

Cultivating Purposeful Positive Relationships: The Need for Meaningful Connections in Education

April King, University of Windsor, Canada

Abstract: This article highlights the critical role of purposeful positive relationships in education, emphasizing the potential to reduce early leavers in school, and the potential prevention of involvement in criminal activities among in-risk male teens. Focusing on collective teacher efficacy, interpersonal and learning relationships, and contributing factors to incarceration among in-risk males, this article accentuates the importance of fostering supportive and inclusive environments within schools. Understanding the pivotal role of relationships in education stresses the need to cultivate purposeful positive relationships. Sharing the voices and lived experiences of incarcerated males, and educators supporting in-risk male teens, affords school boards, researchers, policy makers, and transitional support workers the opportunity to discover the perceived supports needed for in-risk males to achieve educational success.

Keywords: In-Risk Males, Incarceration, Student Success, Education, Collective Teacher Efficacy, Interpersonal and Learning Relationships, Disengaged Students, Equitable Education, Recidivism

Introduction

Personal Ground and Context

On the outset, it is imperative to recognize that I am a White, cis-gender, heterosexual, Canadian, able-bodied woman, holding additional power and privilege in my role as a school board administrator. I have benefited from access to an educational system that supports my personal privileges yet works against many of our marginalized youth. Acknowledging my privilege allows me to share the lens of which I view the world, along with the note the unlearning and learning that I do with the goal of limiting bias. Although I continue to work toward eliminating bias, it is impossible to be bias free, as we all understand the world through the lens of our lived experiences and teachings.

Although it is common to read and make reference to *at-risk* youth in literature, I am intentional to use the term *in-risk*. My preferred use of the term *in-risk* suggests students have lived experiences resulting in being in risk of being pushed out of the school system and thus not graduating high school. The term *at-risk* implies a static place and a label placed upon a student, rather than acknowledging that they are *in* a system that does not work to support their lived experiences.

Overview

Extensive literature can be found surrounding the topic of the positive impact that educators have on students. However, limited research highlights the impact that the absence of positive relationships with educators can have on students, particularly in-risk male teens. Understanding the importance of obtaining positive interpersonal relationships to create strong learning relationships (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013) is imperative in discovering how relationships are formed in an educational setting and thus the resulting impact of existing or lacking positive learning relationships. When examining the impact of various relationships that contribute to the educational system topics such as collective teacher-efficacy (CTE), mentorship, interpersonal and learning relationships, professional expectations in forming student-teacher relationships, and both the factors and consequences that contribute to in-risk students lacking positive relationships in school, there is a plethora of information found. Along with the aforementioned topics, King and Sider (2018) highlighted the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging within their educational communities in order to find success in school. Literature confirms that when students do not feel connected to their school community, they tend to leave before graduation, and this lack of connection contributes to deviant behaviours (King & Sider, 2018; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Such deviant behaviours being connected to criminal activity and youth entering the justice system. The United States Department of Justice released statistics that demonstrate a theme of incarcerated males leaving school early and becoming connected to criminal activity (Harlow, 2003).

Objectives and Aims

The overarching goal is to come to understand the importance of purposeful and positive relationships in education. It is through understanding the importance of purposeful and positive relationships within an educational setting, that educators may come to better understand how to reach in-risk males and schools may see a decrease in teens leaving school early and becoming involved in criminal activity. In identifying and examining the three target areas of collective teacher-efficacy, interpersonal and learning relationships, and the factors associated with in-risk male teens becoming incarcerated there is a clear theme that positive purposeful relationships are necessary for in-risk males to flourish in a school community.

Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE)

Seminal researcher Donohoo (2013) described the impact that a caring adult can have on secondary school students deemed in-risk for failing courses and losing credits with the potential of leaving school early. Being aware of the need to formulate caring interpersonal relationships to reach in-risk students there is a need to be aware of ways that educators can positively impact students. Donohoo's (2017) research addressed the needs and benefits of collective teacher efficacy (CTE) by examining the professional learning and professional development that educators could benefit from in efforts to help support their students. Donohoo (2018) explored the importance of CTE, as an increase of CTE leads to a decrease in excluding students from school due to behaviour. Being aware of the relationship between CTE and the increased inclusion of students motivates increasing the CTE in a school community to benefit the male students that are in risk of leaving school and participating in deviant behaviours. When educators are confident in their ability to build positive purposeful relationships with youth, the youth may have an increased sense of belonging and thus be more engaged in their educational pursuits compared to that of being involved in deviant behaviours. Increased student engagement is a strong predictor of student behaviour and student achievement in school (Klem & Connell, 2004).

One of the concerns that may surface in future findings is the lack of training and support provided to educators in supporting in-risk males. By identifying the needs of in-risk males one may in turn identify the training that educators may benefit from, and in turn build their collective-efficacy and confidence to do such important work. Ninkovic and Floric's (2018) findings assisted educational leaders in understanding the best approach to take in providing such learning opportunities and thus increasing CTE. Ninkovic and Floric (2018) posited that, "[w]hen teachers believe that they are personally competent to teach, this can lead to better academic achievements of students and, consequently, to more positive perceptions of the efficacy of the school staff" (p. 60). Once it is determined what the best professional development and professional learning opportunities are for educators to support in-risk male teens, educational leaders will be able to positively impact the success of the students as well as the collective-efficacy and confidence of educators through the forums of professional development and learning.

Interpersonal and Learning Relationships

Klem and Connell (2004) also reinforced the belief that students need a caring adult in their school to support them within the environment in which they spend so much time. Through understanding the importance of student-teacher relationships in the educational setting, one must consider the need to create interpersonal relationships in order for a successful learning relationship to emerge, thus resulting in increased engagement levels (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). Interpersonal relationships and learning relationships are not terms to be used interchangeably. The purpose and goal around learning relationships is to "enable the accretion of knowledge and action and the performance of these in specific contexts" (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013, p. 13). Knowing there is a need for interpersonal relationships should encourage educators to ask themselves what they are doing to form and strengthen their interactions and relationships with students and families. In turn, educational leaders should be encouraged to consider forums and strategies to encourage educators to do the important self-reflection necessary to consider said interactions and relationships. If it is time to acknowledge and understand the impact that relationships have in education (Giles, 2011), then it is most definitely time to explore the impact of lacking relationships in education as well.

The complexity of these relationships is evident as Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) outlined the conditions in which interpersonal relationships and learning relationships thrive: the student as an equal contributor, the need for time, mutual engagement, and an openness for negotiation through relationships. These conditions and Tobbell and O'Donnell's (2013) suggestions led to an understanding that, "not all interpersonal relationships lead to learning relationships, but all learning relationships emerge from successful interpersonal relationships" (p.12). Students deemed, "to be 'at-risk' both clinically and academically, note the connection between at risk behaviour and relationship quality; the more issues there were in the teacher-student relationship, the more at risk the student was perceived to be" (Murray & Zvoch, 2011, as cited in Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013, p. 13). Raskauskas et al. (2010) contended that the student-teacher relationship may influence social behaviours, highlighting that bullies and victims have self-identified as having poorer student-teacher relationships at an elementary school level. When considering the approach to take in forging relationships with in-risk male teens and identifying areas of need to assist educators in their capacity to do so, Alexander et al. (2009) four dimensions of learning (what, where, who, and when) and how they continually interact with one another will prove to be helpful. Taking all four dimensions into consideration when forming relationships with students is essential as "the interplay among these four dimensions results in a shape to learning that is fluid and dynamic" (Alexander et al, 2009, p. 181). If the student-teacher relationships can influence disciplinary issues in demonstrating a decrease at the secondary level, as Crosnoe et al. (2004) attested, then it is worth exploring methods in creating these relationships further.

