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REACHING BOYS TEACHING BOYS

Strategies That Work—and Why



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Table of Contents

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[ABOUT THIS BOOK](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[THE AUTHORS](#)

[Introduction](#)

[THE TEACHING BOYS PROJECT](#)

[THE OVERARCHING FINDINGS](#)

[TEACHING FITTED TO BOYS' LIVES](#)

[PART One - Effective Lessons](#)

[PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS](#)

[ACTIVE LEARNING EMPHASIS](#)

[EFFECTIVE LESSONS: FORMATIVE OR MERELY FUN?](#)

[THE UBIQUITY OF TECHNOLOGY](#)

[CHAPTER 1 - TRANSITIVITY AT WORK](#)

[LESSON 1: "TWICE THE SPEED": A LESSON ON THE PRINCIPLES OF MOMENTUM](#)

[LESSON 2: RISING TO POWER, RULING THE WORLD: "GAMING" THE TEACHING OF LATIN AND ...](#)

[LESSON 3: TACKLING—LITERALLY—AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT IN PHYSICS: THE TRANSITIVITY ...](#)

[LESSON 4: THE TRIUMPH OF THE NERDS: THE TRANSITIVITY OF ENGAGING BOYS IN A ...](#)

LESSON 5: SUFFERING SLAVES: THE TRANSITIVITY OF
DRAMA, NOVELTY, AND SURPRISE

CHAPTER 2 - CREATING PRODUCTS

PRODUCTS THAT GO
PRODUCTS OF USE
PRODUCTS THAT ILLUSTRATE
PRODUCTS THAT ENGAGE
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 3 - LESSONS AS GAMES

GAMES FOR FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS
GAMING DIFFICULT OPERATIONS
GAMING FOR RETENTION
GAMING INQUIRY
GAMING A PROCESS
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 4 - MOTOR ACTIVITY

EMBODYING A PROCESS
EMBODYING CONCEPTS
THE GENERAL TRANSITIVITY OF MOTOR ACTIVITY
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 5 - ROLE PLAY AND PERFORMANCE

ROLE-PLAYING A PROCESS
ASSUMING REAL-WORLD ROLES
ROLE-PLAYING CRITICAL DECISIONS
EMPATHIC ROLE PLAY
BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LEARNING OF OTHERS
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 6 - OPEN INQUIRY

EXPERIENCE AND THEORY
DESTINATIONS WITHOUT MAPS
ENCOURAGING PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 7 - TEAMWORK AND COMPETITION

ENERGIZING COLLABORATION
TEAMWORK WITH A COMPETITIVE EDGE
TEAMWORK AND COMPETITION: PARTS COHERING INTO
WHOLES
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 8 - PERSONAL REALIZATION

CONSIDERATION OF OTHERS
SELF-DISCOVERY
MASCULINITY
INTRINSIC SUBJECT MATTER
PEDAGOGY DESIGNED FOR BOYS
THE BOYS RESPOND

CHAPTER 9 - NOVELTY, DRAMA, AND SURPRISE

A HINT OF DANGER
VISCERAL EXPERIENCES
CROSSING BOUNDARIES, BREAKING EXPECTATIONS
THE BOYS RESPOND

PART Two - Effective Relationships

CHAPTER 10 - A TEACHER'S PRESENCE

INVITING ENGAGEMENT
ANSWERING, "WHAT'S THE POINT?"
ELEVATING THE SUBJECT
ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIP
OFFERING CARE AND COACHING

CHAPTER 11 - A TEACHER'S KNOWLEDGE

KNOWING THEIR SUBJECTS
KNOWING BOYS
WHERE TEACHING MEETS BOY
CONCLUSION

PART Three - Lessons for Educators

CHAPTER 12 - ENHANCING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

CHAPTER 13 - ACTIVATING THE ELICITING PROCESS

THE COED CLASSROOM: WHAT BOYS AND GIRLS ELICIT
TOGETHER
THE TRANSITIVE FACTOR IN EFFECTIVE LESSONS

CHAPTER 14 - WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

FOSTERING LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS
REACHING BOYS: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PRIORITY
DOING BETTER BY ALL CHILDREN INCLUDES DOING
BETTER BY BOYS
A REMEDY AT HAND

APPENDIX - DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS FOR THE
TEACHING BOYS STUDY
REFERENCES
INDEX

More Praise for Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys

“Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys is the best, most practical book about teaching boys that I have ever read. Reading it is like visiting the classrooms of two hundred master teachers who really ‘get’ boys. Any teacher who has ever struggled to engage boys in the classroom—and isn’t that every teacher?—will want to own this book.”

