

# Relational Teaching With Black Boys: Strategies for Learning at a Single-Sex Middle School for Boys of Color

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**Background/Context:** *Positive teacher-student relationships are critical for Black boys' learning across single-sex and coeducational environments. Limited attention to these relationships by school professionals is rooted in deficit-oriented conceptions of boyhood and Black masculinity. The popular message of deficiency and pathology is clear: Black boys and men are either dangerous or at-risk and need to be saved. Such narrow conceptions are destructive, operate unconsciously, skew teachers' perceptions of who boys are, and distort teachers' efforts to meet boys' distinct learning needs. A "boy crisis" in U.S. education has been characterized by a set of distressing school outcomes in specific learning categories. Racial marginalization and poverty only serve to exacerbate these negative academic outcomes, whereby low-income Black boys remain in the bottom quartile across all achievement measures. Scholars have recently begun to partly attribute boys' underachievement to a lack of emphasis on the relational dimension of schools.*

**Purpose/Focus of the Study:** *(1) Illustrate how a set of relational teaching strategies supported Black boys' engagement and learning, and (2) further contribute boys' "voice" to a counternarrative, which strives to complicate and dispel negative race and gender stereotypes associated with Black males in the United States.*

**Setting/Population/Participants:** *This study employs a relational teaching framework to examine the learning relationships among teachers and a full cohort of eighth-grade Black boys (N = 27) at a single-sex middle school for boys of color in New York City.*

**Research Design/Data Collection:** *In-depth interviews from a critical ethnography conducted at the school-site (2011–2012) culled boys' narratives of their teacher-student relationships.*

**Findings/Discussion:** *Boys particularly expressed how teachers must foremost convey mastery of course content, with a lucid set of humane behavioral expectations. Narratives from the boys revealed how relationally effective teachers consistently enacted the following gestures: reaching out and go beyond; personal advocacy; establishing common ground; and accommodating opposition. Teachers demonstrated the capacity to acquire and refine relational gestures, but relationship struggles among the boys and their teachers were commonplace. Core findings include: (a) Boys illuminated how specific aspects of the school context facilitated successful enactment of the relational teaching strategies by teachers; (b) teachers' use of the relational strategies was also facilitated by the social categories of race, gender, and class the boys embodied; (c) boys' engagement and learning benefited from positive teacher–student relationships, which ensued after effective use of the relational teaching strategies; and (d) relational teaching with Black boys is not limited to either single-sex or coeducational learning environments.*

## INTRODUCTION: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER FOR BLACK BOYS

Increased recognition of the social costs associated with adverse Black male outcomes (e.g., high rates of homicide, suicide, and incarceration, and low rates of high school and college completion; Brown, 2011; Harper, 2014; Howard, 2013) has sparked unprecedented concern among school professionals, community-based organizations, social service agencies, and policy makers. At the helm of their collective action in the United States have been well-respected public officials at the local, state, and most recently, the federal level. In 2014, with \$150 million in financial support from foundations, corporations, and philanthropists, President Obama launched the My Brother's Keeper initiative to redress educational opportunity gaps and improve the life outcomes of Black males and other marginalized males of color. A limitation of this laudable effort is insufficient engagement of antideficit perspectives and the empirical knowledge of "what works" (Warren, Douglas, & Howard, this issue) for Black boys and young men, particularly with regard to their PreK–12 and postsecondary education. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how asset-based perspectives of Black boys bolster their learning relationships with teachers, and further contribute boys' "voice" to a counternarrative, which is intended to disrupt negative race and gender stereotypes linked to Black males in the United States.

This article contends positive teacher–student relationships are critical for Black boys' learning across single-sex and coeducational environments. Teachers' ability to recognize the importance of relational learning for this subgroup is obscured by public discourse often disparaging Black males. The message of deficiency and pathology is clear: Black boys and men are either dangerous or at-risk and need to be saved. The school-based implications of this relational dynamic are primarily twofold: First, teachers often disregard the relational desires and capacities Black boys bring to school and largely attribute their relational perspective to the interrelatedness of urban poverty in the United States (i.e., violence, joblessness, and crime; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 2009), and norms of Black masculinity (i.e., hyperaggression, anti-intellectualism, and hypersexuality; Cose, 2000; Cunningham & Meunier, 1999; Majors, 1992). Second, teachers deemphasize relationships with boys for the purposes of social–emotional development (i.e., social skills, care for others, empathy; Chu, 2014; Warren, 2013, 2014) and prioritize the effective use of evidenced-based instructional strategies to further boys' learning. Neoliberal reform in U.S. education and achievement disparities among Black and

White students have compelled teachers to generally deem relationships with boys less essential for their scholastic success. In contrast, this article illuminates the vital nature of positive learning relationships between Black boys and their schoolteachers, especially given the vulnerabilities and hardships associated with urban life in America.

Boys' narratives of teacher-student relationships were drawn from 27 interviews with a full cohort of eighth graders who were the core participants in a multi-year ethnography of a single-sex school for boys of color in New York City. This article examines how a relational teaching framework (RTF; Reichert & Hawley, 2014), which comprises of discrete strategies to engage boys relationally toward learning, was utilized by middle school teachers to support the engagement and learning of low-income Black boys specifically. In U.S. cities with concentrated poverty, Fergus, Noguera, and Martin (2014) recently conducted a longitudinal study of mainly single-sex high schools for Black and Latino boys, where a key finding centered on these learning environments cultivating school relationships to support boys' academic success. From a deficit perspective, however, school adults believed the boys were nonrelational, and came to these particular schools with a history of strained relationships at home, in their neighborhoods, and at their past schools, but largely resulting from the social and material conditions of urban poverty. This article extends this seminal scholarship by employing a framework rooted in asset-based perspectives of boys, in order to explore the engagement of relational teaching for Black boys' learning and academic performance. In light of the paucity of empirical scholarship on Black boys' schooling during early-adolescence, this research is also situated within the distinct context of a single-sex middle school for Black and Latino boys.

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: BOYHOOD, RELATIONSHIPS, AND LEARNING

A "boy crisis" (*Newsweek*, 2006, p. 1) in U.S. education has been characterized by a set of distressing school outcomes in specific learning categories (e.g., literacy, retention, special education, discipline, and higher education; Kimmel, 2006; Martino, Kehler, & Weaver-Hightower, 2009). Racial marginalization and poverty only serve to exacerbate these negative academic outcomes, whereby Black boys, other boys of color, and boys from low-income backgrounds, remain in the bottom quartile across all achievement categories (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). The social categories of race, class, and gender, and their influence on boys' school success generally, has made it essential to understand the myriad ways Black boys respond, adapt to, and are shaped by school environments (Bristol, 2015;

Noguera, 2008). Scholars have recently begun to partly attribute boys' underachievement to a lack of emphasis on the relational dimension of schools, or not taking a relational learning stance with boys (Raider-Roth, 2005; Reichert & Hawley, 2014). Investigating effective pedagogy for boys globally, Reichert and Hawley (2010) discovered a key relational finding: "Boys experience their teachers before they experience the lessons they teach" (p. 11). The dynamic lessons facilitating boys' grasp of course content revealed the value of personal connection among the boys and their teachers, and how establishing a relationship is a precondition for boys' learning. Extending the theory of a relational self (Gilligan, 1996), Raider-Roth (2005) offered a relational learner model, which posits how relationships constitute the most apt medium to acquire new knowledge, and how a learning self is constructed within boys' relationships at school.

