FOR WHOM THE BOY TOILS

THE PRIMACY OF RELATIONSHIP IN BOYS’ LEARNING

Michael Reichert & Richard Hawley
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Acknowledgments

## Part One: Relational Teaching
- Chapter One: Boys and Their Teachers 1
- Chapter Two: The Relational Teaching Project 12

## Part Two: Successful Relational Gestures
- Glossary of Key Concepts 19
- The Efficacy of Relationship in Transforming Boys’ Performance 24
- Chapter Three: Reaching Out to Meet Particular Needs 32
- Chapter Four: Responding to Boys’ Special Interests and Talents 55
- Chapter Five: Conveying Mastery and Maintaining Standards 70
- Chapter Six: Other Successful Relational Gestures 87

## Part Three: When Relationships Break Down
- Dismissing the Other: Relational Impasse 133
- Chapter Seven: Boys’ Stories: Disappointment and Blame 139
- Chapter Eight: How Teachers Assess Relational Failure 158

## Part Four: The Significance of Relational Teaching for Boys
- Chapter Nine: The Primacy of Relational Teaching with Boys 189
- Chapter Ten: A Framework for Relational Teaching 196

## References
- 209

## Appendix A: Relational Teaching in Educational Theory
- 216

## Appendix B: Research Methods for Relational Teaching Study
- 229
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PART ONE

RELATIONAL TEACHING

Chapter One

Boys and Their Teachers

We are sitting around a conference table with a group of older boys enrolled in an independent school in Toronto. We are discussing when and how they respond positively to a teacher.

Three of the boys, unalike physically and in their mannerisms, begin to talk animatedly about their economics teacher who, one of them claims, “ignited” him. The boys speak of this man with something like reverence. They describe the atmosphere of his classroom as somehow charged with importance. “It’s a class,” one of them says, “where you wouldn’t think of acting out.” The teacher’s presence, they explain, is not strict or commanding. The elevated seriousness of his class seems to stem from the teacher’s own seriousness about his subject—the boys speak of his “passion”—and the care he takes in responding to what they say and the written work they hand in. “There is just something about him,” one of the boys says. “You would be ashamed not to do your work, your best work.”

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Across the city, we are talking to a similar group of boys enrolled in another school. The discussion has turned to teachers to whom the boys felt they could not respond. One boy’s face hardened noticeably when he described a hurtful encounter with a history teacher. The boy, self-described as frequently in trouble, had been sent out of class for a dress code violation: a colored tee shirt under his code-required dress shirt. Because his outer shirt was in code and (he felt) the undershirt did not really show, he was angry that he was called out. As he stormed out into the hall, the teacher followed him and continued to berate him, concluding with, “You are such a punk.” How did that make you feel, we asked. The boy said with conviction, “I hate him.” We persisted, you are still in the class, you have to work for him, right? The boy said, “I’m not doing anything in that class. He can flunk me, they can kick me out—I’m not doing anything.”

***

In the course of a day-long workshop with students and teachers at a school in the United Kingdom, a 17-year-old boy recounted a French class in which he underperformed, did not care for his teacher, and was well aware that his teacher did not care for him. The boy reported that he disengaged from the class and handed in partially prepared, sloppy work, which his teacher duly awarded the failing marks it merited. By year’s end, what had begun as wariness on the part of boy and teacher had devolved into mutual resentment and dislike. In the course of exchanges between the boy who told the story
and the roomful of teachers who heard it, one teacher—a teacher of French—asked the boy, with some feeling, whether he (the boy) did not feel a responsibility to do what he could to repair the relationship himself. The boy paused to reflect. Then he said, “I suppose so. I can see that I was not easy to teach or to deal with—but I was 13.”

**When Boys Are Not All Right**

Over the past few years, a provocative thesis about the future of Western societies has been proposed: We have reached an “end of men.” One version of this thesis concerns, based upon demographic and economic trends, whether “modern, postindustrial society is simply better suited to women?” (Rosin, 2010) The question celebrates women’s progress and captures the current zeitgeist while noting the tottering position of men within the new order. The trends are sweeping: By the year 2050, demographers predict, “Women will outrank men academically in most parts of the world.” (Mundy, 2012, p. 209)

Demographer Thomas Mortenson, working out of the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, is probably the leading researcher of the relative social trajectories of contemporary men and women. His 2011 report, *Economic Change Effects on Men and Implications for the Education of Boys*, documents significant declines in men’s college enrolment, labor force participation, mean wages, annual income, and marital stability, as well as their increasing unemployment, incarceration, poverty, and suicide. In the United Kingdom, the Higher Education Policy Institute also has explored these issues and concluded after an analysis of education and employment outcomes,

*In our view of even greater concern is the possibility that current trends take us to a situation where higher education and the related professions are overwhelmingly female, and where the only men to progress to higher education are those from the most advantaged socio-economic groups. (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2010)*
These same reports indicated that even in those countries where educational opportunities favor males, boys’ academic outcomes remain flat. The situation is dire enough that a number of contemporary observers have concluded that educational institutions are “leaving boys behind.” (Whitmire, 2010) Kimmel studied college-aged males in the United States and concluded, “The evidence is overwhelming that boys of all ages are having trouble in schools. They are underachieving academically, acting out behaviorally, and disengaging psychologically.” (2008, p. 71) Commentaries on the so-called boy crisis have noted that although achievement differences between boys and girls are smaller than those between races or classes, within each racial and class group, boys underperform girls—to the extent that boys stand at the very bottom of achievement rankings for all groups of color. (COSEBOC, 2009; Mead, 2006; Salomone, 2003)

Among explanations for the contemporary decline in the prospects for boys and men is the notion that conventional patterns of masculine expression—aggression, dominance, and individualism—are increasingly ill-suited for the emerging social order. Other gender theorists view the current state as transitional and cite evidence that men are evolving and adapting productively in response to shifting opportunities. As one British sociologist and gender theorist put it,

*Men’s resistance to change is not reducible to their psychic obstinacy or incapacity. Men can and do change. Resistance to change is also bound up with the persisting gender routines which characterize most of the wider economic, social and political structures of contemporary society.* (Segal, 1990, p. xiii)

Prominent among those “persisting gender routines” noted above are ones that influence the trajectory of boys’ development, such as school curricula and relational practices. Children learn gender norms as they proceed through their school years, but do they necessarily incorporate prevailing stereotypes into their scholastic
conduct? A mounting body of evidence suggests that they may not. On the basis of her studies of thousands of boys over a period of 20 years and in several countries, Way (2011) proposed that educators and developmentalists have been telling “a false story” about boys:

*My studies furthermore reveal a disconnection between the cultural construction of boyhood and boys’ lived experiences. The general lack of interest in the scholarly and popular culture regarding the dynamics of close friendships among males, combined with boys’ passion for these relationships, their emotional acuity, and the significance they give them, suggests that our expectations and stereotypes of boys are preventing us from seeing boys—their social and emotional desires and capacities—in broad daylight.* (p. 11)

Far from the emotionally constricted, relationally averse creatures so often assumed in popular archetypes, boys, when carefully observed and listened to, are apt to reveal themselves as warm, vulnerable, attuned to their own needs, and receptive to the overtures of parents, teachers, and other nurturers. A substantial body of emerging research, including our own conducted in schools, points to highly specific practices that contribute to viable and productive boys. (Reichert & Nelson, 2012)

However troubling claims about today’s male students may be *generally,* boys’ troubles in school and other developmental deficits are neither universal nor normative. The intriguing fact of the matter is that boys in some schools—in fact, some boys in most schools—are productively engaged, meet, and often even exceed expectations. Moreover, on the evidence of two extensive global studies, we assert with confidence that many boys succeed dramatically, regardless of their tested ability level, ethnic or economic status, the particular type of school they attend, or the region in which they live. When and how they have succeeded, the conditions they encounter in schools and in *their* relationships with teachers that enable their success, have been the focus of our studies.
Our intent in undertaking this research was both basic and profound. We set out in our first study to identify clearly effective teaching practices with boys and to explore their applicability to classes and contexts in which boys do less well. Again, effective teaching and learning are readily observable—somewhere—in most schools. We were convinced that actual students and practicing teachers would provide the best explanations of what works in the classroom and why, providing we could train a careful eye on classroom interactions.

The First Study: Effective Practices in Teaching Boys

Effective teaching—including the effective teaching of boys—takes place every day and can be identified and described. In 2008, the International Boys’ Schools Coalition contracted with a research team from the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives to conduct a study of successful teaching practice in boys’ schools in six countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom, and United States). Within those schools, we solicited online responses from teachers of adolescent boys and from boys themselves to a basic prompt: Describe an especially memorable classroom lesson.

We were aware that teachers’ narrative gifts would likely vary a great deal, and we knew that the depth and clarity of their narrated best lessons would vary with these gifts. In sum, we did not know what kind of quality and substance we would get in response from busy teachers asked to engage in yet another task imposed on them. Nevertheless, most teachers in the participating schools responded with considerable care and detail. The lessons teachers submitted were not merely effective but, for many, were their best lessons. We received nearly a thousand teacher narratives in all, representing a majority of each school’s teaching staff that works with adolescent boys.
The participating teachers responded to the following prompt:

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

After a preliminary review of all of the teacher submissions, they were sorted into a number of categories determined by the kinds of activity the teachers narrated. The convergence of similar practice—across disciplines, genders, length of tenure, school region and culture—was pronounced. Although we summarized lessons under thematic headings based upon their dominant element, nearly every reported lesson included multiple elements, as when a teacher devised a game wherein teams of boys created a product that would be judged competitively.

Unsure as we were as to how thoroughly and thoughtfully the surveyed teachers would address the task, we were even more concerned whether boys, under conditions of promised anonymity, would respond seriously to our survey:

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

We received responses from more than 1,500 boys who ranged in age from 12-19 years and represent considerable ethnic and economic
diversity as well as a wide range of scholastic motivation and achievement. Despite our injunction against naming names, many respondents ignored this prompt and proceeded, often with great feeling, to relate their appreciation of particular teachers: their patience, their impressive mastery of their subject, their willingness to offer extra help and, strikingly often, their sense of humor. The following tribute, by a Canadian boy, is a representative example:

This took place in Computer Studies in grade 10. When we began programming, I had difficulty understanding how it worked and how to do it. However, the teacher was very understanding towards me and helped me through the whole way. She never gave up on me even though I kept on having difficulty, and finally, after many morning and lunch extra help sessions, a light finally turned on in my mind and I understood everything. I was able to get a really good score on the big test of that unit, but that is not the point of the story. The thing that is memorable is that she never gave up on me and always believed that I could do it. There is no way that I could’ve understood this confusing and complex unit without her extensive aid. She went the extra mile to help me, and that’s what makes this school so great.

Three General Findings

In addition to helping us to categorize the types of lessons found to be especially effective for boys, the student and teacher narratives taken together revealed three overarching findings. The first of these was that boys tend to elicit the kind of pedagogy they need. Many of the teachers and boys described how some current practice was visibly not working. In response, the boys were disengaged, inattentive, even obstructive. The unsatisfactory student feedback stimulated teachers to adjust their material, delivery, and classroom setting until the boys’ responses improved. The teachers’ narratives revealed no sense of wise and all-knowing practitioners applying time-honored and proven techniques. To
the contrary, many teachers acknowledged prior frustration and even outright failure in the process of their coming to their favored practice. Teaching more often involves a kind of feedback dynamic by which ineffective practice disengages boys, which prompts teachers to adjust pedagogy until responsiveness and mastery improve. Lessons identified as effective had in effect been “chafed” into being by sustained interactions between teachers and boys. These instructional successes were not so much a matter of teachers always getting their pedagogy right but more about their ability to sustain relationships while they figured things out.

The second finding was that successful lessons often introduced an element—an inspired novelty, kinetic activity, the adrenal boost of a game, or a dramatic role-play—that was *transitive* to, or *carried*, the intended learning outcome. These transitive elements, often not directly associated with the lesson at hand, arouse and hold student attention and interest. That is, the motor activity or the adrenal boost of competition or the power of an unexpected surprise in the classroom does not merely engage or delight; it is transitive to (i.e., it attaches to and carries along) a specific learning outcome.

For example, in a British teacher’s narrative of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to his early adolescent boys, he introduced the discipline of stage swordplay. As the boys trained, practiced, and mastered some of the conventions of swordsmanship, they were engaged in a number of ways: the training is physically rigorous, dramatic, novel, and holds a faint promise of danger. As the teacher’s account revels, however, it was also transitive to a deeper, more enlivened reading of those scenes in which Tybalt slays Mercutio and Romeo slays Tybalt and to the play as a whole. The active exertions infused the experience of the students’ tackling a dense, rich text with an altogether different kind of energy, appreciation, and attention.
A lesson on the principles of momentum offered by a technology teacher from New Zealand challenged boys to design a model vehicle that will compete with other models to see which can go fastest. The learning objectives included student mastery of a number of physics principles—momentum, aerodynamics, friction—as well as interpersonal skills necessary to teams as they constructed their vehicles. A number of factors were transitive to the achievement of these learning outcomes. One was the stimulus of competition. Another was the stimulation of interactive exchanges with team members. The exercise also offered opportunities for physical movement and the manipulation of materials. Perhaps the most transitive component of the lesson was the drama of the demonstration. The kind of dragster demonstrated by the teacher not only sped down the miniature raceway, it did so at twice the predicted speed—at 70 miles per hour. The teacher enhanced the drama of the demonstration with a simulated countdown to the launch of the car. The boys were stirred to the extent they had to be “calmed down” before they were able to proceed to subsequent analysis and tasks.

The third major finding came to us almost exclusively from the students’ responses. It surprised and, for a time, puzzled us. We had asked the boys and teachers simply to narrate a lesson. Although the teachers adhered strictly to the prompt and wrote about a specific project or lesson, boys seemed unable to do this. They not only mentioned teachers’ names, they wrote about them with great feeling. At length it

“Boys experience their teachers before they experience the lessons they teach.”
dawned on us: The boys were unable to discuss effective lessons without describing the teacher who conveyed it. “Boys,” we concluded, “experience their teachers before they experience the lessons they teach.” (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p. 191)

The overall substance and tone of the students’ responses—including their refusal, if not their inability, to refrain from naming and relating instances of valued personal connections with their teachers—strongly suggests that the establishment of an effective connection is a precondition for the successful conveyance of scholastic material, a conclusion supported by the work of Raider-Roth (2005), who proposed the “relational learner” as the most apt model for how students acquire knowledge:

*Just as the theory of the relational self postulates that the self is born and develops in the cradle and life of relationships, so the notion of the relational learner postulates that the learning self is constructed and developed within the relationships of school.* (p. 21)

The fact that the boys’ accounts of successful lessons tended to be relational while their teachers focused almost exclusively on the substance of their lessons and on elements of their pedagogy led us to a clearer understanding of how and why boys engage in and disengage from classroom instruction. The boys described no single type of effective teacher. Some shared stories of their being uplifted by their teacher’s humor, passion, and care; others related their positive responses to highly structured, demanding, “no-nonsense” teachers, especially when they found those teachers to be “fair” and personally interested in them. In sum, the boys in our earlier study indicated their willingness to engage in classroom business, to suspend prior resistance—to try—for teachers to whom they were able to relate.
Chapter Two
The Relational Teaching Project

For the boys who participated in the first study, the relational aspect of successful teaching was apparently essential. In our report to the International Boys' Schools Coalition, we wrote, “Successful learning is a social process, built upon relationships that embody qualities of trust and mutual respect.” (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, p. 216) At the time of our first study and continuing to the present, there has been a growing interest in the facilitative nature of teacher-student relationships. Appendix A reports on our survey of the most important of these studies, some of which also have indicated strong links between quality relationships and academic outcomes. In this chapter, we describe a follow-up study designed as a result of the finding of our first study, with which we intended to deepen researchers’ and educators’ understanding of this critical dimension in boys’ learning. The study represents, to our knowledge, the largest and most diverse sampling of boys’ and teachers’ views of their relationships.

The Relational Teaching Study

Although our Teaching Boys study (Reichert and Hawley, 2010) enabled us to identify and to some extent document the importance of relationship in effective teaching, we did not specifically investigate how teachers conceptualize or construct the relational aspect of their pedagogy. What was for us the surprising centrality of relationship in boys’ accounts of successful teaching was largely unacknowledged in the teacher narratives,
which focused almost exclusively on the substance and delivery of their lessons. We realized that we needed to understand better how both boys and teachers approach relationship in classroom settings and, if possible, identify the particular understandings, dispositions, and skills that promote productive relationships, as well as those that prevent them or cause them to break down. If we were able to do this, we believed we would be able to heighten practicing teachers’ awareness of the place of relationship in boys’ scholastic progress, help teachers become more intentional in their approach to relationships, and offer useful examples and strategies for effective relationship formation.

As we presented our earlier study at conferences and schools, it was clear that the relational finding resonated strongly with teachers, although they found it difficult to articulate their own relational craft. Some drew upon general notions such as emotional intelligence to describe what they meant, but the boys’ narratives in the Teaching Boys study had indicated that many factors other than their teachers’ emotional savvy came into play in their willingness and ability to enter into productive relationships.

The challenge, as we saw it, was to design a research study that could reveal the relational dynamics at work in successful learning across a wide range of schools, teachers, countries, and cultures, and to relay these findings to the larger educational complex. To study relationship would require us again to survey both boys’ and teachers’ experiences. To understand teacher-student relationships in sufficient depth and nuance, however, we needed, in addition to asking teachers and boys to compose narratives about relationships, to meet with them in intimate focus groups and active workshops so that we could invite clearer, deeper, more considered responses than many boys and teachers are able to offer in a survey.
The relational teaching project was able to move forward because, once again, the International Boys’ Schools Coalition contracted with a research team from the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives to undertake the work. Like the Teaching Boys (2010) study, the Relational Teaching study followed the model of action research, which consists of two parts: (1) a collaborative diagnosis of the target social situation and (2) an intervention in which positive, stakeholder-driven change is developed and tested (Baskerville & Meyers, 2004). Action research is “essentially a social experiment, introducing some new policy and then monitoring its effects” (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 9). In the case of relational teaching, our experiment was to determine whether deliberate attention to an underexplored but possibly critical dimension of schooling can mobilize greater awareness and improve practice.

The Relational Teaching project sought to address the following research questions:

- How can we describe the relational dimension in teachers’ pedagogy and map the skills and processes involved?

- How can individual teachers be helped to reflect upon and improve these relational teaching skills?

- How can schools create professional learning contexts to help teachers sharpen these relational skills?

... the relational finding resonated strongly with teachers, although they found it difficult to articulate their own relational craft.
The project has addressed these questions by collecting data with a qualitative survey, focus groups, and relational teaching workshops. The survey solicited teachers’ narratives of how they achieved satisfying and scholastically productive relationships with boys—as well as how they encountered barriers they were unable to overcome. In the same manner, we surveyed boys about their positive and negative relationships with their teachers.

In addition to the survey data, we also organized focus groups with students and teachers at selected schools to test emerging narrative themes as part of a live member-check of both constituencies to refine our understanding of the written material.

Finally, daylong workshops with teams from regional project schools were convened in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom to examine and debrief project participants about the validity and applicability of our emerging findings. Akin and in addition to the workshops, conference calls with team members from project schools in New Zealand and Australia were conducted for the same purpose.

Once survey responses were collected from participating schools, the research team proceeded to analyze our data. Initially, each member of the team read the responses of both teachers and students for general reactions. From this initial reading, a preliminary coding framework was developed at a data analysis workshop. This coding framework allowed the researchers to organize the narrative responses of both teachers and boys into defining categories. As schools in the southern hemisphere added their responses to those from the northern hemisphere, the team reviewed and revised the coding framework to incorporate the nuances and new emphases that emerged from these later responses. These preliminary findings were shared with teachers and students in a series of focus groups and multischool conferences, to allow the researchers to elicit further feedback.
The thousands of pages of survey narratives, recorded interviews, and field notes from the workshops amounted to a daunting volume of data that nevertheless revealed a number of clear findings: patterns of relational practice hold true across national boundaries, teaching disciplines, teacher gender, student ability level, and school type and size. Throughout the project period, but especially in the course of site visits and live interviews, the researchers were impressed by the participants’ candor and willingness to disclose both positive and negative relational experiences. In so responding, both the boys and the teachers made it clear to us that relationship matters to them and is indeed the very heart of their common endeavor.

Project Outcome: A Framework for Relational Teaching

One key outcome from the project was a framework that summarizes practical approaches to relational teaching and details action steps that individual teachers and schools can take to improve their relational practice (see Chapter Ten). These final recommendations will acknowledge that different school cultures impose different limitations and offer distinctive opportunities to consider relational teaching; it is understood that the schools that participate in the study and others interested in the findings will filter the report through the lens of their own needs, priorities, and organizational histories.

In sum, the Framework for Relational Teaching is intended to help individual teachers and school leaders to respond to the following challenges:

- How to foster a school culture that understands the dynamics and the value of relational teaching;

- How to promote relationship-building in the multiple roles assumed by many teachers (i.e., classroom instructors, athletic coaches, activity advisors, guidance counselors, upholders of school policies and standards);
- How performance assessment policies can better support and assess the relational dimension of teachers’ work; and

- How to nurture the relational dimension of teachers’ work throughout their careers.

**Project Report: For Whom The Boy Toils**

The findings of this action research project are presented in the following sequence. We first present the dominant patterns revealed in the relational narratives submitted by the boys and teachers, including, in Part Two, a consideration of eight relationship-enhancing gestures made by teachers in response to boys’ relational needs. In Part Three, we identify patterns at work in unsuccessful relationships between boys and their teachers. Taken together, Parts Two and Three demonstrate how successful relationships are constructed and how breakdowns occur. The patterns that cause relational breakdown suggest promising measures for improved practice. In Part Four, we first summarize the key principles and implications of this research before we prescribe an action plan (i.e., a framework) for schools committed to the improvement of the relational dimension of their work with boys.
SUCCESSFUL RELATIONAL GESTURES

Glossary of Key Concepts

**Developable relational skills**
Success in student-teacher relationships does not depend on unevenly distributed gifts. Although generations have subscribed to the myth that certain rare individuals, from sacrifice, dedication, and profound personal reckoning, accomplish relational heroics, we discovered that there are many skilled teachers in schools everywhere and that all of them developed their success in a hit-and-miss, persevering way, guided by the responses of real boys in the laboratories of their classrooms and schools. We would say, based upon this analysis, that there are no inherently relational and nonrelational types. Rather, we view relationship as a natural and fundamentally human capacity, available to each and every teacher. Relationship-building, as abundantly revealed by our student and teacher narratives, is a *developable* capacity.
Dyadic/triadic relationships
A triadic relationship among boys, the subject matter before them, and their teachers exists in each boy’s case, and the dyadic dimension must be correctly struck for the mutual goals of learning to be met. In the Teaching Boys study, we discovered a transitive quality that underlies successful instructional approaches with boys; in the present relational study, we found that the dyadic dimension of the learning paradigm is primary in that it allows boys to engage in working, goal-oriented partnerships with their teachers.

Reflective relational practice
A common element recounted by teachers who reported that they had overcome boys’ scholastic resistance by establishing better relationships was a capacity for continuous reassessment or a willingness to revise prior assumptions and to improvise new approaches. This capacity for reflective self-monitoring and adjustment particularly distinguished teachers who encountered strong resistance, experienced initial frustration and relational failure, and yet ultimately overcame their reactions to enter a working alliance.

Every teacher, whether master or novice, experiences relationship frustrations and snags at some point, with some boys. To avoid the defensive loop elicited by repeated instances of relational failure and rejection and to generate new, creative responses, teachers need the safety and support of respected peers. Although each school establishes particular cultural norms for teacher self-reflection, schools in general must invest in the primacy of the relational dimension by building into their schedules sufficient opportunities for peer-based support.
**Relational gestures**

With striking congruence, the positive accounts collected for our study from both boys and teachers revealed a number of specific relational gestures they believed were responsible for the salutary effects of their school relationships. All of the positive narratives, whether written or related in interviews, indicated one of these features as central to the relationship’s success. We refer to these features as *gestures* to account for their invitational and provisional qualities. Teachers intend the response to communicate an invitation to the boy to join in a working alliance and recognize that the gesture may or may not hit the mark, in which case, it requires modification. The message received by the student from these gestures, ideally, is one of care, mastery, and attentiveness, as a result of which the student develops trust and experiences greater willingness to engage in the lesson at hand.

**Relational learner**

Adapting the general insight that human development occurs within relationships to education and learning, Raider-Roth (2005) proposed the *relational* learner as the most apt model for how students acquire knowledge. Our use of this term emphasizes that children acquire knowledge in a trusted, dyadic context:

*Just as the theory of the relational self postulates that the self is born and develops in the cradle and life of relationships, so the notion of the relational learner postulates that the learning self is constructed and developed within the relationships of school.* (p. 21)
Relational teaching
A key premise of our relational perspective is that learning is achieved when the dyadic dimension of teacher and boy enables the specific developmental and scholastic outcomes desired by both. These purposeful alliances are forged when the boy sees that his teacher, coach, or advisor genuinely knows and respects him, monitors his progress, intervenes when necessary with effective help, and creates a safe climate for offering comment, asking questions, revealing confusion, and seeking help. The dyadic connection does not merely contribute to or enhance teaching and learning; relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning is performed. Effective relational teaching is always provisional, subject to teachers’ modification on the basis of feedback received and results achieved.

Relationship manager
What became especially clear from our analysis of boys’ and teachers’ narratives is the corollary of the working alliance theory: it falls to the helper in the working alliance (i.e., the teacher) to manage the alliance by addressing its strains and breakdowns when they occur. With the boy so absorbed by his efforts to learn and wrestling with emotional reactions of all sorts, it is only the teacher who can maintain objectivity to see above the fray. With the working alliance so critical to boys’ learning and so many sources of strain arising from boys’ lives in and out of school, the management of the health of the relationship is an essential part of teachers’ job descriptions.

Standing resistance
Boys bring varying degrees of standing resistance with them into the classroom, which are dissolved by a variety of relational gestures on the part of their teachers. In many instances, the level of resistance is considerable, as indicated by the boys’ recollections of their entering new classes in which the subject is regarded with anxiety because of self-doubt, substandard performance in prior years, or the reputation of the course or its instructor.
Transformation
The resistance manifested by many boys as they enter particular classes has various root causes but rarely is it the case that boys do not want to learn about their worlds. They may be fearful, lack confidence, or have developed attitudes of mistrust and defensiveness. To achieve a better understanding of their environments (i.e., to develop and transform themselves), however, they seek teachers who can guide them through the mysteries of language, science, and art. It is the transformative role of relationship—that the teacher enables hesitant boys to risk engagement—that we discovered in the first Teaching Boys study and that came into sharper focus in the present investigation.

Working alliance
Relationally successful teachers establish a mutually agreeable working alliance with each student. In extending this concept from psychology to education, we believe that the teaching and learning process is, above all, a collaborative endeavor in which change is sought and teachers are the agents of change. A key premise of this perspective is that learning is achieved when the dyadic dimension of teacher and boy enables the specific developmental and scholastic outcomes desired by both. These purposeful alliances are forged when the boy sees that his teacher, coach, or advisor genuinely knows and respects him, monitors his progress, intervenes when necessary with effective help, and creates a safe climate for offering comment, asking questions, revealing confusion, and seeking help.
The Efficacy of Relationship in Transforming Boys’ Performance

Our approach in this second study was similar to the first in that we solicited written narratives from both teachers and boys and asked them to recount both a productive relationship as well as an unsuccessful one. The pervasive theme that ran through the submitted narratives of positive relationships was that they are transformative; as a consequence of the relationship, behavior changed and scholastic improvement followed, sometimes dramatically. The successful relational accounts described how varying degrees of standing resistance boys brought with them into the classroom were dissolved by a variety of relational gestures on the part of their teachers. In many instances, the level of resistance was considerable, as boys recounted their entering new classes in which the subject was regarded with anxiety because of self-doubt, substandard performance in prior years, or the reputation of the course or its instructor.

Considered analytically, the scholastic relationship between boy and teacher is triadic: composed of the boy, his teacher, and the subject matter to be mastered. Our findings strongly suggest that this essential triadic enterprise depends for its success on the dyadic relationship between teacher and boy. This is not to say that a warm, mutually regardful relationship between teacher and boy ensures scholastic success, but it suggests that a positive dyadic relationship typically precedes and certainly is conducive to engagement and progress in the triadic enterprise.
How does relationship affect this positive outcome? Boys’ narratives suggest that the dyadic dimension, once established, fosters a willingness and enables a focus that might otherwise be absent in students. Asked how this transformation from indifference, passivity, and even resistance is accomplished, Hawken offered this response in his seminal paper, “I, Thou, and It” (1974):

*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. (p. 56)*

In the excerpt below, a South African boy, new to his school, related that he was helped by a teacher who noticed his reticence and helped him to establish himself.

**Miss K. was the first teacher I had and I was surprised in how she was so interested in me. I was a new kid and I wasn’t expecting to receive that kind of attention. I would try to talk to my teacher and try showing the same amount of interest, but I was too shy. She was the one who helped me get used to the kind people at the school. This particular teacher helped me to become less of a shy person and made me confident, which has allowed me to explore more things in the world. I have managed to be brighter in personality. School has become a better place than it was.**

In hundreds of stories of this sort, boys related that they had learned to believe in themselves, to love a subject area or play a sport, and to develop habits of work and self-discipline that changed not just their school fortunes but their lives in general. The relational dimension of schooling enabled them to overcome whatever hesitance or aversions they brought to school so that they could tackle the learning challenges before them.
With striking congruence, the accounts of both boys and teachers revealed several specific relational gestures they believed were responsible for the salutary effects of their school relationships. All of the positive narratives, whether written or related in interviews, indicated one of the following eight gestures as central to the relationship’s success:

- **Teachers reaching out, often improvising measures to meet a particular student need.** Most often, but not always, the need was to correct a specific learning deficit. The “special measures” taken by teachers invariably included the initiation of meetings with the student, and perhaps the student’s family, outside of the classroom setting; observing the boy in spheres of interest and competence unrelated to the classroom; and teachers making themselves available for personal consultations and for scholastic remediation.

- **Teachers demonstrating persuasive mastery of their subjects and maintaining consistent expectations of their students and of themselves.** Perhaps counter-intuitively, neither teachers nor boys indicated that positive teacher-student relationships were simply a matter of the establishment of mutually warm affect. Teachers’ clear mastery of their fields was the relational *sine qua non* in many of the narratives, as was the maintenance of clear and even demanding standards of classroom conduct and quality of work.

- **Teachers responding to a student’s personal interest or talent.** Another strong theme that ran through both the boys’ and the teachers’ relational accounts was the enlivening and enabling effect of a boy’s realization that his teacher knew him beyond his status as, say, a math or English student. Teachers who take pains to learn boys’ defining interests and talents are able to engage them both on the uncertain turf of a difficult subject and also in the more reassuring context of the boy’s special strength.
Teachers sharing a common interest with a student. For the reasons discussed above, teachers and boys who share a personal interest—whether athletic, musical, mechanical—is a reliable relationship-builder with similar positive effects on scholastic performance.

Teachers sharing a common characteristic with a student. Although this feature and the three that follow were not indicated as frequently as the four features cited above, the fact that a boy and a 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.

Teachers willing to disclose aspects of their personal lives. Although no boy or teacher reported a positive relationship based on a teacher’s being excessively confessional, both reported relational breakthroughs and subsequent scholastic progress when teachers found the moment and an appropriately professional way to share formative personal experiences that bore on the boy’s scholastic and personal circumstances.

Teachers who are able to accommodate a measure of opposition. Teachers and boys alike reported that teachers who can resist personalization of 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.

Teachers who are able to reveal vulnerability. Although this gesture was the 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 line between a teacher’s necessary authority and the occasional appropriateness of personal disclosure and vulnerability are clarified in the discussion that follows of the teacher’s responsibility to manage the relationship.
This study’s participants attributed relational success to the eight features indicated above in approximately the same proportions—with one significant exception. Whereas teachers most frequently attributed their relational successes to their efforts to meet their individual needs, the boys were much more inclined to attribute relational success to teachers’ mastery of their material, effective classroom management, and maintenance of standards.

**Effective Relational Gestures**

In both their written narratives and in their personal interviews, the boys stressed their appreciation and admiration for teachers who seemed genuinely to want to know them, including their personal strengths, weaknesses, and special needs. The boys also expressed warm appreciation of teachers who established clear expectations, high (but attainable) standards and, in various purposeful initiatives, convinced the boys that they could succeed in meeting those standards. In considering teachers’ initiatives toward students as *relational gestures*, we wish to emphasize both the invitational and provisional aspects of the action. Boys, we believe, closely read these gestures for the teachers’ underlying message: to invite a working alliance. As we show later, effective relational teaching is always provisional and subject to teachers’ modifications on the basis of feedback received and results achieved. The following chapters illustrate the kinds of gestures teachers offered and boys attributed to scholastically successful and mutually rewarding relationships.

Our findings suggest that relational success is achieved along multiple pathways. That the same relational gestures succeeded in so many different school settings and were reported with such consistency by teachers of all disciplines, by both early-career and veteran teachers, and by male and female teachers, strongly suggests that there is no single relational type or personality. Relationally successful teachers reveal a determination to
improvise until a climate is established in which the boy is able to make eye contact and engage in spoken exchanges both in and outside of class, a climate in which school matters and other matters of common interest can be comfortably aired and shared.

Relationally successful teachers establish a mutually agreeable working alliance with each student. In extending this concept from psychology to education, we follow Rogers (2009) in believing that the teaching and learning process is, above all, a collaborative undertaking in which change is sought and teachers are the agents of change. As he wrote, "All teaching and learning activities can be assumed to have embedded working alliances" (p. 4). A key premise of this perspective is that learning is achieved when the dyadic dimension of teacher and boy enables the specific developmental and scholastic outcomes desired by both. These purposeful alliances are forged when the boy sees that his teacher, coach, or advisor genuinely knows and respects him, monitors his progress, intervenes when necessary with effective help, and creates a safe climate for offering comment, asking questions, revealing confusion, and seeking help.

In both successful and unsuccessful narratives, the teachers' skill and persistence when challenged by boys' resistance is the determining factor. The essential premise of the working alliance theory is that it is the responsibility of the teacher to manage the relationship by addressing its strains and breakdowns when they occur. For boys beset by the effort to learn amid fears of failure, it is the teacher who must maintain objectivity and remain above the emotional fray.

The boys also made clear that in addition to teachers' relating to them personally and taking charge of the relationship, the boys valued teachers' ability to establish a positive and respectful climate for the entire class. The boys were especially sensitive to the ways teachers respond to challenges presented by resistant and obstructive boys. The boys expressed grateful admiration of
teachers who are able to resist personalization of obstructive student behavior, a quality that contributes positively to the boys’ sense that the classroom is a safe and comfortable place.

Taken together, the successful strategies underscore two profound implications for relational teaching. The first is that the dyadic connection does not merely contribute to or enhance teaching and learning; relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed. The second implication is that relational success does not depend on unevenly distributed gifts, as is too often suggested in popular school fictions, such as Peter Weir’s 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, which celebrate the eccentric or specially gifted individual as the only effective relationship-maker in an otherwise deadening scholastic community. Rather, we view relationship as an inherently and fundamentally human capacity, available to each and every teacher. Relationship-building, as these narratives abundantly reveal, is a *developable* capacity.

The chapters that follow in Part Two document these successful strategies. The eight relationally successful gestures indicated earlier are condensed into the following four chapters and are discussed and illustrated in each. The examples of students’ and teachers’ narratives were selected for their clarity in illuminating the meaning of the gesture and not for their representativeness across participating schools.
Suffice it to say that all of the schools submitted stirring examples, in which teachers and boys come alive in their common regard, and we regret that we are unable to include more of their stories.

In Part Three, we consider teachers’ and boys’ narratives about their unsuccessful relationships and identify attitudes and specific practices that appear to impede formation of effective working alliances between boys and their teachers.
Chapter Three
Reaching Out to Meet Particular Needs

One of the most encouraging findings of this study was unexpected. When asked to describe an especially productive relationship with a boy, most teachers discussed boys who first presented themselves as scholastic problems—boys especially resistant to school work and relationship. The challenges posed by these resistant boys was at times stressful and even discouraging to the teachers who addressed them, but with persistence and an imaginative array of improvisations, teachers succeeded in overcoming the resistance and guided the boys to mutually rewarding personal transformations. These teachers’ accounts of successful relationships demonstrate the stimulation and pleasure they experienced as they solved these so-called problems—as well as the pleasure of getting to know and being known by boys with whom they formed a productive working alliance.