Not only is it important to consider the four dimensions when developing interpersonal and learning relationships with students, it is also imperative to understand the work of Maulana et al. (2013) in understanding the gender differences in perception of teachers. Fraser (2007) found that girls tend to have a more positive view of their teachers than boys do. Noting that males perceive their educational relationships in a different way than females, it is intriguing to consider a deeper understanding about how in-risk male teens perceive their educational relationships and the differing ways they may form motivation towards their academic studies. These are key contextual thoughts to continue to discover more about as understanding student interpretations may benefit future educators in finding ways to motivate and engage in-risk male teens along with understanding how their interactions are perceived in school. Wubbels and Brekelmans (2005) presented the Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour (MITB) illustrated below:

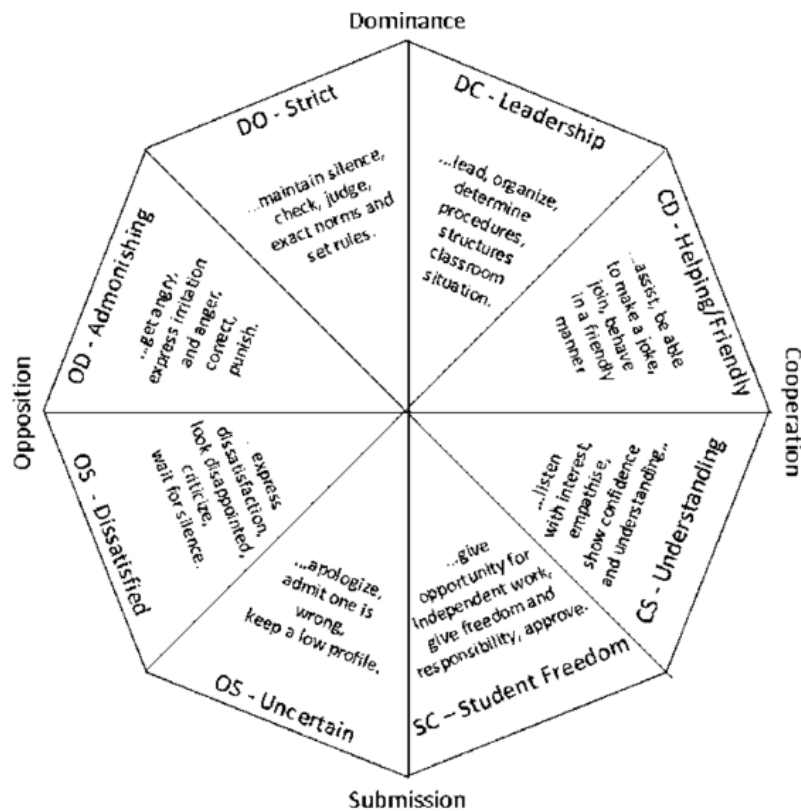


Figure 1: Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour (MTIB)
 Source: Wubbels and Brekelmans (2005)

The MITB notes that, interpersonal behaviour can be mapped in terms of two dimensions, namely *Influence* and *Proximity*. Influence refers to behaviours associated with teacher control and authority (with the opposing values of Dominance-Submission). Proximity refers to behaviours indicative of the closeness of interpersonal ties, such as teacher friendliness, how warm the teacher-student relationship is, and the care shown by teachers (Cooperation-Opposition) [...] The two dimensions of interpersonal behaviour specified in the MITB have been recognized as primary influences on the social interaction in an educational context. (Maulana et al., 2013, p. 461)

Maulana et al. (2013) assert that, “the sooner teachers establish a positive interpersonal relationship with their students, the more likely it is that the decline in the quality of [Teacher Student Interpersonal Relationships] is prevented” (p. 462). The self-determination theory (SDT) posits that, supportive relationships may be what adolescents’ need to fulfill their basic psychological need for social relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When this need is met, adolescents can feel connected to their teacher and peers, which fosters their motivation to behave in socially appropriate ways and concentrate on learning (Kiuru et al., 2020). These authors further address the fact that positive interpersonal relationships can promote students’ sense of belonging. Kiuru et al (2020) also acknowledged that, supportive interpersonal relationships function as an important resource for promoting students’ academic skill development.

