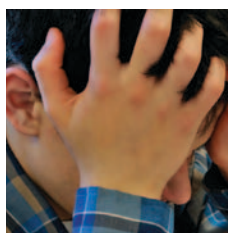


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Across the city, we are talking to a similar group of boys enrolled in a public school. The discussion has turned to teachers the boys felt they could not respond to.

One boy's face hardened noticeably when he described a hurtful encounter with a history teacher. The boy, who described himself as frequently in trouble, had been sent out of class for a dress code violation: He was wearing a colored tee shirt under his code-required dress shirt. Since his outer shirt was in code and he felt the undershirt didn't really show, he was angry at being called out. As he stormed out into the hall, the teacher followed him and continued to berate him, concluding with "You are such a punk." And, we asked, how did that make you feel? The boy said with conviction, "I *hate* him." But, we persisted, you are still in the class, you have to work for him, right? The boy said, "I'm not doing *anything* in that class. He can flunk me. They can kick me out. I'm not doing anything."



In the course of a daylong workshop with students and teachers at a school outside of London in the U.K., a 17-year old boy recounted a French class in which he underperformed, didn't care for his teacher, and knew his teacher didn't care for him. The boy reported disengaging from the class, and handing in partially prepared, sloppy work, which his teacher duly took in and awarded the failing marks it merited. By year's end, what had begun as wariness on the part of boy and teacher had devolved into mutual resentment and dislike. In the course of exchanges between the boy telling the story and the roomful of teachers who heard it, one teacher asked the boy, with some feeling, whether he didn't feel a responsibility to do what he could to repair the relationship. The boy paused to reflect. Then said, "I suppose so. I can see that I was not easy to teach or to deal with — but I was 13."

Teachers can develop their capacity to improve their relationships with students.

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When boys are not alright

Amid growing concerns around the world about the prospects and performance of boys and men, a new, more dire thesis is emerging: We may have arrived at an “end of men.” Proponents ask whether “postindustrial society is simply better suited to women?” (Rosin, 2010).

Greatly abetting if not outright causing this troubling downturn in male fortunes is their experience of school. With the American male dropout rate at or above 25% in many urban schools, underperformance in all disciplines and grade levels, and the consequent gap between male and female enrollment in colleges and graduate schools, demographers forecast a grim future for American males (Mortenson, 2011). In one cultural historian’s bleak assessment, “The evidence is overwhelming that boys of all ages are having trouble in schools. They are underachieving academically, acting out behaviorally, and disengaging psychologically” (Kimmel, 2008, p. 71).

Positive relationships precede desired school outcomes, including the end of obstructive, resistant behavior, increased engagement in classroom process, and increased willingness to complete assigned tasks.

Yet however troubling such claims may be about today’s male students *generally*, those failures to engage in school and to achieve are neither universal nor normative. The intriguing fact of the matter is that some boys in some schools — some boys in *most* schools — are productively engaged and exceed expectations. Moreover, on the evidence of two global studies, we have found that many boys succeed dramatically regardless of their tested ability level, ethnic or economic status, the type of school they attend, or where they live.

In undertaking this research, we set out to identify clearly effective teaching practices with boys and to explore their applicability to classes and contexts where boys are doing less well. Again, effective teaching and learning are readily observable — *somewhere* — in most schools. We were convinced that actual students and practicing teachers would provide the best explanations of what works in the classroom and why.

The first study: Effective lessons

In 2009, in partnership with the International Boys’ Schools Coalition, we studied successful teaching practices in 18 schools in six countries — the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Within those schools, we solicited online responses from 1,000 middle and upper school teachers and 1,500 adolescent boys to a basic prompt: Describe an especially memorable classroom lesson.

The elements common to these best lessons revealed encouragingly clear contours in examples submitted by teachers of both genders, all ages and experience levels, in all types of schools, and across all teaching disciplines. The common features of these lessons comprised a blueprint for effective practice generally — one adapted to boys in particular (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, 2010).

The Relational Teaching Project

Drawn by the promise of one particular finding — about the centrality of relationship in boys’ stories — we designed a second study, again in partnership with the International Boys’ Schools Coalition, including 35 schools from the same six countries (Reichert & Hawley, 2013). The larger sampling of this second study enabled us to include a wide range of school types: large and small, well and poorly resourced, rural and urban, homogenous and multicultural.