Limited attention to these relationships by school professionals is rooted in deficit-oriented conceptions of boyhood and Black masculinity. Physical toughness, emotional stoicism, and independence and autonomy are the qualities associated with a prevailing *boy code* (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pollack, 1998), and hyperaggression, anti-intellectualism, and hypersexuality are the specific norms related to Black masculinity (Cunningham & Meunier, 1999; Howard, 2014; Majors, 1992). Kindlon and Thompson (2000) and other scholars (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Reichert & Nelson, 2012) argued such archetypes of boys are destructive, operate unconsciously, skew teachers' perceptions of who boys are, and distort efforts to meet boys' distinct learning needs. Many scholars and activists have committed to interrogating boys' social and academic condition, but few have derived their analyses from the boys' perspectives. This present study of relational teaching garners narratives of teacher–student relationships from interviews with low-income Black boys during early adolescence. With a focus on younger Black boys from under-resourced communities, it acts on the empirical claims of Reichert and Hawley (2014), which consider affective relationships critical for successful conveyance of course material, especially for boys confronting difficult social stresses in their everyday lives, or who struggle academically. For these boys, the task was not to determine what subject matter or instructional strategy would stimulate their effort, or extend their learning, but for which school adults the boys would extend themselves in such a manner.

With respect to school engagement and learning, boys' receptivity to the relational dimension of their schools has been underexplored in educational research. Of recent, however, a growing number of empirical studies have examined boys' relational desires, expectations, and social–emotional needs. In a meta-analysis of 20 years of scholarship on boys' friendships, Way (2013) found a mutual care for and interdependency

among a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of boys from early to late adolescence. These findings refute a “false story” (Way, 2013, p. 23) perpetuated by the popular media and challenges narrow conceptions of boyhood in society. There is a clear disconnection between the cultural construction of boyhood and boys’ lives in real-time. The general lack of scholarly and public interest in boys’ friendships, combined with boys’ genuine desires to be in relationship with others, their emotional literacy, as well as boys’ acknowledgment of these feelings, strongly suggests how popular conceptions, expectations, and stereotypes of boys prevent U.S. society from understanding boys and their social-emotional desires and capacities. Due to the vulnerable expression of relational needs by boys unearthed through her scholarship, Way (2013) debunked persisting stereotypes of boys, especially those stereotypes suggesting how boys are nonrelational. Although centered on boys’ friendships, Way (2013) paralleled Reichert and Hawley’s (2014) investigation of boys’ relationships with their teachers. The boys’ views on friendships with peers at school coincided with their views on relationships with teachers. To remedy the disconnect between the culture of boyhood and boys’ sense-of-self, Way (2013) recommended families, communities, and schools work collaboratively toward fostering boys’ resistance to entrenched cultural norms of masculinity, especially the hypermasculinity found among boys from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and Black and Latino boys particularly in the United States. Despite these misconceptions of boyhood and Black masculinity, Way (2013) and other scholars (Howard, 2013; Martino et al., 2009; Noguera, 2008; Reichert & Hawley, 2014) assert how empirical research on boys in U.S. schools fail to substantiate claims of boys’ oppositional stance to learning, which contradicts mainstream portrayals of boys being largely disinterested in school.

Teacher–student relationship quality and its link to academic achievement has been of recent interest to social scientists internationally. This line of inquiry was motivated by the lack of significance between nonrelational instructional approaches and school performance. Teacher focus on the use of effective instructional strategies for boys, in response to race and gender-based achievement disparities, and neoliberalism in U.S. education, was empirically discovered to be unfounded. The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (2009) conducted a global assessment of teacher effectiveness studies, which revealed how research has not identified specific teacher qualifications, characteristics, or classroom practices, with a credible likelihood of enhancing student learning. The studies associated with these aspects of teachers did reveal intangible variables accounting for the majority of variation between achievement and instruction. Teacher–student relationships are among these variables, which

has spurred large-scale investigations of school relationships over the last decade. Taken together, these corroborate the value of positive relationships among students and teachers (e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment, 2009; Measuring Effective Teaching Project, 2009).

Positive relational dynamics for classroom engagement and achievement are reinforced by the field of developmental psychology, which argues how children need secure relationships to meet physical and other developmental milestones, including those tied to learning in a school environment (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). When the social traumas of racism and poverty in the United States are considered, the negative effects on children who experience these insecure relationships can be eventually repaired by positive relationships at school (Sroufe et al., 2005). Of critical importance are low-income Black boys who make up a sizable percentage of students with histories of insecure relationships, exhibit resistant behaviors toward schooling, and thus more challenging to engage relationally toward learning. Empirical evidence also suggests how positive learning relationships may be especially beneficial for teaching children, such as Black boys, who fall at the lower end of various achievement scores (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). A key lever toward enacting this benefit is a robust cultivation of the relational dimension of schools.

#### RESEARCH CONTEXT: BRIGHT BOYS' ACADEMY

In their seminal study of mostly single-sex high schools for Black and Latino boys, Fergus et al. (2014) discovered the potential for academic gains when the relational dimension of these schools were prioritized. Extending this empirical research, as well as contributing to the dearth of scholarship on Black boys' schooling during early adolescence, boys' narratives of their relationships with teachers were gleaned from a single-sex middle school for boys of color. Bright Boys Academy (BBA; pseudonym) is an independent school (private) serving boys in fourth through eighth grade. Founded in 2003, its stated mission centers on "helping boys recognize their abundant gifts within a learning environment designed to cultivate the widest sense of possibility in boys' lives" (BBA School Proposal, 2012, p. 12). Through its policies, practices, and traditions (e.g., identity-based advisory program, peer-to-peer mentoring, "gifted and talented" academics, and seventh and eighth grade retreats), the school actively intends not to be yet another U.S. institution in Black boys' lives that inadvertently limits their potential in life. The school further expressed a fundamental commitment to providing boys from low-income backgrounds with a rich intellectual life, infused with joy, gratitude, and love, and considered to lead to a life-changing experience of school community

(i.e., “brotherhood”), where boys are instilled with a pride in who they are (i.e., personal identity), and encouraged to become community leaders. The institution’s approach to educating boys of color is decidedly asset-based, which makes it ideal for examining boys’ learning relationships with teachers from antideficit perspectives.

The admissions process consists of an entrance exam, participation in a simulated school day, and a parent interview. Boys are recruited from zip codes or neighborhoods with the highest rate of concentrated poverty. Teachers and administrators at elementary schools in partnership with BBA (i.e., for recruitment purposes) regularly encourage boys and their parents to apply. A needs-blind philosophy governs the allocation of financial aid. Only upon admittance does the family’s financial situation become subject to review. Tuition is approximately \$14,000 per pupil, with families paying no more than 10%. One hundred percent of the boys’ parents are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and receive financial aid directly from BBA. Even if students are eligible for full tuition assistance, every family is expected to make a personal contribution. Since its inception, no family has been turned away, or asked to withdraw their son, based solely on their inability to pay. The financial aid program is able to provide its support through contributions from individual donors and foundations.

The founder/president and Head of School are White males, with long-standing careers in educational leadership across single-sex and co-ed schools, as well as public and private institutions. Two Black males are the Assistant Head of School for Curriculum and Faculty Development, and Administrative Operations. The school employs 13 full-time teachers across all grades and academic subjects. There is roughly a 50–50 split among male and female teachers, with racial and ethnic composition being predominantly White (54%), followed by Black (31%), and Latino (15%). The average length of teaching experience is 9.5 years, and BBA maintains a 12:1 student-teacher ratio.

