

Successfully Educating Boys: What Works

(Originally titled “Unlocking Boys’ Potential”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Michael Reichert (University of Pennsylvania) ponders his international research on teachers’ and coaches’ work with challenging boys – those who are defiant, disruptive, reticent, shy, passive, depressed, or rally peers against the teacher’s purpose. Back in Renaissance times, schools were specifically designed for boys, but today cultural beliefs about masculinity clash with what it takes to “do school” successfully. Those beliefs convey that “‘real’ boys are tough and emotionally stoic, independent and autonomous, keen to compete, and eager to prove themselves in feats of risk-taking and aggression,” says Reichert. “In every school I have visited, social competition and hierarchy, bullying and maltreatment, peer policing, and the marginalization of less-preferred types of boys characterize cultures that even wonderfully committed faculty and staff cannot control.”

Many schools have responded by bringing in “boy-friendly” subject matter, kinesthetic activities, technology, and more, but the results have been disappointing. Meanwhile girls are surging ahead, creating a widening gender gap. What is to be done?

The answer is right under our noses, says Reichert – in the practices of our successful teachers. These teachers report that, “contrary to the stereotypes of young men as diffident, disruptive, or dangerous, most boys care deeply about being successful and simply long for instructors... capable of connecting personally with them and believing in them, even when they may not believe in themselves and struggle with behavior, effort, or attention problems... Relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed with boys.”

On the flip side, boys often refuse to learn from adults who don’t connect with them. When boys have a problem with an adult – a personality clash, difficulty with work, not getting their needs met – they are much more likely than girls to misbehave or check out, and they seem unable to engage in repairing the relationship. One boy said of an unhelpful teacher, “I *hate* him. I’m not doing anything in that class. He can flunk me, they can kick me out – I’m not doing anything.”

Reichert’s interviews and focus groups with teachers and students revealed seven strategies that build connections with boys. His conclusion: “It appears that every boy can be reached.”

- *Demonstrate mastery of subject matter.* “Teachers must be seen as competent, as invested in their subjects and their pedagogy, and as reliable guides for the learning journey,” says Reichert.
- *Maintain high standards.* This goes for content, quality of work, and behavior.
- *Respond to a student’s personal interest or talent.* Does the teacher know the student?
- *Share a common interest.* This can be athletic, musical, mechanical.
- *Acknowledge a common characteristic.* Sharing background, ethnicity, a problem overcome “can be a reliable, if serendipitous, relationship builder,” says Reichert.
- *Accommodate a measure of opposition.* Successful teachers don’t take oppositional behavior personally but respond with civility.
- *Be willing to reveal vulnerability.* This could take the form of a teacher apologizing to boys with whom he or she had been harsh or made a mistake.

“When these relational gestures are offered and a learning relationship is struck, teachers can make a profound difference for boys,” says Reichert. “When they develop new abilities, boys’ self-concepts shift as they come to see possibilities they could not imagine previously. Even more basic, though, is the life-altering lesson that boys absorb from teachers who demonstrate a willingness to go an extra mile on their behalf. They discover that there is help.”

“Unlocking Boys’ Potential” by Michael Reichert in *Educational Leadership*, September 2016 (Vol. 74, #1, p. 22-26), available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/2bSwTvT>; Reichert can be reached at atmichreich@comcast.net.