

# Me Read? And How!

**Ontario teachers report on how to  
improve boys' literacy skills**



reach every student

Ontario

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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *Moi, lire? Et comment!*

This publication is available on the Ministry of Education's website, at [www.edu.gov.on.ca](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca).

# Introduction

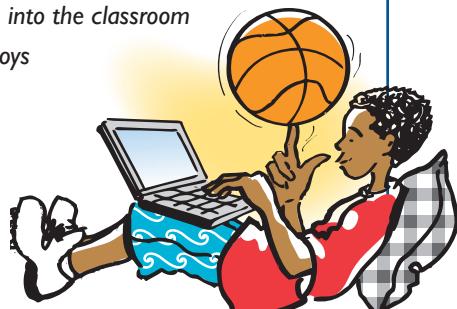
## About This Resource Guide

This resource guide is intended for classroom teachers, special education teachers, principals, and other professionals in the field of education who are developing and delivering literacy programs or support for boys at the elementary or secondary level. It may also be of interest to parents<sup>1</sup> who are concerned about their sons' literacy skills and who may wish to advocate for the use of these strategies in their schools.

*Me Read? And How!* is based on the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, which is part of an ongoing, multifaceted initiative in Ontario to support the improvement of boys' literacy skills from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

The Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project was initiated by the Ministry of Education in 2005, in response to enthusiastic feedback from teachers about the booklet *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills*, which had been distributed in the fall of 2004 to every school in Ontario. *Me Read? No Way!*, based on a review of effective practices around the world, was intended to stimulate discussion about boys and literacy and provide practical and effective strategies that teachers could put to use in the classroom. It was organized around thirteen key strategies:

- Have the right stuff: *Choosing appropriate classroom resources for boys*
- Help make it a habit: *Providing frequent opportunities to read and write*
- Teach with purpose: *Understanding boys' learning styles*
- Embrace the arts: *Using the arts to bring literacy to life*
- Let them talk: *Appealing to boys' need for social interaction*
- Find positive role models: *Influencing boys' attitudes through the use of role models*
- Read between the lines: *Bringing critical-literacy skills into the classroom*
- Keep it real: *Making reading and writing relevant to boys*
- Get the Net: *Using technology to get boys interested in literacy*
- Assess for success: *Using appropriate assessment tools for boys*
- Be in their corner: *The role of the teacher in boys' literacy*
- Drive the point home: *Engaging parents in boys' literacy*
- Build a school-wide focus: *Building literacy beyond the classroom*



1. The word *parents* is used in this document to refer to parent(s) and guardian(s).

To take part in the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, teams of elementary and/or secondary teachers across Ontario submitted proposals to conduct inquiries into strategies for improving boys' literacy skills based on *Me Read? No Way!* Successful proposals were approved for funding by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The project was active for a span of three years, from 2005 to 2008. For a complete description of the project, see *The Road Ahead: Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, 2005 to 2008 – Final Report* (OISE Research Team, 2009) posted on the ministry website, at [www.edu.gov.on.ca](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca), along with the final reports submitted by the individual inquiry teams.

*“Boys are more literate than their reading and writing results indicate, and if we use different strategies to engage them and assess their achievement, the abilities that we were unable to see before will become apparent.”*

– Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Southwood Secondary School, and Huron Heights Secondary School

The overall goals of the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project were to:

- build capacity among teachers and administrators for literacy instruction that supports achievement among boys, drawing on the strategies described in *Me Read? No Way!*;
- identify and recommend effective practices to improve boys' literacy skills;
- share effective practices across the province;
- improve instruction and programs on the basis of assessment data;
- build sustainable, collaborative professional learning communities among schools for purposes of literacy development.