When considering the need to promote students’ academic development, it is not a surprise to learn that in an educational setting, when youth perceive that the expectations for their success are limited, they do not make significant effort to change that perception. Conversely, ... almost all people find school (or other work settings) more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like

and value them' (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 68). As a result, it is important to consider ways in which one can assist youth in increasing their sense of belonging. (King & Sider, 2018, p. 239)

King and Sider (2018) continued to address the need to build the confidence and sense of belonging for in-risk male teens in their school community. The use of mentoring is discussed as a way to help support young people's positive sense of self. Mentoring can also, "provide modeling for stable and sustainable relationships with adults that many young offenders have not experienced" (Dubois & Keller, 2017, as cited in King & Sider, 2018, p. 241). Schools are a place that in-risk males are exposed to many caring adults. Mentorship is one form of an interpersonal relationship that educators and educational staff can offer students.

The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) have highlighted the need for care, respect, trust, and integrity as traits outlined in the Ethical Standards (oct.ca), all traits associated with approaches that can be used to connect with students. I posit that these are traits that should be considered when training for teachers about forming interpersonal and learning relationships. Continuing to examine educational training and guidelines, the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) has dedicated a full domain to that of Building Relationships. In doing so, the OLF is in turn demonstrating that all levels in the educational system recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships at both the educator and student level. No matter the age or stage in life everyone benefits from interpersonal relationships in order to create positive and safe learning relationships.

Not only did King and Sider (2018) identify the need to assist students in feeling a sense of belonging in school, but they too argued the need to build trust with students. The participants in the case study outlined by King and Sider (2018) identified the importance of creating trusting and respectful relationships reciprocal relationships, stating that "it is important to get to know the youth and authentically work to identify ways to gain their trust and respect" (p. 253). With the goal of forming learning relationships that keeps students engaged in school, there is a need to form positive relationships between teachers and students. If educators are able to make relationship building with all of their students a primary goal in their classrooms, is it possible that they can also in turn, positively impact criminal activity and recidivism rates?

Engaging the Disengaged

There is a noticeable gap that exists, "in research and literature exploring inmate school experiences and, consequently, school dropout" (Attardo-Maryott, 2015, p. 2). Research can be found about early leavers and various causes to leaving school, but it is challenging to find writing that speaks from the perspective and voice of in-risk males themselves. The information that is readily available also tends to be from an American point of view (Harlow, 2003; Attardo-Maryott, 2015). Understanding the in-risk male students' experiences will assist educators in determining the best approach when working to engage students in school and encouraging them not to withdraw from school. Attardo-Maryott (2015) pointed out that school disengagement can not only be linked to behavioural problems, but it is also a predictor of dropping out of school.

Leaving school early is a common factor among incarcerated males. The Bureau of Justice Statistician, Harlow (2003), highlighted that, "41% of inmates in the National State and Federal prisons and local jails in 1997 and 31% of probationers had not completed high school or its equivalent. In comparison 18% of the general population age 18 or older had not finished the 12th grade" (p.1). These glaring statistics are a reminder of the importance of keeping all students engaged in secondary school because students that struggle to connect to their school community have a greater chance of dropping out (Finn, 1989). Interestingly, "State prison inmates without a high school diploma and those with a GED were more likely to have a prior sentence than those with a diploma or some college or other postsecondary courses" (Harlow, 2003, p. 10). There are many reasons "why youth might be at risk of engaging in criminal behaviours and becoming incarcerated. For example, in urban school settings, there appears to be low academic expectations of some youth and this increases the risk of failure in traditional school settings (Montero, 2012). Failure in school can result in involvement in deviant behaviour" (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017, as cited in King & Sider, 2018, p. 237). Additional contributing factors to leaving school early and getting involved with criminal activities are that of challenging home situations, substance abuse, and socio-economic status (King & Sider, 2018). Harlow (2003) stated that "over a third of jail inmates and a sixth of the general population said the main reason they

quit school was because of academic problems, behaviour problems, or lost interest” (p. 3). Incarcerated males are leaving school due to academic, behavioural, and engagement concerns twice as often as those in the general population (Harlow, 2003). The links that are made to males leaving school early and ending up involved in criminal activity indicate a need to stay curious to discover if positive impactful interpersonal relationships can prevent in-risk males from completing their secondary education, preventing them from participating in criminal activities.