The transformations recounted by the teachers in their relational narratives included discussions of boys with a variety of learning and physical difficulties—some of which might be considered beyond the range of standard instruction. At the heart of these positive relational stories and preceding the scholastic or behavioral turnaround is the teacher’s willingness to address the boys’ resistance directly by using such strategies as meeting outside of class and taking a personal, non-scholastic interest in the boy and his circumstances.
Teachers narrating their relational successes readily acknowledged the gratification they experienced when a difficult boy became responsive and productive, but few of these transformations happened quickly or easily. More typically, progress was gradual and intermittent, assured only when the interpersonal relationship became strong and the teacher’s role as advocate and relationship manager was fully established. The following account, composed by a Canadian history teacher, reveals something of the serrated nature of relational progress as well as the pleasure acknowledged by the writer in her “sense of ownership of [her student’s] success.”

We spend a tremendous amount of time gathering information and data about our incoming grade-nine students, particularly those that may struggle due to social emotional concerns, learning exceptionalities, behavioural concerns, or simply having selected the wrong level of study. One of our boys was identified early on as being of great concern, being on the autism spectrum. This young man was small in stature for grade nine, stubborn, bright, and yet struggles in social situations, with cues and particularly with the stimulation of the boys’ school environment. Change was not easy.

When he gets nervous, he talks at length about whatever interests him, regardless of the appropriateness of subject or timing. Technology is his passion. But this tendency is his greatest obstacle; his colleagues will poke fun and if not shut down, attempt to get him going. I met him at orientation camp. It was too much for him, and we had to send him home a day early, but his tenacity showed through. He was unable to handle the stimulation and physicality of the activities, and the anxiety was too much. I had him in my grade-nine math class. I immediately began to talk to him, meet him before class to walk him there, talk to him about his computer and weekend, and I set the classroom expectations and held him to them. I would be sympathetic with his daily excuses as to why he couldn’t complete work but would help and assist him to do so. I attended lunchtime peer tutoring to make sure he got work completed and praised his ability and efforts. He was pleased that
I thought he was good at math. Often, confidence is the biggest obstacle to grade-nine applied math students. I would take the time to work with him and his tutor, allowing for a debrief about his day and interests, and then would insist work got done, and it did. I would advocate for him when he experienced difficulties with other students. He would seek me out in the morning or at lunch to talk. I knew it was his way of coping with anxiety or too much stimulation in the halls. He knew what the boundaries and expectations were and he met them. I communicated regularly with mom, the leadership teachers, and special education to help ensure the expectations were consistent.

He did very well that term. I would take the time to sit and chat with him at lunch if he didn’t have tutoring; the cafeteria was too much for him. He was quite ill after the first day of provincial testing, so I called his mom to let him know how proud I was of his achievement the first day so that hopefully it would alleviate his anxiety. He arrived the next day and was beaming. His transition to high school has been tough, but you see the moments of happiness and excitement in this young man—when you take the time to chat with him. His second semester has been another difficult transition, but he seeks out those he is comfortable with. I hope that he learns to engage more effectively with his peers, but there has been considerable progress and he is quite an endearing character. I look forward to working with him throughout his high school career. I probably learned more from him than he did from me.

The assumption of advocacy, sometimes an almost fierce advocacy, on the part of committed teachers is a strong theme that runs through these narratives. A sure sense that the teachers have played their parts in a boy’s transformation clearly motivates committed teachers to reach out to students who are not thriving. In the following account, an American teacher of remedial English shared her determination that a boy on the brink of dismissal from his school should get back on track:
The boy I will discuss as an example of a gratifying teaching experience is an African-American boy who was in my eighth grade class and received a letter in October from the Head of the School that because he was failing English, he would not be sent a contract unless that situation was turned around during the first semester. The boy was devastated, as was his mother, and I was determined to make sure that he pass the English course that term. As extra help sessions were not sufficient, I had the boy to my home every weekend—Saturday and Sunday for most of the day—and we read together, worked intensively on his English term paper including research, outlining, note cards drafts, etc. I encouraged him to write on Richard Wright as I wanted him to relate to the books he was reading and to be able to bring his own experience to his work. (This boy taught me how to read *Native Son.*) So much of this student’s problem in school was feeling different and alienated socially, emotionally, and academically. Those weekends were a struggle as I was a hard task master, but we worked together as a team and as we did, he became a more confident learner and more enthusiastic about his task. (Obviously the warm atmosphere of a home contributed to the success of our sessions.) At evaluation time that year, the headmaster remarked that I was obsessional about this boy, and I agreed but added that teaching him and helping him to succeed was my proudest moment at school, and it was. The boy did graduate and went on to prep school where he felt prepared for the work, made friends, and did well.

“The assumption of advocacy, sometimes an almost fierce advocacy, on the part of committed teachers is a strong theme that runs through these narratives.”
He also graduated from college. For many years, his mother would call me at Christmas to thank me for helping her son to help himself. I have since lost touch with the family as I think they have moved out of the city, but his success confirmed my sense of the importance of a committed teacher in the life of a youngster and the singular gratification that comes when you help to open doors to a student who is floundering. I believed in this boy, I knew he was intelligent, I knew his problems, I felt his pain. I did not really understand his lack of effort and passivity but I decided to make him prevail if he could. I thought the school needed to be behind him. I got as much as I gave and as with many very difficult tasks the road was rough and challenging. I tried to make him believe that education would be his way out of isolation and of a sense of failure—his ticket into a successful life. I will always be gratified by the part I played in this boy’s journey.

We learned in the course of our discussions with teachers in participating schools worldwide that different circumstances, both legal and cultural, shape the kinds of professional relationships possible between students and their teachers. For instance, the growing concern about the protection of children from child abuse has in some regions and in some countries resulted in laws and policies that forbid teachers and students to talk on the phone, share rides in cars, exchange personal emails and texts, and visit in one another’s homes or at venues outside of school. Understandable and laudably intended as these measures may be, they can make it difficult for boy and teacher to find the setting and degree of privacy necessary to forge relational connection. Thus, each teacher in each country and even within each school must calculate what options best facilitate productive relationship. Although we cannot prescribe a universal set of relational practices and boundaries in this report, we can document successful relational practices that boys and teachers alike acknowledge as contributing positively to boys’ scholastic and personal development.
The relationships recounted by teachers in this study were by no means unidirectional gestures on the part of caring teachers to needy students. The teachers were both generous and eloquent in expressing what they learned from the students in their charge and how, as a consequence, their personal and professional perspectives were deepened, as were those of an American high school science teacher who “cherishes” what she learned and the time spent with a struggling student.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work in a high school that most would describe as a “rough” school. Many of the students attending came from one-parent families or foster homes. Some of the students there came from middle- to lower-class families, struggling to even afford bus fare to attend school on a regular basis. I had this one particular student in my class who had a very strong exterior. He had a hard time trusting people of authority because most in his life weren’t around for a very long time. His experience was summed up in one of our very first interactions when he asked me, “So when will you be leaving?” But as I did with most of my students, I treated him as a young adult, holding him to reasonable standards. I tried to draw him in with life experience both he and I could relate to. Over the course of the quarter, he began to let down his guard. He went from showing up late to class to coming in on time with homework in hand. Though he kept fairly reserved, I began to feel his potential as a contributing student and member of a larger community.

On one particular day, he decided to spend some time with me after school. It was then that I learned more about who he was and what he dealt with on a regular basis. He started to tell about his girlfriend and how she had recently become pregnant. Her parents were really enraged, yet this young man wanted to still be a part of both her life and the child’s. He had been battling with this all semester long, and it was only then that I realized what real problems he was dealing with. Here I was worrying about him doing his homework; meanwhile he was wondering how he was going to raise this child. It was that day that I truly observed his vulnerability.
To this day I still remember and cherish that time I had getting to understand this young man. I feel that because of the consistency I created in my classroom, along with the respect I gave him as a student, regardless of his abilities in my class, he began to see me as a role model and someone he could trust.

To strike a responsive chord in a heretofore unresponsive student often requires the willingness to get to know the boy well enough to determine precisely which chord that would be. The catalyst for many of the successful relationships reported in this study was the teacher’s coming to know a boy’s personal strengths and passions that had often been occluded by the seemingly more immediate need to address his scholastic problems. The Canadian special education teacher who wrote the following narrative was gradually able to bring a resistant reader and writer to address those necessary skills, but only after she discovered and cultivated his gifts as a storyteller. The gratifying results of their collaboration were only possible, she concluded, “when relationship-building took precedence over skill-building.”

The student I have in mind was referred to me by his Grade 3 teacher for help with reading and writing. In total, he and I worked together for two years. At the beginning of our time together, he was very resistant to any type of reading or writing activity, and in the course of a 40-minute class, he would spend the majority of time playing with the toys in the room, hiding... he began to see me as a role model and someone he could trust.
under his chair, asking to go to the bathroom—otherwise avoiding any kind of work!

Over time, it became clear that he was a very creative storyteller, and we began to explore story through puppets. We also started using the computer to research animals (a favourite topic of his) and to produce written work using PowerPoint™. Phonics and word-building were explored through wooden letters and magnetic words. The more I tailored the activities to the student’s interests (puppets, animals) and competencies (using the computer, 3-D visualization), the more buy-in I received from this student. So although the pace of learning was slower than might have otherwise occurred, it was really important to build a relationship together.

In our second year of working together, the student’s resistance to working with me had disappeared for the most part, as had his bravado around writing and reading. He stopped avoiding work or pretending that it was too easy and was much more willing to share what he didn’t know or understand. We would engage in conversations around subjects that he was interested in, and he would often ask my opinions about world events or activities happening at the school.

To summarize then, I believe this student’s growing success as a student began when relationship-building took precedence over skill-building, and when we began to relate to each other as human beings rather than as instructor and student. More than anything else, this student needed someone to see what he was good at, to show interest in him as a person, and to believe in his potential to learn.

Although the establishment of working alliances contributed to the scholastic success of the boys discussed in these teacher narratives, many teachers acknowledged other important, trans-scholastic benefits of their being available for relationship with boys who badly needed one. Such was the experience of a senior teacher at an American independent school:
I didn’t teach this boy, but I got to know him because he was the sort of young man who was easy to know: He engaged adults and generally respected and admired his teachers. Through the give and take of daily life, through interactions in the hallway, at my lunch table, in my office when he’d stop by and talk, we became quite close. He became a friend, though there still was some distance: I was a faculty member and an adult, and he knew that.

I think we found kindred spirits in each other. He also became friendly with my wife, and would often stop by our house to visit, while in high school and later when he was home from college. His own family life was somewhat chaotic, and he was looking for support and confirmation wherever he could find it.

Here’s what drew us together: He felt isolated, I think, because he was gay, and at this time, some years ago, our school, indeed our society, was not as accepting as it now is of homosexuality. My wife and I were sympathetic and listened. He was experiencing fairly severe depression—as was his mother—and both of us had some knowledge of depression, if not through personal experience, through that of family members. So we listened. I remember we once asked him: “How are you? We mean how are you really?” That may have been the first time anyone asked him such a question. He opened up. We didn’t give a lot of advice. I would say that our ability to lend a sympathetic ear deepened our relationship. My wife also got to know his mother a little.

I think we were helpful because of our availability, of our welcoming him. We were a safe harbor. We didn’t judge. And we had time—no children, not a heap of responsibilities at school. He was also looking for adults who would approve and not condemn. We still keep in touch through email.

As in the narrative above, the following account, composed by a senior administrator in an American boarding school, recounted how a committed adult built a productive relationship by, among other things, dissolving the boundary between in-school and out-of-school:
This student came to us from a very different world. His family was Dominican, and he had grown up in a fairly rough area of New York. An alumnus of our school who ran a basketball/academic support program identified him as someone who had the intelligence and grit to make the leap to an independent prep school in which he would be a boarder.

For this boy and his family, his move to our school was a leap of faith, a transition much more demanding than studying in a foreign country because it involved a different world on almost every level: linguistic, economic, academic, social, even athletic. Fortunately, we have a program that works to support students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds, and those of us who helped with that program were an initial safety net for him. In the beginning, he was very cautious, and he was understandably proud and at times defensive of his background. As one of the Spanish teachers, I had an immediate inroad with him as I quickly became a liaison between the school and his mother who spoke limited English. With the difficult task ahead for him to adjust to and thrive in our school without losing his sense of who he was and where he came from, it was important for him that his family have some appreciation of what he was undertaking and of the place.

I talked to his mother on the phone a great deal, and I translated all of the communications from the school (the dorm handbook, the quarterly teacher comments, etc.) into Spanish for her. I knew, because [name] had hinted at the fact that every time he went home, he struggled with whether to return. We began an unspoken ritual.

When he went home, I would always drive him to the bus station. On our ride to the station, I would say, “You are going to come back. You need to come back.” I would often call him at home the night before he was to return just to prod him. And I was nearly always at the bus station waiting for him to bring him back to school. He told me he really hated the bland food, so we went out to dinner in search of food he would like. Over time, [name] began to let me in. He shared a great deal about his family, his girlfriend back home, the hardship of feeling like he belonged nowhere anymore.
By his second year, two fellow students from the NY program arrived, and he was in the position of mentor while still walking the fragile line between the two worlds.

In rides to and from the bus station or at restaurants, we would talk about differences in clothes, girls’ behavior, the role of physical violence between his NY neighborhood and our school. In [his] junior year he wrote a piece for his Spanish class. It discussed his dual psyche, one [version of himself] speaking to [version of himself]. In it, he revealed how difficult it was to straddle the two worlds and how often he wanted to give up. But he recognized that he wanted to make something of his life for himself, his mother, and his community. By senior year, this boy was really coming in to his own. He was in my Spanish class, and we had lively discussions, even arguments, about his Spanish and why I wanted him to learn to spell correctly in Spanish while never taking away from the colorful way in which he spoke. He graduated, went to Georgetown University, and majored in English and Spanish, and he is planning to prepare for the LSAT exams while he lives at home with his mom and works at a law firm. He gets in touch regularly, and nearly always ends by thanking me for those car rides to the bus and those calls home.

As I reflect on why this student was so successful at our school, it strikes me first that it is because our entire community wrapped its arms around him. A parent in the community with sons at our school took him under his wing and served as a crucial mentor to him; a teacher from NY bantered and joked constantly about the ways of NY with him; the director of our support program followed his progress and challenges closely; the admissions director took pains to find him summer work and opportunities. As for my own relationship with him, it was successful for a number of reasons. He took a chance and trusted me. His mother trusted us and gave up those years with her son so that he could grow, in many ways, beyond her. I listened and used our common language of Spanish to find common ground. Mostly, I think I tried just to be there when he was most fragile.
Few committed teachers would argue that their reaching out to students to meet their particular needs is not a foundational premise of the teachers’ work. However, each challenging student raises the questions of how far and how long do I reach out and can this particular need be met by me situated as I am in this classroom and this school? These questions arise with special force when students are not merely unresponsive but hostile and oppositional. A high school teacher in an urban American school recounted how her efforts to support and praise a disruptive student with a “short fuse” formed the basis for a transformative relationship.

In the 6th grade, one boy was a smart kid with a short fuse. He could be pleasant and eager to please, but when something set him off—watch out! He would flip over trashcans, scream, and pace, shoving desks out of his way. A few times out at recess, he would just start walking off. It seemed to him that everything I did was unfair, and it was unpredictable what would set him off. Academically, he knew the material but started out a bit averse to hard work. He was disorganized and rarely arrived to class with everything he needed. All of these things resulted in his being a C or lower student in my class.

For the first semester, this boy made life difficult for me, and I would have been happy to see him go on his way, to find another teacher and another school. Yet when the end of the year meeting came and we were debating what students would not be asked back, I found myself fighting for him to stay. I
don’t know when it happened but over the course of the year, I came to realize that he had a lot of good qualities, and the more I was able to point them out and reinforce them, the less he acted out. One thing I have always tried to do as a teacher is to find out what my students do well and to support them in that. So when he started playing basketball that winter, I began going to his games and cheering on him and his fellow classmates. If I couldn’t make a game, I was sure to ask him about it the next day. I also started talking with him one on one after he had calmed down from an incident, making sure he understood why he had gotten in trouble. I also made sure to seek him out and offer him extra help, whether that meant quizzing him for the test the next day or helping him to try and stay organized. Finally, I started finding out what he did well and making sure to notice it. As the year progressed, he started to do better academically and also his temper tantrums became fewer and more spread out. By the end of the year, I was able to see the good in him a lot more often. The summer following 6th grade, he was in my advisory for our summer program. This is where I think he finally started to really trust me. I could see that he was a good leader and let him take charge of the service trip the students were designing. Now that he’s an 8th grader, I continue to work with him even though I do not teach him. He is a common fixture in my classroom. We have even gotten to the point where I can point out a 6th grader having a meltdown and the two of us can laugh about how that used to be him. He is by no means a straight A student, but I can’t remember the last time I saw his temper get the best of him, and I think that has been the greatest way I have seen him grow.

**The Boys Respond**

When we set out to survey adolescent boys about their relationships to their teachers, we were more than a little uncertain about the nature of their responses. This uncertainty was a result, at least in part, of a prevailing assumption that boys are likely to be guarded and not particularly articulate about
“relationship.” It was therefore instructive and often inspiring to read boys’ written narratives about their successful and unsuccessful relationships—especially when we were able to meet and talk more extensively with small focus groups in selected participating schools. We found the boys surprisingly willing to open up to us both about what they appreciated in their teachers and what frustrated the boys and shut them down. As indicated in the foregoing, they attributed their positive relationships to the same factors as did their teachers, although not always in the same proportions.

As in our prior study of effective pedagogy, we were struck by how deeply and unquestioningly the boys—even the most resistant and oppositional—accepted the assumption that they belonged in school and that the required course of instruction set before them was legitimate. Across the cultures represented in our international sample and across school type, the boys tended to accept and affirm the value of their school program. When they failed to succeed and to thrive, they attributed the breakdown to the manner in which their courses were taught and to the personal qualities of the teachers who conveyed the material. Similarly, when the boys overcame obstacles, doubts, and fears and succeeded, they were effusive in their affection and admiration for the teachers who enabled them to do so.

Teachers singled out for praise were skilled relationship builders, able to make boys feel known and valued, while also establishing a class-wide emotional climate in which students felt safe and positively engaged. Teachers’ efforts to reach out to boys who appeared to lack confidence or requisite skills did not go unnoticed by those who participated in the study. The boys responded most warmly to teachers who knew and addressed them by their names, who were aware of their personal interests and circumstances, and who made an effort to know them as whole beings and not merely as students of a particular discipline. Boys who were relationally engaged with their teachers related
how the boys suspended resistance to the tasks set before them and how they appreciated a learning climate in which it felt able to try and fail. Boys in this kind of relationship tended to respond, as did a middle school American boy, with great warmth:

One teacher was there for me more than any other. He was a nice, kindhearted person who has always helped me and always cared. He was my math teacher, and he always taught me in a way that made me feel comfortable with the material. He reached out to each student, and no one ever felt like they were being left behind. If someone fell back, he would work with them until they were able to catch up. I had trouble with trigonometry, but he helped me to understand it. He couldn’t make it any easier, but he did make sure I understood it. I was able to do well with the extra help. He was more than a teacher though. He didn’t just care about school. He asked about things outside of school, like family life and things like that. He asked me about sports and things I like to do. He did it genuinely though. He didn’t just say it and forget about it afterward. If I told him I had a basketball game that night he would always ask how it went the next day. He was always ready to learn new things about me, and he really cared about his students. I really enjoyed having him as a teacher, and I bet some other kid is being treated with the same amount of kindness.

“Boys bring not only their learning histories but their relational histories with them to class.”
Boys with discouraging learning histories were in special need of relational support—and of the “calm” that an urban American, middle school boy said helped him overcome resistance to his least favorite subject.

I never was that interested in history, but my teacher made it fun and interesting to learn. He interacts with me in a very calm way and engages me in class. I like to ask him questions because I feel comfortable telling him that I am confused.

Boys bring not only their learning histories but their relational histories with them to class. In any given classroom, there are likely to be boys whose past nurturance or schooling has made them wary or even relationally averse. The establishment of a relationship with such a child may not happen easily or quickly, but when it is achieved, the ensuing transformation can be dramatic. An American high school student wrote with great feeling about both needing and finding relational support in his school.

My favorite teacher loves me for who I am, not what he thinks I should be. My entire life has been filled with tears and psychological pains. . . . To have a mentor, an emotional cornerstone, someone you can trust and go to in any time of need is one of the better commodities of life. When I go to a teacher and ask them how they are the first day I meet them to the last day I see them, and actually get a thoughtful answer, [that’s] a sign of a personal relationship that makes people more comfortable around each other. . . . The very best teachers are the ones that can look you straight in the eye at the end of the day and tell you, "You are perfect the way you are—no matter what."

Not every relational success is dramatic. Perhaps equally valuable are small gains that contribute to a boy’s mounting confidence that bumps and setbacks can be endured and that the most dreaded aspects of school are perhaps not so dreadful after all. Such was the experience of a Canadian student as he contended with his least favorite subject:
Through my elementary school years, physical education was my least favourite, most difficult, and simply the worst subject. I met this teacher in September of 2010 at my first grade 9 gym class. The first couple of weeks were awful; I hated it even more than ever. I felt as though my teacher just didn’t know me. The truth is, for the first two months, he didn’t. When he noticed I was doing very poorly on my tests and my skill level was low, things changed. My teacher started to really help me out, giving me tips, working with me one on one during the class. He would monitor me and make sure I wasn’t having trouble, and if I did, he would come over and show he really cared. Although I still did not like the subject, I did not hate it entirely. I felt as though somebody cared and knew me. My grades started to improve, and I began to take a greater liking for coming to gym class. This was true even during our health unit. I disliked health the most. It made me sick, nauseated, and lightheaded. I didn’t think I would make it through my first health class, but my teacher was great. He made it clear that everyone had different sensitivity levels to the subject matter.

No single point became clearer to us as we reviewed the thousands of relational narratives than that there was no formula for relational success; nor was there a distinct relational personality type. Rather, relationships tended to succeed as teacher and boy came to see one another as distinctive individuals with signature gifts, needs, and interests. All types of teacher personalities were noted by boys in their positive narratives, but by far the most appreciated personality feature was an easy sense of humor. Teachers who could make boys laugh—at the occasional absurdity and at themselves—managed to achieve not merely welcome relief from classroom rigor but often a deeper relational connection. An American middle school boy recounted how laughter with and at his elementary school teacher eased his uncertain progress as a young reader.
In the third grade, I had difficulty with reading comprehension, and the school hired a new teacher to help the students in the learning center. This teacher was fresh out of college, so she still had part of her youth left. Consequently, it wasn’t awkward to joke around with her or for her to joke around with me. I remember we would always joke around about who was going to get fat because of our obsession with Dorito™ chips. During our sessions, she would teach me certain techniques that were tedious, but at the same time built up skills that I would need to move on to middle school and high school. I would always hate having to go to our sessions just because of all the work I had to do, but when I got there, she would always make the lesson fun and exciting even while there were tedious elements of reading comprehension. Then she finished her masters in graduate school and became my homeroom/English teacher. Because of our previous relationship, class became fun and exciting for me. I became interested in my studies, and I felt more motivated not to let her down because she taught me for so long before. I felt as though she led me to the water and it was now my turn to drink. We always joked around about what each other was wearing and if my teacher or I felt offended, we would always say, “It’s just constructive criticism,” just to set each other over the edge. We would always laugh about it in the end, making the relationship so much better.

Many of the positive relationships recounted by students were, like the one just cited, catalytic in remediating a learning challenge, but many others described how a teacher’s relational gifts enhanced an already realized strength or talent. Such was the impression of an American high school boy:

When I used to be in public school, I remember that I won an essay contest in the entire New York City public school system and got to meet Mayor Michael Bloomberg. However, when I came to this school, I was actually considered one of the worst writers in my grade and my teacher determined all that. She then came to me and had a lengthy conversation that lasted until we
were able to figure out a solution to my writing. If it were not for that conversation, I would not have been as good a writer as I am today, although I could still improve a lot more. I think that before I spoke to my teacher about this, I actually thought I had no weaknesses in school because I was a straight A student otherwise. My teacher actually brought out of me some of the greatest writing pieces that I have ever written because she was open to me for everything. I think the only way a student could actually do well in something in school is by having a more open relationship with the teacher and a more comfortable relationship with them because otherwise it feels really awkward to talk to teachers about something that is really personal. School would feel like home if students were able to talk to any teacher about something personal they would not talk to anyone else about.

As noted in subsequent chapters, relational effectiveness has nothing to do with one’s pleasantly pandering to students’ antischoolastic inclinations. The teachers most revered in these student narratives were those whose actions demonstrated their commitment both to reach their students and to convey the substance of their lessons. The following narrative recounts the scholastic transformation of a South African high school boy under the attentive eye of a teacher he was certain would be his nemesis:

My previous teacher suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after the second term began. As a result, the dreaded reserve teacher, who was past retirement age and renowned for her bad temper and strict rules, took over the lessons leading up to the end of the year.

I was a terrible student looking back to the first half of the year. I was the cause of fights mostly with this teacher, who had a distaste for anything that came out of my mouth (mostly smart arse comments or swear words) and never did any work as a result of being hyperactive. I still find it funny looking back to those early years and asking myself why nobody ever took the time to
explain to me exactly what I was doing wrong, why nobody every explained the reason behind why they were asking me to "keep quiet and sit still." Having said this, however, when my teacher arrived, my life was turned upside down. She was strict and expected hard work from everyone, yet her manner was that of a typical granny. She was kind and really liked our class. For some reason, she seemed to bring a calm energy that was reciprocated by all of us hyper kids. My teacher never shouted but when she spoke, we hung on her every word. Reverence for her legendary temper kept all of us in line. And yet she was the first person who told me I was not bad or stupid (that in fact I was pretty smart!), but that no one would know it if I never put pen to paper. My teacher’s rule of success was setting realistic boundaries, showing us what was and what wasn’t acceptable, and leaving the rest to us.

At the end of the year, my teacher announced my name at prize-giving: a shock that was clearly evident on my face as I skulked on stage in front of all the dragons that said I was going to fail the year. Only when I was on stage did I realize I had been given the general knowledge trophy and a medal for my academic improvement.

Like the transformative “granny” cited above, the relationally successful teachers described by students were often fully aware of the range of their students’ resistant behavior but were nonetheless undeterred from asking for better performance. A number of boys in this study seemed to draw positive comfort from their

“The teachers most revered in these student narratives were those whose actions demonstrated their commitment both to reach their students and to convey the substance of their lessons.”
teachers’ acknowledgment of their anarchic impulses. Another South African boy found this to be especially true of his “kind but very naughty” mathematics teacher:

In year six, my marks were good but not fantastic. I am a boarder and was meant to be learning in the prep classrooms in the evening but I just could not concentrate. My then teacher was a kind but very naughty teacher whom we all loved (he’s got more tricks up his sleeve than a fully fledged clown). I was messing around until my teacher came and told me I was almost exactly as naughty as he was when he was my age. So he helped me to do my best in my studying and he told me that if I ever ended up like him, he would shoot me. Throughout the whole year he helped me study and taught me the basics of studying. The day after he taught me his first lesson, I got a 100% for my test.

In his light-hearted acknowledgment of his student’s “naughtiness,” a relationally deft teacher managed to penetrate the boy’s surface resistance while supporting him in addressing the scholastic business at hand. Clearly the boy felt honored to be likened to the teacher in his student days. For a tentative boy in school, a teacher’s extending an interest in him beyond his role as a student of an assigned subject can be positively empowering. To be taken seriously by a thoughtful adult is an invitation to take oneself seriously. Such was the experience of a British mathematics student:

The main thing my teacher did to build our relationship was that he treated me in a way that very few people had before. He treated me not like a world-ignorant teenager but as an intelligent peer. Being treated as somebody who knew what they were talking about, instead of like someone to be spoken down to made life with him as a teacher very enjoyable. My teacher encouraged discussion that often veered off course of the lesson at hand and in personal questions and experiences related to the matter. This welcomed me into the class and made it fun to be there. Respect is a word that is thrown around all the time by
teachers, but he is one of the few teachers I have ever met who truly did respect every one of his students as if they were teachers. I can’t describe how good it feels to have someone in authority treat us as an adult.

Though I’m not adult yet, I’m just a teenager. As a teenager, I’ve found that I’m pretty confused about how to act around family, friends, and authority figures (including teachers). Around this teacher, I had no doubts in my mind how I should act. I should clearly act like myself. Whether I was having a good day or a bad day, I should be myself. I only feel that comfortable around a few people (parents being one of them). Being myself allowed him to truly get to know me in a way few people have. From being able to speak my mind and hang out in the classroom to having a serious discussion with him after school, it almost felt like he had become a second father.

The boys in this study consistently expressed the importance of their being addressed, understood, and valued personally by their teachers as well as of their teacher’s even-handed, respectful treatment of everyone in the class. In doing so, teachers create that climate of emotional safety in which the boys seem to thrive, as did a South African student in his college preparatory English class. For this boy, what the teacher did for “us” was as important as what he did for “me”:

I have a very good relationship with my Grade 12 English teacher, who has a very understanding approach that allows a certain amount of freedom for the students, which was returned to him with respect. Most of the students would not even think of disrespecting him as he helps us out so much. It is not a fear of getting into trouble but more a fear of disappointing him. He knows the ability of all his students and is always willing to help them as long as they are willing to work as hard as they can. . . . He has a very positive attitude toward the students, and you get the sense that he truly wants us to succeed for our own benefit. He tries his best to stay in a good mood and not take things too
personally. He understands that there are certain students in the class who do not have a good work ethic and have a slight attitude problem, and he handles them extremely well. He does not attack them or confront them angrily but speaks to them in a way in which they can see that he is on their side and that he wants to help them. He has made me a lot more interested in English as well as in reading and this has caused a very positive influence on my marks.
Chapter Four

Responding to Boys’ Special Interests and Talents

As discussed in the previous chapter, teachers tend to succeed relationally with boys when the teachers come to know them beyond their scholastic performance and classroom behavior. Perhaps this should not be surprising, yet many teachers who participated in this study were surprised to learn how accomplished, admirable, and likable their students were when observed in arenas closer to their hearts than, say, their mathematics or history classrooms. Many teachers indicated that their relational breakthroughs with underperforming and resistant boys occurred when the teachers made a special effort to find out the boy’s personal strength and then built that new awareness into their working alliance with the boy.

Boys’ narratives in the previous chapter revealed how energized and empowered they felt when teachers took them seriously, addressed them as they might another adult, and expressed interest in their lives and circumstances beyond the classroom. Just as most boys do not define themselves or represent themselves to others in terms of their scholastic profiles, teachers who seek to build productive alliances with their students would do well to look beyond scholastic measures. An appreciative awareness of a boy’s signature strengths can serve as a relational platform on which tentative and resistant boys are more likely to engage and try—because their overall effectiveness and value are not in question.
In the following account, a South African English teacher relates how his newfound appreciation of a quiet student’s emergence as an accomplished Shakespearean enhanced both of their experiences in the classroom:

A boy nervously slid into my grade 11 class without my even noticing. He was not a stereotypical boy in our school, which, with its proud rugby history and traditional values, seems to value boys with archaic “manly” traits such as size, strength, and ability to make big tackles. The boy was quiet to say the least and seemed quite content to stay “below the radar.” He came out of his shell for the first time almost two months into the year when we began our Shakespeare work for the year, *Romeo and Juliet*. And blow me down, the boy quoted a soliloquy before we even started the play. This kid clearly knew his *Romeo and Juliet*. I quoted a bit of Shakespeare back at him, and we never looked back. I try to create an atmosphere in my classroom where an individual’s ability to manipulate words is held in higher esteem than an individual’s ability to manipulate someone smaller than himself, and he thrived on this. He was a gifted orator (and it turns out a talented musician and lyricist) and, upon finding himself in an environment that supported his strengths, he grew in confidence to the extent that even his “macho” peers developed a sense of respect for his strengths. It was a most pleasing relationship, which dispelled my earlier belief that my school only has room for the “jock.” I believe he saw the environment as a safe one that was developed especially for his passion, and this allowed him to come out of his shell. And I think Shakespeare and the other great poets we looked at are mainly responsible for this. I also feel I played a small part in bringing out a little of the best in this particular boy.

To locate and cultivate a boy’s current passion or passions was the second most frequently reported relational gesture in the positive narratives submitted by teachers. Attentive teachers recounted how they were able over time to tap the energy and confidence boys bring to their favorite out-of-school pursuits and
link the qualities to scholastic endeavors. Although the measurable improvements in performance were gratifying to our survey respondents, the pleasure both teachers and boys expressed in finding that common ground seems often to have been the greater benefit. Such was the experience of an American English teacher when he located a student’s deep immersion in music and films.

I taught a young man in various classes over the course of three straight years, his tenth through 12th-grade years. He was, and is, remarkably intelligent, though he was also anxious and a bit closed off. At the start of our first year of working together, he coasted; he was clearly used to relying on his natural insight and quick mind. He didn’t always do the reading, and he preferred to sit back in class and let others do the heavy lifting. To be fair, his grades were solid and above average, but he was certainly not working up to his potential. We would speak frequently outside of the classroom, and as the scope of his interests became more and more apparent, he would drop by more and more often. We would talk music and movies, primarily, but over time, literature and life slipped in there just as frequently, and when he started writing a 20-minute long prog-rock song about Beowulf, I figured I had gotten through on some level.

Watching this boy test the limits of his capabilities over the next two years was the most rewarding experience of my teaching career. I don’t think I’ve ever been more proud than the day he asked me to work with him on some difficult texts over the summer because he wanted “to be a serious reader.” He roused a few of his friends to join our reading group, and we met regularly over the next few months, over coffee or dinner and also in an online forum we had set up to help facilitate our discussions. The boys blew me away. Everything was entirely driven by them, and they were working on a level that put many of my grad school classes to shame. Looking back, if I added anything to their experience, I think my presence legitimized to some degree for them what they were doing and worked as a safety net of sorts.
The young man who used to work through everything he was about to say in a class in advance of actually saying it, no longer cared if what he said was wrong or sounded foolish; he just wanted to explore and learn.

He wrote me a letter once he graduated, and he pinpointed the moment things started to “change” for him as the walk back from our first class together as we discussed the similarities between *A Separate Peace* and *Fight Club*. I’m not surprised that the moment took place outside of the actual classroom. To be sure, our time in class over the years helped establish a crucial trust between us, but the real connections came in those moments outside of the classroom, when seemingly nothing was riding on our interaction and we could just share our interests and be our true selves. I have come to learn that boys ultimately respond to such openness in ways I could have never imagined, that they will put themselves out there just as far (and further) as I am willing to go, and that has probably been the great lesson of my time as a teacher so far.

To acknowledge and perhaps share a boy’s personal interests can deepen a relationship to a point at which he feels free to disclose more difficult concerns. A veteran South African teacher of English literature believed that she was encouraging a specially able and well-read scholar, but in doing so she realized that she was serving perhaps a more important purpose:

This student was a gifted, complicated individual who, because of his affinity for the humanities, his artistic temperament, and his unusual interests—a fascination with Georgian silver and antique furniture—found himself on the periphery of some groups. Although different, he was not a loner as he commanded respect amongst the intelligent boys he chose to befriend. He was not sporty, but arguably one of the best read school boys I have ever encountered, devouring sophisticated texts voraciously. Although enormously able, he was vulnerable, strangely diffident, and self-critical at times.
I taught him English and was astounded when he offered, at a moment’s notice, to deliver a paper in the prestigious Alan Paton literary competition, when another pupil failed to meet his commitment. The author whose works he chose to analyse was none other than E. M. Forster. [The student] was, amazingly, sufficiently familiar with Forster’s work to produce, overnight, a highly successful academic analysis of his novels. There was also a creative writing section to the competition, and I chose his short story for submission, but when a couple of members of the English department expressed reservations, this student, his confidence shattered, promptly withdrew his story. It took much persuasion on my part to get him to allow me to submit his entry: and he won the competition!