An additional goal of the project was to incorporate elements of the many other initiatives that support student learning in Ontario, including:

- initiatives under The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, which works to improve students' reading, writing, and math skills;
- Student Success/Learning to 18, which supports students' staying in school;
- Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership, which supports low-performing and static schools;
- Managing Information for Student Achievement, which builds capacity in schools for managing data to make decisions;
- projects of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education that help support students with special education needs;
- projects of the Ontario Psychological Association that support students who receive professional assessments and intervention support;
- the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program, which provides an opportunity for teachers to engage in advanced professional learning and to share their learning with others;
- the School Effectiveness Framework, which addresses student achievement.

As a sequel to *Me Read? No Way!*, the present resource guide is organized according to the same thirteen strategies presented in the original booklet, with one additional strategy, “Split them up: Using single-sex groupings”, that represents another method explored by a few teams. This guide presents recommendations for implementing the fourteen strategies in the voices of the educators, parents, students, and administrators who were involved in the teacher inquiry project. Ideas and suggestions are provided through direct quotations, as well as through practical and authentic examples of practices found to be beneficial. The findings of the teacher inquiry project overwhelmingly show that boys can and do read, in volume and in depth. The stories presented in this guide illustrate how the inquiry teams ignited a love of reading among the boys in their schools and, in many cases, improved the boys’ literacy skills and their attitudes towards literacy-related activities. *Me Read? And How!* shows how teachers in their various roles as learners, coaches, advocates, storytellers, mentors, colleagues, researchers, planners, assessors, data analysts, and practitioners observed, taught, and assessed the performances of students; monitored and revised their instructional practices; and deepened their joy in teaching boys. Through their thoughtful and dedicated pursuit of the inquiry work, teachers not only furthered their understanding of boys and their learning needs and styles but also experienced insights into the strategies that work best with boys and the specific aspects of schooling that can impede their learning.

The recommended strategies in *Me Read? And How!* are designed for all students, including girls. However, they may be particularly relevant for some boys and some girls. In addition, not all students will respond equally well to each strategy. The findings reaffirm that a single strategy cannot provide the solution to improving boys’ literacy skills but that several strategies, used in combination, provide the best pathway.

For each of the fourteen strategies discussed in this guide, information is organized into six sections:

- Student, parent, team member, and administrator quotations
- Strategy Recommendations
- Putting Strategies Into Practice (“Overview of Best Practices” and “Examples of Best Practices”)
- Try This! (quick tips and suggestions for the classroom)
- What the Literature Says
- Reflections (questions and prompts for reflection)

*“No adolescent learns to read in a vacuum with artificial reading matter and no purpose of his own. He needs real books, real intentions and real help and he ought to have all of these.”*

(Meek, 1982, p. 210)

The guide concludes with an appendix listing the names of all the schools and boards involved in the teacher inquiry project and a section on references and resources for further reading.

## Why Are We Still Focusing on Boys?

There have been a multitude of studies on and investigations into boys' difficulties with literacy, yet educators at all levels are still faced with a continuing gap in achievement between boys and girls. The 2008 report *State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future*, published by the Canadian Council on Learning, states that in 2004–05, "more boys (13%) than girls (7.5%) exhibited delayed development" in the area of communication skills (p. 18). The number of young males who are dropping out of school, relinquishing graduation, and dispensing with college or university education, thereby constraining their economic futures, is a source of continuing concern. The report goes on to state that "In 2005, 62% of all university undergraduate completers were female and 38% were male – a change from 1992, when 58% were female and 42% were male" (p. 23).

In England, an extensive study of British children entitled *Girls Rock, Boys Roll: An Analysis of the Age 14–16 Gender Gap in English Schools* (Burgess, McConnell, Propper, & Wilson, 2003) found that the gender gap is primarily driven by performance differences in English, whereas boys and girls are still obtaining similar results in math and science.

A study funded by the Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations entitled *Boys, Literacy and Schooling: Expanding the Repertoires of Practice* (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002) produced data about the observations offered by teachers around boys' poor engagement and achievement in literacy. Teachers reported (p. 4) that:

- boys were less successful than girls in their ways of negotiating and participating in conventional literacy classrooms and conventional literacy activities;
- boys showed a general lack of interest in print-based reading and writing activities;
- boys demonstrated a perceived lack of purpose and relevance in school work;
- boys made "minimalistic" efforts to complete and present school literacy tasks;
- boys were disruptive, easily distracted and difficult to motivate within the classroom; and
- boys lacked self-esteem and confidence as learners.