Knowing that the women in State prisons have been more likely to have a high school education and to have passed the General Educational Development (GED) attests to the need to further examine the experiences of incarcerated males, specifically a need to consider young male inmates as they are, “more likely than older inmates to have failed to complete high school or its equivalent” (Harlow, 2003, p. 7). These aforementioned statistics support the need to look at the educational experience of male teens involved in criminal activity. Some additional factors to be considered when exploring the experiences of incarcerated males may lead to topics such as race, upbringing, abilities, substance use, and recidivism. Race is a significant factor to look deeper into as Harlow’s (2003) findings showed that, “44% of black State prison inmates and 53% of Hispanic inmates had not graduated from high school or received a [General Educational Development] GED compared 27% of whites in State prisons” (p. 6). Making reference to the male teens’ upbringing refers to the findings that, when compared to other inmates, inmates growing up without two parents in the home, with an incarcerated parent, or with parents receiving financial assistance from welfare or subsidized housing were less likely to have earned their high school diploma, GED, or to have attended a postsecondary educational institution (Harlow, 2003). Another important factor to be considered further would be related to incarcerated males reported to have a disability, as Harlow’s (2003) report noted that 44% of inmates that reported a disability also had not completed high school or its equivalent. Substance use and recidivism are also important factors to consider when investigating educational experiences of incarcerated males. Close to half of the incarcerated males in State prison for selling or using illegal drugs had not earned their high school diploma nor passed the GED, and inmates without their high school diploma or GED were more likely to have committed past crimes and completed prior sentences than those that had earned a diploma or taken postsecondary courses (Harlow, 2003). Additional considerations of some of the factors that may attribute to in-risk males leaving school early and becoming involved in criminal activity: poor educational experiences, gender, familial background, interpersonal relationships, socioeconomic status, racialized implications, living conditions, and mental health, needs to be considered.

Next Steps

In understanding the power that relationships have, at all levels in the educational system, it is evident there is a need to continue exploring ways to form and maintain positive and impactful relationships. It is through interpersonal and learning relationships that educators are able to develop their CTE and both offer and benefit from mentorship. It is also through positive interpersonal and learning relationships that educators are able to form strong TSIR and influence change in student behaviour. Educators have the ability to both motivate their students to engage in schooling and to support one another by developing relationships that demonstrate their care, respect, trust, and integrity. Relationships matter. Purposeful positive relationships matter.

Continued research can help uncover the factors that in-risk male teens look for in a teacher-student relationship along with the ways in which these attributes and needs can be disseminated to educators. Hearing and presenting the voices of incarcerated males’ educational experiences will help educational systems come to understand and plan professional development and learning experiences that will benefit educators in feeling better equipped to support in-risk male teens. In hearing and presenting the voices of educators that have felt ill-equipped to support in-risk males there will be opportunities to create professional learning communities in which educators are able to share with and support one another and in turn form a great CTE and level of professional confidence in reaching in-risk male teens. In reaching in-risk males I hypothesize lower rates of early leaving and the potential decrease in criminal activity among male teens. A result in identifying the perceived supports that in-risk male teens need to engage in school, next steps include coming to understand *how* to provide in-risk male teens with the relationships that they desire and what educators may need to form such positive and impactful learning relationships.