We solicited online narratives from teachers and boys in middle through high school grades, asking them to recount a productive relationship as well as an unsuccessful one. We were able to deepen our understanding of survey responses by conducting focus groups and daylong workshops with boys and teachers in the U.S., Canada, U.K., and South Africa.

The narratives submitted by 1,200 boys and 1,100 teachers once again revealed clear patterns. In particular, the successful relational accounts described how varying degrees of resistance boys brought into the classroom were dissolved by a variety of relational gestures by teachers. In many instances, the levels of resistance were considerable, as boys recounted entering new classes in which they were anxious about the subject because of self-doubt, poor performance in prior years, or the reputation of the course or its instructor.

With a striking congruence, the accounts of boys and teachers revealed a number of specific relational gestures that helped create the supportive relationships. In those accounts, teachers:

- *Reach out, often improvising measures to meet a particular student’s need.* The special measures taken by teachers invariably included initiating

meetings with the student, and perhaps his family, outside the classroom, observing the student in spheres of interest and competence unrelated to the classroom, making herself or himself available for personal consultations and for scholastic remediation.

- *Demonstrate mastery of their subjects.* Perhaps counterintuitively, neither teachers nor boys indicated that positive teacher-student relationships were simply a matter of establishing mutually warm affect. Teachers' clear mastery of their fields was the relational *sine qua non* in many of the narratives.
- *Maintain admirable standards.* Likewise, boys often cited teachers who maintained clear and even demanding standards of classroom conduct and quality of work as those with whom they had the best relationships.
- *Respond to a student's personal interest or talent.* Another strong theme running through boys' and teachers' relational accounts was the enlivening and enabling effect of a boy's realization that his teacher knew him beyond his status as, say, a 7th-grade math or English student.
- *Share a common interest with a student.* For the reasons discussed above, teachers and boys who *share* a personal interest — whether athletic, musical, mechanical — is a reliable relationship builder with similar positive effects on scholastic performance.
- *Share a common characteristic with a student.* The fact that a boy and a teacher share and acknowledge a common characteristic — a defining physical feature, background, ethnicity, a wound, a problem overcome — can be a reliable, if serendipitous, relationship builder.
- *Accommodate a measure of opposition.* Teachers and boys alike reported that teachers who can resist personalizing boys' oppositional behavior and instead respond to it with restraint and civility not only may succeed in building relationships with difficult students but also create a promising climate for relationship-building classwide.
- *Reveal vulnerability.* While this was the gesture least frequently reported in the positive narratives, those who did discuss it — both from the boys' and teachers' perspectives — indicated it was an important element in developing relationships.

The teachers and boys in this study attributed relational success to the eight features indicated above in about the same proportion — with one

significant exception: Teachers and boys alike attributed the greatest number of relational successes to teachers' efforts to meet their individual needs, but almost twice as many boys as teachers attributed relational success to teachers' mastery of their material, effective classroom management, and maintaining standards. In both their written narratives and in their personal interviews, boys stressed their appreciation and admiration for teachers who established clear expectations, held them to high (but attainable) standards and, through various affective gestures, convinced them that they could succeed in meeting them.

Relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning occurs.



In successful approaches, the teachers' goal is establishing a mutually agreeable *working alliance* with each student. Daniel Rogers (2009) suggests that the teacher's responsibilities in a working alliance with students include: (1) serving as the expert who will guide learning; (2) maintaining an awareness of the quality of the relationship; and (3) addressing and repairing strains or ruptures in the relationship.

From both teachers' and boys' narratives, we could plot teachers' reactions to boys' resistance along a continuum between two poles: *teacher as relationship manager* or *teacher as self-manager*. Teachers achieved a working alliance with a boy when they read the boy's resistance, however persistent

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or personally directed, as feedback about the quality of the connection between them and changed their behavior until achieving some cooperation. Successful teachers could operate independently of boys' negativity or personal rejection, ultimately transforming the relationship from a negative to a positive one.

At the other end of the continuum, pushed beyond their personal limits by rejection, disrespect, or failure to engage in assigned tasks, teachers typically defaulted to a more defensive and reactive posture and became *self-managers*. Teachers in this position said they were conserving their personal capital and focusing on students who are able to cooperate and minimize classroom disruption.