However, the Australian teachers also observed aspects of boys' classroom behaviour that made them far more successful than girls in engaging with the multimodal literacies and literacy contexts that are likely to become dominant in the future. Teachers observed (p. 4) that:

- boys had a strong interest in electronic and graphic forms of literate practice;
- boys were willing to "do" literacy in active, public ways (such as debating, drama, public speaking); and
- boys were eager to engage with "real-life" literacy contexts and "real-life" literacy practices.

Recent provincial, national, and international assessments have produced results that echo the findings above. Provincially, the results from the Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) for students in Grades 3 and 6 show that boys do not perform as well as girls in reading and writing. (The results for mathematics do not show similar gaps.) Results from the EQAO Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in 2007–08 indicate that more girls than boys continue to pass the test.

Nationally, the 2007 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2008) showed that girls outperformed boys in reading and achieved results equal to those of boys in math and science.

Internationally, the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007) revealed that the international average scale score was higher for girls than boys, and the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) showed that girls continue to outperform boys in reading in all OECD countries.

Boys outnumber girls among students with special education needs and among English language learners. Even gifted boys may be misunderstood and their talents overlooked if their special needs or language deficits mask their abilities (Gentry & Neu, 1998, p. 295).

Although most educators acknowledge that not all boys are underachieving or at risk and that socioeconomic status, geographical location, and poverty affect the educational performance of both boys and girls, the evidence of weaker literacy skills among boys provided by the above-mentioned and other assessments has become an issue of deep concern. Poor literacy skills can have a profound effect on performance in other subjects, as well as on students' success throughout their lives. As evidence continues to show that many boys are not flourishing in the school environment, educators believe that there needs to be more precise attention paid to, and continuing, in-depth investigation conducted into, the issue of boys' literacy.

In a recent article entitled "What Students Want From Teachers" (2008), students identified what they needed in order to be engaged in the classroom. Their comments fell into the following categories (pp. 48–51):

- Take me seriously
- Challenge me to think
- Nurture my self-respect
- Show me I can make a difference
- Let me do it my way
- Point me toward my goals
- Make me feel important
- Build on my interests
- Tap my creativity
- Bring out my best self

## What About the Girls in the Classroom?

Being a boy or a girl is obviously not the only factor that determines performance in literacy. In fact, the differences *among* boys and *among* girls are greater than the differences *between* boys and girls. Rather than focusing on the differences between boys and girls, teachers should recognize that any given literacy strategy may be more effective for some boys and some girls than for others. With that understanding, teachers can consider the strategies in *Me Read? And How!* as they strive to provide appropriate and equitable opportunities for boys and girls alike.

*“Who would have thought that our boys would have liked doing origami or cat’s cradle and that our girls would equally enjoy what are often considered to be stereotypically masculine materials?”*

– Upsala Public School

## Gender Equity in the Classroom

A report delivered by the Gender Equity Task Force in Maine in 2006 was clear, forthright, and unequivocal about the difference between equity and equality and the importance for both boys and girls of acknowledging that difference.

*Gender equity is often confused with gender equality. Achieving gender equality in schools requires that we provide the same resources and opportunities to all students regardless of their gender. This is a relatively simple task in comparison to creating gender equity in our education system. Gender equity goes beyond the expectations for gender equality. Gender equity ensures that boys and girls are given the necessary supports to achieve the same standards of excellence. Equity acknowledges that boys and girls may need different supports to achieve these outcomes.*

(as cited in Tyre, 2008, p. 286)

The relationship between gender and performance is complex, multifaceted, and often dependent largely on local context and conditions. Addressing the needs of boys effectively will require commitment, dialogue, and the collective expertise and talents of all partners in the education process, including government, educators, parents, and community leaders. Among these partners, however, educators play a particularly important role in determining how individual students develop as literate individuals, as readers and writers, as speakers and listeners, as critical viewers and creators of media products. It is essential, then, that educators broaden the boundaries of literacy instruction to provide classroom experiences that respond to the diverse interests, needs, and learning styles of all students, that they exercise the effective leadership required to engage boys and girls equally as literate individuals, and that they take action to help all students realize their full potential.

