

**BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND THE ETHIC OF CARE: A PARTICIPATORY  
ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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## DEDICATION

To the twelve teachers who made up the Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade research team and donated their time and insights into helping me better understand the way they teach and work to make all students successful.

To my Friday night “Happy Hour” group, Brad, Jerry, Kristin, Lu Ann, Sarah, Naomi, Angus, Henry, Zoe, Micah, Ben, and Eliza who have supported me in friendship through this journey and provided a venue for discussing ideas about education.

To my children Angus and Zoe who patiently waited for me to finish this project.

To my parents Richard and Frances Siemens who were always interested and supportive of what I was learning.

To my sister Charlotte Siemens who helped me notice the topic of boys’ education and encouraged me to conduct research in this area.

Most importantly, to Lu Ann Zook, my partner in marriage and parenting and one of the best teachers of both boys and girls that I know.

“I give an expression of care everyday to each child. Help him realize that he is unique. I end the program by saying you’ve made this day a special day by just your being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you and I like you just the way you are. For fifteen years in this country and in Canada I have tried to present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care.”

---Fred Rogers appearing before the United States Senate (Rogers, 1969).

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## ABSTRACT

Achievement of boys in school is falling behind girls nationally and internationally. Fewer boys are enrolling in honors and advanced placement classes and fewer of them are going on to college. In fact when compared to girls, boys earn lower grades, are suspended and expelled more often, and more of them drop out. Research is inconclusive on attempts to correct the problem through the use of single-sex schools or recruitment of more male teachers. This participatory action research project created an opportunity for pre-k--12 collaboration to study the phenomenon of boys' underachievement to consider how Noddings (1984) care theory and relationships might be used to close the gap. Six themes came from the research: differences between boys and girls, care through responsive teaching, care through building relationships, power of parents, stress and pressure in education, and taking action and trust. Each of the first five themes was seen by teachers to positively or negatively influence the degree to which boys succeed in school. Teachers understand the need to take time to be seen as a person and to also take time to learn something about the student. Teachers understand the need to build and maintain relationships over time. Teachers' understanding of how they care for boys shapes their role as a teacher as they focus on building relationships in which the teacher is *present* or *in the moment* with the student and maintains high standards for academics and conduct. The sixth theme taking action and trust revealed a challenge within the district involving trust and the nature of participatory action research.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past 20 years boys' achievement in school has declined when compared to girls. Fewer boys are enrolling in honors and advanced placement classes and fewer of them are going on to college (Kleinfeld, 2009). The gender gap for men in higher education continues to widen with fewer men than women choosing to pursue and complete a college degree (Whitmire, 2010). Traditional male employment opportunities such as manufacturing continue to disappear giving way to jobs in the private sector that require a college education (Sax, 2007; Tyre, 2008). Consequently fewer men are working and earning at rates that they once did. Mortenson (2005) of the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education says that due to the changing labor market men are struggling in a variety of ways. As evidence he points to high male incarceration rates, declining male voting rates, declining male engagement in raising children, and overall problems in fulfilling civic and family responsibilities.

### **Background to the Study**

It is not surprising that fewer men are going on to college when data are examined as to how well boys are performing in K-12 public schools. It was not always this way. Boys used to outperform girls in school, but then in the 1970's, attention was given to girls and women to achieve equity in education and the work force. New civil rights laws worked to level the playing field to provide better opportunities for women to access higher education. Although there is still work to be done to equalize earning power of men and women, girls are thriving in today's public education system because of these laws (Tyre, 2008). This is encouraging news

for girls, but there is a growing population of boys who are not succeeding in school. Compared to countries like Australia and Britain, who have initiated studies at the federal level to address underachievement in boys, America has been slow to respond (Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). Studies are inconclusive or problematic on attempts to help boys through the use of single-sex schools (Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2005; Salomone, 2006) or recruitment of more male teachers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009). There is a need to find what works and what can be done to help boys who are struggling in unprecedented ways. An investigation into the relationships of students and teachers and how teachers care for boys in particular may inform better teaching practices.

### **Research Problem: Relationships and Caring for Boys in Education**

Most people assume teachers in public schools at all levels know the best practices and pedagogical means for teaching and managing all students (Aud, Hussan, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp & Tahan (2011). Teachers are trained professionals who have graduated from a college or university in a degreed program and are licensed through the state in which they teach (Hill, 2011). There is a great deal of regulation through accrediting bodies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2011) and teacher education and licensure teams within state departments of education to insure that teachers joining the work force are ready for the task at hand (KSDE, 2011). Many teachers say they became teachers for the children and correspondingly teacher education programs take it for granted that teachers know how to build relationships and care for students (Bennett, in press).

Many teachers are dedicated to teaching and they care deeply about their students; spending long hours planning, preparing, assessing and grading. They want their students to be highly successful and their actions show it. The United States public education system is designed to create an educated work force of citizens for the public good and at many levels this education system works. High school students graduate and find employment, or enroll in a vocational program or go on to college where they continue to succeed. However, a significant population of boys are not achieving and succeeding at the same level when compared to girls. Evidence can be seen in a recent proposal for President Barack Obama to create a White House Council on Boys to Men which lists the five problems facing boys and men today. A multi-partisan commission of 30 nationally known scholars and practitioners said the number one concern for men and boys is education (Farrell, 2011).

Boys are more likely to drop out, get lower grades, take less rigorous classes, and are less likely to go on to college as compared to girls (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kleinfeld, 2009). More boys than girls are referred for special education, receive more disciplinary referrals and are more likely to commit suicide than girls. These gaps exist even when ethnic groups, socio-economic groups, schools, classes and even within families are taken into consideration (Tyre, 2008). To say that boys are failing because teachers don't care is an insult to every hard working teacher who strives to make connections, build relations, and make a difference in the lives of their students. Yet, if teachers are trained professionals who use best practices and research proven methods of teaching (Hill, 2011; Aud, et al, 2011), then why are boys failing in so many ways at this time?

### **Rationale: Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the role personal connections and care play in the success of boys by looking at the complex intersection of relationship, gender, and learning. It was the aim of this qualitative study to understand the effects of caring relationships between teachers and the boys they teach. When boys earn high grades without disciplinary problems in school, are elements of care in place that promote and support success? If significant populations of boys are struggling in a variety of ways in school, is it possible that one answer may be this is due to a lack of caring relationships to support learning? Noddings' (1984) theory of care was used to address these questions. The ethical and moral purpose for this research is that to ignore boys' struggles at this time does a disservice to them and our economy. Globalization has sent many manufacturing, textile, and auto parts jobs overseas. Our knowledge economy requires more than just a high school diploma. Boys who barely make it through high school or worse, drop out, will fail to reach their potential and risk a dismal existence bathed in low self-esteem and lack of confidence (Tyre, 2008). A significant discrepancy in academic achievement between genders has larger societal implications. This imbalance will influence the quality of life for whole families. If one gender is shortchanged in education, both genders suffer (Farrell, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework: Care Theory**

Noddings' care theory was used as the theoretical framework to increase understanding of the successes and struggles of boys in school (Noddings, 1984). This feminist moral theory was chosen to study the plight of boys because care theory is an optimum tool for teasing out the

nuances of the relationships of boys and teachers and understanding how gender and identity shape those relationships. Interpersonal relationship is a powerful factor in the classroom and the ethic of care provides a way of analyzing teaching-learning relationships (Bennett, in press; Goldstein, 1999). There is a call for researchers and teachers to look closely at what happens within relational elements in the classroom because the nature of the relationship determines if students will be supported or hindered in their learning ( Hamre, & Pianta, 2005; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Raider-Roth, 2005). A mutual relationship between the teacher and student is foundational to Noddings' theory of care (Noddings, 1984).

Noddings (1984) observed that since World War II there have been huge social changes in terms of the way people work, live, communicate, entertain themselves, and the structures and nature of families, but schools have done very little to keep pace with these changes. She contrasts the schools of the 1950's that were like a second home with the schools we have today with 1,200 to 2,000 students that make it difficult for teachers to identify strangers on campus which leads to strict rules about entering the building and the need for security officers. It is no wonder students biggest complaint in these schools is that "they don't care." A survey from 1989 reported that only one third of student respondents believed that their teachers cared for them. Even though educators will say that they care a great deal for their students, the perception of two thirds of students is that their teachers do not care (Noddings, 2005).

To understand why there is a lack of connection between teachers' belief that they are caring in the classroom and the perception of students, it is helpful to understand Noddings' theoretical model of care. Noddings sees caring as a universal social process involving a state of

being fully present which she calls *engrossment*. In addition to *engrossment* there must be empathy or in other words one must be sensitive to the needs or feelings of the other person. Finally there must be an unquestionable will to act on behalf of that person. There are three parts or stages of an act of care: *engrossment*, *empathy*, and *action*. It would seem that if all three of these had occurred then this would describe a caring encounter, but according to Noddings this is not complete. In order for a caring encounter to be complete it must be received and acknowledged; there must be *reciprocity*. For example, A cares for B and A's motivation for helping B is not necessarily because doing so will benefit A. A is engrossed in the moment, is empathic to the needs of B and acts in a way that cares for B. B recognizes that A cares for B. The sum of all of these actions is what makes a caring encounter. In order to maintain and cultivate care, strings of these encounters must occur over time (Noddings, 1984, 2005; Patterson, Gordon, & Groves Price, 2008). The assumption in education is that teachers understand care but research has shown that teachers are not always aware of these complexities (Goldstein, 1998). Two major barriers for care in the classroom are couched in the current NCLB policy. The first is that care and academic achievement are mutually exclusive and the second barrier is that when care is acknowledged it is assumed that teachers and schools know how to care (Schussler & Collins, 2006). Noddings (2005) shows us a common misunderstanding we have about caring in school. Some would point to the free and reduced lunch and breakfast programs in schools and say this is an example of caring. At some level of course it is; the program provides free or subsidized meals for students, but we are not feeding these children because we care and it is the right thing to do. We are feeding these children so

that they will be able to learn and do well on the tests. If the children do well on the test then the school will make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The children are a tool in the system and we are taking care of them as such and not as human beings who we are engaged with at the level of caring Noddings defines (Noddings, 2005). Schussler (2006) posits that when care is a central valued belief in a learning community then structures to support care are more likely to exist and the perception of students in such an environment will be that they are cared for.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors are contributing to male underachievement as perceived by local educators?
2. What are the attributes of positive teacher and student relationships that support learning?
3. How do teachers' understandings of care for boys shape their role as a teacher?

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized in 5 chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the background to the study, research problem, rationale, theoretical framework and research questions. Chapter 2 will present the current context and recent research to understand the gender gap in achievement and how teacher care and teacher and student relationships play a part in the success or struggles of boys. Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results and identifies the themes of the research. Chapter 5 answers the research questions using the six themes from the research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature presents the context and background for reasons a significant population of boys are struggling in education at this time and what is being done to help them. The review of literature represents a process of learning and consideration of the topic to map a course of action and rationale for further decisions in the research process. This review is designed to invite the reader along on the journey to understand the concerns and possible solutions in the education of boys (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). The material that follows leads to speculation that the problem and solution to understanding the gender gap lies in our understanding of the ethic of care and relationships to support boys learning.

#### **Political Landscape of Research and Writing about “Boy Trouble”**

In order to understand the role caring relationships play in the success of boys this review of literature begins by describing the political context and an overview of the pertinent guiding research. The reality of boy trouble in the United States has not been easily accepted and continues to be debated by those who shape public policy (Kleinfeld, 2009; Mead, 2006; Okopny, 2008). After surveying the literature on the problems of boys in school it was evident this is a controversial political issue with feminist and conservative scholars opposed in the argument. Conservative scholar and philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers (2000) created the biggest stir with her attack on the American Association of University Women and feminist scholar Carol Gilligan. Sommers, who was quickly championed by conservatives, claimed the achievement of girls was promoted at the expense of boys (Sommers, 2000; Tyre, 2008).

Sommers' writing created backlash with feminist writers who dismissed any possible boy trouble as really being about women competing with men for jobs and the changing social realities created by Title IX and the work toward equal rights for women (Tyre, 2008). It is ironic that in studying the ethic of care and how relationships support boys learning, we find deeply polarized arguments, which have delayed scholars and policy makers from taking action sooner to help boys. More tempered research and scholarship on the boy problem in education do exist and I will look at these more moderate trends.

### **Focusing on Boys in Educational Research**

In the mid 1990's focus internationally turned toward the education of boys with research on schooling and gender taking place in several industrialized countries with a good deal of information coming from Australia and England (Francis, 2006; Younger, Warrington & Williams, 1999). The momentum directing this surge was in large part due to media coverage, pressure from parents, attention to policy, and efforts by practitioners to expose issues concerning the education of boys. It was as if, after the great push equal rights laws had given to women and girls in education, the pendulum had swung back to pay attention once again to the boys. Weaver-Hightower (2003) has done extensive analysis of writing about boys. He identified four categories of literature on boys and education: popular-rhetorical, theoretically-oriented, practice-oriented, and feminist, which will now be looked at in closer detail.

**Popular-rhetorical literature.** It is often perceived that popular rhetorical literature is the sole source identifying the problem with boys because these writings in the media and popular press are visible, loud and grab our attention with an urgency of social crises and moral

panic. According to Weaver-Hightower (2003) much of what these writings have to offer is rooted in stereotypical sex roles and the idea that “boys will be boys.” These books tend to argue that boys are victims of school due to the harmful effects of a feminized environment which creates a disadvantage. He says that these writers are often essentialist in their view believing that what they are describing has universal validity rather than as being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct. He also evaluates that these books represent anti-feminist, conservative politics and a biological determinist point of view. Examples in this category include William Pollack’s, *Real Boys* (1998), Christina Hoff Sommers’s, *The War Against Boys*(2000), and Michael Gurian’s, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* (Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Stevens., 2005; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). In spite of the weaknesses mentioned above, all three of the above titles were best sellers indicating a public interest in this topic.

**Theoretically-oriented literature focused on boys.** The theoretically oriented literature has mainly concerned itself with sampling, naming and noticing the subtle qualities of masculinity as well as its effects and origins. It is mainly qualitative and tries to answer how schools as institutions and society create and change masculinities. Often this writing ignores public concern and practitioner needs and is written in less accessible language. The focus often completely neglects the academics of the classroom (Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Topics in the theoretical literature involve multiple masculinities, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. The main ideas here are that due to social and historical variables, an unlimited number of masculinities exist; there is no one ideal masculinity (Imms, 2000). Also, within the theoretical boy literature researchers have looked at hegemony. Hegemony in boy literature is

concerned with the idea that there is a struggle for dominance among and between masculinities with winners and losers and the resulting consequences (Connell, 1996). The notion of masculinities or the masculine identity is also actively constructed and resides in institutions. The findings in this area encourage the researcher to look at more than one site to determine the nuances of masculinity as they are constructed by institution and their context such as school, the workplace, the sports arena, or other public spheres (Mills & Lingard, 1997). Understanding factors of masculinity as constructed by culture and institutions is important in understanding relationships. A large body of writing has been done using the tools of qualitative research to create ethnographic studies to examine gender. The shift away from quantitative technique is partially due to disregarding biological and sex-difference theories of how masculinity is formed. Books such as, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ferguson, 2001) and *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (Thorne, 1993) have looked at the micro-level such as playgrounds and classrooms to search for the construction of masculinity, but also there are researchers looking at the macro-level to see how masculinity is formed around larger social processes. Examples of larger social processes include changes in the United States of long-term career options with the movement of jobs in manufacturing overseas, causing turmoil in the labor market in the United States and giving way to the need for job training for men whose work had previously been secure for a lifetime. Pressures of race-relations as documented in Foley's ethnographic study, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas* which looks how race, class and gender hierarchies are transformed and reproduced along the Texas-Mexico border (Foley, 1990; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Understanding theoretically-oriented material

may develop educator capacity for building relationships, but the delivery of information must be accessible.

**Practice-oriented.** Practice oriented literature comes in many forms and through many subjects including things like anti-bullying tactics which became a major concern following school shootings at Columbine High School and other schools, to writing about how to make adequate yearly progress by raising the test scores of boys (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Here is a summary of the main pedagogy and program ideas in the practice oriented literature:

(a) suggesting whole-school approaches rather than isolated programs; (b) considering carefully the gender of the teachers conducting programs; (c) training teachers to teach boys, despite obstacles and discouragement; (d) providing reasons for boys to change; (e) creating respectful non-blaming approaches to working with boys; (f) attending to the gendering of textbooks and materials; and (g) using critical literacy to teach boys about gender and its construction through texts. (Weaver-Hightower, 2003 p. 483).

The essence of this list is centered in the interpersonal relationships of the classroom. Writing in this category values the importance of interpersonal engagement with student and teacher. Weaknesses of this category are that it has overly simple quick fix approaches and is under theorized. These how-to books also usually fail to address feminist concerns about funding and the question “Which boys?” Not all boys are failing (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Examples of this category published after Weaver-Hightower’s survey include titles such as *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life* (Gurian & Stevens, 2005), which is filled with tips on parenting boys and how to support your son’s learning in

school. These are good common sense ideas but lack research and peer review. This category of writing indicates an understanding of the importance of care and relationships in teaching and learning.