During the 2011–2012 school year, there were 131 boys enrolled, with 20–36 students per grade (i.e., two classes per grade). The overall student population is boys of color: Black (85%), Latino (10%), Asian (2%), Multicultural (e.g., Biracial; 2%), and White (1%), and 51% of boys are first-generation immigrants. The school currently does not have the capacity to serve students with special needs or English Language Learners. The New York City boroughs of residence for boys were the Bronx (i.e., South Bronx; 64%), Manhattan (i.e., Central Harlem, 17%), Brooklyn (i.e., Bedford-Stuyvesant; 10%), and Queens (i.e., Jamaica; 9%) respectively. The average commute to school is 45 minutes. Limited bus service is provided for fourth and fifth graders only.

School hours of operation are 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Doors open at

7:00 a.m. for breakfast. A staggered arrival time is employed, with 6th–8th grade starting at 8:00 a.m. and 4th–5th grade starting at 8:30 a.m. The fourth and fifth graders are in a self-contained classroom, with a single teacher providing instruction for all subjects. Boys in the 6th–8th grade follow a variable schedule, and academic subjects and electives are taught by different teachers. Classrooms are typically arranged in a seminar-style to encourage dialogue among the boys, with desks, tables, or chairs in a U-shape. The walls are often decorated with student work (e.g., poetry) and learning tools (e.g., world map, periodic table of elements, number line). Classes are 60 minutes in length, and there are no study halls or free periods. Advisories (i.e., homeroom) meet four days a week for 50 minutes, with split school assemblies (i.e., community meetings) held once a week for 60 minutes (i.e., 6th–8th and 4th–5th grade). Lunch and recess are also a combined 60 minutes, with the cafeteria in the basement (no windows; bare stucco walls), and recess at a nearby city park. Extracurricular sports (i.e., basketball and football) were cocoordinated with a local non-for-profit organization whose mission is to provide recreational sport and other activities for low-income youth of color.

Erected in the early 1900s, the school building is four stories tall, with a tattered façade.

Each floor has high ceilings with tin moldings, which reflects its prior use (i.e., Catholic school and cathedral). The hallways are moderately spacious and painted a matte blue. The school walls are also decorated with student work (e.g., art projects), inspirational quotes (e.g., “Excellence is in YOU”), a monthly calendar, announcement board (e.g., birthdays), academic honor roll, and a *Student of the Week* poster. Maintenance of the school facility is partly handled by the boys themselves; it is a tradition intended to reinforce pride in the distinct educational opportunity being provided. Boys are taught to upkeep their “home away from home” (BBA School Proposal, 2012, p. 12), which ties to the values of their school community and code of conduct.

Brotherhood, care, support, and respect make up the core values of BBA’s learning community. *Brotherhood* is where boys assume the role of caretaker for their fellow brothers (i.e., same-sex peers), the growth of their entire school community, and their own personal growth (i.e., social and academic). *Care* encourages boys to place the in-school and out-of-school needs of peers before their own, fully participate in collaborative tasks (e.g., school maintenance), and accept peers for who they are (i.e., unique identities). *Support* challenges boys to let no physical or emotional harm come to peers, and demand the personal best from peers in all facets of life. *Respect* asks boys to allow truth, kindness, and love to govern their interactions, whereby exclusive relationships are discouraged and

boys are expected to treat each other like brothers (i.e., family kinship). These values are not only for boys, but every member of the school community (i.e., teachers, administrators, staff). School adults primarily cultivate these values through their learning relationships with boys (e.g., seminar-based instruction, advisory), and other school policies and traditions. (e.g., community meetings, peer mentoring, retreats).

The code of conduct requires boys to be in dress code: a collared shirt, tie, slacks, and oxford shoes. This attire is deemed to cultivate a level of seriousness toward academic pursuits, and promote a healthy physical appearance. Boys are instructed to make eye-contact and greet BBA guests by stating; “Welcome to BBA, my name is . . .” Signed by the boy, his parents, and the Head of School, the code is a formal document which constitutes a shared commitment to the boy’s personal and academic success. To the best of their ability, boys adhere to these guidelines, but if noncompliance occurs, the misconduct is considered a learning opportunity. School discipline at BBA is restorative (i.e., consults parents, privileges boys’ perspectives, accounts for racism and poverty-related trauma), and less punitive than traditional approaches to address misbehavior, which are linked to adverse Black male outcomes in U.S. schools and society.

#### BACKGROUND: SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS FOR BOYS OF COLOR

The impetus for BBA, similar to most other single-sex schools for boys of color, was indeed the adverse social and academic outcomes associated with Black males in the United States, and the archetypes of Black masculinity these outcomes perpetuated in the media. The founder and president of BBA, however, challenged this popular message of what is possible in Black boys’ lives. He chose, instead, to act on the potential and capacities of these vulnerable boys, despite the debilitating effects of racial discrimination and urban poverty. The school demands a concerted effort by school adults at BBA to construct a single-sex learning environment reflecting a core belief in the promise of Black boys and men.

Since 2003, the creation of single-sex schools for boys of color has become popular, mainly due to these schools being considered a strategy to ameliorate the race and class-based hardships linked to achievement, social development, and life trajectories. Much like President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, the well-intentioned efforts of these school adults, however, do not sufficiently engage antideficit perspectives and the empirical scholarship of “what works” (Warren, Douglas, & Howard, this issue) for Black and Latino boys at school. Despite their extraordinary dedication, this limitation has weakened the school model’s ability to address the complex problems confronting boys (Fergus et al., 2014). BBA

is a clear exception; graduates of this institution have historically attended selective independent day and boarding schools in the United States, as well as the nation's top public and parochial schools.

Single-sex learning environments for boys of color can be attributed to two recent policy changes in U.S. education. First, single-sex settings were sanctioned by amendments to Title IX in the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Second, the adequate yearly progress measure of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001) required school districts to publicly report achievement data for subgroups of students (e.g., low-income, racial and ethnic groups, and by gender). The disaggregated, student-level data revealed the overrepresentation of Black and Latino males on most indices correlated with school failure. The increase in single-sex schooling was also traced, and later found to be encouraged by school professionals and community leaders concerned with boys of color, especially those in urban school districts. The assumption bolstering these advocacy efforts was a belief in single-sex schools being a promising alternative to co-ed public schools, where failure is viewed the accepted norm.

Despite this increase, there still remains a shortage of evidence supporting the school-related benefits of isolating boys and girls generally, and Black and Latino boys specifically. The few studies conducted thus far have not identified consistent academic benefits with single-sex schools for boys of color (Fergus et al., 2014). These varied results are comparable to research examining single-sex education broadly (Haag, 2002; Mael, 1998). Disparate sociocultural contexts and desired outcomes have complicated the ability of scholars to determine the merits of single-sex schooling for either sex. Single-sex education, in and of itself, does not ensure specific positive or negative outcomes; its success or failure is contingent on the goals of the stakeholders (e.g., superintendents and principals). Insufficient evidence, however, has not quelled concerned entities from holding the school model in high esteem and a viable educational option. Whether or not single-sex schools are a promising intervention for Black boys specifically has yet to be determined and constitutes yet another high-stakes experiment under the guise of school reform.