Helping boys become lifelong readers is an imperative educational challenge. It is hoped that *Me Read? And How!* will re-energize our focus on effective literacy strategies for boys. As educators consider the insights collected in this guide, expand their use of instructional and assessment strategies, and pursue their own research on boys’ learning in greater depth, their experiences will continue to expand our body of knowledge to the benefit of boys in classrooms across Ontario.

*“Boys need to be engaged and capable readers not solely to be as good as or better than girls, but to increase their educational, occupational, and civic opportunities and, above all, to become thoughtful and resourceful men.”*

(Zambo & Brozo, 2008, p. 3)

**Have the**

# **right stuff**

**Choosing and promoting appropriate classroom resources for boys**

*“Getting books for the classroom libraries that are interesting to boys, like ones on sports or mysteries, has made us want to read more often. It is important to think of what boys like before you start to recommend different books to them. It is also important to know that just because some boys don’t like to read novels, does not mean they don’t like to read or can’t read.”*

— A student, St. Mary’s Catholic Elementary School

*“I was pleasantly surprised that my son took such an interest in the novel Sketches. He was actually talking about it with us during dinner .... and he rarely had to be reminded to complete his literature circle assignments. It’s been a real treat to see him actually enjoying reading!”*

— A parent, Lansdowne Public School, Sudbury Secondary School, and Wembley Public School

*“Our starting point was to invest in graphic novels and multi-genre texts. There was an instant impact – students were trying to withdraw new books from the librarian’s desk before she had time to get them bar-coded. It is important to have many interesting books that support the curriculum available, but the books seem to have extra appeal if they are perceived to be new and if the book bins are changed frequently.”*

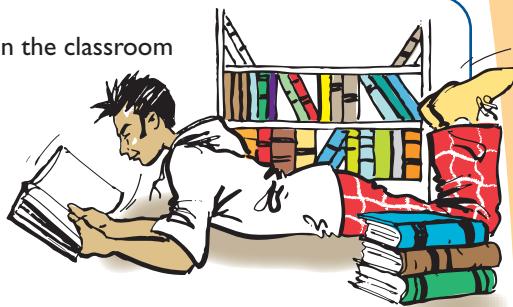
— A team member, Armstrong Public School

*“This project has shown that graphic novels are more engaging for our male population, and so we extended the traditional definition of reading to include this genre. Our English teachers have helped our boys connect with reading, which many of them found challenging or simply disliked. The graphic novel has allowed them to engage in discussion and become invested in the literacy process.”*

— An administrator, Father Henry Carr School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide a wide variety of reading material in the classroom and library.
- Allow students choice in their reading.
- Select books that reflect boys' image of themselves.
- Include graphic novels.
- Include books in series.
- Provide a balance of non-fiction and fiction.
- Use classroom or library organizers to make reading material more accessible.
- Know and teach a variety of traditional and non-traditional forms and genres.



## PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE

### Overview of Best Practices

The majority of the inquiry teams began by using their ministry funding to purchase new reading resources. Teams interviewed boys individually, surveyed groups of students, and then used this information to choose new materials. Some teams actually recruited boys to examine book lists and catalogues, advise on the purchases, and accompany staff to buy the books.

