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I Want to Learn from You

Relational Strategies to Engage Boys in School

MICHAEL C. REICHERT AND JOSEPH D. NELSON

Educational Sacrifices of Boyhood

Both the promise and the problems of the new era of gender equality are more visible today. The rise of women has incidentally cast light on a masculine code that benefits neither boys nor our society. But there are two problems with talk of a “boy crisis.” First, underperforming boys and their troubling, sometimes tragic, outcomes are nothing new. Noted educational researchers Thomas DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann have shown that a gender achievement gap has existed in the United States for over a century.¹ Even before they enter kindergarten, many boys have fallen behind in the development of “soft” skills essential for success.

But while the costs of boyhood begin early and seep deeply into all boys’ self-concepts, ambitions, and accomplishments, the most troubling aspect of the educational gap is that, while observable across virtually all socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic conditions, it is most pronounced when the impact of masculine conditioning is compounded by other social stresses, like racism and poverty. In a recent study examining outcomes for children from low-SES households, a research team matched birth certificates and health, disciplinary, academic, and high school graduation records for more than one million children born in Florida between 1992 and 2002, and found that, compared to girls, 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.²

The authors ruled out two common explanations for this gap—biological vulnerabilities and SES-related disadvantages—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.”³

The second problem with talk of a crisis is that there is nothing surprising about this story. The science of human development points to a fatal contradiction at the heart of how boys are raised. Boyhood was never intended to serve boys themselves, and has never worked very well for them.⁴ Losses and casualties have always been an inconvenient truth built into its design. Instead of a focus on “what people are actually able to do and to be” as the proper measure of boyhood’s success, masculine socialization makes sure boys “man up.”⁵ As boys of all kinds fit themselves to masculine identities that are restrictive, are coercive, and violate their human natures, educators and developmentalists might ask how to create conditions—resources and relationships—that allow all boys to translate their innate capabilities into actual abilities.

In the past twenty years, there has been an explosion of new research on “interpersonal neuroscience.”⁶ Psychiatrist Amy Banks argues that how independence and individuality are conceived, at the heart of boyhood’s value system, works against the very design of human anatomy. She identifies four separate neurobiological systems, from brain structures to adrenal-cortical interactions, ensuring that each individual is in sync with others. Every person, male as well as female, is “built to operate within a network of caring human relationships,” she argues. Health and happiness, in her view, are a function of the vitality of these relational connections.⁷

Attachment experience has been studied with particular attention. Challenging the traditional view that biology sets a frame for behavior and personality—that boys develop as “boys” because of their biological inheritance—psychiatrist Daniel Siegel and developmental psychologist Mary Hartzell argue, “Experience is biology. How we treat our children changes who they are and how they will develop.”⁸ Children’s mental models, the basis for how they relate to others, develop directly and continuously from experience and have little to do with “boys will be boys” clichés:

“Recent findings of neural science in fact point to just the opposite: Interactions with the environment, especially relationships with other people, directly shape the development of the brain’s structure and function.”⁹

These child development findings have been extended to the field of education. In response to the global “crisis” of boys’ underachievement, there have been a host of reforms: more male teachers, more kinesthetic movement, longer recess times, and boy-friendly curricula and pedagogies. One country, Australia, issued a parliamentary-level set of recommendations that established special single-sex schools for boys, something that is also being tried in the United States, especially for boys of color from low-income backgrounds. But there has been a basic problem with these reforms: the understanding of boys underlying them represents what developmental psychologist Niobe Way has called “false stories.”¹⁰ Doing things the same way, only with more fervor, is unlikely to produce better results. A better approach is to build a model of how boys learn that does not begin with assumptions steeped in mistaken stereotypes.

A Relational Approach to Boys’ Learning

In 2008–2010 and again in 2010–2012, the International Boys’ School Coalition, a collection of over three hundred schools of all kinds, from fully fee-based to fully government-funded, elite to urban, partnered with the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives, a research collaborative at the University of Pennsylvania, to develop an empirical understanding of boys’ education by studying what was *working* in real classrooms. From surveys and interviews with twenty-five hundred adolescent boys and two thousand of their teachers from over forty schools of all types, we found that underlying successful learning was a phenomenon we termed “eliciting”: attentive teachers, committed to getting it right with their students, refined their lessons until they succeeded in engaging boys.¹¹ In a reciprocal, “serve and volley,” communication process, boys provide teachers with constant feedback in their levels of attentiveness, their posture, their on-task and off-task behavior, their test marks, and the quality of their homework assignments; in response, conscientious teachers modify their lessons until they reliably work. Their pedagogy, in this sense, is elicited from their students.

We found great convergence between how boys and teachers described the successful lessons that result, which usually represented general teaching practices but might also be specifically tailored to boys' interests, needs, or relational styles. Good teachers, we found, were both flexible and willing to employ whatever they could to connect with their students and lead them to the lesson.

