

Relational Teaching Strategies for Elementary School Educators of Boys



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Introduction: The Crescent School Elementary Research Collaborative



Previous research studies conducted by Reichert and Hawley (Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys and I Can Learn From You) found that boys are relational learners and the quality of the relationship between the boy and his teacher is a key factor in determining the quality of the learning.

The next phase in the relational learning project was to focus on the relationship between boys and teachers in elementary school settings and examine situations in which the relationship goes less well. This project was conducted during the 2015-16 academic school year. Rich conversations and data emerged from the student, parent and faculty workshops conducted for the Crescent School Elementary Research Collaborative.

The findings from the Crescent School study support the results of Reichert and Hawley's previous studies, including the resonance of the seven relational gestures in developing and maintaining successful boy-teacher relationships. We would add an eighth gesture for elementary boys, that of "Building Confidence Through Leadership" by having a teacher ask for a student to assist them with a task, job or situation.

Successful Relational Learning in an Elementary Boys' School Setting

In the elementary classroom, the role of the teacher as the relationship manager is different than that of our Middle and Upper School counterparts. Elementary teachers are more likely to be engaged with the class in an active way throughout the entire period of instruction, as students are too young to have acquired the skills to prioritize their time effectively. As group work and cooperative learning interactions are encouraged, it is up to the teacher to monitor mindfully these activities and lessons to ensure the boys stay on task.

As such, we know our boys well, and can see first-hand how our boys navigate the academic and social challenges of their school community. Much of the learning at this age is social: getting along, manners, dealing with competitiveness, wanting to be first, liked, etc.

Understanding this dynamic infers that each relational gesture can live in an elementary classroom in several ways, but tends to begin at the "teacher to group/class" level first. Then, depending on the situation and the student responses to the gesture, (i.e. the questions and/or student reactions) a teacher may approach a boy or group of boys to connect further.

Understanding Relational Breakdowns in an Elementary Boys' School Setting

Relational "breakdowns" or moments of "disconnection" occur differently in the primary and junior grades. Where in the older boys, a relationship breakdown could represent the complete deterioration of a boy-teacher relationship, breakdowns or moments of disconnection between younger boys and teachers can be categorized as more frequent yet less severe in duration, severity and long-term impact on learning.

Crescent Definition: Relational breakdowns occur when a situation or incident results in unresolved feelings of fear, anger and frustration between any or all of the stakeholders in a school's community: (boy, teacher and/or parent).

Teachers divided "breakdown" into two categories:

1. Student behaviour necessitating teacher corrections and therefore negative relationship interactions
2. Students with fixed mindsets, unwilling to participate or to be a part of the solution to their problem

Elementary teachers did not describe these students' actions as defiant, removed or disengaged from school or the teacher, as was the case in older boys. For the majority of cases, the elementary school breakdown moments were assumed by the teacher to be part of a greater journey towards an eventual resolution with that boy and his family. Though stressful, there was no indication that the Crescent teachers felt a situation was beyond repair; the disconnections represented the ongoing business of mentoring boys and helping them mature.

Living Reichert's Relational Gestures at Crescent School

"Relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning is performed."

(Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p.191)



The face of an elementary school boy is a blank canvas on which every emotion is displayed. Good relational teachers of boys at this age are adept at monitoring the emotional temperature of their charges throughout the school day. A crucial relational gesture employed by teachers at this level is to spot emotional vulnerability and intervene before the tears begin. In most cases, a distraction or alternate possibility is put forth. Elementary school teachers frequently ask boys to be their "helpers", assigning them a job or task to complete, an errand to run, etc. Through our Crescent School research project, we have added a new relational gesture: "Building Confidence Through Leadership."

Below, please find representational examples of how Crescent School teachers described how the relational gestures resonated positively in their classrooms.

Sharing a Common Interest:

"We both have a love for Star Wars and the Grade 3 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:

"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."

Responding to Talents and Interests:

"I have a weekly Classroom Leader and at the end of the week the helper brings in three sentimental items to share with the class. The boys really look forward to their special week. It is a great opportunity for them to share their interests, talents and life achievements and to feel important."

Sharing A Common Characteristic

"This boy loves to chat about sports and we have a common interest in that regard. 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."