**Feminist and pro-feminist criticism.** Those writing in this category generally question the argument that a gender gap exists at all (Mead, 2006). Because some of the argument about boys' struggles is based on achievement scores in literacy, critics use the flaws of the tests themselves as an argument that these gaps are only captured in the test data and do not bear themselves out in real world examples. Additionally they reject arguments of biological and neurophysiologic brain differences between males and females and the negative influence of the feminized classroom on boys learning (Okopny, 2008). The most consistent criticism of "boy trouble" in education is the question of "which boys?" Not all boys are struggling but the headlines and cover pages from writing in the popular press would not lead one to believe so. Additional criticism concerns the population that the boy crisis in education seems to be concerned with: upper-middle class white males. At a time when even larger gaps loom across minority subgroups, the cry of a crisis for struggling white boys overlooks those who need help the most. Advocates for boys have not done a good job of sifting and sorting which boys need the help. There are still boys who are doing well with the school system as it is and are thriving. Some state there is no problem with boys because despite claims of underachievement, males are employed in jobs that pay more (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). If we discover how care and strong relationships are built to support boys it is likely this knowledge can be applied universally to support all learners. In studying the achievement gap it is important to see the big picture. There

is more differentiation of achievement within gender groups than between gender groups (Robinson & Lubienski, 2011).

**Teacher education, research, and practice.** From the analysis of these categories Weaver-Hightower (2003) hopes researchers will avoid following paths that have been problematic in creating research in the study of boys. One thing became clear in his analysis of writing concerning the teaching of boys. Teacher education programs need to do a better job of utilizing research and likewise researchers would need to expand to do a better job of listening to and examining the needs of practice (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). In response to Weaver-Hightower's lament that teacher education theorists and classroom teachers are disconnected, Froese-Germain (2006) recommended the usage of participatory action research as a way to bring these traditions together. Greater use of teacher-researchers can inform teacher education programs and these collaborative efforts can explore the influence of gender in the intersection of teaching and learning. It is useful to understand the recent history and political landscape in boy education research. This review of literature now looks at the data and statistics on boys that compels research in this area.

### **Boys' Relationship to Academic Success**

Boys in American public schools are not achieving and succeeding in the same way as girls. Boys are disengaging from school at all grade levels and across ethnic and socio-economic lines (Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). American boys exhibit lower abilities in literacy, earn lower school grades, are less engaged in school, have a higher dropout rate, have higher rates of repeating a grade, show higher rates of emotional disturbance, learning disabilities and placement

in special education, as well as higher rates of suspensions and expulsions, and lower rates of postsecondary enrollment and graduation (Kleinfeld, 2009). A growing body of research indicates the needs of boys in the classroom are not being met when compared to girls. That is not to say that the work to match best practices to the learning of girls is over, but it must be recognized that gender equity in education is beneficial to both boys and girls (Sprung, Froschl, & Gropper, 2010).

### **Federal Law Driving Public Schools Disregards Gender Gaps**

The intention of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was to raise student academic performance in schools across socioeconomic, minority, English Language Learner, and Special Education sub groups (USDE, 2001). The focus on raising test scores in all students year to year and showing adequate yearly progress (AYP) is intense; requiring a great deal of time and other school resources (Mathis, 2005). American public schools diligently take part in the practice of preparing students for the test and completing state testing requirements every spring. Scores are analyzed and student achievement is measured which generates a school report card. Based on these data schools are graded and ranked. Differences in boys and girls achievement were not a concern of the framers of NCLB, and as such the disparity of performance between genders has not been noted. While scores are broken out for various subgroups, data by gender is not measured according to NCLB guidelines and does not affect a school's AYP status. Therefore, the major driving force in public education does not give weight to differences in boys and girls achievement and so gaps largely go unnoticed in the day-to-day

operation of schools because it is not considered in high stakes testing the way other subgroups are. Neither is NCLB concerned with aspects of care for students (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

### **Significant Reading and Writing Gaps**

Even though NCLB does not value gender data there are government entities that track differences in achievement according to gender. Since 1969 the National Assessment of Educational Progress has conducted assessment in schools to record and compare the achievement of various subjects over time (Progress, 2009). Recent analysis of the National Tests of Educational Progress by Kleinfeld (2009) show a substantial gap between 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls in writing with 26% of the boys scoring below basic and only 16% of boys scoring at the proficient to advanced range. This contrasts with girls' scores where only 11% were below basic and 31% scored in the proficient to advanced range. Reading is another area where the achievement gap is notable. Boys read less than they did 30 years ago and boys overall proficiency in reading is much lower than girls. In the population of white high school seniors with at least one parent who is a college graduate, 23% of males and 7% of females scored in the below basic range (Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). In other words almost a quarter of the boys who have the advantage of having a college educated parent lack the ability to read and understand a newspaper. Noddings (2005) says that in order for the child to care, the adults around them must demonstrate care. Some boys at a young age receive subtle messages that reading and writing are activities for girls so they do not care if they are not good at it (Sprung, Froschl, & Gropper, 2010).

## **Grade Point Average Gaps**

Another area of note in terms of gender differences comes in the area of grade point averages as reported through the High School Transcript Study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). This report showed that in 2005 females overall grade point average was a B (3.09) while males' grade point average was a C (2.86). A Higher Education Research Institute survey from 2007 also showed differences with reporting of GPA's in the A range with 28% of freshmen women at that level compared to only 21% of freshmen men (Kleinfeld, 2009). Throughout all levels of education boys receive lower report card grades than girls (Sadker & Sadker, 2002). As we will see later in this review, significant cognitive differences do not exist between genders (Robinson & Lubienski, 2011). I speculate that boys are being related to differently. Because of their gender something different is happening to them in school. The relationship they have to school and their teachers is not the same as girls.

## **Disengagement**

Boys are disengaged in school compared to girls in terms of homework completion. Lack of homework completion irritates teachers and reduces school grades (Kleinfeld, 2009). Almost 3 times as many high school boys than girls reported that they did no homework and a similar number of boys also reported they most often came to school unprepared. Males are likely to spend an hour or less on homework, are more likely to come to class late, and are more likely to not ask questions in class (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). When a teacher is irritated with a student then their relationship will likely be different with that student. The

assumption is that schools and teachers know how to care for students (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

### **Placement in Special Education**

More boys than girls are found in special education classes, and more boys than girls are held back to repeat a grade in school. A government report for 2005 showed that 69% of secondary students receiving services for disabilities were male. Of those receiving services for emotional disturbance 76% were male, the learning disabilities population was 73% male and of the students with multiple disabilities 65% were male (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2005). Boys have an 8% chance of being held back to repeat a grade whereas girls are only held back 5% of the time (Kleinfeld, 2009). Boys are far more likely than girls to repeat a grade level (Sadker & Sadker, 2002). When teachers are not successful in teaching boys, they are quick to recommend medication for what they perceive as attention problems or refer the boy for special education testing (Sprung, Froschl, & Gropper, 2010).

### **Boys Dropout More Frequently than Girls**

Boys dropout rate is higher than girls (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sadker & Sadker, 2002). The U.S. Census report for 2008 showed 80.8% of males graduated from high school compared to 82.4% of females (Bureau, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics for 2008 shows the dropout rate for males at 8.5% and for females 7.5% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010) Regardless of the method of calculation, the resulting numbers show that more males than females drop out of school. Not only do fewer girls drop out when compared with boys, but girls are choosing to enroll in more rigorous advanced, honors and AP courses. Of the

boys who are graduating fewer are taking challenging courses at the same rate that girls are (Kleinfeld, 2009; Tyre, 2008). Boys' relationship to academics is different than girls.

### **Gender Gap in Accessing Higher Education**

Nationally women make up 57% of the population who enter and graduate from college. It is this statistic which often sets off the alarm about a boy crisis. The ratio of males to females in higher education has tipped in the last 50 years with parity being reached sometime in the late 70's (Sax, 2007). The trend continues to rise with about 100,000 more women than men attending college every year (Tyre, 2008). Gender gaps vary by institution with more highly selective colleges showing smaller gender gaps, but at less selective state schools that tend to draw more non-traditional students the gender gaps can be quite high (Whitmire, 2010). The number of men going on to college has become such a concern that some colleges and universities are no longer able to admit only the top scholars based on high school academics. If they did there would be far more women based on the fact that more girls are taking challenging upper level, honors, and advanced placement courses in high school. Some colleges have had to resort to using a secret form of affirmative action in order to balance their campuses with male and female students (Mortenson, 2005; Sax, 2007; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010).

### **Gender Gaps Overseas**

This is not just a problem with boys in the United States. A collaborative, mixed methods research project uniting three countries on three continents produced similar evidence indicating problems in the education of boys (Clark, Thompson, & Vialle, 2008). Three principal university researchers in UK, Australia, and the United States, conducted research

utilizing future counselors and teachers who were students in a seminar to study the possible existence of, and implications of, a gender gap in education. Major themes identified reflected some of the same areas of concern mentioned above. There exists an educational culture in which girls are outperforming boys as shown by “grades, enrollment in rigorous academic coursework at the high school level, high school graduation, enrollment and completion of college and even graduate school” (p. 63). Understanding gender differences in school achievement is complex with many factors having an effect on the outcome and other countries are wrestling to find the answer. Australia in particular has focused on the problems with educating boys to such a degree that the government has enacted legislation to overcome the gender gap (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Thinking about Noddings (2005) observation that the world has changed in terms of our daily lives in the ways we work, live, communicate, entertain ourselves, and the structures and nature of families, but schools have not changed that much, then internationally as well teachers and schools need to understand how care and relationships support the learner (Noddings, 2005; Schussler & Collins, 2006).

### **Feminized Education**

Because schools are predominantly staffed by women, particularly in early childhood education and elementary grades, there are those who speculate the reason boys are struggling is because school and the classroom are a feminized environment that does not adapt to boys needs. Boys and girls act differently and the classroom teacher adapts her lesson to what she knows; the domain of girls (Gurian, 2001; Pollack, 1998; Sax, 2007). A recent survey of primary-school personnel in the Netherlands indicated that 75% thought feminization was a problem in

educating boys and it was a threat to the quality of education. The majority of respondents said feminization is detrimental to the social-emotional development of boys because boys need male role models (Driessen, 2007).

### **Effects of Teachers' Sex on Pupil Achievement.**

Some governments have adopted policy that would promote bringing more males into the classroom. These policy decisions have not been based on any research evidence (Mills, Martino & Lingard 2004). Although there has been research documenting the differences in boys and girls and some research documenting the differences in male and female teachers, there is little to no research that looks at the relation between teachers' sex and the attitudes and achievement of boys and girls. In order to understand more fully the effects of teachers' sex on student achievement, attitudes and behavior, a large scale study of Dutch primary schools was conducted. The study looked to identify differences in male and female teachers with regard to background, class, and/or teaching characteristics. Then the study looked at cognitive and non-cognitive competencies in boys and girls. Finally, the study looked for a relationship between differences in the competencies of students and the sex of the teachers who are teaching them (Driessen, 2007).

The Dutch study found that whether a teacher is male or female had no effect on the behaviors, attitudes or achievement of students regardless if that student was a boy or a girl. (Driessen, 2007). In a similar large-scale quantitative study in Sweden looking at gender gap in school performance and sex of the teacher found no correlation either. There was no strong support to conclude that gender gaps in achievement were due to the sex of the teacher

(Holmlund & Sund, 2006). Based on the findings of these two studies there is no evidence to support that placing a male teacher in the classroom will close the achievement gap between boys and girls. There are other considerations in looking to male teachers as a way of helping boys.

### **Male and Female Teachers Grade Boys Lower**

Brophy and Good (1973), studying the effects of the feminized classroom, observed that boys were not achieving at the same rate as girls although there were no differences in boys' and girls' measured intelligence. In the early grades girls were achieving higher than boys in reading and other verbal skills. They cited research that found that female teachers preferred female students in classroom interactions, but they also said that male teachers had the same tendency as female teachers to grade boys lower and girls higher than their measured achievement would predict. At the time of Brophy and Good's research, data from other countries disproved that boys were scoring lower in American classrooms based on biological differences of gender because boy scores were on par or in some cases higher than girls. Teacher relationships, regardless of the sex of the teacher, were different with boys than girls to the extent that boys were marked lower even though achievement should have been equal. In a K-8 longitudinal study of gender achievement gaps in mathematics and reading, research discovered that even though cognitive abilities of boys and girls were equal, teachers evaluated girls to be more knowledgeable in math and reading (Robinson and Lubienski, 2011). In kindergarten they found that even though there was no overall gender gap in math, teachers evaluated females' mathematics skills significantly higher than those of males. In kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade a larger percentage of teachers are female. Robinson & Lubienski's study does not break down

teacher ratings between male and female teachers but Brophy and Good did and they discovered that male teachers had lower expectations of boys just like female teachers.

It may not be the gender of the teacher that matters but the way the teacher perceives ability based on student gender that shapes student success. Still, the belief that women in the classroom have a powerful effect on learning is strong. Historical concern regarding perceived influence of women in the classroom goes back even prior to the 1970's. Because so many women were school teachers in the 1900's, physical education and sports programs were added to the curriculum to balance the feminist influences in education. The thought was that women were making boys weak (Sadker, Sadker & Klein 1991.)

### **Male Teachers**

Australian educational policy suggested that placing male teachers in the classroom might help boys close the achievement gap. Mills, Martino, and Lingard (2004) pointed out several problems with this policy. The first problem with asking for more male teachers is that by doing so denigrates the work of female teachers. The implication is that women have failed and so if we just send some men into the classroom things will improve. The second issue is that the Australian policy does not advocate for recruitment of gay male teachers or indigenous aboriginal male teachers. There is an implied ideal of what a male teacher is and that ideal represents a very specific masculinity to be perpetuated. Finally, Mills, Martino, and Lingard said some male teachers were abusive to female teachers and did not uphold traditional masculine ideas, or they were abusive to students, and took sides with boys against girls.

Often the argument for male teachers in the classroom is made that boys need role models. This argument implies that female teachers in some way are deficient. Often the idea is that a man is needed to instill discipline and order which says women are incapable of managing a classroom that is energized with boyish energy. This post-feminist criticism illuminates some cautionary details to consider in promoting more male teachers in the classroom. Mills et al. conclude by recognizing there are teachers who confront and contend with constructs of traditional masculinity in their daily routines. They agree that more men need to be involved with the education of children but point out effort needs to be taken to create school environments that are free of misogyny and homophobia (Martin Mills, et al., 2004).

**Male teachers and the construct of masculinity.** Research has been conducted to learn elementary school teachers' perceptions of how ethnicity, sexuality and gender operate in their approaches to teaching boys. Also in this same research, teachers were asked to consider if matching student and teacher by gender and ethnicity made a difference (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009). Over 70 teachers were interviewed and classroom observations were completed in four public, inner-city schools and one private boys' school. Researchers found that the idea of male teachers serving as role models was very strong in parents, administrators, and the teachers themselves. Male teachers were actively recruited for employment by teachers and administrators. Parents sought out male teachers for their children. The prevailing belief was that male teachers would serve as role models and have the capacity to handle boys. Another finding was that males in elementary teaching positions represented a minority in terms of their low numbers. As members of this minority they were treated differently by administrators and

parents. I concur that this idea of male minority privilege exists. I am the director of an elementary teacher education program for a small liberal arts college. One of my male students who just started the program was assigned to do some early field experience in a nearby elementary school. The principal told him there would be a job for him when he graduated. He still has three years of coursework and student teaching to complete and the principal is already offering him a job. In my tenure I have had no female students relate similar experiences. I concur that male teachers in the elementary may be granted privilege based on their minority status.

Gender and professional identity were found to be linked which created the potential for a divisive hierarchy of power. Ten teachers at one of the schools referred to the existence of a “boys club” made up of the male teachers. The perception was the male principal and male vice principal supported this privileged group. One female teacher felt that she did not hold the same amount of influence or authority as the male teachers. If she wanted to propose or request something it was not weighted the same as if the request had come from a male teacher. She reported it was necessary to lobby the support of the male teachers in working with the male principal (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009).

Several female teachers said that because male teachers were given preferential treatment they were not held to the same high standard as females. Female teachers believed that males were not as rigorous and did not hold their students to the same high standards that females did. Male teachers on the other hand, said that female teachers were task oriented to an obsessive degree, overly repressive, and too authoritarian in their approach to teaching. Men stated they

had a higher level of commitment to the students as evidenced by their operation of after school extra-curricular activities. The men stayed after school to coach sports but the women left. Two women reported this was because many of the female teachers were going home to take care of small children (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009).

The men's claim of a higher level of commitment because they were involved with sport programs is an example of a classed position in the manifestation of their masculinity. Some men like sports and are involved with coaching sports programs so the hegemonic belief is that these programs are more important than the academic learning where the women are committed. The research insight from both male and female teachers have constructed an environment filled with subtle forms of social class hierarchy, sexism, and misogyny built on propagating male authority in schools (Martino & Rezai Rashti, 2009). These ideas are likely not considered when males are recruited to be role models in school, but what about race and ethnicity in the male teacher debate? Martino, citing the work of Hopkins (1997), who advocates an infusion of Afrocentric curriculum along with African American teachers in the classroom. Black male teachers are better able to serve as role models to fight stereotypes of African American men. A quote from a fourth-grade Black male teacher: "Teachers who expect inner-city Black boys to sit-up straight, look at them, focus, don't talk, have his pencil, smile, write, read, sit quietly, get up, eat lunch, sit back down, are quite clearly living in a fairy tale" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009 p. 197).

