

# Relational Teaching with Primary and Junior Boys

*What Works for Teachers, Students, and Parents*

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## Overview

In two global studies conducted by the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives at the University of Pennsylvania for the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC), including more than 2,000 adolescent boys in grades 6-12 and 2,000 of their teachers from a diverse sample of 50 schools, the teacher-student relationship was identified as a necessary condition for successfully engaging boys in learning. The more recent of the two studies identified the features of successful relational strategies employed by teachers in these schools; the underlying causes of relational breakdowns were also described. A reflective relational practice was recommended to help teachers and coaches function as relationship managers when encountering challenging resistance or overwhelming professional stresses.

As the findings of these studies were shared in workshops and presentations around the world, educators asked how the relational framework applies to those working with younger students. At a stage of development in which attachment processes are of critical importance, boys in elementary grades depend on their teachers in ways that are more and less obvious. It is clear, for example, that the role of parents in the relational dynamic between younger boys and teachers requires special thought. Ruptures in relational connections at this age also look different than those with older boys. Primary and junior school teachers suggested that having a more explicit adaptation of the relational teaching framework for their classrooms would be most welcomed.

Beginning in September 2015, teams from four schools in three countries — Canada, Australia, and the United States — were enlisted, including a coeducational school serving disadvantaged families of color in West Trenton, New Jersey, United States. Employing a research design that included individual and focus-group interviews with teachers, parents, and third-through fifth-year boys, as well as surveys, the teams investigated questions that paralleled those asked in the prior studies of adolescent boys. The research teams reviewed these data for common themes across the four schools and presented their findings at the 2016 IBSC Annual Conference in Vancouver. Each team prepared a Manual on Relational Teaching with Primary and Junior Boys to be used in professional development and in the orientation of new teachers at their schools.

This report summarizes the study and its findings. The report begins with a summary of the relational teaching framework derived from IBSC-sponsored research on teaching and coaching relationships with middle and upper school boys, the results of which have been published both as IBSC reports and separately as books. Subsequent chapters describe findings of the current investigation with younger boys, their teachers, and parents. The final section outlines guidelines and offers tips based on these findings.

## Chapter One: Background and Research

### Background

Some boys thrive in school; many do not. There is a growing consensus that the scholastic performance of boys as a whole is failing to keep up with the new knowledge economy. As *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks 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." (2013) In both National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results in the United States and Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) outcomes globally, boys' achievement has remained flat while results for girls reflect the advances of gender equality. In an authoritative summary of research on this gender achievement gap, Thomas DiPrete of Teachers College at Columbia University and Claudia Buchmann of Ohio State University (2013) demonstrate that differences between boys and girls show up early, prior to kindergarten, and grow through primary school years. They identified three factors in these diverging trajectories.

1. Girls begin school with an advantage in social and behavioral skills.
2. Girls put forth greater effort than boys and thus get greater returns on their abilities.
3. Girls show greater levels of attachment to school and thus experience more gratification from their performance.

However these differences arise, they are fundamentally important. In a study conducted by a team of Canadian researchers, it was determined that differences in boys' and girls' school effort and engagement can be traced to different dreams imagined for their lives (Fortin, et al., 2015). By eighth grade, according to the team's review of annual Monitoring the Future surveys, boys set lower aspirations for themselves and put in less educational effort as a result of this lowered bar. They take less rigorous courses, earn poorer grades, and are more likely to become involved in behaviors, like smoking, and risk-taking that reflect less investment in their futures.

But the most troubling aspect of the educational gap is that while found across virtually all socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic conditions, it is most pronounced when masculine socialization is compounded by other social stresses, like racism and poverty. In a recent U.S. study to examine why boys fare worse than girls in low-SES (socioeconomic status) households, a research team matched birth certificates, health, disciplinary, academic, and high school graduation records for more than 1 million children born in Florida between 1992 and 2002, and found that, compared to their sisters:

*Boys born to low-education and unmarried mothers, raised in low-income neighborhoods, and enrolled at poor-quality public schools have a higher incidence of truancy and behavioral problems throughout elementary and middle school, exhibit higher rates of behavioral and cognitive disability, perform worse on standardized tests, are less likely to graduate high school, and are more likely to commit serious crimes as juveniles. (Astor, et al., 2015)*

The authors ruled out two common explanations for this gap — biological vulnerabilities and socioeconomic stresses — to show that family disadvantage more adversely affects boys as a result of their experience as males "...not because boys are more affected by family environment per se but because the neighborhoods and schools in which disadvantaged children are raised are particularly adverse for boys." (Astor, et al., p. 30)

All of which points to the significant impact boys' experiences have on their educational engagement and achievement. Yet as troubling as this trend may be generally, school troubles are neither universal nor normative. The intriguing fact is that some boys in some schools — in fact some boys in most schools — find their footing, become productively engaged, and even exceed expectations. In order to discover more about these successes, in 2008 the International Boys' Schools Coalition partnered with a research team at the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives at the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a large-scale study of how and why many boys flourish in school. Based on the findings of a first study that identified successful strategies for reaching and teaching boys, a second study was conducted in 2010 specifically investigating how the quality of learning relationships contributes to boys' success. Across 36 schools — private and government-funded; urban, suburban, and more rural; in six different countries — the researchers attempted to locate the effective relational strategies identified by 1,400 adolescent boys and 1,000 of their teachers.

The team had been drawn to the student-teacher relationship by the power and clarity of boys' comments about their most effective lessons. In their resounding validation of teachers who inspired, helped, and uplifted them, the researchers concluded that for boys, "Relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed" (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p. 191). These stories of successful student-teacher partnerships offered a counterpoint to the increasing alarms about their educational underachievement.

This research, the first to consider male student-teacher relationships in particular, came at a time of growing interest in learning relationships generally. "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 determined that both positive and negative teacher-student relationships affect scholastic achievement. Even hard-to-engage

students respond to relational strategies. These studies found 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% 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. (Bergin & Bergin, 2009)

### The Part of the Teacher

Concern about the effects of school relationships on children should not overshadow the significant effects these relationships have on teachers. Professor Andy Hargreaves of Harvard (1998) has found that relationships with students are the greatest sources of enjoyment and motivation for 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.

In the IBSC-sponsored study, boys themselves were clear and articulate about the relational dimension of their learning. In one focus group, in response to our question about a teacher they had gotten on well with, one boy began to talk animatedly about how the teacher had “ignited” him. Other boys in the group chimed in, speaking of this teacher with something like reverence and describing the atmosphere of his classroom as though it were a church or a sacred space. “It’s a class,” they said, “where you wouldn’t *think* of acting out.” The teacher’s presence was neither strict nor commanding. The seriousness of purpose they felt stemmed from the teacher’s own seriousness about his subject — the boys spoke of his “passion”— and the care he took with them. Patient, committed, concerned, and helpful: This was how he was described. “There is just something *about* him,” one of the boys said. “You would be ashamed not to do your work, your best work.”