Later, he wrote a poem: a veiled allusion to homosexuality, which he said he hoped I would not find offensive as he gauged me to be sufficiently open-minded to understand. Soon after that, he came to my home to advise me on our 300-year-old grandfather clock. There, he told me that he had informed his parents he was gay. His mother was accepting, but his very sporty, macho father was mortified, to the extent that when diving—the one interest they shared—he had shown revulsion when asked to zip his son’s wetsuit. The young man felt deeply hurt and rejected. He shared other problems associated with his sexual orientation. He had confided in a couple of close friends, but no other teachers, although some might have had their suspicions.

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To acknowledge and perhaps share a boy’s personal interests can deepen a relationship to a point at which he feels free to disclose more difficult concerns.
”
In a homophobic school environment, I think it was a relief to him to confide in someone who listened without being judgmental. I had established my belief in him and my trustworthiness. I could also share with him the fact that my brother-in-law’s brother, also gay, had moved to Canada, where he and his partner were more readily accepted socially.

This young man wrote to me once after school saying he remembered my lessons fondly and was reminded during a lecture of the importance I had placed on an understanding of the interplay between style and tone.

To locate a boy’s personal gift and then establish a working alliance in which that gift is more fully realized is not only scholastically productive but is deeply satisfying for both parties in the alliance. When a music teacher in a U.K. school quite accidentally became aware of a reticent student’s gifts for playing the piano, a collaboration began that positively transformed both of them:

This student arrived at school during Y10 and was allocated music as a GCSE option subject. He spoke almost no English at that time. He was a pleasant student but shy and was finding it difficult to make friends and was clearly frustrated at his inability to access the curriculum due to his poor language skills. I couldn’t get anything out of him during lessons really, although, as I said, he was polite. One day, there were Y10 examinations that resulted in the absence of about half of my class, so I decided to turn the lesson into a jam session. The atmosphere was relaxed and I invited all students to improvise on their instrument. He put his hand up to everyone’s surprise. What then happened will remain with me forever: He went to the piano and started playing the most amazing boogie-woogie tunes, one after the other. We were all gobsmacked as he had not shown the slightest interest or aptitude on the piano before this.

After this breakthrough, he rapidly started making friends as news of his skill got around. I started working with him on his
English and arranged for a piano tutor and translator so that he could adapt his compositions for the requirements of the GCSE syllabus. This young man and I became quite friendly, and he was happy to work quite late after school on his compositions and spend many hours working on his written briefs and commentaries. Just before his examination and assessments, I asked him to perform at a school event. He did a lot of practice as he was a bit shy. The performance was a massive success, with the Head Teacher singling him out for special praise. On results day, I was overjoyed to discover that he had done well enough in the written examination (in English) for him to be awarded a “C” for GCSE music. This was his only A*-C. Grabbing what he was good at and using that to increase his confidence was key to him becoming a more rounded, happier student with lots of friends. I wish him well and am proud that I was able to help him.

Boys’ artistic, athletic, and other favored activities outside of school are often unknown and unacknowledged by their teachers. Even when teachers are aware of these activities, there is a possibility that they will be seen as problematic distractions from the school responsibilities of the boys. Such, for a time, was the experience of the American middle school hockey players in the following narrative, until a sympathetic social studies teacher determined that he would look for the positive benefits conferred by the boys’ hockey program.

Our school has been fortunate in that it regularly attracts some of the most talented ice hockey players in the metro area. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to have three young boys who, at the age of 12, played for one of the premier, select teams in the nation.

In my 6th-grade history class, the three of them were just average students. They were polite and respectful, and they did acceptable work, but they missed a lot of class to travel with their youth hockey team. I’d often hear from my colleagues that they were frustrated with [these boys’] excessive absences, and they
believed the boys should be spending more time in the classroom and less time on the ice. I, on the other hand, sympathized with the boys. I had played hockey as a boy (not at their level), and I am still a huge fan of the game. What’s more, the more I talked to the boys about their hockey experience, I learned that they were learning some invaluable life lessons while they were away from school. They were learning dedication (on a level beyond that of the average 12-year-old), teamwork, and sportsmanship. They were also traveling North America, often representing their school, their city, and their club at exclusive tournaments.

Thus, it was a no-brainer that I made time to see the boys play when their team hosted a tournament in our city. I didn’t think it was a big deal at all. I was just a hockey fan attending a game on a lazy Saturday afternoon, but my presence at their game meant the world to them. Via their parents in the stands, I learned that I was the first of their teachers to ever take an interest in their sport, and I was surely the first to attend one of their hockey games. I even remember one of them waving during a pregame, warm-up skate.

A few weeks later, the three boys traveled to Canada for two weeks to live with a French-speaking family in Quebec and represent the United States in an international youth hockey tournament. While they were away, they took the time to send me e-mail with updates on their progress. They were so excited to have someone, beyond their teammates and parents, to share their sport with.
When they returned to the classroom, I saw a renewed effort in academics. They made sure that they had completed their assignments and asked if there were extra things they could do to make up the time they had missed in class. They even volunteered to give a presentation to the class about sportsmanship and their time in Canada. They quickly became leaders in the classroom, modeling respect and gentlemanly conduct.

Considered summarily, teachers who took pains to build a relationship around a boy’s special strength or interest found that they had more to talk about and a more agreeable time doing it than they did when limited to classroom business. The mutual disclosure, warmth, and trust that result from these interactions serve as a comfortable platform for the consideration of scholastic matters, including the need for improvement. The following narrative from a New Zealand science teacher relates that she was able to parlay a senior boy’s interest in kayaking and other outdoor pursuits into a thoughtful reconsideration of his approach to his classmates and to his studies.

The relationship was established as the student in question was enrolled in a year-12 class and showed the ability to learn new skills very quickly compared to his peers. Once the skill set was mastered, [the student] had a tendency to seek entertainment through verbal sparring with those around him. The class in question was not academically demanding but could push students out of their specific comfort zones regularly. The student and I both had similar interests in outdoor pursuits (kayaking, mountain biking, snowboarding, etc.), so I got him and a group of his similarly interested friends involved in outdoor pursuits competitions. The group were all bright, academically able, and generally good blokes.

The student in question was the “roguish” element of the group and had a tendency to try and get away with the minimum required in his academic subjects. Changes in his work ethic and behaviour in some of his classes had set in at the start of year
12 when I met him. As the relationship developed (always as a teacher/staff/coach to student relationship), he began to be more open and frank in his conversations as we worked on developing his skills in kayaking. He was able to vent frustrations about issues around his involvement in other extracurricular activities and a perceived lack of relevance of a lot of the content he was learning. We openly discussed such things as satisfaction derived from work and vocational commitment, compared to lifestyle and financial security, and the many ways the balance of a person’s life requires periods of plain hard work of a sometimes difficult and unpleasant nature to reach goals.

His contribution to the relationship was to commit to turning up and making an effort to support a very difficult endeavour in distance kayaking as the least experienced team member. He also possessed a wry, dry wit and an ability to recognise that everyone has their fallibilities. Instead of using his ability to recognise other people’s weaknesses/fallibilities for redirection of attention, he became more tolerant and able to work with people as his self-awareness and self-discipline matured. His relationship with his parents appeared to be a healthy, normal, and robust one. They are very supportive and realistic and level-headed people.

I feel the relationship functioned well for this student because he was able to be listened to and in the process, learned to actively listen better himself. He had the support in a small way from me for his search for some direction in terms of a nonjudgmental listener who was in the second year of the relationship, not one of his teachers, but supportive of both him and his present teachers, someone with a different perspective from his parents, not wiser, just different. We had experiences of school life in common. Above all, I think he made the realisation that I liked him and cared how he fared and all of his teachers did too. This helped him to get motivated and study harder for that last third of his year 13 and gain very pleasing results for himself, which in turn gained him the option of choosing entry into his preferred course for tertiary study.
The Boys Respond

In both their written narratives and in their live interviews, the boys in this study made it clear how differently they respond to teachers and to their subjects when they feel that their teachers know them individually. The boys expressed deep appreciation for teachers who made an effort to know them beyond their roles as grade-level students of a given subject; these teachers were likewise willing to disclose themselves beyond their roles as teachers. In narrative after narrative, the boys described their heightened sense of responsibility to behave appropriately and to do their best work when they were in a working alliance with a dimensional person and not merely meeting curricular requirements.

A British student related his appreciation of an English teacher who, while demanding, “really understood me”:

Possibly the best teacher I ever had. When I first met him he made a pretty scary impression. He is tall, and has a loud, imposing voice. However, that did not reflect his personality. He was very kind and very supportive of students. At the beginning of the year, I did not usually do my assignments with quality. However, he expected much from us and made me feel I would have to meet those expectations. When I did not, he was disappointed, and that inspired me to work harder for the next time.

He really thought we could excel at English. He truly believed what he said and treated every student equally well. In my grade-seven year I struggled. . . . He helped me throughout the year and by the end of the year, I had improved significantly. I did not only improve in English class; he inspired me to excel in my other classes as well.

I had him as my English teacher in grade nine as well. That was the best year of English I had ever had. He always keeps class interesting by relating the material to different real-life situations. He would also talk about random things that I would never have learned before. He talked to us about Greek mythology and about his days as a high school student.
I think that relating his experiences as a student was one of the best things he had done. It made me feel he understood my situations and thoughts very well. I personally felt as if he really understood me. He understood what it was like to be a teenage boy. He always gave me help when I needed it, which I am personally very grateful for. He always promptly replied to my emails, helping me whenever I asked. It helped a lot that I felt like he was supporting me.

A South African boy underscored what was for him the “weird” experience of his feeling compelled to do his best because he could not bear to disappoint a teacher who “went out of his way to have a relationship with each boy in his class”:

When I was younger, I had a lot of trouble concentrating and doing the work given to us, whether it was during class or for homework. When I reached grade six, our class teacher was [name]. Everyone in the class liked him. Even boys who were in the high school would visit him from time to time. He was very funny, and we never had a dull lesson. If the class did well in a test or worked hard for the whole day, then he would award us with a game of soccer during last period. But the thing about him that was different from other teachers is that he just wasn’t teaching us and doing his job. He went out of his way to have a relationship with each of the boys in his class, and by him doing this, we felt obliged to do the work. And if we didn’t do it, you felt like you had disappointed him and you generally felt bad, which was weird because normally I wouldn’t care what the teacher thought about me.
A Canadian middle school boy expressed his relief that his teacher, while "knowing all about" his poor prior performance, refused to label him and instead came to the relationship “with a clear mind”:

My teacher is someone that was really nice to me even if I wasn’t the best student the year before with a different teacher. My teacher had heard all the bad things I had done the year before, but he just ignored it and came in with a clear mind. In that year, I thought I behaved really well and I am very thankful for him because if it weren’t for him, I would still have had a bad reputation. I also think that because he was nice to me, I wanted to work hard for him. I wanted to work hard and be kind to him. He respected me, and I respected him, so I would say you need to have a good relationship with your teachers if you want to succeed.

Another Canadian boy attributed his scholastic improvement to his teacher’s getting to know him well enough that they were able to establish an interpersonal “common ground”:

I think that I have had a good experience with one of my teachers, who helped me in many ways. He knew what my strengths are and what I needed to work on. He knew what I was capable of, even things I was not sure I would be good at. He helped me in writing, which is something that for my whole life I have struggled with. He knew I was capable of doing better than I was and influenced me to fight through it the way he fought through cancer.

“Boys described their heightened sense of responsibility to behave appropriately and to do their best work when they were in a working alliance with a dimensional person . . ."
After the first time he helped me with my writing, getting my thoughts out, I sought to find him and get help from him. He also had many other interests that I had, so when we talked, he and I had common ground. I think [he] made a special effort to get closer to me because he knew I was smart on certain things and struggled on other parts. He forced me to do what I needed to do and knew that I could do it. I also think he changed the way I saw myself doing work.

Boys’ positive responses to teachers who reached out to make personal connections, although friendly, differed from the boys’ peer friendships in that both teacher and boy acknowledged their respective roles in a working alliance; the teacher as the informed, concerned manager of the relationship, the boy as a willing partner in an enterprise he understands is to promote his scholastic and personal development. A Canadian boy acknowledged both the friendliness and the in loco parentis concern he experienced on the part of a warmly attentive teacher:

He basically took me under his wing about two years ago. I had him as a teacher twice throughout my high school career, once in grade 10 for math and the other time last year in grade 11 for fitness. Nowadays, he stops in the hallway to chat with me, catch up on what’s been happening lately and/or the Toronto Maple Leafs. We joke around sometimes too. He may not be in the same age category as me, but sometimes it feels like it.

He wants me to persevere and excel in all my classes. He bandaged me up after I had a horrible bike accident at camp during the summer. My leg was pretty bummed up, as was my arm. After my grade-10 math exam with him, he called me into the hallway. He asked me if I smoked, at all. I didn’t smoke at the time but my parents did. So I guess their smoke stuck to my clothes and he assumed that I did. After I told him I didn’t, he let me go, but that sign of courtesy showed me he cared about his students. He likes to listen when you have something to say. When he teaches he takes his time, nice and slowly to make sure we all understand the lesson.
Both teachers and boys struck an unmistakable, human note of affection and gratitude in their accounts of successful relationships. A Canadian boy’s account of an especially favored teacher is representative of the warmth with which boys described teachers who “made a special effort to get to know me”:

A teacher I had a strong relationship with would be (name). We have had a positive relationship since the beginning. He provides comedy to the lessons along with a good amount of seriousness and focus. After some of the lessons, you would want to explore the topic more because it was so interesting. Whenever you do not understand the material, he always made it easy for you to come up to him and ask him alone. He always made it easier to understand when you are one on one with him. The way he teaches just makes you want to do your best and try your hardest.

He always compliments you when you do well and supports you when you don’t do as well. . . . One thing that improved my relationship with him is that he had a positive relationship with my older brother. Before I even met [the teacher], he had some set expectations and a positive state of mind about me. He made a special effort to get to know me even before he started teaching me, and he always encouraged me to do certain activities and sports. I tried my best to please him and to look into whatever he suggested I take part in.

He is a very fun teacher to have around, and he has a good balance between having fun and being serious about teaching. He gives very useful advice that always leads you in a good way. In class, he always makes the odd joke that makes you laugh and keeps you positive, engaged, and interested. Outside of class, the fun side of his personality would come out. All around he is a great teacher and awesome if you get to know him.
Conveying Mastery and Maintaining Standards

As indicated earlier, both teachers and boys attributed relational success to various ways that teachers masterfully conveyed their material and maintained clear standards. In fact, boys were more likely to attribute relational success to these factors than were their teachers. This finding may underscore what we mean when we describe boys’ relationships with teachers as “working alliances.” Although strong, positive feelings did indeed come to bear on these accounts of mastery and standard-based relationships, those feelings were elicited from boys in response to their being challenged to engage, to achieve, and to try by teachers whose command of and interest in their material was irresistibly compelling. Descriptions of these pedagogical actions as relational gestures, in the sense of conveying invitation, may bear further elaboration.

The standing resistance carried by many students into the classroom is an accretion of the uncertainties, anxieties, and remembered setbacks experienced in prior instructional settings. The anticipated frustration of “not getting it,” the shame of poor marks, of not knowing, of getting it wrong—all witnessed by an audience of immediate peers—can be a significant barrier to engagement and learning. Relationally effective teachers take pains to present lessons that are worthy of boys’ attention and engagement. They demonstrate at the outset of instruction that the classroom climate would be civil, respectful, and warm. They
set forth clearly how to build the skills necessary to master the material and operations they teach. They let boys know how to get help and that help will be forthcoming. Teachers—including highly rigorous and demanding teachers—who established these conditions were roundly appreciated and praised by the boys in this study.

A crucial theme that runs through both the boys’ and the teachers’ relational accounts is that even as they put forth insufficient effort, failed to achieve, projected an attitude of indifference or worse, the boys did not want to think about themselves or to have others think about them that way. Relationally effective teachers succeeded in convincing underconfident and resistant learners that they are capable of meeting and even exceeding expectations. As many boys in many scholastic situations attested in this study, “She/he knew I could do it even when I was almost sure I couldn’t.” The ability of teachers to locate, to expect a boy’s best effort, even before it has been made manifest, is a recurring feature of relationally successful practice.

A chemistry teacher in an American high school recounted the far-reaching consequences of distinguishing between how a boy presents himself at any given moment and how he might be at his best.

A noisy and crowded classroom with students pressed around the front desk could not hide the fact that this one student just handed in his pathetic lab. I was not surprised by the work because the boy was as disheveled as the paper. His clothes, his demeanor, and his discipline were without guidelines. Sometimes a boy’s original character defect involves a lack of maturity, other times it involves selfishness. This student had a problem with direction. He didn’t know what he was doing in my class; he didn’t know why he was there. I decided to find out who he was and in doing so, perhaps he could find who he was.
I asked [name] to see me after class. He acknowledged with the slow roll of the eyes and sag of the shoulders, a look that seemed very practiced. He had the look of a person who had been taken to task before. I was not sure of what to say but I wanted to see how things would play out.

At 1:30, he approached my desk, and to be honest, I had forgotten just why he was there. And then I remembered. I fished through the pile of papers and found his lab. In a stack of typed graphs and papers, I found his mess. It was half a page of scribbled ink with the tags of ripped spiral paper dangling.

I handed him his paper and said, “Is this who you are?” I said, “Make a decision today, because if this is who you are then fine, but decide who you are.” I handed his paper back to him and he took it. I told him to either redo the paper or just hand the same one in, but next class you must decide who you are.

Again I forgot about our discussion. We are on the block system and our classes are every other day. Two days later, this boy enters the class and hands in a paper that is unlike his old work in every way. It is organized, it is neat, and the lab is six pages long, typed, with graphs and comments. It is changed. I look at him and accept it and say, “So this is who you are: good.”

I am personally a bit forgetful. I do not remember the student from then on. I cannot recall his work from that day on or his discussions in class. It was years later that I received an email from [name], who was in his fourth year of medical school. He told me that it was that day eight years ago that I forced him...
to change. It was at that moment eight years ago at the front desk that he made a decision as to who he was.

Relationship-building may begin, as it did in the instance above, with confrontation. It also may begin in a teacher’s adherence to standards that a boy declines to meet. This is especially likely to be the case when the boy understands that the teacher’s insistence that he meet the standard is not an impersonal, professional obligation but an expression of the teacher’s concern for him. Such was the lesson recounted when an American English teacher drew a line between what was acceptable effort and what was not with a promising young writer he happened personally to like.

I had a clearly bright and verbally talented student who was always polite and pleasant but who simply would not do his homework. His intelligence and talent were obvious from his daily quizzes and from other ways I tested him (some oral). I warned him over weeks that he could not continue in an AP class if he didn’t do his work. He always apologized, always promised to do his work, and never did. At first I encouraged him, praised his off-the-cuff, in-class work (which was very good when it did not depend on out-of-class work). The kid liked me and I him—but he simply didn’t have the habit of homework and refused to acquire it. I warned him that he would have to leave the class if he didn’t change his habits. He promised to—but never did. After several clear warnings, I finally told him he was out of the class. When reality finally dawned on him, he was very upset, genuinely upset—but I knew I could not go back on my word. He was moved to a regular class. I met with his angry father and with the boy. No, he was out of the class. However, if he could perform in the new class at the highest level for a grading period, if he could secure a letter of recommendation from his new teacher, and if he could both write a convincing petition letter and convince me face to face that he had changed—then and only then would he be allowed to rejoin the class. Result: He came back to AP English, never again failed to do his homework, enjoyed English more than ever (because
he was prepared when he came to class), and earned a five on the English AP. To this day, he is deeply grateful to me for forcing him to change. And he has been extremely successful in college humanities classes.

Both in their written narratives and in their personal interviews, the boys in this study revealed a clear sense of when a teacher or coach was “on their case” because of some personal antipathy or because the teacher/coach genuinely wanted the best for them. When teachers have that distinction clearly in their own minds, they are able to impose considerable demands, correct, chastise, and even occasionally annoy and disappoint their charges without endangering productive relationship. A South African mathematics teacher maintained a warm and much appreciated relationship with one of her school’s prefects by becoming at times his “Nagger-in-Chief.”

He arrived in my class at the start of his penultimate school year, as a very good academic and a very good rugby player. At this stage, I knew that I would teach this class for the last two years of their school careers. This was an excellent class, with a very sound work ethic. He, however, was the only boy in the class who was playing sport at the highest level. The majority of the class in fact had had the single focus of academics. It soon became clear, though, that he was very concerned about his academics and determined to keep the balance. I often found myself in the position of checking with him that he was still on track academically and that rugby was not taking over his life! He managed to maintain his high standards in both spheres for the first year, and at the end of that year, he was appointed to a leadership position within the school. He was also a member of the First XV rugby training squad.

A short while into the new year, he ran into some trouble because of being over-zealous in what he perceived as the performance of his prefect duties. As a big, well-built fellow with a loud voice, his mere appearance was calculated to strike fear
into the new junior boys. His arrival in one of the junior quads at break would prompt absolute silence. I tried to counsel him about getting the junior boys to cooperate via respect, rather than fear, but he had difficulty in seeing my point of view. On occasion, I had to speak to him even more harshly about how his image among the boys had plummeted from hero to zero directly as a result of his actions. He always listened very politely, but I felt that my words of caution were falling on deaf ears. The situation reached the stage where the headmaster called him in and gave him the weekend to reconsider his position. The following Monday morning, a subdued young man was waiting outside my office. He had written a long letter to the headmaster, and he wanted me to read it first. I realised that my opinion did count for something after all. It was a great letter.

Luckily this situation was resolved and he kept his leadership position. My role as nagger-in-chief continued for the rest of the year: “Are you sure you aren’t spending too much time in the gym?” “Surely you don’t need to go to rugby practice EVERY day?” He finished the year getting the school’s prize for academics and sport. On the final day of the year, he came down the passage with a rugby practice shirt draped over his arm, and said to me: “This is for you.” He also handed me a two-page letter, written on foolscap. I had to be informed by one of our rugby coaches that this shirt was only given to a member of the First XV, and that each boy only got one, so it was a very precious item. I will cherish the letter, particularly this paragraph:

“The common denominator in these past two years was you. I cannot begin to explain to you the service you have done me, a service that has shaped me into the man I hope to become. Whenever I was lost, somehow you seemed to find me; when I was drained during rugby season, you were the battery that drove me to do better; and whenever I was off-course, you were the compass that guided me.”

Teachers honor boys and their potentials by holding them to high but attainable expectations. In the course of their being challenged
to do more and to do better work, not every boy sees it that way—at least not in the immediate present. Transformation and scholastic improvement often are preceded by a period of resistance in which boys test their teachers’ insistence on better work and behavior. Even as they resist, however, underperforming boys are capable of seeing that teachers who require their best work and deportment are clearly interested in them and in their ultimate success. This realization on the part of a struggling New Zealand mathematics student surprised and delighted his teacher—who had been on the brink of giving up on the boy:

I have a boy in my mathematics class. He has not been particularly successful in previous years. He brought some of that negative attitude towards the subject into this year’s class. One would describe him as a lazy student who is often absent from school with sporting commitments outside of what is permitted at school. His home situation is not a stable one, and he alternates between spending time at mom and dad’s houses.

I initially put a lot of energy into trying to motivate him to be more positive and start completing homework as it was obvious that he does have ability. He never demonstrated a “bad” attitude towards me, yet at the same time, I felt that I was making little progress with him. I started following the school’s assertive discipline procedures and made contact with his parents to express my concerns. I also started issuing detentions for noncompletion of homework. During all this time, I tried to emphasise the fact that I was really on his side and I was acting in his best interest. I tried to build a positive relationship knowing that the boy had it in him to achieve. Time passed by with little change.

Just when I thought that I was going to give up on him, we had a class visit from the head of faculty. [The student’s] work was picked to be checked and for him to do an evaluation on me. I did not expect him to write anything positive. He asked me after class what I thought he had written. I said that I did not think it would be too positive. To my great delight, he told
me that he wrote that I was a great teacher and that I had changed his mind about the importance of learning. Since then, the quality of his work was much improved and he started achieving in the subject.

This made me realise the impact we have on students and that we often do not realise the impact we have on them. The importance of having a meaningful, caring relationship with students was highlighted again.

Although hundreds of gratifying transformations were recounted in these teacher and student relational narratives, most lacked a storybook quality. Encouraging student progress was often followed by lapses and regression. Whole school terms and whole school years sometimes passed before significant change became evident. Moreover, along the often arduous, indeterminate way, boys in transition may not have been especially appealing, cooperative, or likable. As indicated by the narratives of broken relationships recounted in the chapters that follow, many teachers who experience boys’ seemingly intractable resistance reluctantly cease to expend the extra effort to reach them. A beginning English teacher in an American school had an inclination and very good reason to give up on a sullen, uncooperative boy. As was the case with many of his colleagues worldwide, he succeeded both scholastically and relationally by locating and encouraging what the boy did well while insisting on his meeting appropriate behavioral standards.
Back in the mid-1990s, I worked with a student as his JV lacrosse coach in his 9th and 10th grade years; I taught him 10th grade British literature, and I served as his academic advisor his junior year. To be frank, my first many impressions of him were entirely negative. He was disrespectful to adults, his peers, the school programs, and himself. I spoke to him over and over about the importance of caring, of giving one’s best effort, and respecting oneself first before being able to make progress. Slowly, over time, I felt that he began to mature and apply his real talents—and he seemed to buy into the school mission. Eventually, I became a strong advocate for him and remain one to this day. This period of transition was not a pleasant one, however. Nonetheless, through these sustained encounters, I came to appreciate pretty quickly what a tremendous turnaround this young man had made.

My first impression of him is that he was suspended just prior to his first JV lacrosse practice because he had been caught smoking. His physical abilities in lacrosse were weak and his conduct, atrocious. Essentially, he misbehaved during practice, preventing others from keeping focused. I dealt with his childish behavior by making him sit in “time out”—I tried to impress upon him that playing was a privilege, one he would need to respect.

In my 10th grade survey of British literature, this boy began the year by doing none of the assigned work. I did notice that he was often reading—just not what was assigned. He refused to annotate his text in the margins as directed. His grades were mired in the F and D range in my class.

In the winter term we got to Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth. Suddenly, he seemed to come alive. When we took our quotation identification quizzes on these texts, he consistently earned near-perfect marks, far surpassing his classmates. When he reeked of cigarette smoke, I spoke to him about appearances (he still didn’t seem to care much). Eventually, I dismissed him from class, telling him he had to go shower before he could come back to class. (Fortunately, he wanted to get back to class.) His attention to detail, conscientiousness and focus in my class sky-rocketed—as did his performance and his grades. He was consistently earning
A- and A marks in the course by mid-winter and through the spring.

His junior year, he took AP literature (a placement many challenged, as he had continued to earn deplorable marks in his other classes his sophomore year). He earned a 4 on the AP his junior year, took the test again as a senior and scored a 5. As his advisor, I saw him begin to buckle down in all his classes that year. He attended a fine college, subsequently earned an MA in English literature, before teaching high school English at a rival school, a position he holds at another high school today. This young man is a great resource for students who might otherwise “fall through the cracks.”

Although this study was not structured to show it, it is certainly true that some of the transformations teachers work to promote are realized after their students have left school. These genuine but unseen transformations are of course as valuable as those witnessed by the teachers. The underlying point is that a teacher’s relational gestures can register deeply and formatively whether or not boys visibly show or otherwise acknowledge them. A Canadian economics teacher suspected that he had failed to reach a resistant boy but was surprised to learn many years later that he had not:

This boy was the very first student I met on campus before I actually started teaching. He made a great first impression, as he greeted me with a smile, firm handshake, and welcome to our school. I later found out that he would be in two of my classes that I taught, so I was looking forward to teaching him. Eventually though, as the year progressed, he became your typical grade-10 student: He had the too-cool-for-school attitude and became somewhat cocky. His marks didn’t match this new attitude, which he blatantly showcased to me on numerous occasions. I felt that he was never working up to his potential and when called out on this, he admitted to not doing so. He was content to coast through with attitude and was happy
and able to work (or not work); he was satisfied with “average marks,” knowing that we both knew he could be at the top of the class. It didn’t matter to him, but I took it personally: This wasn’t the same guy I met a few months ago.

As he moved into grade 11, I was no longer his teacher. When he would see me, he would either be nice for the sake of being so or more often he maintained his somewhat self-centered attitude. He made it a point to make sure I knew that he was doing extremely well in school (repeatedly told me of his top-10 ranking and his high mark in math which I taught him last year). My response to him every time this happened was to tell him that I was proud of him but not surprised. I continuously told him that he had the potential and that I strongly felt this since teaching him last year. For some reason, I think his views on my comments and discussions the year before were misunderstood. I think that that he felt that I thought he was incapable or not intelligent. Since that time, I believe he had something to prove, which in my mind was clearly not the case.

I have not taught him since, but a breakthrough came this year, while he is in grade 12. Working out in the gym, he took the time out of his training to talk: “Sir, I don’t think I ever told you this, but I am sorry for the way I acted when you taught me in grade 10.” Caught off guard, I gave him a confused look. He went on to explain how now that he realizes my intentions and motive behind my teaching methods and classroom etiquette.

“... a teacher’s relational gestures can register deeply and formatively whether or not boys visibly show or otherwise acknowledge them.
He continued to tell me how he was apologizing for everyone in those classes as he felt a lot of the students (including him) were purposely trying to test my limits on more than several occasions. He again apologized, shook my hand, and told me that I actually was a good teacher and knew what I was doing! This meant a lot, especially since this was the beginning of my career. As a new teacher, I tend to doubt my abilities and effectiveness in the classroom. I have always told myself that one day, if one student ever comes back to visit and all he or she tells me is a simple thank you, then I know I am on the path to being a successful teacher. I just didn’t think it would have happened this early in my career. Oddly enough, it happened and it ironically came from the first student that I met at the school.

**The Boys Respond**

As noted at the outset of this chapter, boys were by quite a margin more willing than their teachers to attribute relational success to a teacher’s mastery of their subjects and their adherence to high but attainable standards. Boys found that masterful teachers who instilled confidence that their students had the requisite ability to succeed and who established clear pathways to their success. In appreciating their teacher’s instructional mastery, boys warmly noted the *effort*—the preparation and thoughtful lesson planning—expended by their teachers to make their classes engaging and productive. In that instructional climate, boys, such as the South African English student quoted below, become positively stimulated to meet the task at hand.

This is the teacher who I feel I get on with the most, and I like his teaching style. He is a funny, interesting teacher, and what I like about him the most is that he is passionate about his work and approaches it in a fun and non-dull manner. Instead of just constantly repeating the topic we are learning or the section we are doing, he explains it to us in one lesson and then after, gives us work so that we can learn by practice and not theory. He
pushes me beyond the limitations I have set for myself and literally forces me to go the extra mile. I like a challenge, and when one is presented in front of me, I will do what I must to complete it. If someone else genuinely believes I can do it, then I’ll do it. Also [name] never gives up on us or says that it’s his fault that we are not doing well. The saying that there are no such things as bad students, only bad teachers, is total lies. He knows that and also fully believes that nothing is beyond my comprehension in his subject. His point of view is simply, “I’ve done what I can and now it’s up to him” and I like that.

Boys were especially appreciative of teachers who were willing to offer them needed remediation. From the elementary grades forward, boys who are aware that they have not mastered necessary scholastic skills can quickly believe that the cause is lost; they are never going to “get it” and thus use various forms of resistance to armor themselves emotionally against feelings of failure. Teachers who are able to address remedial needs while instilling the confidence that they will be met create working alliances that can extend into the student’s larger life. An urban American boy was unsettled to find that what he thought was an academic strength in his previous school was, in the context of his new college preparatory school, a serious deficit.

The most positive experiences I have had with a teacher was with this one teacher my freshman year of high school. Coming from a public school curriculum where I wrote all of my papers the night before the due date and got A’s, I believed I was a great writer. I was horribly mistaken. The very first paper I handed in to her, she handed back to me covered in red ink, saying I should meet her after class for revisions. The paper was so bad, she could not put a grade on it. For the next two weeks, we went over the paper, going over all of my problems with my grammar and writing conventions. My teacher showed great patience and understanding as she helped me with my writing. Over that period of time, we got to know each other very well, and I learned
how to write and better organize myself in school. At the end of two weeks, I turned in my paper and left her office knowing that I could not only come to her for help with my writing but as someone who would always be there to help me out with any problems I may have inside or outside the classroom.

A middle school American biology student appreciated a teacher whose lessons rewarded active inquiry in class over predictable routines—including required homework:

His desire to do away with homework meant that we were graded on our demonstrations of understanding on tests and quizzes and the thoughtfulness we displayed in asking questions in class. The frequent tests and quizzes without homework meant that everyone was able to practice what they needed to practice rather than a predetermined course one might even resent if he already understood the material. The emphasis on asking important questions in class meant that we were always asking how such a function happened and why that function happened and ensured our continuous attention in class. Ultimately that relationship, where he taught us what we needed to know and allowed us to figure out how much we needed to practice on our own made me perform at my best since I could focus on the one thing I had trouble with rather than the hundred things I could do in my sleep.

Teachers who succeed in reaching students and helping them to improve are not always aware that they are modeling generosity and accomplishment. Such was the effect of this U.S. middle school drama teacher on a boy who was not especially inclined or even able to express himself on stage.

Over the years, I got to know this teacher especially well. She gave me incredibly helpful advice about projecting my voice on stage and very useful tips on how to memorize my lines. In the classroom, she would ask me questions about the work I had submitted in an effort to get to know my writing style. I think
this reflects very well on her as a teacher but also as a person; it demonstrates how caring she is of her students.

I tried to get to know this teacher the best I could. I used to have problems with speech; I couldn’t enunciate certain letters and sounds properly. One thing I always noticed about this teacher is how well she speaks. Coming from a background in drama and theater, she pronounces every word perfectly. Since she first taught me in grade 5, I have tried to emulate her way of speaking and I’ve made substantial progress since then.

I had never really been interested in drama or acting in plays until this teacher suggested I audition. When I finally did, she worked with me and helped me come up with a character that was properly suited to the production. Her commitment and caring for her students is truly commendable; she is still one of my greatest role models.

Like a number of the boys cited above, an American high school boy was moved to something like awe by the meticulous care taken by his English teacher to ready his students for his class, including composing exhaustive study guides for each student. The extraordinary level of care and commitment on his teacher’s part stimulated the boy to do his very best work:

My teacher distinguishes himself because of his inspiration from a purely academic standpoint. Twice I have had the pleasure of enrolling in his classes, and both times he has inspired me to put forth nothing but my highest achievement. I believe that this inspiration stems from his complete and infallible mastery of the subject matter, his unflinching passion for the material, and his willingness to reach out to me personally.

While most of the papers that filled my backpack on the first day of freshman year came in the form of heavy textbooks and notebooks, he handed me an especially thick packet to add to my collection. After perusing the packet, I found that he himself had compiled notes on every single piece of literature in the class, each grammatical issue, extra notes on punctuation, guidelines for
formal papers, and instructions for quotations and citations applicable to every piece of writing I could imagine. When I enrolled with him again my junior year, he impressed me with a spiral bound book even more comprehensive than the one from freshman year.

Confident of the breadth and depth of my teacher’s knowledge, I was even more comforted by his passion for the material.

Finally, a U.S. middle school boy submitted a story that relates the impact made by a science teacher, both on the boy’s learning and on his development more generally. His narrative reveals notes of gratitude and deep respect that characterize so many of the boys’ positive stories.

The Man Who Lit the Table on Fire

Throughout my middle school years, I had seen two science rooms on the 4th floor of my school, both stacked with chemicals and interesting scientific models. However, I had only stepped foot in one of those classrooms because there was no reason to be in the other. The teacher of the unknown classroom was a mystery to me until about halfway through the 5th grade. Ironically, the first time he had ever seen me I was peeking through the window into his classroom. He was lighting a table on fire, and I was beyond amazed. I was stupefied. I had always wondered what happened in that classroom and at that moment, I knew. In sixth grade, I would have the privilege to be in his class and be inside the classroom where the

“ The extraordinary level of care and commitment on his teacher’s part stimulated the boy to do his best work. "

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mysterious man lit tables on fire. However, there was a method to his madness, and he would be the best teacher I would have for years. He wasn’t just the man who set the table on fire, but he was the man who had great morals, and when he taught his students, he didn’t just teach them chemistry, he taught them life lessons. He and I always had a good relationship especially because I was a frequent speaker during class conversations.