—Michael Thompson, Ph.D., author, Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children, and coauthor of the New York Times best seller Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys

“Reichert and Hawley take us beyond the grim realities of the ‘boy crisis’ to reveal how some schools and teachers are winning with boys. Here, at last, is the help we have all been hoping for.”

—F. Washington Jarvis, director, Educational Leadership and Ministry Program, Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University, headmaster emeritus, The Roxbury Latin School

*“For those who believe that the full potential of boys is a distant hope, Reichert and Hawley obliterate that assumption. The authors have pulled together a commonsense and intuitive collection of strategies that work. It is a must-read for anyone who believes that all boys can excel. *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys* is just in time!”*

—Ron Walker, executive director, Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color

“This book is the best kind of writing about schools: knowledgeable about theory, but rooted in a wealth of practical experience. It offers profound insight into the way boys learn and what teachers need to do to be effective. It is about boys learning in real time.”

—Anthony R. M. Little, headmaster, Eton College, Windsor, England

*“Through highlighting teachers’ and boys’ perspectives on what works in the classroom, *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys* offers valuable insight into effective strategies and practical advice for fostering intellectual and*

emotional engagement, inspiring a love of learning, and bolstering sources of strength and support . . . among both boys and girls. This book is an important resource for educators and parents seeking to understand what students need in order to thrive, not merely survive, in school.”

—*Judy Chu, lecturer, Stanford University School of Education, co-editor, Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*

“In this book, Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley offer us solid research into what works in reaching and teaching boys in our schools. As well, they present us with the actual voices of teachers and boys—a powerful combination—and we benefit as educators from these anecdotes of successful classroom experiences, enriched by the authors’ insightful interpretations.”

—*David Booth, Ph.D., research chair in Literacy, Nipissing University, Ontario, Canada*

“One of the most effective ways of improving student outcomes is to enhance the quality of instruction. This book provides unique insights into quality teaching and learning experiences for boys based on real classrooms and real teachers. It is a tonic and guide for all those who are interested in what is best for our boys.”

—*Garth Wynne, headmaster, Christ Church Grammar School, Perth, Western Australia*

REACHING BOYS, TEACHING BOYS

Strategies That Work—and
Why

**MICHAEL REICHERT
RICHARD HAWLEY**

Foreword by Peg Tyre

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

If there is a crisis in boys' education, answers are not hard to find. Thousands of teachers around the world have found the secret to making lessons successful for boys. Despite a continuing stream of concern on the part of researchers, demographers, and cultural pundits about a crisis in boys' social development and schooling, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what is perhaps the richest pool of data: current, observable teaching practices that clearly work with boys. In schools of all types in all regions of the globe, many boys are thriving. Boys of limited, ordinary, and exceptional tested aptitude; boys of every economic strata; boys of all races and faiths—*some* of them—are appreciatively engaged and taught well every day.

A study of teachers and students conducted by a psychologist and an educator at schools in six countries—the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia—found profound similarities in successful lessons for boys. Using the testimony of teachers and boys themselves, this book offers a host of examples of approaches that have been honed by classroom practice to engage boys in learning.

In particular, the book also offers three key insights into boys' lives that shape successful approaches to teaching:

1. Boys are relational learners. Establishing an affective relationship is a precondition to successful teaching for boys.
2. Boys elicit the kinds of teaching they need. Teaching boys has a feedback dynamic in which ineffective practice disengages boys, which causes teachers to

adjust pedagogy until responsiveness and mastery improve.

3. Lessons for boys have transitivity. Successful lessons have an element that arouses and holds students' interest.

Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys introduces concerned parents, practicing teachers, and whole schools to classroom practices that have been proved worldwide to engage boys in school work, resulting in the kind of confident mastery that leads to life-long learning.

FOREWORD

Maybe you picked up this book because you work in an all-boys' school and are wondering how to engage the kids who always sit in the back row. Or maybe you are a school administrator who has noticed that boys make up the majority of behavioral problems in your division. Perhaps you work in a mixed-gender school and have spotted the ever-present achievement gap between boys and girls, especially around reading and writing. Or maybe you are a parent who is wondering just how it came to be that while you cherished your school days, your own school-aged son barely tolerates his teachers and classrooms.