The qualities of successful teachers listed by the teenage boys were consistent across all the different cultures, countries, and types of schools. Reviewing their stories in the aggregate, we could deduce common features among successful relationships. First and foremost, because it is an instrumental relationship from which boys are looking to learn, the mastery of the teacher was fundamentally important for the establishment of a working alliance: Teachers must be seen as competent, invested in their subjects and their pedagogy, and reliable guides for the learning journey. They must also be approachable, attentive, and responsive to boys' needs, as well as interested in knowing them beyond their performance in their particular classrooms. Both boys and teachers agreed to a remarkable extent on the list of relational gestures offered by teachers that promoted successful learning partnerships.

- Demonstrate an attractive *mastery of their subjects*. Perhaps counter-intuitively, positive teacher-student relationships were not simply a matter of establishing mutually warm affect. Instead, clear mastery of teachers' fields was the relational sine qua non in many of the stories of success.
- Maintain *high 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 most trust and, overall, the best relationships.
- Respond to a student's personal *interest or talent*. Another strong theme running through both boys' and teacher's relational accounts was the enabling effect of a boy's realization that his teacher knew him beyond his status as, say, a seventh grade math or English student.
- Share a *common interest* with a student. For the reasons discussed above, teachers and boys sharing 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 boy and 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 class-wide.
- Have a willingness to *reveal vulnerability*. While the gesture was least frequently reported in the positive narratives, those that did discuss it — both from the boys' and teachers' perspectives — may indicate an important element in relationship-making.

The learning relationship is best understood as an example of a *working alliance*, in which teachers serve as agents of change and students as those seeking to grow, with mastery of the subject or skills 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. Rogers (2009) assigned these unique responsibilities to the relationship manager:

- The expert facilitating the student's learning;
- The one to maintain an overall awareness of the alliance; and
- The one to monitor and to mend strains in the alliance.

How do busy teachers carry out the role of relationship manager? To monitor a relationship that has become difficult, one eliciting feelings of frustration and self-defense, clearly requires an ability to keep one's head even as frustration and other upset feelings arise. It requires a capacity for reflection and self-awareness, a willingness to reassess present practice, and the motivation to improvise new strategies. Assigning this role to teachers can seem unreasonable against the realities of the job in many school systems — too many students, too many special needs, uncooperative parents, pressures to produce test results. In workshops teachers often voice the strongly held belief that boys must also bear some responsibility for the relationship. As one teacher put it: "A successful teacher-student relationship requires mutual commitment from student and teacher. The student's motivation level is the most apparent factor in creating an effective teaching relationship."

But to these claims that boys must share relationship responsibility with teachers we brought news. In our survey we asked the boys what they had done, if anything, to improve the relationship that had gone awry. Among all of our respondents, quite simply, there were no accounts of such initiative. In one memorable dialogue between students and teachers during one of our workshops, one 17-year-old student acknowledged behaving poorly a few years earlier — not completing his work, ducking other responsibilities, behaving disrespectfully — but when challenged by a teacher 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 was off course. More commonly they dug their heels in, condemned the teacher in angry justifications, or fatalistically wrote off the course and the teacher.

### **Responsibility for Relational Breakdowns**

Absent such connections, boys are sometimes willing to check out and then to act out. Their stance as learners assumes a teacher willing and able to guide them; in relationships with teachers where there is a relational rupture, boys described the teacher as unresponsive, inattentive, disrespectful, a poor pedagogue, or downright mean. For a variety of revealing reasons, it is rare that a student takes any responsibility to repair a breakdown in a relationship with his teacher or coach. Instead of trying to fix the relationship, boys vote with their feet. As a boy at a Catholic school explained about a teacher he felt mistreated by: "I *hate* him. I'm not doing anything in that class. He can flunk me, they can kick me out — I'm not doing anything." When asked why, despite the obvious fact that this stance hurt him more than the teacher, he remained adamant: "I won't do *anything* for him." Such hardened attitudes were the norm in boys' stories of relational breakdowns; feeling violated, boys disconnect righteously and readily.

The following seven themes summarize boys' views of why things had not gone well with teachers. The list is virtually opposite to the previous list of successful relational gestures.

- *Teachers were disrespectful or disparaging.* Respect was the sine qua non for relational partnership in boys' views; its absence was the most common explanation offered by boys for relationship failure. Teachers who displayed negative or critical attitudes risked boys' absolute refusal to relate, no matter the consequences.
- *Teachers showed little personal enthusiasm.* Boys expected teachers who not only had mastered their subjects but who also cared deeply about them; they hoped to be guided by teachers' personal passion in ways that elevated the class above the mundane.
- *Teachers were inattentive or indifferent.* Boys expected not only good teaching but also teachers who were capable of noticing them and responding with care. They could be quite disdainful of teachers they perceived as somehow out of it.
- *Teachers were unresponsive.* Similarly, boys expected — needed — teachers who would respond to their struggles in the triadic context with their own commitment to help, including a willingness to revisit their present approach in search of a better match for a boy's learning style.
- *Teachers were unable to control their classes.* In many ways the frequency of this reported theme reinforced our hopeful finding that boys do, indeed, hope for classes managed by competent teachers in which they can focus and learn.
- *Teachers were uninspiring or boring.* Distinct from the teacher's level of passion and involvement with their subject, how teachers taught their lessons mattered a great deal to boys who, again, hoped to be lifted by their teachers out of the tedium of school routines.
- *Teachers communicated poorly.* Sometimes boys may not have felt any particular animus toward teachers they named in their negative relational example; rather, they simply could not understand them or their lessons.

In their own accounts of relational breakdowns, teachers did acknowledge responsibility for relational failure as well as considerable regret when a working relationship could not be restored. In fact, both in survey responses and in workshops, their accounts of these breakdowns were poignant and often quite painful. But like the boys they tended not to blame themselves. In the end teachers attributed relational impasse and failure to the intractable personal or family circumstances, psychological problems, severe learning deficits, or, in some cases, larger cultural stresses bearing upon the boy. In fact, many teachers took pains to convey that they had done everything that could be professionally expected of them to reach the boy, whereas in their positive accounts they celebrated the serial attempts and sustained effort they made to overcome these same circumstances.

That there are frequent breakdowns in learning relationships should surprise no one. After all, both boys and their teachers have full lives, with various stresses and challenges that impact their ability to be present in the partnership. As Hartling and colleagues (2004) described, every human relationship cycles through periods of connection-disconnection-reconnection. Given the ubiquity of disconnections, small and large, in all kinds of relationships, we wondered whether boys might be expected to take more responsibility when a breakdown occurs in their relationships with teachers and coaches, as a way to build their relational repair repertoire. Exploring this question in a focus group with top student leaders at a Canadian high school, we learned that even the most empowered and endorsed students are largely paralyzed when a school relationship goes awry; they typically write off the course or the teacher, resolving to endure until the end of the term and sometimes developing a negative attitude that can seep into their behavior.

Unfortunately, in ways that may be particularly problematic for teachers of boys, the resistance of male students when they are offended, frightened, or overwhelmed often manifests in ways that put teachers off (Raider-Roth, et al., 2012). When confronted by a belligerent, disruptive, or disrespectful attitude, many teachers defensively conclude that they have done all they can and that it is up to the boy — despite his disadvantages — to take the next step. Thus, underlying most relational breakdowns is a teacher who has reached the end of the proverbial rope and has reverted from relationship management to self-management.

