

What Makes Boys Form Good “Working Alliances” with Teachers?

In this intriguing *Kappan* article, Michael Reichert (Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives) and Richard Hawley (headmaster emeritus of University School in Cleveland) describe their study of thousands of secondary-school teachers and male students in six countries. Their conclusion: relationships are the key to adolescent boys’ success in school: “[R]elationship does not merely contribute to or enhance teaching and learning; relationship is the very medium through which successful teaching and learning occurs.” Even when boys enter a classroom with negative expectations and a bad attitude, specific gestures by a teacher can create a supportive relationship.

But productive teacher/student relationships aren’t random occurrences. They develop when specific teacher and classroom characteristics are present. Reichert and Hawley found remarkable consistency across schools and countries, with male and female teachers, on eight catalysts:

- *The teacher reaching out to meet a student’s needs* – This usually involves talking to the boy, and perhaps his family, outside of class and being available for personal consultation and help with schoolwork.
- *Knowing one’s subject* – “Teachers’ clear mastery of their fields was the relational *sine qua non*,” say Reichert and Hawley. “Although pursuing content mastery depends on the quality of the student/teacher relationship, a positive student/teacher relationship is unlikely to occur unless the teacher has pedagogical mastery of the subject. Thus, in school, positive relationships, however valuable in themselves, don’t ensure that the student will learn. Nor will learning occur in the absence of a positive student/teacher relationship – a teacher’s subject-matter mastery notwithstanding.”
- *High standards* – The best relationships develop with teachers who have good classroom management, maintain clear, demanding (yet attainable) standards for classroom conduct and work, and convey a belief that the student can meet the standards.
- *Responding to a student’s passions or talents* – Boys are drawn to teachers who show an interest in their athletic, musical, or other extracurricular activities.
- *Sharing a common characteristic* – This might be a defining physical feature, background, ethnicity, injury, or a problem that was overcome.
- *Not taking it personally* – Respondents told Reichert and Hawley that “teachers who can resist personalizing 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 relationships classwide... Successful teachers could operate independently of boys’ negativity or personal rejection, ultimately transforming the relationship from a negative to a positive one.”
- *Showing vulnerability* – For some teachers, opening up about a flaw or weakness was an important element in developing a relationship with a student.

What about teacher-student relationships that *didn't* work out? Reichert and Hawley found a striking difference between the reasons given by teachers and students. Teachers said they had done everything they could but concluded that a boy was unreachable because of psychological problems, learning deficits, or a family situation. Boys had quite a different narrative, attributing the breakdown to:

- The teacher's inability to present course material and expectations in a clear, compelling way;
- The teacher seeming aloof and uninterested in them personally;
- The teacher seeming inappropriately angry, judgmental, sarcastic, and authoritarian;
- The teacher being unable to maintain order and establish a civil, emotionally safe climate.

"Boys' negative accounts included little assumption of personal responsibility for the relational impasse," say Reichert and Hawley. "In their accounts of relational success, they frequently acknowledged the difficulties and challenges they presented to teachers."

"Relationships Play Primary Role in Boys' Learning" by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2013 (Vol. 94, #8, p. 49-53), www.kappanmagazine.org; Reichert can be reached at michreich@comcast.net.