

Reaching Boys

An International Study of Effective Teaching Practices

If there is a crisis in boys' education, answers are not hard to find. Thousands of teachers around the world have found the secret to making lessons successful for boys.

By Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley



Juunlimited/Thinkstock Images

Despite a continuing stream of concern on the part of researchers, demographers, and cultural pundits about a crisis in boys' social development and schooling, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what is perhaps the richest pool of data: current, observable teaching practices that clearly work with boys. In schools of all types in all regions of the globe, many boys are thriving. Boys of limited, ordinary, and exceptional tested aptitude; boys of every economic strata; boys of all races and faiths — *some* of them — are appreciatively engaged and taught well every day.

MICHAEL REICHERT is executive director of the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives (www.csbgil.org) and on staff as consulting psychologist at the Haverford School, Haverford, Pennsylvania. **RICHARD HAWLEY**, author of several books about children and learning, is the retired headmaster of Cleveland's University School and founding president of the International Boys Schools Coalition. He lives in Ripton, Vermont.

PDKConnect

To comment on this article, log in at pdkintl.org and click on PDKConnect.

Our career-long immersion with school life convinced us, in partnership with the International Boys' Schools Coalition, that it might be possible to document the elements of successfully teaching boys in schools where the process was most clearly observable: in schools for boys. We did not presume, nor do we now, that effectively teaching boys was possible *only* in boys' schools. Rather, we wanted to document common characteristics of effective practices and, if we found them, to consider their applicability to schools generally.

Although our previous research in individual schools suggested it might be promising and even revelatory to sample a large pool of teachers' and boys' accounts of "what works," we did not begin with any assumption of what such reports would reveal or, more critically, whether there would be any common factors in what was reported. Moreover, we did not want to hear only from or about proven faculty "stars"; we wanted to hear from whole school faculties—beginning, mid-career, and veteran teachers; men and women; teachers of all types in all disciplines; teachers who had taught in both single-sex and coed schools.

Participating schools were in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia. The schools ranged in enrollment from a few hundred boys to over a thousand. Some were highly selective, others not at all. Many were primarily fee-based; a few were mostly government-supported. We asked teachers working in grades 7 through 12 to share an example of a lesson that worked especially well and to provide their reasons for its effectiveness. Specifically, we asked:

Please describe an effective practice you have employed. Tell the story of the practice, as if you are explaining it to a colleague in another subject, or perhaps to a younger teacher who is looking for guidance.

We are aware that teachers' narrative gifts vary a great deal, and we knew that the depth and clarity of their narrated "best lessons" would vary with these gifts. We did not know what kind of quality and sub-

stance we would get from busy teachers asked to engage in yet another task imposed on them by their schools and us.

We received nearly a thousand teacher narratives, representing a majority of each school's faculty. Without much prompting, most teachers in the participating schools responded with great care, detail, and evident pride. Their lessons were clearly articulated, revealing in the narration considerable enthusiasm, an impressive command of the material composing their selected lessons, and a sharp eye for their students' responsiveness.

The teacher submissions were sorted into categories determined by the kinds of activity the teachers narrated. The categories included Gaming, Motor Activity Emphasis, Role Play/Performance, Open Inquiry, Teamwork/Competition, Personal Realization, Responsibility for Outcomes, Intrinsic Subject Matter, and Novelty/Drama/Surprise.

Regardless of other factors, such as different disciplines, length of tenure, school regions, and cultures — the similarities among reported practices were profound. Nearly every reported lesson included multiple elements, as when a teacher devises a game in which boys form teams to create a product that will be judged competitively.

In the following excerpt, submitted by a veteran U.S. English teacher, boys are asked to consider a sustained passage from *Moby Dick* in which the ship's crew participates in an especially visceral kind of fellowship. In the teacher's approach, one can detect elements of physicality, role play, novelty, and surprise.

I ask the boys to join hands to form a circle with me. They are reluctant at first, but after the obligatory rolled eyes and shrugged shoulders, they finally go along with it. Leaving nothing to chance, I am the one who reads the passage aloud. They listen. Slowly, glancing like a dozen Ishmaels from one pair of eyes to the next, they begin to sense the purpose of the exercise. As my reading of the chapter progresses, they themselves become the crew, and they start to feel and then understand the deep brotherhood and mutual dependence that defines one of the central themes of the book. At last, as the chapter ends, I send a squeeze of the hand around the circle, and they release their grips. The physical moment is over, but the lingering stillness signals that the impression has been made.

In this lesson, offered by a teacher from New Zealand, an energizing element of gaming was prominent — a strong and persistent theme in the teacher responses.