### Repairing Breakdowns

Both the positive and negative teacher accounts tended to begin with relational challenges to be 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*. This finding was critically important: It was not a boy's circumstances that differentiated the successful and less successful teaching relationships. Strong teaching alliances can overcome a host of difficulties carried to school — and do so every day. Even boys facing severe family or social stresses become positively engaged and set on promising paths in alliances with teachers and coaches. As Pedro Noguera of the University of California at Los Angeles has written, "The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself should be regarded as a learning disability." (2011, p. 10)

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 arise when teachers are 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 management *of themselves*. Hargreaves (1998) has detailed the "emotional practice of teaching," in which feelings of powerlessness can be especially unsettling for teachers whose professional identities depend on being liked or welcomed by their students. When stressed, depleted, or confronted with intractable resistance, 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 particular 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 acknowledgement of the need to change the approach if it was not working. By contrast with the successful accounts, stories of breakdown reflected more rigid stances taken by teachers who had run out of ideas, likely becoming frustrated and upset, 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. The emphasis on sorting and measuring that has filtered into professional evaluation systems may mitigate the safety and openness that is the *sine qua non* of relational reflexivity. In fact, Eleanor Drago-Severson 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." (2012, p. 5)

In schools implementing these findings — the action phase of the research cycle — it became clear that school cultures in which teachers are well held while struggling with difficult students display three features. The first essential condition is establishing that the relationship manager role belongs to the teacher, not the student. 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 are resistant to 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 up 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.

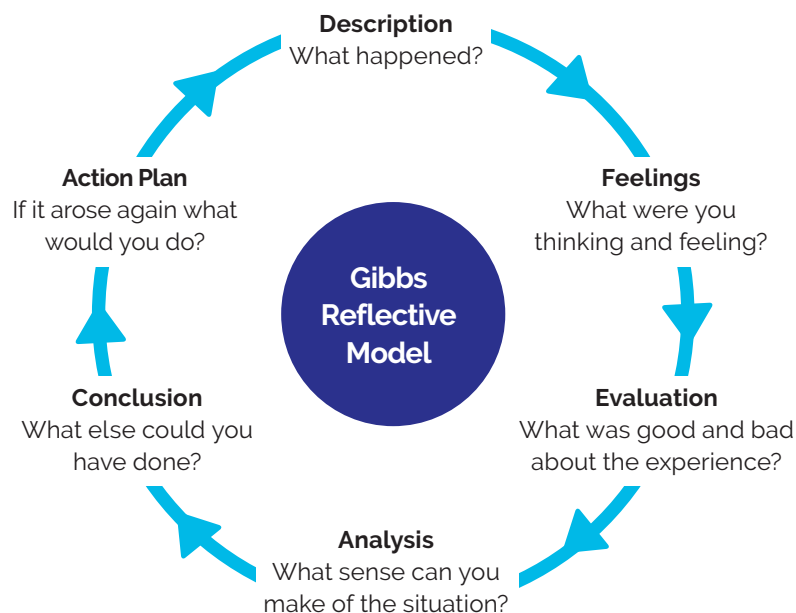
To do so, when they reach the edge of their relational skills, a second essential condition is for teachers to recognize that they are stuck and still believe that it is still possible, at least theoretically, for the boy to be reached — somehow, sometime, by someone. The successful relationships narrated by the teachers in our study were broadly characterized by:

- A willingness to be *flexible* and to improvise alternate approaches, and
- A capacity to step back and *reflect* on what was working and not working in their relational efforts.

Instead of defensively digging in their 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 on 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, it may be difficult for teachers to find new, creative solutions to these relational puzzles. While an imperative to see beyond one's blind spots may seem oxymoronic, Miriam Raider-Roth 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." (2005) The third feature found to support teachers' 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 helpful. The model (see figure below) for this action phase melds an approach developed by Graham Gibbs (1998) 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 a mutual exploration of relational challenges and problem solving in a supportive and coaching context.



Schools using this model have reported that the sequence of steps can help untangle the welter of facts, feelings, and strategic choices that sometimes becomes overwhelming to practitioners. Faculties have found that the exercise goes better when cultural habits of keeping relational struggles to oneself and blaming the student are challenged. One particular school, deciding to commit more resources in support of the teacher-student relationship, primed the exercise with the dean of faculty 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 importantly this exercise helped to shift a faculty culture to one in which relational breakdowns are not seen so much as personal failures but rather as teaching challenges requiring peer support, understanding, and concrete feedback.

## Relationships with Disadvantaged Boys

In his consideration of how well this relational teaching framework applied to boys of color from disadvantaged circumstances, Nelson (2013) conducted interviews, observations, and surveys with 50 black and Latino boys attending a single-sex middle school for boys of color in New York City. In his exploration of how boys in his study relate to their teachers, Nelson found the following dynamics related to the relational teaching strategies (Reichert & Hawley, 2014).

- *Subject and pedagogical mastery.* Like the boys in the global study, boys of color at this New York school also held an expectation that teachers would be knowledgeable in their subject areas and would demonstrate the ability to communicate the material in a clear and compelling manner, while effectively managing their classes and maintaining a learning environment. In fact, it was a "given."
- But *care* was more important to them, especially when it was expressed in their "being seen" in ways that were outside of the negative stereotypes associated with black masculinity (e.g., hyperaggressive, anti-intellectual, and hypersexual). In this light, care was expressed by holding high expectations of these boys' academic ability and performance, as well as of their ability to "stay out of trouble." They not only wanted to be held accountable for their actions in class or related to schoolwork but also wanted to "be" and "feel" supported to meet these high expectations.
- Care was also expressed by demonstrating an *understanding of the boy's life circumstances* related to urban poverty and the special challenges confronting his family. In these situations, maintaining high expectations while offering accommodations (e.g., extensions in assignments) effectively communicated the teacher's caring.
- *Reaching out and going beyond.* There were many examples cited by boys that registered the commitment of the teacher or coach to their success, including picking up and dropping boys off at home and school; taking students on a range of field trips to experience "new things" (e.g., opera, Julliard performances, museums, music camps, science camps, "famous" guest speakers); allowing boys to share "their side of the story" when they misbehave; and remembering boys' birthdays and celebrating them.
- *Being relaxed about misbehavior.* Instead of knee-jerk, formulaic consequences, boys appreciated and felt cared for by teachers who took their circumstances into consideration as they responded to misbehavior or poor performance. Boys overwhelmingly felt that more rigid responses were flat-out "unfair," but agreed that special accommodations should be made "in private" and with the general understanding that they are intended to support school success. Boys appreciated teachers who make adjustments to policies or classroom practices when they learn of challenges in a boy's personal life that affect his schoolwork. Examples included setting flexible due dates for assignments when there is no computer at home; allowing the student to be a little late to first period because of a long commute to school; letting the student slide with grammar/punctuation issues if they know that the boy generally struggles with communicating his ideas; etc.
- *Personal advocacy.* Making a special commitment to a boy was another frequently cited theme. With boys experiencing more pronounced social stresses, including domestic and/or child abuse, father absenteeism, incarceration, deportation, housing instability, or caregiver substance abuse, teachers sometimes helped families find housing, legal representation, or even substance abuse rehabilitation. Facilitating on-site social services (e.g., counseling) also communicated a personal commitment.
- *Establishing common ground* was the most prominent relational teaching strategy mentioned in these interviews. Boys stated that it "felt good" for them to know that their teachers shared some of their life experiences related to poverty and still managed to be successful, especially when the teacher was a male of color. There was a "closeness" that came from knowing about this shared experience and in the bond established with their teacher; boys were less inclined to feel "less than" or "messed up." Boys also stated that this relational gesture relieved pressures they often felt to "be perfect;" instead, they felt that they were in a "safe environment," able to make mistakes, to learn, and to grow. In addition to sharing the "common ground" of poverty, teachers could establish a connection through a shared interest in sports (e.g., basketball and football), music (e.g., nontraditional music choices, classical, or "Indie"), and theater (e.g., Broadway musicals or plays).