### **Single Sex Classrooms and Schools.**

In the United States the two overarching questions to be answered concerning single sex education are: Is it legal? Does it work? Title IX and subsequent regulations to stop sex discrimination set the stage for the past thirty-five years in how boys and girls were educated moving us out of the separate but equal thinking of shop, science, and advanced math being for boys and book keeping, home economics, and sewing are for girls. Classes and curriculum were revised to support co-educational opportunities to learn and compete in sports programs and take part in extra-curricular activities for students regardless of gender. Then in 2001 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress made federal funds available for schools willing to develop innovative “same gender” schools and classrooms. The only problem with doing so is that the program was implemented without any supporting research to see if single-sex classes were effective (Salomone, 2006; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010). In December 2010 at least 520 public schools in the United States offered single-sex classes either as a whole school or gender separated within coeducational buildings (Glasser, 2011).

Research studies of teaching boys and girls in single sex schools were lacking in 2001 and the studies now available have come mostly from abroad. They cited mixed results in academic gains. There is a potential for creating a high achieving atmosphere of learning, but there also exists possibilities for problems in politics of gender and masculinity, modifying teaching to fit stereotypical constructions of boys and girls, doing nothing to change bullying and macho male cultures inherent in schools (Jackson, 2002; Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2005; Warrington & Younger, 2001; Younger, & Warrington, 2006). Research on single-sex education

that controls for socioeconomic background and degree of parental involvement is lacking ("Gender gap," 2010).

A recent study of single-sex middle school science classes with a class of boys and a class of girls who shared the same teacher was studied using grounded theory methodology. The two classes were taught the same lessons using the same slides and materials. Ethnographic methods of observation using field notes as well as audio and video recording were conducted to capture the data for comparison. It was found that although the classes received similar grades, analysis of the data indicated the boys received more exposure to argumentation. Argumentation is noted in the National Science Education Standards as a central trait for intelligent engagement with ideas. Although the same female teacher delivered the same lesson in both classes, the boys' class in this case demonstrated more activity using argument as part of their learning. In the girls class the trait of argument was not apparent in their discussion of the lesson. The emerging theory from this study is that single-sex classes can construct a difference between the sexes. The findings do not suggest that single-sex classes disadvantage girls and women in science, but segregation based on sex could propagate larger differences in boys and girls (Glasser, 2011). The existence of care and strong teacher and student relationships from all boys schools is cited later in this review (Reichert, 2010). Single sex schools provide a setting to control effects of teachers evaluating boys as compared to girls. This controversial area should continue to be studied.

## **Pushed Down Curriculum**

Mulvey (2009) has claimed boys are not performing as well as they did 10 years ago and points to current practices that create this problem. NCLB has mandated young elementary students to achieve levels of reading readiness that developmentally they may not be ready for. “Boys who are two years behind girls in their readiness for formal reading and writing instruction now are asked to master skills in these subjects even earlier” (Mulvey, 2009 p. 34). Girls at age 5 are capable of sitting still and use a cooperative learning style whereas boys at this same age are less mature, more impulsive, and physiologically not at the same level as girls which gives them a deficit in the skills necessary to learn the process of reading and writing. Brain imaging shows differences between the sexes in brain development. In fact human female brains are more mature than human male brains from age 6 to age 29 (Sax, 2001). The area that connects the left and right hemispheres is 25 percent larger in girls than in boys. It is thought that this difference allows girls to process information differently with more attention to detail and a heightened ability to pay attention at an earlier age. This gives girls a distinct advantage in a kindergarten classroom where the expectation is to write alphabet letters, sit on the carpet, and listen to stories. Instead of being able to play, handle and manipulate objects and build with blocks, boys are being forced to do things they are not developmentally ready for. This early tension influences their feelings about school and carries over to middle and high school. The bad feelings created in kindergarten and first grade are carried with them to shape the rest of their school career.

Sax’s thinking corroborates with the above except he contends that kindergarten has undergone a change over the last 50 years (Sax, 2001). He surveyed historical writing about

education and found education has gotten away from the original philosophies behind kindergarten. Children in kindergarten were not expected to read, write and study school subjects but were instead to do things like take nature walks, make music with cymbals and tambourines and play with modeling clay. The push-down of reading skills into the kindergarten classroom has been spurred on by historical events such as the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957, the beginning of Head Start programs in the 1960's and again with the 1983 publishing of the federal report on education: *A Nation at Risk*. These historical landmarks shaped education policy that pushed the first grade curriculum down into kindergarten. These changes in curriculum have given girls the advantage over boys. The experience for the boys is one in which they learn a sense of scholastic incompetence. Because of the pushed down curriculum and frustration they have already experienced in kindergarten, boys enter first grade with a poor academic self concept which leads to the belief that what happens in school will have no future benefit.

### **Delay Formal Instruction**

Although there are different interpretations of what developmentally appropriate means, few educators would disagree that the curriculum should be developmentally appropriate in order for a student to successfully learn. Yet, in spite of known gender differences in children's neurological development which subsequently affect learning, all kindergartners are enrolled in school at the age of 5 (Sax, 2001). The choice to delay formal instruction in reading and writing until boys are developmentally ready is suggested as a possible solution to close the gender gap in achievement. The idea is that instead of formal reading and writing instruction, give boys the

opportunity to build confidence and self esteem by engaging their exploratory and spatial strengths (Mulvey, 2009; Sax, 2001). Another suggestion is to change the operations of kindergarten altogether. Sax proposed delaying boys' entrance into traditional American kindergarten until age 6. Instead boys would go into an alternate curriculum until they are ready to learn.

One such alternate program that comes from Europe and is slowly gaining popularity in the U.S. *Waldkindergartens* which translates to forest kindergartens provide educational programming for children ages 3 to 6. Instead of traditional kindergarten focused on the curriculum of literacy and numeracy, children spend time outdoors. *Waldkindergartens* have no classrooms, no books, and no manufactured toys. They spend every day outside even in the rain and the snow. One of the axioms of these schools is there's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothes. The children spend the day hiking, singing songs, engaging in imaginative play and improvising things to play with through the use of found objects in nature. Parents and teachers reported that this type of class is quieter, more peaceful and less stressful for children than being in a traditional classroom (Esterl, 2008; Sax, 2001).

Academic "redshirting," a one year delay of when a student starts school, has become so common that in one affluent suburb of Winston-Salem, North Carolina nearly 50 percent of kindergartners now entering are 6 years old before they start. This trend has created a demand for alternative programming so that a private school began offering junior kindergarten. This option is expensive and not every family can afford to hold their son back and pay for an extra year of private kindergarten. There are families who enroll their student in school at age 5 and

are very enthusiastic and hopeful only to find that the child is being asked to behave and do things that he is not capable of creating a frustrating situation (Tyre, 2008). Since 1980 there has been a 71% increase in boys responding that they do not like school (Farrell, 2011).

### **District Wide Research Examining Male Underachievement**

A team made up of university professors and their graduate students conducted research at a district level to find out what degree male underachievement was present and what factors could possibly attribute to achievement gaps between boys and girls. This study provided an opportunity for university and K-12 public school educators to collaborate to further understand the phenomena of male underachievement (Clark, Lee, Goodman & Yacco, 2008). This mixed methods study was conducted in a district of 25,962 students, 24 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, and 6 high schools. Variables used for the quantitative section were gender, race and ethnicity, with criterion variables for unexcused absences, number of discipline referrals, placement in special education including gifted, and student GPA. Findings were similar to those cited by Kleinfeld (2009) earlier in this review.

The second part of this study used qualitative methods to interview elementary, middle, and high school teachers and administrators to ask questions about boys and achievement. Their answers indicated a deficit view of boys as compared to girls. Common themes at all levels described boys in general as lacking maturity, having poor organizational skills leading to poor work completion rates. Boys do not have a good understanding of what it takes to be successful or how to plan for the future. Starting around 3<sup>rd</sup> grade boys increasingly disengaged in school

work and did not seem to care about grades, so by the time they reached high school many dropped out (Clark, Lee, Goodman & Yacco, 2008).

Educators identified examples of problems for boys: (a) class periods are too long for them to sit still in their seats, (b) recess time and unstructured play time has been reduced in recent years, (c) organizational skills are not as developed as girls, and (d) lack of positive male role models. At all levels there was a perception that teachers did not know how to specifically teach boys. All mentioned that poverty was a major factor in achievement, but boys seemed to be more affected by it as shown through disciplinary referrals, grade-level retentions, and placement in special education (Clark, Lee, Goodman & Yacco, 2008). The study recommended considering learning styles when lesson planning, working to provide mentors for boys to help plan for the future, and the idea that educators need to take a more proactive role in teaching and demonstrating the skills necessary to be successful in college. Broadly these recommendations all fall under the umbrella of the importance of building and nurturing caring relationships in learning. This review of literature now focuses on the importance of care and teacher relationships in the education of boys.

### **The Primacy of Relationship in Teaching Boys.**

A large-scale qualitative survey of best teaching practices as reported by teachers and the boys they teach was conducted in 2008. Researchers collected data from 18 different all boys schools in 6 different English-speaking countries. Nearly 1,000 teachers and 1,500, 12-19 year old students responded giving descriptions of what works in the lessons and teaching of boys. Common themes that surfaced among lessons were the power of holding students responsible for

producing or presenting material to their peers, creating an open field of inquiry in which students needed to complete tasks along the way, intentional use of humor and surprise, extensive movement, and gaming. More important to this dissertation was the collection of data that supported the idea of the importance of relationships in connecting and communicating with boys (Reichert, 2010).

Reflecting on the data collected from boys and their teachers through online surveys and narratives, the researchers noted how their findings resonated with previous research on the importance of relationships in engaging students in learning. Citing the work of Raider-Roth (2005) and her concept of the “relational learner,” the researchers aligned what they had found with a theoretical construct from relational psychology; the relational self. The idea of a relational self describes how instead of growth being measured by an individual’s capacity for independence and autonomy, it is instead measured by a person’s capacity for relationships (Raider-Roth 2005). Thus the goal of development, instead of growing out of relationships, is learning how to grow into them. Examples of effective teaching and learning collected by the researchers were infused with a distinctive sensitivity to the lives and educational needs of boys. The data described connection and communication that engaged boys in learning (Reichert 2010).

Relationships in school provided the framework for constructing the learning self. Through these experiences students flourished or faded in the dynamics of school and classroom relationships. One survey question asked students to describe what keeps them motivated and interested in school and their coursework. The majority of the responses described relationships

with teachers as critical to engagement and motivation to learn. Conversely when teachers identified boys' resistance to the institution brought on from school pressure or adherence to masculine codes, especially when resistance was directed at a teacher, it was nearly impossible for the teacher to recapture the relationship with male students. Boys' resistance acted as a barrier to teachers' capacity to seek to understand the exterior pressures and interior lives of boys (Reichert 2010). When strong positive relations exist they enhance learning. When real relationships are absent, meaningful engagement in learning cannot occur.

Particularly helpful in Reichert's study was the description of teacher attributes that support effective relationships in teaching and learning. One of the major qualities is that of teacher presence with boys. Reichert described an appreciation for the confident hands, trained eyes, and open hearts of teachers evident in submitted lesson plans and focused on the importance of teacher presence. Rodgers and Raider-Roth define presence as:

A state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step. (p. 266)

Recall Noddings' Care Theory and notice the similarities to what she labels engrossment or what could also be referred to as being emotionally available and willing to become involved. After teacher presence, students recognized other important aspects of effective teachers including the following ideas. The class work is highly structured, demanding, and no nonsense especially when fair. The teachers' humor and good moods create a relaxed attitude that facilitates

learning. Also, mood and personality elicited cooperation and engagement. The teacher seemed open and ready for a laugh. The teacher's ability to invite attention before starting instruction was helpful. The teacher was willing to reach out and offer extra attention—finding a mentor. Students felt a sense of safety and inspiration from the teacher's mastery. Students were elevated by the teacher's inspiration, friendship and respect (Reichert 2010). The factors recognized by the students supported the relational learner.

Reichert's (2010) research speculated that problems boys are having in school are not due to neurological, hormonal, or other theoretical explanations, but instead are the result of teachers varying capacities for building and nurturing relationships. When boys react, resist, and rebel it is because of a lack of attuned teaching. Boys become oppositional due to lack of teacher enthusiasm and teachers who are unable to connect in relationship with them.

One of the limitations of Reichert's (2010) study was that the data were collected from fee-based all boys schools. The authors looked to these schools for what works because these are schools that have been in the business of educating boys and pedagogy for what works has been shaped through practice over time which helped educators develop the right fit to meet the needs of boys' lives and educational needs.

### **Understanding the Relational Complexities of Working with Boys**

Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkley, Gedseg & Murray (2008), researchers familiar with the struggles of boys and their own experience as teacher educators, sought to examine how social and cultural forces of gender sculpt educators' concepts of relationships with boys. Related to this, researchers wanted to further understand teachers' capacity for making

connections with boys. If it can be seen how connections are made then conversely it can be seen how teachers disconnect with boys. This qualitative research used a teaching boys study team made up of thirteen pre-k through 12 teachers who selected one boy from their class to study in detail through descriptive review and a variety of reflective writing assignments that were presented and then analyzed.

It was found that teachers in their relationships to boys are confronted with two tensions. The first is the teacher's ability to see the child as a gendered, versatile learner and at the same time work to mold that child into the "good boy" to fit into the culture. The second tension involves the tangled situation of the teacher understanding his or her own history, pedagogical beliefs, and affective responses while at the same time fully seeing the boy. This tension became most apparent during times of resistance with the boy causing them to question their teaching competence and their own values (Raider-Roth et al. 2008).

By opening the questions of how teacher identity and gender form and shape relationships these teachers began to see how these dynamics influence their relationships with boys. By acknowledging the gendered identity of boys they can then further acknowledge their own gendered identity and how that works within relationships with boys. When teachers are aware of the forces of their own gendered identity, the gendered identity of their students, and the complex intersection of those identities in learning relationships, then teachers will have the capacity to resist forces of disconnection and will be better suited to support student learning (Raider-Roth et al. 2008)..

## **Summary**

This review of literature has covered the background and political landscape of research on boys struggles in education. Concerns of the feminized classroom and the pushed down curriculum have been identified. Suggestions of alternative programming, more male teachers and single sex education environments are not without controversy and lack conclusive evidence as to their effectiveness. In spite of data and statistics about boys problems with education there are still those who do not believe it exists and others are unaware. More research is needed to understand the effects of caring teacher and student relationships.

## CHAPTER 3

### **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study used qualitative participatory action research methods to answer questions about the relationships, successes, and struggles of boys in school as was suggested in the literature review as a promising methodology for investigating boys' gender achievement gap (Froese-Germain, 2006). Qualitative research was chosen because of its ability to provide rich, deep, investigation to develop answers based on multiple perspectives and reflection (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research has a clearly defined purpose for application to real world experiences from the research questions which generate valid and reliable data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The choice of using participatory action research (PAR) in Midwest-Town School District allowed for a shared opportunity to investigate, educate, and take action to resolve the question of a gender gap in boys achievement (McIntyre, 1997). A qualitative study was preferred to answer the research questions using the lens of care theory. The complexity of care theory coupled with the constructivist nature of qualitative PAR allowed the researcher to explore in depth the intersection of gender, teacher-student relationship, and learning in school (Merriam, 2009; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

PAR became manifest in developing countries during the 1960's and 1970's originally as an educational, political, and social movement to fight oppression. Since the 1970's PAR has been used in education and other social science research as a way to address a number of community and social issues (McIntyre, 1997). PAR has been defined as participatory research

in which the researcher becomes a facilitator who works with those being studied to lead them in helping define what needs to be examined, leading to the next steps for investigation and deciding what action should be taken (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). This form of research represents a fusion of practical and theoretical traditions and has been used in fields as varied as agriculture, health care, social work, and education. In principle it is a group activity but care should be taken in defining what “participation” means. Authentic participation means ownership of and responsibility for the production of knowledge and not allowing predetermined institutional policy to supersede and oppress the synergistic ideas of the group. Setting the agenda for inquiry, participation in data collection and analysis, and then determining how the outcomes are used and what actions are taken, are the role of the people (McTaggart, 1991). PAR is an open and transparent process that can quickly and in real time redirect confused theoretical logic (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1989). Because of the focus on shared responsibility and decision making it appears to be a good choice for a school improvement strategy such as understanding how teachers and the boys they teach relate to one another.