Inquiry teams found that boys, especially those with special needs, required high-interest reading material (material that held a strong interest for them), from easily accessible, short texts to longer, more challenging selections. Selections were drawn from a multitude of sources, both fiction and non-fiction, including non-traditional text forms such as magazines, newspapers, comic books, graphic novels, picture books (in the primary grades), joke and riddle books, instruction manuals, information books, and websites and other digital texts. Increasing the variety and number of resources for boys at both the elementary and secondary levels led to increased motivation and engagement among boys.

The inquiry teams found that boys like to see themselves reflected in the books they read and that including topics relevant to their lives yielded positive results. Selections that portrayed boys in familiar situations or with familiar cultural backgrounds proved a powerful stimulus for engaging reluctant readers. The use of humour in narratives and poetry strongly appealed to many boys. For younger students, topics such as cars and trucks; hockey, soccer, and wrestling; ghosts; cooking; animals; and science proved popular. Adolescent boys preferred materials that dealt with music and sports, biographies, and books that presented issues related to drugs, relationships, gangs, bullying, history, science, and ethics. These materials fed boys' curiosity about the world and their interest in making meaning of their lives. While many schools noticed a tremendously positive response to graphic novels, there were also a number of schools where this

was not the case. Teachers found that common reading choices in the classroom included fiction featuring action, mystery, and fantasy; detective fiction; fiction about real-life problems; and comic books about superheroes, as well as non-fiction forms such as how-to books and information books. Some teachers found that the new resources captured the boys' interest and focus and improved on-task behaviours in class.

Teachers discovered that some boys do not believe they are reading if they are not reading classroom text-type materials or full-length novels. Students were surprised to learn that reading graphic novels, sports magazines, or books on auto mechanics was considered "reading" by the school authorities.

Although it is important to use non-fiction texts to engage students' interest, teachers need to be especially observant when they are being used. Non-fiction texts that are heavily illustrated and include minimal text may allow weaker readers to pick up some of the plot and information without actually reading. These students may be able to maintain self-esteem in their peer group, but they may not actually be improving their literacy skills. Teachers need to provide additional support to ensure that students continue to develop their skills.

A significant number of school teams reported the successful use of books in series, first to engage boys and then to propel them into further reading. The team from Arthur Meighen Public School suggests, "If a novel is popular, look for a sequel or another novel by the same author." Series books, with their predictable plots and characters, hook the boys and at the same time reinforce their knowledge and experience of literary elements such as plot, characters, and settings and their understanding of the features and conventions of these texts.

Boys who were allowed to exercise some choice around their reading selections and writing topics showed increased motivation and engagement. Empowering students in this way helped them to stay on-task and gainfully practise their literacy skills. Teachers recognized that not all students can read the same thing at the same time with the same level of interest, and embraced the concept of individual and personal engagement, as opposed to collective engagement, for the boys in their classes.

The acquisition of substantially more resources presented schools with the challenge of how to store and display these materials. Schools responded with innovative solutions, such as the use of plastic eavestroughing or skateboards for shelves; mobile carts and trolleys, which enabled teachers to share materials among several classrooms; bins to sort books by level; and dedicated shelving for boys' books in the classroom or the library. At Bishop Macdonell School, "the reading carts provided more diversified reading and greater flexibility with resources".

Teachers developed their professional knowledge of non-traditional text forms and of ways to support their students in understanding them. New materials injected into the classroom without accompanying instruction were insufficient to increase boys' literacy. Teachers needed to think about how to align the use of these new text forms with the curriculum expectations and integrate them into the regular instructional practices within the classroom.

## Examples of Best Practices

At St. Gregory Catholic School, the staff used surveys to find out which topics and formats interested the boys. The team members noticed that most of the boys preferred non-fiction to fiction and enjoyed humorous texts; shorter texts such as articles, magazines, and statistics; and illustrated texts with diagrams and maps, and the team made its purchases accordingly. They overwhelmingly concluded that boys need first to be engaged with a rich and varied mix of materials and then to experience a wider variety of teaching practices to achieve literacy success. One team member commented, "When we brought a variety of reading materials into the classroom – *Guinness World Records*, trivia books, joke books, sports magazines, humorous poetry, and so on – the boys became engaged and eager to talk about them and share the books with their friends. This opened my eyes to the fact that literature circles aren't just for novels. We can use magazines, picture books, and newspaper articles and bring the boys into the discussion."