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.



## Chapter Two: Study Design and Research Methods

This two-year qualitative study was conducted with a cohort of four primary schools in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Teams from these schools engaged in an inquiry process that sought to explore relational teaching with PK-5 boys.

The goals of the study were:

- To map the broad themes and dynamics associated with relational teaching with boys in primary and junior school;
- To describe parental roles in the support of relational teaching and/or coaching; and
- To chart relational breakdowns between primary and junior boys, and teachers and coaches, with a particular focus on teachers' perceptions of and responses to these breakdowns.

Each school organized a site-based research team comprised of three to five teachers and administrators, who were supported by the study's investigators. This collaborative group established a common research design and timeline and offered training to members of school teams in research methods (e.g., conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups, and qualitative data analysis). School teams themselves conducted on-site data collection and analyses.

Intended to capture multiple perspectives, data collection methods across all four schools included focus groups with primary school boys (N=88) and their parents (N=33), interviews with schoolteachers (N=38), and an additional open-ended survey with parents (N=55). Focus groups and interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length, and the online survey with parents was narrative-based (300-500 words). Data analysis consisted of inductive and deductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and thematic analysis (Creswell, 2001).

## Chapter Three: Relational Teaching with Elementary and Junior School Boys

In the research sponsored by the IBSC described in the previous sections, early adolescent and adolescent boys were found to be relational learners, the quality of the connection with the teacher a key factor in their learning. This next phase in understanding how boys learn is focused on the relationship between boys and teachers in elementary and junior school settings. During the 2015-16 academic school year, four research teams worked collaboratively to build an independent understanding of relational pedagogy under the conditions at their schools. Rich conversations and data emerged from student, parent, and faculty surveys and interviews.

To the question, "How does the relational teaching framework deduced from research with older boys apply to younger boys and their teachers?", the answer was clear.

- The findings from this study of younger boys across varied contexts support the results of the previous study with older boys, including the primacy of relational gestures in the development and maintenance of successful engagement in learning.
- While the teams found strong concordance with both the relational teaching framework derived from older boys and with each other's findings from different school contexts, there were some divergences — of age and development, of local school culture — worth mentioning.

For example, the role of the relationship manager, so critical to successful relational pedagogy, is different at the lower school level. With primary and junior boys, teachers are typically active and engaged with their classes for the entire day. This means that there are many teacher-whole class interactions, while 1:1 interactions are likely to occur on the fly. Another key difference was found in how relational breakdowns typically occur between younger boys and their teachers: They are generally quieter and less noticeable, though teary or stormy meltdowns certainly take place on occasion in all of the schools. Younger boys are characteristically less bold or belligerent, for example, and are more likely to internalize their resistance than to show it overtly. With breakdowns so common, though quiet, an important take-away from this research was the importance of helping teachers notice when boys have disengaged.

In our data, it was clear from all three perspectives — students, teachers, and parents — that no factor is more important for the establishment and maintenance of a successful connection than the boy's perception of the teacher's attitude toward him. When boys believe that their teachers care about them, see them as competent, respect their views, and desire their success, they tend to work toward fulfilling high expectations.

In this chapter, we summarize the most common relational gestures described by teachers and boys, as these were told to the different school research teams. While there is overlap with the gestures found in the study of middle and senior school students, to convey the authentic nature of the findings we use the words, themes, and examples of the participants from the present study in this report.

### Boys' Views of Positive Relationships

In response to the prompt, "Tell me about a teacher with whom you really connected" (and variations of that prompt depending on boys' age), boys in grades kindergarten through third grade reported that teachers' "niceness" and their offering special activities or rewards were important features in successful relational strategies.

#### • Teachers Who Are Nice

Boys in grades K-3 consistently used the word "nice" when describing a teacher with whom they connected. In their own words:

"She's nice to me." (kindergarten boy)

"She was nice." (interviewer probes, "What made her nice?") "She... I don't know." (first grade boy)

"She's nice and she's gives lots of 'on-the-balls.'" (second grade boy)

#### • Offering Special Activities or Rewards

Boys also reported that teachers who offered rewards or special or preferred activities were held in high regard. In boys' own words:

"She lets us use the Chromebooks once in awhile." (first grade boy)

"She picks some people to read books to the class in the morning." (second grade boy)

"She gave us candy." (third grade boy)

- **Care and Love**

When boys felt cared for by the teacher, their own warm feelings grew and they felt connected to that teacher. In boys' own words:

"She loves me." (kindergarten boy)

"When you were hurt or anything, she would bring you to the nurse, like, really fast." (first grade boy)

"I love her." (second grade boy)

There was a shift as boys entered fourth and fifth grades. These older boys have developed a greater sense of themselves as learners and thus became more interested in the teacher's ability to help them grow more as learners. More in line with the study with middle and upper school boys, these junior and primary school boys became more instrumental and more focused on the value of the teacher in helping them to achieve learning goals. While kindness, interest, and special attention were still desired features in a teacher, fourth and fifth grade boys also valued teachers' pedagogical skill and subject mastery.

- **Teacher Can Help Me Learn**

Increasingly viewing learning and academic success as important, boys in fourth and fifth grade value teachers whom they see as competent in helping them reach their goals. In boys' own words:

"She helped us with different strategies to help us learn." (fourth grade boy)

"He worked with us well and he knew how boys were... he taught in a way that

made things funny, but we also learned well, so I think he was a great teacher." (fourth grade boy)

- **Teacher Knows Me as More Than a Student**

Fourth and fifth grade boys appreciated being known as an individual outside of their academic standing. In boys' own words:

"This person helps me learn in a positive way because she understands me and she talks to me and cares about your life and not just learning." (fourth grade boy)

"She doesn't only care about learning, she cares if you have fun, and not only just getting A+'s on everything... If we get in trouble, she's like, 'You can have another chance.'" (fourth grade boy)

**In summary, boys explained that they want teachers who:**

- Treat them fairly — individually — and judge each situation on its merit.
- Praise/recognize their efforts and progress — not just their achievement.
- Make them feel part of the group.
- Like them (value, respect, understand).
- Are consistent and don't "sweat the small stuff" (i.e., overreact to misbehavior).
- Don't yell or embarrass them in public.
- Allow them personal freedom to develop their own ideas and methods.
- Respect their creativity and allow them to develop their own ideas and conclusions.
- Give them feedback that helps them improve their work.