For a long time, we pretended the so-called boy problem did not exist. But experts have begun reaching a consensus on a myriad ways in which boys are falling behind. In school in the United States, for example, boys are retained at twice the rate of girls, are identified as having learning disorders and attention problem at three times the rates of girls, and get more C's and D's and do less homework than girls do. With the exception of sports, boys have all but withdrawn from extracurricular activities like class plays, the school newspaper, and the marching band. And boys are more likely to drop out of school. Right now in the United States, 2.5 million more girls than boys attend college. The underachievement of boys in the United States is echoed in nearly every industrialized country where boys and girls have equal access to education.

For a long time, we blamed the failure of boys on boys themselves. But that conversation has begun to change. The phenomenon is simply too pervasive—and in these recessionary times, too expensive—to assert once again

that school-aged boys need to change to better suit our current set of educational conventions. Policymakers in the United States calculate that if 5 percent more boys completed high school and matriculated to college, the nation would save \$8 billion a year in welfare and criminal justice costs. Around the world, the costs of male underachievement—lost opportunity, dampened climate for innovation, increased poverty and joblessness—grow every day. We can—indeed we must—do better.

But how do we fix our schools in order to get and keep boys engaged? And how do we do that while taking care to ensure that the boys we teach will become young men who are fit to share a workplace, and maybe a home, with our educated, high-performing young women?

In this remarkable book, *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys*, Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley have come up with some answers. In a study sponsored by the International Boys' School Coalition, they polled nearly one thousand educators at eighteen boys' schools from Canada, England, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and the United States.

In answer to the researchers' question, "What works with boys?" successful teachers convey their best—and sometimes highly novel—solutions. Many of their techniques use activity and physical movement. Others stress hands-on learning. Competition is introduced in different ways again and again. Some of the most imaginative teachers take advantage of a boyish determination to show off to other boys by using drama or display to deepen learning. Some teachers take the boys on a journey of self-discovery or freight learning with raw emotion. There are some successful lessons that depend on surprise (one English teacher dresses in a costume to match a particular play). Some, like the geology teacher who begins the lesson by lighting up the lava on a model volcano, rely on pure fun.

The common elements are that all take as their baseline rigor, respect, and mutual trust.

The authors also asked the boys themselves what worked best for them in the classroom and have neatly organized the fifteen hundred responses they got. And the answers Reichert and Hawley elicited are moving ones. Boys want clear rules and directions. They also want relevance—a clear line drawn from their lessons to their lives or feelings. They want to be protected from public shaming (the pedagogical equivalent of DDT on a boy's wild and sometimes disorderly appetite for learning). Boys want to be scaffolded while they try and fail so they can rebound and try again. And they want to be recognized—sometimes by a quiet gesture, sometimes with great fanfare in front of their peers—when they succeed. To be successful in school, boys want connection: mentors, guides, and, most of all, caring teachers. They want what the authors call relational teaching—the ability to know and be known beyond a seating chart, a test score, or a semester grade.

To teach boys and teach them well, educators and boys seem to agree that lessons must be taught with passion. The aggregate wisdom of the teachers' lounge tells us that ideal learning environments tend to be conventional ones—a result of careful planning, heavy-handed duty classroom management, and unbending rules of decorum. The teachers and youthful respondents to Reichert and Hawley's survey remind us that to teach boys well, both teacher and student must, from time to time, feed their appetite for innovation and sometimes even risk.

There is no silver bullet in these pages that will fix the problem. But that is because the cause of male underachievement is as variable as boys themselves. Instead, quite sensibly, Reichert and Hawley offer a host of

remedies—each one wise but each as unique as the teacher or student who proposed it.

Savor these pages. Take what you can use. It is becoming clear to all of us—teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers—that schools must evolve in order to do a better job educating young men. It will not happen overnight, but it must happen.

How to start? Turn to Chapter One. You will be taking the first step on what I promise will be a fascinating journey.

June 2010

Peg Tyre

Brooklyn, New York

author of *The Trouble with Boys*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is drawn from the findings of an international study of effective teaching practices for boys undertaken on behalf of the International Boys' Schools Coalition for the sake of its member schools. Without the vision and support of the Coalition's trustees and staff, we would not have been able to amass and assess the data reported here. In particular, we thank Brad Adams, executive director of the coalition, who worked closely with us from the inception of this project. His guidance in selecting the participating schools, suggestions for how to shape and solicit the survey data, and his shrewd and thoughtful advice on how best to compose our findings were an invaluable help in reaching our conclusions. His executive assistant, Kathy Blaisdell, worked imaginatively and very hard to produce online surveys that were easily accessible for globally far-flung participating schools, and she was quick and responsive to our needs to view the survey data in a variety of ways.

