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CHAPTER 1

Critical Issues in the Educational Lives of Boys

I'm thinking of one child in particular who was really an intelligent, sweet, good natured child, but in kindergarten somehow was labeled as a bad kid and sat at a separate table (not at group tables with other children). And I could see the self-fulfilling prophecy happening. He was being told he was a bad child, so he started to act that way. (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006, p. 81)

An elementary school teacher once expressed her worst nightmare as “a class of all boys.” Clearly, this person brought attitudes and expectations into her classroom that defined boys as troublesome and difficult to teach. How and where did she form her ideas? Did they start way back with the silly rhyme, “What are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails?” Did they come from experience in her classroom? Was she unable to “control” the boys in her class? Was she frightened by this lack of control? Did she view the energy that boys typically brought with them to school as a deterrent to learning?

BOYS ARE NOT THE PROBLEM

Research shows that, all too often, boys are viewed as “problems” in school, and that this perception begins with teachers at the preschool level. The startling findings from a national study showed that pre-kindergarten students are expelled from school at a rate more than three times more often than K–12 students; that boys are five times more likely to be expelled than girls; and that African American boys are most at-risk for expulsion (Gilliam, 2005). African American boys also are stigmatized by teachers beginning in pre-K, and that label often is passed along from teacher to teacher throughout the child's schooling. The label as a “bad

Expulsions from preschool occur three times more often than the national K–12 expulsion rate, and boys are five times as likely to be expelled as girls. African American boys are three times more likely to be expelled than white children (Gilliam, 2005).

boy” or “troublemaker” leads to isolation, exclusion from classroom activities, and, most disturbingly, is picked up by the other children and perceived as truth (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006).

Active boys are not finding encouragement in the early childhood and elementary school classroom. Although the energy that boys bring to a classroom should be viewed as an asset, young boys' physical response styles and kinetic learning behaviors are often seen as deficits (Gartrell, 2006). In too many preschools, being a perfectly normal loud, active boy just isn't acceptable (Tyre, 2008).

One boy had been doing really well in pre-K. However, when I observed him in Kindergarten, he was wild and off-task much of the time, but I think he was just bored. The teacher did not respond effectively to stimulate and engage him. Instead of finding a challenge that would interest him, she did the opposite and denied him opportunities. (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006, p. 81)

In one study, teachers said that boys were “difficult and take up more than their share of room in the classroom” (Shaffer & Gordon, 2000). The result is that, in many cases, boys are nurtured less and disciplined more (King & Gartrell, 2004).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The national study conducted by Gilliam mentioned earlier, attesting to the high expulsion rate of boys from preschool, is a clear indication that inadequate attention is being paid to critical social-emotional development. In many cases, teachers and daycare providers are not sufficiently prepared in child development to help boys learn the skills they need to become successful members of the school community—skills such as impulse control, anger control, and the ability to make friends. In the words of Comer, the lack of attention paid to social-emotional development in schools or in learning is the “critical missing link in school reform” (Comer, 2005).

The stigmatization of African American boys begins in preschool and continues through the grades. Classmates quickly pick up on the message that the “bad” boys are African American (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006).

Relational teaching is a key factor in the development of social-emotional skills. Research has shown how the relational life of a classroom shapes social-emotional development and learning, particularly for boys. In one study, a group of teachers, pre-K through high school, met monthly for 1 year to describe individual boys in their classes using the Descriptive Review process. In Descriptive Review, teachers take the time to look at something deeply using descriptive rather than evaluative language. In this particular case, the research focused on the teachers’ relationship with boys and how the notions of gender shaped those relationships. At the end of the study, teachers reported an overall shift in their relationship with the observed students; their understanding of boys had changed (Raider-Roth, 2003).

Chu (2000) has studied the centrality of relationships from the young boy’s point of view. She notes that boys are capable and desirous of relational attachments but learn early on how to mask them or fit them around stereotypical expectations. In her ethnographic studies of boys, she found evidence that relational capabilities detected at infancy carry through early childhood and into adolescence. She examined boys’ experiences of gender socialization and explored how boys negotiate their senses of self, behaviors, and relationships in light of cultural constructions of masculinity. She concludes that boys learn to anticipate how others will respond to them and accordingly modify their self-expression and styles of relating.

Relationships with caring adults in the school as well as in the home are essential to the development of a child’s positive sense of self, trust in

Boys feel angry, anxious, sad, and restricted by expectations that they adhere to a rigid set of behaviors that has become known as the “boy code” (Pollack, 1998; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999).