Teachers' Views of Positive Relationships

In another difference from the study with older boys, teachers at the primary and junior school level could talk about successful relational strategies with more perspective than their students could manage — not surprising given their ages. Across the participating schools, these themes were gleaned from teachers.

- **Meeting a Student's Particular Needs**

For a teacher to meet the needs of students, they must begin with knowing who each boy is academically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Making an effort to identify and meet a student's needs, whether in the classroom or on the playing field, makes that student more receptive to the teacher's input and more willing to assume ownership of his learning goals and ambitions. In teachers' words:

"I took the time to work with him and see where his struggles were coming from and he could sense that."

"Social cues were difficult for him, and because of that, peer relationships were very difficult. Relationships among your peers are tremendously important. We had some healing to do."

"I think he wants, or needs, to feel like he has a voice and I think having a chance to listen to him means a lot."

"I kept trying different hooks with him, things he might be interested in, and tried to chat with him, to learn some things that he was interested in."

"He had gotten kind of a bad rap. Boys did not want to work with him. That made it really hard. We had to tackle that."

- **Making the Effort to “Get” Him**

Even beyond knowing what boys need in order to learn, it helps when teachers endeavor to know a boy more holistically. When they invest time and effort to really know their students — what they care about or may be struggling with, what factors affect them in their lives — boys come to believe that the teacher “gets” them and are more likely to feel positively about class and about school in general. Boys are more willing to work hard, to risk making mistakes, and to ask for help when they have determined that their teachers know them in such personal ways. A common strategy to accomplish this was to talk with the boy’s parents in an effort to learn more about him. In teachers’ words:

“I worked hard on how to talk to the boys and to talk about their feelings.”

“I think he’s been very misunderstood in the past. Because he is so bright, people think that he just either doesn’t care or isn’t working hard, because they know he can do it, so they don’t understand why he’s not. His parents really saw that I understood him.”

“One parent shared, ‘I really appreciate what you’re doing for my child. Maybe that’s why he’s in your class because you’re the kind of teacher who understands him.’”

“Talking to the parents about that (the kind of books he likes) is important, I think, because it shows that you are showing interest in their child. Then once you develop that type of relationship, then they’ll seek you out when they’re looking for books to purchase for their child. It’s the big picture of getting to know the child better on all levels.”

- **Sharing a Common Interest**

When teachers share something in common with their students, the strength of their relationship seems to benefit, also improving academic performance. In teachers’ words:

“This boy is an amazing artist and we have a great time sharing our artwork together, so I think that commonality is really helpful.”

“I carry a journal with me and he kind of picked up on that and he got his own journal. He carried it around with him all the time and writes down everything, which I love. He shares that with me and that has been another good piece that we share together.”

“We both have a love for Star Wars and the grade three boys especially connected with this event. We read stories together and participated in discussions about the books, films, TV shows, graphic novels, and conventions. On their own, the students brought in costumes and dressed up for library class, as well as brought in books and collectibles to display in our museum. The event added much excitement and enthusiasm about reading.”

- **Personal Disclosure**

When teachers bring in aspects of their personal lives and share personal anecdotes and stories with students, this self-disclosure bridges the gap between them and their students, leading to increased student engagement. In teachers’ words:

“He has two fathers and we’ve talked a lot about my sister, or my niece and nephew having two moms.”

“The boys were hesitant to share their fears at first. No hands went up to share. Responding to this, I decided to tell them about my fear of the dark as a child and shared a personal story with them about this fear. They were extremely attentive. The instant my story was done, hands shot up in the air to share their stories.”

“They usually start the interaction with something personal that they want to share with me, which then opens the door for me to share something personal with them.”

“Like him, I can be sensitive and he has seen me struggle with my emotions. I am a true believer that sharing personal disclosure can foster and strengthen a relationship, as can ensuring that you can be present for your students.”

- **Fairness and Trust**

Teachers generally felt that the boys they teach or coach are keenly attuned to fairness and connect better when they trust their teachers to treat everyone with thoughtful consideration. In teachers’ words:

“I remember him going, ‘Huh, okay. She’s going to discipline the behavior. It doesn’t matter the kid.’ That went a long way with him.”

“He had a strong sense of fairness... based on his own interpretation, not everybody else’s interpretation of fairness. We had to work through that.”

“For him, I was very clear and made sure that he understood that when he was disciplined for something he had done, it’s the behavior that has to be corrected. I love you; I think you’re great; it’s the behavior.”

“He learned to understand that if you don’t do your part, there’s a consequence.”

- **Setting High Expectations**

Teachers and coaches also understood that for their male students, high expectations delivered with strong support often lead to more motivated academic and athletic performances. The two go hand-in-hand: Building a strong connection with a boy allows the teacher to expect the student's best work. In teachers' words:

"What motivated him was that he didn't want to see me disappointed in him."

"The biggest compliment for a teacher is when the student truly works hard because he knows you believe in him."

"They see how much you are doing to help them and they want to work so that they can give back to you."

- **Keeping a Sense of Humor**

When teachers use humor effectively in the classroom, it builds rapport with students and positively affects their ease in the classroom, thence their participation and motivation. In teachers' words:

"Those boys that I have a really good, healthy relationship with are those who love to laugh and joke around with me."

"I think one of the main things is when you have a sense of humor, and you can laugh with them. It's just being able to laugh with one another."

- **Revealing Vulnerability**

Another common strategy was for teachers to mitigate students' distance from them by carefully sharing themselves in personal ways, mindful still to maintain professional boundaries. In this teacher's words:

"I was willing to allow my deep emotion to be seen by my students, and this trust, which I showed, has been given back to me. The teacher/coach, whom they see every day, was transformed during our trip, and it was a surprise for them. The students saw a different aspect of me, and they gained a more complete understanding of me. The development of the relationship was also nurtured by the participation of the boys' parents, who also saw a different side of me, and who could add their adult observations, perspective, and context. The growth, which I describe, can be seen and felt in the respect which we have for one another, and in the trust which they have in me, and where and how I lead them as a teacher. This trust is priceless, and it must be lived up to daily."

In summary, while we discovered that both boys and teachers at the primary and junior school levels echoed those heard in the middle and upper school studies, in important ways the relational dimension was influenced by features specific to this level: boys' age and capacities for understanding; the contours of teachers' classrooms, days, and schedules; and the nature of the relationship struck with parents. But the same phenomenon — of teachers adapting their pedagogy to fit their students, especially in the relational realm — underlies successful teaching and coaching.

## Chapter Four: Relational Breakdowns with Elementary and Junior Boys

As we found in our study with middle and high school age boys, the power asymmetry between boys and teachers influences how free students are to acknowledge conflicts and disconnections that arise in these relationships. We found this to be all the more true with younger boys. Kindergarten boys, for the most part, were unable to share a story of disconnection with a teacher when asked. Instead, they readily chose examples from outside the classroom, with siblings or coaches.