In Latin, I decided to make a competitive game of grammar revision (students vs. me — 13- to 14-year-olds, or year 9). I place verb/noun forms for conjugating/declining on the board, and I get them

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

A survey of teachers and students at boys' schools in six countries — the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia — found profound similarities in successful lessons for boys regardless of region or culture. Success in educating boys rests on three themes:

1. Boys are relational learners. Establishing an affective relationship is a precondition to successful teaching for boys.
2. Boys elicit the kinds of teaching they need. Teaching boys has a feedback dynamic in which ineffective practice disengages boys, which causes teachers to adjust pedagogy until responsiveness and mastery improve.
3. Lessons for boys have transitivity. Successful lessons have an element that arouses and holds students' interest.

PDKConnect

To comment on this article, log in at pdkintl.org and click on PDKConnect.

up to the board to answer them. Each form they get wrong is point(s) to me, each correct form a point to them. I ensure that the game is always close by taking off points for untucked shirts/socks down, etc. In this way, the game is always close, and thus competitive. It rewards them for getting answers right, which hopefully encourages learning. I build it up, stating that I've never lost, and that they could be the first class to beat me, but "only if you know your Latin!" They love the competitive nature of it, and when used sparingly, it is an effective tool for encouraging learning in a fun way.

Although we began this study without expecting a boy-specific approach to pedagogy, it was clear to us as we reviewed the teacher responses that these lessons had a distinct for-boys cast. The common elements found in teachers' lessons traced the outlines of a pedagogy fitted to boys' experience and interests. This impression was roundly confirmed by the boys themselves.

While we were concerned about how thoughtfully the teachers would answer our question, we were even more concerned that schoolboys, under conditions of promised anonymity, would not respond seriously to our survey. We asked them:

In the box below, tell us the story of a class experience that stands out as being especially memorable for you.

Over 1,500 students responded. They ranged from 12 to 19 years old and represented a wide range of motivation, tested aptitude, and economic and ethnic diversity. We noted with interest that, despite our injunction against naming names, many respondents ignored this and proceeded, often with touching emotion, to relate stories of particular teachers.

Lightheartedness and good humor were mentioned frequently as qualities that contributed positively to the boys' learning. This 12th-grade boy from New Zealand, for example, took pains to appreciate his teacher's good humor and amiability.

My 4th form Maths stands out as a memorable experience, because the teacher had created personal links with the students by telling stories of his life in a comic way to do with sport and his education. He did it in a light mood, which made everyone relaxed at the start of the lesson, which also made us tune in to his lessons more.

Perhaps as often, boys related stories of teachers' patience, commitment, and confidence in their students. This 10th grader from Canada, for example, remembers gratefully a teacher who helped a "light turn on."

This took place in Computer Studies in grade 10. When we began programming, I had difficulty un-

derstanding how it worked and how to do it. However, the teacher was very understanding towards me and helped me through the whole way. She never gave up on me even though I kept on having difficulty, and finally, after many morning and lunch extra help sessions, a light finally turned on in my mind and I understood everything. I was able to get a really good score on the big test of that unit, but that is not the point of the story. The thing that is memorable is that she never gave up on me and always believed that I could do it. There is no way that I could've understood this confusing and complex unit without her extensive aid. She went the extra mile to help me, and that's what makes this school so great.

The positive school experiences recounted by the boys strongly corresponded to and appeared to validate teachers' accounts of their effective practices. It is perhaps unsurprising that the practices that faculty reported as especially effective also were found to be so by the boys. One of our central findings is that *boys tend to elicit the pedagogy they need*. In other words, teachers present material, and if either the substance or conveyance isn't right, boys will disengage and will engage in either passive inattention or diverting disruption. A committed teacher will not

Boys will disengage and will engage in either passive inattention or diverting disruption.



JUnlimited/Stockxpert

accept these responses and will adjust content, manner of presentation, or perhaps his or her relational style. Effective adjustments will result in better engagement, sustained effort, and mastery on the boys' part. Their positive responses in turn reinforce and lock into place the better pedagogy. In this manner, teachers committed to boys' success will reinforce the boys' adjustments in a continuous, self-correcting cycle.

A PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIP

Teaching boys effectively is like a dance: While someone leads and another follows, the process is a partnership united in common purpose. Our findings suggest that at the heart of this productive partnership are three strong themes.

Boys Are Relational Learners. The overall substance and tone of the student responses in this study — including, notably, their refusal, if not their inability, to refrain from naming and relating instances of valued personal connections with their teachers — strongly suggests that the establishment of an affective relationship is a precondition to successful teaching.