But there was a large—and important—divergence between teachers' and students' descriptions of what worked. While teachers focused on the craft of their lessons and spoke in technical language about them, boys spoke in equal detail—but about the qualities and personalities of the teachers themselves. We were led to the primacy of the student-teacher relationship by the boys. In their resounding validation of teachers who inspired, helped, and uplifted them, we had concluded that, for boys, “relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed.”¹²

Surprising for the clarity of their relational embrace, boys' stories of successful student-teacher partnerships validated converging lines of inquiry settling on the efficacy of relational approaches to stem educational casualties. “Positive student-teacher relationships” were found to explain the success of students in the Programme for International Student Assessment.¹³ Meanwhile, in a meta-analysis of nearly one hundred studies, a Dutch research team demonstrated that both positive and negative teacher-student relationships have a significant effect on scholastic achievement. Even hard-to-engage students respond to relational strategies, they found; positive learning relationships may be especially beneficial in reaching those—mainly boys—at the bottom of the achievement gap.¹⁴

Despite these recent investigations, when we searched educational literature for research detailing the role of relationship in teaching boys, we discovered very little. The paucity of research-based recommendations until this most recent period matched what we had found in the field: teachers all *knew* that boys required connection in order to engage with their lessons but had given little systematic thought to what that meant. Asked to talk about why they did what they had done, what they were thinking, it was often hard for teachers to find words. Their relational pedagogy occurred on the level of intuition, as if crafted in a black box.

It seems that many working in schools, steeped in cultural stereotypes of boys as arelational, have trouble knowing what we really should know. This was the conclusion of the consortium of writers and researchers behind the Manifesto of Relational Pedagogy, which cautioned:

A fog of forgetfulness is looming over education. Forgotten in the fog is that education is about human beings. And as schools are places where human beings get together, we have also forgotten that education is primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another.¹⁵

But boys themselves are quite 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 not strict or 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 in our study were consistent across all the different cultures, countries, and types of schools. Reviewing their stories in the aggregate, we could deduce the common features of 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, as invested in their subjects and their pedagogy, and as reliable guides for the learning journey. Then, 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:

- Demonstrating an attractive *mastery of their subjects*. Perhaps counterintuitively, 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, underscoring that these are *working* alliances in which boys hope to advance their educational goals.
- Maintaining *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.
- Responding to a student's *personal interest or talent*. Another strong theme running through both boys' and teachers' 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.
- Sharing 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.
- Sharing a *common characteristic* with a student. The fact that the boy and the teacher share and acknowledge a common characteristic—a defining physical feature, background, ethnicity, wound, problem overcome—can be a reliable, if serendipitous, relationship builder.
- Accommodating a *measure of opposition*. Teachers and boys alike reported that teachers who can resist personalizing boys' oppositional behavior and respond to it with restraint and civility, not only succeed in building relationships with difficult students but also create a promising climate for relationship building class-wide.
- A willingness to *reveal vulnerability*. While the gesture was least frequently reported in the positive narratives, those that did discuss it—from both the boys' and the teachers' perspectives—may indicate an important element in relationship making.

When these relational gestures are offered and a learning relationship is struck, teachers make a tremendous difference for boys, even beyond their learning. Certainly, there is the practical benefit of acquiring skills or mastering subject matter well enough to pass required tests. But there are also transformational and even existential benefits from these

learning partnerships. When they develop new abilities, boys' self-concepts grow as they come to see possibilities they could not imagine previously. Even more profoundly, the life-altering lesson boys absorb from teachers who care for them, and who demonstrate a willingness to go an extra mile on their behalf, influences their orientation to the world: they discover that there is help, that they can expect their needs to be met, that they are cared for. Educational philosopher David Hawkins, in his famous essay "I, Thou, and It," described what students feel about teachers who help them to mastery and success:

What is the feeling you have toward a person who does this for you? It needn't be what we call love, but it certainly *is* what we call respect. You value the other person because he is uniquely useful to you in helping you on with your life.¹⁶

Disconnection in Learning Relationships

Absent such connections, boys are quite willing to check out and thence 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, and disrespectful, as poor pedagogues, or as downright mean. For a variety of revealing reasons, reflecting the power asymmetry of teacher-student relationships, 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 features represented 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 who 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 who showed little personal enthusiasm.* Boys expected teachers who not only had mastered their subjects but also cared deeply about them; they hoped to be guided by teachers' personal passion in ways that elevated the class above the mundane.
- *Teachers who 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 who 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 who 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 who were uninspiring or boring.* Distinct from teachers' 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 who 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 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.

From these observations about what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful teaching relationships, we concluded that there are relational responsibilities that belong to the teacher, as the adult and the professional, and not to the boy regardless of his age. Clinical psychologist Daniel Rogers has described three responsibilities of the teacher, as relationship manager, that are not shared by students: (1) to serve as the expert facilitating the student's learning, (2) to maintain an overall awareness of the alliance, and (3) to monitor and mend strains in the alliance.¹⁷ In our study, relationally successful teachers did not *expect* students to assume mutual responsibility for an improved working alliance in the classroom.

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 psychologist Linda Hartling and colleagues in the relational-cultural school have described, every human relationship cycles through periods of connection-disconnection-reconnection.¹⁸ 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 the course or the teacher off, resolving to endure until the end of the term and sometimes developing a negative attitude that can seep into their behavior. Power asymmetry in these relationships and most boys' experience with arbitrary consequences when they have challenged teachers' power inhibit boys' initiative.