## METHOD

For two years, I taught first-grade for a single-sex class of so-called at-risk Black boys. Disturbed by the imposition of this deficit-based school intervention, especially given its lack of empirical basis, I sought to reframe this educational opportunity for boys. This relational process, engaged through my schoolteacher role, entailed upholding possibility, nurturing intellectual curiosity, and conveying unconditional love. Four years later,

and partly in light of this teaching experience, I was invited to be a research assistant for a longitudinal study of single-sex schools for boys of color in the United States (Fergus et al., 2014), and BBA was a participating middle school. In this role, I developed a close relationship with the Head of School, and once the three-year project concluded, I was granted permission to conduct a year-long critical ethnography (Soyini, 2011; Thomas, 1993) of Black boys' identity at the school-site (Nelson, 2013), from which the interviews analyzed for this article are derived.

### CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

Critical ethnography, at its base, is conventional ethnographic inquiry with a sociopolitical purpose. How scholars reflect upon and evaluate their aims, intentions, and interpretative frameworks for analysis are central to the method, along with thorough consideration of how the research endeavor will make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice throughout the world. This ethnography analyzed +100 hours of school observation fieldnotes, two-hour interviews, and "student identity projects" (i.e., family tree, ancestor interview, and identity-based reflection) to explicate how the boys negotiated their identities within a distinct single-sex school context. Garnering nuanced insights on Black boys' identities within such a learning environment was premised on the asset-based framing of Black boys I held while teaching, and still hold to this day.

### EIGHTH-GRADE COHORT

The eighth grade cohort (2011–2012) had 27 Black boys enrolled, 17 were 13 years old, and 10 were 14 years old, with African-American ( $n = 11$ ), Afro-Caribbean ( $n = 9$ ; e.g., Trinidad and Jamaica), and African-Immigrant ( $n = 6$ ; e.g., Ghana) ancestry. One boy self-identified as biracial. Nine of the boys had attended BBA since fourth grade, eight enrolled in fifth grade, and 10 enrolled in sixth grade. All of the boys lived in neighborhoods or boroughs with concentrated poverty. The majority of boys ( $n = 25$ ) resided in single-parent households led by a mother, with at least one male or female sibling. Although all of the boys were considered "bright," there was still variation by achievement level specific to a high-performing school context: (a) eight boys were high performers (A+ or A average); (b) 11 boys were average performers (A- average); and (c) eight boys were low performers (B+ or B average).

## UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The Relational Teaching Framework (Reichert & Hawley, 2014), a set of strategies to engage boys relationally toward scholastic success, and fundamentally rooted in asset-based conceptions of boyhood, was utilized to examine early-adolescent Black boys' relationships with their teachers at BBA. The goal is to: (1) illustrate how a set of relational teaching strategies supported Black boys' engagement and learning and (2) further contribute boys' "voice" to a counternarrative, which strives to complicate and dispel negative race and gender stereotypes associated with Black males in the United States.

## INTERVIEWS

The interviews conducted with the full cohort of eighth grade Black boys ( $N = 27$ ) were in-depth, semistructured, and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes in length. The protocol was modeled after a longitudinal study of boys' friendships (i.e., in their neighborhood, and at school) from early to late adolescence (Way, 2013). Interview questions centered on background and contextual information (e.g., family structure, neighborhood or borough of residence, previous school), school norms, values, and beliefs (e.g., brotherhood and care for others), curriculum and instruction (e.g., favorite book and subject or class at BBA), social programming (e.g., advisory, community meetings), discipline policy (e.g., code of conduct), identity development (e.g., race and gender identity), as well as peer-to-peer and teacher-student relationships (e.g., close friends and teachers at BBA). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were analyzed using a two-tiered procedure derived from "open-coding" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990): (1) Interview transcripts were read line-by-line to identify boys' narratives of their *productive* and *unproductive* (Reichert & Hawley, 2014, p. 3) relationships with teachers at BBA. Boys' teacher-student relationships were assigned to these categories based on the depiction of their relationships either supporting or inhibiting school engagement and learning. (2) Both teacher-student relationship categories were examined to determine how the use of various relational teaching strategies (or the lack thereof) contributed to boys' scholastic success or failure. *Member checks* (Creswell, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were also administered with boys in the eighth-grade cohort to assess the validity of how teachers enacted the relational teaching strategies at the school-site.

## RELATIONAL TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Intended to address the disparaging academic outcomes associated with boys overall, the Relational Teaching Framework (RTF; Reichert & Hawley, 2014) offers a pragmatic but substantive means to influence the reversal of these trends. Relational strategies embedded within the framework emerged from two empirical investigations in six countries (i.e., United States, Canada, United Kingdom, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia). The first identified effective pedagogy for boys (Reichert & Hawley, 2010), and the second examined the role of relationships in boys' scholastic success (Reichert & Hawley, 2014). The effective pedagogy study culled lesson plans and instructional strategies from a diverse sample of +1,000 middle and high school teachers and +1,500 boys. The relational teaching study assessed the quality of boys' relationships with their teachers. Of particular interest were the relational dynamics and how and why these dynamics either fostered or inhibited boys' learning. More than 1,000 boys and middle and high school teachers provided narratives of both productive and unproductive relationships.

Boys' relationships with their teachers were considered a working alliance or partnership between the boy and his schoolteacher, whereby the teacher assumed the distinct role of relationship manager. Teachers therefore extend relational gestures to cultivate positive learning relationships with boys, particularly at the forging stage, and when a conflict in the relationship occurs. The boys particularly expressed how teachers must foremost convey mastery of course content, with a lucid set of humane behavioral expectations. Narratives from boys and their teachers revealed how relationally effective teachers consistently enacted the following gestures: (1) reaching out and going beyond; (2) personal advocacy; (3) establishing common ground; and (4) accommodating opposition. Teachers demonstrated the capacity to acquire and refine relational gestures, but even despite careful use, relationship struggles among the boys and their teachers were commonplace. The next section relays boys' narratives of how teachers at a single-sex middle school for boys of color enacted the relational teaching strategies and how these relational gestures supported or inhibited their learning and engagement.

### “WHAT WORKS” FINDINGS: RELATIONAL TEACHING WITH BLACK BOYS

Subject mastery and care narratives by boys revealed how their engagement in the learning process was indeed forged by the teacher's mastery of subject matter, as well as pedagogical context knowledge, and

strict adherence to a set of high but attainable academic standards. This level of skill by teachers was most evident in their ability to cultivate intellectually stimulating classroom cultures, with the clear priority of boys' emotional safety (i.e., intellectual risk-taking). Teachers' labor-intensive efforts to craft thoughtful, dynamic lesson plans were associated with teachers' care for the boys, and confidence in their social and academic success.

When asked to describe the relationship with their favorite teacher, several of the boys named a White male humanities teacher who had taught at the school since its inception. Within their relational narratives was recognition of his care for the boys. Andre (pseudonym), a 13-year-old, Afro-Caribbean boy from Jamaica shared:

Mr. Tate (pseudonym), he was very caring. I was a horrible student in fifth-grade, and he wouldn't give up on me to become a better student. He always talked to me after school, asking me how my day was, and if I was "messing up" my grades. He would bring up the problem I had at school that day, and he talked to me about it. He would ask, "Why is this happening?" And a lot of the times I just sort of brushed off his care, or his interest in why I was "messing up," but I kinda regret just brushing it off. . . . Inside of the classroom, he was very strict, but outside of the classroom he was more easier to talk to, but I think I should have taken more advantage of speaking to him about issues, not only academics, but also personal, and I'd say his "caringness" and his willingness to know his students, pretty much pushes you to work harder because you know that someone cares.