Some nights, I go home and I have hours on end of homework and complain and begin to get stressed about not finishing it. In spite of all this, I am still able to just think back to what life lessons my sixth-grade science teacher taught me about persevering and never quitting. Even though he might not know it, the man who lit tables on fire would change my life forever.
Chapter Six
Other Successful Relational Gestures

The stories boys and teachers shared with us in the course of this study indicated clearly that there are multiple pathways to productive relationships. The most commonly cited features in those relationships were reviewed in the preceding chapters. A number of other factors bore critically, if somewhat less frequently, on relational success.

**Shared Common Interests**

Chapter Four explored the relationship-building potential of teachers who take pains to locate and cultivate boys’ personal talents and interests and how that awareness on the teacher’s part served as a bridge to address boys’ scholastic concerns. Many teachers also related the positive effect of shared mutual interests on their working alliances with boys. Central to these accounts was the pleasure that both teachers and boys found in their discovered commonality, as recounted by this Canadian high school science teacher:

I developed a good relationship with a student by engaging him in conversations both in and out of the classroom, engaging him in chess matches, a game I know he likes, and submitted myself to a request that I read a book he suggested. It was only once I read the book in question that we really were able to converse openly and naturally (not forced or awkward). I suppose this was our “common ground,” and it was in one of his areas of expertise,
which might have made him more comfortable in conversing. This relationship did little to improve his grades. Nor did it improve his behaviour (he was already well-behaved to begin with). What it did was create a relationship that we continue to nurture between classes and at lunch hour by discussing various “topics of the day.” We both agree that it inspires us internally because we both seek out the conversations and get something positive out of it.

An American biology teacher in a high school reported a similar relational success—and a similar pleasure in achieving it—when she and a new boy in her school discovered a musical common ground.

This boy and I first met when he was a student in my sophomore biology class. He was one of seven new boys in the upper school, many more than our school usually has. We always worry about these new boys as our school starts in grade seven. At the first advisor meeting, each faculty was concerned about his fitting in and connections to the class. I was worried too, at first, as I didn’t see him getting to know the boys in his class. What I did notice, however, is that he was spending more and more time in my room. At first, it was during scheduled extra help times: X block and 2:15. We found out that we had some common interests: He plays cello and I played horn. We both loved rowing. Although I was not his advisor, his mom would e-mail me about his connections at school and how we could help him feel more at home. Funny, but when he would come by during my free block, I would be frustrated as I had so much work to do, but as the year moved on, I would really look forward to our conversations. He confided in me. Nothing of real concern, just normal teenaged stuff. I found out that he had a girlfriend whom he met in orchestra. I loved knowing more about his off-campus life, primarily his love for music. To me, knowing more about a boy’s life at the end of the school day is even more important than when he is at school. He came to me one day during the winter season about his lack of athletic ability. I took a chance and
suggested cross-country skiing. Much to my surprise, not only did he take my advice, but he joined the team. This awkward, new boy made some meaningful connections with the team and was seen as a member of the school community! He was trusting. He shared things about his family. I felt comfortable sharing things about mine. Today, he is a junior. We have continued this relationship, and when we can, we spend a free block/early morning having a conversation. He is funny, smart, respectful, warm, and willing to have a relationship with peers and adults alike. I look forward to keeping/nourishing this relationship after he graduates. I hope that he feels the same.

An American mathematics teacher parlayed his discovery of two shared interests—birth order and competitive swimming—into a longstanding relationship that he believed contributed positively to a boy’s math performance.

I met this student when he entered my pre-algebra A section on his first day at school. This was a seventh-grade honors class designed to move at a reasonably fast pace and filled with young boys who were good at and/or excited about the subject. He was no exception. Nine of these 15 boys, not including this one, were also my advisees. As the first semester rolled along, he showed himself to be a solid math student, but he felt a bit behind his peers at times in regard to his background or prior exposure to specific topics. He began to come to occasional extra help sessions and thus began a more meaningful and personal relationship. When I discovered that he was the youngest of six siblings, I let him know I was the youngest of 10. This gave us plenty to chat about between problems. It also came out that all of his siblings were accomplished swimmers and that he was working hard to be a solid swimmer as well. He explained about his 5:00 a.m. practices before school and his evening practices as well. He was a bit surprised when I knew all about his schedule and one of his club teams. Several of my nieces and nephews also swam at a high level in high school and college.
Many teachers also related the positive effect of shared mutual interests on their working alliances with boys.

Having found common ground outside the math classroom and spending a lot of math time together, this boy came to the end of the year feeling great about his accomplishments. He approached me near the end of that year to express the hope he would be in my class again. Though it took until his junior year, he entered my precalculus A classroom as a similarly strong student amidst a very talented group. Over the years, we had seen each other briefly on campus and talked a bit about math but mostly about swimming. The intense work ethic that helped him move through the pool, which was about 45 minutes from school, for four hours a day also helped him maximize his growth in mathematics. His incredibly strong academic success that year helped him attract a coach’s interest and gain admission to a very competitive college at which he planned to pursue an engineering degree.

Though this student was rather shy as he entered the school, he had an outgoing personality and was a hard-working student. He had many friends in class but was not as connected, as his main sport was not offered here. Just as he made an effort with his peers, he was tremendous about checking in with me during his senior year. As I was one of his college recommendation writers, he updated me on his school thoughts and his progress in the pool. His willingness to seek me out or stop and talk when we ran into each other during the day made a tremendous difference in the strength of our relationship.
A veteran mathematics teacher at an Australian high school recounted how, with good humor and a stimulating sense of competition, a discovered shared interest can even transform the prospect of serving a dreaded remedial detention.

The boy concerned was in my tutor group and hence we’d meet most mornings before school (2003 to 2008). I had him in my tutor group for five years. One day, he was in deep discussion with his peers in the tutor group about his Saturday detention. This discussion somehow led to what he’d rather do on Saturday, and that was play table-tennis. I too had interest in this sport and asked him how good he was. His response was, “I can surely beat you, Sir.” I refused to take it lightly and said that that might not be possible. He wouldn’t give up and said that he would like to challenge me and if he won then I should take him off the Saturday detention.

While I pondered with the possibility of this challenge, he yelled to one of his mates, “Sure, I can beat him. I have a table tennis table at home.” I then told him that the challenge was on.

My other innocent member of the tutor group asked me, “Sir, why did you challenge him after you know that he has a table at home?” I explained that I had three pianos at home and I still can’t play the piano.

To cut the story short, a few weeks later on that eventful day, the boy concerned organised all the tutor boys to meet at the gym and then came to get me. I walked in about three minutes later with my racquet. I sensed that I had won half the battle. I completely trashed him in front of all his mates. I even destroyed some other challengers. He had to do the detention and also attend early for some general mathematics support for the rest of the term. His mother called me and inquired about his eagerness to get to tutor 30 minutes early every day. After I explained, she said that she loved me.
A New Zealand science teacher was struck early in his career that a chance revelation of a highly particular interest—in this case, racing cars—could spark an enduring relationship.

The boy in question was, at the beginning of the year, very happy to be at school and a very lively personality. He seemed to deteriorate in his outlook over the first few months of the school year and became somewhat difficult in his behaviour. His academic results were only average. It so happened that I had on the desktop wallpaper of my computer at one stage of the year a photograph of the Formula One driver Ayrton Senna driving his 1988 McLaren Honda. The first day upon which I used the data projector with my class and this photograph came up on the screen, this boy was suddenly ecstatic.

“Is that Ayrton Senna, Sir?” he asked, and continued to ask questions about my interest in grand prix racing, and we struck up quite a conversation.

When I told him I had sat in that very car when I was 9 years old, he was quite impressed, and wanted to see the photos, which I brought in to school to show him.

Since that day, the boy’s behaviour has improved, he always seems happy to see me, and is much more enthusiastic in class. It seems to me that exposing this common interest has had a profound effect on the relationship between us.

The Boys Respond

Not surprisingly, boys’ narratives of shared interests paralleled the teachers’ almost exactly. For boys, the realization of a shared enthusiasm dissolved the distance between them and their teachers and thence the resistance they may have carried with them into class for any number of reasons. Shared interests are instant relationship-builders, and as the previously cited teacher accounts attest, those relationships become a positive platform from which to address scholastic concerns and challenges. Boys’ narratives also remind us, as did this American high school history student, that the shared interest is occasionally the subject taught.
Two years ago, I was very fortunate to develop a longstanding relationship with an American history teacher at my school. As history is one of my favorite subjects, it was natural for me to develop an interest in the topics he presented, and our relationship came about mainly because he noticed that I was both passionate about his class and willing to work hard. He developed a special interest in me as a student that went beyond class itself. He was not only my teacher, but also my school advisor, so we had an opportunity to know each other on a more personal level. The teacher commended my work ethic and was always willing to work with me if I needed an extension on an assignment, knowing that I was a reliable student and would not try to take advantage of him.

In the classroom, he chose a unique approach to exploring history that I found very appealing. We did not have a textbook but instead, like true historians, analyzed many different primary and secondary sources to learn history through our own eyes. He left no area of his subject untouched, covering everything from military history of the era to politics and everyday life. The subject seemed much more real because instead of the typical abbreviated entries in a textbook, we saw the whole picture and learned that every aspect of history is of some importance.

Outside of class, this teacher made a special effort to know me. For instance, one day we were having a conversation about American colonialism after class, and I mentioned that I am descended from William Bradford, the governor of the Plymouth colony. He saw that I was interested and cared about my family history, so he gave me a book from his private collection about the founding of the Plymouth Colony.

One thing that I greatly admired about him was that he was extremely passionate about what he taught. He lived and breathed American history.
From a boy’s perspective, the discovery of a common interest with a teacher often enables him to refocus his interest in course material from the emotionally barren realm of required study to the feeling-charged realm of actual, lived experience, as reported by this American high school boy:

I had a positive relationship with my religion teacher last year. This relationship came about when I expressed my religious views to him. He then made a special effort to get to know me because he was interested in educating me. He also did this by having private discussions with me before and after class as well as nonprivate discussions during class. I related to him a lot because I felt he understood where I was coming from and that we had a lot of similarities. I really liked my teacher’s approach to his subject matter because he liked teaching our class through open discussion.

There were many stories of boys and teachers who forged strong bonds on the basis of shared sporting interests, particularly in schools in which teachers wear multiple hats. This New Zealand boy told the story of his being set on a highly successful cycling course at the invitation and dedicated coaching of a teacher who noticed his potential and became, in the end, a “good friend”:

At intermediate, I was much into sport and still am. A teacher approached me and asked if I would be interested in joining the school road-cycling team. I was very interested, so I borrowed a bike and went along. First race I came in second. After that, this teacher helped me to improve by taking me out to races and helping me train. In no time I was winning. Nationals came around, and he entered me in it knowing I would do well. He organized some more training for me and I ended up coming second. Now we still talk to each other and he is a good friend.

Likewise, a British student wrote about how a teacher parlayed a mutual interest in football and fandom to build deeper
connections with his students, enabling him and his classmates to experience instructional periods “like an arrow soaring through the sky”:

At the age of 10, my family and I moved to Oxfordshire, where I was settled into a small primary school that was situated only a few hundred metres from where I lived. For both year five and year six, I had the same teacher who taught me all the core subjects, such as maths, English, and science. During these two years, I never had any bad experiences with this teacher (from what I can recall), and my time at this school went by like an arrow soaring through the sky. Not only was the teacher an extremely cheerful and optimistic human being, he was able to relate to me and my fellow classmates, which is an essential skill for any teacher. At the time, I was extremely into the sport of football (even though now rugby is my primary sport), and he himself was a dedicated Tottenham fan, which created a positive sense of competition as I was a Liverpool fan. I can remember this remarkable teacher as having a strong relationship with every pupil in my class. He would usually join me and my friends at break for a quick kick-about outside, and I must say that his skills were world class. Normally, students at this age would be wanting to push the boundaries with their teachers and test them to the limit, but during my time at this school, I only had admiration for this unique teacher. I can honestly say during my time at the school I never had a single bad experience with him.
In the following British boy’s account of a satisfying instructional relationship, the initial connection grew out of a mutually acknowledged interest in film—a shared interest underscored by the teacher’s ability to create a classroom climate of “mutual respect”:

This first teacher has been teaching us for about three years. At first, I must admit I was a bit apprehensive. He seemed nice enough, but at that time, I wasn’t really interested in English, as our previous teacher hadn’t been, let’s say . . . that inspiring. He seemed to be full on and knew what he was talking about: He was obviously well-trained in his profession. Our positive relationship first came about due to our mutual interest in various films. We both used to talk about films that were coming out soon, etc. Over time, this increased because he started a film society, which I greatly enjoyed. He didn’t act as the other older teachers did (at that time). He was less formal and would often stop the lesson to tell us one of his many stories to stop us from falling asleep from the boring course we have to study. What was good wasn’t just this effort to relate to us but an effort to make the lesson interesting. Instead of doing work straight out of a book (as many teachers do), he just would orally tell us the notes—a class discussion if you will—and told us to take down what we feel we could remember and/or forget. That’s what is good about his general attitude. It isn’t one of urgency or hatred—as it is with most teachers. It is an attitude of mutual respect. He approaches the subject keenly and wanting to tell us what he enjoys doing. Overall, he is a very nice guy and our results (personally and as a class) have improved exponentially.

**Personal Disclosure**

Even at their best, teacher-student relationships are asymmetrical, in that the teacher’s role is to guide and instruct and the student’s role to engage and learn. The teacher determines the scholastic expectations and manages both the learning and the relationship.
Despite this necessary division of roles, certain relational gestures, such as the sharing of common interests discussed above, tend to break down what can seem to boys the authoritarian rigidity of teacher-student expectations. One such gesture recounted by both teachers and boys in this study was the willingness, in the right setting and at the right time, for teachers to disclose something personal and unexpected about themselves, which established a welcome sense of shared experience between teacher and boy and a basis for productive relationship.

When a Canadian high school English teacher realized the source of her student’s hostility was not really her but an unhappy domestic situation, she succeeded in winning his alliance with her by disclosing something of her own family’s domestic troubles:

A grade-11 student was showing signs of unraveling. He was disengaged in class, which manifested itself in his talking out of turn, making inappropriate comments and jokes during lessons, not completing homework, and eventually doing poorly on tests and assignments. One day, I made a comment about divorce, which directly related to the material we were studying. The student snapped and once again made an inappropriate comment. At this point, I asked him to go outside. I met him in the hallway and a discussion ensued about his parents’ divorce. When I shared with him that I too came from a divorced family, his demeanor changed immediately. From that point on, we would chat here and there about how things were going at home. I would offer “survival tips” for managing schoolwork in a tense home environment.

At that point, his parents were living separately and he was spending a week with Mom and a week with Dad, which was causing him some strife. When I established a creative writing club on Wednesday afternoons, he joined, using the time to write freely about his relationships with Mom, Dad, the boy’s his older brother, and the tension in family. The writing exercises seemed to work on a cathartic level, and the student became visibly more
relaxed and happier. Later that year, he sought out my help with university applications. We’d meet at lunch to go over personal statements and admissions essays. Eventually he got into the university of his choice, a place he had expected would be out of reach. He will soon be graduating from university, and I have been receiving regular updates on his progress, adventures, and successes.

The student contributed to the relationship by seeking out my help. He obviously trusted me because I had shared candid and honest stories from my childhood that I applied to his experience. He made himself available for the creative writing club despite a rigorous co-curricular schedule and made time for one-on-one writing help.

I attribute honesty and directness to the success of this relationship. It took time and effort to reach out to this student beyond the parameters of the grade-11 classroom, but it paid off.

More than a few teachers told stories of their building a relationship by intentionally stepping out of role and talking to their students with a surprising frankness. Although the students addressed this way may not at first have liked what they heard, the teacher’s willingness to relate to them in a concerned, unvarnished way conveyed a certain mutuality and respect. Such was the impact of a South African house tutor’s encounters with an underperforming and unpleasant tutee:
This was a very ordinary boy. He was very, very ordinary. His family had sent two remarkable children to the school, one a rogue who was asked to leave, having achieved status as a “legend” 1st XIII rower and dope smoker, and his sister who was popular but also a little wayward. Joe wanted to be good. He was physically small, prone to sulks, and was suspicious of authority.

I came into close contact with Joe because I stopped housemastering. My response to stopping housemastering had been to request a position as an ordinary house-tutor in a colleague’s house whose style I admired. I may well have been hypercorrecting at the time and “over-tutoring” by comparison with my peers as I seemed to have found the extra 12 hours a day I missed as a housemaster. I took a mixed-age group of boys for two years in that house. He was, I could see at our first meeting, going to be a tough one to crack. He was in year 11.

He had bummed along in the middle of everything, never wanting to stick his neck out. One of the first things I did in a one-on-one session was to get him to write down what he wanted from the last two years of his time at the school. We then started chatting about what “wankers, posers, and pricks” the year 12s were.

He played basketball in summer, despite being a better-than-decent cricketer, and I was teacher-in-charge, although coaching the youngest in the club, so we could at least talk ball. He was also a mad crazy Man U supporter, and that also allowed me to take a jocular, oppositional approach, with a token Bayern leaning.

I started to push him academically from about a month into the year; he transferred into my design class, and I knew that with seeing him every day, on the ball courts, in the design studio, I could see how far things could go.

After three sets of dull results, and a lacklustre sporting performance and no cultural involvement, I stopped being nice, and started asking him whether he was a either a wanker, poser, or prick. He was surprised; I’d been quite nice until then. I walked out of his study, fully expecting an irate call from the Head.
This fellow came to me two days later. He asked me to explain what I meant. I did, and he started to listen to some of the advice I gave. By the end of the year, he’d been made club captain of basketball and a prefect. The following year, he ran just about every decision about his life past me, a bit of a pain, and after a bit, he realised and started to edit the consultations. His work ethic improved, his results went from dully poor to dully good (but good enough in the end to get into a university to do the course of his choice). His pride in his achievements are some of my highlights of that year. He still writes me an email every couple of months to tell me how he’s doing.

He contributed to the relationship by being divergent, by challenging authority, and using his sulking time to good effect. I contributed by getting him to formalise his aspirations, become strategic about achieving them, and to look back after a sulk, and ask whether his choices were really only “Wanker, poser, or prick?”

Boys who, for social or scholastic reasons, do not thrive in school often feel that they are unique in their distress—and may question how one so scholastically accomplished as a teacher could begin to understand. Under these circumstances, when a teacher made a deft personal disclosure to such a boy, he was likely to feel less isolated. He was reassured to know that his “problem” also had been experienced by his teacher, which provided living proof that the problem could be solved. This American middle school teacher overcame a learning-impaired boy’s discouragement by finding the right moment to share her unhappy past and what she had learned from it:

This boy entered my class as a cheerful sixth-grade boy who was enthusiastic about middle school. Reports from the lower school had informed me that he struggled academically and testing had confirmed that he fit the profile of ADD. His family situation had grown more challenging in recent years; his father had remarried and his mother needed to return to work full-time. His time was
divided between households. Regardless of numerous challenges, he was remarkably positive and distinguished himself as a well-liked leader among his peers.

As the first grading period came to an end, it was clear that [his] grades didn’t match his enthusiasm for learning. His homework was completed hastily or not at all. His test scores fell in the C–D range. He was soaring socially and offered excellent contributions to our class discussions, but sometimes I wondered if school itself served as a place for him to “relax” or maybe even a place where he could simply feel “safe and secure” within a day that revolved around consistency and routines.

This boy was content with C’s and D’s, but his parents were not. I spoke to his mother and offered some strategies for supporting him by helping him manage his agenda and calendar. He made some real strides but only half the time. When his scores took a dip, Mom checked dates and was swift to share that low scores correlated with time at the father’s house. The student’s low grades seemed to stir tension in an already troubled family dynamic. His spirits began to sink. His test scores dropped further.

I met with him during study hall and let him know I was worried about him, that he didn’t seem like himself, that I missed his insightful contributions to class discussions, and could I do anything to help? He told me that he really liked middle school but that he just couldn’t keep up with the tests and homework. We discussed the success of earlier strategies, but he told me that he really needed to handle homework and test prep on his own—getting his parents involved just seemed to get them “fired up” at each other. I took a deep breath, and told him, “I get it. My parents got divorced, too.” “It’s really not fair,” he said. “I know.”

What I told him next went something like this: “You can’t fix the thing with your parents and you really don’t get to ask for fair—at anytime in your life but, you like school right?” He reminded me that he liked everything about school—except the tests. “So, when you’re at school, you’re surrounded by friends, you like learning about stuff, and you’ve got a bunch of teachers who want to help you succeed.” He agreed. “So, what if you
look at it this way? School is a part of your life that you DO have control over. Everything here runs on a routine. Figure out the routine, put some extra energy toward ‘playing the game,’ and I’m confident you’ll see some great results.”

The student was able to verbalize how that routine works. “You mean, like, how this one teacher gives a quiz every day?” “Yes. What do you need to do to prep for the quiz?” He smiled, “The homework.” Even though we had been in school for 10 or 12 weeks, I really think he needed to talk through all the consistencies of middle school for the “light bulb” to ignite. We decided to meet the next week to touch base. During that meeting, we cleaned out his binder and his backpack. He seemed pleased when he repacked his backpack: It was half of its original girth.

In the weeks and months that followed, his smile returned and remained. He even began to enter class and show me an improved test or quiz grade from other subjects. All he needed in return was a smile and a nod, but he seemed to know that I was “rooting” for him, proud of him, and happy for him. This boy succeeded in middle school by accepting what he had, appreciating the gifts around him, and taking ownership of his academic responsibilities. Two years later, I’d still run into a tall, smiling young man on campus who would stop on his path to tell me about a book he was reading or a test score worth repeating.

Personal disclosure, sincerely offered, is an invitation to relationship. A veteran American language teacher found that stepping in practically to help a boy and his parents respond to a death in the family provided an occasion for mutually enriching personal exchanges:

This student is a student new to my school, coming from a background of home schooling. He is quiet and though he performed fine in class, I did not really get to know him very well. Just before Christmas, his grandmother in India died. Due to the circumstances of her death, his mom and dad had to leave
immediately to deal with his grandfather and the death rites.

This student lives two blocks from me. When his mom came in early that morning just to relay what was happening, I offered to pick up the student every morning for school (his mom did not ask that). It was convenient and I was happy to do this. So every morning for nearly a month, I picked the young man up and we drove to school together. Though the trip is only about 15 minutes, my student and I developed a relationship based on mutual trust and sharing. We shared not only about our families and lives, but we listened to the news and discussed current events. I learned about his views and how he thought about the world. I learned how he spends his weekends and who he hangs with. The student’s dad is a research scientist and his mom works with the homeless. I found out that he often goes on homeless runs with his mom during the very cold months of the year and what he sees. He related that on one occasion, they encountered a homeless person who was very drunk and got a little violent when he got into the car and that he and his mom actually took the man to the hospital and stayed with him until he was taken care of. I often expressed to him that I had thought about going out with them, but that I would be concerned and afraid. As a result of conversations with my student, that homeless organization was the one I used with my students at Christmas for a special project.

Talking to him and listening to him discuss the people they met gave me a new view of his world. When the current news of the day

**“Personal disclosure, sincerely offered, is an invitation to relationship.”**
reflected events in the world, my student and I discussed those events, but we also talked about his Hindu heritage. Though my student is not Hindu, his whole Indian family is, and so we talked about different ways of viewing situations. We talked at length about his grandmother’s death and the impact that will have on his whole family. His uncle and whole family will move from the south of India to the north to live with the grandfather. That is difficult and strange for me to grasp, but listening to my student accept and explain that reality was definitely a learning experience for me. As the weeks progressed, my student and I became a “mini-family” in the car every day for just those 15 minutes. I grew to appreciate even more who the student is and he listened and learned about me. My student continues to do good work in my class. That is part of his work ethic. Though I always knew him as a great, caring kid in my class, I now see him as a very special individual who circumstances allowed me to get to know better. I am grateful for that opportunity.

There is no doubt ill-advised personal disclosures are offered by teachers from time to time, particularly those motivated by anything other than to help a student come to terms with a difficulty. When they are apt, however, these gestures can be powerful. The boys in this study were deeply touched by and grateful for such gestures on the part of their teachers, and the boys experienced these disclosures as expressions of unexpected trust and mutual respect.

The Boys Respond

A British boy recounted what it felt like to be treated by his teacher as “an adult and equal”:

In year 5 at my old school, I had a new form teacher for the year; she had just come to the school and seemed a positive, caring sort of person. I first established a rapport with her when I did a presentation on my holiday the previous summer. She seemed
impressed and congratulated me on it afterwards. Being in a class of almost 40 people, I found it hard to have any one-on-one time with her, but she presented me with an opportunity when she asked me how I was finding a book that I had been reading, as she was thinking of reading the book herself and wanted some advice. I was taken aback as no teacher had previously treated me as an adult and equal, nor had they ever asked for a personal opinion or advice. This made the relationship seem like friendship and less formal. After a while, I found myself comfortable making jokes when speaking to her, and I was more vocal in her lessons by asking more questions and sharing my opinion. This was reflected in my report when she wrote, "He contributes well in class." I was very proud of this, as my previous reports had urged me to "come out of my shell more," which I feel I had actually achieved, thanks to her.

Not all personal disclosures are guaranteed to strike responsive chords in all boys. Nevertheless, teachers who are willing to disclose and share something of themselves beyond what is required by their professional posture stand a chance of opening up a depth of feeling and productive scholastic effort from boys that would not occur otherwise. Such was clearly the case for a thoughtful American middle school science student:

One of my strongest connections is to my science teacher in 6th and 7th grade. I feel badly that he isn’t really a favorite with the students. For that, I feel badly for him and for the students, but it is the students who are missing out on such an interesting and encouraging person. Most kids don’t understand him because he is a little quirky. He is a genuinely good guy, who has a real interest in the subject he teaches and in his students. He also leads the community service efforts at school and gets no credit, at least publicly, for putting in all that extra work. But that’s just how he would want it. He is one of the quieter teachers on campus. He taught me a lot about nature, plants, birds, weather, and just made me more aware of the whole world around me. I loved his class and
was so excited to go to it every single day. Even now, he is excited to hear about my new discoveries or about things like how I fixed my family’s dryer. He is always encouraging me and I think he knows he means a lot to me. I’ve brought him a deer skull, a hawk talon, and a paper wasp’s nest to keep and use for his class.

To this day, I love seeing him in the hall and around campus. He has great stories and is so interesting to me. He has been building his own house for about five years now. I mean, completely, all by himself! He also builds his own furniture and builds guitars. Do you know how hard that must be? He gets up at 4:30 in the morning just to play the guitar. He never takes lunch at school, he just eats baked beans in a bowl as he teaches woodshop class. He keeps track of all the birds he has ever seen and when and where he has seen them. He has a unique sense of humor only some people get. Some people think he is really odd. I really like him. I don’t know if that says more about me or him.

A Canadian middle school student recounted similarly heartfelt appreciation of a relationally successful teacher who confided personal experiences to his students, including his “great love of video games”:

I have a positive relationship to my language teacher. It came about when I started in his class this year, and I immediately liked him a lot. Even though he knew I didn’t like the subject, he kept pushing me to do my best in class. This made the bond that I have with him even greater. In our advisory group, we started to learn that he

“Teachers who are willing to disclose and share something of themselves beyond what is required by their professional posture strands a chance of opening up a depth of feeling and productive scholastic effort from boys . . .”
had a great love for video games just like us, and we started to talk to him about all kinds of different things.

Through this relationship, I found that the subject was not as hard as I thought it would be. Now, even though I may not enjoy the subject, I do my best because I have an enjoyment in finishing it. My teacher inspired me to work hard in subjects I don’t like. Thanks to my teacher, I found that it may just be the teacher you don’t like and not necessarily the subject they are teaching. He also relates to the class the experiences he has had. This makes the class more interesting and lets us get to know him. When we don’t understand something we are learning, because we know him, we can tell him and we can spend more time on it. . . . When you have a teacher that is likable, is passionate about his subject, takes time to get to know the students and makes the subject easy to learn, it makes it easy to like the teacher.

Common Characteristics

Just as sharing common interests can catalyze teacher-student relationships, sharing common characteristics—race, appearance, religious affiliation—can be relationship-building as well. This is especially true if the student feels isolated or marginalized. As the value of ethnic and other diversity in schools has been widely embraced, the lofty commitment sometimes preceded an understanding of how a child’s being thrust into an unfamiliar cultural mix can become a barrier to safety and scholastic focus.

Many schools, especially those situated in or near urban centers, have found it easier to admit a diverse student body than to compose a similarly diverse teaching staff. In consequence, many students pass through their formative school years without the adult presence of someone who shares their ethnic experience or heritage. Productive teacher-student relationships can of course be formed across racial and other cultural lines, but, on the evidence of this study, when boys and teachers share an important cultural characteristic, relationships may proceed with a special
ease. In some cases, the characteristic that links a boy to a favored teacher is serendipitous, as when an American high school history teacher attributed the relational breakthrough he made to the fact that he happened to look like a troubled boy’s favorite uncle. More typically, however, the realization of common characteristics unites boys and teachers who share a minority status, which was the experience this African-born science teacher in an American school:

Being educated in an all boys’ school back in West Africa many years ago, I thought it would have been a great idea to teach in an all boys’ school as a way to live those memories that I missed the most. However, I had to make a connection, a connection that seemed in fact too difficult, first because I came from a different continent with different cultural experience and, second because my students were predominantly Caucasian whereas I am Black.

Despite these self-created obstacles, after a couple of days, I was able to be looked upon as the “alpha male” in the room, who had the confidence of the students to drive my biology class with great care and precision. Two students helped me do this perfectly; one of these students is a Black African-American young man who always had interest in what I did as a teacher. This student would set up my IT materials and even come after school to clean the screen of my laptop. Did he really know what I had in mind for him? I guess not, but you know quite frankly, this student paved the way for me being confident that I could work in this environment.

In fact, one day the mother of this young man walked up to me in the hallway when I was hurrying for class and said, “Mr. B (how students and parents call me), my son really loves your class and he takes interest in all that you do as a teacher and as a person.” I was not surprised at all, for I knew that I share common sentiments with this student. What puzzled me the most is that I did not know that this student would look up to me as a role model.
Again, boys are just boys and sometimes they need good role model so that they can be able to follow up in all that they do. I know that I can go on and on to talk about the different characters of boys that I meet every day in school, yet the kindness and respect that I have received from this one student is a clear manifestation of how these young men see adults and mimic their behaviors accordingly.

The Boys Respond

As boys progress through the elementary grades into adolescence, their perceived and actual “differences”—whether distinctive physical characteristics, socioeconomic position, or learning deficits—can be a source of a debilitating lack of confidence and thus a serious obstacle to scholastic engagement and performance and mastery. Teachers who recognize and ease these heightened sensitivities were warmly praised and appreciated in our study, as was this Australian teacher of English:

English was not my best subject. Coming from a family where English is not widely spoken in the household, it was very hard for me to adapt to different environments. I have Serbian and Greek heritage and speak both. Ever since I was a kid, I have struggled in English due to the fact that I used to only spend time with my grandparents, who speak broken English, like the Count from Sesame Street. This is where, in Grade 8, my first high school teacher helped me. He was American and extremely motivating. He had so much experience with people like me learning English due to the fact that he used to teach in Europe. He understood where I was coming from and knew I was limited, so he gave me lots of advice and books to read. What made him the best was that he challenged me and motivated me. He made me feel confident and better about myself. Another thing he did was store my work, and at the end of the year, he showed me my improvement. I think that showed me how much he taught me and how much I improved and listened to him.
Similarly, warm relational gestures on the part of teachers serve as lifelines to boys who feel racially or culturally marginalized in the dominant culture of their schools. A British biology student recounted how he was coaxed out of a resistant, defensive attitude by a relationally effective teacher who shared some of his cultural heritage.

I believe that the most positive relationship that I have had with any teacher, in my whole educational career, would have to have been my GCSE biology teacher. I must admit that at first, she and I were not the best of chums. I think, however, this was greatly due to how I behaved in lessons and my general attitude towards the subject. Before my GCSE course began in year nine, I don’t think that I had as much respect for her as I should have had. And undoubtedly I received the various punishments. I presume that the reason all of this tension faded was because of my change in attitude towards the subject. I suddenly took a great interest in the subject, and so my relationship with the teacher grew. Not only was I starting to find the subject interesting, but I also knew as I was taking it for GCSE, that I would really have to start paying attention to every detail of the subject. I achieved well in my first two examinations, receiving two A’s. I think that as my confidence grew in the subject, so did our relationship. Now, I am able to have casual, yet sometimes meaningful and purposeful conversations with her. She comes from India, and I myself being half Indian from my mother’s side made us realize that we had more in common than we first originally presumed. Not only that, but we also share the same sense of humour to an extent, and we love the same type of music. I believe that it is so important to be able to have a relationship like this with a teacher, especially at this stage in your education because not only has it improved my confidence in my social skills but also in the subject. I’m also a lot more able to ask questions in class than some of my other fellow students because I believe that she trusts me to say something worthwhile, which I think is a massive strong point of my education.
Boys who are hungry for relational connection are capable of establishing highly concrete points of identification with teachers who reach out to them positively. A New Zealand science student saw common features that link him to his teacher as something close to destiny:

A teacher I have this year for science is a teacher who brings a positive attitude towards schoolwork. I have a good relationship with the teacher as I am always on task, but to me, I think a reason we get on so well is because me and my teacher’s son both have the same name. But the really weird thing is that we both have a birthmark on the right side of our faces. My teacher makes the subject fun, which appeals to me and inspired me to keep on doing my best.

**Accommodating Opposition**

Again, it is a clear finding of this study is there are multiple pathways to productive teacher-student relationships. Some successful relational gestures may seem to run mildly counter to others. Just as many teachers and boys attributed relational success to teachers’ upholding of important scholastic standards, others formed productive relationships as a result of teachers who decided in *certain circumstances* to make exceptions, to overlook a boy’s performance or conduct that they might not otherwise tolerate. In these strategic instances, to make an exception of a boy can help him see that his individuality is known and recognized by his teacher—and that *he matters* more than the general rule.
Obviously not all student opposition can or should be accommodated by teachers, but the deft sense of when a boy’s need for emotional room and comfort trumps the value of a teacher’s holding him to standard expectations expedites successful relationships that would otherwise have been unlikely. A veteran American English teacher recounted how his appreciation of a talented student’s literary promise persuaded him to relax a previously firm policy of requiring daily note-taking.

I had known this boy, but not in a good way, before he was a student in my English class. He had been part of a freshman science class that, as a school administrator, I had to scold because of general misbehavior; in a subtle if not insidious way, he was one of the biggest challenges for the teacher in that class. I knew from another experience with him later that same year that he was defensive, even had a chip on his shoulder. A scuffle he had had with another student necessitated my sending a warning letter home for him and also led to my talking with him about why he had been so aggressive with the other boy. I came away from that conversation with a greater understanding of his own vulnerability and sensitivity, and I think he felt better that at least his side had been heard.

When he arrived in my English class the next year, I put my previous year’s experience with him behind me; I hoped he would as well. Although attentive in class, he was quiet and passively defiant about taking notes. He simply would not. While I would have admonished another student for not recording points made in class discussion and lectures (how dare he?), I chose to hold back with him. I wasn’t so much afraid of a confrontation as afraid of losing him in the first week of semester. In week two of the term, I asked him to see me to talk about the first paper he had written for the course, an engaging, smart discussion of musical styles and tastes. We had a rewarding conversation about a topic we both enjoyed. He was a good writer, so the opportunity to praise him helped set the direction for the months ahead. He knew I liked his writing, and it was clear he liked to write. We
never talked about the events of the previous year, and only after establishing more trust with him in a second writing conference did I mention that note-taking in class might help him to keep his test grades on par with his excellent composition grades. He conceded the point in the abstract if not in practice.

