

Early Rel. Teaching Rev.

# **The Power of Relational Engagement to Transform Elementary School Boys**

by

Richard Hawley and Linda Rohler

*Never pass a boy without thinking about him.*

--Australian bush talk

## **Some Background**

Through much of the past decade my research partner Michael Reichert and I (Richard Hawley) were engaged in two international studies identifying teaching practices that were demonstrably effective with boys. Our published findings appeared in a number of education journals and subsequently in two books, *Reaching Boys/Teaching Boys* (2010) and *I Can*

*Learn From You: Boys as Relational Learners* (2014). Both studies drew on a wide sampling of boys and teachers in the United States, Canada, The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

We focused exclusively on boys and teachers of boys because of the abiding--and still abiding—concern about boys’ declining scholastic and personal prospects in the United States and in the other nations studied.

In our first study of effective lessons we asked teachers and boys to mention no names in the narratives they submitted, adding that if anybody inadvertently did so, we would omit the name from any published findings. The teachers followed this prompt without exception; not a single boy was named, described, or discussed. The boys were unable to do it. Again, the lessons selected were nearly always *favorite* lessons, and many of the boys relating them were unable to separate what they had liked about the lesson from what they liked about the man or woman presenting the material. We concluded that, from a boy’s standpoint, the issue was less what pedagogy or curriculum makes me engage in and master assigned material than *for whom* am I willing to do these things.

Our second project focused exclusively on the kinds of *relationships* boys and teachers felt promoted personal and scholastic development. This time we asked teachers and boys to narrate both a relationship that had flourished and one that had failed. Our hope was that these accounts would yield, as the lesson narratives did, common features of successful relationships, features that might be replicable for teachers willing to embrace them. Suspecting that conveying personal relationships would be more difficult for some boys and teachers than recounting classroom lessons, we decided to augment the thousands of written narratives we collected with live focus groups and individual interviews on site at participating schools.

The thousands of written and live narratives we reviewed revealed a number of clear contours to effective relationship, including—

- *Teachers’ demonstrated mastery of their disciplines and classroom management*
- *Teachers’ commitment to establishing, monitoring, and repairing relationships when there was a breach*

- *Teachers' determined efforts to understand and meet students' special needs*
- *Teachers' willingness to know their students in contexts beyond the classroom and the school's program*
- *Teachers' willingness to share personal interests and experiences*
- *Teachers' ability to accommodate a measure of opposition without personalizing it*
- *Teachers' willingness to admit vulnerability*

Boys who forged satisfying relationships with their teachers valued the experience at the feeling level, but also for the mastery, accomplishment, and self-understanding that followed. Both boys and teachers remarked, always with appreciation and sometimes with something like wonder, at how *transformative* their relational experiences proved to be. Under-confident, resistant, obstructive boys became productively engaged. Under-performing and even failing boys improved and succeeded. Although we did not ask them to, almost all of the teachers participating in the relational study chose to recount the relational success with a boy whom they first experienced as a scholastic or behavioral *problem*.

We were--for good reason—excited about our relational findings. Effective relationships were not only demonstrably transformative, they could be shown to consist of clear gestures any committed teacher could make. The boys in our study responded to these gestures whether offered by beginning teachers, veteran teachers, male teachers or female teachers, teachers of humanities, teachers of mathematics, sciences, arts—teachers of any subject. The same gestures appeared to succeed in schools with remedial programs and advanced study programs. The same gestures were noted by struggling students, highly successful students, students of varying ethnicities and economic circumstances.

Making effective relationships proved not to be a narrowly distributed “gift” held by certain empathic individuals; instead relationship building was revealed as a replicable skill that teachers acquired by choice, care, and a willingness to abandon past practice and to improvise.

