

HOME > MAGAZINE > INDEPENDENT SCHOOL > SUMMER 2015 >

RELATIONAL STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE BOYS

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By Michael C. Reichert

In a daylong workshop that my research partner, Rick Hawley, and I conducted outside Philadelphia, we met with educators from Canada and the eastern United States to explore their relational craft with boys. During one exercise, we asked participants to share two stories: the first about a relationship that had gone well and the second about one that had not. The stories of successful teaching and coaching relationships were heartwarming: boys' lives uplifted, struggles of all sorts overcome, imagined identities transformed. There was general agreement about the particular strategies underlying these successes: teachers reaching out to meet their students' individual needs, maintaining a sense of humor, taking pains to establish a personal connection and common ground, and others.

But when it came to the stories of relationships that had not gone well, the tone in the room shifted. As if awaiting blame, participants grew wary and tentative. I invited a woman from a Saint Louis school, a veteran teacher, to tell her story. The breakdown she shared had occurred nine years earlier and had had an "awful" outcome: a boy ultimately exited the school. As she related a familiar story of conflict, personal rejection, and glaring hostility, followed by lost opportunity, she began to cry, and the room became heavy with shared feeling. This moment stood as a revelation for me as a researcher, offering a poignant glimpse into the heart of teaching. In response to an open prompt about unsuccessful relationships, this warm and committed teacher had summoned an example that still pained her years later. Despite the hundreds of students with whom she had succeeded in the intervening years, this loss haunted her.

Some boys thrive in school; many do not. There is a growing consensus that many boys' scholastic performance is failing to keep up with the new knowledge economy. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently observed: "Over the past few decades, millions of men have been caught on the wrong side of a historic transition, unable to cross the threshold into the new economy." ¹ But as troubling as this trend in boys' scholastic performance may be *generally*,

school troubles are neither universal nor normative. The intriguing fact is that some boys in most schools find their footing, become productively engaged, and even exceed expectations.

In 2010-12, the International Boys' School Coalition, a collection of nearly 300 schools of all kinds - from fully fee-based to fully government-funded, from elite to lottery-driven - partnered with the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives in our efforts to conduct a large-scale study of how and why certain boys succeed and, more specifically, how the quality of their learning relationships contributes to their success. Across 35 schools in six countries, we attempted to locate the specific relational strategies identified by 1,400 adolescent boys and 1,000 of their teachers as effective. We had been drawn to the student-teacher relationship by boys themselves in an earlier study. From their resounding validation of teachers who inspired, helped, and uplifted them, we concluded that for boys, "Relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed." ²

Surprising for the clarity and strength of their embrace of the relational dimension in our study, stories of successful student-teacher partnerships offer a counterpoint to the increasing alarms about boys' educational underachievement. Converging research trends across the world spotlight relational approaches. "Positive student-teacher relationships" were found to explain the success of students in The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). And in an analysis of nearly 100 studies, a Dutch research team found that both positive and negative teacher-student relationships affected scholastic achievement. Even hard-to-engage students respond to relational strategies. Research finds that positive learning relationships may be especially beneficial in reaching those - mainly boys - at the bottom of the achievement gap. And for the 30 to 50 percent of students who come to school with troubled attachment histories and who because of resistant behaviors are harder for teachers to deal with, the negative effects of these primary relationships can be corrected - "disconfirmed" - by subsequent positive ones with teachers, with corresponding improvements in school engagement and achievement.³

The Teacher's Part

Concern about the effects of school relationships on children should not overshadow the significant effects these relationships have on teachers. Andy Hargreaves, professor of education at Boston College, has found that relationships with students are the most important sources of enjoyment and motivation for the teachers; he also found that conflicted or alienated relationships tend to diminish both teachers' professional satisfaction and their personal sense of well-being. Research into the phenomenon of "teacher burnout" further corroborates the stressful cost when teachers defend themselves against challenging relationships with students.⁴

In addition to stories of successful relationships, Hawley and I collected stories of relational breakdown and found strong emotions to be the rule for both partners. Through his "I, Thou, and It" framework, educator and philosopher David Hawkins argues that students and teachers make deeply personal investments in the learning partnership - students for the sake of imagined futures, teachers for the sake of professional identities. When there is success, the relationship is mutually gratifying. When things go poorly, there is hurt and blame.