Charles (pseudonym), a 13-year-old Afro-Caribbean boy from Trinidad, addressed a respect for his brilliance:

I liked how Mr. Tate challenged me, pushed me to think, because at my last school [co-ed public school], students were just handed the work and we were expected to do it. But here, you are helped and your mind is pushed forward . . . they're not just getting you above standard, just to make you go on to the next grade, but they're giving you a lot of information; you're not just learning one thing. In last year's history class, Mr. Tate was teaching us world history. He was very smart, brilliant—incorporated things like psychology and philosophy, and even art history. He used history as a foundation, and then added more to the curriculum. During class we would pretend to be PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] scholars. . . . His lessons made us think; use our minds.

Lafayette (pseudonym), a 14-year-old African-American boy from Brooklyn, highlighted his teaching experience and confidence in the boys' abilities:

In my opinion, he was my best history teacher—Mr. Tate, I could go to him for anything, and he'd always help me with schoolwork, and he always has confidence that I can do well, and believes in me.

The boys attributed relational success to the myriad ways their teachers masterfully conveyed the course material and preserved high learning standards. These relational outcomes substantiate the *working alliance* aspect of the relational teaching framework. While emotions (“He was very caring”) were prominent throughout these excerpts of relationship quality, they emerged from boys' narratives of being challenged intellectually to engage lessons thoughtfully and to meet high expectations by teachers whose expert command of, and strong interest in the subject matter was convincing (“His lessons made us think, use our minds”). Even when boys put forth lackluster effort (“I was a horrible student in the fifth grade”), they did not want to think of themselves, nor of their teachers in such a manner (“I kinda regret just brushing [his care] off”). Relationally effective practice arose from the teacher's ability to understand boys' actions (“Why is this happening?”), expect the boy's best effort (“Inside of the classroom, he was very strict”), and even when the boy doubted his abilities (“He always has confidence that I can do well”). Relationship-building regularly began with concern for boys, followed by direct confrontation (“He would bring up the problem I had at school that day”). With teachers in the role of *relationship manager*, their knowledge and pedagogical skill furthered their relationships with boys (“. . . He was my best history teacher . . . I could go to him for anything”).

Reaching out and going beyond requires teachers to go above and beyond school procedures to identify and meet a boy's unique learning or social-emotional need. Boys depicted relationally effective teachers, or teachers who “reached-out,” with the ability to come to know the boys outside of their academic performance and classroom behavior. Teachers were surprised at how talented, noble, and generally more likable boys appeared to be when observed in other school settings, particularly those settings more aligned with their burgeoning self-concept (e.g., sports, student clubs, extracurricular activities). Both relationally resistant boys, and boys who struggled academically, even noted how breakthroughs in their relationships with teachers came on the heels of thoughtful efforts to see the boys' personal strengths. This recognition fortified the working alliance, whereby boys' themselves acted on this new knowledge (e.g., expressions of gratitude). Boys not only felt honored by the personalized

attention of their teachers, but also by teachers' disclosing appropriate facets of their personal lives outside their schoolteacher role.

Teachers who reached out were typically the boys' advisory group leader as well, which was a common school practice. Boys' recounted narratives of teachers "going beyond," for instance, when teachers coordinated out-of-school activities related to boys' interests, or shared vulnerable stories of overcoming hardships to achieve success in their own lives. Rudy (pseudonym), a 14-year-old African-American boy from the Bronx, described the relationship with his advisor:

Mrs. Kilgore (pseudonym), she's been my advisor since 6th grade, and I have her now for language arts. She started the Drama Club—that I'm a part of; before she became a teacher, she was an actress. Mrs. Kilgore had a theatre director come visit us this year, and he invited us to audition for the show he was directing at a theatre a few blocks from school. I auditioned, and I got a part. . . . She bought the 8th-grade class tickets to the opening night, so we went to her house for an hour for dinner before the show. She lives right by school. The next day in class, we made all these connections to the book we were reading [Toni's Morrison's *Songs of Solomon*].—She's basically like a friend who teaches me. All the 8th graders, we're all close with Ms. Kilgore, we learned a lot from her.

Fataah (pseudonym), a 13-year-old biracial boy from Brooklyn, also narrated the relationship with his advisor:

My advisor, Mr. Vidale, shares a lot of stories about his childhood, persons who influenced him, and what he had to go through to get to where he is in life. He had a single mom and [didn't know] his dad. He had to take care of his younger siblings. It was interesting hearing those stories because I have to go through those things too. It's deeper than what I see when he's my Latin teacher—its more than what I expected of him. When I see him, I wouldn't think he would've gone through that. He seems like a very serious person at first sight, and he's so serious because he use to be a lawyer, but when I got to know him more, he turned out to be very funny, and he jokes around a lot. That changed my image of him, and we're much closer, and he made me care about Latin more.

In their positive reactions ("We're all close with Mrs. Kilgore") to teachers who sought to make personal connections ("She bought the 8th-grade class tickets to the opening night"), the boys distinguished between the friendliness of their teachers versus same-sex peers. The teachers'

relational gestures were considered purposeful, informed, and tied to their relationship manager role (“She’s basically like a friend who teachers me”). The boys willingly participated in this relational enterprise to further their scholastic success (“The next day in class, we made all these connections to the book we were reading”). Boys’ relationships with teachers who succeeded at connecting (“That changed my image of him, and we’re much closer”), and aided their improvement academically (“He made me care about Latin more”), were usually not cognizant of how their modeling vulnerability, generosity, and personal accomplishment affected the boys. Across the boys’ narrative accounts, there was no sole archetype of a relationally effective teacher. The boys instead thought highly of teachers who demonstrated a commitment to getting to know them and who masterfully conveyed their course content.

Personal advocacy builds on reaching out, going beyond by necessitating a consistent tapping into and acting on boys’ individual interests and talents, with a particular focus on resistant boys. Narratives relayed by the boys often began with personal confessions of their oppositional stance to classroom lessons or the learning process. The challenge posed by these recalcitrant boys was at times stressful and disheartening for teachers to address. Boys described teachers, however, regularly meeting with them outside of class; accommodating provisions for their special needs; and exhibiting nonacademic interest in their well-being. The boys’ emphasized the gradual, clumsy progression of their relationships with teachers, but also believed teacher advocacy helped these relationships eventually reach a positive, connected state. Persistent and creative pursuit of relationships with boys allowed the teachers to temper boys’ resistance, establish mutually beneficial relationships, and facilitate boys’ personal transformation.