– St. Gregory Catholic School

A collaborative partnership between one secondary and two elementary schools found an overwhelming correlation between the availability of a rich and diverse selection of resources and the willingness of boys to engage in reading activities. Their collective project was designed to improve Grade 8 and 9 boys' academic performance, literacy skills, and attendance through the use of differentiated teaching strategies and a diverse collection of materials that appealed to adolescent boys. Teachers conducted surveys and met individually with each of their students to determine their reading interests and habits and attitudes towards reading. On the basis of the information they gathered, classroom libraries were upgraded with new fiction and non-fiction books and magazines, and the teachers were able to differentiate instruction effectively. As one student commented, "It was really neat that the whole class didn't have to read the same book. There were different groups that each read a different novel and it sounds like they were all pretty good. I might read one of the other literature circle books."

– Lansdowne Public School, Sudbury Secondary School, and Wembley Public School

The acquisition, promotion, and circulation of high-interest reading materials by this team resulted in a huge increase in reading among Grade 9 boys. Because of the significant proportion of Asian students at the school, the team chose to create a collection of manga (Japanese graphic novels). Upon seeing the collection of approximately 500 manga titles in the library, some new Grade 9 boys were overheard to say, “We’ve died and gone to manga heaven.” In addition, the team created their own boys’ version of the Ontario Library Association’s White Pine Program. The books chosen all had a boy protagonist and either a compelling story-line, powerful characters, or a humorous tone. The team also purchased a wide selection of biographies, young adult titles, and magazines. The school’s next project is to develop a Grade 10 boys’ reading program that will include young adult titles and popular genre titles such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Da Vinci Code*, the Adrian Mole series, and the James Bond series.

— Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute

Do graphic novels promote boys’ literacy? The findings from this team’s project demonstrated that boys scored significantly higher on assignments related to graphic texts as opposed to traditional texts, were more engaged when reading graphic texts, and were more likely to finish a graphic text than a traditional text. The inquiry team also discovered that the boys were more likely to share their opinions on graphic novels and that, when given a choice between a graphic novel and a traditional text, they overwhelmingly chose to read graphic texts. Once the boys were engaged, they were able to learn challenging concepts. The graphic texts *300* and *Fables and Reflections* helped students understand literary terms, such as *hubris* and *hamartia*. The inquiry teams also found that the illustrations and diagrams in information texts helped the boys to understand procedures and practices.

— Father Henry Carr School

This inquiry team wanted to find out if allowing boys (and girls) to select their own reading materials would increase engagement and overall reading scores, and the answer was a very quick yes. As soon as the first shipment of new books arrived from which the students were to select books for the classroom library, their excitement about reading increased. The students were thrilled to select brand-new books to add to their classroom collection. Labels were placed on the front covers, naming the student who chose the book. All the classroom libraries were arranged in child-friendly bins organized by genre/topic, as well as by level in the primary grades.

— Holy Family Catholic School

## TRY THIS!

At Graham Bell-Victoria Public School, the staff encouraged boys to explore different genres and also highlighted different genres each month in the library. In the classrooms, all the reading materials were organized into bins by genre and by author so that the classrooms and the library were more closely aligned.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Heather Blair of the University of Alberta and Kathy Sanford of the University of Victoria have studied early adolescent boys in Western Canada. In their findings (2003), they report:

*Boys' personal interest in text is connected to the active emotional, mental, and physical engagement they experience and to the amount of success they experience in the engagements. Not only do they like to read and write about action, but they also "really want to get into the action" themselves, to "do stuff," and they "don't want to have to wait." The early adolescent boys in our study also wanted to be challenged, but in contexts in which they felt confident of success or at least improvement. These boys often selected visual, humorous, and active texts such as comic books, magazines, and cartoon anthologies. It became apparent to us that a critical factor in selection of their readings was purposefulness, whether in getting information, figuring out how something works, keeping track of sports statistics, or staying connected with their friends.*