### **Site Selection**

Midwest-Town has a population of 19,132 (Bureau., 2010). Midwest-Town School District has an enrollment of 3715 students. Sixty-six percent of those students are Caucasian, 25% are Hispanic, 2% are African American and 7% are other ethnic groups. Fifty-three percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, 8.9% are English Language Learners and 16.5% are students with disabilities. Divided by gender, 53% are male and 47% are female. The district is home to five elementary schools, one fifth and sixth grade center, one seventh and eighth grade middle

school, and one high school (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010a). I have chosen this site because of my history as a former teacher in the district and the strong partnership I have nurtured as a teacher educator who regularly places students for field experience, and student teaching with teachers in the district. This is my home town school district and it is my hope that this work will in some way benefit the students who attend schools in the Midwest-Town District.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants were purposefully selected to inform the research and gain an understanding of the central phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). I selected subjects and sites because they can purposefully educate and guide toward understanding the phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2007). Twelve teachers from the local school district were purposefully selected to be a part of the participatory action research group to share information concerning gender achievement gaps and relationships in teaching boys. In the spring prior to the study, I solicited administrators, school social workers and counselors for the names of teachers who work well with boys or who work well with all learners in general and started a list. Names that showed up more than once were moved to the top of the list and those teachers were asked first to be a part of the group. Each participant was invited through e-mail. Then I stopped by in person to invite them face to face and to answer any questions they might have. Collaboration across education levels has been recommended in the literature (Clark, Lee, Goodman, & Yacco, 2008) and such collaboration allows an opportunity to build upon the previous suggestions from the Kansas P20 Education Council (Kansas State Department of Education, 2010b). The intention was to create a

group with two representatives from each of the five building levels which are: the early childhood center, kindergarten through fourth grade elementary schools, fifth and sixth grade center, seventh and eighth grade middle school and ninth through twelfth grade high school, for a total of ten teachers. However, one more person was added from the early childhood center at the suggestion of the center's director so that a pre-school classroom teacher of four year olds would be part of the team since the first two selected were birth to age three educators who work with families mainly in the home setting. The addition of the pre-school teacher brought an important additional perspective from early childhood education. An additional high school teacher was added because one teacher had a school sports conflict and could not attend the first discussion session and may have missed more if the school's team continued to win in the playoffs. Of the top teachers from the master list, only one teacher declined to be part of this project. She said she was too busy and did not have time to add one more thing to her schedule.

The information gathered in these interviews and questionnaires allows the formation of a group profile. The team had a total of 267 years of teaching experience. The average was 22 years of teaching experience. The most experience was 37 years as a teacher and the least amount of experience was 5 years. The ratio of men to women was 4 (33%) to 8 (67%). The ratio of certified employees for the district is 78 (21%) men to 290 (79%) women. All teachers were Caucasian.

From the research group there were no men who taught in the Pre-kindergarten through fifth grade classes. This also reflects the makeup of the district where, not counting P.E. or music, all of the classroom teachers in pre-kindergarten through fifth are women except for one

man who is teaching fourth grade. Kindergarten through fourth grade teachers teach all subjects in their classroom, but when students advance to fifth grade, teachers specialize and work in teams so planning and teaching become more focused on only one or two core subjects per teacher. Therefore, from fifth grade up, the teachers in the group taught specific subject content. Two math teachers, three science teachers, one social studies teacher and one computer technology and business teacher made up the different content areas in the upper grades. Math and science are subjects boys have traditionally done well in which begs the question: were these teachers chosen because boys like what they teach or is there something else with the way they teach that they were recognized as doing well with boys? Teachers were given pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected during the fall of 2011. The data were gathered with the permission of the 12 participants and followed guidelines set forth by and in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. The consent form is included in Appendix A. Qualitative methods were used to collect the data. Multiple sources were used for data collection to insure quality, accuracy and integrity of information (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected through audio recording and transcription of individual interviews, and five, one hour-long teaching boys study group sessions. Interviews were conducted at a site convenient to the interviewer which in most cases was their classroom or a conference room in their building before or after school or during their planning time. The teaching boys' field study group was held at a site convenient to

the participants in a college conference room. Copies of documents for document review were captured electronically, through photocopies, or hand written notes as appropriate.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Qualitative research often uses personal interviews in order to collect data. Interviews give the researcher access to information from a different perspective through relational interaction with the participant (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1995). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility not found in traditional, formal interviews. I was able to ask follow up questions to clarify or probe deeper as discoveries were made. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with each member of the teachers' study group prior to the group's first meeting. Personal semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture thoughts and ideas of individual teachers regarding boys' achievement gap and how they relate to boys in teaching. Interview questions are located in Appendix C. Time spent for this individual connection helped me build rapport with study team members and informed decisions of how to proceed with the organization of the PAR experience (McIntyre, 1997).

Each teacher took part in a semi-structured interview prior to the first group meeting. They were asked to tell about their teaching experience, how many years they had been teaching and what different grade levels or subjects they had taught. They were also asked to tell what they knew about educating boys. Finally they were asked what they thought should be done if an achievement gap for boys existed in this district.

**Teaching boys study group.** Through the use of qualitative PAR methods, a boys' education research group made up of twelve pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers was used to collect data (McIntyre, 1997). Although there are a variety of ways PAR can be

conducted, McIntyre (1997) summarized three guiding principles: (1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem and (3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem. Although it is not widely used as a research method it has proven to be an effective method for promoting action or allowing time for reflection and change (McIntyre, 1997).

Teachers were asked to consider the boys' achievement gap phenomenon as it exists nationally, locally and asked to assist in answering the research questions. This group of purposefully selected educators identified factors contributing to male underachievement locally, outline the attributes of positive teacher and student relationships that support learning, describe how their understandings of care for boys shape their role as a teacher? The first three study group meetings were planned by the researcher/facilitator.

The group met 5 Tuesdays in a row in October and November after school from 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in a seminar room at the college where I teach. At the first meeting I shared my research in the form of a PowerPoint presentation explaining why I had chosen this topic and why they had been chosen to be part of this participatory action research group. Information in the presentation was organized by the same headings as those used in the literature review and summarized those ideas. I explained the nature of participatory action research and then asked them to bring data in the form of grades, state assessments, disciplinary referrals, special education placement, and any other pertinent information from each of their buildings for the group to study. In session two we looked at data from the district they brought from their own buildings. In session three the focus was on what teachers do to build relationships with boys

and discussing what they do to help boys succeed. Session four reviewed what had been discovered by the research group and session five the group focused on how to share their research with the rest of the district.

**Document review.** A review of documents was conducted to analyze district and school data on numbers of students receiving special services, distribution of grades, state assessment scores, percentage of boys and girls taking advanced classes and those numbers were compared with national averages. According to Merriam, document review is an important part of qualitative research because it provides information in addition to interviews and focus groups (Merriam, 2009). Because of the emergent nature of PAR, other documents suggested by members of the study group may have relevance and be looked at as well (Khanlou & Peter, 2005).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Transcriptions of interviews and group sessions were presented for approval of individuals involved. Data were analyzed using qualitative methods such as repeated reading and or repeated listening to the descriptions in order to isolate themes or central tensions that influence teacher student relationships and resulting decisions for teaching (Raider-Roth, Albert, Bircann-Barkey, Gidseg & Murray, 2008). Data were analyzed to look for commonalities and then coded to identify major themes (Creswell, 2007). Analysis was ongoing throughout the research process using Noddings (1984) ethic of care to analyze data. Additionally I listened for emergent themes mentioned in the review of literature or for new themes as they occurred.

**Analysis of interviews.** After transcribing audio recordings of individual interviews and group sessions, I read and re-read the interviews immersing myself in the details before breaking the interviews apart. While I read, I made memos in the margins and then created a list of these ideas (Creswell, 2007). I then pushed, considered, and condensed that list to form six categories: differences between boys and girls, care through responsive teaching, care through building relationships, power of parents, stress and pressure in education, and taking action and trust. Using these six categories I sorted the interviews by hand. Using my computer's word processing program, I cut and pasted; sorting the data into the smallest possible units of meaning and filed them under one of the six categories they were most closely related to. When all of the data had been sorted from twelve individual interviews and five group sessions, I read and re-read the thematically sorted groups of words to search for meaning.

Within those groups I discovered the foundations to frame the report of the results of this research and have organized writing in those six areas. The first five themes: differences between boys and girls, care through responsive teaching, care through building relationships, power of parents, and stress and pressure in education provide research information directly related to boys' education. Care theory (Noddings 1984) was used as the theoretical framework for this research. From this theory I looked for how teachers care for their students. In teacher to student relationships and when teachers were teaching their students I found evidence of care in these themes. The sixth theme, taking action and trust, relates to the nature of participatory action research as the chosen methodology as well as the climate of the Midwest-Town district at the time of the data collection.

## **Researcher's Stance**

I have over 25 years of experience teaching in public and private schools as a high school and middle school English teacher and special education teacher. I currently teach in the department of teacher education at a small liberal arts college where I am also the director of the elementary teacher education program where I place and supervise student teachers prior to licensure. I am the father of a 14 year old boy and an 11 year old girl. My experience as a father of a boy who has been resistant to and frustrated with school as well as my current job as a teacher of teachers informs the assumptions I make about the subject of boys' underachievement. Understanding this subject is very important to me because of my role as an educator and father. I acknowledge my own biases in this research. The selection of participatory action research will challenge me to assume the role of facilitator rather than the role of authority. McIntyre, who provided the model for my methodology, comments and reflects that she felt uncomfortable at times in the process of PAR. The themes she had planned for group sessions often took directions she had not considered. (McIntyre, 1997) I had a vision for what this research would look like, but the reality was different than I had visualized. McIntyre describes her experience as transformational and I agree. This experience has been transformational just as the previous years of doctoral coursework have been.

## **Reliability and Trustworthiness**

In traditional research reliability is the extent to which results can be replicated. In qualitative research due to the dynamic capacity of working with humans and human behavior, the question is not whether results can be reproduced but more importantly do the results

correspond to the data (Merriam, 2009). The shared nature of PAR adds a level of trustworthiness to the study because of the openness of the process (Whyte, et al., 1989). To insure for internal validity, interview transcript summaries were presented to teachers for approval. The act of member checking is essential to the credibility of the research. In addition, the researcher sought peer review at regular intervals from education faculty of the college where he teaches to discuss data and assist with interpretation (Merriam, 2009).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher secured approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as approvals from the school district. Participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participating to insure that participants volunteer on their own and their best interest were protected. Participants were advised that they could withdraw at any time. Participants would remain anonymous and information shared would be confidential.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Qualitative research design is emergent (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis begins at the point of collection and is ongoing through transcription, organization and report writing (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Data analysis is a part of the research process when the researcher considers what meaning can be derived from interview transcripts, field observations, review of documents, and audio recordings of interviews. Analysis of data yielded six themes: (a) differences between boys and girls, (b) care through responsive teaching, (c) care through building relationships, power of parents, (d) stress and pressure in education, and (e) taking action and trust

#### **Differences Between Girls and Boys From the Teachers' Perspective**

The opportunity to talk to educators who work with students at different ages made it possible to compare and contrast what they see happening in the classroom. When teachers were interviewed and asked to comment about boys' education, their comments about boys were most often in terms of how boys perform compared to girls, or they explained boys today through contrast of what they remembered about themselves as a child or through earlier experiences in their teaching careers.

The data from the interviews and document review showed several differences in teaching boys as compared to girls. Some universal findings that ran across every age level were boys receive the majority of disciplinary referrals and boys are more often placed in special education. In Pre-K through sixth grade teachers identified boys need for movement. In middle

school a gap begins in grades and achievement with girls edging out boys with higher GPA's, fewer missing assignments, and fewer disciplinary referrals. At all levels more boys than girls are placed in special education.

This section is grouped chronologically by student age and grade level and introduces the individuals who made up the research team. The teacher perspectives are not necessarily themes per se although there is some overlap. These perspectives represent the views held by teachers selected for this study.

### **Early Childhood Perspective**

Teachers at the early childhood center described boys as being more concrete and busy, exhibiting and needing more movement when they worked with them. One teacher was aware that children are entertaining themselves through electronics in the home rather than engaging in activities like block play or being read to by a parent. Another perception formed through many years working with special education pre-school students and their families was that there is often a lack of male parent involvement in the home. Two of these teachers also described girls as being more complacent to sit whereas boys tend to be more active with examples like bouncing a ball, jumping, or climbing.

Janet has been teaching 24 years in early childhood and currently works in infant and toddler services at the early childhood center. Much of her job is spent out on home visits working with families of children who have been referred for special services. In describing the differences between boys and girls she said:

I think they [boys] are more concrete. Have to have more motor things built in . . . busyness, activities. I think that's really true of a couple of the boys right now that I have on my caseload. They're really busy and we're trying to build that motor piece in to capitalize on what they're learning and doing.

Molly has been working in education for 21 years; 2 years as a paraprofessional and the rest as a teacher with infant/toddler services in early childhood education. Like Janet, she spends much of her time working with parents of infants and toddlers in the home. In describing boys' educational needs she says:

You know they're definitely more motor driven. A lot more into the active type learning; the activities and that rather than doing a little sit down and a little project at the table.

You probably need to interject a lot more activity in; and even in the home based setting you know they're not necessarily the ones who are going to want to sit and do the floor activities, but they're the ones who like to run and jump.

Julie is a preschool teacher at the early childhood center and has been teaching 37 years in special education. Ten of those years she worked with adults, but the rest have been with pre-school children. Here is the response she gave in describing what she thinks about in educating boys:

I think we're seeing less men in the home for one thing. I see us as not having creative play. As much creative play available for children such as with block building and it's more a lot of electronic type of play for kids and I see boys that I know who are bright

were read to as a young child and I think that has something to do with their success, like how they will do later.

Early childhood educators in this study also described boys as being more concrete in their thinking and also more motor driven in student to teacher interaction. Teachers described themselves as often prepared to follow a boy as he is moving in order to engage him in learning activities. These teachers said more boys are referred for infant and toddler special education services than girls. One reason they cited for more boys being referred was their perception that boys who are born prematurely tend to be more susceptible to having physical problems than premature girls. Molly described her perception:

I think we could say unscientifically that the boys have more struggles if they have physical pieces going on just by the virtue that they have---that they are a boy. They seem to be less resilient than our preemie girls are.

Also, these educators indicated boys mature at a rate slower than girls and said that language is later to develop.

### **Elementary Kindergarten through Fourth Grade Perspectives**

Jill teaches kindergarten and has taught first grade and kindergarten for 12 years. She said, “You can really tell the difference in maturity level between a boy and a girl. Girls focus attention better than boys.”

Bonnie currently teaches third grade. In her 31-year career as a teacher she has also taught special education and fourth grade. Notice how her statement below clearly states it is not every boy. There are exceptions.

Well you know obviously some boys tend to be a little more ornery than others. They may not take the classroom work as seriously. That's not. . . I shouldn't say that's one hundred percent. You know it's every once in a while you get a few kids that kind of want to goof around. They don't take it seriously.

Bonnie also said that traditionally boys had always been thought to do better in math than girls but actually that was not true all of the time and that there were instances of girls who were very good in math as well. At the kindergarten level, Jill described the differences between boys and girls in the way they use math manipulatives:

They [boys] turn them into little guys who are blowing up things or they use them as guns or something like that and the girls never play with their manipulatives. Never. And isn't that funny because I feel like we use them [manipulatives] to reach the boys more because they're playing with something but actually they turn it into a toy.

Jill continues and speculates on possible differences in creativity between boys and girls:

The girls don't, so I don't know if it's like a boy thing like their creativity is different so they get a toy to play in front of them or they think it's a toy and I mean they turn it into some kind of play thing. Whereas the girl is using it for the appropriate reason.

Further elaboration of the way boys and girls use manipulatives reveals the idea that boys are ready to play with most any object set in front of them, but that the girls are more compliant and willing to wait for instruction.

Anytime we give them anything to use the boys are automatically building with it or playing something. Girls just sit there waiting for the task to be done and they're [boys] playing almost every time.

Similar to the early childhood teachers who described the motor needs of the boys they work with, the elementary teachers described boys as kinesthetic learners who favor the opportunity to move in the classroom. One teacher also noted that boys need more affirmation than girls in early elementary.

I think with our age I mean the 5 and 6 year olds it's maturity and social things that we see the most discrepancy with. Girls seem to be more mature at that age than boys do. I don't know if that makes sense. I don't know. They kind of seem like they need more affirmation I think than girls . . . I'm more likely to hold out boys saying my name like five hundred times whereas a girl might say my name a couple times and then move on, "O.K. Fine I've got to go figure it out." but they [boys] will consistently say it, say it, say it, until I do say something to them.

By coincidence Jill had a class two years ago populated with a majority of boys at a ratio of 2 to 1 boys to girls. Here is how she describes this majority boy classroom, "There was a whole new vibe in my room. It was way different. We were loud. We were more rambunctious. So it took probably until December for me to be O.K. with that."

Even though boys at the K-4 level were described as being loud, ready to play with anything put in front of them or to goof off if given the opportunity, teachers at this level said there was no difference in academic achievement. In fact when they were asked about it they

said it had never been an issue. Indeed when these teachers brought forth student scores from their buildings for state testing in reading and math there was little difference between boys and girls scores.

### **Fifth and Sixth Grade Perspectives.**

At the fifth and sixth grade level teachers also reported there was no indication that boys or girls were dominant in succeeding in their classes, but teachers did indicate an awareness of differences in development and that boys' student behaviors can vary from year to year. One teacher also expressed a concern that classrooms and the way we run school does not meet boys' needs for movement and activity.