Such relational success and transformation became a source of motivation for teachers to wade through the ebb and flow of relationship-building with resistant boys particularly. Boys’ portrayals of their teacher-student relationships suggested a necessary eagerness on the part of teachers to get to know the boys on a deeper level, where teachers learn precisely what advocacy approaches to implement, as well as heighten teacher awareness of boys’ personal strengths or passions. This relational effort is to deliberately prevent the urgency to address boys’ school behavior and academic problems from impairing their ability to see other dimensions of the boys’ themselves. Brandon (pseudonym), a 13-year-old Afro-Caribbean boy from Trinidad, depicted the relationship with his humanities teacher, who was also the Head of School, and illustrates how this school adult personally advocated for a positive learning relationship:

My history teacher, Mr. Gillon (pseudonym), he really annoys me a lot, with his nagging voice, saying like, “Are you playing around with school? You need to get serious about your education.”. . . He was making sure I don’t do anything wrong in school and that I was making good decisions with managing my schoolwork and playing on the basketball team, which I love—I really do like him though, he doesn’t just nag me about school, he would nag me about basketball too; asking how the team was doing and stuff, and he came to some of our games. . . . I was really overwhelmed last quarter with all my school assignments and basketball practice. I started missing assignments; it was bad, but Mr. Gillon held me in from recess to come work in his office. It’s hard for me to focus on schoolwork with my peers around; he kept me in to help me focus. . . . I was a crappy writer, and my work ethic was poor; I had good ideas, but I didn’t know how to express them in writing all the time. He helped me with my writing for my history term paper—I got a B+ on it. He also helped me get organized, and told me how to go talk with all my teachers about missing work in my other classes. He always has time for me; always believes in me. I think my relationship with Mr. Gillon has improved. I’m matured, like with my writing, I’m better able to handle it; find help—that doesn’t lead to negative repercussions. . . . He thinks I can achieve anything in life that I set my mind on.

This boy’s narrative indicates how positive learning relationships with teachers aided boys in confronting extramural pressures (“Playing on the basketball team”), focusing on their scholastic struggles (“I was a crappy writer, and my work ethic was poor”), improving academically (“I got a B+”), and strengthening their student–teacher relationships (“He always has time for me; always believes in me”). The steady relational investment of teachers (i.e., nagging, writing support, etc.) also cultivated the boys’ abilities to advocate for themselves (“I’m matured, like when I’m in a situation of adversity, like with my writing, I’m able to handle it; find help”). A core feature of these transformative relationships is their intentionality; teacher actions are purposeful, directed, and monitored by the teachers to assist boys to achieve academic and social goals. Teachers’ locating the boys’ passion was paramount (“He would nag me about basketball too”), and with ample time, their extracurricular pursuits can be effectively linked to classroom learning (“It’s hard for me to focus on schoolwork with my peers around; he kept me in [from recess] to help me focus”). The relational bond is enhanced for the boy and the teacher when the boy comes to know the teacher’s confidence in what he can become (“He thinks I can achieve anything in life that I set my mind on”).

Establishing common ground acknowledges similar interests and talents among boys and their schoolteachers. Boys' learning relationships with teachers evolved at school through shared participation in activities of common interest; appreciation of identical traits, as well as social and academic experiences (e.g., race and ethnicity, academic struggles, socio-economic background); and here too, when professionally appropriate, the relationship was enhanced when teachers exhibited a willingness to be vulnerable (e.g., express sadness), and disclose relevant matters in their personal lives to engage boys relationally toward a learning goal. When personal information was revealed, the boys typically understood this expression to be an invitation to relationship. With careful timing and placement, such acts strengthened teacher–student dynamics, whereby several boys regularly communicated positive relational outcomes when mutual interests were identified.

Even in the most secure relationships, a power imbalance was present and derived from traditional expectations associated with everyday school life: Teachers dictate academic goals and expectations, boys are to be passive recipients of the learning process, and teachers provide direct instruction on specific content knowledge and skills. Reinforcing the relationship manager role, boys attributed the dismantling of these rigid dynamics to purposeful gestures by teachers, rooted in common interests and self-disclosure. Boys told many stories of relationship-building efforts where teachers stepped outside of their professional role, and however emotionally fraught, candidly made known a shared life experience. From their perspectives, later on, this blunt expression represented a mutual respect. Nathan (pseudonym), a 14-year-old African-American boy from Brooklyn, established common ground with his teacher through football:

I remember in 4th grade when Mr. Vidale taught me how to properly throw a football. It was like a father-figure moment. After that, our love for football grew. He already loved football, but when I learned the basics of the game; the strategy behind it, I loved it too. It challenged me intellectually. I gained knowledge that Mr. Vidale related to school. He wanted me to work hard in class, like I did during football games at recess. We had these long conversations about football—made all these parallels to school and life. . . . I liked that about our relationship, and it helped me to not let him down with my schoolwork.

Dennis (pseudonym), a 13-year-old African-American boy from the South Bronx, found commonality between him and his teacher through their similar backgrounds:

To help us all grow in brotherhood, the eighth grade retreat was when we came together as a class. It molded us, because we bonded over our similar backgrounds; being Black males from poorer neighborhoods, dealing with peer pressure, violence, and drugs. . . . In order to be successful in life, we will face these challenges. Mr. Harris (pseudonym) talked about us being just like him; smart and having to deal with difficult life situations, and learning how to get past them together, with a successful Black man who has done it before us. Without Mr. Harris as my language arts teacher, I wouldn't have the courage to do well in school, or even think that it's possible to be successful. . . . My brotherhood with him is strong.

Michael (pseudonym), a 13-year-old Afro-Caribbean boy from Jamaica, appreciated how he had a blunt communication style, similar to his teacher:

I could tell Ms. Coleman (pseudonym) anything, just "how it is," and she wouldn't judge me. She would tell me "how it is" and she'll tell me when I'm slacking off with my class work, or "acting up." She would tell me how she messed up in school too but got back on track. She always wants what's best for me; help me become the best person I can. She respects me.

There are indeed moments when personal disclosure by teachers is inappropriate, especially when the gesture is not intended to further students' learning or development. When the act is befitting, however, it can be truly impactful for boys ("We had these long conversations about football. . . . I liked that about our relationship"). Boys were grateful for these unexpected gestures ("Without Mr. Harris . . . I wouldn't have the courage to do well in school"), and often the boys considered the self-disclosure an expression of respect ("She respects me"). A common interest (i.e., football) certainly strengthened the boys' relationships with teachers, but within this particular single-sex learning environment, sharing common characteristics or social experiences ("Being Black males from poorer neighborhoods") greatly bolstered the relationship ("My brotherhood with him [Mr. Harris] is strong"). Of course, positive relationships with teachers for boys existed across racial and socioeconomic lines (i.e., Mr. Gillon and Mr. Tate; both White males), but when these social categories matched, the boys' narratives implied these relationships tended to proceed with more ease ("learning how to get past them together [difficult life situations], with a successful Black man who has done it before us"). Boys in scholastic distress ("I'm slacking

off with my class work”) usually felt alone in their struggles (“I could tell Ms. Coleman anything, and she wouldn’t judge me”), but when a teacher makes a well-placed, personal disclosure (“She would tell me how she ‘messed up’ in school too”), boys were inclined to feel more unique (“Help me become the best person I can”). This outcome was even more likely when boys knew the teacher had firsthand experience and triumphed ([Ms. Coleman] “got back on track”).

Accommodating opposition is predicated on a belief in multiple pathways to positive teacher–student relationships. Although boys associated relationship success with teachers who deployed the relational teaching strategies presented thus far, a comparable number maintained productive relationships when teachers made deliberate exceptions for boys, but under specific learning-related circumstances. Purposely overlooking, for example, boys’ achievement, school behavior, and other actions typically deemed inappropriate for learning environments. Boys’ narratives depicted strategic instances when these exceptions helped with the realization of their own uniqueness, and how the gesture demonstrated teachers’ appreciation of their individuality. The relational process enabled boys to see how their personhood mattered to teachers more than a school rule or discipline policy.