Did he eventually take notes in class? Yes, but only in a sporadic manner. Fortunately, his test work didn’t suffer as much as it might have had he been a less able student. More important, the losses on the note-taking front were, for me, compensated for by what became an enriched student-teacher relationship. I didn’t give up the cause, but I didn’t let it become an obstacle in my relationship with him. In my early teaching years, I would have fought the note-taking battle to the bitter end, no matter what. I won most of those battles, but, looking back, I know that at least a few were fought at too great a cost.

A female geography teacher in Canada recounted how her stressful adjustment to teaching in a boys’ school was relieved when, in the course of a single verbal exchange, she realized that she had been “fighting the boys when neither of us wanted to”:

I had taught for seven years when I moved to an all boys’ school to teach grade nine. I had had experience teaching at co-ed schools, international teaching experience, and had taught briefly at an all girls’ school in Scotland during one of my teaching placements. None of this prepared me for teaching four classes of grade-nine boys. I felt like it was my first year teaching all over again.

The boys were much more physical, knocking over chairs, accidentally brushing papers off the desk, and scattering them across the floor as they sat down. The noise was different—the boys were loud. They handed in assignments with no name and no staple. They forgot their pens and pencils and liked to play a game that involved a certain bodily function (I won’t go in to detail). I felt like I had lost control of everything. To top it off, they didn’t “talk” to me. Not the way, I realize now, the girls did in my past teaching experiences; at least, not at first.
Here is what I learned. The work [handed in] with no name and no staple was thoughtful and creative. The noise, you get used to. It was the antics I continued to struggle with. For example, shortly after our headmaster had given the school a “talking to” about throwing snowballs, I walked in to my class after lunch only to find the boys having a snowball fight inside the classroom. They could push my buttons.

Until one day, the period before lunch when they are most driven by their stomachs, I was about to reach my breaking point. The words “you are staying in at lunch until this work is finished” were about to leave my mouth. Then, a boy in the front row tapped me on the arm and whispered, “You do know that means you will have to spend even more time with us.” In that moment, everything changed. Instead of calling a class detention, I laughed. He laughed. The mood in the room changed. In that moment, I learned the importance of “a good laugh”.

I had been fighting the boys and neither of us wanted to. From that moment on, I learned to relax more. Don’t get me wrong, I still had to set the rules and give consequences, but my mindset changed that day. We learned to work together rather than against each other. I learned that the boys did want to talk to me; it just took them a little longer to get there. Maybe it was about building trust or finding a connection but in my experience, I have found that once the boys make the connection, the relationships are strong.
The determination to endure a boy’s resistance or hostility can provide an attentive teacher the time and perspective to notice and then to cultivate scholastic promise that might not have surfaced in a climate of confrontation and disapproval. Such was the experience of a New Zealand teacher of Japanese as she got to know a prickly but promising student:

A Korean boy joined my Year-10 class towards the end of Term 3 a few years ago. He was transferred from his previous school because he was spending too much time with his fellow Koreans, who apparently were a bad influence. My colleague at his previous school warned me about this boy’s attitude and behaviour being somewhat uncooperative and problematic. He appeared to be a bit sullen and because there was another Korean boy who had very poor communicating skills in English, and he spent most of his class time talking to this boy in Korean for the rest of the year.

I tried to not be prejudiced towards this boy and tried to see something positive in him. I actually felt, although there was no firm evidence because I did not understand the Korean language, that he was far more intelligent than the other Korean boy.

He chose Japanese for one of his Year 11 option subjects, and this time he had a couple of different Korean students in class to learn Japanese with. He got on well with these boys, and I realised that he was quite competitive in getting better results as well as in showing some cheek that was bordering on rudeness, which was also his way of being creative with language usage. I decided to tolerate and go along with his ways as long as we were all learning things and no one was hurt emotionally or physically.

The preparation for internal assessments were a good opportunity to get to know students personally, as the students generally tried to communicate their more private experiences and feelings or ideas in the target language. I normally give suggestions and point out some inconsistencies in their statements, etc. As this boy worked on his essay writing assessment, I read what he wrote and found him to be a very honest, caring person who took his responsibility towards the
family very seriously. From then on, I started to see him in quite a different light. He had a very sensitive and sensible side of his personality hidden behind the cheeky carelessness that was his exterior.

By my trying to ignore his shortcomings and to focus more on his creativity and his innate intelligence, I think he was able to grow freely in this subject and able to enjoy the process as well as the end results. It was also my pleasure as a teacher.

Some teachers recounted the benefit of their weighing the “absolute” value of upholding a standard against the toll that doing so might take on a boy’s willingness to engage and to produce. Deciding that the prospect of deeper engagement and better work made more sense than imposing discipline and penalties, an Australian teacher of high school English related the positive outcomes that followed her decision to “negotiate” deadlines with a student who resisted meeting them:

When this student first entered my class he presented as a disaffected and angry young man. He slouched in 15 minutes late to the first lesson, shirt untucked and scowling. In response to my enquiry as to the reason of his lateness, he groaned, rolled his eyes, and muttered something incomprehensible.

It was obvious that his past experiences with English had been unhappy. His confidence was very low, and his automatic response to questions was to shrug, sneer, and mumble that he didn’t know/didn’t care. As his attitude and behaviour was not impacting negatively on the other students in the class, I decided to take a “softly, softly” approach. When he failed to hand in a number of class assignments, I defused his defensiveness by telling him calmly that, as long as he understood that he would lose marks for late submission, we could negotiate further due dates. As he has a strong sense of fairness, he was happy to be penalized and could calmly discuss extended deadlines. He and I thus spent the whole of term one developing a calm and nonaggressive/combative relationship.
I discussed my strategy with his parents, and his mother confirmed that he had had a number of relationships with teachers in the past that were characterized by mutual hostility and apparent dislike. It seems that he had come to my English class prepared for a similar showdown with me. He was surprised and grudgingly pleased that I was not prepared to repeat this pattern. His parents were happy to accept low marks for him for Term 1, in exchange for the establishment of a workable relationship with me.

As he did hand in his work (albeit very late) throughout Term 1, his English skills improved. He is a bright and capable student and was highly gratified by a steady increase in his marks (notwithstanding the deductions for lateness). In turn, he began to participate in class discussions, chose not to sit next to students who would encourage him to disrupt the class, and tried very hard to control his impulses to call out inappropriate comments.

He continues to apply himself in English and is now a force for good in the classroom. I have encouraged him through a variety of interpersonal strategies, including making friendly eye contact, asking him about his interests outside school and generally conveying the impression that I like him as a person.

The success of this relationship is attributable to a number of factors. Firstly, his parents were on board and happy to accept an initial period of low marks. If his parents had insisted that I make him hand in his work on time or be punished beyond mark deduction, it would have been very difficult to establish the calmness needed to diffuse his defensive attitude. Secondly, he is an intellectually capable student. When he applied himself, he was able to see a steady improvement in his marks and skills. This was very gratifying for him and boosted his confidence, which in turn impacted positively on his behaviour. Lastly, I happened to personally like him. Whilst I do not let my personal response to my students get in the way of my relationships with them, it helps to feel naturally warm towards a student. I think that he can sense that I like him as a person, and this makes him want to please me (as everyone likes to be liked).
We noted earlier that the full impact of teachers’ relational gestures may not be immediately apparent. An American teacher of languages and leadership training recounted the positive outcomes that resulted from her decision to “put aside my ego” to develop a better understanding of an oppositional boy who seemed to resent her presence in the school:

I had a very contentious relationship with a 10th grader whom I did not teach. This student disliked me for a couple of reasons, but the main issue for him—as he explained to me years later—was that I had broken into his culture, which was not my own due to gender and provenance. He resented this intrusion and more importantly, he perceived incorrectly that I wanted to change his world. The tension became obvious during an experiential program I was running. During several seminars on leadership that I had arranged, he was openly disruptive and belligerent. I realized that this relative stranger was incredibly angry with me and that I had to put my ego aside to confront the issue before he ruined the program for everyone else. So, at first, my goal was to put out a fire and not to forge a relationship with a boy I may or may not teach in the future.

My initial conversation did not go well, but I was able to get across my primary point: He was unquestionably a leader. I also made sure he understood that I valued his world and that I knew he was acting out of a form of loyalty, albeit misplaced. The question I placed before him was: Did he want to be a positive of a negative leader? He listened to me, but he was offended by my overt criticism of his behavior. Although the situation improved over the remainder of the week, he was definitely not a fan of mine.

Over the following year, I made a point of stopping him in the halls to praise him for his successes in school, and he softened a bit towards me. Once he realized I would teach him his senior year, he popped his head in my office for a chat. He explained that he had been unfair towards me and that he was looking forward to starting over the following year in class. I was delighted
and let him know how brave and mature I thought he was. I felt exceedingly fortunate because even though I had made overtures to end his animosity, he is the one who made the incredibly difficult step of accepting my “extended hand.”

He taught me the importance of seeking out a relationship of value with every boy that I may have contact with, and not just my own students. The following year was a resounding success, academically and personally, in our class. He was one of the top students, and we talked outside of class often about a variety of topics.

Today, he and I remain in touch and he updates me on his life, as well as on his peers. My friendship with him has been an incredibly rewarding experience as a teacher and as an adult. I do not credit myself for it, since I truly believe that it was his unusual willingness to break through his animosity to give me another chance. He is a remarkable young man.

Few teachers of long tenure have not encountered students who, using physical mannerisms or direct comments, have let the teachers know that the students did not care for the subject and, perhaps, the teachers. It is of course natural to take offense when offense is given, but many seasoned teachers have found that by refusing to take the bait and, to the extent possible and practical, responding to unpleasantness in a calm, unthreatened manner, they are able to learn the underlying cause of the boy’s unpleasantness—trouble at home perhaps, or a fear of revealing scholastic weakness—and
begin to build a productive relationship. An Afrikaans teacher in South Africa managed at length to help a student succeed in a subject that the student had been quick to tell him he “hated”:

He came to my class in the third year of high school and immediately told me he hated my subject. I told him it was fine, but the others in the class had been with me for two years and didn’t seem to mind, so as long as he didn’t try to influence the others, it was okay. I always made sure that he got special attention and would ask him questions I was fairly sure he could answer. He seemed to like my sense of humour and eventually came to ask me if I could explain a few concepts to him privately, which I did and then, basically because the others seemed to like being in my class and doing well, he changed and eventually got an A in my subject at the end of his school career. The year after he left school, he was asked to come back and speak to the new final year students and then mentioned my name to tell them how I had changed his attitude and how well he had eventually done.

I think things worked out well because I never felt threatened by his negative attitude and kept on being friendly and cheerful.

When a boy’s resistant behavior does not impede a teacher’s ability to conduct class business effectively, teachers have some leeway in considering how strictly they may respond. A veteran American teacher of advanced mathematics determined that strict discipline of a perennially tardy senior was less important than maintenance of what turned out to be a mutually rewarding relationship with the boy—who apart from his lateness was a willing and able student. By accommodating what might on some days have been a minor annoyance, the teacher managed to establish a mock cat-and-mouse relationship with the boy that was not only productive but outright enjoyable:
My relationship with this student started when he took my calculus BC class as a senior. I knew he had had some depression issues and had trouble finishing assignments like long papers, so I didn’t really know what to expect in a math class. Happily, with a couple of exceptions, he started off the year on a high note and maintained his good work. He is a very smart young man, but I pretty much kept my distance for fear of triggering the same issues I had heard about in other previous courses. There were numerous times when he was late for class, and after a while, while I was trying to be understanding of a boy with a clear history of difficulty completing tasks on time, I was getting annoyed with this behavior. About that time, a few months into the year, I also began to uncover his sense of humor. I knew he was quick-witted and bright, but we had really not connected on that level. Soon I was feeling comfortable about reprimanding him, and he was taking it without apparent harm. Indeed, he soon became adept at flashing a very funny look at me, with one eyebrow raised, and a bit of a perturbed look on his face as if to say, “Okay, you got me, but I’m still too cool to get to class every day on time, so good luck trying to change this behavior.” This was done with just enough of a smile and a twinkle in his eye that we both came to realize that this was really a great game of matching wits and ultimately just role-playing the powerful-powerless positions we respectively held. We both enjoyed it, each teasing the other about their positions in the relationship. One day, I locked him out of the room when he was late, and without missing a beat, he promptly went through the adjoining classroom and entered our room through the connecting door. The smug, “gotcha” look on his face was priceless, and each of us had to work to suppress a good laugh.

These interactions opened up a wonderful way for us to connect, and I am happy to say we have continued a friendship right through his college years, during which time he has been very open with me about his life.
Boys ... were consistent in their appreciation of teachers who were able to see their potential despite their problematic behavior and performance.

The Boys Respond

As might be expected, the boys’ accounts indicated warm appreciation for teachers who reached out to them despite their errant behavior and lapses. Once again, even as they act out and misbehave, boys do not wish to be defined that way. An American high school Spanish student spoke for hundreds of his contemporaries who participated in this study in expressing his appreciation of a teacher in whose class he was admittedly “a pain”:

My positive relationship with a teacher began sophomore year. When we walked into the classroom for the first time that year, she absolutely scared me. She scared me so much that when I forgot my book the next day at my house, I felt it necessary to go buy a new book altogether. She turned out to be not like that at all. By week two, she was joking with students and teaching us material we didn’t even know we were learning at the same time. She made an effort to get every student to talk and contribute, and she wasn’t afraid to make fun of you, not in a bad way, just in the same way your friends do.

I don’t find Spanish a very engaging or fun subject, but it became my favorite class as I paid attention to hear the next funny thing my teacher said. I was a pain in her class, but she still liked me and asked me to come after school to improve my Spanish and work on my accent. It has founded my interest in Spanish, and she serves as a mom at school for me. I go to see her whenever I have problems and want
someone to talk to. It’s great to have such a person at school and I’ve confronted her with all sorts of problems such as drinking, colleges, children, recommendations, girls, and everything else imaginable. I make an effort at least twice a week to go see her during my frees.

We found a surprising number of instances, like this one above, in which boys’ difficulties in conforming to school regimen and classroom demands were openly acknowledged by their teachers, often in a spirit of good-humored understanding. Boys in this study were consistent in their appreciation of teachers who were able to see their potential despite their problematic behavior and performance. A British student who transferred from New Zealand wrote of his being transformed from “mischievous and energetic disruptor” to a “happy young man” by the relational gestures of a particularly effective teacher who taught him lessons in “life itself”:

Four years ago, I made the life-changing voyage across the world to England from New Zealand. This flight was, in effect, the beginning of a new life for my family and me. I remember the first day I met the man who was to be my form master. We were being shown around the school by a senior teacher when suddenly a large, very red, lively-looking young man cut into our conversation, introducing himself and warmly shaking me by the hand. This was the start of a relationship that would undergo considerable battles and emotion but after four years has brought a small boy from New Zealand into a happy young man. I was a mischievous, energetic, lively boy and a lot of the time when I was in year seven, this energy and mischief were channeled into disruption and trying to be the one who stood out or had the last say in every matter. My form master, having caught on to this energy being wrongly used, was pretty quick to realise that this energy could easily be channeled into good qualities and the bad qualities firmly stamped out. Over the last four years, my form master has nurtured me (firmly and with direct impact) into knowing, in effect, the difference between right and wrong and
to make decisions, which could be the difference between me getting into serious trouble or taking a step back and saying no. In terms of making a special effort to get to know each other, I think that as he wanted to help me and I wanted to try my best to basically impress him by being good or doing something right, we both unwillingly made a special effort to relate and get to know each other. Now, it is not like all we did was help each other—the amount of conflict and disagreements we have had are quite ridiculous—yet in some ways, these arguments have almost brought us together. Although, it was not in a particular subject that this teacher affected me, the lesson he has helped me with is life itself.

**Vulnerability**

As stressed in Chapter Five, an essential condition for boys entering into productive working alliances with their teachers is the boys’ sense that the teacher is in full command of the material presented and is able to maintain in the classroom a lively, purposeful climate in which boys are known and valued personally. In sum, the boys were effusive in praising teachers who were at once warm and firm and fair: comfortably *in control*. Moreover, this perceived competence and control must be in place for teachers to assume their necessary role in a working alliance as *relationship manager*.

Necessary as such pedagogical command may be, teachers—even those trying their best—may periodically be frustrated in achieving it. In the discussion of failed relationships (Part Three), our participants relate a number of unproductive responses on the part of teachers whose authority and intentions were thwarted by resistant students: anger, emotional withdrawal, and a tendency to attribute boys’ troubles to intractable psychological or social problems. Characteristic of these less successful responses from teachers is the tendency to *take personally* the boys’ resistance.
and rejection, to the point that the teachers become unwilling or unable to manage the relationship.

Occasionally teachers who contend with especially resistant students succeeded precisely by acknowledging that they are having a hard time. Although teachers may rightly wonder whether their revealing such vulnerability will undermine their pedagogical role, boys, including difficult boys who know something about vulnerability themselves, may regard such gestures as appealingly honest, opening a pathway to easier communication and ultimately to a mutually respectful relationship.

A Canadian drama instructor recounted this feeling-charged instance of mutually revealed vulnerability, which, in this case, led both boy and teacher to relational success:

I had taught a young man for a number of years and worked with him on shows. His talent was formidable. I did not realize, in the early years of our relationship, that he was wrestling with personal issues of some magnitude, and by the time it became apparent to me, he had become quite lost: to us, to me, to himself. I was heartbroken at the erosion of what I had considered a special relationship. Finally, it came to pass that the grade 11s were to share scenes, for drama class, which had proved challenging as positive group dynamics were not this class’s forte! The student in question, unbeknownst to me, had been exploiting the material therapeutically. The raw honestly of the final work was so breathtaking that I broke down and cried . . . for some time. No one moved. It spoke to the general teenage angst of the boys but especially to the pain of this hurt and angry young man. I realized at that moment that I had built up my own stone façade over many months, in order just to manage the group and “discipline” this boy who “disappointed” my expectations. He gave me a gift that day; he impacted everyone in the room. A weight was lifted off of our collective shoulders: We were able to move forward much more honestly and begin to relate more truthfully with each
other, more emotionally comfortable, now, with each other. This young man worked very hard to heal himself over the next few years and spoke of that moment even after graduation. I have tried since to more fully respect that beneath so much challenging behavior, is a boy crying out.

Because boys’ fears of exposing their vulnerability is often the cause of their relational resistance, teachers’ admission of their own could help to dissolve that fear. An American high school English teacher who was willing to reveal her own history of “many failures” helped an unhappily self-absorbed boy disclose his deepest vulnerability—with unexpected and gratifying results:

Perhaps because we are a very busy school, I have learned to use the small pockets of time around the edges—between classes or walking to lunch. The first time I spoke to this boy outside of class was at the snack bar. Although we’d just begun the semester, he’d already struck me as someone for whom school was difficult; he seemed off-center and anxious about what would be required of him in class. At the snack bar, when I teased him a little about eating junk so early in the day, he looked stricken, so I sat down for a minute to make sure he knew I was only joking. Over the next couple weeks, I spoke to his advisor and to his former English teacher who told me that he had a particularly strict father who never seemed to be happy with his performance at school. When the student was at my lunch table, I asked him questions about his family—not directly about his father but about his siblings and where they went to school and what kinds of things he liked to do outside school. He can be very self-deprecating, but he has a wonderful sense of humor. When he said something negative about himself, I responded with how much I’d learned from my (many!) failures. I think we bonded at lunch over a mutual love of the movies. Soon after sharing a lunch table, we read a play in class about, among other things, a son’s difficult relationship with his father. He had become more and more confident about speaking out in class, but usually in response to my direct
questions. After we’d read and discussed this play, however, he asked the class as a whole how they thought Cory, the son in the play, could better his relationship with Troy, the father. It was a heartfelt question, and I held my breath waiting to see how the class would respond. His question came at the end of class, and several boys stayed after to talk to him one on one. When I watched him walk into his next class, he was surrounded! The next day, I came back to this student’s question, but I framed it as if it were Cory’s (the son in the play), which allowed the boys, this one included, to talk about father-son relationships. I tamped down my urge to hold forth and let go of my agenda completely that day because the boys really wanted to talk about their own lives. When we had end-of-semester conferences, he spoke movingly to me about the importance of the class and how he’d felt supported by others.

A New Zealand high school science teacher established a relational connection with a belligerent, uncooperative boy only when the teacher took the boy aside and confessed that the teacher regretted their hostile confrontations because they prevented the teacher from knowing the boy well enough to help him.

At the start of his Year 13 course, this student was uncooperative and belligerent. He would enter the class late, noisily and often eating—anything that he could do to elicit a confrontation from me. This went on for some weeks.
I then had occasion to be with him on a one-to-one basis when the rest of the class were involved elsewhere, and I simply pointed out that I would much rather spend the energy that our confrontations took for more productive things, like preparing him for next year. I also pointed out that because of the negative relationship we had, I didn’t even know what his plans were let alone how I could help him. We talked!

The Boys Respond

Although they had ample opportunity to do so, the boys in this study made nearly no reference to unwanted relational gestures on the part of their teachers. In contrast, they were full of praise and appreciation of teachers who reached out to them beyond the requirements of instruction. A Canadian boy who was fully aware of his role in the school with respect to his teacher was nonetheless grateful that although they were by no means peers, there were moments when it “felt that way”:

He basically took me under his wing, about two years ago. I had him as a teacher twice throughout my high school career, once in grade 10 for math and the other time was last year in grade 11 fitness. Nowadays, he stops in the hallway to chat with me, catch up on what’s been happening lately and/or the Toronto Maple Leafs. We joke around sometimes too. He may not be in the same age category as me but sometimes it feels like it. He wants me to persevere and excel in all of my classes. He bandaged me up after I had a horrible bike accident up at a camp during the summer. My leg was pretty bummed up, as was my arm. After my grade 10 math exam with him, he called me into the hallway. He asked me if I smoked, at all. I didn’t smoke at the time, but my parents did. So I guess their smoke stuck to my clothes and he assumed that I did it. After I told him I didn’t he let me go, but that sign of courtesy showed me that he cares about his students. He likes to listen when you have something to say. When he teaches, he takes his time. Nice and slowly to make sure we all understand the lesson.
It is an abiding and understandable concern on the part of teachers, especially beginning teachers, that their changing practice as a result of student criticism and complaints might be perceived as a debilitating lack of command. However, both teachers and boys in this study acknowledged the benefits of teachers’ listening without defensiveness to what students have to say. Teachers who are able to do this may receive a double benefit: improved perspective on how individuals and whole classes are responding to instruction and a warmer, less guarded climate for classroom discourse in general. From the boys’ standpoint, teachers who listen are perceived as more confident and capable, not less so.

A New Zealand boy wrote with impressive empathy about a “grumpy” teacher who “listened to our opinions and tried to change”:

He was quite grumpy and had mood swings frequently. He would be talking to you one minute and then the next he would be yelling at you for the smallest mistake you had done. I enjoyed talking to this teacher when he was happy because he would always ask what you were doing and really tried to be nice, but when he was grumpy, he was really grumpy. He would frequently ask what we thought of his teaching and we would say that he has mood swings and he said that he would try and change that. After a time, he did change the way he acted during class, which is good that he listened to our opinion. Whenever he asked for an opinion about his teaching, I would always say to try and be nicer even when the day isn’t going right for him. I told him that I enjoyed his teaching when he was happy and nice, but when he became angry, classes just became unfair and I didn’t really want to be there. He listened to all of our opinions and tried to change these when we told him what we didn’t like about his teaching. Now I believe that he is a better teacher because of the fact that he listened to our opinions and tried to change them.
That there will be days when things “aren’t going right” is a given certainty in a teacher’s life. Although to maintain an unfailingly sunny disposition may be an admirable goal, there are bound to be lapses, just as in conveying instructional material, there will be occasional errors and unintended misstatements. Teachers who acknowledge the occasional lapse honor their students by revealing their own adherence, however imperfect, to the same standards to which students are held. Teachers who admit lapses and, when appropriate, make amends are, without having to say so, modeling the kind of relational sensitivity necessary to an emotionally safe scholastic climate.

An American middle school boy described how his mathematics teacher’s reconsideration of an ill-considered outburst helped to establish a deeper, more productive relationship:

One teacher who I have forged a very successful relationship with is my math teacher and advisor, though I would never have thought so several months ago. A couple of weeks into the school year, as a class, we were on the buses back from a field trip. The teacher asked us politely at the very beginning of the trip to not stand up on the bus because it was dangerous. Sure enough, however, during the middle of the trip, a boy behind me got up onto his knees in his seat and turned to talk to the people behind him. The teacher told him to sit down and proceeded to inform us that the next person to stand up would get an hour detention. Young seventh graders that
we were, new to the school, we all dreaded an hour more than anything else possible. As I began to forget about the warning, however, I started talking with the students behind me. Before I knew it, I was on my knees, turned around. “You, my friend, just got yourself an hour,” said the teacher from the front of the bus. The whole bus went quiet, and I sat down awkwardly. If I hadn’t felt so awful, I would have found it pretty funny. You could have heard a pin drop. As the noise around me resumed, my life didn’t. I couldn’t think what my mom would say, what I would do. I had never received a detention before either. I was sick to my stomach and was a mental train wreck. I knew people were whispering about me, but no one actually talked to me. I just stared out the window, furious at myself and my teacher. Then the teacher did something I would have never thought he could do, and that won him my respect. He walked down the aisle of the bus and sat himself right next to me in my seat. He talked to me, told me that he was sorry he had been mad at me, and that he didn’t think that his reaction was really appropriate. He also told me that the only reason on earth he would do something like that would be for us, the students, and that as a teacher, that was his job. He was concerned for my safety, and that was why he lost his temper. I never served that detention, because he told me not to. That is the way that he has always acted towards his students. He is only strict to push us to our full potential, and he has helped my peers and myself to achieve exactly that. In short, my teacher cares for his students to an amazing degree, and as a teacher he is also terrific. He makes a huge effort to understand me and my peers, and to make sure that we are doing our best, not only as math students, but as people.
PART THREE
WHEN RELATIONSHIPS BREAK DOWN

Dismissing the Other: Relational Impasse

Although the elements of relational success described in the previous chapters of this report hold great promise for reaching and teaching boys, they cannot guarantee relational success. As in other human relationships, those between teachers and students are often beset by developmental, family, and culturally imposed stresses. Students and teachers carry their entire lives, including their prior relational histories, with them to class. The following chapters explore the challenges and possibilities revealed in teachers’ and boys’ accounts of their unsatisfying, unsuccessful relationships. These stories illuminate how individual circumstances can combine to deepen boys’ resistance to scholastic engagement and also to undermine teachers’ abilities as relationship managers.
Our research design called for us to ask the same boys and teachers to offer an account of both a positive and negative relationship. Reading these accounts sequentially, we were struck by how the stories of negative outcomes differed from the positive ones. The most striking difference was the lack of congruence in what boys and teachers attributed to relational failure. The boys’ accounts included a good deal of blaming and teacher disparagement with little assumption of personal responsibility for the relational impasse, whereas in the boys’ accounts of relational success, they frequently acknowledged the difficulties and challenges they presented to their teachers. The teachers’ accounts of relational breakdown tended to assign cause to factors beyond their professional control: irremediable learning deficits, boys’ psychological problems, domestic circumstances, or other cultural factors that make it impossible for a productive working alliance to be formed. In their negative accounts, 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 ultimately to overcome these same circumstances. In sum, teachers and boys viewed the breakdown through the lens of their respective roles, disappointments, and personal upsets. In cases in which relational success was achieved, the dyadic dimension made it possible for boys and teachers to unite in common purpose; in cases of breakdown, instead of mutual acceptance of boy and teacher, there was disconnection and an inability to focus on the learning challenge at hand.

Although teachers, especially experienced teachers, might fairly be expected to bring to bear a broader perspective and more objective, professional training on their evaluation of student-teacher relationships, both teachers’ and boys’ attempts are more or less subjective interpretations of what are often feeling-charged, mutual encounters. Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) stressed that “interpretation matters.” The relational impasses described
by both boys and teachers in this study illustrate vividly how irreconcilable interpretations of a mutual experience can close off one or both parties to productive engagement.

The boys’ accounts of negative relationship focused on the perceived shortcomings of their teachers: their teaching style, their classroom management, and their relational attitudes. In these accounts, the boys cited teachers they found to be boring, uninterested in their own material, uninterested in them, excessively critical, sarcastic, and otherwise disrespectful. Boys who criticized and dismissed teachers in this way often conveyed in their written and spoken accounts a measure of shame, humiliation, and resentment, which are feelings easily projected onto male and female teachers standing in loco parentis. (Bibby, 2011) In our study, the boys’ expectations of their teachers were typically very high. As one Canadian senior boy put it, “They are supposed to care about us and help us to learn.” When such expectations are unmet, the disappointment and resentment are profound.

Boys expect their teachers to be not only pedagogically and relationally masterful but to be the managers of the relationship: initiating contact, offering support when problems arise, and repairing breaches when they arise. In striking contrast to their positive relational accounts, in which they often reflected on and acknowledged the difficulties they initially posed to teachers, the boys expressed little agency or responsibility for relational breakdowns in these negative accounts.
The following two chapters relate in some detail the ways boys and teachers account for relational failure, with special attention to the difference in their perspectives. The boys attributed relational breakdown to the following seven factors:

- Teachers who were disrespectful or disparaging,
- Teachers who showed little personal enthusiasm,
- Teachers who were inattentive or indifferent,
- Teachers who were unresponsive,
- Teachers who were unable to control their classes,
- Teachers who were uninspiring or boring, and
- Teachers who communicated poorly.

Teachers attributed relational breakdown to a decidedly different set of factors:

- Boys with unsupportive or difficult families,
- Boys who were unprepared to work,
- Boys who were overmatched academically,
- Boys who were fragile or wounded,
- The impact of so-called masculine pressures, and
- The impact of other social stressors.
In contrast to the boys’ narratives, the teacher accounts did express concern about their responsibility for relational failure as well as considerable regret when a working relationship could not be achieved. In fact, both in survey responses and in workshops, the teachers’ accounts of these breakdowns were poignant and sometimes quite painful. Like the boys, however, they did not typically blame themselves. The teachers tended to attribute relational impasse to boys’ intractable personal circumstances, psychological problems, severe learning deficits, or, in some cases, to larger cultural forces.

Although the teachers typically absolved themselves from blame in these accounts, many nonetheless were rendered with a touching depth of feeling. Some of the most wrenching narratives recounted the teacher’s experience of failing to reach a boy decades earlier. Understandably, if not helpfully, the teachers in this study tried to distance themselves from students with whom they failed to relate. Whether or not the extramural causes cited above were actually at work in boys’ resistance, teachers’ determination that a student was unreachable and their distancing themselves in response closed off the possibility of relationship.

In tandem with the tendency to psychologize and even pathologize boys with whom they were unable to relate, some teachers attributed boys’ unreachability to a number of larger social forces: prevailing gender attitudes, ethnicity, class. Although it is widely acknowledged that

“Teachers’ responsibility to serve as relationship managers, however, requires a measure of introspection and self-awareness, a willingness to reset, to reassess present practice, and to improvise.”
racially or economically marginalized boys can pose special scholastic and relational challenges, scholars have cautioned that “the research never suggested that poor children are incapable of learning.” (Noguera, 2012, p. 10) In fact, in schools that produce measurably better achievement on behalf of disadvantaged boys, including boys of color, “strong, positive relationships between students and teachers are critical ingredients” (p. 11), a finding confirmed emphatically in this study.

Such findings lend a special weight to teachers’ abilities to persevere with particular boys, especially when social circumstances are most pressing, even when there is little outward sign of success. Of course, teachers, like their students, carry their relational histories with them into the classroom. They too are subject to unexamined or underexamined reflexive responses to a variety of challenges posed by the students in their charge. Teachers’ responsibility to serve as relationship managers, however, requires a measure of introspection and self-awareness, a willingness to reset, to reassess present practice, and to improvise—qualities often absent from teachers’ negative narratives.
Chapter Seven
Boys’ Stories: Disappointment and Blame

As discussed earlier, when boys’ expectations of their teachers were not met or when their prior resistance to instruction was not overcome, the boys expressed their dissatisfaction in a variety of complaints. These complaints targeted perceived inadequacies of their teachers’ pedagogy, their attitudes and aversive personal traits, or both. In their narratives of unsatisfactory relationships, the boys identified a number of tendencies in their teachers that for them precluded the possibility of relationship.

Teachers Who Are Disrespectful or Disparaging

Teachers experienced in the manner suggested above led the boys’ lists of those with whom they refused to relate. Whether or not we should have expected it, the research team was a little surprised to read so many accounts of teachers as hypercritical scolds. This very measured account from an Australian student illustrates how difficult it can be for a boy to embrace school lessons with a teacher he feels undermines his self-esteem:

The teacher may be aware about how I feel about her; however, it is more the way she feels about me that I find the issue. She has embarrassed me on numerous occasions in front of the whole class by stating that she does not like me or that “everyone knows that we don’t get on.” I feel this is unwarranted as I hand in all my work, do not disturb the class, and try my best to be a good student. I do not have these problems with any other teacher I
have . . . leading me to believe that it is more her approach to me that seems to be the problem. I feel that the teacher in question is not open to receiving questions and on many occasions she has patronised me and made me feel terrible for asking a question that "I should know." Similarly, she has openly admitted she has favourites in the classroom and has named these, which makes those who were not named by her feel shameful. To be honest, I have done little to improve this relationship as I don’t see how I could do so. I continue to hand in all my work on time and am genuinely interested in the subject matter; however, my relationship with the teacher has negatively impacted my enjoyment of this class and has me dreading these periods.

A Canadian high school student echoes that dread—resulting in his case in a refusal to learn from a teacher whose "screaming" and “getting mad at us” elicited feelings of powerlessness, vindictiveness, and rage.

When I first met this teacher, I knew my mark was going to be low. In my point of view, she was so mean! She was screaming at me or my peers, getting mad at us for not doing our work when we didn’t know what we were doing, and more. It really just pissed me off, and I just wanted to drop the class, but I couldn’t, which made me even more pissed. So I decided I will just accept the nine weeks with her. This teacher did not know how I feel about her, her teachings, or her class. In fact, I didn’t want to let her know how I feel. I wanted to get her fired; I was failing plus SHE DIDN’T TEACH ME ANYTHING! Even I if I told her I think she wouldn’t give a damn. I was dying in her class, failing, and I knew I couldn’t boost my mark up. I was depressed. I didn’t try to improve this relationship. Well, I tried sometimes, but still the same thing over and over and over again. I think, if I tried, nothing would happen she would still treat me and the class the same. She didn’t do anything; she didn’t try to help me get a higher mark. All she did was scream at us and told us to teach ourselves the work we had to do. While we were doing this, she was just sitting on the computer. Oh man, I was just AHHHHHHH!
This New Zealand boy would agree, clearly believing that as a baseline, teachers must “at least recognize if someone is doing well”:

Some teachers are just plain bad, shouldn’t be teaching, act like bullies . . . the list goes on and on! In short though, there are some teachers that just SHOULDN’T TEACH. They are that mediocre. Now, it may seem as I’m being harsh in particular to Mr. X as I shall call him throughout this survey, but so is he, so that’s that. Practically, this teacher, who I shall name Mr. X, was plain right down damn mean. He was a bully, a really spiteful one at that too. He told us that we were doing so horrible at his subject that we might as well not come to class. In my opinion, that wasn’t a good move. Some people never went back to the class after that day, and for good reason too. He didn’t even reward the students that did well. In fact, he IGNORED them. That’s what really annoyed me about him. I mean, you have to at least recognize if someone is doing well.

The following American boy described an experience with a teacher whose angry and derogatory remarks prompted him to involve both his parents and school administrators in getting help, though ultimately to no avail. As he detailed the learning costs of this failed relationship, he sounded a note we heard frequently in these stories: boys’ vulnerability, their “apprehensiveness about asking for help”—especially when they entered the class with “low confidence in the subject.”

This teacher has always had a reputation of being very aggressive. I have had many problems with her and so have my parents. She has a very negative teaching technique, where she often begins a lesson with shouting at the class. Whenever I ask for help with something I find difficult, she again raises her voice at me and overcomplicates the work. I am apprehensive about asking for help. I have low confidence in this subject because of this. My parents made it very clear to her at a parents’ evening, the way we feel about her negativity, but it didn’t affect her in any way as she carries on with the same teaching technique. In a lesson,
she often puts you down, and I often find it hard to be confident in this subject because of this. One of the parents of a student wrote a letter of complaint to the head of department about her and about all the problems I have mentioned. The head of department had a word with her about this, and in the next lesson, she was clearly moody and angry about this as she shouted to us about this letter. A few students including myself went to see the head of department, and in the next lesson, she again shouted to us about this. On the whole, I have strong feelings against her and she’s one of the worst teachers I have ever had.