## REFLECTIONS

1. Think about the range of resources in your classroom and school library. How could these resources be expanded to reflect the learning needs and interests of boys?
2. Are your boys provided with a range of choices for their reading? How do you monitor their choices? How do you extend the range and scope of their reading selections?
3. In what ways do you involve boys in purchasing and choosing appropriate reading materials?
4. Should newly purchased books be housed in classrooms or in the library?
5. What can you do to increase your ability to introduce new text forms to your students?
6. As you consider new graphic and other texts to acquire, think about which ones would appeal to girls as well as boys, students with special needs, English language learners, and students in workplace courses.
7. What texts can you share with your boys that show boys and men with positive qualities, thinking about issues of importance, dealing with social and emotional issues, and acting responsibly?

# Help make it a habit

Providing frequent opportunities to read and write

*“I like silent reading time because that’s the time when everything calms down and I can read graphic novels. I get to feel what it’s like to be in the story and it’s really cool.”*

— A student, Agnes Macphail Public School

*“By setting reading time aside on a daily basis in class, creating an inviting library conducive to reading, and scheduling time with reading buddies, teachers can help students develop a love for reading and, in turn, achieve better results in overall scores.”*

— A parent, St. Jean Brebeuf School

*“We will place a greater emphasis on sustained, daily silent reading time and accompany it with discussions, making connections, read-alouds, and book talks.”*

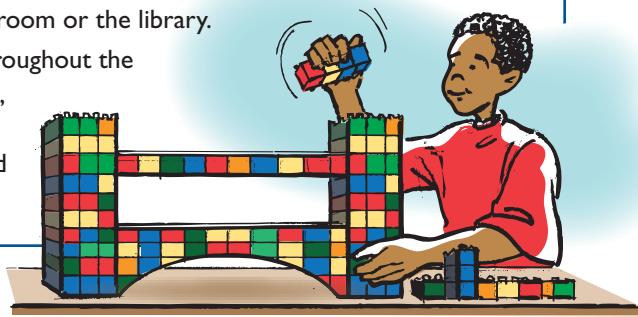
— A team member, Land of Lakes Senior Public School

*“Reading empowers, awakens, develops, and inspires growth in every person who takes it up. The Holy Family Catholic School community of parents, students, and staff does a phenomenal job of promoting and supporting daily reading in all curriculum areas for all grade levels. It is a joy to watch students blossom as they gain confidence through regular reading.”*

— An administrator, Holy Family Catholic School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schedule daily blocks of time for literacy instruction, and schedule regular blocks of time for uninterrupted independent reading.
- Make clear connections between reading and writing in all subjects.
- Create a boys’ corner in the classroom or the library.
- Encourage a culture of literacy throughout the school through a variety of events, such as in-school broadcasts and shows of culminating activities, and the use of artefacts.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

The inquiry teams found that boys need consistent, sustained opportunities to read and write. They need two to three hours per week for reading practice in a relatively quiet space that is free of distractions and interruptions, such as bells and announcements.

Boys need this sustained time dedicated to independent reading in order to internalize the ideas that arise from their reading, to “find out what they think” about what they have read. At St. Joseph-Scollard Hall Catholic Secondary School, both students and staff said the school’s sustained silent reading program showed them “the value of daily engagement in reading and its impact on student attitudes”.

Many of the schools outfitted a special area within the classroom or the library for scheduled reading groups. These areas were often furnished with rugs, lamps, and comfy chairs to create a cosy environment that encouraged reading. The addition of posters depicting boys reading or personalized pictures of boys reading their favourite book enhanced the attraction of these areas. At Riverside Public School, the junior boys actually painted and furnished the room themselves, making it truly their own reading space. At Sister Mary Clare Catholic School, the boys provided input to a local male artist, who created a flowing presentation of fictional and real heroes throughout the ages, from Noah’s Ark to the Pirates of the Caribbean to astronauts, to decorate the walls of the Boys’ Literacy Corner.