Not all opposition should be accommodated of course, but a keen sense cultivated among teachers to discern when a boy’s learning or developmental need supersedes the value of adhering to a policy. This disposition allowed for a successful relationship to flourish, even when circumstances at school might suggest the implausibility of such a relational outcome. Boys admitted in their narratives how teachers’ gestures, in light of the boys’ resistant state, may not be readily identifiable, and also the impact may not be immediately apparent in the boys’ actions. Teachers, understandably so, can be disturbed by boys’ rude, brazen, and disrespectful behavior. The relational task, however, is to remain resolute and thoroughly consider how boys’ behavior may purport deeper struggles, either academic or outside of school. Permitting some resistance (or even aggression) provided teachers with time to contemplate what might be underlying the boys’ demeanor. Teachers can further utilize this new knowledge to re-engage boys in classroom learning. Steps to accommodate unruly dispositions are taken with the clear goal of establishing a working alliance or a productive relationship to ultimately support boys’ learning.

Boys appreciated teachers’ ability to convey warmth, comfort, and control, despite their belligerence at times. A vignette involving Andre, Michael, and Fataah was constructed from interview data to encapsulate how teachers accommodated boys’ resistance. The boys, in short, opposed indoor recess due to a heat advisory:

Thursday, June 23, 2011, was the last day of classes for eighth graders before graduation. It was a very humid 92 degrees outside, and the window-unit air conditioners were on full blast in all of the classrooms. The boys had been in school since 8 a.m., prepping for a placement exam, a prerequisite for boys attending independent high schools next year. Their first break was for lunch. While eating, and just before the bell rang for recess, Mr. Gillon announced, "Indoor recess," and boys became visibly disgruntled [e.g., shuffling in their seats, sighs of disappointment, etc.]. Sitting at a table together, one of three eighth-grade boys said, "It's our last recess as an eighth grade class." To which, Mr. Gillon sternly replied, "It's just too hot guys. . . . And, there's more [prep-work] to do this afternoon," and then left the lunchroom, headed back to his office. For indoor recess, boys could remain in the lunchroom and play board games or ask for permission to hang out in the library or in a classroom, but only if there was a school adult present. Continuing to plead their case, another boy said, "We only want to play with our friends for the last time." All three of the boys followed Mr. Gillon back to his office. Picking up on their genuine desire to be outside together, Mr. Gillon took a deep breath before he replied with a different demeanor and tone, "You sure you want to go outside? It's sweltering. It can't be pleasant out there." The boys persisted, "We need the break, it will help us focus this afternoon," "It's our last special time together." After listening attentively, Mr. Gillon replied, "I don't think it's a good idea. The answer is still no. I promise to make it up to you guys. Maybe we can do a special outing for eighth graders next week?" Leaving the office, the boys looked defeated [e.g., scowls, walking slow], one of the boys stated, however, "At least he didn't say, 'it's an administrative decision,'" which boys clearly understood to mean, there was to be no more deliberation. According to boys, Mr. Gillon was known for being "uncompromising," but the boys still confessed, "He's right, we'd come in from outside all sweaty. . . feeling gross, and not in the mood for more prep-work for our exam." (June 27, 2011)

Early adolescent Black boys, much like all school-aged boys, will experience bouts of overwhelming stress, inattentiveness, and unpredictable mood swings; in fact, few teachers can claim not to have encountered a boy in this state at some point in their professional career. The boys harbored a fear associated with their revealing vulnerabilities (i.e., placement exam anxiety, last day of classes, loss of friendships). This emotion was linked to their resistance ("All three of the boys followed Mr. Gillon back to his office"); in this

instance, with a school administrator and teacher previously known to have positive learning relationships with boys (see “Personal advocacy” section), but every so often can be annoying, nag a lot, and uncompromising (“It’s an administrative decision”). The conscious decision to bear the brunt of the boys’ resistance, or even hostility, allowed more time to gain perspective on the boys’ needs (“You sure you want to go outside? It’s sweltering. It can’t be pleasant out there”), and to leverage this new knowledge for the benefit of boys’ academics or social developmental (“Maybe we can do a special outing for eighth graders next week?”). Although the desired outcome was not obtained (“I don’t think it’s a good idea. The answer is still no”), the boys did feel acknowledged (“he’s right, we’d come in from outside all sweaty . . . feeling gross, and not in the mood for more prep-work for our exam”), even if it may not have been immediately apparent from their behavior (“Leaving the office, the boys looked defeated [e.g., scowls, walking slowly]”).

#### BOYS’ RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES

The relational teaching strategies were enacted by teachers’ to fundamentally address boys’ resistance, academic issues, and school misconduct. Boys’ narratives suggested how—even with the effective use of these strategies—a positive teacher–student relationship did not always ensue. Detailed accounts of relationship struggles revealed boys’ tendency to blame and criticize teachers for failed relationships, with limited consideration of their contributions to the relational outcomes. In successful relationships, however, boys readily acknowledged how their resistance presented a profound challenge for teachers. These divergent perspectives are rooted in the boys typically holding very high expectations of their teachers’ practice. When these high expectations were not met, disappointment and resentment eventually set-in.

Teacher mastery was critical for boys and consisted of expert knowledge of course content, a repertoire of effective instructional approaches, and a commitment to their relationship manager role. While comparing productive and unproductive relationships, boys emphasized how the latter were unpredictable, emotionally damaging, and impeded their ability to trust teachers who clearly exhibited care for their scholastic success and general well-being. There was relational disengagement from schoolteachers whose actions suggested, for example, a lack of care or unwillingness to address a special learning need. Boys’ actions themselves reflected a stance of aggressive self-protection, compounded by social stresses outside of school (i.e., family dynamics, structural racism, neighborhood poverty). When these stresses were acute, boys’ relayed how the relational teaching strategies were particularly transformative when used for academic re-engagement.

Relationship challenges with teachers, at their core, were steeped in either real or perceived displays of what boys' called disrespect or hypocrisy and general disinterest in getting to know the boys personally. Glenn (pseudonym), 13-year-old, African-immigrant boy from Ghana narrates his relationship challenges with a schoolteacher:

I do not have the strongest relationship with Mr. Mayorga (pseudonym), my physics teacher. He uses the Socratic method, which I like. I like being forced to think on my feet, but he goes overboard. He gets disrespectful. If you don't get the answer right when he calls on you, he'll sarcastically call you a moron in front of the whole class. He would always try to control everything. I couldn't ever get out of my seat without him yelling at me. He has to show his superiority. . . . I think he also has a tendency to be hypocritical; he's always saying "be thoughtful and gentle." . . . During our graduation rehearsal, he was telling a story about last year's graduation—he sarcastically threatened to kill a kid for not shaking his hand properly, when he walked across the stage, and I thought, that's not thoughtful, that's not gentle. . . . He has these outrageous outbursts of anger too, for no reason; I would try to talk to him, or explain why I had to get out of my seat, but he wouldn't listen. . . . I try not to say much during class. I can understand that he doesn't have to abide by his values at every moment, but he would say that he wants to be remembered as a thoughtful and gentle person after he dies, and I'm like, I don't think so.