Boys often complained of teachers who seemed punitive, intent on getting them into trouble, or who were unforgiving of even minor offenses, as noted by this British student:

My initial impressions of the teacher I had a bad relationship with was a teacher who looked and sounded like she was here to give us a hard time, and she didn’t give out a good atmosphere at all. The teacher was aware that I didn’t like her, but she wasn’t aware about how much I didn’t like her. I tried to improve my relationship with this teacher by putting my hand up more and trying to participate more and remembering all my equipment, but the minute I did something vaguely wrong, she would make sure I knew about it. Unfortunately, this teacher didn’t try to improve our relationship at all and instead just made it worse by constantly shouting at me and my friends for minor things like forgetting our glue stick. Also, I once forgot
my book twice in a row, so she threatened to report me to the senior management team despite the fact it says in the school diary you see the senior management team after you’ve had a Saturday detention.

No word appeared more frequently in the boys’ narratives than “respect.” Its absence characterized nearly all the failed relationships and often caused those who felt they were disrespected to “tune out” instruction, as reported by the following American boy:

There is one thing that I cannot stand, and that is lack of equal respect for all people. Whether that be in the form of picking favorites of students who excel in a given subject or just a lack of respect for all students. Being in my ninth-grade year, the senior year of my school, I expect to be treated like a ninth grader. Perhaps that does not make me a teacher’s equal, but I do expect not to be talked down to as if I were a student of the lower school in my first year. Often, if I am not treated like I am a capable 15-year-old, I will not take the course as seriously.

Coaches too were assessed on the basis of the respect they conveyed to their players. An American boy offered a rather philosophical assessment of a coaching approach that did not work particularly well for him:

I know in the course of my sporting career there are some coaches who have a method of telling you that you are doing something wrong in what might be seen to be a harsh or provocative way. Sometimes this may produce results, but on the other hand, it normally reduces the student to a state in which he feels the opposite and wants to stop or give up on the sport and wants to displease his coach. For me, this is a very unsuitable approach to coaching. The better method in my eyes would be one in which the coach praises the student for what he does right and his improvement, which makes a connection that I have
already mentioned and one that is ever so important to teaching. However, this may sometimes make the student feel satisfied and not compelled to work harder or achieve more in his sport.

**Teachers Who Lack Enthusiasm**

Boys enter their respective classrooms with a wide range of expectations, ranging from dread to high hopes for success. Typically underlying each set of expectations is an assumption that the teacher has mastered the material to be taught as well as effective methods of delivering it. Students who may have struggled in the past often additionally assume that if help is needed, it will be given. When these expectations are not met, when boys feel that their teachers are not especially interested in their own subjects, much less them, the students decline to engage and relate. The following American boy, for example, wrote about how his teacher’s “lack of enthusiasm” made the class a “chore” in which his own motivation and interest flagged:

Although I expected some leniency in the course, my teacher’s poor attendance, tardiness, and lack of enthusiasm for the material made the class a painful chore each day. As a student, I lost all interest in the class and found no motivation to do the readings or write the best papers I could write. By second semester, my teacher had subtly surrendered to the fact that the class would not do much work, and he did the same. I recall one day when he reprimanded us for not reading and then asked us all to open up to the reading from the previous night. As he retrieved his textbook, he remembered that he did not know what chapter we were reading and asked us which it was. When he asked, nobody could answer him. While I was embarrassed that I had not done the reading, I felt ashamed to be a part of such a lackluster class, especially considering there were other classes, both AP and regular, that were working considerably harder and enjoying themselves much more.
A Canadian boy offered a similar complaint about a teacher who seemed to have invested little time in preparing her lessons and assignments:

The last thing that has made my experience in this teacher’s class extremely unenjoyable is the fact that nearly every single assignment I have received from her in the three courses she has taught me can be found with extreme ease on the Internet. If one copies and pastes an essay question into Google, the exact wording is often found on more than one “study guide” Web site. I’m aware that many teachers use external resources to assist them, but when every single major assignment can be found online, it is extremely frustrating. And, though this may sound bratty, I don’t feel that it is fair to expect students to put in exceptional time and effort into an advanced literature course when the teacher is unwilling to put in the effort required to create assignments.

Whether they related successful or unsuccessful relationships, the boys’ narratives were suffused with expectations that teachers would add to their competence and knowledge. The following Canadian boy, for example, described how he came to teach himself as a result of having a teacher who seemed to have been unwilling to do it:

I had a science teacher last year who I did not get along with at all. He never showed up to class on time, he didn’t teach his material well, and he was generally apathetic about his students. I had heard bad things about this teacher from his past students, so I wasn’t expecting much, but I was still optimistic. Unfortunately, his past students were proven right over the course of the year. His teaching style is dismal; he does not clearly explain things, and although this is uncommonly a complaint, he never assigned homework. This was bad for us because we were completely unprepared for tests, as we did not get sufficient practice on homework questions that he should have assigned. After a while,
I took matters into my own hands and started assigning myself homework from the textbook, but I don’t feel that it should be my job to do that. Admittedly, I never really got to know this teacher very well, but that was because of his complete lack of attention for any of his students. Even when I passed him in the hall and said hello, he rarely responded and when he did, he simply nodded at me. It is a year later, and it feels as if I was never taught by him. I have not spoken to him since last year, and we never speak to each other anymore. I attribute this to the fact that he does not make an effort to get to know any of his students. I can only hope that he will attempt to improve his teaching habits and his people skills, as they are currently lacking.

An Australian boy complained that his efforts in the classroom were “degraded” by a teacher who “just didn’t seem to want to be there at the front of the class”:

I can’t seem to get along with this one teacher. His way of teaching the class is not the greatest, and I find that he doesn’t engage me like most of my other teachers have done. My initial impression of him was that he was passionate about teaching the subject, but after a while, he just didn’t seem to want to be there at the front of the class. He never seems to know that he is boring the class. The relationship has not seemed to improve, and it makes me want to not be in the class. It has also degraded the quality of my work in that class and is bringing my mark down. I just have no reason to do the work for someone who I don’t really care about. He also doesn’t seem to care. He rarely checks the homework, and when he does, he doesn’t even look, he just asks you if it is done. Sometimes I just want to replace him with one of the other science teachers just to see what they are like. He mostly just assigns work and lets us go from there with no more direction. If he made an effort to make the class more interesting and liven it up with personal stories so we could get to know him, it would be much more entertaining and allow us to get to know him. When he is teaching, he is very detached and is always
behind his desk and this puts up a [barrier] between the class and himself. He seems to not even want us to be in front of him at times. We never go over things that have possibly troubled us about certain topics, so we never seem to slow down and look at something. I just can’t seem to figure him out. If I knew more about him, I would possibly have more respect and want to finish the work, but I don’t know anything about him so I don’t really respect him and I don’t want to finish the work that he assigns.

**Teachers Who Are Inattentive or Indifferent**

The surest barrier to relational success with a student is to offer no invitation. A British boy expressed disappointment—even astonishment—about a teacher who simply seemed uninterested in his students: “I wonder why he chose to be a teacher if he had no enjoyment from children?”

A relationship that did not work for me was with a teacher recently. He came across as a man who was more concerned with the subject he taught than the pupils he was teaching it to. It was almost as if he had no time or desire to connect with a single one of them. To this day, I wonder why he chose to be a teacher if he had no discernible enjoyment form working with children. He made no effort to talk to or get to know any children outside the classroom, nor did he even seem to care if they were struggling. I never had any personal problems with him, simply because there was no opportunity to,
as he barely even noticed me. This is not necessarily a good thing, because even a problem with him would have established a rapport, but as it was, there was nothing, no rapport, no connection good or bad. And so there was no relationship to speak of, just a lack of one that presented the problem. I found that the only pupils who really got to know him were the troublemakers, as they were the ones he spoke to most, even if it was shouting. All in all, I think this teacher made no impact on me and vice versa. I found that I had to work much harder at the subject consequently, because I felt a lack of support from him and so I realised it was entirely down to me to achieve anything with the information that he was giving to us.

An Australian boy registered similar disappointment with a teacher “who doesn’t care much”:

I think she is a cold person who doesn’t care much. She never really tried to be nice to me, so I did the same back. It was a very bad experience. The things I found funny was she was so nice with some other boys in my class, but with me and some of my friends, she acted like we did something wrong every time I asked her something! I may enjoy (subject) one day but not with a teacher like that.

As indicated in the positive relational narratives, the boys’ feeling they are personally known and valued is foundational to relational connection. In the absence of that recognition on teachers’ parts, relationship—and relationship’s salutary scholastic benefits—will not be realized, as attested by a South African boy:

My first impression of this teacher was that I was just another pupil. She was there to teach maths and that was that. Often she got my name wrong, that is, when she was not ignoring me. She never made any effort to get to know me and only stopped confusing me with another boy when he left the school. My marks were dropping. She wouldn’t answer my
questions and in one instance, after she congratulated another boy on being selected for something when the class told her I had been as well, she simply stared at me while an awkward silence ensued.

**Teachers Who Are Unresponsive to Boys’ Need for Help**

As discussed in Part Two, teachers most frequently attributed their relational successes to first locating and then successfully addressing a special student need. Central to many of these accounts was the teacher’s willingness to abandon prior practice and to improvise a new approach until relationship was achieved. In the following narratives, boys relate from their perspective the dispiriting experience of failing to receive needed help. A British boy recounted his frustration at being rebuffed when asking a teacher for fuller, clearer explanations:

A lot of the teachers do not even listen to your request but simply tell you to “shut up” and “go away.” Maybe this is a common factor for the English school system (I only joined it from year nine), but I find this approach extremely unprofessional and frustrating. It was a mistake to come to this school, one that I would take back if it were possible.

Similarly, when the following Canadian boy became convinced that his teacher was unwilling to help him, he could see no way forward, either scholastically or relationally:

I felt this teacher was lazy, often unprepared, and didn’t really care about his student’s success. He was often caught simply sitting there for an entire lesson, relying on us to learn the material without his help. It annoyed me that he wouldn’t even help students during a lesson and only cared about how fast he got through it. He never went that extra mile for any student. His tests would sometimes consist of material we hadn’t even covered in class or sometimes would have incorrectly written questions.
Boys who seek help are, of course, typically the least confident and most easily discouraged if help is not forthcoming. Just as skillfully locating students’ special needs and improvising ways to meet them is one of the most frequently cited causes of teachers’ relational success, failure to do so figured prominently in the accounts of relational failure, as in the experience of this Canadian boy:

I don’t think he ever knew my feelings toward him because, quite frankly, he never cared. I remember vividly, one day during class, I went up to ask him a question, and as I advanced towards his desk, he scolded me and told me to sit down, telling me to “go figure it out yourself.” Normally, a teacher would/should be willing to help a student; but with this outburst of his, I was thoroughly unnerved and [it] convinced me that this teacher was the worst I had ever encountered. I did not do anything to improve the relationship because I knew that all my efforts would be in vain.

As discussed in Part Two, boys are more likely than their teachers to attribute relational success to teachers’ mastery of their material, their classes, and the care they take to prepare clear, engaging lessons. It was no surprise, then, that teachers’ failure to do so figured prominently in boys’ accounts of relational failure.
Teachers Who Are Unable to Control Their Classes

For a serious Australian student, a poorly controlled mathematics class was a “horror”:

In Grade 9, I had a horror of a year in mathematics. Having a sound year in Grade 8 in math, I started Grade 9 in the second top class. The problem was, I don’t know how some kids in my class were there. They were always causing trouble. After the first week, these kids were doing everything that I would call ridiculous. No detentions, no rubbish duties. No discipline! My teacher was not doing anything about it but telling them to stop and not do anything. He would focus so much time on the naughty kids that he would focus less time on teaching. We were learning nothing. On test days, I was barely passing just on natural ability. By the time reports came in, I had to get my parents involved.

A Canadian boy recounted his struggle to stay motivated in a class in which his teacher lacked the “strength” and focus to command interest and attention:

A poor teacher that I had was in grade 9 when she was a new teacher to the school: She didn’t seem to hold down the class with a strong presence. She also seemed to get very angry with students and seemed to judge students. She seemed to teach some classes with experience but for the most part, she was okay with teaching lessons. I didn’t seem to be very motivated and it never seemed that I would look forward to her classes. Even though she didn’t seem to have the best teacher experience . . . she was a nice teacher that seemed to make the effort to help in possibly the best way she could. She also seemed to not be able to make the right choices in hard circumstances and seemed to have a hard time with her emotions in class. I think I could have made a bigger effort to go for extra help and teacher time, but from the classes, I never felt really motivated to go in after school because her teaching ways seemed to counter my learning type.
Even boys who were sympathetic to teachers’ classroom challenges found it impossible to achieve productive relationship. For again, it is the teacher’s responsibility, not the boy’s, to be the relationship manager, as a British boy reported:

I thought that his character was weak; he stood fearfully in front of the class, eagerly anticipating the end of the lesson. He spoke with a quiet and broken voice. He seemed to me like a six former trapped in a maths teacher’s position. At the beginning of the year, he seemed to be under the false impression that we still accepted him and in some mad subconscious way, we heard his half mumbled phrases. But towards the end of the year, it was made very clear to him that our manner was certainly not one of respect, rather of disappointment. We were only a small year-nine class who I’m sure an after-school detention or red card would easily silence. This rather disrespectful relationship between pupil and teacher at one stage got to the point where he broke down in tears. At first I tried to build a form of relationship with teacher, by paying attention in class and handing in my homework. But it got to the stage where it was almost impossible to pay attention in class as he seemed to have no control. So to be honest, I gave up. He, however, stuck out this prolonged torture to the bitter end, every time he walked through the door looking fresh and had a small grin on his face. Unfortunately, he just simply seemed to have no control over the class.

Teachers Who Are Uninspiring or Boring

A Canadian student made no bones about his disappointment with a teacher who, he concluded, had “the personality of a breadstick dipped in water”:

A teacher that I do not like is my history teacher. She is simply one of the most boring people I have ever known. When she presents, she always puts boring white slides with only words, words that she reads in her dreadfully monotone voice. She doesn’t even
put any images to illustrate her point. She essentially has the personality of a breadstick that has been dipped in water until it becomes a soggy mess. The subject matter makes it even worse, but my main complaint is that the teacher is simply not a very good teacher, as she cannot keep my attention.

Although also disappointed, an American reconciled himself to tedious science classes and learned to accept the teachers’ limitations, even though from the outset of the course, he asked himself, “How am I going to get through this year?”

I want to share with you a story about an experience I’ve had with a teacher that has been very disappointing. For almost all my elementary years, I’ve taken science. I loved science; it was interesting, fun, new, and innovative. My liking for science changed this year when I started grade 9. In September of 2010, I meet my new science teacher. I remember my first class with him and my initial impressions. They were not good at all. He was a monotone speaking character—I could barely hear him—and seemed tired, bored, and fed up with his job. I thought to myself, “How am I going to get through the year?” Well, I can tell you, so far it hasn’t been easy. When I go to class some days, it moves by really slowly, other days it’s okay, but I just feel as though since the beginning it was lacking passion, drive, and enthusiasm. Over time, I’ve adjusted. Today I don’t feel as unhappy as I did when I started. Maybe I’ve been just getting used to the tone and enthusiasm of the class. What is interesting is that I have a very good relationship with this teacher. To improve my relationship, I had no choice but to accept his way and style of teaching. It isn’t my preferred method, but it is what it is.
A Canadian boy, apparently having endured more than one airless, unengaging class, specified categorically what makes bad teachers bad:

I think the main reason this teacher and I did not have a very strong relationship was due to his inability to captivate my interest on any level (educational, emotional, and physical). This proved a hindrance in maintaining my focus, dedication, and overall will to participate and improve. I came to this conclusion almost immediately, just from the teacher’s physical presence, tone of voice, and the way he would address the class. His clothes were out of fashion, he seemed overwhelmed and mentally absent, but most importantly, he didn’t sound passionate or energetic about the subject matter. This proved detrimental to my learning experience greatly, because, as I found with this specific course, if the teacher is uninterested, then I as a student have no reason to engage with the material.

Teachers Who Communicate Poorly

In some instances, boys’ inability to relate to teachers or to the subjects they teach bore no personal animosity whatsoever; the problem, from the boy’s standpoint, was that he could not make sense of what the teacher was saying or demonstrating. A British boy had the special grace to see the problem as a mutual responsibility, in which “both of us were trying to understand how the other worked.” He did acknowledged, however, that he “practically had to teach myself”:

A relationship with my teacher that hasn’t really favoured me was my relationship with my year-7 maths teacher. Although my teacher was a very nice man who I got on well with outside the classroom, I could never understand anything he talked about in the lesson. I struggled for many years after with my maths due to poor understanding of my teacher on my part and poor
teaching from my teacher on his part. It was a very difficult time for both me and my teacher because both of us were trying to understand how the other worked and understood. At the end of my year-7 exams, I barely got a B, which was still quite disappointing, but it took a lot of effort on my part as I practically had to teach myself, as trying to learn from my teacher was impossible. I still see my teacher around school and our relationship outside the classroom is still very easy and relaxed. However, I still doubt, if he were to teach me again, that I would still not understand anything.

A South African boy, while expressing compassion and even affection for his teacher, was nevertheless frustrated and disappointed by the fact that “she is not very good at teaching the subject” of geography:

At first, I really thought this teacher was going to help me enjoy geography once again. Geography has always been one of my most hated subjects. I have never really found an interest in HDI or landforms, and so I thought this teacher could really teach me to rekindle my love for geography (as it was fun in grade 4 doing volcanoes), sadly I was wrong. It’s not that I dislike the teacher; in fact, she is a very nice person. It’s just that she is not very good at teaching the subject. I felt as though I wasn’t able to get a firm understanding of what was going on in the course, but throughout the year, I really had no grasp of what was going on, and I had to rely on friends to explain everything to me. This teacher was also not very reliable. A
couple times I would ask to meet her for extra help, but she did not show up. She also was terrible at explaining certain things and would sometimes give up on what she was trying to say. When it came to that (which happened frequently), she would try to get me to ask a friend. She also had no experience teaching a class (or so it seemed). She couldn’t really keep a proper train of thought going. Great person, bad teacher. Although I feel bad for her, the truth is the truth and there is nothing more I can say.

Discussion

Although the boys’ negative relational accounts express a range of frustrations and critical observations, these narratives share a striking similarity to the positive ones: the assumption that the boys’ teachers, classes, and the school’s overall program are legitimate and potentially valuable to them. As indicated by many of the previous excerpts, the boys’ disappointment about and even hostility toward unsatisfactory teachers resulted from the fact that the boys’ expectations—of subject mastery, clear, lively presentation, a willingness to clarify and offer special help, to be fair, to show personal interest and concern—were not met.

Another instructive feature of the boys’ negative narratives is that even as their resistance hardened to the teachers they criticized, sometimes to the point of nonperformance and noncompliance, the boys did little to reflect on their own responsibility for the relational impasse. This reluctance perhaps reflects their position and developmental state: many school-aged boys are unable to assume relational responsibilities with adults in authority. Yet even as they misbehave and underperform, boys do not want teachers to regard them that way.

In the introductory vignette reported in Chapter One, a senior British boy addressing an audience of teachers in a daylong workshop told a touching story of how, years earlier, his anxiety that he would not be able to learn French led to a mutually hostile
relationship with a teacher who, at year’s end, gave the boy failing marks. The boy did not dispute the marks but acknowledged that he had done “garbage” work when he did any at all. When asked by the assembled teachers what he could have done to avert the failure and improve the relationship, the boy said he was not sure, because at the time “I was 13,” and added that he wished his teacher had not accepted the poor work, because by doing so the boy felt “that’s the way he thought I really was.” Unless and until relationship is established, teachers are unlikely to see boys at their best. As we have stressed, the invitation to relationship and its ongoing management is the teacher’s responsibility.

To summarize, boys’ success in school is a triadic enterprise that appears to be achieved most reliably when dyadic relational requirements are met, but these necessary relationships are unlikely to be forged in the absence of masterful teaching, including classroom management.
Chapter Eight
How Teachers Assess Relational Failure

The negative relational narratives submitted for this study by teachers revealed considerably more willingness to acknowledge the writer’s role in the breakdown than did the boys’ accounts. Like the boys, however, the teachers were generally not inclined to admit fault or assume responsibility. Few teachers expressed hostility or resentment in discussing boys with whom they had failed to relate. Instead, they attributed relational and scholastic failure to factors beyond their personal and professional control. These attributions tended to fall into six categories, bearing upon boys’ debilitating personal circumstances (e.g., poor nurture, insufficient scholastic preparation, psychological problems) or debilitating social factors (e.g., masculine conditioning, racial discrimination, poverty). These factors, it should be noted, also appeared prominently in the narratives of relational success, in which the reporting teacher recounted that they had been overcome.

Boys with Unsupportive or Difficult Families

In their stories of successful relationships, many teachers gratefully acknowledged the parental cooperation and resulting sense of partnership they experienced as they worked to meet boys’ scholastic and personal needs. In the unsuccessful accounts, by contrast, teachers described that they were at cross-purposes with parents they felt made unreasonable demands, were unsupportive of the teacher’s efforts to help, or failed to provide sufficient
nurture or supervision to enable the boy to function effectively in school.

An Australian teacher recounted the impasse he reached when a parent withdrew her support for his attempts to help her son come to terms with his inclination to bully.

This boy presents as defiant and aggressive. From the outset, he refused to do independent work. Of more concern was his continuous attempts to undermine, bully, and torment other students. He continually disrupted the class and mocked fellow students and me at every available opportunity. The relationship deteriorated as long as I held him to account for his behaviour. If I issued any consequences he would stop, throw tantrums, or storm out of the classroom. This was not helped by the fact that his mother, after a brief initial show of support for me, fully supported him in his decisions to not engage and told me (and senior members of staff) that the problem wasn’t him but my teaching, which did not inspire him. My relationship with him is now on steady ground because I have stopped consistently following up his bad behaviour. I believe that the key obstacle to a positive relationship with him is his parents’ indulgence of his decisions to misbehave/bully/antagonize and [that they] do not support me in trying to get him to learn. I fully expect that if he does not do well in his HSC, this too will be attributable to me and not his refusal to work on the tasks that I set. I have spoken to his other teachers and their experiences are identical to mine.

A U.S. Spanish teacher, like many of her colleagues internationally, expressed exasperation with parents who are quick to assign blame for boys’ problems to teachers’ shortcomings but are disinclined to see their sons’ contributions to the problem.

The relationship that did not succeed was with a student who was in a second year Spanish class three years ago. He left school in the middle of the fall of his sophomore year and returned to his
...many teachers gratefully acknowledged the parental cooperation and resulting sense of partnership they experienced as they worked to meet boys’ scholastic and personal needs.

The following British narrative expresses the frustration teachers often feel when their ability to work with boys is undercut by families. The teacher here also revealed an unmistakable sense of certainty that his analysis of the boy’s circumstances is correct and that no further measures on his or the school’s part were appropriate; like so many of the negative relational accounts, this one expresses regret that the boy was not reachable but little doubt as to the cause.

public high school. He was a weak student and did not put forth much effort. For me, the main obstacle to not having him succeed were his parents. As soon as he received a low grade, one or both of them called and went over the test and questioned why points were taken off. Not once did they question their son’s effort. This not only occurred in my class but in other classes and on the football field. The parents constantly questioned the teacher’s tests, attitudes, and for coaches, the playing time for their son. The parents told me more than once that the faculty was out to get their son and break him. It was almost an impossible task to try to reach this young man, as he would say that he needed to speak to his parents before he could respond to others or to me. When his parents decided to take him out of the school, many of us felt relieved. But I did worry that now [that] he was even closer to home in his public school, he would never learn to be independent nor cope with any setbacks on his own.
A relationship was established with a particular student upon arrival into the school as a year-8 pupil through being placed into my tutor group. The student in question was a self-conscious individual with a very poor home/family background. The relationship had evolved over the 18 months that the student was in my tutor group from year 8 to 9. As a popular young man, the student started his school career well with support from his foster parents at home and my relationship with him was very positive. Towards the end of year 8, the student moved back in with his mother, which began a downward spiral. His characteristics increasingly advocated a lack of enthusiasm for school, and his attendance began to decline rapidly. His mother and grandparents were very supportive but failed to deal with appropriate discipline at home, which prevented his attending school. At school, many special measures were put in place and taken into consideration. The boy in question was a talented footballer, and if he completed a period in school, he was allowed to participate in sporting fixtures. The student was also allowed to drop certain subjects and a reduced timetable was produced for him to help him achieve in the subjects he enjoyed and needed for further career ideas. Study periods were incorporated into his timetable and I implemented a number of one-to-one sessions and interviews. Unfortunately, by the spring term in year 9, the student had become a nonattender. After daily contact from his mother and grandmother, informing us they could not get him to come into school, a number of home visits were made by myself, his Head of Year and Deputy Head. The visits showed a short-term improvement but very quickly old habits had returned. In the meantime, support for the mother was put in place (family support worker) and the matter continued to remain the same. Eventually the boy began home tutoring and has not attended school since. It is a shame that a boy who had a good start at the school with so much potential, pressed the self-destruct button and lost all of the opportunities available to him.
An Australian teacher confessed that without the active support of a boy’s parents and his peers, his attempts to “see what is going on behind his eyes” would be futile.

I pride myself on generally being able to forge some sort of relationship with my students. I’m not sure that this response is going to be helpful, as in the end, I don’t know why I was so spectacularly unsuccessful with this boy. Not that he was particularly badly behaved or disruptive in my Year 9 English class. He just didn’t engage. I remember saying to a colleague that I look at him and “can’t see what’s going on behind his eyes.” I tried jokes. I tried one-on-one chats about his inadequate work, trying to get to the bottom of why he was handing in inadequate responses quite consistently. He wouldn’t engage. At the end of the year, he left to go to the local public high school. Classmates told me the following year that this is what he had wanted all along—his best friends were there, and he resented the demands our school placed on him. Eventually he had worn his parents down. Perhaps this is the lesson here: whatever we do to foster personal relationships with students can be overwhelmed by the other relationships in a boy’s life, with his parents, his peers, and with the institution of school itself.

Boys Who Are Unprepared to Work Hard

Whether as a result of their achievement, motivation, family circumstances, or prior school history, some boys are unresponsive to teachers’ exhortations to work harder. A mathematics teacher in New Zealand expressed his frustration at his inability to reach an underperforming boy who, despite indications that he had sufficient ability, could not be moved to work—and more specifically, to value “knowledge for its own sake.”
This young man, it seemed, was a reasonable math student through Grade 9. However, when he came into my grade-10 mathematics class, he seemed to find math to be suddenly challenging. We met initially on several occasions. He seemed to be disinterested in math. This showed in the minimal amount of homework he did. His daily quizzes were inconsistent. There was clearly an underlying ability here. However, this ability was not being utilized on a regular basis. I encouraged the young man to apply consistently the skills that produced positive results. In so doing, he could see these results on a regular basis, thus creating an eventually self-sustaining feedback loop of positive reinforcement. He accepted that this was a plan that could bring him success. However, larger issues seemed to prevail. When it came to putting his “nose to the grindstone” regularly, the student was lacking. It appeared as though there were always things he’d rather be doing than mathematics homework. Our discussions focused on this, and for a while, even revolved around a self-reward system (i.e., he can do what he really enjoys after his homework was done). It ushered in no long-term success. He seemed to feel that he could “turn on the jets” any time and pull himself from the fray. During our many meetings, countless words of positive reinforcement, parental support, this young man was one student with whom I was not developing a rapport. He simply lacked the desire for this knowledge. He openly admitted to me that knowledge was something that had to be directly applicable. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake was a waste of time and effort.

Similarly, a veteran U.S. teacher, despite repeated attempts to engage a resistant underperformer, conceded that without the student’s determination to try and to “care,” there would be no forward progress. Moreover, such refusals on students’ parts can elicit a “sense of betrayal” on teachers’ parts:

Though this school year is only half done, I have two students who are not working anywhere near their potential. I have to ask myself if there is a better way to approach them, a better way
to teach them the material. I have to ask myself if it is because they feel that I don’t care about them, have not connected with them. The second student is where my serious frustration lies. This student came to our school from a public school and has a lot of time-management and “how-to-study” issues. This student has come to our school with very high athletic prospects. In academics (or at least in my class) though, he projects an attitude of not wanting to bother with the learning. During the first semester, I went way beyond trying to reach this young man. I offered to help him before school, allowed him to redo assignments, retake quizzes and tests, and finish assignments very late. In class, I tried to be sensitive to calling on him and putting him on the spot. Before and after class, I talked to him to try to get a feel for what he thought he could get finished. Though at times, I felt that we were making some progress, overall, there was never a sense of being connected. I did not have a sense that he cared about doing well in my class. But unfortunately, I have not seen appreciable effort in my class. Though I want to be fair with him, I feel a personal sense of betrayal. To succeed as a fine man as well as a fine athlete, one also needs to be willing to buy into all that involves, on and off the court.

It is perhaps instructive that two distinctive features of the negative relational accounts were often linked: (1) the depth of feeling expressed by teachers at “losing” a boy, even years after the event, and (2) the retained conviction that, whether willed or circumstantial, the fault lay entirely within the boy or his circumstances. Even when, as in the following account from a U.S. teacher and coach, there is a germ of self-questioning (“I probably did not have the skills to handle him”), the accounts of relational failure usually find against the boy and for the approaches adopted by the teacher and the school.

Early in my career, I was the teacher and advisor of a boy who was asked to leave the school at the end of the year. I feel as though I never got through to this student, no matter what I tried. Looking back, I probably didn’t have the skills to handle
him, and he needed someone who could be much more effective. The boy signed up for my class, woodworking, so it was natural that he would be in my advisory. He was a big guy and had a reputation of not pushing himself very hard. He was a sophomore trying out for varsity football (I was one of the assistant coaches) and the prospect was good. In our initial meeting, I told him that there were going to be a lot of demands on him in the Upper School and that the stakes were higher. The boy seemed optimistic and hopeful for the year. Several weeks into school, he realized that he wasn’t making the impact in football that he had hoped. Other coaches mentioned to me that he had the size, but he wasn’t doing much with it. At the same time, school started to get harder for him. The boy’s work in my class was being poorly done. He was rushing through things and complaining to other students that he didn’t like the work. His other teachers were notifying me about his lack of effort in their classes. Trying to talk to him about woodworking, the conversation would soon spill into other problems he was having. Most of what I was trying to relate was that his effort needed to improve. The more I checked in on him, the more he seemed to dig in his heels. Before the first semester ended, the boy and I met with the director of the Upper School to try to turn him around. By the end of the year, he had several D’s on his report card, had been cited for a major cheating violation, and had used up much of his good will with other faculty members. I remember when the faculty voted that he not return, and I thought it was the right decision.
Boys Believed to Be Overmatched Academically

In addition to teachers attributing relational impasse to boys’ unwillingness to work and to try, other accounts suggested that such losses are felt to be the result of boys’ being asked to do what they could not possibly do either because of inherent inability or prior learning deficits. These attributions were alike in that they both relieved the teacher of blame or further responsibility.

Even while attributing boys’ inability to succeed to factors beyond their pedagogical reach, the teachers who narrated these episodes nonetheless expressed their continuing frustration at the resulting failure, as related in this narrative from a U.S. mathematics teacher:

I still ponder if there was something more that I should have done to help this boy. He was a kind boy with an odd sense of humor. He was a student in my homeroom class who was working far below grade level, struggling in English, mathematics, and geography. He had difficulty understanding the material in most lessons. I often taught the lesson to the class and then sat with this boy to offer him additional help; he learned best one-on-one. Writing was particularly challenging for him due to poor handwriting and difficulty expressing himself. He was always the last student to complete each task. He also struggled in mathematics. The boy did not know his basic math facts and learning new concepts did not come easy to him. During the first quarter, I shared with the boy’s parents that he was working below grade level but that I would work with him to help him improve. The parents told me that it was taking their son hours to complete his homework each night. The boy appeared very sullen in class. The mother reported that he remarked that he hated his life. Though he worked steadily during class time, the boy often ended the day with incomplete assignments. I began making arrangements for him to arrive early or stay after school to complete his work. As the school year progressed, the boy
continued to need extra time to complete most assignments. He never quite learned his multiplication facts, and he did poorly in geography as well. At the close of the year, the boy was still having difficulty in every subject area. He never quite learned his basic math facts, and writing remained a chore for him. Each Friday, the boy remained after school to complete assignments that he was unable to finish in class. Though he was ultimately able to complete all of his tasks given the extra time, this student never achieved grade-level performance. Additionally, his demeanor remained unhappy.

Sometimes the resistance boys offer teachers cannot be assigned neatly to known learning disabilities, troubled domestic circumstances, or psychological problems. Sometimes teachers experience what appears to be a simple refusal, as a U.S. teacher related in candid bewilderment:

This boy, a junior, was in my precalculus class. This course is a requirement for graduation. This boy did not take notes in my class; did not turn in his homework assignments; and did not answer any questions on the quizzes. He started putting his head down on the desk, which I did not allow. He was told that if he slept in class, he would get a detention. Basically, he did nothing in precalculus. When I attempted to talk to him about his lack of progress in my class, his attitude was, “I’m here to play football.” I spoke to the head of the upper school about the situation. She had a meeting with the boy, but this did not change his behavior. I asked him to come see me during study hall; he did not. I talked to his advisor and football coaches. They spoke to the boy; no change. I sent comments home at the mid quarter and at the end of the quarter, describing his lack of work. I had no response from the parents. I told him that if he saw me during his free period, I would help him catch up in class and that he could pass. He did not come to see [me]. After about the middle of the second quarter, I felt my hands were tied. The boy was too far behind in the material; and he made no effort to do any work. He failed for
the year. With the threat of being dismissed for the school if he did not pass precalculus in summer school, he passed the course with no trouble. I was not the summer school teacher.

Boys Believed to Be Fragile or Wounded

Teachers’ relational narratives—both positive and negative—included many examples of their facing instructional challenges posed by boys who exhibited a wide variety of special issues that range from learning deficits to past traumas. The positive narratives in Part Two documented the pleasure and satisfaction experienced by teachers when such needs were satisfyingly met. The following accounts suggest some of the frustration encountered by teachers when they find the challenges posed to be beyond their means of remediation.

An Australian housemaster, confronted by a very difficult boarder, fortified his account of the boy’s leaving the school with a number of diagnostic labels, including “dysfunctional family,” “personality disorder,” and “delusional.” In this account too there is no mention of any relational or remedial gesture on the teacher’s part, only the focus on the boy’s presumed disabilities:

Boy 2 was not in my class but was in my boarding house. Obstacles preventing an effective relationship with this boy revolved around an emerging personality disorder. His family was dysfunctional: his mother was a busy executive who had placed the boy in boarding from Year 5; his father lived overseas had

I felt my hands were tied.
had no contact with the boy; he had a grandmother, aunt, and uncle who were estranged from his mother. The boy exhibited classic bullying and attention-seeking behavior, risk-taking and delusional. On one occasion, he claimed that his laptop had been stolen from his room at night—despite the impossibility of his claim, he insisted loudly and publicly that it was the case for several weeks. A police report was made of the “theft.” Then it emerged that he had hidden the laptop because he wanted a new one. As his behavior became increasingly disengaged and aggressive, he found himself in more and more trouble, until finally he packed his bags and walked out of the school. He was 15.

An Australian teacher and her administrative colleagues determined that the discovered source of one boy’s difficulties was beyond their relational resources and that making such determinations was “the toughest part of our job”:

My first year teaching, I taught him English. He was angry, did not like women, was violent and rebellious. I tried very hard to work with him but was ineffective. He would get angry for what appeared to be no reason at either myself or a student. He would throw desks around the room and curse loudly. At one point, I thought there was a breakthrough as he left his book behind. It did not have his name on the front of it, so I had to open it up. Inside, the loose sheet of paper, was a poem on suicide. I thought he was reaching out to me. I brought this note to the attention of administration and the counselor. Unfortunately, he was beyond our help and need more serious counseling. He found his father, who had hung himself, and had not dealt with it. [The boy] left school shortly after this. It is difficult when you cannot help someone. I think that is the toughest part of our job.