Since publishing our findings, I have spent a good deal of time in schools of all types and in educational conferences working with school leaders and practicing teachers on relational practice. And while this has been satisfying work, there has been a recurring challenge for which I have not had a satisfactory answer. Both of our international studies involved boys enrolled in middle school grades through secondary school, boys ranging from age 12 through 18. Teachers of elementary grade students wanted, with good reason, to know what was known about relational practice with younger boys.

This was a good question--and one carrying with it some urgency in light of the fact that early positive scholastic interventions are known to be more formative than later ones. If we are serious about reversing the worrying prospects of school age boys, we need to focus on our earliest learners.

## **Relating Effectively to Younger Boys: A Remarkable Example**

We limited our prior studies to middle school and high school boys because we believed most of them would be competent to compose coherent, useful responses to the questions asked. We were not sure—nor did we give much thought to—how we might gather similar data from early learners. We understood that in principle, younger boys could be observed and interviewed, but we had neither the resources nor the man-hours to carry out this work with thousands of participants, as we had in our other projects. While I understood that such work was beyond my personal capacity, I held out a vague hope that others, perhaps early learning specialists, might design a parallel study of effective relationships with younger boys.

Then it occurred to me: was a massive international study required to demonstrate the efficacy of constructive relationships with younger students? Even taking into account critical developmental differences between younger and older boys and structural differences in primary schooling, such as all-day immersion in a classroom with a single teacher, wouldn't the effective relational dynamics be largely the same? Or would they?

I was about to conclude that I didn't know--when I realized that *of course* I knew. I had taught in the same boys' school for nearly four decades. For seventeen of those years I had also been headmaster of the school. The school enrolled boys from kindergarten through year twelve. Over the course of those years I had observed and evaluated dozens of my elementary school colleagues at work. I had observed, without naming it, a wide range of relational practice, much of it, on reflection, revealing clear contours.

And yes, there *were* clear similarities in relational dynamics between teachers of younger and older boys, and there were also clear—and developmentally necessary—differences. Understanding and articulating both would, I believe, go a long way to improving the school experience of boys everywhere. Laying out the features of positive relationships in the primary grades held out the possibility of changing early educational practice for the better, both by introducing relational gestures to teachers who had not previously adopted them and by making those gestures consciously *intentional* for those already making them.

These convictions were strengthened by a subsequent personal realization. Not only had I observed an instructive range of my colleagues' relational approaches, I had for years observed an undeniable genius of relational practice. I suspect and certainly hope that every school principal might make similar claims about certain colleagues. In my particular case, I was able to observe a gifted teacher who demonstrated relational gestures that had advanced the school performance and personal maturation of *every* boy in her fourth grade classes. There was not to my knowledge, nor I believe to the knowledge of her colleagues or the parents of the boys she taught, a single exception.

Under this woman's tuition boys whose previous teachers believed strongly that they could not, due to emotional or cognitive difficulties, continue another year at the school, made personal and scholastic adjustments that enabled them not only to master the fourth grade program, but to flourish in subsequent years. Boys with an edgy, combative side became affectionate, respectful collaborators. Brilliant, eccentric boys became happily more so. No other teacher of my acquaintance had so reliably and so consistently *transformed* her students as this woman did.

Her name is Linda Rohler. She came to University School in Cleveland from an inner city public school where she had been teaching elementary grade students designated as Learning Disabled. The range and depth of the learning difficulties she encountered in her previous school exceeded anything addressed in her certification program, but she was willing to improvise. She quickly warmed to the children in her care but confided to me that it was discouraging that their families, almost all of them poor, were so transient that she could never count on any given child's daily presence. Enrolled students would cease to appear, and new faces arrived sporadically throughout the school year. Few students present on the first day of school were on hand at year's end.

While Linda was considering a teaching post at my school, I invited her to join me to observe a third grade Theme Sharing the boys were presenting to their parents at the school on a weekday evening. The class had been studying Ancient Egypt for weeks, and through a series of demonstrations, enactments, and explanations of things they had researched and constructed they were going to make an accounting of themselves—standard practice in our Theme-based primary curriculum.