But beginning in first grade, boys were more willing to share a time when they felt disconnected from a teacher. The stories they chose usually related to times they encountered a teacher's negative emotions: blame, disappointment, or anger. Many of their stories involved a perception of injustice or unfairness, when they were punished for something they felt they didn't do or when an entire class received consequences for the actions of a few boys. Boys used emotional language as they shared these stories, recounting how they felt "sad" or "angry." By third and fourth grade, boys were able to share stories that were specific and clear.

Once again, as with their stories of connection, in their stories of relational breakdowns junior age boys were focused on their ambitions as students. They often related times when teachers required them to complete tasks in a way that "would not help me study" or when they did not understand the directions given and received a punishment. A fourth grader explained, "Some teachers just have to try to adjust a little bit more to be able to really understand the kids well." Boys disconnect from teachers when they perceive that the teacher is unable to reach them as individuals, match their needs, or become frustrated and raise their voices to convey negative emotions.

### Boys' Views of Relational Breakdowns

When a relationship with a teacher has not gone well for a boy, he generally explained that it was because the teacher was unfair. Examples included times when a whole class or group was punished for the deeds of a few, when punishments were too harsh, or when there was a perception that some boys were picked on or targeted unfairly. Boys also attributed breakdowns to instances where teachers did not allow for individual learning styles and differences and instead worked on a one-size-fits-all approach.

Some common themes in their stories of relational breakdowns, described in boys' words:

#### • Teachers' Unfairness

When boys perceived a lack of empathy or understanding from a teacher, especially when corrected or punished, they were often left feeling distant and disconnected from the teacher. In boys' own words:

"Then I kind of tried to like, take it away from him so he would play [the game] the right way, but then my teacher made me have to write a note home because she thought I was like, fighting with him... I stayed mad at her for about a day... because my parents would kill me... My parents got really, really, really mad at me when we go down to yellows."

"People were building this ginormous house and they wouldn't let me go in. But then the teacher came out and said, 'You can't go in unless you helped them build it.' But it was already finished so I couldn't do anything about it."

"She thought I was talking and I had to sit in the hall. I was very sad... I wasn't talking."

(Blamed for something that another student did.) "I got in trouble for nothing."

"In preschool I closed the door behind me and it hit my friend's hand and it got, it hurt him... It was an accident and my teacher made me go to the principal's office... [I felt] sad... because it was an accident."

#### • Teachers' Disappointment

Similarly, when they disappointed their teacher, boys experienced difficult feelings that could lead to their withdrawal. In their own words:

Boy: "In Pre-K there was this teacher who got super upset at me and that made me feel super sad... I was just doing some stuff that I shouldn't have been doing... and that's all."

Interviewer: "So, what made you feel sad, do you think? Were you sad that you got in trouble? Were you sad that you felt like she was upset with you?"

Boy: "Yeah, that was the part. Where she was upset with me."

#### • Teachers' Anger

As with stories of being punished or otherwise told they had let their teacher down, boys could not help but react negatively when teachers expressed anger at them, often causing them to withdraw or to feel afraid. In boys' own words:

"Sometimes I felt like when my teacher was angry she was like a fireball."

"She gets frustrated really easily."

- **Teachers Not "Getting" Boys**

Particularly as they became older, boys reacted to a teacher's actions with an implicit criticism that they misjudged or handled things poorly. In boys' own words:

(story from preschool) "There was a teacher that always yelled at us. They wouldn't let us have any free time or anything. She would make us do stuff that didn't make sense."

"They would make me do random things that would not help me study."

"Some teachers just have to try to adjust a little bit more to be able to really understand the kids well."

"Our class wasn't behaving... She made us stay silent... I feel like we kind of earned the respect that we could get back to kind of whispering quietly and that never happened."

- **Teachers' Views of Relational Breakdowns**

For their part, teachers of younger boys followed the same pattern we found among teachers of older boys, tending to attribute relational breakdowns to circumstances of the boy that they felt were beyond their control.

- **Psychological and Behavioral Characteristics**

The idea that certain boys have constitutional or inherent, perhaps immutable, personality characteristics that work against their being able to function well at school was a popular explanation for breakdowns. In teachers' words:

"I felt like, in the classroom, he was hard to reach. I think partly because of his personality, and that he was kind of closed."

"You can give as a teacher, but sometimes the kid's personality may not give back to you."

"I don't know if there were psychological things going on with this student, but one day he loved me, and the next day he just didn't want to have anything to do with me or anyone."

"I think he does not have a great understanding of social cues. He would roll his eyes or make these gestures that definitely come off as rude but he had no idea that they came off as rude."

"I think about a boy I have right now... who has been having a high level of anxiety."

"He would just freeze, but I could see in that expression that there's anger. There's so much anger there. You just want to get down in there and just pull it out. You know you really can't."

- **Learning Issues**

Likewise, teachers' focus on boys' learning differences often became their explanations for any difficulties reaching or effectively engaging them in working alliances. In teachers' words:

"In addition to academics being difficult for him, his stamina is not where his peers' stamina is. When he's putting all the pieces and parts together, the whole day is challenging for him. I don't know if what happened that day with that disconnect was a physical or a mental exhausting issue, but he was at his breaking point. He was done."

"He didn't know how to do the task and didn't know how to ask for help. He thought I was pushing him beyond his comfort zone."

"He was really not comprehending what was going on in the classroom so when he wouldn't know a word, he wouldn't ask questions. He would just shut down."

- **Parent Influences**

We heard stories of how a teacher's best efforts to establish an effective learning partnership with a boy were undermined or sabotaged by parents who did not support the relationship. In teachers' words:

"I always find it difficult when parents are so caught up on the grade because I try to get the boys to not get caught up on the grades, but if it's coming from the parents, you can't do anything about it."

"I just couldn't get to that little fellow, and I'm just not sure if it was more of hearing mom at home or his personality."

"The parents were in a divorce situation, so one parent was very receptive of me reaching out, the other one not at all. When the dad was involved helping him study, I would see a good grade and I would see motivation in my room."

"The best way to describe my interactions with them is that it's not that they're negative, but they are strained. I'm always the first to initiate conversation. Mom, when she initiates, it's because she needs something."

"Sometimes when a relationship has broken or is at least needing repair, a child goes home and says something very exaggerated from reality and a parent will come back accusatory."

- **Family Stresses**

The fragility of teachers' efforts to work with boys and sustain their focus was evident in comments about how family circumstances could undermine their relational efforts with boys. Their emotional investments in students were sometimes frustrated by these family-based issues. In teachers' words:

"It was early in the year and admissions let me know that mom was pulling him out. The whole thing was just very difficult to understand, and I realized that when you can't make a connection, some of that comes from home, from that parental piece. For whatever reason, if the parent decided that they don't like you, they don't like what's going on, as opposed to coming in and talking it through, then there's that kind of flight response."

"I love this boy and I feel like we do well together, but I feel like he has a very complex home life. His family tends to make teacher phone calls on a regular basis and talk about him being bullied or his needs not being met, and I think that has led to his anxiety."

"I think he has very high anxiety, but I think his family life has a high level of anxiety."