While boys generally gave high praise to the teachers featured in their stories of positive relationships, we nonetheless noted that they described many who were not particularly warm or

emotionally intelligent. Many instead talked about teachers whose high standards and mastery of their subjects demanded investment and effort. At a school in Toronto, for example, several animatedly described a teacher who, they claimed, *ignited* them. They spoke of this man with something like reverence. "It's a class," one explained, "where you wouldn't *think* of misbehaving." From this and similar stories, we realized that the triadic relationship begins with a boy's assessment about whether a teacher can help him succeed. Effective learning relationships are not friendships or *in loco parentis*. But boys are clearly reluctant to engage with a poor or dispassionate teacher.

A Working Alliance

The learning relationship is better understood as an example of a *working alliance*, in which teachers serve as agents of change, students as those seeking to grow, and mastery of the subject or skills as the objective of both. A distinct set of responsibilities falls to each role in the alliance. While students absorb themselves in efforts to assimilate new information, skills, and perspectives while confronting their limitations, teachers - the guiding professionals - must serve as *relationship managers*. Students are too preoccupied and too vulnerable to keep perspective on the relationship itself in this framework. Daniel Rogers, associate professor of psychology at Kennesaw State University, assigned these unique responsibilities to the relationship manager: (1) the expert facilitating the student's learning, (2) the one to maintain an overall awareness of the alliance, and (3) the one to monitor and mend strains in the alliance. ⁵

How do busy teachers carry out the role of relationship manager? Monitoring a relationship that has become difficult, one eliciting feelings of frustration and self-defense, clearly requires an ability to keep one's head even amid frustration and other upset feelings. It requires a capacity for reflection and self-awareness, a willingness to reassess present practice, and motivation to improvise new strategies. Assigning this role to teachers may seem unreasonable, given the realities of the job in many school systems - too many students, too many special needs, uncooperative parents, pressures to produce test results. Indeed, in workshops in our study, teachers voiced the belief - often strongly felt - that boys must also bear some responsibility for the relationship.

But to these claims that boys must share relationship responsibility we brought news. In our survey, we also asked the boys what they had done, if anything, to improve a relationship that had gone awry. Among all of our respondents, there were *no* accounts of such initiative. In one memorable dialogue between students and teachers during one of our workshops, a 17-year-old acknowledged behaving poorly a few years earlier - not completing his work, ducking other responsibilities, behaving disrespectfully - but when challenged by a teacher, he explained, "*But I was only 13.*" However much boys may regret their irresponsibility and misbehavior, they generally showed little ability to correct a relationship that drifted off course. More commonly they dug their heels in, condemned the teacher in angry justifications, or fatalistically wrote off the course and the teacher.

While it would be nice for boys to take some responsibility when a relationship with a teacher breaks down, few, if any, ever do. It therefore falls to the teacher to make sure the alliance remains.

A Promising Observation

Both the positive and negative teacher accounts tended to begin with relational challenges to overcome - boys whose resistance required special attention and teachers' willingness to adjust present practice. But despite the steep challenges faced with boys whose learning differences, family circumstances, or social stresses create real barriers to engagement in schooling, relationally successful teachers reported positive transformations with boys beset by the same - *or worse* - circumstances.

It was not a boy's circumstances that differentiated the successful and less successful teaching relationships. Both boys and teachers strongly supported the conclusion that teaching alliances can overcome a host of difficulties boys carry to school - and do so every day. Even boys facing severe family or social stresses become positively engaged and set on promising paths in healthy alliances with teachers and coaches. As Pedro Noguera, professor of education at New York University, has written, "The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself should be regarded as a learning disability."⁶

In stories of breakdown, we could see that, instead of a boy's circumstances, it is the teacher's *interpretation* that most affects the relationship's trajectory. Negative or pessimistic interpretations arose when teachers were under particular stress themselves, stresses challenging their sense of professional competence and general self-worth. In these circumstances teachers tend to abdicate their role as relationship manager and revert to more defensive self-management. Hargreaves has detailed the "emotional politics of teaching," in which feelings of powerlessness can be especially unbearable for teachers whose professional identities depend upon being liked or welcomed by their students. When stressed, depleted, or confronted with intractable resistance, such teachers are vulnerable to "flooding" and can respond with defensiveness and self-protectiveness.