Connie teaches fifth grade math but has taught many other levels of elementary. This is her 27<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. When asked about teaching boys, she said:

Well I think that for boys we haven't got the classroom or school set up for their greatest success. I think that boys need a lot more movement than we tend to give them in the classroom so that's sort of one strike against the boys already that they need more than what kind of structure we set up for them.

In addition to not having classrooms set up to favor boys' need for movement, Connie also says there is a difference in development between boys and girls and schools value skills girls are better able to exhibit because of this developmental difference.

Yes I know that nationally boys are behind girls. Some of that has to do with how they develop. Girls just develop earlier. A lot of the skills that we value in school, girls develop them early on and are able to do those fine motor things that we look for in

school and so boys come a little bit behind so I do know that they're behind. Yeah they're behind.

Connie says she knows boys are behind girls based on what is valued in school.

Norm teaches sixth grade math and has been teaching 11 years. The first 4 years he was the regular education resource room teacher for at risk students for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. He is also the high school boys and girls tennis coach. Here is what he notices about boys in his classroom:

Some years are better than others. Like this year for example we've got a great group of boys. You know I have just a handful that have missed an assignment, so you know, I mean I'm not used to that. I'm used to playing it another way where I've had to track kids down all the time.

### **Middle School Perspective**

At the middle school level, teachers mentioned girls will write more and take time to make sure they are completing lessons the right way. At the eighth grade level it was also one teacher's experience that girls made up the majority of students he had worked with who were on extended learning programs for giftedness. Just as the third grade teacher described boys who do not take the work as seriously, these teachers noted that boys are often times the students who do not care about their school work. One reason cited for that was the belief boys saw no practical application of how school-work would help them in the future. Teachers said some boys believed they would be able to enter the world of work and succeed without having done well in school.

David teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade science and has taught seventh and eighth grade science for 22 years. He also is the head coach for middle school football. Here are the differences he sees in boys and girls.

I would say that if you look at least at the written work that is produced overall, the boys don't get their ideas in written form. And we also have several students, and it seems like sometimes boys more than girls, that don't really see education as something that they need because they can go in the work force without the education that maybe they could achieve.

Connor has been teaching for 11 years. Most of that time has been at the middle school level with some substitute teaching in high school during the first 3 years of his career.

Well I think by in large what I've been made aware of over my teaching tenure is that a lot of the guys aren't holding up their end of the deal. Most of the research will show that girls exceed boys in most cases. There are some exceptions to that of course but the perception is that by in large girls do achieve at a much higher rate than boys do for I am sure of various reasons.

**Not all boys.** Notice how Connor, like Bonnie, also mentions there are exceptions and that it is not all boys but some. As was reported in the review of literature it is important to remember not all boys are struggling in school (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Some boys are thriving and doing quite well in school. Although teachers often became quite passionate about what they were talking about and may have spoken in absolute terms using words like "never" or "always," if questioned they could usually think of an exception to what they were saying.

## **High School Perspective**

Frank has taught science for 31 years. Five years teaching eighth grade and the remaining 26 years have been at the high school.

It's been my experience that girls are often better students at the levels that I teach simply because they do the things that good students do whether it's to pay attention to the detail or be careful with what they write or to complete their assignments, and I realize that sometimes boys are a little more free spirited and choose their own paths rather than being willing to be pleasing other people.

Linda has been teaching 5 years and teaches science. Her first year she taught in another town and the remaining years have been at the high school.

Well a lot of what I see in the classroom is less motivation in my male students than in my female students and you know some of that could be due to the whole intrinsic-extrinsic motivation thing. Girls seem to be motivated a little bit more intrinsically to get those A's and B's. If they have a poor score on something they want to rectify the situation. In a lot of my male students it's like if they've got a C they're happy with that regardless of missing assignments or any sort of thing like that to do with in class.

Karen has been a teacher for 35 years. The last 5 of those years have been here in this district as a computer technology and business teacher.

It's kind of interesting you know for years it was girls that were the underachievers in math and so then there came this big emphasis to try to get them onboard and level with the guys in math and science and now that's totally reversed, and now we're back to

working with the guys, but yes I definitely see it and it's getting to be a bigger problem.

Guys that I see in my classes are either solid, solid students; and I'm talking solid A's and B's just really good students and that's not the majority. The bulk of the boys that I see are just struggling to be mediocre students and unfortunately there are many of them who don't even get to mediocrity but I definitely see it. It's a huge problem.

High school teachers described boys as more free spirited or lacking motivation that would lead to success in the classroom. One teacher noted that once emphasis had been placed on girls' achievement but now the focus has turned to boys and rightfully so because boys are not thriving in school as compared to girls. In fact some boys were described to be struggling just to be even mediocre.

### **Categories of Differences Between Girls and Boys**

Boys and girls were also shown to have differences in the data looked at by the research group. Teacher researchers brought data showing several gaps between boys and girls in five areas.

**Differences in academic performances.** Although pre-k through sixth grade teachers talked about differences in boys and girls, the consensus was that boys and girls are equal in terms of performance assessment in reading and math during those school years. In our group review of documents, data from state assessments for reading and math as well as grades from teachers' grade books showed no significant differences between boys and girls. Then around seventh and eighth grade a gap begins to appear between boys' and girls' grades. Boys earned a larger percentage of D's and F's than girls and boys were also shown to have a higher number of

missing assignments than girls. This was particularly evident through a seventh and eighth grade incentive program called Absolute Zero Club that rewards students at the end of each quarter who have no missing assignments. The data collected from this incentive program showed boys represented the majority of students who had failed to complete or turn in an assignment in one or more classes. Whereas kindergarten through sixth grade teachers said they did not see much difference between boys and girls academically, this changed in seventh and eighth grade and carried on into high school.

**Grade point averages and test scores.** One of the high school assistant principals who was aware of this study, sent the following information to our research group. For the graduating class of 2011, boys' average Lexile reading scores edged higher than girls at 1379 to 1354. Lexile is a widely used tool for assessing a student's reading level to assist them in choosing leveled books for reading. The difference between 1379 and 1354 with boys scoring higher is interesting because in that same class, girls outscored boys on the ACT Reading Test 25.2 to 22.2. Girls also closely outscored boys in the state assessment for math 63.5 to 61.6. Girls narrowly outscored boys on the state assessment for reading 80.8 to 79.7. The grade point average for boys in this group was 2.73 as compared to the girls' GPA, which was 3.00. This data is similar to the national data cited in the review of literature (Sadker & Sadker, 2002; Kleinfeld, 2009). Boys' grades and test scores from this sampling fell below girls. Even though boys' and girls' performance scores were close with girls ahead of boys on all but one test, the boys' GPA was .27 lower. As a letter grade this might be reported as the difference between a B and a B-.

**Honors and advanced placement classes.** Enrollments for Advanced Placement U.S. History and Advanced Placement Calculus were balanced with close to equal numbers of boys and girls in those classes. In Honors English however, there was a definite imbalance across all four grade levels at the high school with about 2/3 of the classes being made up of girls and 1/3 boys. As stated in the review of literature (Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010) there is a national trend for fewer boys to enroll in advanced placement or honors classes. For this district the trend only exists in honors English classes and there is a balance between boys and girls who are choosing to challenge themselves with AP U.S. History and AP Calculus.

**Disciplinary referrals.** Through participants' review of records for their buildings, it was found that boys receive the majority of disciplinary referrals at all grade levels for this district. The teachers from the early childhood center do not use a disciplinary referral system but at one of the group discussions on this topic Julie remarked, "If I sent kids to the principal today, then two of my boys would have gone." At the kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school level two different buildings were represented. One building reported that boys made up 85% of their disciplinary referrals and the other building reported that boys made up 71% of disciplinary referrals. It was also discovered that the number of office interventions for discipline in one building had increased 276% the previous year. This building houses the Emotionally Disturbed Special Education program for kindergarten through fourth grade elementary in the district and the spike in referrals was attributed to 3 kindergarten boys from that program. When examining this data further it was discovered that out of 155 interventions 110 (71%) of those were boys. In a total school population of 237 students 21 boys were

responsible for 110 office interventions and of those 21 boys, 3 of them were in kindergarten and had been sent to the office 47 times. Some members of the group were concerned by these statistics and wondered what these behaviors were that resulted in them being sent from the room, but there were no descriptions available to us of what had happened to result in an office referral.

No data were supplied for disciplinary referrals from the fifth and sixth grade center, but the seventh and eighth grade middle school supplied some data from the previous year. Of the 1,019 office interventions in a school with an enrollment of 522 students, 622 (61%) were boys and 397 (39%) girls. Although there was no specific data to show how many different boys and girls these numbers represent, as in the case of the elementary school listed above, the seventh and eighth grade teachers speculated that these numbers would be attributed to a handful of students some of whom are also part of an identified at-risk group of students.

At the high school, conduct is tracked through the use of a points system. Students begin the year with zero points and are given points for any infractions as they occur during the school year. If a student reaches twenty-five points a conference is held with the student, parents, and administration. If a student acquires fifty points, a hearing is held and it is determined if the student should be removed from school for a period of time.

Average discipline points for the 2011 class of 290 students showed boys were at 21.9 as compared to girls at 15.2. Within that group 12 boys and 8 girls had reached 25 points. In step with the national trend, boys in this district receive the majority of disciplinary points by a significant margin.

**Special education placement.** The study looked at the number of boys referred for special education. From the information supplied to the research team it was determined more boys are in special education than girls at every level. During the 2010-2011 school year, there were 166 children birth to age 3 referred for testing. This group consisted of 72 (45%) girls and 92 (55%) boys. At age 3 there were 3 girls and 9 boys receiving services. In the 4-year old category there were 6 girls and 10 boys. Only one of the elementary schools brought their special education data which showed that of the 40 students in special education 28 were males and 12 were females. The teachers from the fifth and sixth grade center did not bring any special education data. Special education placement for eighth grade for the 2011-12 school year was 57 boys and 21 girls. Special education placement for seventh grade was 31 boys and 8 girls. For the graduating class of 2011 at the high school special education placement was 34 boys and 17 girls. Of the data surveyed, boys outnumbered girls in special education at the rate of 2 to 1 and in some instances as much as 3 to 1. This data again was similar to the national trend that shows more boys than girls are referred and placed in special education (Kleinfeld, 2009).

### **High School Straw Poll**

One of the teachers from the high school became interested enough in the research that he decided to collect some data on his own. He asked his ninth grade students: "Who does better in school, boys or girls?" He printed out a ballot on a slip of paper with that exact question. Out of 96 respondents 66 circled "girls," 22 circled "boys," and 13 students circled both boys and girls. Another teacher in the same building took a count by show of hand on the same question and reported in her class 100% of her students believed girls outperformed boys in school. Although

there may be some validity problems with this methodology, sharing this with the group sparked some observations. Frank wonders if students have internalized from experience, an understanding that girls are better students because they act more mature and comply with teacher requests by doing what is asked of them.

The students have this understanding, too, whether it's true or false that girls both physically and mentally are more mature at the ninth grade level where I teach and maybe that's because we drill that into them as some experience or research they've done. And then girls said that girls could pay attention to details, follow instructions, and so that falls with the whole compliance sort of thing.

Participants noted there may be the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy of what we expect out of boys in school. No one would say they expect less from boys because they are boys, but the straw poll did cause the group to pause and consider why the dominant perception was that girls do better in school. This led to considering evaluation, assessment, and what is being measured. Connie asked, "What are we grading them on? Correct answers or ability to sit in their seat? Can they pay attention?" Earlier in this section girls were described as better students because they do the things schools and teachers have said that good students do. Schools value sitting still, being quiet, taking notes, carefully completing assignments, and complying with teacher requests. "Who does better in school boys or girls?" From the data collected by the teachers in the boys' education research group, there are several ways girls are outperforming boys in this district at this time.

**Tennis team eligibility story.** To close out this section describing how teachers described boys as students in terms of boys compared to girls, here is an observation from Norm the sixth grade teacher who also is the high school boys' and girls' tennis coach.

I've coached at the high school; this is my eleventh year. And I coach boys and girls tennis and I give out the same information packet to parents when we have the parent meeting and one of the things on there is about eligibility. If you're failing a class you don't participate, if you've got a D in a class you've got to get your grade up to a C before I will let you participate. And in 11 years maybe one time have I ever had a girl who had a D in something. You know I don't even have to say anything about it in the girls' parent meeting because it's never an issue. Boys every year 5 to 7 of them and I have the same numbers. On average about 20 kids on each team. The numbers are about the same. Every year I have to emphasize that point at the boys' meeting in the spring. Girls I don't have to say a word and I haven't had to. I would if I did and it's in the information. I don't have to say anything. No problems this fall (girls) and I'm sure at least one or two of my varsity kids will have a problem in the spring (boys).

In the next section I turn to how teachers in the research group respond to the needs of boys to help them succeed in the classroom.

### **Care through Responsive Teaching**

In analysis of the data, there were many pieces of information showing how teachers took action to meet the needs of the learner. As stated earlier, this group of educators was selected because they were judged by administrators to work well with boys or work well with all

students in general. In their descriptions of teaching and managing students I found evidence of teachers caring for their students by making small adjustments or sometimes complete changes in the way they taught. Teachers cared enough about the success of boys that they were willing to respond to the needs of the learner. One way some teachers also chose to respond was by maintaining high standards and rigor in what they expected in conduct and work habits. Ideas for how to respond to the needs of boys included such things as using cooperative learning and competitive teams, allowing for movement, and opportunities to learn kinesthetically. At the same time more than one teacher suggested that the traditional classroom is not set up to benefit the needs of boys.

One story stands out as an example of how a teacher realized the need to change and respond to the needs of boys in the classroom. Jill teaches kindergarten and tells how she responded and took action to meet the needs of boys. One year her class was made up of 14 boys and 7 girls. In her words the class was loud and rambunctious and she realized she would have to change her thinking and accept the class as it was.

The more I tried to get them to conform to the way I wanted it to be, it became a fiasco in my room. But I think the more I accepted the fact that we were going to be louder, it was just going to be constructively louder.

She had to accept there would be differences and one of the differences was less excess talking.

Seems that girls are more chatty. And so I didn't have extra talking, I mean if we had something to do they would get to work on it, but I had a lot of bathroom humor (laughs) and a lot of immaturity things.

In order to engage the boys in learning she also consciously changed the way she planned and taught lessons. She explained, “We just kind of changed it to doing more game kinds of activities and a lot of cooperative learning.” This large boy population anomaly still exists in the school and every now and then she says other teachers will remark about how it is different with so many boys. Jill’s strategy was to accept the difference and then make changes to fit the needs of the students. She said, “You could definitely just feel the difference with that many more boys and it wasn’t a bad thing it was just a change in my . . . I had to change.”

This was in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of teaching in this educator’s career and when she was confronted by the different demands from boys in teaching, she saw it as her responsibility to change the way she had done things in the past. Her experience with boys has created an understanding for her of what works with boys and from this experience she has some strategies of how to manage the classroom in order for boys to learn. Here she talks about her experience of what works for teaching boys:

Cooperative learning is good for boys. I have noticed that they do really well. I mean at kindergarten level and I’ve only taught kindergarten and first grade so I can only speak about little ones, but I’ve noticed they do a really good job in group work. They aren’t definitely always individual workers but I’ve just noticed some of the things that we can do for cooperative learning or just little . . . we play little games like they can pair up so usually it’s partner work or usually four but usually no more than that per group but I’ve noticed that boys usually do a very good job of working in groups.

Jill's experience that boys do well in teams and respond to playing games matches the research cited in the literature review (Reichert 2010).

Yeah that they usually do a good job of following along and being part of a team. It's not usually in those groups that you hear some one's not being fair. They usually play along pretty good. So I think they like games. They like the idea of playing something to learn.

Another strategy she uses is giving boys choices when assigning work.

Like I don't know if I've just noticed with girls you can just say, like writing for instance, "We're going to write about this." And boys if I let them choose I feel like I get more out of them than if I tell them what to do. I don't know if it's because I'm a female teacher that I come up with ideas that might entice the girls more, but I've just noticed that. That the boys definitely do better with writing kinds of things when they're given choices.

Another insight she had about working with boys is what they prefer to read about.

With reading, boys love non-fiction books. They love that kind of stuff. You know they like. . . I don't know if it's not necessarily history kinds of things always but they just learn to love factual information and they retain it and grasp it and girls love the storytelling, which is funny to me because boys love to be creative and silly and play but they like real stories. So I just think that's kind of. . . you know they like to live in a fantasy world a lot but they love to read real information.

Little boys like to live and play in a fantasy world but they prefer to read about the real world.

Other teachers spoke of how they differentiated instruction through guided reading groups with as many as 6 different reading group levels in a class in order to accommodate the different

needs of the spectrum of abilities. Rather than teaching to the whole class, teachers took the time to differentiate instruction by grouping them into smaller performance level groups. By doing this the teacher is able to match the reading lessons to more precisely meet the needs of each student.