It occurred to me as we pulled into the front drive of the school, that what Linda was about to experience might be a jarring contrast to her work in the inner city. I decided to alert her to something she might observe about the parents attending: that some of them were not merely “involved,” but over-involved.

I had been concerned about what I felt were excessive efforts on the part of some of the third graders' parents to manage the boys' friendship arrangements. A group of them had insisted on school-wide meetings to address hurtful exclusion from birthday parties. We also had to talk to some of the fathers about over-participation in their sons' construction projects, so that it might be clearer to us what, if anything, the boy had contributed to what he handed in. I was still talking when Linda interrupted me. “Oh, *give me* over-involved parents!”

We did. In addition we gave her a section of fourth grade boys, over which she presided with great energy, enthusiasm, and affection for sixteen years. In the course of her time with us she was warmly evaluated on a number of counts. Her boys impressively mastered the skills required of our fourth graders, and they brought a wonderful energy to the research, writing, and

building that composed their semester-long Themes: The Civilization of China and Whaling: A Way of Life. Within days of school starting, Linda managed to establish an elevated tone you could feel when you walked in the door of her classroom.

When she came to us Linda, a mother of two grown daughters, was suitably motherly. She was also an extrovert, quick to laugh, easy to like. Yet the tone of her classroom could not be reduced to the clear affection she felt for the boys and they for her. It was also clear that her students felt affection for each other—they were *interested* in each other. They listened to each other. This classroom atmosphere was neither incidental nor fortuitous; Linda had thoughtfully and systematically set out to create it. The last day of school each spring was emotionally wrought for Linda's boys. They were aware that over the course of the school year something important had happened to them and was about to be over. At day's end, tears, hugs, and pledges always to stay in touch, many of them kept.

The relational climate Linda Rohler managed to establish and maintain was, I believe, a value in itself, but it was also remarkable for the scholastic and personal gains her students made. The scholastic requirements of the fourth grade program were appropriately rigorous. Boys were by year's end expected to have mastered the conventions of narrative writing, including story arc, descriptive setting, the establishment of distinctive characters, and convincing resolution. In so doing, the boys were also expected to address correct capitalization, sentence structure, punctuation, and paragraph structure. In addition each boy was to devise and stick to a personal strategy for revising and correcting his work.

Over the course of the year, boys were to demonstrate a variety of reading skills, including close interpretation, critical comparison of texts, and reading for information: research. Reading beyond the curriculum—for pleasure—is warmly encouraged.

In mathematics fourth graders are expected to demonstrate proficiency in all whole number operations and an understanding of basic fractions. In addition to mastering mechanics, fourth grade boys are also expected to devise and be able to articulate individual problem-solving strategies.

Most of the mastery of grade-level skills was incorporated into exploring the year's two major inquiries, or "themes": the culture of China and New

England Whaling. Each theme requires boys to undertake research, including book research, internet research, and consulting with designated experts. Boys demonstrate their understanding of the theme's components by writing and presenting documents, building projects, and making group and school-wide presentations of their findings. Some of the work is undertaken individually, some of it in groups.

In presiding over theme-based learning, the teacher operates in multiple modes—as subject matter expert, as research guide, as facilitator of group process, as evaluator.

Linda proved at once to be a natural practitioner of experiential, research-based learning. Varying with the Theme under review, her classroom became a *mélange* of Chinese or whaling village artifacts and images. To be honest, the fourth grade classrooms were not our most commodious or flexible spaces, but Linda managed to transform hers into an arrangement of different-use stations, some for group work, some for construction, one of them always a partly isolated place for her to talk to boys individually.