In summary, breakdowns in relationships between teachers and younger students were as ubiquitous and consequential as at the upper levels. Establishing and maintaining positive connections with students is central to successful teaching with younger boys and must be part of a teacher's toolkit. As with older boys, teachers can lose sight of their connections with students and may not fully notice when these connections have become attenuated or have ruptured, weakening boys' engagement with them.



## Chapter Five: Including Parents in the Relational Framework

To successfully establish and sustain a working alliance with their students, teachers must create partnerships with parents. With the deeper dependence of boys on their parents in primary and junior grades, parents are integral to the education process and a necessary part of teachers' relational efforts with students. Teachers must communicate proactively with parents and parents must, for their part, keep teachers informed about the ups and downs of the boy's reactions to life. Each party in the school-home partnership can reinforce or undermine what the other is doing.

In focus group and survey comments, parents expressed strong views about their expectations of teachers. In particular, they believed that every teacher should have the sensitivity and professional insight to read their sons accurately and match their pedagogy to each boy's needs. Underlying their strong convictions were even stronger emotions: Parents have a great deal riding on their sons being successfully engaged and helped by teachers and coaches. As much as they have invested themselves in their sons, they hold to hopes and expectations that others will see their sons' promise and help them to fulfill it.

Parents often experience relationships with teachers as difficult to navigate. When they feel the working alliance is working well, they are happy to step out and let teachers do their jobs. When it is not going to their satisfaction, however, they feel conflicted. Should they intervene — running the risk of antagonizing the teacher — or remain silent? They feel a double bind, torn between advocating for their son and partnering with the teacher. In these moments, many become passive, internalize their worry and stress, and feel uncertain about how to proceed. Some parents try to take on the role of teacher at home or adopt a "wait it out" attitude, in the hope that next year their son will get a teacher that connects better with him.

Depending on the age of the boy, the seriousness of the situation, or their level of anxiety and stress, parents can find it difficult to navigate between conflicting impulses: to allow their sons to develop resilience or to step in when he appears to be overwhelmed. Complicating this calculation was a fear of a negative backlash if their intervention rubs the teacher the wrong way. Still, this is the key challenge for parents in their efforts to help their sons get on in school: discerning when to encourage the boy's own relational problem-solving and when to step in on his behalf.

The single most important feature that parents appreciated in a teacher was the ability to connect with their son. They expressed this desire in a number of ways. First, they wanted teachers to see what they see in their sons, to "get" him as they do. They also wanted teachers to see their sons as multidimensional, more complex and interesting than his academic performance. In consequence, they wanted teachers to take time to get to know their sons, believing that as they connect with teachers, boys will work much harder and achieve greater outcomes. Once a teacher has established a personal connection based on an accurate read of a boy, parents want highly skilled teachers capable of inspiring and improving learning.

### Themes in Parents' Views of Relational Teaching with Their Sons

#### • Expectation and Anxiety

Levels of parental stress were directly related to the quality of their sons' relationships with teachers. If the teacher relationship was going well, they felt happy to let teachers do their job. If they viewed the relationship between their son and the teacher as weak or broken, they felt extremely stressed — even to the point of attempting to take on the role of the teacher at home. But those who had taken this step reported negative effects on their personal relationship with their sons, not to mention how little it did to improve things with the teacher. In parents' words:

"When I know somebody else has got him under control as far as his learning, I feel like I don't have to be involved at all."

"When things go well, it gives me confidence that I can seriously just be a mom, because trying to be a mom and a teacher, they get sick of hearing it always."

"Yeah, I was relieved, and I felt supported. It's just like... Really, it's like a weight has lifted."

"You don't want to put your teachers offside. You don't want to upset them; you don't want to offend them, because in the end, it's coming back on your child."

"You're praying to God that you get the right teacher for next year."

#### • Connection First

In focus groups and survey responses, parents expressed that teachers connecting with their sons was their greatest hope. When they perceived that a teacher had reached him, parents felt appreciation, deep gratitude, and relief. In parents' words:

"My son's current teacher gets my son."

"My son has a relationship with his classroom teacher based on respect, understanding, and admiration. His teacher definitely 'gets' him."

"When he has a teacher that he connects with somehow, he's just so much more open to learning."

"There was one teacher in the early years who understood my son and understood his learning and inspired him to strive."

- **Hope That the Teacher Believes in Their Son**

Parents also stated that they appreciated when the teachers see what they see in their son and convey their belief in his potential to him. In parents' words:

"His grade teacher did something... You could just see him flourish and grow, particularly when he found that he had somebody who believed in him."

"I think that the other teachers that he's done well with are ones that definitely have helped him to feel that they valued him, and they understood him."

"If he feels a teacher values him, and is encouraging and being supportive, he's more likely to do something for them, rather than hang back and stay in the background."

"It's somebody who will get to know my child and the style that works best for him."

"Our son has been given the opportunity to feel valued and to shine in areas where he has strengths."

"It is instrumental to his performance: If he doesn't feel he is being valued or appreciated, he doesn't bother."

- **Role of Respect**

Parents felt their son's relationships with his teachers were strongest when the teacher respected him. Experiencing teacher's respect, boys were more likely to develop reciprocal feelings of respect that were very motivating. In parents' words:

"Not necessarily her affection as in care, because it is sometimes a respect thing as well, his respecting the teacher. He will really try to step up for that teacher."

"If my son has respect for the teacher and they engage with him, this makes all the difference. And it is generally the case that if he is tuned out, he will muck up."

- **Role of Humor**

Parents stated that a sense of humor also contributed to positive relational learning. In parents' words:

"They have a shared sense of humor, and our son really relates to the strict but fair and humorous style of his teacher."

"He really enjoyed that year and the humor and the fun in the classroom."

- **Role of Fairness**

Teachers' fairness was also mentioned by parents as contributing to good relational learning — and a lack of it as leading to relational breakdowns. In parents' words:

"Our son really relates to the strict but fair and humorous style of his teacher."

"This teacher takes a different line with each child in the class dependent on that child's abilities, behavioral needs, and emotional maturity."

"This teacher was strict and took a one-size-fits-all approach to all students in her room."

- **Role of Skilled Pedagogy**

Parents reported that good teaching practice in general was also an important — perhaps critical — dimension of effective relational teaching and that poor teaching practices could lead to relational breakdowns. In parents' words:

"By going into what he wanted to do, choosing the books he wanted to do, but then teaching that way engaged him and that built his confidence."

"He seems to be able to engage my son by showing experiments, and allowing him to have a hands-on involvement in various things."

"My son really liked this teacher, and I'm sure this teacher knew him. I just wasn't impressed with the quality of the education."

**In summary, parents explained that they want teachers who:**

- "Get" their sons and see what they see in them.
- Are willing to get to know their sons on a personal level.
- Are able to connect with their sons and show they are interested in them, understand them, and respect them.
- Communicate openly, frequently, and honestly with parents.
- Are highly skilled educators.

Parents' influence on their sons is incontestable and when parents and teachers are aligned, boys reap the benefits. When they align less well, parents' anxiety increases and their interventions may not support teachers' efforts. They may convey their anxiety to their sons and may even become "helicopter parents," undermining their sons' relational agency and skill development. In short, a working alliance must be established not only between the teacher and the boy but also between the teacher and the parent.