Norm at the sixth grade level adds elements of competition into his teaching and classroom management by setting up challenges between classes where only one class will be the winner for that grading period. To add to the experience, through the direction of this teacher, students have designed and made their own samurai headbands that they wear in class on days they take tests. The headbands hang in rows grouped by class as one enters the door of this teacher's classroom. This is a reminder that every day is a competition and they have to work together as a team. One person can make it or break it for the class. Norm gives his rationale:

A lot of boys work well with competition within the classroom as long as its kept healthy and sportsmanship is always---at sixth grade level it's always important --you don't want to be a loser. You know in my room there are four classes and one winner. There's only one first place - they all know that - so we work a lot on sportsmanship but with competition I've learned and this is with boys and girls combined, they're a team and one person can earn a lot of points for the team. One person can screw it up. All the kids know that and the expectation is set from day one. So that cuts down on how much I have to hold a kid accountable for. I gotta kid talking and they know their team is going to lose points if I have to ask them again, I don't have to shush them again, someone else will.

At the end of the grading period there is an elaborate puzzle of problem solving and the class must work together to reach the winning prize of candy in a secret locker that the whole class shares as a celebration of their victory.

### **Not Always Able to Help**

Teachers were also aware of ways they were not helping students. The perception was that students often need more than just academic help. Also there was recognition that only assigning worksheets did not inspire students to do their best work. Student mental health was seen as a problem and David describes what he sees.

I still see it now - there is some anger that builds up and what we don't do as a school system is we don't help. We don't do any therapy; we don't help kids who have emotional issues. In middle school probably not in high school either right? So basically they are there for academic is what we try to do and as teachers we see them for an hour and we try to help them but they're not getting the emotional help they sometimes need. And with referrals I don't know if we. . . in fact I know it's not effective at all.

Kathy also shared what she sees as a major problem with the education many students are receiving. Too much teaching is limited to the use of worksheets and does not respond to the individual needs of the learner.

We just absolutely have to quit "work sheeting" these students to death. We've got to quit "work sheeting" them to death. Because they're not . . . most of the kids are focused on getting the assignment done. I'll give them that credit. Most of them want to get done with whatever they're asked to do, but we're not asking them to think. We're asking

them and I do mean “we,” sometimes I even fall into that trap. I mean it seems like as a district teachers don’t like to take work home. I don’t like to take work home, but you cannot get kids to where we need them to be without the teachers doing a heck of a lot of work.

Kathy continues and endorses teaching that is hands on, project based, involves research, and by the nature of it takes more work on the part of the teacher and the student.

It needs to be so hands on and engaged and that takes, you know, that takes a ton of time to prepare those kind of lessons. And if it’s going to be a lesson where the kids are actively doing some research then what their end project is going to be cranked out is going to be a project or a paper or something that will take a good deal of time to grade. And I know that’s why teachers have tended to do the worksheet because worksheets are easy to grade. I think that we’ve got to encourage teachers to develop activities that really require the learner to do a lot of work. But it also requires a lot of work of the teacher. So that then comes back to the district as far as the scheduling is concerned. Teachers need plan time!

Another teacher from the high school described how he sets up his coursework for his classes. The unwritten expectation for students at the high school is that students will pass their classes. With that in mind the teacher must find ways so that all students can succeed.

There is another part to this. It’s great to have rigor but it’s also great for every student to have some degree of success. So sprinkling your assignments around so that all students can be successful.

### **Care through Building Relationships**

One universal belief held by every teacher in this research group was the importance of building caring relationships with their students in order for all students to succeed; especially with boys. This section illuminates what this group of teachers thinks about the relationships they have with their students and how they build those relationships. Teachers agreed that it was important to take time to build trusting relationships and connect personally with individual students. There was also recognition that effective student and teacher relationships not only involved personal connection but also were effective because the teacher had high expectations for the student. In order for teachers to maintain high expectations they could be kind and nurturing, or strict and demanding. In either approach, the teacher exhibits a level of care that builds a relationship to support teaching and learning.

#### **Teachers Believe in the Power of Relationships**

Before the group discussion that focused specifically on building relationships, one teacher made a strong statement concerning the importance of relationships in teaching. In her individual interview, I asked Connie what she thought we should do if we found achievement gaps in boys' learning here in this district. Her reply caught me off guard:

Well I guess I think the most important thing I do is I develop relationships with all the kids and I think that's probably at least 80% of my job is having a connection with the kids and then the other 20% is the academics we need to learn come along behind that.

I was somewhat caught by surprise with her answer because she said this without hesitation and to me it didn't fit the answer I was anticipating. What she was telling me was why she believes

she is successful in the classroom. The administrators see her as a successful teacher with all learners in her building. She sees the power of relationships and to her the relationship aspect of teaching is more important than anything else she does. In her opinion any gaps in boys learning might be closed if teachers worked harder to build those relationships. I tried to clarify what she was saying and asked her if she really thought it was 80% relationship and she said yes, “Because kids will do a lot for you when they know you and they know you care. Yeah. I think it is that high.”

Similarly, when I asked Linda what she thought we should do if we found achievement gaps in boys learning here in this district. She had a very simple solution:

I don't know necessarily that I would see a big giant program that we could instate to fix all of our problems with male achievement, you know, long term or holistically, but I think just maybe working on those relationships with the students would be kind of the best realm.

No big programs are needed. Work on relationships and getting to know the students. She continued her answer with this statement:

I think one of the biggest things is just building relationships with your students and trying to figure out what those motivating factors are for each kid. I mean cause it's so hugely different from one kid to another.

### **How Teachers Build Relationships**

Teachers talked about how they are deliberate and intentional in the ways they build relationships with their students. Teachers shared examples of how they got students involved by allowing

them to be responsible for something that needed to be done. Norm said, “I think the other deal is to allow them to help you with something you need done. You come up here and help Johnny. You figure this out. I mean you know. Give them some ownership.” Often teachers identified trust as a factor and trying to overcome past negative experiences. Sometimes students and particularly boys can excel in disruptive and off-task behavior. Here Bonnie tells some of the things she has done.

If I’ve got one that’s really good at pushing buttons, I’ve got to figure out how to occupy their time whether it’s passing out papers for me, or running to the office to get something you know, to get that movement. There’s usually some purpose for praising him. “Thank you that was really helpful.” You’ve got to find something that they do well and stay on them and I don’t know. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn’t. And sometimes I’ve had to get in their face and say listen! I know what you’re doing here and it’s not going to work.

A boy may be acting out inappropriately and a teacher may need to intervene. Here Bonnie describes a scenario she has encountered more than once in which she tries to reach out to a troubled boy and establish trust. Sometimes she succeeds and sometimes not.

I know what your game is. I don’t know what’s going on in your life otherwise, but you’re safe here at school. Trying to establish that, too, that I’m not going to hurt you whatever. You do what you need to be doing here.

Karen talks about how she sees herself building relationships in the classroom. This discussion happened just after Halloween in November. Notice how she is intentional about trying to connect with and understand the lives of her students.

The relationship thing I think is very important. It sometimes takes a long time. Even up to this point I'm not saying it's happened with all of the students but I adjust when I'm helping them. When I'm walking around helping them I'll just sit down and talk to them and try and find something that is important in their lives. Like I have one boy right now who can't wait to leave to go to his deer stand. And so I can talk to him about that. Or talk to them about football or their part time jobs or I used an analogy this morning of taking candy out of their little brother's or sister's trick or treat sack. The kids. You should just see their faces like, "oh you caught me." So it's just hard. It's difficult to build that relationship and a lot of times trust is an issue but that's what I try to do. You know we may have to go back and talk about deer hunting two weeks from now. If this kid over here looks like he doesn't want to be on task, I'll just walk over and say, "Hey have you got your deer yet? No? Hey you'll have to tell me about that. About this problem . . ." and then we're right back to work, but it's just almost like a little diversion for them.

The teacher may not be personally interested in deer hunting but she is interested in her students. She takes the time to let them tell her something about themselves and she is emotionally available and in the moment with them. Notice how she says, "You know we may have to go

back and talk about deer hunting two weeks from now.” Karen understands that caring relationships have to be maintained.

Other teachers spoke of the importance of trying to relate subjects they are using to illustrate lessons to things boys might be interested in. Teachers talked about using sports or other topics as a hook to gain boys’ attention. Bonnie said, “I love sports and some boys you can do that just chit chat about sports with them and maybe that’s been an in on some boys but like I say, find something that interests them.” The idea that the teacher needs to work to connect by talking about things that are interesting to their students was identified several times. Teachers who can talk about skateboarding as an example may appeal to a specific population of students who are often boys. There may be just a few students who actually skateboard, but the fact that the teacher is aware of the student’s participation in this activity may be enough to personalize their relationship.

Since in my work in teacher education I teach pre-service teachers, I asked the group how I should teach my students to develop caring relationships with their students. Here Bonnie talks about a recent student teacher she worked with and how, in spite of the student wanting to care and build a trusting relationship, one student resisted. How do you explain how to build relationships with students?

Doesn’t it just go back to basic human care and interaction? I mean I don’t know how you would tell a college student to apply that to their teaching. I mean I had a student teacher in the spring and I don’t know how to tell her how you do some of these things,

and she was a very caring person and very giving and all that, but we had one student that gave her the what for. And he wouldn't do that for me but he would do that for her so . . .

Several teachers said pre-service teachers needed to be aware that in order to build relationships, one must make time for it. Norm offered what he calls the Walmart example as sort of a test to see where you are in how your students see you.

I think it's also important that your kids don't see you as a robot. And what I mean by that is I use the Walmart example. If kids see you from a distance at Walmart would they run up and tell you hi or would they ignore you? You know because some kids you see at Walmart, and they're surprised you live outside the school. (Group laughter and agreement.) I mean that's a question I ask myself before I start with a group of kids and I think, without showing too much, it's good for them to see that you're not just a teacher; that you have feelings. (talking to the rest of the group) I mean you all I'm sure have things in your classes that show things that you love to do. Places you've been. Pictures and I mean I'm not shy at all. First day of the school year when we're talking about things we're going to do I let them know right off the bat that I probably dislike state assessments more than they do. And I'm not afraid to tell them that. I don't care who's in the room. I mean to tell you. You think you hate it, you know how I feel about it so we're in this together, but we have got to do it. I think just a few of those things where they know that builds trust and shows you are on the same team I think that will go a long way.

Take time to be seen as a human being and, without showing them too much, let them know who you are and what you like and dislike. Norm continues:

Take time to talk to kids. “Hey how are you doing?” They may want to say hi or they may want to stop and talk. Obviously this morning every single kid wanted to tell me a story about last night and how some kid threw eggs at them or they threw eggs at somebody else or whatever.

When Norm tells this story he smiles and genuinely conveys that he likes this part of his job. He likes hearing what his sixth graders are up to. He cares for them. He understands that in order for him to be an effective teacher he has to do this but he doesn’t mind. It’s not a burden.

When teachers talked about care for students they also talked about having high standards or rigor. Coaches are able to demand a higher degree of commitment from players than by comparison teachers demand on their students. Players choose to be a part of the team and participation is voluntary. Students are assigned to classes and are not there because they volunteered. With that dynamic in mind, David recognized the value of the relationships he forms as a coach with his players and the carry over that has for the classroom.

One of the things obviously that has helped me through the years is coaching. I can get certain things out of students in the classroom if I also have them in football. Because in football I can be very demanding and in the classroom it turns out, it’s not that much different once we get in it.

Notice the identification that he will make demands as a coach and then as a teacher he will also make demands of his students. There were those in the research group who also considered the

caring they do for students to be driven by a high standard of expectation. Sometimes that high expectation had to be enforced with a more authoritarian relationship. Frank explains the way he sees it:

And then the relational component was there. I think there can be two kinds of relationships and maybe both have their effect but one is the pat on the back, hand-in-hand relationship and the other is the more patriarchal, authoritarian relationship and with some . . . a lot, the hand-in-hand pat on the back works. With others they're just waiting to test to see if you stand your ground or not. And so that varies among individuals too.

Teachers understood there needed to be a balance in managing the classroom and the student and teacher relationships in those rooms. Here Karen describes that balance:

Sometimes it's easy for teachers to say you, you, you, you, you, but if the kids and a lot of people try that and it results in referrals, some places more than others, but if I didn't build that relationship with kids, they don't need to listen to me. They don't need to do what I want. So you know you can build that into your instruction, and use a story that a kid tells you and the kids buy into that. Well she does care about us and therefore we will pay attention, a little bit, to what we are doing.

Near the end of our group discussion on the importance of building relationships, Connie shared this thought:

You know so much of education is quantitative now. They want to have data and put a number to it, but the important piece is the qualitative part, which is what we're hearing a

lot today. What's the quality of the interaction you're having and that's the immeasurable, but it's huge.

Recall from the literature review the speculation that problems boys are having in school are not due to neurological, hormonal, or other theoretical explanations but instead are the result of teachers varying capacities for building and nurturing relationships (Reichert, 2010). When boys react, resist, and rebel it is because of a lack of attuned teaching. Boys become oppositional due to lack of teacher enthusiasm and teachers who are unable to connect in relationship with them. The way these teachers understand the importance of building relationships with students supports this theory. Teachers also see parents as an important factor in boys' lives.

### **Power of Parenting**

During interviews and group discussions the role parents play in education regularly surfaced. The actions of parents were believed to have an influence on the learning of the child. For instance, boys whose parents read to them were believed to have an advantage in succeeding in school. If parents had high expectations for the student, regardless of the educational level of the parent, students were able to succeed. Molly also noted, "When you meet with parents you know parents are pushing their kids to read and it can be a boy or a girl and it all boils down to their parents' expectations." Teachers in the research group believed parent expectations played an important role in the success of boys. Frank recalls the power of a mother's push for her son to succeed:

There is a kid on this campus and no names but that mom had such high expectations for that kid. I couldn't believe what she expected the kid to do. You know what I'm saying?

Hey this kid struggles with the most basic things and she expected him to have a B or something like that and the kid usually came through somehow.

Not all boys respond to the high expectations of a parent. Sometimes boys fail even when parents are concerned, involved, and supportive. Parental support is seen as an important ingredient in the success of the student, yet there can be exceptions. The phenomenon of the disengaged boy from the supportive family has been cited in the literature (Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010) and here Norm refers to its existence in this school district..

I've been around long enough you know, I mean parenting is clearly one of the problems, but I've had some super supportive parents and sometimes you still have a kid, for whatever reason, for no more time than what I get to spend with them, doesn't seem to care and like the subject. It's not that the parents aren't supportive. The parents are called and they'll say, "How can I help? What do I need to do?"

Economic stress on families was identified as having an influence on a parent's ability to support the learning of a son or daughter. Here Molly weighs in with what she sees with parents and families in her work with them in their homes:

Those of us who do home visits would echo that just the family in general, if they don't have the basic needs . . . that Maslow's hierarchy . . . if they don't know where their money is coming from, or where their housing is going to be, or they have no vehicle, us working on anything else related to skills (sigh) good luck with that because that is not their priority they need to have.

When people are trying to find ways to meet their basic needs for living, it becomes difficult to support children in their education. There was majority agreement that the population of low socio-economic students has increased during the past 20 to 30 years in this district and with that change, family values have changed as well. There was also agreement with the idea that the way families operate has changed over the years also. Currently there seems to be little or no parental involvement. Connor describes what he sees:

We have a lot of kids who are in families, and I use that term very loosely, but where they don't have a positive role model anywhere. You know there's no uncles or aunts involved. Mom's a drunk. Dad's in jail. Whatever the case may be.

The parent's role could be positive and supporting or negative and lacking support or worse. Families are under economic stress and that stress makes it difficult to parent. When parents break the law on top of that it makes for a chaotic and unsupportive home life for the children. Here Connor refers to a student who is part of his school's at-risk program:

I think of the pilot group we're working with this year and a lot of those young men by default have stepped into a role that they're not ready for. We have a young man that we're dealing with now that comes to the top of my mind where just this past weekend the mother was arrested and pulled from the home and the father has no control.

### **Children Taking on New Roles**

Several times, teachers in the study group suggested that roles had been reversed and children were parenting themselves or that children were being asked to take on responsibilities they were not ready for. Boys who were described as having no positive male role models at

home were seen to be at a disadvantage. The dominant opinion of the research group was that family structures of the students they teach are different today than they were even 10 years ago. The maturity level of the children is different and loss of innocence occurs earlier. The stress of the change in family dynamics has caused some children to rebel. Bonnie describes how she has seen the way children have changed:

And I just think that our society in general . . . that maturation changes have moved down. I could say that when I first started teaching 4<sup>th</sup> grade they were still very innocent. Yet you know, and everything has kind of come down lower and lower in grade level as far as things they've been exposed to, just experiences in life. They've been given a whole lot more responsibility than they used to. You know some of these kids are kind of running the home. Mom and Dad are working or they [the child] are kind of the parent in some cases.

More than once problems were described as being made worse by the poor economic environment.

I just think the stability of home life for kids is rare that you have two parents and also our economic situation right now has caused a lot of stress in families. I think that's had an effect too. It's just put a lot more responsibility on kids and sometimes I think they're rebelling.

## **Male Role Models**

More than once, the idea of providing male role models was believed to be beneficial or if there was a deficit it was seen as due to lack of the presence of a male role model. Here Frank reflects on some of his colleagues thoughts about the influence of male role models:

And I tread gently by not mentioning any of our current coaches, but in the past I've heard a coach or two say, "You know the guy will never step up to the plate, and one of the reasons is because he hasn't had that strong male role model."