I remember Linda's inviting me to join her one late August afternoon on an excursion to Cleveland's Chinatown where she shopped intently for items—enameled chop sticks, maps, fans, rice bowls, calendars, fortune cookies—that would compose individual gift bags placed on the desk tops of her twenty-two new arrivals on the first day of school. Linda was by no means well off, and I was concerned about the mounting expense of her selections, so I proposed that this be a school and not a personal expense, but she would not hear it. “This is *my* pleasure,” she said, and it clearly was.

But much more than personal kindnesses and surprises were at work in Mrs. Rohler's effectiveness with her boys. Essential to that effectiveness was an unshakable intuitive understanding that engaging children in the challenge of mastering new scholastic and social skills depends on their being held in secure relational attachments, not only to their teacher but to each other.

In 2005 Miriam Raider-Roth, a professor of education at the State University of New York at Albany, wrote a book, *Trusting What You Know*, in which she explored ways children themselves, in this case an assortment of sixth graders in a school in which she had formerly taught, best relate to the school's instructional program and to each other. Raider-Roth asks, “How

can we create classrooms in which a culture of safety and truth prevails, allowing the students to bring as much of their knowledge and their diverse selves to the table as they can?"

Linda Rohler's relational approach to the boys in her care is a clear answer to that question. For years I observed Linda at work and have already revealed my admiration and appreciation of her contribution to the life of our school, but no amount of praises and personal observations on my part can convey the dynamics of her classroom practice as fully as she can.

For this study, Linda composed a series of narratives of relationships she formed with a variety of fourth grade boys. The boys ranged from precociously gifted to socially and cognitively challenged. Some of them were felt by prior teachers to be poor bets to succeed at the school.

## **A Relational Teacher Reflects**

As her headmaster and long term colleague, I had innumerable occasions to discuss and praise Linda Rohler. But only after Michael Reichert and I had completed our relational research with older boys did it occur to me to ask her what she thought enabled her so consistently to establish productive relationships with such a variety of her fourth graders. The following is her considered response to that question.

*We trusted each other. That trust began in class meetings. I held the meetings each morning for 15 minutes. I started on the first day. I always wanted to take the boys to the edge. I challenged the boys to be authentic, and thus I had to lead the way. I talked about many subjects that might be considered a bit off limits for a nine year old--fears, sadness, death, science fiction, ghosts, current events, fear of failure, relationships with parents and siblings and friends as well as subjects about which they craved conversation: sports, pets, movies, travel, hobbies. I couldn't plan these meetings. They unfurled, unraveled, delighted and shocked us with their variety--the death of a pet, my own father's death, the winning of a pennant, their own weekend heroic sports stories, funny weekend stories, 911, Columbine, Obama's election to the presidency, recess bullying, heroes in the local news, visitors to the classroom. In these moments I realized our profound mutual equality.*

*In the course of these meetings I learned anew that encouragement empowers children to articulate their emotions and their aesthetic vision. By attending closely to their narrative writing, poems, photography, constructed projects, and other creative efforts, I began to realize what motivated them academically.*

*The boys were interested in helping each other learn. The more collaborative the work, the more we established a sense of community. Increasingly they let each other in. Increasingly they let me in.*

*In my first year at [University School], I began to see something distinctive in the hearts and minds of boys together. They ached to find a safe place for their sometimes inspired or scary or comical thoughts. I needed to make space for and to listen to what they love. At odd points, I would feel a shift, and sense that mutual trust had begun. With trust came a genuine pleasure in manipulating numbers, manipulating language for a desired effect. I came to realize that the transformative moment came at a different time for each boy. There was a note on my desk, a knowing smile, a little gift, a change of attitude, a desire to make me happy, or proud, or impressed. It was a humbling moment always: that moment of excitement when the light bulb goes on and a boy is propelled to a new level of mastery.*

*There is a quotation from Paulo Freire that I like, that teachers should attempt to “live part of their dreams within their educational space. The implication is that teaching should be partisan.” I agree. As a teacher I wanted to be an agent of transformation, with my classroom as a compact working democracy. Class meetings involved agreeing on the rules and moral values we all wanted to prevail in our classroom.*