CHAPTER 3

Social-Emotional Development

A Critical Factor for School Success

Like most parents, the Johnsons wanted only the best for their 5-year-old son, Anthony. In their Midwest school district, grades K–3 were housed in separate buildings and parents could choose between two different types of programs. One school offered an academic approach beginning in kindergarten and the other one was more traditional early childhood, at least in kindergarten. After visiting both schools, the Johnsons chose the more academic program. Even though Anthony had only just turned 5, they thought that the academic program would give their boy a “head start.” The Johnsons reasoned that since Anthony had been in a preschool program when he was 4, he didn’t need more of “that play stuff.”

Anthony didn’t thrive in the academically oriented kindergarten. He showed signs of stress and often cried in the morning, saying he didn’t want to go to school. At a parent conference in the fall, the teacher said that it was difficult for Anthony to pay attention during work time and he often cried in frustration when he couldn’t finish a worksheet. She suggested a talk with the school psychologist. The Johnsons left the conference worried about their bright little boy, and they made an appointment to speak with the psychologist.

Dr. Greene, the psychologist, had looked over Anthony’s records in preparation for the meeting. He helped the Johnsons see that, for Anthony, a “head start” was a program that was a better fit with his developmental level. Dr. Greene said that, in his opinion, the program with less focus on academics would allow Anthony, who was one of the youngest children in his class, time and space to

develop social-emotional skills that would serve him well over the long term. He suggested a midyear move to the other K–3 school. It was a hard choice for the Johnsons to make, but they didn't want their boy to have school problems.

During morning meeting on the first day in his new kindergarten, the children sang a welcome song to Anthony. The teacher made special time in the week to find out about the things Anthony liked to do, and helped him to feel that he belonged. Within a couple of weeks, Anthony was bubbling about school, talking about new friends, and using his teacher's favorite expressions at home. Somewhat reluctantly, the Johnsons had to agree that the program that paid attention to Anthony's social-emotional needs really was the "head start" he needed.

REAL "SCHOOL READINESS"

Like Anthony's well-intentioned but misguided parents, whole school systems have veered off course by focusing on early academics at the expense of social-emotional development in the name of "school readiness." Social-emotional competence, however, is at the core of early childhood education, and is a key factor in boys' success in school. It is the most important skill young children need to acquire. In the rush to "push down" academics into the early childhood years, attention to the development of this vital skill has too often been sidelined, to the detriment of all children, but especially boys.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has defined social-emotional skill as the ability to calm oneself when angry, initiate friendships, resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute constructively to the community (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009). Goleman (1995), a cofounder of CASEL and known worldwide for his work on emotional intelligence, believes that social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-discipline, persistence, and empathy are as vital as cognitive skills measured by IQ and achievement tests. A meta-analysis of 200 research studies conducted by CASEL gives further weight to the importance of social-emotional learning in early childhood. Studies show that children who attend programs that focus on social-emotional

development do better academically, have higher rates of attendance, and are safer in school (Epstein, 2009). Many other early childhood organizations, such as NAEYC, have guidelines for social-emotional learning written into their policies (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

RELATIONAL TEACHING AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In order to create a learning environment where every child feels valued, teachers must take the time and effort to reach each child on a relational level. Raider-Roth (2005) speaks about the importance of trust in human relationships and defines four central features of a “trustworthy teaching-learning relationship”—the teacher’s capacity to be connected to her students, the teacher’s genuine interest in nurturing students’ own ideas, collaborative study on the part of teacher and students, and an environment in which trust can prevail. One of Raider-Roth’s students, an experienced kindergarten teacher, expressed her frustration about the push for early academics during a class on the Relational Context of Teaching and Learning. She stated, “I’m thinking, in the light of increasing standards-based work in the classroom and the need to justify every moment spent in the classroom with children, about how ‘relationship’ is being trivialized, marginalized” (p. 167).

Research shows that teachers in grades K–5 who provide high levels of instructional and *emotional* (emphasis added) support close the achievement gap for at-risk children (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). Many preschool and early primary grade teachers are aware that what they are mandated to do is not developmentally appropriate and lament the fact that they no longer have time for the relational aspects of teaching. It is a paradox—instead of a focus on social-emotional development and an active-learning, experiential approach that was the heart and soul of early childhood education filtering up through the grades, the more didactic, structured way of teaching typical in the mid-elementary grades has filtered downward. It is clear that when pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade children have warm, caring relationships with their teachers, these relationships foster development and learning (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, as cited in Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

One of this book’s authors has observed that teachers are under pressure in terms of academics being pushed down into kindergarten. In some kindergarten classrooms, children are now expected to read and write for more than 1 hour a day, and recess is being eliminated in many places. In