The term *disrespect* itself was prominent throughout the boys' accounts of their unsuccessful relationships with school adults ("He gets disrespectful"). This boy's strained relationship with a teacher was characterized by such a lack of respect ("He'll sarcastically call you a moron in front of the whole class"), and led to his disengagement from classroom learning ("I try not to say much during class"). Oftentimes, this disrespect was reflective of teachers' unresponsiveness to the boys themselves ("I would try to talk to him, or explain why I had to get out of my seat, but he wouldn't listen"), which represented their disinterest in personal knowledge of the boy, or a lack of concern for their development. There was essentially no invitation to relationship; many of the boys associated frustrations with teachers in the classroom to the disregard of their perspectives and experiences. The boys' frustrations were exacerbated when a teacher's delivery of instruction, or teaching style, did not facilitate their learning ("He uses the Socratic method . . . but he goes overboard"), and revealed their inability to model the comportment of a relationally and pedagogically masterful teacher ("He would always try to control everything. I couldn't ever get out of my seat

without him yelling at me, he has to show his superiority”), and cultivate a classroom learning environment which fostered emotional safety related to intellectual risk-taking (“He has these outrageous outbursts of anger too, for no reason”). These relationship challenges, although difficult because of the asymmetrical power dynamics involved, did not completely deter boys from the learning process (“I like being forced to think on my feet”), and prompted boys to be forgiving of teachers for their relational shortcomings (“I can understand that he doesn’t have to abide by his values at every moment”), and ultimately implied if a teacher carefully enacts appropriate relational teaching strategies (e.g., conveying care, taking a personal interest), boys’ learning could be furthered.

## DISCUSSION

Boys’ narratives of teacher–student relationships illustrated how specific aspects of Bright Boys’ Academy facilitated successful enactment of the relational teaching strategies. The school mission was decidedly asset-based, with a deliberate focus on the abundant gifts of Black boys, along with their potential and other capacities. Such a perspective mitigated the influence of popular and scholarly discourse mired in disparaging language associated with Black males in the United States (i.e., President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, Black male social and academic outcomes). This institutional stance enabled teachers to acknowledge boys’ inherent relational desires and leverage the resulting positive relationships toward learning. Bolstered by a commitment to school community rooted in brotherhood, relationship-building were considered a precondition to engaging boys academically (e.g., advisory, community meetings), which is critical for enacting the RTF strategies (Reichert & Hawley, 2014). BBA’s rigorous academic program for low-income Black boys (i.e., entrance exam, “gifted and talented” curriculum, selective admissions process) challenged the anti-intellectualism central to narrow conceptions of Black masculinity. This facet of the learning environment compelled teachers to confidently convey their subject mastery and maintain high academic standards.

Teachers’ use of the relational strategies was not only facilitated by the learning context of BBA itself, but also the social categories of race, gender, and class the Black boys embodied. Schoolteacher efforts to dispel negative stereotypes tied to these categories, as well as complicate boys’ identities, took the form of developmentally appropriate identity-based advisory curricula, community meetings, peer-to-peer mentoring, and nontraditional extracurricular activities for boys (e.g., drama club). The societal construct of hypermasculinity negotiated by boys at school failed to repress their relational capacities; and instead, heavily propelled boys’

receptivity to relational gestures extended by teachers. Boys provided complex narratives depicting their transformation when engaged relationally toward scholastic success, including the disconnected, recalcitrant boys who possessed hypermasculine personas; a subgroup of Black boys who were especially unlikely to be successful at school without supportive teacher–student relationships. Due to the material conditions of urban poverty, which perpetuated the rigid archetypes of Black masculinity, the relational teaching strategy of *establishing common ground* was prominent, and achieved through shared neighborhood and schooling experiences among boys and their teachers (e.g., class background, academic challenges, familial structure, racism), and in turn cultivated relational trust, which supplied the necessary foundation for other relational teaching strategies to be enacted (i.e., reaching out, going beyond; personal advocacy; accommodating opposition).

The boys' engagement and learning benefitted from positive teacher–student relationships, which often ensued after effective use of the relational teaching strategies by BBA schoolteachers. With subject mastery and care, Andre's, Charles', and Lafayette's relationships with Mr. Tate, a teacher boys' considered brilliant, actually compelled the boys to acknowledge their lackluster efforts toward scholastic pursuits, and to challenge themselves intellectually. With reaching out, going beyond, Rudy appreciated when Mrs. Kilgore strived to get to know him outside the classroom (i.e., drama club), and scaffolded his ability to draw text-to-self and text-to-world connections in the classroom (i.e., Toni Morrison's *Songs of Solomon*). Personal advocacy came in the form of Mr. Gillon's persistence in aiding Brandon with managing scholastic and extracurricular commitments (i.e., writing skills and basketball); while establishing common ground surfaced through Nathan and Mr. Gillon's love of football, Dennis and Mr. Harris' similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and Michael's blunt communication style with Ms. Coleman. Lastly, Mr. Gillon accommodated opposition from Andre, Michael, and Fataah regarding outdoor recess on a hot and humid day in New York City.

Relational teaching with Black boys is not limited to either single-sex or coeducational learning environments. The relational teaching framework (Reichert & Hawley, 2014) calls for a paradigm shift in what constitutes high quality education across all types of educational settings for boys overall, and particularly for Black boys with acute social stresses. BBA prioritized the establishment of a relational climate for boys' learning (i.e., school culture of brotherhood), with the purpose to shape every aspect of school life; so much so, it constitutes a defining feature of the school environment, whereby all teaching is approached relationally. Relationships must become "the very *medium* through which students' engagement, effort, and ultimate mastery are clearly realized" (Reichert & Hawley, 2014,

p. 165). School transformation is more likely to occur when educational leaders embrace a commitment to relational school cultures, but also experience their importance for boys' scholastic success. For Black boys especially, relational learning environments will only be achieved when school leaders demonstrate a specific commitment to asset-based relationships among their Black male students, and their schoolteachers.

Relationally effective teachers are of the utmost importance while establishing or improving a relational culture for boys' learning. Teachers must cultivate or possess the ability to forge and maintain productive learning relationships, despite the foreseen challenges associated with the boys' class background, as well as their race and gender identities, which are often constrained by stereotypes. Teachers must furthermore demonstrate how to especially engage resistant or oppositional boys, and creatively help the boys become resilient against these oppressive stereotypes and other debilitating social forces. Boys relayed how this relational process had profound implications for their engagement, learning, and even identities. When the boys experienced substantive relational engagement with teachers at BBA, there was thorough expression of praise and gratitude for those teachers.

Boys' narratives of learning relationships with teachers further added their "voice" to a counternarrative, which challenged the hypermasculine and nonrelational stereotypes associated with Black males. In U.S. society, Black boys and men are regularly assumed to be guarded or not particularly adept at articulating relationships in their everyday lives. Despite such a social milieu, it was affirming and instructive to witness the relational aspect of boys' humanity, and subsequently how the boys' thoroughly discussed and engaged their relationships with teachers in this distinct single-sex learning environment. Embedded within the learning culture of brotherhood, boys enrolled, for example, tended to accept the part of the school mission to support low-income boys of color, and the rigor of its academic program, but when the boys failed to succeed or thrive, boys attributed the failure to the quality of instruction provided by the teacher, and to the quality of their teacher-student relationships.

It is a clear overstatement to imply positive relationships are achievable with every boy. Life circumstances outside of school can certainly pose insurmountable challenges to even the most relationally skilled teachers. With a commitment to reevaluating the enactment of relational teaching strategies over time, profound transformation, even with the most recalcitrant boys, is indeed attainable. At the school-level, despite whether or not a particular institution is able to achieve positive relationships with all students enrolled, there is a greater likelihood of strong transformation with boys if positive learning relationships are a fundamental goal of the school.

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