Similarly, a Canadian teacher determined that she “did not have the tools at her disposal” to help a boy who would at times present himself as “an unpredictable beast.” Her difficulties in this
case were compounded by the fact that the boy’s parents were resistant to counseling and her administrators were reluctant to address the frequent obstacles the boy posed to classroom management.

I can’t even remember the child’s name but I’ll never forget him. The family had just moved into the neighbourhood and would be leaving at the end of the year. This boy was troubled, and he was trouble in the classroom and in the yard. It was a 3rd grade, split primary class with 27 students, and it was a busy place. It was an activity-based program so that the students could all work at their various levels. He seemed like a nice enough child, liked to do his work (at a below-average level), was proud of everything he accomplished in class, but he had no sense of control or empathy. Every so often, something would come over him and he became an unpredictable beast. I was not equipped to deal with him and his outbursts. Often I would have to physically remove him from our circle or from a group of children sitting at an assembly. I was forced to send him to the office on many occasions, one of which was when he raised his pencil in the air and stabbed another child in the hand. The parents were called regularly but they were not helpful when it came to their son’s social problems. When it was suggested that the boy needed psycho-educational testing (the other parents were threatening to pull their children from the class as they felt too much of my time was used for settling this boy down) the mother became fiercely protective and was adamant that she and her husband would not allow this. I tried to anticipate stressful situations to avoid the potential outbursts. I asked him to sit next to me in circles so that I could be close enough to stop him from confronting another child. I kept him very busy with appropriate activities and gave him lots of praise for acceptable behaviour. Nonetheless he continued to be disruptive and difficult and he never reached the point where he respected me enough to continuously behave properly toward his classmates. I still wonder whatever happened to that boy.
In fact, some boys may, at least for a time, be lost to those who seek to reach and teach them, and although conscientious teachers may forever wonder “what if” some alternative, untried approach might have created a working relationship, it is impossible to know with certainty. A dedicated and long-serving Canadian teacher, like many of her colleagues internationally, could conclude nothing further in her account of a failed relationship than that she had done everything thing she could.

This boy was one of the most difficult students I have ever worked with. I used every engagement technique that I have accumulated in my 30 years of being in education. I would spend one-to-one time talking with him, supervising and monitoring him, organizing him to no avail. He was reclusive, evasive, and extremely disengaged with the world. His self-esteem was almost nonexistent. His family situation placed enormous pressure on him to succeed, but this only distanced him further from school and success. Unfortunately, I was caught between demands of his parents and the needs of this lost boy. I eventually had to seek further support with both our social worker and insist that the family seek further outside support. He eventually stopped coming to school. I wanted to believe that I could assist him but the issue was much larger than I knew about. I knew that I had to move on to help others. He sought psychiatric help and eventually enrolled in an alternative school. I have heard that he is taking part-time university courses.

Although teachers are not beyond admitting misjudgment and outright mistakes, there also was evidence in some of the narratives, such as the following by a U.S. track coach, that although he may have made a particular misstep or two in response to a problematic boy, in the final analysis, he was probably in the right:
My work with this next student may ultimately evince some of the same long-term payoffs as my work with the first one, but in the short term, the disappointments were more evident. This boy’s main challenge was that his low self-esteem demanded constant attention; his valuing of the more superficial aspects of the sport (varsity letter status, running in a varsity race) stemmed in large part from his insecurity. To run in a varsity race meant validation. To earn a varsity letter brought him a status that he craved in so many ways but found difficult to gain in almost all areas of his life. On one occasion, at the conclusion of a cross-country season, I left him off of the varsity letter list. I assumed I had done the right thing; varsity letters at the time were earned by those running varsity races, and since he had not run in one that year, he would get a junior varsity letter instead. The night after our seasonal sports assembly where the letters are announced, I received a phone call from his parents, who informed me that their son was distraught over not earning a letter. I explained the protocol to them and offered to come over right then to comfort the boy. When I arrived and began speaking with him, he pointed out that he had run in a varsity race mid-season. Upon reflection, I realized I was wrong and that he should have earned a varsity letter. The next day, when I checked my records, I spoke with the boy, awarded him the letter, and then called the parents and apologized. “An honest mistake made by an honest man,” or something along those lines, was the gracious response by the father. One year later, when confronted with the challenge of whom to place in the varsity championship race, I entered a sophomore who had beaten this boy on several occasions leading up to that race, and placed the boy in the junior varsity race. Once again, he was devastated. The comment from his mother this time was that “you talk about winning not being the most important thing, but it’s clear in your actions that it is.” I had failed to connect with the boy with regard to the sport’s most important meaning. Whether the greatest obstacle was his low self-esteem, which needed a more measurable nourishing than the sport’s more esoteric, to him, meaning or the emphasis placed by his parents on those more surface-level rewards was hard for me to discern.
The Impact of Masculine Pressures

The gender-related pressures, stereotypes, and assumptions related in the project surveys operated in both directions: in boys’ responses to their teachers and in teachers’ responses to boys. Some female teachers attributed boys’ lack of receptivity to their inability to relate to women generally, as suggested by an Australian teacher:

A dismissive, misogynistic student could not cope with the prospect of having a female teacher. He spent two years making snide remarks and apparently dismissing anything that I had to say. I tried hard to give him additional information and could never convince him that what I had to say was valid. All I managed to do was ensure an excellent result for him, but the relationship remained fractured.

A U.S. biology teacher reported that she had made a special effort to assure a persistently resistant boy that she was fully a “human being,” but beyond speculating that the boy may have experienced a prior bad experience with a woman in authority, she was unable to soften his resistance or form a satisfactory relationship with him:

In contrast to the good relationships I have had with students, I think about this one boy. From day one, he was unwilling to see me as a human being. I was a teacher, yes, but never a person to him. Although most of my students would say that I am knowledgeable and caring, I am not sure that he would ever say this. He would
oppose everything that I would say or suggest to him. It could be a test grade or a homework grade. It really didn’t matter. Despite my best efforts to get to know him, he did not let me in. I lived at the school in an all-girls dorm, so knew most of the students at the small school. I gave my personal life/time/energy to the students every day of the week. Because of our close quarters, my life was very intertwined with the students. Although my dorm was a girl’s dorm, the boys were always around. This boy was too. He actually dated one of the girls in my dorm. I tried to get to know him outside of the biology classroom, but it didn’t matter. His body language told me that he had no interest in getting to know me as a person. My now ex-husband was his dorm parent. We both tried to figure out what had happened. . . . I can only imagine that it wasn’t really me but a relationship with a female that was not positive in his life. I tried to keep this boy after school to give him extra help, but he was so uncomfortable in my room that I let him go. To this day, I have wondered what else I could have done to help this young man. I did find out that only with the males on campus did he have a good relationship. I spoke to the school psychologist to get some insight—even he was stumped. It is funny, I have made such positive connections to students—boys and girls—that it is the one or two students that don’t go well that stay with me. Why is that?

A thoughtful and candid reflection from a female teacher in Canada related how the challenges she faced learning to manage an all-boys classroom were exacerbated when she was seen to have made a clear mistake—one for which at least one boy would not forgive her.

Being a first-year teacher is tantamount to being thrown into a shark tank. I’m sure everyone feels that way, but as a young female teacher at an all-boys school, this was especially true for me. Teaching this one boy was VERY difficult. He was a grade-nine student who, like me, was new to the school. He was a successful judo champion, had a great sense of humour, and quickly became
one of the most popular boys in his class. Things started out great! He seemed to enjoy my class and would participate and ask thoughtful questions. As he became more comfortable, however, he started to joke around. He also asked questions about my family, my husband, and me, and I wasn’t comfortable sharing this information with him or with any of the other boys. Consequently, I drew a hard line in the sand. I was determined to make a good impression on this new community and to show my bosses that I could command a classroom full of boys. To do so, I felt the need to take a strict approach to classroom management. This, as you can imagine, was not well received, and I often looked longingly at other female staff who could easily establish a more congenial rapport with their students. Unbelievably, come spring, this boy decided to join the track and field team that I was coaching with another colleague. During the season, his attendance was spotty, and he spent most of his time at competitions chatting up girls from other schools. My co-coach and I were considering cutting him from the team. We had been emailing back and forth about the issue. Late one night, I inadvertently sent the following message to him instead of to my colleague: “I think he needs to go. Can’t wait to deal with this tomorrow! Fun times!” Obviously the boy took this to heart. He took particular issue with the “fun times” comment. Sarcasm doesn’t translate well in black and white. Regardless, it was an email he never should have received. I had handled the situation poorly. The boy forwarded the email to my boss, his parents, and other grade-nine students. His goal was to make my life a living hell by turning all of the boys in his class against me. It worked for a while, until I addressed every class and publicly apologized to him for my mistake. Allowing the boys to see that I was human made that year a little easier. Remarkably my boss forgave me too and even recounted a similar situation to me. The email is still a sore spot. Every time I run into this boy on campus, there is always an awkward hello and we both move to pass each other quickly. I wouldn’t say I was able to improve this relationship, but I learned how important it is to connect with your students and to care about not only their academics but their
social and emotional well-being. I struggled with this task for three years. Frustratingly, I couldn’t relate to grade-nine boys! It wasn’t until I switched to teaching grade-three boys that I truly understood what it means to foster a positive classroom environment. Grade three is where I belong. I love my job!

Boys’ stereotypic masculine reactions and attitudes are not restricted to their dealings with females and sometimes also confound teaching relationships with male teachers. A U.S. teacher of literature recounted his experience of a boy he characterized as “too cool for school,” a designation applied by a number of other teachers in this study. This narrative also is notable for its clear admission that the failure to achieve relationship with a talented though resistant boy was his, the teacher’s, loss and perhaps avoidable had the teacher been able, as reported by relationally successful teachers in Section Two, to accommodate a measure of opposition.

Many years ago, I taught Bartleby (not his real name) in my required sophomore English class. I didn’t know him well when the semester began; from that vagueness forward, our relationship deteriorated. Bartleby sat in the back row of the class, participated very little, and embraced an air of disinterest, almost condescension. Were the class a 1960s movie, he would have been Jean-Paul Belmondo. On either side of him sat his friends, students who participated somewhat more in the class while also acting as buttresses, as I imagined, for his

“ I learned how important it is to connect with your students and to care about not only their academic but their social and emotional well-being. ”
disengagement. They looked to him as the source of cool energy and detachment to which they aspired. Still, he was smart. The few responses he offered in class were thoughtful and interesting, but they didn’t lead to any sustained input from Bartleby. His answers confirmed, and perhaps it was important for him to show, that he could participate substantially in class discussions but preferred not to. The tipping point of our relationship came with the responsibility of note-taking. I made it clear on day one of the semester and reinforced in a class handout that I expected students to take notes every day. This was not a discussable point. Bartleby not only abjured note-taking but also refused to own a notebook. He would come to class every day with the novel or poem or play we were discussing but nothing else. At first I would gently chide him in class: “Bartleby, please take out your notebook”; “Bartleby, you’ll do better on tests if you take notes”; “Bartleby, scholarship begins with careful note-taking”: All to no result. At the end of one class, I spoke to him in private along the same lines (“You need a notebook for class”). He offered a hazy reason for not complying and an insincere promise to follow through. He never did. I sent an academic warning note home at mid-quarter, zeroing in, to be sure, on his failure to take notes in class or even to own a notebook. Had I become obsessed? Absolutely. A day or two after his family received the warning, I asked Bartleby in class if he had yet purchased a notebook. He said “yes” and triumphantly held up a 2” by 3” assignment pad as evidence, accompanied by laughter from the other students. It was clear that, like it or not, in this hunt, I was Ahab to his white whale. What should I have done? Stopped focusing on the notebook and start focusing on the boy. I became so concerned with classroom procedures and challenges to my authority, I lost a chance to connect with a difficult but able student. The straight line we were both traveling was going to lead to a collision, not a shared journey. I can easily blame Bartleby, but, looking back, I know it was more my responsibility to help him dig out his heels rather for me to keep pushing against him. Eventually Bartleby and I closed out the semester, neither of us having budged but
both finally free to move on. Naturally, he never signed up for any elective course I taught over his next two years. Our paths never crossed again, but years later I heard that he had earned a Ph.D. in English literature.

As in the prior excerpt, a New Zealand physics teacher and rugby coach found himself engaged in a “power struggle” with a popular but resistant boy. As lines were drawn as to whether teacher or boy held more influence over the masculine peer group—the boy’s “posse”—the underlying mission of reaching and helping the boy was scuttled:

I have had a few relationships with students that have been less effective. What follows is an account of a student where I really struggled to engage him for long periods of time during 2010. It was my first year teaching at this school, and I was the new boy on the block. This boy (Year-12 student) was very much the “man about town.” He had similar interests to me—rugby, sport in general. He was likely to be in the 1st XV and this, as a Year-12 student, held some currency. I always felt that there was an uneasy, almost suspicious feeling towards me. He always gave me the impression that he knew more than me on a number of issues. I was teaching him Level 2 physics in a big class, and several of his classmates thought very highly of him, idolized him. I hadn’t taught physics to this level before and was finding the subject matter a “good” challenge. I was enjoying teaching the class, but there was a posse around this boy that made behaviour management more difficult. He was highly thought of by other staff throughout the school; he became a Prefect during 2011 and likely 1st XV captain, and I think he felt like he could do what he liked in my class as no one would believe the “newbie” that he was anything less than fantastic in physics. This boy also knew, correctly as it turned out, that he could cruise through the year and be okay in the end. His examinations during the year were poor, but his NCEA assessments (both internal and external) were better than average. It was not what he was
capable of and this was the basis for my reporting to parents and my conversations with him but his results were reasonable nonetheless. It is important to note that this class, the boy himself, or the posse around him never turned into a circus, but there was often a feeling that it was “The boy vs. the teacher” on some very basic issues such as time management, homework, completing tasks in class, and generally acceptable noise level in class. The posse would often look around to see what his reaction was to my instructions and get their cue from him. I needed to split up the posse. I did this most of the time and tried to spend some one-on-one time with each of the class to help them do better. It is difficult to do all the time in a practical subject as there is considerable movement around the class. I was always in amongst the groups physically and worked really hard to keep good established class routines. I spent time with the boy to help him with some issues he was having with the subject. I talked to him about the unhealthy relationship that was developing between him, his group of followers, and me. I explained that the trouble was, although he was going to be okay at the end of the year, many of his friends were going to struggle if their work didn’t improve. I took an interest in his rugby, but I didn’t believe he was anywhere near as good as others had told him he was for several years. I was the NZ schools’ coach at the time and I really tried to help him on a basic issue that he was particularly bad at but still he gave me the impression that he was a little above his station. I was really conscious never to take him on head to head as this is what he really wanted and his group was looking for. I removed him from class twice, something that I generally never do.

Although a clear and reliable formula to dissolve boys’ showy “macho” opposition eluded many of the writers of these narratives, a U.S. teacher became painfully aware that literally taking the matter angrily into his own hands is emphatically not the answer.
This is a terrible story. When I was first teaching, I had this student. Of the many mistakes and misjudgments I must admit, I must admit that he was difficult to look at: duck-like lips, greasy hair, acne that was not severe but enough to notice, and flat eyes, behind which much was hidden. In class, he was not interested in participating in the discussion; he was interested in disrupting it, and his technique always involved calling attention to himself. He told unwanted stories of his weekend, he made fun of other students, he made lewd comments, and he laughed at any awkwardness I showed. As a young teacher, I didn’t know many ways to try to break through. Early on, I found out a full frontal attack didn’t work. When asked a direct question about why he behaved as he did, he never responded with the truth—only with sarcasm. When I tried to find a shred in an inappropriate story about his weekend and see if I could tease anything out that might make him interested in school, he was smart enough to trounce all over my efforts. Every time he returned from the dean or principal’s office, he announced to the class that he got off scot-free, and when the dean told me that young man did not, I began to wonder whether anyone in the school could change this boy, and by extension, whether anyone could help me at my work. The climax came during a last period of the day. Our school had students pick up attendance slips each period—we left them in the door and were not supposed to be disturbed. But also an announcement list was sometimes sent out. Rick burst into my class without knocking and shouted at the top of his voice that he had announcements to read. It was rude. It was in keeping. To be short, I carried him out of the room and told him never again. The headmaster came to see me late that afternoon to tell me the boy and his father were in his office. Only by the grace of God, the patience of the head and his belief in me, and the time this occurred (many years ago) did I keep my job.
The Impact of Other Social Stressors

The impact of gender was only one social force cited by teachers as limiting their relationships with boys. A U.S. teacher and coach related with appreciation the special adjustments required of an African-American boy whose family sought a richer, safer academic experience at an elite suburban school—as well as the relational missteps that occur when teachers are unaware of their own racial assumptions and stereotypes.

It is very difficult sometimes for an inner-city boy to make the incredible transition from a dysfunctional school system and an unstable, often dangerous neighborhood to a private school campus where a large percentage of students drive expensive new cars to school every day and talk about summer homes and trips abroad. This boy, who graduated 20 years ago, was a charming, smart, athletically gifted young boy of 13 when he came to our school as a first-former. He was so endearing and energetic that he made friends fast and earned the affection of all of his teachers and coaches as soon as his first year with us commenced. Over the next six years, however, I believe he learned how to play the game of feeding upon the natural inclination of a generally all-White, well-educated, and affluent school community. His charm often encouraged some of his mentors to look the other way when he passed in a paper late or transgressed a school rule. I believe that I, as his teacher and two-sport coach (cross-country running and track) fell into this trap, and I regret that I did not mentor...
him with more firmness. I also think that, at the time, a lack of presence of African-American teachers and students on campus made this boy feel like an outsider who could be most valued by behaving like a comedian instead of being taken seriously for his clearly superior intelligence. I also blame this, in part, on a faculty that was all too willing to view him as a special “project” through whom they could assuage their baggage of “White guilt” by bending over backwards to accommodate his needs. While everyone had the best of intentions, we all succumbed to the notion that what this boy needed was the gift of unconditional acceptance and kindness rather than the gift of discipline and clear direction in life. Coming from a broken family, he attracted the good will of one of our nicest families who offered to take him into their homes. This boy was a teammate of two of their sons, so it seemed like a good idea. Unfortunately, things soon went downhill. He soon developed an air of entitlement and started to take advantage of his host family’s generosity. One Saturday night, while the parents were away, the boy took the keys to a family car and totaled it in an accident while visiting friends from his old neighborhood. Luckily, he was not hurt. Of course, this was it for his host parents, and he was asked to leave the house for good. While he did eventually graduate and went on to a prestigious local university, he had some run-ins with the law before he finally settled down and straightened out his life, by and large. While we and other independent schools have done a much better job of diversifying our student bodies more effectively, there still remains the need to understand when good intentions and kindness become a kind of unintended patronization, something that can be quite damaging at times.

The unintended and unconscious ways cultural stereotypes influence judgments about boys who struggle with class and race-based pressures were raised by other teachers who reported relational difficulties with minority students. A U.S. teacher, for example, wrote of feeling “manipulated” because of his willingness to accommodate a student who “did not have many of the resources that the other students did”:
This boy was older than all of the other kids in class. He came from a disadvantaged household and didn’t have many if not any of the resources that most of the others students had. He entered seventh grade as a new student while the rest of the class already knew each other. This kid was bright, and I was aware of this based on his performance in other classes; however, he had a sassy attitude in my class. I offered him extra help. I was available early morning, during lunch hour, and after school. I tried to understand his situation and even sympathize with it. I made lesson plans targeting his interest and gave praise whenever he participated in class. He had never taken a foreign language before. He was not interested in Spanish. He wanted to focus on disrupting the class. There was a point when I felt that he knew I was willing to go above and beyond to reach him, and he manipulated many situations. He was a resistant, noncooperative student. I felt like I was never able to reach him, but till this day I am not sure I could have got him to work and build a teacher student relationship with him.

In such stories, whether or not the teacher acknowledged it, there was always a sense of their guessing, inferring from how a boy might have been affected by social forces that were only dimly perceived and poorly understood. A South African teacher, when faced with a boy who seemed virtually uneducable—“impossible to handle”—concluded that school “may have been the least of his worries”:

This particular boy was schooled at a government, inner-city boys school and was by far the most difficult pupil that I had taught. He would sleep in class, his work was always incomplete, he did not have the required stationery and was sometimes a disruption to other pupils. He was involved in issues of theft and at one stage, threatened another pupil with a knife within the school premises. This pupil was impossible to handle—no amount of talking, advising, etc., had made a difference but it all made sense when I had met with his father. The boy’s background had obviously
shaped him into what I had experienced. His father would not take any responsibility for the boy and his acts of violence, theft, insolence, etc. In fact, I was threatened by the father and was told to “watch my back.” This boy failed and was excluded from the school. On thinking about this boy, I realised that the many hardships that he had possibly experienced (possible lack of meals, involvement in gangs, poor role-models at home) meant that this mathematics class may have been the least of his worries and hence his unresponsive behaviour.

An Australian teacher related the frustration she experienced as a result of her being assigned to teach indigenous boys at levels beyond what she believed they could possibly master. Her attempt to form relationships with such boys was not altogether futile but was severely diminished by curricular requirements she felt the boys were unable to meet.

The biggest obstacle I have faced when trying to establish a good learning relationship with a boy has been the level of academic achievement required for success. My school offers scholarships to indigenous students who frequently arrive with limited academic skills at the middle of senior secondary end of their education. It is very hard to close the gap for these boys, as time is short and the standard is so high that their skills fall short. These boys quickly become dispirited and are keen to leave the school. I am convinced that a more flexible curriculum with more hands-on subjects would
have made a difference to their achievement hopes. I tried to focus on establishing a good emotional relationship with the students, however, this frequently does not compensate for the lack of achievement they feel academically and they then give up and return home. A different curriculum and intensive cultural/educational support plus an initial long-term orientation program prior to school entry would certainly have enhanced these students’ chance of success. We need to look at what they can offer the school community rather than just what we can give them if they are to feel successful.

Discussion

Both in their contrast to the positive narratives discussed in Part Two and in the different emphases expressed by teachers and boys, these accounts of failed relationship reveal several clear patterns that point the way to improved practice.

In both positive and negative teacher narratives, teachers reported that they took special measures to address the problems and needs of resistant boys, but the positive accounts documented success with boys whose patterns of resistance and unsatisfactory performance were often parallel to those featured in the negative narratives. These successful accounts included features that might have improved the outcome of the unsuccessful ones. For example, although both positive and negative accounts revealed teachers who were willing to address student resistance by attempting to relate and otherwise remediate, the successful narratives indicated an openness to continuous reassessment. Whatever theory or analytic construct guided teachers in the successful accounts, when an approach did not seem to work, the teachers were willing to reconsider assumptions and improvise new approaches. In the negative accounts, by contrast, once the teacher’s favored remedial approach failed to achieve its intended result, there was a tendency to determine that the boy was beyond the teacher’s—or perhaps any teacher’s—capacity to
reach and to help. In such instances, teachers’ allegiances to their “interpretative framework” precluded further attempts to achieve relationship (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998).

In the negative accounts cited above, boys and teachers described relational failure in sharply contrasting ways. Although each tended to attribute the fault and cause of relational breakdown to the other, the boys dismissed their designated teachers as professionally ill equipped and/or personally unlikable, whereas teachers attributed relational failure to circumstantial factors beyond their capacity to correct: boys’ dysfunctional homes, poor nurturance, learning deficits, psychological problems, and so on. Unsurprisingly, both boys and teachers expressed a measure of personal hurt, frustration, and resentment in these failed relationships. From both the boys’ and teachers’ perspectives, offense was given and offense was taken.

Here again, there was a significant difference in the positive narratives. In the positive accounts, too, the boys often presented provocative opposition and resistance in class and were defiant about changing those behaviors when confronted. Teachers who succeeded in dissolving resistance and hostility assumed the responsibility of relationship manager. Whether from past experience or learned theory, such teachers did not expect students to assume mutual responsibility for an improved working alliance in the classroom. Teachers as relationship managers were able to convey to resistant boys that (1) they were effectively in charge, (2) they were positively concerned about the boys despite their poor performance or troublesome behavior, and that (3) they, the teachers, were confident better work and better behavior were possible—even when no such work or behavior was yet evident.

None of the foregoing should be taken to imply that the teachers who narrated relational breakdown and failure were simply limited, mistaken, and could have done better. As shown in the stories above, many expended admirable extra effort to reach difficult
boys who may well have been beyond their or their school’s capacity to reach and help. Nor certainly were the boys merely immature in finding some of their teachers badly prepared, uninterested in them and their subjects, and occasionally hurtful in their interactions with them and their classmates. In fact, as discussed earlier, boys’ confidence in their teachers’ mastery of the material they teach and of classroom management is for them a *sine qua non* of relationship.

Those points established, however, it is still promising to consider how unproductive relationships might be transformed to productive ones by teachers’ willingness to step back and reassess (1) the priority and *role* of relationship in boys’ scholastic success, and (2) how one’s disposition to assign cause to boys’ psychological, social, and other circumstantial factors may prevent relational connections that might enable boys to succeed.
PART FOUR

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELATIONAL TEACHING WITH BOYS

Chapter Nine
The Primacy of Relational Teaching with Boys

The findings of the Relational Teaching study are persuasive on several counts. The number of teachers and boys who contributed to the study, combined with the structural and cultural variety of the participating schools, make it the most extensive investigation to date of actual relational practice of boys and teachers. Moreover, as documented in the review of research and theory on relational teaching (Appendix A), the study’s findings both confirm and expand a mounting body of international research about the efficacy of
relationship in scholastic engagement and performance. Our review of this research underscores the conclusion that both teaching practice and school climate improve as a consequence of a better understanding of the relational dimension of instruction. Once again, our findings in both this and our prior study of effective pedagogy suggest that, contrary to abiding stereotypes, boys worldwide demonstrate a promising openness to relationship and a willing acceptance of their part in the learning alliance.

As an action research project, the *Relational Teaching* study has, from the start, considered how its findings can best be put into practice. Guiding the specific recommendations that follow in Chapter Ten are these overarching conclusions from our own study and our review of other relevant research:

- Counter to cultural assumptions that boys are generally resistant to schooling, the findings suggest that far from being resistant, boys indicate a remarkable acceptance of the value and necessity of their school programs. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this conclusion is found in boys’ warm appreciation for those teachers who help them to succeed. That these teachers were often distinguished by qualities of mastery and high standards underscores our sense that boys generally care to do well in school and value those who help them to realize this ambition.

- The prominence of the themes of mastery and high standards in boys’ narrative submissions reminds us that the teacher-student relationship is a *working* one, with boys hoping that teachers’ guidance, understanding, and personal commitment will enable them to transform themselves and advance their learning. Though boys often experience warm regard and deep connection to the teachers who reach them, the relationship is uniquely defined by its instrumental end, even when the relationship itself is deeply enjoyed by both.
Positive relationship typically precedes boys’ engagement with the subject matter of school lessons and other desired school outcomes, including the cessation of obstructive, resistant behavior. In their ability to overcome boys’ standing resistance to school settings and scholastic challenges, enabling boys to take on the challenging work of learning new material, positive relationships are transformative. It is this transformative role of relationship that boys gratefully described in the Teaching Boys study and that came into sharper focus in this present investigation.

These findings suggest a clear structural model of the place of the working alliance in boys’ scholastic success. That model consists of dyadic, effective exchanges between boy and teacher in service of a triadic enterprise in which boy and teacher are allied in the project of the boy’s mastery of scholastic content. Although the findings suggest strongly that the triadic enterprise—boy, teacher, subject matter—depends on the quality of the dyadic relationship, it is equally true that a positive dyadic relationship is unlikely to be formed in the absence of pedagogical mastery on the teacher’s part. Thus, in scholastic settings, positive relationships, however valuable in themselves, do not ensure success in the triadic enterprise. Nor will the triadic enterprise succeed in the absence of a positive dyadic relationship—a teacher’s subject matter and pedagogical mastery notwithstanding. The dyadic relationship, although mutually undertaken, is managed and monitored by the teacher.

Successful relationships share a number of common features, as documented and discussed in Part Two of this report. What underlies these various features are the willingness and ability of the teacher to make a relational commitment to each student, determining to reach the student until a partnership is forged, and to manage the relationship once it is established. That is, the features found to characterize successful relationships emerge from a teacher’s ability to solve the particular relational puzzles
offered by an individual student: to offer the gesture that reaches the boy, overcomes whatever hesitancy or resistance he carries into the class, and engages him in a learning partnership.

- A common element recounted by teachers who reported that they had overcome boys’ scholastic resistance by establishing better relationships was a capacity for reflexivity and continuous reassessment, a willingness to revise prior assumptions and to improvise new approaches. This capacity for reflective self-monitoring and adjustment particularly distinguished teachers who encountered strong resistance and experienced initial frustration and relational failure and yet ultimately overcame their reactions to strike a working alliance.

In live workshops with teachers, the research team experimented with different models for peer-based reflection and several lessons became clear: (1) Every teacher—master or novice—experiences relationship frustrations and snags at some point; (2) To step out of the defensive loop elicited by repeated instances of relational failure and rejection and to generate new, creative responses, teachers need the safety and support of respected peers; (3) Although each school will establish particular cultural norms for teacher self-reflection, schools in general must invest in the primacy of the relational dimension by building into their schedules sufficient opportunities for peer-based support.

“... relational facility is a developable capacity and not simply the result of innate qualities or selectively distributed ‘gifts.’
A paramount lesson from this study is that relational facility is a developable capacity and not simply the result of innate qualities or selectively distributed “gifts.” The salutary effects of applying relational gestures, including those that comprise effective pedagogy, were reported by both beginning and experienced teachers, male and female teachers, and those in a wide variety of school settings. Perhaps most instructive, however, was the finding that in a majority of cases, the relationally effective gestures were reported by teachers who had responded to a relational impasse with a new, improvised, approach. Teachers of all types are capable, upon reflection, of such improvisation, and thus, these skills can be said to be developable.

Our findings also indicate that social and cultural differences between teachers and boys do impact the relationship. The many stories submitted by both boys and teachers about the success of female teachers reaching boys and about white teachers reaching indigenous boys or boys of color, however, validate the essential conclusion that attentive and self-reflecting teachers often succeed in overcoming whatever barriers to trust and partnership may be created by such differences.

Teachers who reported relational success also took pains to note that the establishment of relationship and resulting gains in trust, confidence, and scholastic proficiency often took place over extended time: weeks, whole school terms, and in some cases in which it was structurally possible to engage students at different grade levels, a number of successive years. We identified few relational “quick fixes” in this study and none that involve serious scholastic problems or challenging resistance on the part of boys.

In their accounts of positive relationships, boys and teachers attributed relational success to the same factors. By contrast, in their narratives about negative relationships, boys and teachers assessed cause and fault in different ways. Although each in essence blamed the other for relational failure, the boys attributed
relational breakdown to: (1) The perceived inability of teachers to present course material and performance expectations in a clear, compelling way; (2) The perception of teachers as aloof, uninterested in them personally; (3) The perception of teachers as inappropriately angry, judgmental, sarcastic, and authoritarian; and (4) The perceived inability of the teachers to maintain order and to establish a civil, emotionally safe classroom climate.

Teachers, on the other hand, attributed relational failure to a variety of intractable problems boys carried with them to class, including inadequate family support, insufficient prior preparation, psychological or social pressures, and learning disorders.

However empirically verifiable these negative assessments on the part of boys and teachers may have been, once established, they served to suppress or even to terminate relational efforts on the part of those who reported them.

That boys—and all students—require teachers who are knowledgeable in their subjects and masterful in conveying them comes as no surprise, but in light of these relational findings, the urgency to hire and retain teachers who already demonstrate or are willing to cultivate relational skills is seen in high relief. On the evidence of this study and related research, boys thrive in relationship, but they will be reluctant to enter relationship with ineffective teachers. By contrast, boys enter relationships eagerly and appreciatively with teachers who, in addition to their subject matter mastery and pedagogical assurance, extend a relational invitation to a mutual, purposeful working alliance.

We propose that a promising response to the underperformance of boys in school—an international crisis to some observers who decry an “end of men” as we have known them—is clearly at hand, readily observable, and replicable in virtually any school setting. The response lies in the realization that positive relationship is the essential medium in which effective teaching and learning occur: that positive relationship precedes engagement, effort, and mastery.
The obstacle to the correction of the existing problem is that, despite a generally warm regard extended to the notion of relationship on behalf of most people involved in education, the role of relationship in learning and its practical implications are not yet sufficiently understood, cultivated, or practiced. Instead, educators have been looking in other directions and channeling enormous resources into initiatives that have borne little fruit. The core problem, as suggested by our findings, is that successful teaching and learning do not occur in a mechanistic transmission of instruction and content from teacher to student but rather in a feeling-charged relational medium created by teachers’ directive presence and resulting in a climate in which students’ engagement, effortful exertion, and ultimate mastery are mutually embraced aims. Relationship is not only conducive to those aims but necessarily precedes them: boys learn for a teacher whom they hold in particular regard.

Our study and its findings describe relational conditions in which boys can succeed in school and those in which they cannot—but there is a kind of zen-ish caveat in interpreting these findings. For although the evidence of this study suggests overwhelmingly that positive relationships result in encouraging improvement in student conduct and achievement, the improvement will prove elusive if the imperative to “be relational” is read by students—in this study, boys—as a mere stratagem to get them on track. Relationships flower into engagement and productivity only when teachers authentically value their students as valuable for their own sakes.

Finally, it is no small point to add that in their accounts of establishing successful relationships, teachers acknowledged that these were the experiences that confirmed the value and purpose of their work.
Chapter Ten
A Framework for Relational Teaching

The central finding of the *Relational Teaching* study is that how teachers relate to their students—the dyadic dimension—determines how and whether boys engage in the scholastic challenges set before them—the triadic dimension. The triadic enterprise is a *working* alliance characterized by mutual respect on the part of boy and teacher for one another and for the specified learning objectives. In establishing the dyadic relationship, the teacher serves as the relationship manager, often initiating positive momentum by applying one or more of the relational gestures discussed in the body of this report and thereafter monitoring the relationship for signs of strain and rupture. Our findings indicate strongly that the sensibilities and skills necessary for teachers to become effective relationship managers are developable, not merely personal gifts, and are likely to flourish in a scholastic climate that supports the value of relational teaching and learning.

**Practical Steps for Teachers**

Teachers first establish the basis for a working alliance in their own command of their subject and the establishment of classroom procedures and climate and then make specific relational gestures necessary to engage each boy in a learning partnership.

Teachers lay the foundation for relational success when they . . .
- Establish clear behavioral and scholastic expectations as well as a realistic assurance that students will, with their help, meet those expectations;

- Demonstrate their own mastery of the subject under study with careful preparation of compelling lessons, exercises, and assessments; and

- Create a classroom atmosphere students perceive to be fair and emotionally safe and in which the full range of boys’ developmentally appropriate expression can be voiced.

Although the boys who participated in this study brought a range of expectations, including a measure of standing resistance, to their school programs, virtually all of them accepted the premise that the courses offered to them were valuable and necessary. The boys’ relational orientation to their teachers is thus utilitarian; the necessary precondition for a working alliance is that teachers be seen as adding value to the learning endeavor.

Teachers invite boys into productive working alliance with them when they employ such relational gestures as . . .

- Reaching out to each student, improvising strategies to meet whatever particular needs become evident:
  
  - Greeting and exchanging words with each student every day;
  
  - Learning about, acknowledging, and incorporating the knowledge of boys’ out-of-class interests, achievements, and talents in day-to-day interactions;
  
  - Disclosing, strategically and where appropriate, common interests or characteristics and even aspects of their personal lives;
- Offering individual remedial help and personal counsel;

- Addressing boys’ behavioral changes from day to day;

- Noting how individual lessons and exercises are received from day to day;

- Modifying lessons and methods in response to student performance and appraisals;

- Monitoring and responding to students’ incremental progress day-to-day and week-to-week; and

- Sharing, when appropriate, personal experiences related to one’s own learning and growth.