*I believe in talking about soulfulness in education. When classroom business is soulful, masks drop away. In my narratives about the boys, I tried to convey what soulfulness looks and feels like in the classroom.*

*I wanted the boys to feel safe, to risk saying and feeling what they most cared about. Most often this occurred in activities and assignments in which creative expression was invited. Too often we see creative expression as a distraction from the real work of the curriculum. But I believe creative outlets in the classroom bear directly on scholastic success and mastery.*

*The boys were most excited to learn when they were moved by a conversation or story. The boys got to “play” during our thematic projects, pretending they were a bunch of sailors on a Moby Dick-like voyage, wielding their harpoons and singing sea shanties at the top of their lungs. Role-playing was the heart of their emotional and social learning. The boys got to step out of their familiar reality and to pretend. In play we experienced nonverbal personal connection.*

*If the occasional saboteur or cynic resisted the emphasis on creativity and imaginative expression, I tried to make him my ally. And when enough boys were confident enough to say and write what was in their hearts, the cynic tended to warm to the enterprise and in time come to recognize and respect classmates previously dismissed as less able or otherwise unworthy of his interest.*

*In summary, I realized that the boys thrived best when I brought my own exuberance and passion to our shared business. My own “partisan” engagement served as a kind of permission for the boys to engage, try, and enjoy*

*My end of the year letter to the boys and their families always concluded with the maxim, “To be his best, a boy must be able to give voice and form to the best that is in him.” In practice this means establishing a deep connection with each boy, giving him time for reflection, caring about his big questions, allowing him to encounter beauty, grace, brilliance, love, and the sheer joy of being alive, nudging him to realize his upper limits in athletics, academics, and the arts.*

*May we never seek to quiet and erase what is most alive in boys.*

## **The Relational Triad**

At every level of schooling, the teacher-student relationship is, at its best, triadic. It is not, like parent-child relationships and peer friendships, composed of one-on-one transactions. Rather, the teacher-student

relationship is structured as an I-Thou-It configuration, where the “It” is the scholastic or behavioral task to be mastered.

The teacher-student relationship is not parental, though it is nurturing; nor is it a friendship, though it is friendly. The affectionate dimension of the relationship is justified and appropriate to the extent it serves the “It” of the child’s scholastic mastery and personal development. It is clear in Linda Rohler’s relational narratives—and even clearer in the conduct of her classes—that mastery of an expected skill set and of specific behavioral objectives was the mutually understood business of the relationships formed.

The goal of the relationships established was not to be liked and to be likable, although those outcomes were gratifying when they occurred. Understandably, the boys who were the subject of Linda’s narratives liked and appreciated her at year’s end, but they did so because of what they had mastered, what they had overcome, what, as one of them recounted, “he figured out” while under her care.

## **Toward Better Relational Practice**

As noted above, the relational gestures found to be effective in our studies of middle school and high school boys were also clearly at work in Linda’s narratives. But the resolve to extend those gestures depends on teachers’ *commitment* to the centrality of relationship in their daily practice, even—and especially—when that commitment invites a reconsideration of prior approaches. Relating effectively to elementary grade learners requires acknowledging the following pedagogical realities.

**--Building relationship is a whole class objective.** As can be seen in each of Linda’s narratives, the dyadic—one-to-one—relationships with each of her students serve the additional, larger purpose of enabling them to relate more positively and effectively with each other. For Linda, boys’ effectiveness in working together collectively, empathizing with each other, at times helping and consoling one another, was inseparable from her efforts to establish a trusting individual relationship with each boy.

**--Effective relational teachers operate under a flexible firmness.** The clarity and consistency of daily procedures is essential to an emotionally safe

and productive classroom climate. But in order to meet individual boys' particular needs and to maintain relationship, teachers may make strategic exceptions and improvisations. Linda's narratives include a variety of such instances. The rightness of such exceptions is seen in the degree to which they strengthen the teacher-student relationship and advance the boy in the desired behavioral or scholastic direction. The balance between clarity and necessary flexibility is best achieved when rules and stated expectations are *guidelines* for practice, not inviolable laws.