## Chapter Six: Summary and Recommendations

The research sponsored by the IBSC with middle and upper school boys confirmed that the student-teacher relationship is the foundation on which boys' learning occurs. The stories and insights shared by younger boys, their teachers, and their parents confirm the primacy of relationship in those working with these boys as well. In this final section, we first consider how the relational lens applies to efforts with less advantaged students and then offer a set of guidelines for each group of participants.

### Insights for Relational Approaches with Less-Advantaged Boys

As we tested the relational teaching framework in a school serving predominantly disadvantaged boys in the United States the following observations were made.

1. Student and teacher narratives of relational breakdowns paralleled narratives provided by other participating schools (e.g., "I don't think she likes me."). This observation was important because it is sometimes assumed that low-income students of color experience more severe ruptures in student-teacher relationships. What we found reinforced the insight that breakdowns occur along a continuum for boys, ranging from quiet and internal to overt and sometimes explosive.
2. In a rehabilitative orientation to school discipline, teachers and administrators placed less emphasis on punishment and instead focused on helping boys to understand their behavior and improve their self-regulation. This orientation, a philosophical commitment of the school, guided teachers' relational practice.
3. Engaging parents in their son's education was mediated by home life factors related to family economic circumstances (e.g., access to technology: cell phone, email, instant messaging, social media, online school portal). The school had to establish procedures to overcome these barriers and make special efforts to engage parents.
4. When teachers attributed relational breakdowns to the boys, as was found in research with older boys, they sometimes drew on stereotypes rooted in race, class, and gender biases to explain the breakdown. Even though the majority of teachers at the school were teachers of color from low-income or middle-class backgrounds themselves, it was clear that teachers from all race and class backgrounds are vulnerable to the influence of stereotypes that can impede creative relational problem solving.

### Guidelines for Teachers

More generally, from research across all participating schools, these tips for effective relational teaching with younger boys could be offered.

1. A good teacher-student relationship is a necessary condition for successfully engaging boys in learning. With this in mind, teachers have to work at developing these relationships and repairing the subsequent breakdowns in connection that inevitably occur. Breakdowns are big and small, common, often unfair, highly subjective, and usually emotional. They can however be repaired with relative ease when addressed using one of the strategies described in this report.
2. Given the common occurrence of disconnection in student-teacher relationships, relational teachers should focus less on being liked by students and more on students believing they are liked by their teacher.
3. As the professional, the teacher is the relationship manager and must initiate steps to repair any breakdowns that occur between themselves and students or parents. Boys will not take steps to repair relationship breakdowns with teachers and parents, and often remain silent for fear of antagonizing teachers.
4. In hopes of building boys' repertoire for relational repair, teachers can provide opportunities for boys to reflect on and to develop their relationships with teachers. They need to be given opportunities to give their teachers feedback and to develop their vocabulary for doing this. Teachers can accomplish this in day-to-day interactions with students, simply by asking questions and patiently helping boys put their feelings into words, not becoming offended or taking personally what boys might say. The goal is on boys' skill development and less on their propriety.
5. Given how commonly breakdowns occur in student-teacher relationships, both proactive and reactive strategies for relational repair must be part of every teacher's toolkit. Among strategies teachers can draw from, they might:
  - Start the year with positive communication, sharing details about themselves in order to forge strong, personal connections. An email or a call in the first week of school can let families know teachers have enjoyed meeting their sons. Describing one specific thing to parents about their son will make their connections with parents stronger.
  - When a conflict or breakdown occurs with a boy, teachers must give themselves time to review the situation and consider the issue in context, from all perspectives. They must resist the temptation to act immediately, especially if they are upset: *"I will write myself some notes now and review them before taking any action."*

- Take an opportunity to review the relational situation with a trusted colleague or mentor before taking any action.
  - Schedule a time to talk with the student to give him an opportunity to share his perspective on the situation. Reprimanding a student in front of his peers is problematic on several levels — most importantly, the student is unlikely to “hear” anything being communicated.
  - Always assume positive intent when getting ready to meet boys. It puts the teacher in the right frame of mind to hear concerns objectively and makes it less likely that they will become defensive and take the concerns personally.
  - Begin conversations or meetings by letting the student express his concerns first and letting him finish before offering feedback. This gives the teacher time to understand what will be helpful and reassures students that they have been heard.
  - Prepare for the beginning, middle, and end of the meeting. *“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. You are an important member of my class and I want us to talk about what happened yesterday so we can both feel better about moving forward and working together to have a great year.”*
  - Choose a neutral but transparent location for the meeting, one that allows a boy to speak with privacy. A location with few distractions increases the engagement and focus of participants. Choose a time that minimizes student vulnerability and visibility by his peers.
  - Sharing a personal or related story that connects to the current situation might build trust and reassure the boy.
6. Implement an opportunity early in the year allowing parents to inform teachers about their sons, including what they see as their son’s strengths and weaknesses, his interests and other abilities, as well as his interests outside of school. Develop ongoing opportunities for parents to discuss and give feedback on their son’s relationships with his teachers. Find opportunities throughout the year to convey positive things about boys to their parents. Catch boys being good and convey this to their parents. Embrace communication with parents, both positive and negative. Be open, approachable, and honest. Seek out opportunities to talk to them. Ensure that the communication is authentic and purposeful.
  7. When planning meetings with parents, try to be flexible and accommodate their schedules, communicating respect and a flexible willingness to partner with them. Begin any meetings by establishing that the best interests of the boy are the first priority. Remember that every party to a relationship breakdown feels fearful, frustrated, and vulnerable. Parents’ feelings might be disguised as assertive, unresponsive, or defensive demeanors, so it can be helpful for joining with them to acknowledge their fears or frustrations.

### **Guidelines for Boys**

As part of the working alliance with their teachers, boys carry responsibility in creating and maintaining a positive working relationship with their teachers. Relational expectations for boys expand as they grow and develop, but younger boys should be offered the following two guidelines.

1. Share your story. Let your teacher know who you are as both a student and a person, including what you like to do outside of school. When something is going on in your life that is affecting you at school, talk with your teacher about it so he or she can support you.
2. Reach out. Know that the wisest people are those who ask questions. Reach out to your teacher when you need help or want to learn more about something.

### **Guidelines for Parents**

Parents play a very important role in the development and support of positive student-teacher relationships and can strengthen or undermine teachers’ efforts. The following suggestions can help to ensure strong partnerships between teachers and parents.

1. Share your son’s story. Communicate with your son’s teacher about how you see your son and what you hope he will achieve. Also share information about family life, especially when it directly affects your son.
2. Just ask. Bring questions about assignments, expectations, and classroom procedures directly to the teacher. Avoid “wondering out loud” in front of your son.
3. Understand the ebb and flow of relational connection in every sort of relationship, including between students and teachers. Recognize that the relationship your son has with his teacher is likely to change throughout the year. If you sense that he has become disconnected from the teacher, keep a pulse on the situation but also respect how time, your son’s own relational skills, and the skills of the teacher naturally operate to repair disconnections.

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