Relationally successful teachers described a repertoire of specific relational gestures to invite their students to join them in a working partnership. If a strategy failed to achieve the desired connection, these teachers would simply try another. A defining difference between the positive and negative accounts was the teacher's honest appraisal of the success of the relational strategy and an acknowledgment of the need to change the approach if it was not working. By contrast, stories of relational breakdown reflected more rigid stances taken by teachers who had run out of ideas and were unable to reinvent their relational strategy.

Creating a professional growth climate in which teachers can review their relational difficulties and be open with colleagues about them requires that they be *supervised relationally*: guided by department chairs, curriculum specialists, and other administrators who establish trust and build collaboration, inspiration, and encouragement. In fact, Eleanor Drago-Severson, professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, recommends a professional development approach characterized by observant *peer* relationships in which performance can be assessed in mutually supportive ways: "I noted that when teachers, myself included, felt *well held* by administrators in a psychological sense - listened to, heard, and cared about - it seemed to have a direct and positive effect on the children."⁷

WHAT SCHOOLS ARE DOING

St. Christopher's School

In the context of a commitment to thinking critically about relational pedagogy and to help teachers examine their own relational strategies more carefully, we created a faculty survey based upon the relational teaching framework found in the research conducted by Michael Reichert and Rick Hawley. Teachers were asked to identify three relational practices that they implement regularly and successfully and two practices that can seem difficult to implement and that they plan to focus on this year. Working in cross-divisional Critical Friends Groups, teachers then shared these areas of strength and challenge and offered support and suggestions to one another.

— *Kimberly G. Hudson, director of the Center for the Study of Boys, St. Christopher's School (Virginia)*

Crescent School

One result of our participation in the studies conducted by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley was the school's decision to put relational learning at the very center of all we do and to wrap our programs, both academic and cocurricular, around that foundation. To do so has involved two dimensions and striking the right balance between each has required a very thoughtful, institutional approach. The first dimension is to support and guide our faculty toward a shared relational commitment to our boys — not just an *individual* relational commitment. The second dimension is to guide our boys themselves toward a mature ownership of their learning and athletic relationships. So while teachers and coaches work to ensure that they are always reaching to engage the student and, collectively, we embrace our responsibilities as teachers/ coaches to serve as “relationship managers,” we wish to work at both ends of the relational dynamic.

— *David Young, deputy headmaster for teaching and learning, Crescent School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

St. John's Northwestern Military Academy

The establishment of an effective leadership team was essential to our ability to undertake this new initiative. We formed a group of eight faculty, taking care to ensure good representation, and met weekly to think through “what will it look like” to adopt this relational research to our school culture. From these discussions we began to develop a vision for strategic initiatives to engage other faculty. At the heart of our action plan, professional development for faculty and staff has been the vehicle that has most immediately effected change. Our professional development model in relational teaching centers on reflective practice. It has not been enough for our teachers to learn relational methods and to consult with their peers about relational strategies; we have needed to hold ourselves accountable to a growth model and to go further as relational practitioners.

— *Joe Niemczyk, academic dean, and John Thornburg, associate head of school, St. John's Northwestern Military Academy (Wisconsin)*

In continuing work with schools to implement these findings, I have learned that school cultures in which teachers may be well held while struggling with difficult students display three features.

Establishing that the relationship manager role belongs to the teacher, not the student, is the first, essential condition. In the economy of teachers' limited personal resources - time, attention, patience - calculations are often made about where and how to distribute relational efforts. With boys who resist a teacher's preferred relational strategies, bargaining for more mutuality as a precondition for further investment is common. But as we found, waiting for a boy to put in more effort can be fruitless and is generally not a prudent response to a relational breakdown. Teachers must assume that they are the ones to solve the relational puzzle.

To do so, when they reach the edge of their relational skills, teachers also must recognize that they are stuck and yet believe that it is still possible, at least theoretically, for the boy to be reached - somehow, sometime, by someone. The successful relationships narrated by the teachers in our study were broadly characterized by: (1) a willingness to be *flexible* and to improvise alternate approaches and (2) a capacity to step back and reflect on what was working and not working in their relational efforts. Instead of defensively digging in their own heels and requiring some change on the boy's part, these teachers took the relational impasse less personally and saw it more as an indication that they had not yet hit upon a workable approach.