- Demonstrating an attractive mastery of their subject matter and pedagogy and holding to admirable expectations and standards of performance:

  - Recognizing the time and effort required of their students and ensuring that their own preparation and planning are sufficient to meet the range of needs brought to class by students;

  - Investing in ongoing efforts to renew and expand teachers’ own grasp of their subjects with continuing immersion in their fields;

  - Communicating to students how they became committed to their scholastic subject;

  - Acknowledging the formative influence of their own inspiring teachers and other exemplary figures in their scholastic lives;
- Appreciating that realistic and strategic accommodations for boys’ struggles do not necessarily compromise longer-term expectations for student engagement, effort, and performance.

This inventory of relational gestures derived from this study’s findings is by no means exhaustive. It reflects the practices and contexts of a wide sampling of schools but does not preclude other effective relational gestures on the part of individual teachers in different scholastic settings.

Teachers exercise their part in the working alliance—managing the relationship, monitoring its progress day-to-day, addressing and repairing ruptures when they occur—by . . .

- Reviewing the relational status of each student on a regular basis and maintaining an awareness of relational disconnection or stress;

- Developing a habit of self-appraisal and reflection so as to revise present assumptions that do not prove helpful and to improvise new approaches to the relational challenge;

- Assuming primary responsibility when a weakening of relational connections is noticed to renew mutual understanding, repair breaches, and restore partnership; and

- Initiating problem-solving sessions with individual students in an emotionally safe climate and in a setting that is adequately “private” to avoid the possibility of public humiliation.

... the findings of this study suggest the further need to monitor relational progress. Teachers cannot wait for a boy to signal that he is drifting away and to initiate his own help-seeking.
Just as teachers are trained to monitor the scholastic progress of their students, the findings of this study suggest the further need to monitor relational progress. Teachers cannot wait for a boy to signal that he is drifting away or to initiate his own help-seeking. When signs of relational stress are noticed, teachers intervene until a working alliance can be restored and, if these efforts fall short, seek additional school resources.

In their commitment to relational effectiveness, teachers exercise continuous reassessment of their approaches, assumptions and conclusions in a reflective practice, by . . .

- Acknowledging that every teacher—master or novice—experiences relationship frustrations and snags at some point, with some boys;

- Seeking the safety and support of respected peers to review the relationship and in hopes of stepping out of the personal, defensive loop elicited by repeated instances of relational failure and rejection; and

- Soliciting the examples of colleagues who have succeeded with the boy in question, in other contexts or previous years.

As relationship managers, teachers should also be mindful of . . .

- The likely reasons for boys’ standing resistance to scholastic engagement (i.e., their prior scholastic experiences, domestic circumstances, cultural influences and prevailing attitudes);

- Boys’ relational experience with other colleagues, especially in instances in which these may offer suggestions for successful approaches; and
Central extracurricular and out-of-school developments in boys’ lives that may shed light on the observed relational stresses and offer alternative opportunities for relationship.

Rather than personalizing relational impasses, relacionally successful teachers understand that many factors bear upon a boy’s ability to participate in trusting and productive relationships. Understanding the influence of these historic and extracurricular factors may generate ideas for reaching a boy, just as successes achieved by prior teachers can suggest strategies that have succeeded in the past.

When working through problems that arise from differences of gender, culture, or race, teachers exercise cultural competence when they . . .

- Appreciate that such differences are generally unlikely to trump the student’s interest in being successful in the class and in forging an effective working partnership with the teacher;

- Consider the possibilities differences might offer to enrich rather than diminish relational possibilities and seize the experience of difference as a **mutually educative** opportunity for both student and teacher;

- Exhibit, in particular, open curiosity about a boy’s particular experience, inviting the boy to relate the experience instead of having to defend against preconceptions and generalizations; and

- Acknowledge ways the student may see himself as poorly understood and relatively isolated within the majority culture and relate sensitively and supportively to this perception, carefully self-monitoring for cultural stereotypes and preconceptions.
When dealing with difficult-to-reach boys, teachers should keep in mind that . . .

- The findings of this study suggest strongly that whereas seemingly intractable relational resistance can be overcome by attentive and relationally skillful teachers, the best efforts of teachers may fail to resolve the relational impasse in the initial rounds. In facing such challenges, committed teachers can be fortified by our finding that positive transformation in resistant boys often takes extended time, weeks and months, sometimes over the course of multiple, successive classes and over several years;

- No matter how hardened a boy’s attitude may seem or how overwhelming his circumstances may be, resistance of just this sort has been dissolved by teachers who have faced similar challenges. This finding suggests that even difficult learning, family or social challenges, manifested as disinvestment in learning, can be transformed by relational accuracy and persistence; and

- Teachers who were ultimately successful with initially resistant boys reported only positive effects from the establishment of problem-solving partnerships with boys’ parents and other mentors.

In addition to a tendency to take boys’ resistance personally, teachers also may become discouraged when their best efforts fail to achieve the desired result. Our data,
however, offer many stirring examples of boys who might not have outwardly manifested responsiveness when a teacher made special efforts to reach them but whose very lives were changed as a consequence of those efforts.

Finally, when seeking to establish relational connections with students teachers should be mindful of appropriate professional boundaries and the fact that . . .

- Relationship formation in schools takes place within the legal and cultural guidelines that govern appropriate adult-child relationships. The heightened contemporary concern about adult violations of children’s trust, including physical and sexual abuse as well as emotional manipulation, has generated a great deal of highly specific conditions that bear on how, when, and where teachers and students can interact in and outside of school. These understandable concerns are overall a heartening indication of a larger moral commitment to children’s welfare;

- These new guidelines and policies, however, also may foster an overall climate of unease and caution as educators consider the need to improve and deepen relationships between students and teachers. The caution results from the fact that exploitative adults often conceal their actual intentions within appropriate relationships; they are kind and helpful to the children they approach; they initiate contact, they listen, they make themselves available in multiple settings. Adults who intend to take advantage of children succeed because they appear to meet—and perhaps for a time, actually meet—children’s relational needs;

- The confusing fact of the matter is that relationally skillful teachers will make the same kinds of relational gestures that exploitative adults might make in their initial interactions with children. The findings of this study, however, draw a sharp distinction between relational efforts designed to forge
effective learning alliances with students and those intended to
serve adults’ own needs. Those relational gestures that succeed
with boys enable learning and can ultimately be evaluated
for their effectiveness by observable improvements in boys’
engagement, productivity, and performance;

- Thus, within the cultural and legal constraints that operate
in particular schools and countries, teachers must manage
their relationships with their students and, in cases in which a
relationship shows sign of stress or rupture, exercise creativity,
persistence, and reflexivity until an effective working alliance
can be restored. In searching for appropriate relational
strategies that might reenergize a learning partnership, teachers
can be guided by this test: Will the strategy in question help
convey to the student that the teacher is committed to him and
to his goals for learning?

The emphasis of this study on the primacy of the relational
dimension represents, in a sense, a countercultural injunction
against the over-regulation of teaching. School-aged children
are in development—works in progress. They require nurturing
relationships with their teachers as surely as they require
nurturance from their parents. The differences in the kinds of
nurturance offered by teachers from that of parents is determined
by what we have called here the triadic enterprise: the mutual
engagement of teacher and boy in a set of learning objectives.
Whatever the differences, however, the necessary and enabling
place of relationship in boys’ development is as consequential in
school as it is at home.

Practical Steps for Schools

Relationally successful teachers tend to thrive best in a school
climate that recognizes and values the significant and challenging
work of relationship-building. Schools that adapt to this reality
acknowledge the relational side of teaching—and teachers—and
accommodate its primacy at every level. School leaders can create such a climate by working toward the following goals.

Establish a schoolwide consensus on the primacy of relationship in teaching boys by . . .

- Developing and articulating a relational-teaching mission statement that is woven into job descriptions for teachers, coaches, and other staff;

- Communicating to governing boards, parents, graduates, and all constituents the school’s commitment to relational understanding and to the evidence that supports that commitment;

- Building the school’s relational commitment into hiring practices, new teacher orientation, and continuing professional development;

- Enabling each teacher to set and periodically assess relational goals and personal relational development, ideally in peer exchange or critical friend partnerships;

- Continuing to monitor and assess relational success in staff meetings and other times set aside for professional development;

- Initiating a schoolwide consideration of the structural variables that bear on productive relationships:
  - Class sizes,
  - Teachers’ course loads and student loads,
  - How daily schedules permit relational exchanges,
  - Ongoing support and assessment of teachers’ performance as student advisors, athletic coaches, and activity advisors, and
- Acknowledging the relational dimension of student progress in student assessments and school-family communications.

A philosophical commitment to the relational work of teaching and coaching must be matched by practical, structural commitments. Ideally, these commitments acknowledge the arduous challenges of relational work and foster peer support, personal reflection, and professional growth in an encouraging context.

Build a schoolwide understanding of the relationship manager role in teaching and coaching boys, by . . .

- Developing a practical policy on professional boundaries in the context of a relational commitment, distinguishing sharply between the goals of advancing students’ personal progress and teachers’ personal issues that do not contribute to such advancement;

- Providing special mentoring and peer-learning opportunities with master teachers who can share their own growth in relational facility; and

- Establishing programs for novice teachers that support and encourage relational facility.

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of the working alliance model for relational learning and offer compelling validation for the relational manager role in this model. However, boys develop the ability to repair disconnections in their relationships as they grow and mature, and our findings clearly indicate that it will fall to the helper—the teacher or coach—to monitor and manage the learning connection. To learn to maintain this role in the face of professional challenges and personal reactions lies at the very heart of relational success and requires a clear and ongoing commitment of school resources.
Establish a pastoral care system that includes staff professionals as well as a menu of trusted and effective referral services, to address the needs of especially challenging boys, by . . .

- Maintaining a student services team with clinical professionals available to consult with teachers and coaches;

- Ensuring the confidentiality of these consultations so that teachers may use them as opportunities for personal assessment and growth; and

- Closely integrating the student services program with the broader advisory and mentoring programs of the school to ensure continuity of care and common purpose.


Delta Kappan, 35-40.


Appendix A

Relational Teaching in Educational Theory

As we stated at the outset of this report, the stakes are high for the improvement of the educational engagement of boys. Fortunately, in both our previous study and in this one, we were able to identify actual classroom practices that succeed reliably with all sorts of boys. These findings augment and confirm a mounting body of international research into the place of relationship in scholastic achievement, a summary of which follows.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) represents the best measure of global educational progress. Since 2000, PISA has examined a wide range of educational outcomes, including subject-matter proficiency, among large samples of adolescent students from 20 countries. The researchers who administered these assessments increasingly attribute improved outcomes to “positive student-teacher relationships.” (OECD, 2010, p. 88) Though not groundbreaking news to anyone who works in schools, the international scope of this conclusion has prompted calls for more research into what actually composes such relationships.

Educational researchers have been arguing for years that relationships are the “developmental infrastructure” upon which a child’s school experience builds and have even outlined its contours. Pianta (1992, 1999, 2006) conducted many studies about teaching relationships. In the tradition of attachment theorists, his studies have
described the features of these relationships that researchers find to be especially important.

The key qualities of these relationships appear to be related to the ability or skill of the adult to read the child’s signals accurately, to respond contingently on the basis of these signals (e.g., to “follow the child’s lead”), to convey acceptance and emotional warmth, to offer assistance as necessary, to model regulated behavior, and to enact appropriate structures and limits for the child’s behavior. (Pianta, 1999)

Our previous study referenced this same reciprocal communication process in the concept we termed eliciting, which describes how teachers’ lessons are “chafed into being” by attentive teachers who respond to boys’ feedback.

Despite these early efforts, good teaching—including good relational teaching—has been regarded as something of a mystery. A summary of teacher effectiveness scholarship commissioned for the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality concluded that “research has not been very successful at identifying the specific teacher qualifications, characteristics and classroom practices that are most likely to improve student learning.” (Goe & Stickler, 2008, p. 1) Other studies that have attempted to link student performance to specific, quantifiable teacher variables such as qualifications or personal characteristics have concluded, “The majority of variation in teachers’ effectiveness at raising student achievement scores is due to ‘unobserved’ variables” (p. 10). In a similar vein, an earlier study titled “The Mystery of Good Teaching” (Goldhaber, 2002) concluded that 60% of schooling outcomes could be attributed to out-of-school factors (family and individual background); of the 21% attributable to teacher influences, only 3% could be explained by measurable factors such as professional training or experience. The rest was attributed to intangible factors, which underscores the limitations of this sort of research in locating the factors that influence teachers’ success or failure.
A number of recent, large-scale studies have sought to specify the factors that influence student achievement and have directed additional attention to the student-teacher relationship. New Zealand’s Hattie (2008) reviewed hundreds of meta-analyses to calculate global effect sizes for the great variety of influences on student achievement. With an average effect size of .40 across all influences, he paid particular attention to those that add value beyond this average and concluded that certain teacher mindsets—a “willingness and ability to see through the eyes of the student”—underlay many of the strategies characterized as “winners”. Among those teacher influences on achievement, teacher quality as perceived by students was found to be the most powerful factor, and teacher-student relations placed 11th on the overall list.

In Australia, Andrew Martin (2003) called attention to the relational dimension of student achievement in several studies of student motivation. Noting a difference in achievement motivation between boys and girls, he concluded that boys’ motivation appears to vary directly with the quality of the relationship with their teachers and that, perhaps counterintuitively, boys are apparently less likely to be motivated by a teacher perceived to be aversive than were their female counterparts (p. 54). In more recent work (Martin, 2012), he advocated for “connective instruction”, an approach that integrates teaching relationships with subject content and pedagogy.

The growing interest in teacher quality has led other researchers and educational policy centers in the direction of the relational dimension. The National Center for Learning and Citizenship and the Education Commission of the States in the United States has urged greater attention to “four essential dimensions of school climate” to close what they regard as a “growing gap” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009) between research and teaching practice. School relationships, including mutual support and connectedness, were included as one of these essential dimensions.
A helpful effort to integrate the different strands of research on teacher quality was offered by Rimm-Kaufman and Hamre (2010), whose comprehensive model of teacher quality begins with the premise that teachers’ behavior and interactions with students can enhance student achievement and social-emotional outcomes. The model is conceived as an interconnected pyramid that begins with inputs (e.g., teachers’ psychological attributes, personal and professional development) that contribute to teacher quality, which comprises both pedagogy and teacher-student interactions. At the top of the pyramid are the outcomes of academic achievement and social-emotional learning. According to this model, several psychological and developmental principles underlie effective teaching. The first of these, termed *developmental regulation* by the authors, reiterates that teachers operate in multiple contexts, including various school cultures and professional support structures that strongly influence how the teachers grow and adapt. The second principle, the *reciprocal direction of effects*, focuses on the dynamic relationship between teachers and students and emphasizes both the influence of students on teachers and the transformations that occur in the teacher’s own professional development as these experiences shape their relational approach.

Rimm-Kaufman and Hamre (2010) also reviewed several fields of research relevant to discussions of teacher quality, including personality. For school managers who hope to improve teacher quality, understanding the developmental and
contextual influences on teachers’ personalities can determine how well schools support their relationships with students. The second field of research has to do with the contribution made by teachers’ own relationship histories to their relational functioning. Of special note is research that has shown how different attachment outcomes predict the relational style of adults. As our research on relational pedagogy highlights the role of teachers as relationship managers, these studies have suggested that the relational styles of many teachers, forged in their own attachment histories, may require reorientation and renewal.

The Gates Foundation has dedicated its substantial resources to the question of teacher quality and launched a Measures of Effective Teaching (MET, 2010a) project in 2009 to “test new approaches to recognizing effective teaching (p. 2). Working in seven urban U.S. school districts with 3,000 teachers who agreed to have their lessons videotaped and analyzed, the MET project collected considerable test and survey data from teachers and students. In a report on early findings, the research team wrote, “The average student knows effective teaching when he or she experiences it.” (p. 5) The MET project relied for its student data on Tripod surveys developed by Ferguson (Cambridge Education, n.d.), which sampled seven features of teaching: the 7 C’s (care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer, consolidate), which characterize student reports of effective teaching. The Tripod system itself represents a “comprehensive conceptual framework that emphasizes the importance of an instructional ‘tripod; of content knowledge, pedagogical skill and relationships” (MET, 2010b, emphasis added). Though concerned primarily with evaluation systems, this project reinforces two central conclusions of our study: (1) students hold effective teaching as a core value in their relationships with teachers, and (2) the relational dimension is one of several that define teacher quality.
Bergin and Bergin (2009) offered a very instructive summary of research on the learning relationship, also based on attachment theory. Of critical importance, they found strong links between students’ attachment experiences, including with their teachers, and positive school outcomes. Using the traditional four-factor model of child attachment (secure, insecure/avoidant, insecure/resistant, and insecure/disorganized), the authors reported that 50-60% of children generally are securely attached to their parents and the rest are evenly distributed across the different forms of insecure attachment. Bergin and Bergin cited the important Minnesota study (Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983), which followed children from one year of age through the next 15 years, for its finding that attachment ratings from one age to the next are highly correlated and can predict academic as well as other critical outcomes.

In their exploration of the critical link between attachment experience and school achievement, Bergin and Bergin (2009) found that secure attachments benefit children in school in two ways: (1) by increasing their confidence to try new challenges and (2) by improving their socialization. The authors made the important point that whenever significant adults in children’s worlds become more responsive, a child’s security can improve. That is, regardless of the quality of attachment children may have with their own parents or caregivers, research supports the idea that attachments with teachers can independently affect positive adaptations in school. Applying the four-type model to student-teacher relationships, several researchers have found parallel results at all grade levels, including for high school students. Specifically in terms of its impact on academic functioning, Bergin and Bergin wrote, “In summary, evidence suggests that secure teacher-student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure teacher-student relationships.” (p. 154)
Further, Bergin and Bergin (2009) stated that the academic benefits of good learning relationships “may be particularly important for children at the bottom of the achievement gap.” (p. 162) In terms of the antecedents of good connections, researchers have found that certain teacher behaviors (e.g., warmth, responsiveness, demonstration of caring by being well-prepared and holding high expectations) produce strong attachments. Of particular concern are the 30-50% of students who come to school with insecure attachment histories and who, because of their negative behaviors, are harder for teachers to manage. As Bergin and Bergin concluded, “If teachers are able to behave in ways that disconfirm the insecure child’s internal working models, then a secure relationship can develop between teacher and child.” (p. 155)

Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) from Holland more recently reanalyzed nearly 100 studies that link teaching relationships with both student engagement and student achievement. Roorda et al. looked at studies that examined both positive and negative relationships and found associations between both kinds of relationships and engagement (medium to large effects) and achievement (small to medium). In general, the researchers determined that stronger effects were found with older students, though negative effects were stronger with younger students.

In actual, observable teaching practice, good evidence suggests that teachers have recognized the importance of good teaching relationships
for some time and have generally succeeded in establishing them, even as they lack a language and theory for talking about them. In the PISA (OECD, 2010) report, 85% of students across all of the participating countries reported that they got along well with their teachers; 67% reported that their teachers “really listen,” and 66% reported that their teachers were “interested in their well-being.” (p. 88) Yet, despite the wide-scale acknowledgement of its value, we cannot say that the relational approach is universally endorsed or practiced. The PISA study found significant variation in countries’ Index of Student-Teacher Relations, which ranged from 80% on the high end to as low as 28%. Moreover, relational practices were not uniform within countries: Variation was high in many, which suggests that even in countries where educational policy recognizes the importance of learning relationships, particular subcultures work against it. Even where successful relational practice has been identified, there is little school- or system-wide intention at work; however essential to student success, the relational element of teaching has remained a largely intuitive matter, attributed often to certain teachers’ relational gifts or relegated to the realm of common sense.

Studies of marginalized, at-risk student populations have likewise anticipated the current interest in positive teacher-student relations as a means to improve student engagement. Pomeroy (1999) interviewed a sample of socially marginalized students in Great Britain and concluded, “Relationship with teachers was the most salient and consistently described feature of the interviewees’ experience of school.” (p. 466) Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) compiled an inventory of six positive relational features that students said advanced their learning: respect for students, fairness to all students, a measure of autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support, and security.

In the same way that we can glean useful insights from the study of marginalized student populations or from large-scale studies of effective teaching, we also can benefit from the ways that
the student-teacher relationship has been characterized within different theoretical traditions. Psychoanalytic theory, as one example, has made the study of relational dynamics, including those between students and teachers, central to its educational thought. In particular, the inherent conflict between children’s basic developmental needs and the cultural imperatives of schooling have drawn scholarly attention, beginning with Freud, who discussed how developing children naturally project wishes and conflicts onto school relationships that make them quite complicated. Citing his own schooling in an essay titled, Some Reflections on Schoolboy Psychology, Freud (1955/2001) wrote, “We were from the first equally inclined to love and to hate [our teachers], to criticize and respect them.” (p. 242)

Bibby (2011) amplified this psychodynamic perspective in many ways, stressing the “impossible” conflict between “the creation, control and transmission of knowledge, and facilitating the development of the child.” (p. 16) Bantjes and Nieuwoudt (2011), in a fascinating study conducted in South Africa, applied the dynamic lens to school culture in examining one school’s handling of a major student disruption that was labeled Project Mayhem. The authors concluded that the incident could be traced to a variety of developmental and cultural influences, beginning with unbalanced relationships between particular boys and their teachers. The Tavistock Clinic, operating in England since 1920 to apply psychoanalytic findings to mental health and educational concerns, published a number of studies that relate to teacher-student relationships, including The Learning Relationship (Youell, 2006), which outlined a popular course for teachers that stressed psychodynamic concepts such as transference and countertransference in an effort to help teachers become more reflective and self-aware in the student-teacher dynamic. Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams, and Osborne (1999) used this course to examine “the emotional factors that can facilitate or hinder learning in the environment of the school.” (p. ix)
Some research has more recently provided additional support for the idea that effective relational teachers must develop the skills of self-reflection. Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) in the Netherlands conducted a review of studies of how teachers are affected by student-teacher relationships and found that the relationships demonstrate a clear reciprocal impact. The authors observed that teaching, which is regarded as “emotional labor” (Glomb & Tews, 2004), is commonly ranked as among the most stressful of occupations and that the emotional demands are the primary source of these stress-related outcomes. Spilt et al. explained these findings by referring to the transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus (1991), which holds that it is the subjective reaction to stressful events—particularly how these events affect dearly held goals—that determines the degree of their impact. In terms of teachers’ goals, Hargreaves (1998) found that relationships with students were the most important sources of enjoyment and motivation for the participants in his study; he found that conflicted or alienated relationships were a threat not only to teachers’ professional satisfaction but also to their personal sense of well-being. Hargreaves concluded, “Teachers get intrinsic rewards from close relationships with students and experience negative affect when relationships are characterized as disrespectful, conflictual or distant.” (p. 4) Teacher burnout research, along similar lines, has established that how teachers view student misbehavior correlates directly with reports of emotional exhaustion. That is, difficult student behavior itself does not necessarily lead to teacher stress but instead teachers’ perceptions of it may do so.

As a basis for interventions intended to help teachers respond creatively to difficult relationships, Spilt, et al. suggested that awareness and reframing of cognitive appraisals may be one option. As they wrote, “Analogous to parental caregivers, it is contended that teachers construct mental models of their relationships with students that represent teachers’ views, feelings, and inner world regarding their teaching.” (p. 6) In support of
this view, Chang (2009) reviewed research on teacher burnout and concluded that habitual patterns in teachers’ judgments and reactions to student behavior contribute to their experience of unpleasant emotions. For example, student disobedience “is more likely to be appraised as challenging and threatening when the teacher has internalized negative feelings about the relationship with the student.” (p. 11) Essentially, interventions to help teachers with negative affect and beliefs about students hold the potential to counteract perceptual biases that result when negative emotional states are left to fester.

Another tradition that has inspired its own body of literature and set of interventions regarding teachers’ relationships with students is the “care” approach. Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) gathered a consortium of like-minded writers and researchers to advance what they called “a new approach in educational theory.” Drawing on the philosophical tradition of Buber, Dewey, Heidegger, and others, Bingham and Sidorkin also acknowledged the educational writings of Noddings (1984, 1989), “who put relational thinking into the mainstream of American educational theory.” (p. 1) Working collaboratively for several years, the consortium composed what they termed a manifesto of relational pedagogy, based on the premise that “education is primarily about human beings who are in relation to each other.” (p. 4)

Closely related to the care tradition and representing a feminist perspective on child development and education, Gilligan (1982, 1990, 2002) argued that pressures to conform to restrictive gender norms while struggling to preserve their psychological integrity create a profound developmental conflict for both boys and girls in school, often resolved in a disconnection from their authentic selves. Several of Gilligan’s students have further explored this theme of disconnection in schooling. In the United States, Chu (2000) conducted a year-long study of primary school boys and identified two patterns in boys’ adaptations to so-called masculine pressures—internalizing and shielding—with each adaptation
resulting in different developmental outcomes. Chu’s findings emphasized the critical role played by positive relationships in strengthening boys’ ability to accommodate and adjust to these pressures. Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkey, Gidseg, and Murray (2012) conducted a study of the ways teachers respond to boys’ resistance to schooling. The researchers identified two patterns in teachers’ responses to resistant boys: those able to support boys through their resistance and those who took personal offense.

Another Gilligan student, Way (2004, 2011), conducted longitudinal studies of large samples of adolescent boys in China and the United States to determine the impact of masculine stereotypes on boys’ development. Her findings proposed that, contrary to prevailing assumptions that boys are emotionally armored and otherwise relationally impaired, deep friendships and other relational connections are normal and central in boys’ lives, enabling them to cope with a variety of mental health challenges, including depression and suicide.

Way, Gilligan, and others have pointed to a mounting convergence in the social sciences that identifies the central role of relationship in human thriving. Columnist and cultural pundit Brooks (2011) drew upon dozens of recently published studies in biology, anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience to propose a “new humanism” in which individuals are best understood when considered in the context of their relational complexes, not as individuals with defining personal traits—as “social animals.”
As such, the key to productivity and life satisfaction, including success in school, is the capacity to form sustaining relationships.

This redefinition of human nature as essentially relational and fundamentally attuned to others is central to the work of scholars around the world. Among many examples, several that bear upon education stand out. In Australia, Arnold (2005) drew upon new brain research to propose “empathic intelligence” as a necessary component of teachers’ training: “It is not just what is learned, but how experience is shaped by feelings and reflective thought which determines the nature of learning.” (p. 5) In Great Britain, Cooper (2011) argued that “profound empathy [on the part of teachers] tends to optimize learning,” (p. 59) especially if students experience it over long periods of time. Meijer, Korthagen, and Vasalos (2009) designed a program of teacher training that emphasizes “core reflection” so that prospective teachers might become self-conscious and intentional about the presence they will bring to their students. The authors saw in this presence-based approach an alternative to competency-based training, the revised aim being to “develop the necessary teaching competencies in line with who [the prospective teachers] are and what motivates them to become a teacher.” (p. 302)
Appendix B
Research Methods for Relational Teaching Study

The research design included three separate data sources, in recognition of the need to study so interpersonal and multifaceted a phenomenon and to triangulate it with data from different sources.

On-line survey

First, we designed an online survey of teachers and students in 35 schools from the same northern and southern hemisphere countries as participated in our first study. The larger sample of this second study enabled us to include a wider range of school types: large and small, affluent and state-supported, rural and urban, more and less diverse. The following is a list of the schools that administered our student and teacher surveys in 2011-2012.

- **Australia**
  - Anglican Church Grammar School
  - Christ Church Grammar School
  - The Scots College
  - The Southport School
  - Trinity Grammar School (Kew)

- **Canada**
  - Crescent School
  - Neil McNeil High School
Royal Saint George’s College
Selwyn House School
Upper Canada College

- **New Zealand**
  Hamilton Boys’ High School
  Lindisfarne College
  Palmerston North Boys’ High School

- **South Africa**
  Hilton College
  Maritzburg College
  The Ridge School
  Saint Andrew’s College
  South African College High School

- **United Kingdom**
  Loughborough Grammar School
  Poole Grammar School
  Rokeby School
  Queen Elizabeth Grammar School (Senior)
  Saint James Senior Boys’ School
  The Windsor Boys’ School

- **United States**
  The Allen Stevenson School
  Belmont Hill School
  Boys’ Latin School of Maryland
  The Buckley School
  Bridgton Academy
  Chaminade Catholic High School
  Fenn School
  Gilman School
  Saint Alban’s School
  Saint Christopher’s School
  Washington Jesuit Academy
For the teacher survey, schools were instructed to invite all teachers who worked with middle- and upper-school boys to participate. Prior to the start of the research, the project coordinator explained the project and its aims. Teachers were invited to complete the on-line survey on their own, at their own pace, over a several-week period. After a short introduction and several demographic questions, the survey consisted of two main tasks.

**INTRODUCTION**

This IBSC study attempts to clarify the ways teacher-student relationships form and how they influence boys’ learning. The study involves both a survey and a series of Relational Teaching Workshops. The survey consists of two broad questions that entail participants’ drafting narrative responses (approximately 250–500 words) to prompts that explore relationships with students.

**Task 1** asks teachers to describe a relationship with a boy in which an effective teaching relationship was achieved.

**Task 2** asks teachers to describe a relationship with a boy in which an effective teaching relationship was not achieved.

“Relationships” tend to be fluid and may seem difficult to capture in words. Begin with initial impressions of the boy—mannerisms, physical characteristics, communication style, etc. For both tasks, however, responses should incorporate how the relationship evolved over time, discuss the ways teachers and students contributed to relationship outcome, and mention factors that furthered and impeded the relationship. Be sure to include circumstances that changed relationship dynamics related to student behavior and academic performance. Teachers are also encouraged to consider the full range of students taught (i.e., resistant/cooperative student, assertive/withdrawn, high achiever-to-struggling academically, etc.).
Your responses are strictly confidential. All identifiers of individuals and schools will be removed prior to any publication.

Task 1

Describe a relationship with a boy that resulted in especially gratifying achievement or improvement. The achievement/improvement could be in either his scholastic performance or his behavior.

Guiding Questions:

- How did you establish this relationship?
- How did this relationship evolve over time? (beginning to end of school year, over a number of years, etc.)
- How did the student contribute to this relationship?
- To what do you attribute the success of this relationship?

Task 2

Describe a relationship with a student you felt you were not able to reach effectively. The boy in question could be one who you feel did not satisfactorily engage in the subject you were teaching or whose classroom behavior was unresponsive to your efforts to instruct him.

Guiding Questions:

- What were the obstacles to the achievement of an effective teaching relationship with this boy?
- What special measures, if any, did you take to cultivate or improve this relationship?
Of the 1,238 teachers who completed the survey, 35% were from the United States, 17% from Canada, 16% from New Zealand, 15% from South Africa, and 5% were the United Kingdom. Male teachers outnumbered female by 2:1 and, overall, teachers ranged evenly in experience from 1-40 years teaching.

**Teacher Surveys by Country**

![Teacher Surveys by Country Chart]

In addition to the teacher survey, the project also surveyed a sample of boys from each participating school and asked questions that parallel those asked of the teachers. For the student survey, schools were instructed to collect a sample of middle- and upper-school students and arrange for them to respond to our brief on-line questionnaire during school hours. The survey coordinator at each school explained the project to the students and invited those who were willing to participate. It was understood by the students that only research team members would see their responses and that the students’ confidentiality would be protected throughout the research process. The student survey also consisted a brief introduction and several demographic questions followed by two tasks.
This survey is part of a study conducted by an outside research team for the International Boys’ Schools Coalition. The study attempts to clarify the ways teacher-student relationships are formed and how they influence boys’ learning. The study involves both a survey and a series of workshops for teachers. There are separate surveys for teachers and for students.

The student survey consists of two broad questions that ask students to relate stories about their experience with teachers (not longer than 250 words).

**Task 1** asks you to describe a relationship with a teacher in which you were able to form an effective learning relationship.

**Task 2** asks you to describe a relationship with a teacher in which you and the teacher were unable to forge an effective learning relationship.

**Your responses will be strictly confidential.** Only the research team will review your responses. All identifiers will be removed prior to any communication back to participating schools. In your responses, you do not have to use teachers’ names; if names are used, they will be altered to protect confidentiality in any subsequent use.

**Task 1**

*Describe a positive relationship you have had with a teacher. It could be a teacher who inspired you to explore material and ideas you otherwise would not have explored. It may have been a teacher who helped you understand material you felt you were not interested in or able to master. It may have been a teacher whose manner somehow inspired you to do your best work.*
Guiding Questions:

- How did your relationship with this teacher come about?
- Did the teacher make a special effort to get to know you?
- Did you make a special effort to relate to the teacher?
- What in the teacher’s manner or approach to his or her subject matter appealed to you?

**Task 2**

*Describe a relationship with a teacher that did not work for you, one in which the teacher’s manner or approach to the material made it hard for you to maintain interest and to do your best.*

Guiding Questions:

- What were your initial impressions of this teacher? Be specific.
- Was the teacher aware of how you felt about him or her?
- What did you do to improve the relationship?
- What did the teacher do to improve the relationship?
Of the nearly 1,400 boys who completed surveys, 38% attended school in the United Kingdom, 27% in the United States, 12% in Canada, 9% in South Africa, 8% in Australia, and 7% in New Zealand.

**Student Surveys by Country**

In addition to their country of origin, student respondents described their motivation and achievement levels, as well as their racial and socioeconomic positions. 74% described themselves as either highly or well motivated, 16% described their motivation as average, 5% described it as somewhat less motivated, and 1% said they were not motivated at all.

**Motivation: How would you describe yourself as a student?**
In terms of self-reported academic achievement, 24% of student respondents described themselves as at the top, 47% said they were above average, 22% were average, and only 2% placed themselves below average.

**Achievement: How would you place your achievement level, in relation to your classmates?**

Economically, 12% of student respondents described their families as being in the top socioeconomic category, 46% said they were above average, 31% said they were average, and 5% said they came from below-average circumstances.

**Economic Status: How would you describe your family’s economic circumstances, relative to others in your community?**
In terms of ethnicity, 55% of respondents described themselves as members of the majority ethnic group; 23% from a minority; and 15% said that their ethnic status was more uncertain.

**Ethnicity:** within the context of your wider community, how would others view your ethnic heritage?

![Bar chart showing percentage of respondents](chart)

**Focus Group Interviews**

For this study, given its focus on students’ and teachers’ personal reactions and interpretations in relationships, we needed to ensure that our understanding of the survey responses accurately reflected what respondents actually meant. Therefore, we also conducted a series of focus groups with both boys and teachers. We met with separate focus groups of students and teachers from Maritzburg College in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa; from Saint James Senior Boys’ School in England; from both Upper Canada College and Neil McNeil High School in Toronto, Canada; and from Boys’ Latin School of Maryland in the United States. These data were analyzed for themes by the research team, which were then contrasted with survey themes.
Relational Teaching Workshops

Unique to the research design of this present project, the Relational Teaching Workshops were intended to provide the research team with a better understanding—specifically related to approaches to help teachers improve skills in this area—achievable only in face-to-face interactions with teachers and school leaders who are committed to mutual discovery and explication. The workshop comprised teachers and senior staff who were designated by their respective school administrators as relational teaching leaders. They also were chosen because they were committed to the project’s goals and would agree to serve as a testing ground for themes and recommendations that emerged from survey responses. The research team conducted these daylong workshops in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. At the workshops in South Africa and the United Kingdom, we included a panel of students so that teachers would have an opportunity to respond to boys and discuss issues with them.

The stated goals of the workshops were:

- To offer a live member check for survey interpretation to enable the research team to present emerging themes for additional insight and interpretative feedback and to ensure that each country’s schools participate in shaping outcomes;

- To provide an opportunity to deepen and explore teachers’ reflections about relational teaching, with goal of developing a viable school-based model for ongoing professional growth in relational pedagogy;

- To offer an experience of professional development for participants as they test emerging models for professional development in relational learning; and
To help mobilize teams from each participating school to support the work of relational teaching. The researchers hoped that participating teachers could return from the workshops better able to offer leadership and to mentor other teachers on the subject of relational work with boys.

As a data point from these workshops, systematic observations and field notes were kept by a member of the research team at each workshop. These notes were summarized and analyzed for themes. In addition, participants at each workshop also were asked to complete an evaluation form, which also was summarized and analyzed for themes.

In addition to live workshops, in lieu of travel to Australia and New Zealand, the research team conducted two conference calls with project coordinators and teachers in these countries to review and respond to the researchers’ interpretations in an early draft of the report.