--**Relational teachers honor doubt and uncertainty.** Linda's narratives are overall encouraging accounts of very different boys' personal progress undergirded by a strong relational foundation. But along the way there were periods of concern, stalled progress, reversion to problematic behavior. Linda was not guided by certainty. She was troubled by doubts, sometimes frustrated by a failed initiative. The constant in the course of her uncertainty was her commitment--immediate outcomes aside--to maintaining the relationship, reaching out, actively repairing breaches when she felt one had occurred.

--**Relational teachers share and disclose.** Younger boys held in secure relationships open up and share even their most intimate and troubling concerns. But as in any authentic human relationship, that kind of candor is facilitated when both parties feel they can honestly share and disclose. Between teachers and children, adult disclosure must be bounded by a thoughtful consideration of what the child is able to integrate into his own experience—and even more importantly, by the adult's awareness of his or her motive for the disclosure. If unmitigated by consideration for what is appropriate for the child, personal concerns are best not shared. Linda succeeded in strengthening relationships with her boys by occasionally sharing milestones in her life—the death of her father, the progress of a prematurely born granddaughter—and many personal enthusiasms, including poems and films and life experiences that had been formative for her.

--**Productive student relationships take time.** Only in the movies are students transformed as a result of a single cathartic exchange with a wise, caring teacher. Secure, productive relationships are forged in weeks, months, even years. Forward progress is not, in the short run, easy to assess. Successful relational teachers learn that trust builds as they attend to their students as attentive, respectful witnesses. One of the greatest obstacles to

productive relationships is a teacher's rush to establish tidy closure to a problem not yet fully revealed or fully understood. Relational teachers have learned to wait as they observe and support their students.

--**Relational teachers are quick to recognize and to praise.** It is almost true to say that a teacher cannot overdo the offering of praise. The exception of course is praising conduct or performance the student himself does not feel is praiseworthy. Even when well-meaning, such praises diminish the student's confidence in the judgment and personal reliability of the teacher extending it—creating an obstacle to relationship. Early learners, especially those who come to the classroom insecurely attached outside of it, need to feel recognized—*seen*. Gestures in this direction can be as basic as frequently noticing, naming, and greeting each child. Effective teachers often “narrate” out loud what is going on before them in group work or when students are working independently. Everybody warms to praise and approval. Children with special needs, children who are not presently thriving at grade level tend to thrive as *small increments of progress* are noted and praised.

**Relationship requires a measure of one-on-one time.** Whatever the constraints of classroom size and layout, relational teachers create time and a setting in which they are able to talk to individual students without interruption and out of earshot of others. Productive relationships are composed of all kinds of teacher-student transactions, most of which occur in groups, but one-on-one exchanges are foundational to relationship, especially when a serious personal or scholastic problem needs to be addressed.

**Relational teachers convey the importance of school life.** What our international findings have taught us about older learners applies no less to elementary school boys: students' willingness to engage in and to master school challenges reflects the depth of their teachers' commitments to the twin crafts of classroom management and instruction. Boys are most inclined to relate to teachers whose care for them is inseparable from their commitment to their work. Personal warmth is essential but it is not enough. There is no single “type” of teacher who manages to convey this commitment. There is no particular “style” that convinces a student that his teacher loves the work. That awareness is more likely sensed than cognitively understood. It is conveyed in the care taken in appraising student

work, in the depth of preparation and in the imagination that goes into planning lessons. It is conveyed in the design and decoration of classrooms. It is conveyed most surely in considered, thoughtful utterances to the assembled class and in considered, caring personal exchanges. It is conveyed in children's confidence that for the duration of the school day they are seen and known, because they matter.