Taken together, the successful strategies underscore two profound implications for relational teaching. The first is that relationship does not merely contribute to or enhance teaching and learning; re-

lationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning occurs. The second implication is that through relationship building — as these narratives abundantly reveal — teachers can develop their capacity to improve their relationships with students. That the same set of relational gestures succeeded in so many different school settings and were reported with such consistency by teachers of all disciplines, by both early-career and veteran teachers and by male and female teachers, strongly suggests that there is no single relational “type” or preferred strategy.

When relationships break down

Our findings also illuminated how individual circumstances can combine to deepen boys' resistance to school engagement and thus undermine teachers' abilities to forge working alliances.

We asked the same boys and teachers to describe a positive and negative relationship. Reading these accounts sequentially, we were struck by how the stories of negative outcomes differed from the positive ones. The most striking difference was the lack of congruence between what boys and teachers attributed to failed relationships.

Teachers' accounts of relational breakdown tended to assign cause to factors beyond their professional control: irremediable learning deficits, boys' psychological problems, domestic circumstances, or other cultural factors that made it impossible to form a productive working alliance. Whether the extramural causes cited above were actually at work in boys' resistance, teachers closed off the possibility of a relationship when they decided a student was unreachable and distanced themselves in response to that. In their negative accounts, many teachers took pains to convey that they had done everything that could be professionally expected of them to reach the boy; in their positive accounts, they celebrated their serial attempts and sustained efforts to ultimately overcome these same circumstances.

For their part, boys attributed relational breakdown to:

- The perceived inability of teachers to present course material and performance expectations in a clear, compelling way;
- The perception of teachers as aloof and uninterested in them personally;
- The perception of teachers as inappropriately angry, judgmental, sarcastic, and authoritarian; and
- The perceived inability of teachers to maintain order and to establish a civil, emotionally safe classroom climate.

Boys' negative accounts included little assumption of personal responsibility for the relational impasse; in their accounts of relational success, they frequently acknowledged the difficulties and challenges they presented to teachers.

Rethinking how learning occurs

These findings both confirm and expand a mounting body of international research about the efficacy of relationship in school engagement and performance. In the 2010 report of the Program for International Student Assessment, for example, "positive student-teacher relationships" were described as key to improved outcomes (OECD, 2010, p. 88). In another example, the Measures of Effective Teaching project is built upon an instructional tripod of content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and relationships (2010a, 2010b). The report of a study that examines the efficacy of relational teaching concluded:

In summary, evidence suggests that secure teacher-student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure teacher-student relationships (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 154).

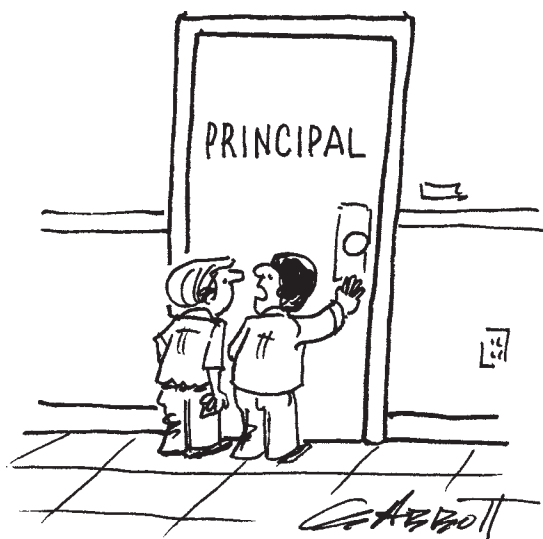
These findings suggest that boys' school success improves because of exchanges between a boy and a teacher that make them allies pursuing a common goal of content mastery for the student. The teacher manages and monitors the relationship. Although pursuing content mastery depends on the quality of the student/teacher relationship, a positive student/teacher relationship is unlikely to occur unless the teacher has pedagogical mastery of the subject. Thus, in school, positive relationships, however valuable in themselves, don't ensure that the student will learn. Nor will learning occur in the absence of a positive student/teacher relationship — a teacher's subject matter mastery notwithstanding.

Conclusion

Counter to cultural assumptions that boys are generally resistant to schooling, boys in our studies indicated a remarkable acceptance of the value and necessity of their school programs. Resistance and opposition arise most commonly when boys are unable to establish positive relationships with teachers and other staff. Positive relationships precede desired school outcomes, including the end of obstructive, resistant behavior, increased engagement in classroom process, and increased willingness to complete assigned tasks. In their ability to overcome boys' standing resistance to school challenges, positive relationships are transformative. **K**

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"My teacher says if I don't straighten up I'll end up as a cartoon character."