Teaching boys effectively is like a dance: While someone leads and another follows, the process is a partnership united in common purpose.

Miriam Raider-Roth proposes the “relational learner” as the most apt model for how students acquire knowledge. She writes, “Just as the theory of the relational self postulates that the self is born and develops in the cradle and life of relationships, so the notion of the relational learner postulates that the learning self is constructed and developed within the relationships of school” (2005: 21).

Andrew Martin, whose research has focused on school motivation, has discovered clear differences in the degree of achievement motivation manifested by boys and girls and has identified a variety of class-

room practices that work especially well with boys. But, he concludes, “Particularly critical to students’ engagement and motivation in a particular subject was their *relationship with their teacher*” (2003: 54).

Our study echoes these relational theorists. Many teachers in our study had figured out how to emphasize the relational dimension regardless of the subject being taught. Many of the lessons teachers reported were invested with a healthy measure of their personalities and passions, as if they had determined they could best engage boys by drawing them into a relational connection. And the boys took special pains to acknowledge and appreciate teachers’ openness to what interested, excited, and worried them.

In the presence of attentive teachers and their refined lessons, boys seemed to find it difficult to resist engaging in learning. They shared stories of being uplifted by their teacher’s humor, passion, and care and of seeking, finding, and submitting themselves to the inspiration of mentors. Many wrote of responding well to a highly structured, demanding, “no-nonsense” teacher, especially when they found that teacher to be “fair” and to want the best for them. Others praised the teacher who was kind, a “friend.”

Boys Elicit the Kinds of Teaching They Need. In none of the teachers’ narratives was there any hint of wise and all-knowing practitioners applying time-honored and proven techniques. To the contrary, many teachers acknowledged earlier frustration and even outright failure. Teaching more often had a feedback dynamic in which ineffective practice disengaged boys, which caused teachers to adjust pedagogy until responsiveness and mastery improved.

If boys really do “elicit” pedagogy that enables them to respond productively to teachers, why doesn’t this gratifying outcome always occur? There are a number of reasons, and they are worthy of serious consideration.

1. Boys and girls may elicit different and even contradictory teacher responses, resulting in muddy, only partially successful lessons.
2. School or state-mandated protocols may not allow teachers the flexibility to make adjustments that actually engage boys.
3. There may be insufficient openness on the part of schools or individual teachers to examine and reconsider actual student-teacher dynamics.
4. Teachers may lack the empathy or openness to consider the causes of student responses and instead proceed according to a prescribed method or an eccentrically established personal approach, punishing or even banishing those who resist or disrupt.

RESOURCES

The International Coalition of Boys’ Schools (www.theibsc.org) offers a wide array of educational and research programs focused on boys’ education.

The Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives (www.csbg.org) is a research collaborative among independent schools and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Its web site includes links to numerous published articles on boys’ education.

Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

Martino, Wayne, Michael D. Kehler, and Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, eds. *The Problem with Boys’ Education: Beyond the Backlash*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Reichert, Michael C., and Richard H. Hawley. *Teaching Boys/Reaching Boys: A Global Study of Effective Lessons*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2010.

Tyre, Peg. *The Trouble with Boys. A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do*. New York: Crown, 2008.

5. Other conditions bearing on students' lives — troubled domestic circumstances, lack of physical and emotional safety — may make engagement in scholastic activity impossible.

But if these factors are indeed the obstacles to boys achieving scholastically, the good news is that they are readily identifiable and correctible. And when such obstacles are removed, the “eliciting” process described above can begin to mold boys' instruction into its distinctive contours.

Consciously or not, teachers of boys tend to modify what they teach and the way they teach in response to what engages the boys in front of them. Intentionally or not, those teachers find themselves “experts” at teaching boys.

Lessons for Boys Have Transitivity. There is a quality of *transitivity* running through the effective practices reported in our study. By “transitivity,” we mean the capacity of some element of instruction — an element perhaps not normally associated with the lesson at hand — to arouse and hold student interest. That is, the motor activity or the adrenal boost of competing or the power of an unexpected surprise in the classroom serves not merely to engage or delight; it is *transitive* — it attaches to and carries along

a specific learning outcome.