We also thank Chris Brueningsen, headmaster of the Kiski School in Salts-burg, Pennsylvania, and David Armstrong, headmaster of the Landon School in Bethesda, Maryland, for welcoming us into their schools to conduct a year-long boys' audit, in the course of which we came to see the promise of an international study of effective teaching practices for boys.

Schools in session are always busy places, sometimes worryingly so. Gathering whole faculties and selected groups of students to address our questions cannot have been easy or convenient, and we are deeply grateful to the leaders of the eighteen participating schools, their faculties, and their boys for so thoughtfully responding to us—and

thus contributing to the possibility of improving the teaching of boys everywhere.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the enthusiasm and unvaryingly helpful suggestions that our editor at Jossey-Bass, Marjorie McAneny, offered us.

THE AUTHORS

Michael Reichert, Ph.D., is a psychologist who has worked with children and families in a clinical and consulting practice for the past twenty-five years. He created and directed an urban youth violence prevention program for the tristate area around Philadelphia and serves as executive director of the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives, a research collaborative comprising independent schools operating in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania. He has consulted with many organizations and schools and is on staff at the Haverford School in Pennsylvania. Reichert has spoken and published widely on the topics of boys' and girls' identity development, including strategies to make schools more responsive to developing children.

Richard Hawley, Ph.D., has worked in all-boys' schools for more than thirty years. During his tenure, he has taught English, history, economics, and philosophy, serving also in a number of administrative posts including, for seventeen years, headmaster. In 1995 he was named founding president of the International Boys' Schools Coalition. A writer of fiction, poetry, and literary nonfiction, he has published twenty books and numerous essays, articles, and poems. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *American Film*, *Commonweal*, *America*, *Orion*, and many literary anthologies. Hawley has lectured extensively at universities, schools, and conferences in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia.

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, there have been periodic eruptions of concerns that boys generally are not thriving in school. Newspapers and magazines herald a “crisis” in which boys lag significantly behind girls in all subjects, drop out of school earlier and in greater numbers than girls, comprise most of those in schools’ remedial programs, account for most of schools’ disciplinary troubles, and are far more likely than girls to be medicated for an array of learning and behavioral disorders. This gloomy picture darkens with new evidence showing a rising gap in the number of young men and women entering colleges and universities. Demographers and other social scientists are now looking at the cultural consequences of this decline in prospects for men, including their diminishing inclination to form stable relationships and marriages, their disinclination to vote and take on other civic responsibilities, and their failure to find satisfying work—or any work at all—in a challenged economy.

The public airing of these concerns has raised its share of counterclaims —some reasonable, some more strident—to the effect that the “boy crisis” reflects little more than that girls have made important and long-overdue advances in school performance and gender equity. Seen this way, any systematic attempt to improve boys’ scholastic and social position can look suspiciously like a patriarchal attempt to restore male entitlements. But to have one’s hackles raised by either the claim that boys are experiencing something like a crisis or that the “crisis” is no more than an admirable advance in feminine achievement is to enter the agonizing

polemics of what have been called the gender wars—which is far from our intention and even further from our interest.

In a more positive spirit, we set out over the course of 2007-2008 to identify what we believed might be the most concrete and most useful data bearing on boys' success in school. We were fortified in this resolve by our career-long immersion in a variety of effective schools. The hypothesis driving the study we wanted to conduct was staggeringly simple: while boys may not be thriving overall in the educational complex, some of them are. *Some* teachers in *some* schools in *some* classrooms are conducting lessons that result in boys who are deeply engaged, retain essential material, and master new skills. In effect, we hoped to identify within a larger set of teaching approaches that are not demonstrably effective with boys a subset of those that clearly are.

We were confident we could get the kinds of data we needed from teachers; prior to undertaking our international study, we had worked intensively with a few schools doing what we called a Boys' Audit. These audits are year-long immersions in the cultures of individual schools in the course of which we collect a variety of objective data—students' grades, achievement and aptitude test scores, ethnic and demographic profiles—as well as subjective data drawn from small group meetings with students, faculty, and parents. From all of it, we can offer a school a rich, data-based picture of its “boy curriculum” and of how well boys are doing.

One of the data points we have collected from teachers in the course of this work has turned out to be particularly illuminating. We asked all of the teachers to review their current practice and describe a lesson they consider especially effective with boys. Reading through these narratives, we have been struck by the recurrence of certain

elements in these reported “best lessons”: lessons that require students to get up, get out, and move; lessons in which the teacher embeds desired learning outcomes in the structure of a game; lessons that require individuals or teams of students to build, design, or create something that is judged competitively against the products of classmates; lessons that make students responsible for presenting consequential material to other students; lessons that require students to assume a role, declare and defend a position, or speak persuasively; lessons that spark and hold students’ attention by surprising them with some kind of novelty; and lessons that address something deep and personal in the boys’ lives: their sexuality, their character, their personal prospects in the world beyond school.

These features of effective teaching have not merely recurred in the faculty narratives; they appear—in remarkably similar language—in the reports of teachers of every scholastic discipline, male and female teachers, teachers of elementary school boys and high school boys, teachers of remedial classes and Advanced Placement classes. We have been struck also by the similarity in the best lessons reported by the faculty of a highly competitive college preparatory day school in Washington, D.C., to those reported by the teachers in a small western Pennsylvania boarding school with a mission to educate boys who need special support.

If these common features of successful lessons—active learning, movement, teamwork, competition, consequential performance, risk taking, surprise—cannot be attributed to the age or gender of the teacher, the type of subject taught, or the age or ability level of the student, to what can they be attributed? It did not take us long to conclude that the success of these lessons stems from their ability to engage and energize boys. In their efforts to reveal an instance of their best work with boys, these teachers had, without

intending it, provided us with tantalizing clues to what might engage boys everywhere in learning and mastery.

THE TEACHING BOYS PROJECT

We knew that if there really were teaching approaches distinctly tuned to boys' learning, we ought to be able to see them at work in a broader sample of school settings. As it happened, our interest in identifying the elements and contours of effectively teaching boys found an eager partner in the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC), an organization of over two hundred schools around the world whose mission is to identify and share best practices. Happily, this organization contracted with us to conduct a study among its member schools in the hopes of offering back to them a reflection of their expertise (for a full report, see Reichert & Hawley, 2009).

Over the course of 2007-2008, we selected eighteen member schools that we felt represented a broad global sampling as well as a substantial range of student abilities, school size, and school mission. The participating schools were in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. These schools enroll only boys, but otherwise they are far from homogeneous. Some are boarding schools, and some are day. Some are intimately small (fewer than three hundred students), and some are robustly large (a thousand or more students). Of the Southern Hemisphere schools, which represent half the sample, some require fees. Others are entirely state supported; unlike North American private schools, admission is unselective, open to all ability levels, and not all students go on to colleges and universities. Taken together, these schools represent a sample of a wide

range of boys, including those representing racial minorities and lower-income families.

It was important to us in conducting this global study that we could see the teaching of boys in the clearest possible relief—that is, in schools for boys. This by no means suggests that the effective practices we might identify would be possible and replicable only in all-boys' schools. We made no such assumption and in fact maintain that the implications of our findings for coeducational schools may well be one of the study's most fruitful by-products.

What We Asked

Teachers in the participating schools were invited to consider the elements of a successful lesson: "YOUR TASK: to narrate clearly and objectively an instructional activity that is especially, perhaps unusually, effective in heightening boys' learning."

We were gratified that so large a pool of faculty from such far-flung places clearly understood what we asked of them and responded with detailed and thoughtful accounts of their lessons. In all, we received just under a thousand faculty responses. Three-quarters of the reporting teachers were male; the rest were female. Respondents were spread fairly evenly in years of teaching experience from one to forty-four years.

We also surveyed a sample of boys at each participating school, receiving over fifteen hundred responses overall that ranged neatly across grade, achievement, motivation, and demographic differences. We asked these boys to give us their name, age, school, and grade; to rate their motivation and achievement levels; and to indicate their socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Then we gave them these instructions:

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

What We Found

A thorough reading of the submissions from all of the participating schools revealed a number of clear and distinctive features—some of them unexpected. One was the remarkable convergence of similar accounts of what teachers found effective in their teaching. As in previous research we conducted in the United States, these global accounts of effective practices did not appear to vary with structural features of the schools—such as day or boarding, large or small—or with cultural differences in the regions and nationalities represented by the participating schools. Nor did teachers’ gender, age, subject specialty, or years of teaching differentiate the nature of the lessons they found effective with their students.