Similar to the research cited earlier (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2009) male teachers were looked to as an answer in encouraging boys to succeed. One teacher remembered in the 1970's and 80's when there was a push to bring more men into teaching. "So if you were a guy and came out of college with a degree in elementary ed. you were about guaranteed you were going to get the job." The belief that more men in the classroom would solve the problems of boys was identified several times during the collection of data. Although out of all the classroom teachers from kindergarten to fifth grade in this district, currently there is only one male teaching fourth grade, there were teachers who remembered when more male teachers taught in the grade schools and the men were often looked to as a key to helping boys succeed. Jill shares this:

I mean we've only had one male in our school but we've kind of separated thinking that this child will need a male and so you know you're kind of thinking that way and so you tend to put those kids in a male classroom. I don't know if it makes any difference or not but you kind of have that mindset that, oh they need that influence or they need that role model.

Even though Mills, Martino, and Lingard (2004) point out that looking to male teachers as the answer to boys problems implies that women are in some way deficient as teachers and studies have shown whether a teacher is male or female has no effect on the behaviors, attitudes or achievement of students regardless if that student is a boy or a girl (Driessen, 2007), there is still a strong belief in teachers and parents that having a male teacher will make a difference for a boy. “I know at the high school we have teacher shopping all the time. That’s what I call it when someone wants to pick which teacher their kid gets.” Sometimes the teacher is chosen solely because he is a man.

### **Stress and Pressure of Education Today**

One theme that was ever present in the data was the stress and pressure educators feel as part of their day-to-day work. State testing, four year olds in kindergarten, budget cuts, district decisions to cut programs and experiment with new ones, identify some of the causes of stress for teachers in this research.

#### **Stress from State Testing**

State testing driven by No Child Left Behind law probably creates the most stress. Recordings and transcriptions captured the frustration teachers feel as they prepare students for testing every spring so their building will make adequate yearly progress. Teachers thought they had more students in class who do not qualify for special education services but at the same time these students are not capable of what they are being asked to do. Even though students do not qualify for special education some are not developmentally ready to work at the academic level of the curriculum, which is being “shoved down their throats.” Some teachers speculated that

the reason for so many disciplinary referrals is because students are engaging in avoidance behavior to escape doing the work. Teachers said if a student did not make the standard one year, they are given twice the work the next year in order to catch up. Norm questions this policy, “So what’s that doing for a kid’s motivation? They act out!” During one discussion regarding state assessments, Bonnie stopped and asked, “Are we still recording?” I nodded yes. She then leaned over and defiantly said into the audio recorder, “I say screw the state assessments!” To which everyone cheered and nodded in agreement. “Alright! I second that.”

Discussion continued over frustration that the test is often misunderstood when for instance a school will one year make standard of excellence, but then not make standard of excellence the next which causes concern in some of the general public. What is not understood is that each year the test is assessing a new and different class of students. Some may think the same results are achievable each year but sometimes there are variables beyond the teachers’ control. Bonnie describes it this way:

It’s a different group. Right! It’s not a sheet of metal that you fold the same way every time like in manufacturing. I always say we’re dealing with a human life and not a piece of metal.

When I listen to this recording I feel the frustration in their voices and I note their observations of what the No Child Left Behind law and state testing is doing to their students. As Connie says, there is “Way too much testing. Way too much.” If students are unable to pass, they receive more work for things they may still not be ready for. The stress and pressure spirals out of

control and students act out while at the same time they learn school is a place they do not like because they are not successful with what they are being asked to do.

### **Budget Cuts**

To add to the stress of trying to teach children and prepare them for a test that they may not be developmentally ready for, budget cuts by the state continue to take away resources for helping students. In a class of 25 students it is difficult to differentiate instruction without the aid of another adult in the room to help manage. Classroom paraprofessionals provide the necessary assistance in order for well planned and well managed differentiation to occur. During the time of the interviews some paraprofessional positions had already been cut and more were being targeted in order to reduce spending. Bonnie worries about what might happen:

That's going to be a level of concern for teachers next year because if they do cut paras which they keep talking that that's a possibility. I don't see how we can physically get around to the kids that we need to get around to. That's going to be real.

And you can only get so many kids in a small group in a day so I don't know . . . but if there is money for some tutoring that's helpful. The paras are invaluable. I don't know how they can get around not cutting that kind of money but I mean a teacher can only do so much.

There is very much a sense of frustration as teachers try to rise to the occasion and prepare students to do their best; yet at the same time, lack of state funding forces cuts in vital resources for differentiating instruction and reaching every learner.

## **Pushed Down Curriculum**

Similar to the information cited in the review of literature (Sax, 2001; Mulvey, 2009), teachers who work with elementary students cited problems with students and particularly boys who are being asked to do things they are not ready for. Teachers pointed out that kindergarten used to be mostly about social skills, but now has become focused on the academics of literacy and numeracy. Bonnie observed, “By kindergarten they need to have come in with identification of letters and are supposed to know all of that and start reading already.” The curriculum which once was taught in first grade is now taught in kindergarten. To add to that complication, the school start dates continue to be moved up earlier and earlier into August. A child must be 5 by September 1 in order to attend kindergarten. Because school is starting in the middle of August this means it is possible for 4 year olds to be starting kindergarten and indeed this is happening and the results are not positive. A 4 year old boy sitting next to a girl who will turn 6 in the next month or two creates a very wide developmental gap in the classroom. Jill experienced it this year in her classroom:

I started school with two 4 year olds this year. Because it’s not until September 1 so they have until September 1 to turn 5, well we keep starting school earlier and earlier so we have more and more 4 year olds starting school. And they’re not ready for school.

In the review of literature it was noted that boys brain development lags behind girls by as much as two years (Mulvey, 2009; Sax, 2001). In addition to the natural biological differences in brain maturity and readiness to learn between boys and girls, the early start date of school has made it possible to increase that gap even more. Jill said, “I mean at a younger age, yes, I do notice that

girls are more mature and can handle social things a little differently, but when you're 4 and you're a boy, it's all stacked against you." Teachers recognized that often kindergartners are enrolled as an economic family decision; sending the child to school to alleviate day care expenses. Parents look forward to all day kindergarten but that new structure can be difficult for some children. Jill says just because a student is five years old doesn't mean the student is ready for school.

And we keep pushing up the date of all day kindergarten starting at the beginning and we've had more melt-downs this year than we've ever had. Because we're expecting them from day one to function for 8 hours and they've never been asked to do anything for eight hours.

Some kindergarten students find themselves in a world that is unfamiliar to them and that they are not ready for. Recall the disciplinary referral data mentioned earlier in this chapter where three kindergarten boys were sent to the office 47 times in one year. Teachers speculated the increase they see in attention and discipline problems is a result of children not being ready for organized structure and demands of the classroom. If a child is not emotionally and developmentally ready for school, that child will experience stress from the new situation. Jill sees it in her class:

Well, I think you notice it like in my boys. Because they are . . . they have tons of emotional things happening so they're not ready to sit down and learn because they have all this other stuff they're dealing with.

The only thing they have ever done for eight hours is play. Jill continues by once again revealing how she as a teacher responds to the needs of her kindergarten learners by allowing more time for her students to play.

Yeah right except play, but we can't play because we have all of this stuff that we have to get done so we're just . . . it's really sad. So we just take the time when we're not supposed to. (Laughter from group) So we play a lot more sometimes than we should.

We have to.

It was pointed out that just because a student is five years old does not mean that student is ready for school. Teachers wished parents understood that before sending their child off to kindergarten and teachers also wished there was an alternative. Once upon a time there was. It was a program called developmental first grade.

### **Story of the Developmental First Grade**

Bonnie started her teaching career teaching a developmental first grade class at one of the grade schools in town. Children who had gone through kindergarten but weren't quite ready for first grade were given more time to developmentally catch up. In a smaller setting students were given more time to prepare for first grade in a curriculum which was basically another year of kindergarten. Today there are no such programs in the district. Today, if students attend the district pre-school at the early childhood center they must go into kindergarten at age five and then into first grade after that. There are no alternatives for students who might benefit from more time. Adding another year of school in order for some students to have time to develop so they can succeed in school costs more money. Maybe that's why the program was dropped, but

Bonnie relates another possible reason while underscoring the fact that the program allowed students to progress and was a success:

They did away with that program because they were afraid that kids would be driving to middle school I was told. (laughter) And it just didn't make sense because some of those kids would come out and go back in to first grade. Basically it was another year of kindergarten but we were in a smaller setting. We were limited to 15 students. There was a para and myself, and you know the kids made the progress.

It is stressful to try to teach kindergarten to a class with such a wide range of developmental readiness and still attend to the needs of every individual learner. Jill shares this wish:

I just wish parents would think about that before they send their kid and not send it for a day care purpose but I know that money is an issue so that has to happen but I wish there was an in between place you could go before kindergarten like between kindergarten and preschool.

While the district may no longer have a developmental first grade, there are still some initiatives and other programs taking place in order to try to reach and connect with every learner. Here is one such program.

### **Story of the iPads and the At-Risk Group**

Two of the participants were from the seventh and eighth grade middle school where an experimental program for at-risk students was started this year. Teachers, counselors and principals identified a small group of 13 students, 10 boys and 3 girls, who struggled with appropriate classroom behavior and motivation to learn and succeed. A schedule was created

where this group would be together all day and move from class to class together. Each student was issued his or her own iPad to use in class for learning. Connor reports:

The newness of it was great for the kids. I think there was an interest there. You know it was just the fact that they had something that the other kids didn't have, but we were behind the eight ball from the standpoint that we didn't get the iPads until about a week before school started.

Teachers did not have adequate time to plan for the new technology to think and prepare for how these might be used. There were no Kansas state history applications for example and minimal training on how the technology might be used. Also, because students in this group had difficulty writing and taking notes in class it was thought that the iPads would be a great way for them to use technology to overcome this weakness. As it turned out the students found it difficult to type with much speed using the virtual keyboards. Most students used a texting style of input where they were using their thumbs instead of all their fingers to type. By October when our research group started meeting the word was that some of the students no longer had the privilege of using their iPads because the screens had been broken or they were accessing non-school related sites. Without the iPads the small group of students did not seem to have much going for it. Teachers described these class periods with this group as not being very pleasant. Connor noted, "You spend more time teaching simple behaviors. How to sit still. How to listen. How to read. Than you do working on the shortcomings of the kids." Later on in one of the group sessions a teacher from the high school shared information about one of the counselors at the high school identifying a group of students who may be at-risk. The group was just forming

and it was not yet clear what programming would be provided for these students. David remarked, “You’re not putting them in one group and having them travel all day together are you? No. Good. Because that’s a bad idea. That’s the failure of our program is we don’t have support outside of the classroom.”

In order to better meet the needs of the learner, students were regrouped into a special class and given a piece of technology with the intention of improving their opportunities to learn. The success of this program seems to be somewhat limited but it has added to the daily stress for these teachers and probably for the students as well.

In the individual semi-structured interviews I ended every interview by saying thank you and if you have other ideas you will be able to contribute those when we meet in the discussion group. Here is Norm’s reply which I will use to end this section on stress and pressure in education. “I think we’ll get some ideas just by talking about it because you know normally we’re so busy day to day to day that we don’t have time to sit and talk about this stuff.”

Teachers have critical responsibilities with what they do in the classroom. Often their jobs are influenced by policies or agents outside of their control. The participatory action research model used in this study allowed this group of twelve educators to hear and be heard. These teachers volunteered their time and by doing so they learned about some of the issues in educating boys as well as the stress and pressure they feel in their classes. The next section validates that it is important to take time to talk about problems affecting our education system as well as the importance of trust and feeling safe and supported to take action for improvement.

## **Taking Action and Trust**

As stated in the Methodology and Research Design section of this dissertation, Participatory Action Research has been defined as research in which the researcher becomes a facilitator who works with those being studied to lead them in helping define what needs to be examined leading to the next steps for investigation and deciding what action should be taken (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). To that end I facilitated and helped the participants learn about some of the national issues in boys' education and they in turn informed me and the rest of the group of the challenges boys face in this district as well as the things they do for boys and all learners to succeed. Through this experience as part of the boys' education research group they became enthusiastic, engaged, and showed a sustained interest in the topic. Janet described herself as even being passionate about the topic:

I mean that's what drew me back. I kept coming back to get this information. I mean I didn't know I would be so passionate about it when I sat here the first time and it's like it sucked me in.

Others also felt strongly about the time spent as part of this project had been worthwhile. Frank said, "My kudos to you Mr. Siemens. Not that I became passionate about this, but this raised a whole bunch of other questions and it's been fun thinking about this."

The boys' education research group pointed out that this information is important because it covers pre-k through twelfth grade. Some of the comments made were, "This is a district wide issue and we want to share it with the district." and "I think there are definitely some things here

that are obvious from K through twelve that our district needs to be aware of.” The teachers were ready to take action but there were some challenges that would have to be overcome.

One obstacle that became apparent in preparing to share this research was a lack of trust within the district. “What feedback are you giving to the district and who are you giving feedback to?” This was followed by several people laughing nervously. Although there were indicators along the way that lack of trust in the district was an issue, it was in these discussions of how and who to report this information to where mistrust was most prevalent. Here one participant identifies the trust issue. To insure confidentiality I have not attached a name to this comment:

I think one thing that’s in the culture of our district is this thought that there are trust issues from level to level and I think that is something that may be addressed as we proceed toward a new superintendent and so I think that is a part of the whole social scene in which we try to promote something like this.

At the fifth boys’ education research group meeting, it was decided that the information the group had discovered should be shared with the rest of the district, but there was not a clear, obvious choice for how to share this information. Group members’ thoughts of how to share the information from our boys’ education research revealed a lack of trust in the way information is communicated in the district. Some thought it should be shared with administrators and specifically the administrators for curriculum and instruction were named. Then there was discussion that some administrators might suppress the information or not think that it was important. Here is one participant’s analogy that captures some of the skepticism in administration:

I still look at it like someone who steps on the scale every morning and looks down and they don't like the numbers they see and they say, "Oh, I'll worry about it tomorrow." I just worry that that's what's going to happen is we're going to give this information to these individuals and they're going to look at the scale and say, "O.K. We'll worry about this tomorrow."

Others thought this might be a good topic to take up within departments or should be suggested as a topic for a staff development in-service day. Some thought the information should be shared at the start of the school year with the whole district during the all district assembly that traditionally starts the school year so everyone would receive the same message. There was also the realization that other teachers might not become as connected and enthusiastic about this because of everything else teachers are being asked to do.

If you throw the idea out there you might have some buy in but you might have some teachers who say, "Well you've asked us to do MTSS this year, you're asking us to do common core standards, you're asking us to do this, you're asking us to do that." I don't know.

There was a belief that everyone should be given this information all at once. I explained my time-line for completing this research and that I would present my report to the district in the spring after I had finished transcription and analysis of data and had written my dissertation. The group wanted to get the word out sooner so on January 6, 2012 at the start of second semester a memo was distributed via e-mail to everyone in the district summarizing what the boys' education research group had found. With the statement that the group felt strongly that the rest

of the district needed to be aware of this data on boys to help guide future decisions and teaching practices. This concludes the section on taking action and trust. These topics will be discussed further in chapter five. This also concludes chapter four and sharing the results of the research. In chapter five I will show how the research answers the research questions and discuss further implications.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This chapter delivers conclusions, implications, and makes suggestions for future research. I will begin with a review of the research problem and then align the results of the findings to answer the three research questions.

#### **Research Problem Revisited**

Most people believe teachers in public schools at all levels are trained professionals who understand and use the best practices and pedagogical means for teaching and managing all students (Aud, Hussan, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp & Tahan 2011). Many teachers are committed to their profession. By their actions, one might say they care deeply about their students. Yet, the way they care does not fit Noddings (1984) model. They spend long hours planning, preparing, assessing and grading. They maintain high expectations for their students. Our public education system is designed to create an educated work force of citizens for the public good and at many levels this education system works. High school students graduate and find employment, or enroll in vocational programs or go on to college where they continue to succeed. However, a significant population of boys are not achieving and succeeding at the same level when compared to girls (Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010).

Boys are falling behind girls in many areas. Nationally, when compared to girls, more boys are placed in special education, receive more disciplinary referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and are more likely to dropout (Sadker & Sadker 2002). Also boys receive lower grades overall

compared to girls and are less likely to enroll in challenging coursework to prepare them for college (Kleinfeld, 2009; Sax, 2007). Research has been inconclusive on attempts to correct the problem through the use of single-sex schools (Glasser, 2011) or recruitment of more male teachers (Holmlund & Sund, 2006).

### **Themes Answer the Research Questions**

This participatory action research project created an opportunity for collaboration across grade levels to study the phenomenon of boys' underachievement. Research activities were conducted and viewed through the lens of Noddings' (1984) care theory to better understand teacher and student relationships and how such relationships might help boys succeed in school. Three questions were used to design and guide research activities to investigate the phenomenon. Chapter four shared the results of data collection and the identification of six themes arising from the investigation. In chapter five I use the six themes of, differences between boys and girls, care through responsive teaching, care through building relationships, power of parents, stress and pressure in education, and taking action and trust, to inform answers to the research questions.

#### **Research Question 1: What Factors are Contributing to Male Underachievement as Perceived by Local Educators?**

The first five themes covered in chapter four: differences between boys and girls, care through responsive teaching, care through building relationships, power of parents, stress and pressure in education can influence boys' achievement in positive or negative ways.