One example of this transitivity comes from an English teacher's narrative of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to his early adolescent students. In the course of this lesson, he introduced his students to the discipline of stage swordplay, and the boys practiced and mastered some of the conventions of swordsmanship. The activity was highly engaging because it was physically rigorous; it was dramatic, holding the faint promise of danger; and it was novel. But, as the teacher's account reveals, it was also *transitive* to a deeper, more enlivened reading of those scenes in which Tybalt slays Mercutio and Romeo slays Tybalt — and to the play as a whole. The active exertions infuse the experience of tackling a dense, rich text with an altogether different kind of energy, appreciation, and attention.

One can also see this kind of transitivity in a technology lesson offered by a teacher from New Zealand, intended to teach principles of momentum. The teacher challenged students to design a model race car powered by CO₂ cartridges that would race other models. The learning objectives include student mastery of a number of physics principles — momentum, aerodynamics, friction — as well as interpersonal skills necessary for teams to

Teachers Are the Center of Education: Profiles of Eight Teachers

In honor of teachers everywhere, College Board and PDK International compiled eight inspiring stories of teachers from across the country. This collection highlights the critical importance of teachers and salutes their great work.

Join us in this celebration of teachers. **Read or download a free copy of these stories at www.pdkintl.org.**



CollegeBoard Advocacy
www.collegeboard.com

construct their vehicles. There were a number of factors *transitive* to the achievement of these learning outcomes. One is the stimulus of competition. Another is the stimulation of interactive exchanges with team members. The exercise also offers opportunities for physical movement and manipulation of materials.

Consciously or not, teachers of boys tend to modify what they teach and the way they teach in response to what engages the boys in front of them.



JUnlimited/Creatas Images

Perhaps the most transitive component of the lesson was the *drama* of the demonstration. As the teacher described it:

They were asked how fast the car would travel down the track, and a general consensus was met of about 30 to 40km/h, again written on the board. Next, they went into the workshop and formed two lines down each side of the track. Waiting until they had settled down and were paying attention, I explained the mechanics of the start gate, finish gate, and timing system. . . .

Then the students were instructed to start a countdown from 3, 3, 2, 1, a loud snap as the spring-loaded firing pin is released, a puff of CO₂, and in a second the car has disappeared down the track and into the finish gate. When the boys calmed down, the time was checked and converted into km/h. At less than one second, the speed was an average of

about 70km/h and the maximum was obviously higher taking into account friction and wind resistance versus momentum.

The kind of dragster demonstrated by the teacher not only sped down the miniature raceway, it did so at twice the predicted speed — at 70 kilometers per hour. The teacher enhanced the drama of the demonstration by a simulated countdown to the launch of the car. The boys were stirred to the extent they had to be “calmed down” before proceeding to subsequent analysis and tasks.

This kind of transitivity is common in the lessons documented in the study. In fact, we maintain that this abstraction — transitivity — may be the central and most valuable finding of this project for practicing teachers. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that some forms of the transitive property are especially effective with boys.

PEDAGOGY FITTED TO BOYS' LIVES

Both of us have worked in schools for decades. Our research and school experience have taught us that a great deal of what we assume to be inherent to boys' and girls' approaches to scholastic life in fact represents adaptations to particular circumstances, including schools' formal and informal curricula. Our interest in this study was to identify those circumstances in which boys revealed special engagement in and mastery of scholastic tasks.

Whatever dissonance, confusion, and hostility may hover in the air as stakeholders assert new and competing claims about the nature and needs of boys and girls and the essential or trivial differences between them with respect to how they learn and how they should be taught, few could reasonably argue with the proposition that many boys are not thriving in the contemporary education system. Nor could one possibly argue that there is no room or reason to improve.

The effective instruction of boys does not require deep immersion in imponderables or tortured theorizing. Boys — some boys, in some settings — are effectively taught every day of the school year. The teachers responsible are easily located. Many of them, as this study has shown, are eager to share what for their colleagues and for boys throughout the world is very good and welcome news. **■**

REFERENCES

Martin, Andrew J. “Boys and Motivation.” *The Australian Educational Researcher* 30, no. 3 (2003): 43-65.

Raider-Roth, Miriam. *Trusting What You Know: The High Stakes of Classroom Relationships*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0912rei.pdf

Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley, Reaching Boys: An International Study of Effective Teaching Practices, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 4, December 2009/January 2010, pp. 35-40.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. **Copies of this article, in print and electronic formats, may not be made, distributed, or posted online without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.**

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at <http://www.pdkintl.org/utilities/archives.htm>.

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275515050>

Reaching Boys: An International Study of Effective Teaching Practices

Article in *Phi Delta Kappan* · January 2010

DOI: 10.1177/003172171009100408

CITATIONS

4

READS

1,010

2 authors, including:



Michael C. Reichert

13 PUBLICATIONS 158 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE