
TEACHING BOYS

WHO STRUGGLE IN SCHOOL

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CHAPTER 1

Framing the Issue of Underachievement

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*Start painting with fresh ideas, and then let the painting replace your ideas
with its ideas.*

—Darby Bannard, artist and professor

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Where to Begin?

As is often the case when an area of inquiry appears straightforward and simple at the outset, my goal of sorting through the various claims about a crisis in boys' academic achievement proved far more challenging than I initially imagined it would be. During the first few months of exploration, it became clear that essentially two perspectives frame this very public debate, the proponents of which each cite research-based evidence yet reach vastly different and conflicting conclusions (see Figure 1.1, p. 6).

Supporters of Perspective A suggest the existence of a genuine crisis in boys' education that requires a major shift in American educational policy to overcome recent gains in girls' overall achievement (which are viewed as having been made at the expense of boys' achievement). Suggested solutions

FIGURE 1.1
Two Conflicting Perspectives

Group A*	← Perspective →	Group B**
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys' education is in crisis. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic, black, and low-socio-economic groups of boys and girls are in crisis, primarily in large metropolitan inner-city schools. There is no crisis among white middle- and upper-class boys.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By almost every benchmark, boys across the nation and in every demographic group are falling behind. 	← Evidence →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys' achievement levels have increased continuously in all subject areas over the past 30 years of national testing, with the exception of a slight but steady decrease in 12th grade reading scores since 1990, which is also seen in girls.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent gains in girls' achievements were made at the expense of boys'. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, there has been no radical or recent decline in boys' scores relative to girls' scores. There is no trend; boys score higher in some areas, girls in others. • Boys' scores increased when girls' scores increased. However, girls' scores increased more.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Today's classrooms, pedagogies, and teachers favor girls. • Boys' brains are hardwired to require a different kind of learning than girls' brains do. • This is the major reason boys are underachieving. 	← Conclusions →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is wide variation among individuals of the same sex. • It is inappropriate to draw causal links between observations about brain structure or activity and human behavior. • Boys' rates of achievement are caused by multiple factors.
<p>* Conlin, 2003; Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sax, 2005; Tyre, 2006</p>		<p>**Alloway et al., 2002; Barnett & Rivers, 2006; "Canberra," 2002; Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Eliot, 2009; Mead, 2006; Reichert & Hawley, 2006; Salomone, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Toch et al., 2006</p>

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include increasing boy-specific teaching strategies in coed classrooms (to counterbalance a presumed overabundance of girl-friendly pedagogy) or separating boys from girls altogether and offering the former instruction perceived as more friendly to boys' brains (Conlin, 2003; Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sax, 2005; Tyre, 2006). The major assumptions underlying this perspective are that boys' brains are hardwired differently than girls' brains, that all boys share this difference, and that the instructional strategies that help boys learn differ from those that help girls learn.

In contrast, supporters of Perspective B conclude that there is no unilateral crisis in boys' achievement, though they readily agree that achievement levels are at a crisis point among several subgroups of the male population (specifically Hispanic, African American, and economically deprived youth, particularly in major urban inner-city settings) (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Barnett & Rivers, 2006; "Canberra," 2002; Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Eliot, 2009; Mead, 2006; Reichert & Hawley, 2006; Salomone, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Toch et al., 2006). In response to the concern that boys' learning needs have been undercut as a result of the attention given to girls' needs, Perspective B proponents point to statistics from the Department of Education showing quite the opposite: namely, that there have been no dramatic changes in boys' achievement levels during the last 30 years and that in many areas, boys' achievement has actually increased, occasionally eclipsing that of girls.

Insights from Both Perspectives

Though clearly at odds, these two perspectives each informed my inquiry in an important way. Perspective A heightened my awareness around the issue of boys and academic underachievement. The proliferation of published books and articles on this topic and a concurrent increase of attention paid to it by other mass media suggested to me that, at some level, concern about boys' underachievement was resonating strongly with the general public as well as with educators. Some perceived "truths" expressed in these publications were connecting with people deeply enough that they were buying into claims of a crisis taking shape in our schools, despite ample evidence to the contrary. I wondered what those "truths" were.

CHAPTER 5

Pathway No. 1: Support

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*In order to discover new lands, one must be willing to lose sight of the shore
for a very long time.*

—André Gide, French writer, 1869–1951
.....

Support is the first and most essential of all the Pathways. In many ways, it defines what the Pathways to Re-Engagement model is all about, in that it addresses the overarching question of what we must provide if we want our struggling boys—many of whom have years of failure under their belts—to willingly re-engage in the learning process.

We know from developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s work (1978) that optimal learning takes place when a student is able to stretch just beyond his current level of understanding or proficiency. In this new territory lies an optimal degree of challenge that stimulates learning without overwhelming the learner. But a learner who is sensitized to the perils of this stretch by his prior lack of success may feel vulnerable. For him, this stretch into new and unknown territory—where his lack of knowledge or skill might be made painfully public—may appear both greater and more difficult than it really is. His perception is distorted.

Access Point: Trusting Relationships

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals deep inside us that something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust.... Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

—e. e. cummings

As far as the Big Four are concerned, the quality of the teacher-student relationship is the gateway to helping an underachieving boy find success in the classroom (Alloway et al., 2002; “Cannberra,” 2002; Martin, 2002; Younger & Warrington, 2005). The powerful force within the teacher-student relationship that swings open that gate is *trust*. Despite initial fears, a struggling boy may be more willing to re-engage if he trusts in two things: first, that his teacher believes he can succeed, and second, that his teacher will provide the support he needs while he is trying.

In Figure 5.1 (p. 70), boys tell us exactly what teacher qualities communicate a supportive attitude and allow this trust to develop.

“The quality of the relationships between students [and] teachers... is crucial to achieving optimal educational outcomes for all students, and this is particularly true for boys” (“Cannberra,” 2002, p. xx).

“As far as boys were concerned, motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement would go a long way if significant time, energy, and resources were directed to strategies to enhance and then maintain a good relationship between students and teachers” (Martin, 2002, p. 126).

“If a teacher met even one of these conditions in the eyes of the students, the boys tended to respond positively and to learn from and work hard for that teacher. When teachers failed to hold up their end of the bargain, the students echoed Herb Kohl’s famous book title: ‘I won’t learn from you’” (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 99).