Accommodating Opposition

"As I started to form relationships with new and different students, I looked for ways to build relationships by showing interest in these students. From discussing their interests and talents to engaging in activities with them and using "nicknames" I believed that I was building positive relationships with most (if not all) students. I was using nicknames to connect and foster these relationships; however, the attention made one of the boys uncomfortable. We need to make sure our efforts are not working against our goals."

Revealing Vulnerability

"...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 and coach, whom they see everyday, was transformed during field experience, 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."



New Crescent Gesture: Building Confidence through Leadership:

Having a weekly helper and carving out sharing time has proven to be very important in our classroom. It is during this time that the boys and I really get to know each other and this has helped build stronger relationships between everyone.

What Our Boys Said:

Boys like teachers who praise their efforts not the outcomes. (even if a boy gets a poor mark or loses a game, the teacher focuses on what he did correctly.)

Boys feel scared when teachers get angry. When this happens, they will not question a teacher about the teacher's decision, and instead, they internalize their feelings.

Boys appreciate it when teachers help them achieve something they couldn't do on their own.

Boys like to be noticed by their teachers, but do not like to be the "teacher's pet."

"He always knew we could get better and he always supported us. He believed in us all and he never gave up. He never doubted us."

"There's a subject, I'm not that good at it... so I don't really want to do the work. Mostly I feel the pressure from my head... I feel like I can't finish the question. Then my head starts spinning."

"Boys work harder for teachers who they think care about them."

"They get so mad and sometimes they get annoyed. I don't like it when they yell."



What Our Parents Said:

Parents really appreciate teachers who get to know their sons as people and as individuals. They are grateful when teachers can bring out a special talent, skill or characteristic in their son

Parents do not appreciate when teachers "bucket" their son as unmotivated or lazy.

Parents worry that if they interact with a teacher about an issue that the teacher will take this out on their son.

Parents are grateful when teachers take a different approach with each child, depending on that boy's social and academic capabilities.

"My son has mentioned times when the whole class is punished for something one child has done."

"We appreciate it when teachers can help our sons in ways that we can't; it means the responsibility for raising our son is shared with others."

"When he has a teacher that he connects with he is just so much more open to learning."



What Our Teachers Said:

Teachers appreciate it when parents work with them to solve a situation, especially when it is still small.

When parents undermine teachers, this puts students in a difficult position as they don't know to whom they should be loyal - their parents or their teacher?

Teachers appreciate the support of colleagues - for comfort, for ideas, for strategies.

It is important for teachers to share positive student interactions with parents throughout the year, and especially at the start of the year.

"It is important, especially when working with young students, to take a long view; you won't see their behaviour change substantially in the short time you have with them, but you will see it change over years."

"I guess he gave a bit of himself, I gave a bit of myself, we opened up and I think having that was what really developed the relationship..."

"Students need concrete proof that we like them; sometimes it means going out of our way to demonstrate this."



Relational Teaching Strategies:

Four best practices strategies supporting positive relational teaching emerged from the Crescent School Research project.



Timing is Everything

- Start the year with positive communication to parents and consider sharing details about who you are as a person to forge strong, personal connections. This can work as letters to parents and personal stories and photos at Meet the Teacher/Curriculum evenings. Send parents an email or give them a call in the first week of school to let them know you have enjoyed meeting their son.
- If a conflict or breakdown occurs, give yourself time to review the situation and consider the issue in context, from all perspectives. Resist the temptation to act immediately, especially if upset: "I will write myself some notes now, and review them before taking any action."
- Take the opportunity to review the situation with a trusted colleague, mentor.
- Schedule a time to talk with the student(s) involved to give him the opportunity to share his perspective of the situation. Reprimanding a student in front of his peers is problematic on several levels - most specifically, the student is unlikely to "hear" anything being communicated.



Plan Your Plan

- Always assume positive intent when getting ready to meet boys, teachers or parents. It puts you in the right frame of mind to hear their concerns objectively and not personally.
- Begin conversations or meetings by letting the student or parent express their concerns first and let them finish before starting your portion of the meeting. Prepare your messaging for the beginning, middle and end of the meeting.
 1. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.
 2. 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.
 3. There are a few things we need to review about what happened....
 4. In the future, let's both agree that....
- Consider the Hamburger Approach
 - Start with positive comments.
 - Provide steps for improvement or an action plan for both parties to move forward.
 - End with restating the concerns and repeat

Putting Crescent Research Into Practice

While these strategies are likely to resonate with practitioners as common sense solutions to conflicts that arise while working in a school, it is hoped that articulating them formally will help them to become common practice in schools dedicated to improving their relational teaching techniques.



the action plan for the future.