**Differences between boys and girls.** Some teachers view boys from a deficit perspective. When teachers in this research were asked to talk about boys and education, their

descriptions of boys were often given comparing boys to girls. Even though the group of teachers was chosen because they are seen as working well with boys or all learners, when teachers talked about boys, it was often in regard to what boys lacked or did not do as compared to girls. Boys were described as being developmentally behind girls and were said to be not as mature. Boys compared to girls were said to be less compliant and willing to sit still. Boys were said to be prone not to write in detail or carefully answer questions in writing compared to girls. Some boys were seen as not taking school seriously compared to girls. Although this deficit view of boys was not as great compared to research cited earlier (Clark, Lee, Goodman & Yacco, 2008), boys in the Midwest-Town school district were seen as deficient compared to girls. This deficit view is inconsistent with Noddings' (1984) care theory. Because a student is a boy, a teacher may have lower expectations for that student. An attitude of "boys will be boys" does not proactively look for solutions of how to reach and teach boys.

**Care through responsive teaching.** Even though some teachers held a deficit view of boys, some shared ideas of how they are successful in teaching them. Providing non-fiction reading, giving students choices, and learning activities that were made into competitions were some of the examples of the ways teachers were successful. These findings were similar to Reichert's (2010) research on what works in the lessons and teaching of boys. Running contrary to these examples, teachers shared their observations that students in some classes were not being asked to think. Teachers were aware some assignments and teaching were done without much engagement on the part of the student or the teacher. Karen shared her belief that students were being "work sheeted" to death. Careless teaching which does not respond to the learner, does not

inspire thinking or working hard. Boys will only work hard enough to complete the worksheet. In completing a worksheet, the goal of the student is not to learn, the goal is to be “done.” Uninspired by the lack of care and effort of the teacher, many boys just get by. A mutual relationship between the teacher and student is foundational to Noddings’ (1984) theory of care. When teachers respond to the needs of the learner they set the stage for a mutual relationship. They reach out and then students respond in reply. There was some evidence of this type of caring but it was not seen in all of the teachers in the study. Many boys exist in a school system devoid of responsive and caring teaching, and because of this, these boys are not achieving to their true potential.

**Care through building relationships.** Teachers believed in the importance of building and maintaining relationships with their students. If teachers fail to build relationships with their students it is very difficult for the student to learn. Noddings (2005) says a mutual relationship is vital to learning. Understanding the quality of the relationship between teacher and student is a key because it is in this relationship where students will be supported in order to succeed ( Hamre, & Pianta, 2005; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Raider-Roth, 2005). Relationships with teachers are critical to engagement and motivation to learn. Some teachers in the study saw building relationships with students as the most important thing they can do as a teacher. Bonnie related:

I think that developing that relationship is essential. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes they’ve had it stepped on so much they’re not trusting. At third grade it seems like you can still develop that.

Teachers in the research group were aware boys and teachers were not always able to build a positive and supporting relationship in the classroom. Without a strong relationship boys are not likely to engage in the subject in a way that they can reach a high level of performance.

**Power of parents.** Parents play an important role in supporting boys' learning (Sax, 2007; Tyre, 2008). Julie said, "The parents who have their kids in the infant toddler program and are more successful, push their kids along." When parents had high expectations, pushed their sons to get good grades in school, and read to their sons at home, the teachers saw that the boys were successful. If the parent was absent or not involved in their son's life; then the boy was more likely to struggle in school. Parents have an important role to play in the success of boys. Noddings (2005) would point out that parents provide the conditions for children to be cared for and to learn to care for others. When parents fail to support boys' learning in school, it is difficult for boys to succeed and reach a high standard.

**Stress and pressure in education.** The push for state testing driven by No Child Left Behind (USDE, 2001) has pushed down the curriculum so that what once was taught in first grade is now taught in kindergarten. Findings for this district were similar to the problems reported by Mulvey (2009). Teachers noted that boys are often behind girls in levels of performance, particularly in language. In addition, in order for school districts to have more teaching days before the window of testing in the spring when the state says districts must test, schools keep moving their start date of school earlier into August. Yet the cutoff birthday date for children to enter kindergarten remains September 1. Consequently, 4 year olds are starting kindergarten alongside students who are older and more capable. Jill said, "If I have a 4-year-old

boy starting and if I have a 5-year-old boy starting there's a huge difference or even in the girls there's a huge difference between boys and girls." Parents enroll their children looking forward to the start of school so they will no longer have to pay for day care, but then find that their son hates school. Students are not emotionally ready for the structure and demands of all day kindergarten. Care theory would say that instead of trying to push children into early literacy and numeracy, schools would better serve learners by teaching them how to care and be cared for. The negative experience of the pushed down curriculum is formative and can shape the rest of boys' school careers. The stress and pressure of education is a factor in boys' struggles in school.

**Research Question 2: What are the Attributes of Positive Teacher and Student Relationships that Support Learning?**

Teachers saw the need to take time to be seen as a person and to also take time to learn something about the student. Teachers saw the need to build and maintain relationships over time. Linda said, "Because the more you know about the kid, the more you know about what makes them tick and the more you can try and work with that instead of trying to break 'em down." The idea of a relational self is concerned with a teacher's capacity for relationships (Raider-Roth 2005). Teachers' capacity for relationships varies, but can be seen in instances when the teacher is "present" or "in the moment" with students. When a teacher is listening to a student's story of what they did on Halloween night is a good example. Teacher presence is evident when the teacher realizes students are frustrated by the academics of the pushed down curriculum and she takes time to let them play. Teacher presence is an important attribute in relationships that support learning.

Teachers also saw the importance of having high standards or rigor in teaching. They provided structure to help students with organization as well as providing structure through routines to reinforce manners and conduct. David said, “There’s those that think if we just make it so they enjoy school, then they’re going to be able to act right and do everything the way they’re supposed to.” These veteran teachers did not believe just making school “enjoyable” will result in better student performance in academics or behavior. There was a belief from some of the teachers in the group there was a need for rigor for the way students behave in school. Frank said:

I think there is this *poor kid syndrome* that goes on too often. I thought about that and the very true situation where some of our kids might spend the night at the homeless shelter or in cars. We’re not helping them move along in life if we say, “Oh you live in a car; we better lower our expectations.”

Along with teacher presence, another attribute of positive teacher and student relationships identified by teachers in the research group was maintaining high expectations for students in academics and behavior. Understanding teacher presence and having high standards also overlap to answer how teachers see their role as a teacher.

### **Research Question 3: How do Teachers’ Understandings of Care for Boys Shape Their Role as a Teacher?**

All of the teachers in the boys’ education research group understood the importance of care as a teacher and care was identified in two themes in the data. First, teachers were able to show care through responsive teaching in which they planned lessons, taught and managed their

classrooms. Planned activities, methods, and materials were selected and designed to respond to the needs of all learners or to boys specifically. The use of competition, games, teamwork and cooperative learning in pairs or small groups was noted. Reading material or examples used to illustrate concepts in the classroom were selected with thought of appealing to all learners. Care was taken to think and identify books and topics in which boys would have an interest.

Second, teachers believed strongly in the importance of building relationships with their students. Connie said her job was 80% relationship and 20% academic and Linda said if boys were not succeeding in school, then teachers should look at building better relationships and getting to know the students individually to understand the different nuances of motivation in individual learners. Teachers told how they deliberately take time for their students to learn to know something about them as a teacher, and likewise teachers worked to learn something about their individual students. They understood relationships do not automatically form and that it was important to take time and make an effort to get to know every student. If we recall Karen's story of how she took time to talk to the student about deer hunting and apply Noddings (1984) model of care, it might look like this: Karen is engrossed in the moment, is empathic to the needs of the deer hunting student and acts in a way that cares for the deer hunting student. Deer hunting student recognizes that Karen cares for him. The sum of all of these actions is what makes a caring encounter. In order to maintain and cultivate care, strings of these encounters must occur over time (Noddings, 1984, 2005; Patterson, Gordon, & Groves Price, 2008).

Kathy starts by demonstrating her ability to be present with the student. She stops to make a connection and remind that student she is interested in him not just because she wants

him to do his work, but she recognizes something is missing; teacher care. She gives a level of care to that student by shutting out everything else and listening to the student tell her about something that is important to him. She is present in the moment. None of this will be measured on the state assessments, but Karen understands if she takes time to do these things, she increases the likelihood this student will succeed in her class. Teachers' understanding of how they care for boys shapes their role as a teacher as they focus on building relationships in which the teacher is present with the student and maintains high standards for academics and conduct.

### **Implications**

The most intriguing implication of this research comes out of the sixth theme reported in the results: taking action and trust. The information from this research will be shared with the district. Participants believe the findings of this research are important and need to be shared with others in the district. However, there exists a challenging level of mistrust. What will the district do to first address the issues of trust and what will the district do? With a new superintendent hired and an almost complete change of leadership in central office there is an opportunity to usher in a new era of transparent communication and trust. If the world has changed but education has not as Noddings (2005) says, then perhaps the ways school districts operate and communicate needs to change. Teacher leaders need to be supported through open and meaningful communication as ideas for improvement come from the classroom.

### **Teacher Ideas for Raising Boys' Achievement**

Ideas generated by teachers in this project should be considered. One overarching idea was to enhance and emphasize the importance of relationships and caring in the district. This

idea is consistent with care theory as it is applied to schools. Above all else, children should be taught to be caring and compassionate before they are taught math and reading (Noddings 2005). Two ways it was suggested to accomplish this were through the creation of a teacher to student mentor program and enhance opportunities for student to student caring. If strong supportive relationships are built with a particular teacher in one grade level, what if those relationships were to continue throughout their school career? Connor explains:

I establish a very solid relationship with a young person. Why, then, can't I become that person's mentor? Why can't there be time carved out for that kid to come and visit me at the middle school or for me to go to the high school to check in with them? You know we constantly push the need for relationships and connections with kids.

At the elementary level teachers wanted to consider the benefits of the teachers looping up with a group of students to have them for two years instead of one in order to build and keep a supportive relationship for a longer time. The idea of teachers looping with students is also supported by Noddings (2005).

The second idea of enhancing care and relationships looked at doing more to intentionally and deliberately teach students to care for one another. Programs like book buddies are already used when upper grade and lower grade students are paired for reading, but what if a more specific curriculum of care were infused throughout the school day rather than just on the days of the week that the fourth graders go read to the first graders? Might we teach the students how to care for one another and thereby increase student success rates?

## **Linkage of Boys Struggles in School with State of Men in Society**

Researchers have pointed out high male incarceration rates, declining male voting rates, declining male engagement in raising children, and overall problems in fulfilling civic and family responsibilities as evidence of the way men are struggling in our society (Mortenson 2005).

During one of the group sessions, Frank shared this observation and question:

We've noticed that men in our society are poorer and poorer protectors, providers, and defenders. And I wonder if there's any linkage here? And the protector, provider, and defender is a character issue, but I wonder if it might apply itself in some academic way here?

Are men's struggles in society a result of the way they are being educated? Are boys growing up in a school system that does not model care and therefore boys do not learn ways society expects them to care. Noddings (2005) points out the world has changed a great deal but schools have not kept pace with these changes. If schools continue to teach in the same way and the result is boys who grow up to be men who are disengaged from society, shouldn't the way we teach and care for boys change to seek a different result?

### **Limitations**

Limitations in research denote areas of weakness in a study or research that are not possible to minimize or avoid (Creswell, 2007). Biases and assumptions held by some members of the group may have had an effect on the results gathered. The research was limited by the relatively small group of teachers in the study group. In a district of over 350 certified employees, I only interviewed and worked with 12 teachers. The relatively small number of

teachers used for the study made it possible for me to complete the research in a reasonable amount of time and ensured information shared was authentic and related to the study. The data collected was not fully representational of all groups involved but provided insights into how boys might be helped to overcome some of the struggles they are currently facing. Information gained through the study counters any negative effects of limits due to size of the study.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In this research it was discovered in one of the schools a “bubble” population with a ratio of 2 to 1 boys exists in one of the elementary schools. Conduct interviews with the teachers in the school who have had the opportunity to teach the class that has twice as many boys as girls.

Replicate the study with another group of teachers but change the criteria for selection. Solicit teachers to be a part of the study who see themselves as weak in working with boys and who want to improve their teacher to student relationships.

Do more in-depth analysis and observation of teachers in the field. Most of the information gathered for this research was from their perspective. Observing relationships in the field may reveal other factors of teacher to student relationships.

Conduct research on boys’ achievement in the district using quantitative methodology.

Use participatory action research made up of a group of at-risk boys and their teachers to focus on teacher to student and student to teacher relationships.

Based on some of the successes of this research, I would encourage further use of participatory action research in solving problems within school districts.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Boys are struggling in a number of ways. This study has allowed me to consider some of the reasons for the gaps in male achievement seen as boys grow to find their place in the world. The power of relationships is an important factor to consider. From what I have learned here I believe teacher education programs need to address building relationships at a deeper level. The veteran teachers in this study saw relationships as one of the keys to positive outcomes for students, yet the quality of the relationship is variable due to the variations in the personalities of students and teachers.

In order for districts to improve, there must be a level of trust between teachers and administration. When teachers are bound by fear and do not take action to improve the quality of teaching and learning because of that fear, students suffer. The use of participatory action research with an outside facilitator was useful in discovering the breakdown of communication and should be considered as a tool for moving districts forward. I hope to be able to use the knowledge I have gained in conducting this research to continue to help improve our public education communities.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

Wichita State University - Educational Leadership Department

### STUDY: PROTOCOL FOR BOYS STUDY TEAM MEETINGS

**Dates of Meetings:** First week of September and then every two weeks after that.

**Location of Study Group Meetings**

**Participants' Names**

**Facilitators Name : Doug Siemens**

#### *Introduction and Ground Rules*

Participants introduce themselves to each other.

The facilitator will make sure everyone participates and feels welcome

The group will analyze data together and the conversation will come from this information to help keep the group focused on the topic.

Examples of topics to be covered: Looking at district and national data on grades and achievement, placement in special education as well as honors and advanced placement classes. Understanding of care theory and how relationships influence learning. Draw on knowledge and understanding of best practice for what works for boys through a show and tell of their favorite lesson.

Questions will emanate from the topics. Sample questions for school data might include: Have you seen this in your classroom? What are some of the differences? Why do those differences exist? What role does school play in these gaps? What can teachers do?

Although there may be many outside reasons for boys' gap in achievement, the facilitator will keep the conversation focused on the school's responsibility for meeting the needs of boys learning.

You have been provided a copy of the consent form that you signed. I have some extra copies if necessary.

## APPENDIX B



*Fall, 2011*

*Department of Educational Leadership  
Campus Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

You are invited to participate in a study of boys' achievement gap and the ethic of care. The study participants include pre-K--12 teachers in USD 373. The field study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate from the Wichita State University Educational Leadership Doctoral program. The purposes of this study are to obtain perspectives on boys' achievement and how care and student and teacher relationships support learning.

A participatory action research study group of 8 to 10 teachers will be formed to answer questions on boys' achievement and student and teacher relationships. The study group will include representation from all building levels in USD 373. The researcher will also conduct individual interviews with teachers prior to assembling the teaching boys study group. Study participants are selected based on purposeful sampling. You have been selected to participate based on the fact that you were recommended by an administrator, counselor or teacher on their evaluation that you work exceptionally well in meeting the needs of boys or meeting the needs of all learners in the classroom.

During data collection, participants will be encouraged to be open in their responses. Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. The study is designed to provide feedback that will assist in forming plans of action. The process and research results lead to a non-threatening study for participants. There will be no anticipated risks to the participants. All participation will be voluntary, and participants will be apprised of the research purpose.

The research is conducted at the request of the district. Results of the study will benefit USD 373 by providing data to improve the quality of education for its students. In addition, the research data will provide administrators with information to better serve the needs of the community.

If you have any questions about this research you can contact Dr. Linda Bakken, Educational Leadership Department, Wichita State University, Wichita 67260-0142. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

**APPENDIX B (continued)**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study and may withdraw at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with USD 373 or WSU. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided and have voluntarily decided to participate. You may have a copy of this Consent Form.

I agree to participate in the research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### Boy's Education Individual Interview

Person Interviewed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been teaching and where have you taught during that time?

Tell me about what you know about male underachievement and if you see that in your classroom?

If boys' underachievement exists in this school district what do you think should be done about it?

## **APPENDIX D**

### Agenda for Group Meeting 1

1. Ground Rules and Introductions
2. Presentation of Current Research in Boys' Education from review of literature with talk back and discussion.
3. Invitation to bring data from buildings on boys achievement.

### Agenda for Group Meeting 2

1. Share and discuss data brought from buildings.

### Agenda for Group Meeting 3

1. Today we have three objectives:
2. The first is to complete or continue looking at the data you brought to me and try to think does this mean anything?
3. Then I'd like to take some time and just have you go around the room and talk about your classroom. Talk about what works. What's good for you in your classroom?
4. Then the third thing is to decide an agenda for our next meeting.

### Agenda for Group Meeting 4

1. Summarize what has been learned from this process and prepare to share information.

### Agenda for Group Meeting 5

1. Decide how and what will be shared with the district.