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.¹⁹ 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.

Relational Teaching with Boys of Color

Exploring how well this relational teaching framework applies to boys of color from low-income communities, educational sociologist Joseph D. Nelson conducted interviews, observations, and open-ended surveys with fifty Black and Latino boys attending a single-sex middle school for boys of color in New York City.²⁰ His research found several themes that addressed how boys related to their teachers, particularly in light of how race and gender stereotypes, as well as class background, both shape and inform teacher perceptions of Black boys in the United States:

- *Subject and pedagogical mastery.* Similar to boys in the global study, boys of color at this NYC 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).²¹ In this view, 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 wanted to be held accountable for their actions in class or related to schoolwork, but they also wanted to “be” and “feel” supported to meet these high expectations.

- *Care* was also expressed by demonstrating a clear understanding of specifics associated with a boy's life circumstances. In situations where difficult and stressful circumstances were a reality of their everyday lives, 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 advisor 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 performance, museums, music camps, science camps, "famous" guest speakers); allowing boys to share "their side of the story" when they misbehave; remembering boys' birthdays and celebrating them.
- *Being relaxed about misbehavior*. Boys appreciated and felt cared for by teachers who, rather than issuing knee-jerk, formulaic consequences, 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 made adjustments to policies or classroom practices when they learned of challenges in a boy's personal life that affect his schoolwork: examples included setting flexible due dates for assignments when there was 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 the boy generally struggles with communicating his ideas, and so on.
- *Personal advocacy*. Making a special commitment to a boy was another frequently cited theme. With boys who experienced more pronounced social stresses, including domestic and/or child abuse, father absenteeism, incarceration or 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).

Becoming a Relational School

The professional responsibilities of relationship manager raise the stakes for schools hoping to do better with boys. Unless teachers can reflect on their relational pedagogy and persist in their efforts to reach for struggling and resistant boys, they are more likely to disconnect from them, pointing to “laziness,” families’ lack of support, learning or psychological handicaps, or overwhelming stresses stemming from poverty or racial marginalization. Both stories of success and tales of breakdown 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 by some of the boys whose learning differences, family circumstances, or social stresses created 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 successful and less successful teaching relationships.

Strong teaching alliances can overcome a host of difficulties carried to school by boys of all races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds—and do so every day, including with boys who live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty. As sociologist Pedro Noguera has written, “The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself should be regarded as a learning disability.”²² In fact, in the stories that the boys shared with us, it was the teacher’s perception of the boy that most affected the relationship’s trajectory.

Too commonly, as University of Pennsylvania psychologists Michael Nakkula and Sharon Ravitch have cautioned, such assessments create a “forestructure of understanding” that prompts and guides a teacher’s subsequent responses to a student.²³

Negative or pessimistic interpretations arose in teachers’ stories of breakdown most often when they were under particular stress themselves, facing challenges to their sense of professional competence and general self-worth. In these circumstances teachers tended to abdicate their role as relationship manager and reverted to more defensive management of *themselves*. Boston College’s Andy Hargreaves 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.²⁴ 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 acknowledgment 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 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, educational researcher 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.”²⁵

In continuing work with schools to implement the findings of this research—the action phase of the research cycle—we have learned that school cultures in which teachers may be well held while struggling with difficult students display three features. Establishing that the relationship manager role belongs to the teacher, not the student, is the first, essential condition. In the economy of teachers’ limited personal resource—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, teachers also must recognize that they are stuck and yet believe that it is still possible, at least theoretically, for the boy to be reached—somehow, sometime, by someone. The successful relationships narrated by the teachers in our study were broadly characterized by (1) a willingness to be *flexible* and to improvise alternate approaches and (2) a capacity to step back and *reflect* on what was working and not working in their relational efforts. Instead of defensively digging their own heels in and requiring some change on the boy’s part, these teachers took the relational impasse less personally and saw it more as an indication that they had not yet hit upon a workable approach.

Even with a commitment to personal reflection, in emotionally charged relationships and under considerable stress as the boy, his parents, and school managers all bear down, 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, University of Cincinnati psychologist 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.²⁶

The third feature found in faculty cultures that supports a reflective relational practice is sufficient opportunity for peer coaching and collaboration. To uphold the relationship manager role and to provide opportunities for peer collaboration, it is necessary to structure relational reflection into school schedules. To this end, a hybrid model for structured reflective practice has been helpful. A model that melds the approach developed by learning theorist Graham Gibbs with a critical friends framework offered by the National School Reform Faculty has been employed with some success at a number of schools.²⁷ 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.

Ultimately, we hope that the experiences of these schools will stand as practical examples of how reflective relational practice can be built into the fabric of busy school schedules. It is worth saying that the central role of relationships in engaging boys in learning is not new. To help children in caring, mentoring, coaching, and teaching relationships is the main reason most teachers enter the profession. But how boys are affected by cultural norms and how challenging they can become is the subtext for the current gender achievement gap. Fortunately, committed teachers, well supported by their schools, can work relational magic with such boys—and do so every day, in every school, everywhere.

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