Location, location, location!

- Choose a neutral, private but transparent location for the meeting.
- Choose a time that minimizes student vulnerability and visibility by his peers.
- If the meeting involves parents, try to be flexible with their schedule.
- A location with few distractions increases the engagement and focus of all participants.



We Are All in This Together!

- Establish that the best interests of the boy are everyone's first priority.
- Remember that every stakeholder in a relationship breakdown is fearful, frustrated and vulnerable. These feelings are often disguised as assertive, unresponsive or defensive demeanours.
- Sharing a personal or related story that connects to the current situation can build trust and reassure the other party.



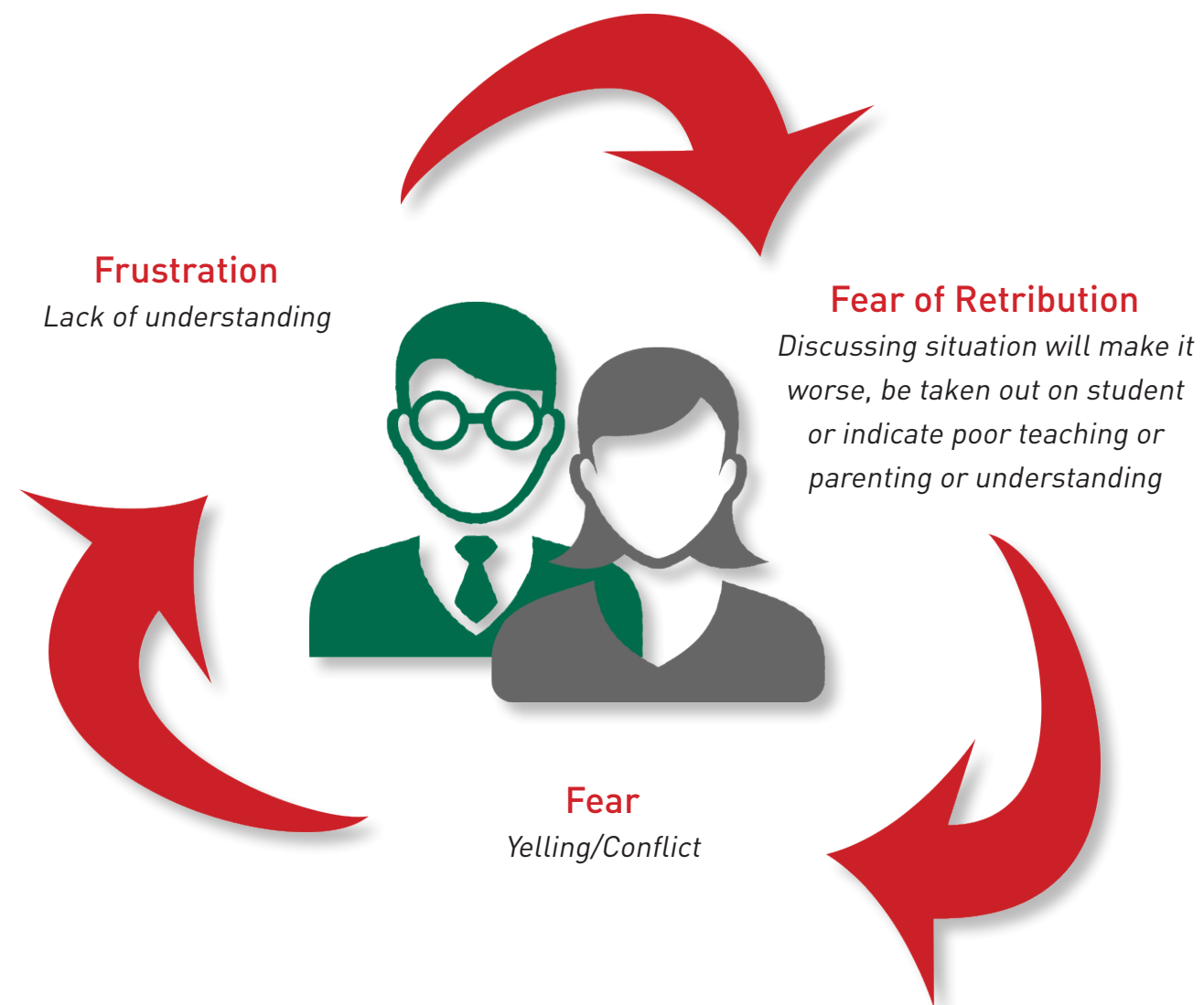
Major Themes in Breakdowns

Relational breakdowns are rooted in fear, frustration and anger

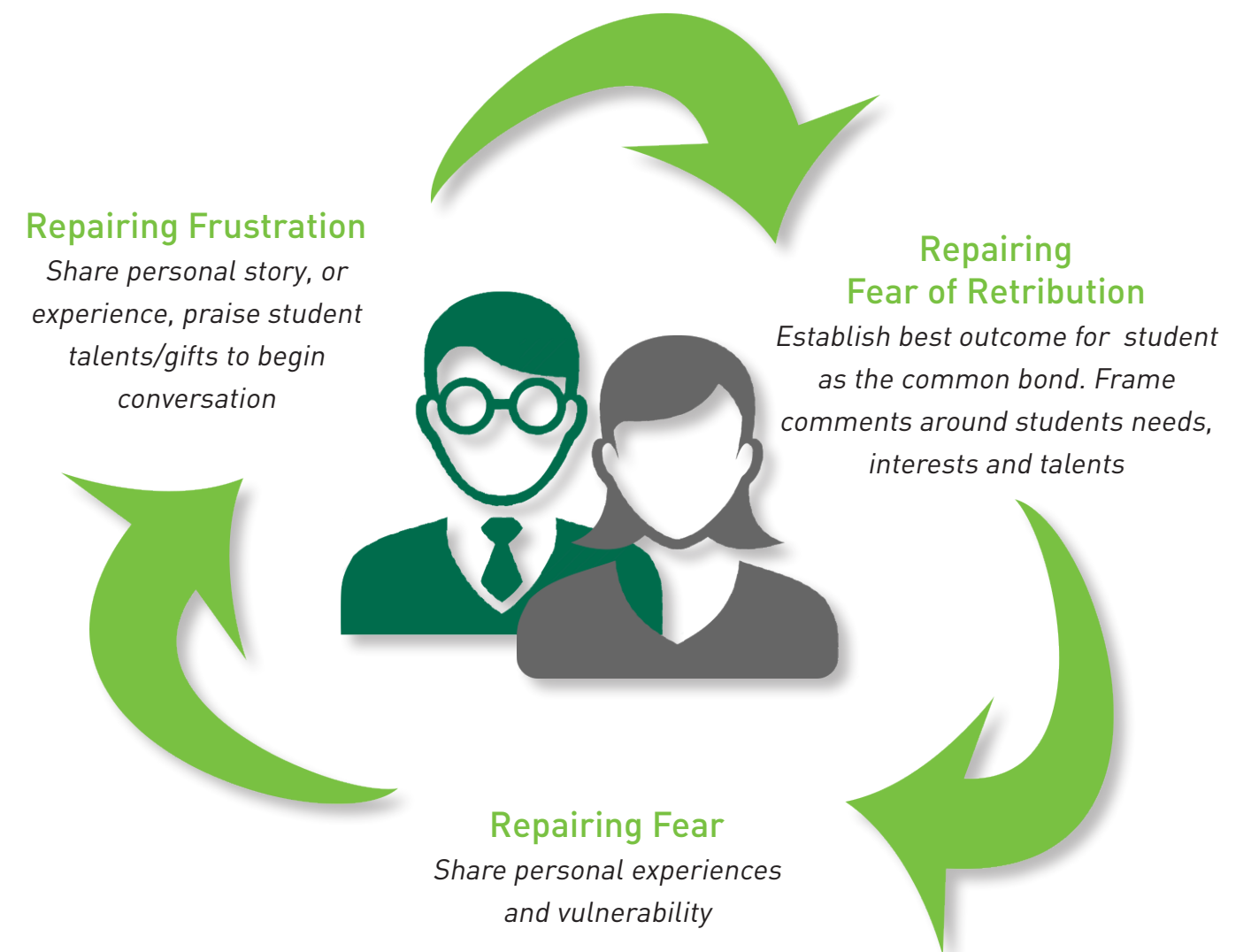
Repairing Relational Breakdowns: Return to the Gestures

Repairing relational breakdowns: strategies can be found within the Relational Gestures

Cycle of Breakdown



Repairing Breakdowns





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