After considerable analysis, we determined that all of the narrated lessons fell into one or more of thirteen categories, which we later distilled to eight. Although we identify the effective lessons under a single category, such as gaming, teamwork, competition, or created product, nearly every reported practice includes multiple elements—as when a teacher devises a game in which the boys form teams to create a product that will be judged competitively against the products of other teams.

Our early impression that there was a distinct for-boys cast to the accounts of successful lessons tended to deepen with subsequent readings and analysis. In the chapters that follow, we examine representative lessons from each of the categories, as well as student responses to the lessons.

THE OVERARCHING FINDINGS

The successful lessons reported in the following chapters share three essential features: (1) they include a “transitive” factor or factors that carry the lesson, (2) the effective features of the lesson tend to be elicited by the boys’ responsiveness, and (3) there is an establishment of a positive relationship between teacher and boy.

The boys’ and teachers’ responses together made it clear that productive student-teacher relationships were essential. When that kind of reciprocity is established, students begin to make connections, respond to stimulation, and set themselves to challenges in ways that dissolve whatever resistance to schooling a particular boy may carry with him to class. Indeed for many of the reporting students, schooling at its best is continuous with their lives at their best. In their accounts of favorite lessons, boys do not report feeling caged into classroom settings until released by a bell, nor do they grudgingly acknowledge a mere overlapping of their interests with some chance offering that day in school.

In the boys’ accounts of being emotionally and intellectually engaged by their teachers, they convey a sense of being transported, exploring new territory, and feeling newly effective, interested, and powerful. Experienced this way, school is not an institution or an imposition of any kind; it is instead the locus of a particular, often quite personal, learning relationship in which the boy is not so much a “student” as he is fully himself, only incidentally at school.

Finding 1: Effective Lessons Have a Transitive Factor

We identified a quality of transitivity running through all the categories of effective lessons. By *transitivity* we mean the capacity of some element in a lesson—an element perhaps not associated with the subject at hand—to arouse and hold student attention in a way that leads to understanding and mastery. That is, the motor activity or the adrenal boost of competing or the power of a dramatic surprise in the classroom does not merely engage or delight; it is *transitive to*—that is, attaches to and carries along—highly specific learning outcomes. For example, an English teacher’s narrative of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to his seventh-grade students included introducing them to the discipline of stage swordplay, to the extent that the boys trained, practiced, and mastered some of the conventions of swordsmanship. The activity is highly engaging on a number of counts: it is physically rigorous; it is dramatic, holding even the faint promise of danger; and it is novel. And as the teacher’s account reveals, it is also transitive to a deeper, enlivened reading of the scenes in which Tybalt slays Mercutio and Romeo slays Tybalt—and to the play as a whole. The active exertions infuse the experience of tackling a dense, rich text with an altogether different kind of energy, enthusiasm, and appreciation.

This kind of transitivity from pedagogical approach to learning outcome is clearly in evidence in the lessons set out in this book. In fact, we maintain that these transitive factors are central to the effectiveness of the lessons reported, and some forms of this transitivity may be especially effective with boys.

Finding 2: Boys Tend to Elicit the Pedagogy They Need

Another central finding of this study is that boys tend to elicit the pedagogy they need. This point was brought into high relief in the accounts of many teachers who reported that their best lesson was conceived as a result of prior failures to engage boys productively. Boys' responses to ineffective teaching—disengagement, inattention, disruption, unsatisfactory performance—are intolerable to a conscientious teacher. Such teachers adjust course content, pedagogy, and relational style until student responses improve. Improved responses over time tend to reinforce the adjustments the teacher has made. Or to put it even more simply, resistant student behavior elicits changes in teacher behavior, and when students respond positively to those changes, the teacher retains them as standard practice. From this observation, it follows that when boys succeed in revealing their learning preferences, responsive teachers adjust in a dynamic of continuous improvement.

This, of course, sounds marvelous, but why doesn't it always happen? This question lies at the very heart of the worldwide concern about boys' scholastic progress. As it happens, there are clear reasons that boys might continue to disengage and that necessary adjustments are not made.

- Boys and girls in class together may elicit different and even contradictory teacher responses, resulting in muddy, only partially successful lessons.
- State- or school-mandated protocols may not allow teachers flexibility to adjust their teaching to more effective practices.
- There may be insufficient openness on the part of teachers or whole schools to examine actual student-teacher dynamics.
- Teachers may lack the empathy or the openness to consider the variety of student responses and instead proceed according to a prescribed method or an eccentrically established personal approach.