Disseminating this work will inform policy, school boards, and transitional support workers (probation officers, social workers, etc.) of the perceived supports needed for in-risk males to find greater educational success.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, P.A., Schallert, D.L., & Reynolds, R.E. (2009). What is learning anyway? A topographical perspective considered. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(3), 176-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903029006>
- Attardo-Maryott, J. (2015). *An exploration of the relationship between school dropout and the academic, emotional, and social experiences of incarcerated males* [Dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania]. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.
- Crosnoe, R., Kirkpatrick Johnson, M., & Elder, G.E. (2004). Intergenerational bonding in school: The behavioural and contextual correlates of student-teacher relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 77(1), 60-81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070407700103>
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1104_01
- Donohoo, J. (2013). Caring adults make the difference. *Education Forum (Toronto, 1988)*, 39(3), 7-8
- Donohoo, J. (2017). Collective teacher efficacy research: Implications for professional learning. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 2(2), 101-116. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCCC-10-2016-0027>
- Donohoo, J. (2018). Collective teacher efficacy research: Productive patterns of behaviour and other positive consequences. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(3), 323-345. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s108833-018-93192>
- Finn, J. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 117-142. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543059002117>
- Fraser, B.J. (2007). Classroom learning environments. In S.K. Abell & N.G. Lederman (Eds.), *Handbook of research on science education* (pp. 103-124). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Giles, D.L. (2011). Relationships always matter: Findings from a phenomenological research inquiry. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(6), 80-91.
- Harlow, C. (2003, January). Education and correctional populations. Bureau of Justice Statistics. (pp. 1-12). <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>
- King, A., & Sider, S., (2018). Incarceration, relationships, and belonging: Insights into the Experiences of two male youth recently released from custody facilities. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, 10(1), 235-258. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy29350>
- Kiuru, N., Wang, M-T., Salmela-Aro, K., Kannas, L., Ahonen, T., & Hirvonen, R. (2020). Associations between adolescents’ interpersonal relationships, school well-being, and academic achievement during educational transitions. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49, 1057-1072. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01184-y>
- Klem, A.M., & Connell, J.P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *The Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08283.x>
- Maulana, R., Opdenakker, M-C., & Bosker, R. (2013). Teacher-student interpersonal relationships do change and affect academic motivation: A multilevel growth curve modelling. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84, 459-482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12031>
- Montero, M.K. (2012). Literary artistic spaces engage middle grade teachers and students in critical-multicultural dialogue: Urban students write about their lives in one word poems and on traveling scrawled walls. *Middle School Journal*, 44(2), 28-36.
- Ninkovic, S. R., & Floric, O. C. K. (2018). Transformational school leadership and teacher self-efficacy as predictors of perceived collective teacher efficacy. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 46(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216665842>
- Ontario College of Teachers. (2021, October 1). *Ethical Standards*. <https://www.oct.ca/public/professional-standards/ethical-standards>
- Raskauskas, J.L., Gregory, J., Harvey, S.T., Rifshana, F., & Evans, I.M. (2010). Bullying among primary school children in New Zealand: Relationships with prosocial behaviour and classroom climate. *Educational*

- Research*, 52(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881003588097>
- The Institute of Education Leadership. (2021, October 1). *The Ontario Leadership Framework*. https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/application/files/8814/9452/4183/Ontario_Leadership_Framework_OLF.pdf
- Tobbell, J., & O'Donnell, V. L. (2013). The formation of interpersonal and learning relationships in the transition from primary to secondary school: Students, teachers and school context. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 59, 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2013.02.003>
- Wolf, K.C., & Kupchik, A. (2017). School suspensions and adverse experiences in adulthood. *Justice Quarterly*, 34(3), 407-430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2016.1168475>
- Wubbels, T., & Brekelmans, M. (2005). Two decades of research on teacher-student relationships in class. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43, 6–24.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

April King is an educational researcher and a PhD Candidate at the University of Windsor. Currently serving as a Principal of Special Education for the Upper Grand District School Board, April brings a wealth of experience to her research endeavours. Her research focuses on understanding more about the educational experiences of in-risk males with an emphasis on the impact of trauma on educational experiences. April is dedicated to identifying strategies and pedagogical approaches that educators can implement to support in-risk males in achieving their definition of success in school. With a passion for educational equity and social justice, April's work aims to contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.