Even with a commitment to personal reflection in emotionally charged relationships and under considerable stress - as the boy, his parents, and school managers all bear down - teachers may find it difficult to develop new, creative solutions to these relational puzzles. While an imperative to see beyond one's blind spots may seem oxymoronic, Miriam Raider-Roth, associate professor of education at the University of Cincinnati, reminds teachers that assistance in transcending limiting perspectives lies very near at hand: "We cannot see our blind spots without our colleagues' gentle and persistent feedback. We cannot see the complexity of children without viewing their worlds from multiple perspectives."⁸ The third feature found in faculty cultures that support a reflective relational practice is sufficient opportunity for peer coaching and collaboration.

To incorporate these three features more intentionally in schools' cultures, a hybrid model for reflective practice has been found to be helpful. The model I developed (see graphic above) melds an approach popular in nursing practice with a critical friends framework offered by the National School Reform Faculty. In following this protocol, participants meet monthly in small professional learning groups to share specific relational stalemates and to collaborate with each other in fashioning a way forward. The point of the exercise is to mutually explore relational challenges and problem solving in a supportive and coaching context.

The Relational School

Schools using this model have reported that the sequence of steps can help untangle the welter of facts, feelings, and strategies that becomes overwhelming. Faculties have found that the exercise works better when challenging prevailing cultural habits of keeping relational struggles to oneself and blaming the student. One particular school, committed to becoming a "relational school," primed the exercise when the dean of faculty demonstrated the protocol in a fishbowl setting before his entire staff. He related a story of losing patience with a challenging boy, causing the relationship to go into a tailspin, and became upset and obviously ashamed as he spoke. From the rapt audience of teachers, coaches, and other administrators, warm support

and understanding welled up in response to his honesty and obvious good intentions. When asked to offer feedback, their respect for their colleague was clear and their suggestions positive and helpful. Most important, this exercise helped to shift a faculty culture to one in which relational breakdowns are not seen so much as personal failures but as teaching challenges requiring peer support, understanding, and concrete feedback.

Improving the relational climate in schools can help to dispel prevailing stereotypes of boys as alienated, disconnected, and unconnectable beings. Relationally effective teachers demonstrate how to engage resistant boys. The boys so engaged are generous in their praise of and gratitude to their teachers. And the teachers who succeed in forging such relationships count those experiences as the principal reason they continue their work.

Notes

1. David Brooks, "Men on the Threshold," *New York Times*, July 16, 2013.
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3. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices* (Vol. IV), 2010.
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5. Daniel Rogers, "The Working Alliance in Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Clarity and Research Implications," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3 no. 2 (2009).
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7. Eleanor Drago-Severson, *Helping Educators Grow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012): 5.
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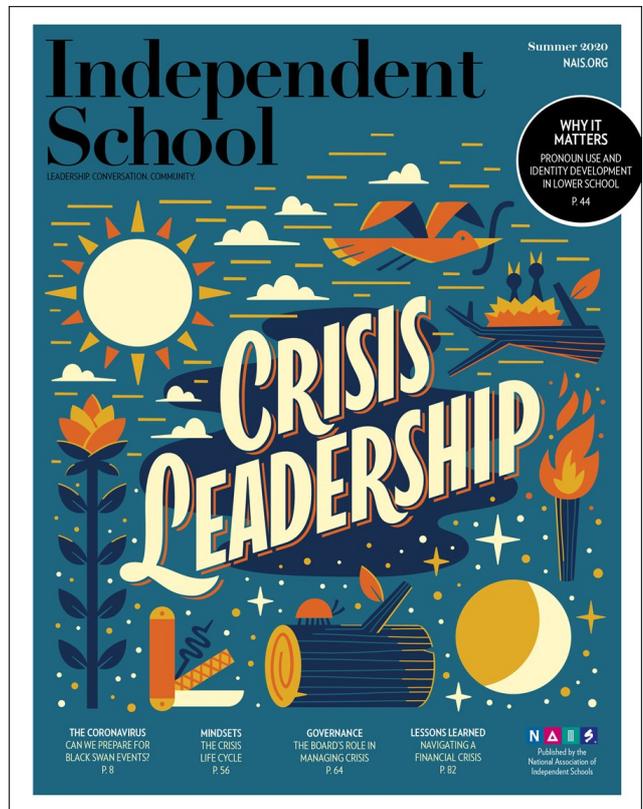
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