Teachers helped boys to recognize the relationship between reading and writing by making constant connections between these two areas of literacy. They also helped boys to see that stories and informational texts are organized in different ways and follow unique conventions. These experiences with numerous examples of different forms of texts helped boys in their own fiction and non-fiction writing. Understanding this connection helped boys to see the purpose in their activities and take greater pride in their accomplishments.

Some schools found that boys responded well to the use of artefacts – physical symbols of their work and their accomplishments in reading, or physical reminders (such as bookmarks) of reading strategies to use. At Bellmoore Public School, reading logs and progress charts helped to create a pervasive culture of literacy. Schools also made an effort to showcase literacy through the use of posters, contests, book raffles, and displays of writing portfolios or culminating literacy activities.

## Examples of Best Practices

The focus for this school's teacher inquiry project was to create "literate" young men through a school-wide community effort. To that end, the school involved one representative from each school department in planning their initiatives. One of the highlights was the revitalization of an in-class reading period, which students named SHHGAR (Shh! Go and Read!). The school made new purchases that took into account the preferences of both genders. Some teachers read aloud to their classes. The school ran a major contest that students could win by being "caught" reading by staff. Boys made biweekly broadcasts of book reviews on the in-school TV station, and the featured books were raffled off in the library at lunch. A "guys-only" writing workshop was initiated for a small number of boys, who came away very motivated to write as a result of their experience and their privileged status. Students deemed at risk of being unsuccessful on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test were invited to participate in a "literacy boot camp" with small-group support, instruction, and feedback. The school has succeeded in creating a culture where boys feel welcome to read and write and where boys now see themselves as readers.

– A.Y. Jackson Secondary School

These two schools paired older students with younger reading buddies on a regular basis to determine if this approach would help make reading a habit. Older students were taught or reviewed a specific comprehension strategy and then made bookmarks to reflect this strategy. The comprehension strategies featured on the bookmarks included:

- asking questions;
- making connections;
- visualizing information;
- identifying text features;
- identifying the main idea of a text.

Teachers also outlined the strategies of summarizing, identifying features of non-fiction text, and finding supporting details. These bookmarks became very important to the students, who took ownership of them and took care not to lose them. In one classroom, the bookmarks were laminated and put on a key ring for easy access. Both the older and younger buddies would prepare a book or selection before each meeting to read to each other. When they met to read, the older buddy would structure the conversation around the reading selections using the questions and prompts from the bookmarks.

– St. Anthony's Catholic School and Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School

The team at Kensington Community School designated many regular, short periods of time for literacy-related activities to make reading and writing a daily habit. They became keen observers of the boys in their classes. Among other things, they noted that boys often read in bits and pieces, returning to a text many times over a period of months rather than reading straight through a text. They watched carefully for “happy accidents” that would open a door for a student and lead to excitement and enthusiasm for reading or writing. For example, when asked to write about a special gift, one previously reluctant writer was transformed into an almost unstoppable author who produced pages of information. This new energy for writing also supported his reading abilities, as he enthusiastically read his writing to others. Frequent opportunities to read and write for a wide variety of purposes and audiences led to increased enthusiasm and interest among boys. The teachers also set up a section of the school library with display shelves for magazines, non-fiction, and contemporary and popular literature. This area, which proved to be a popular place for the boys to congregate, had camp chairs, a small sofa, and a carpet that partly set it off from the rest of the library.

– Kensington Community School

This school team worked at facilitating opportunities for boys to use engaging fiction and non-fiction materials and make connections with what they read on an ongoing, daily basis and in literature circles. Teachers used a variety of activities, including rapid writing journals, reading response journals, book-boasts, current event presentations based on non-fiction, readers’ theatre presentations, and an activity called “Read and React” (a quick, on-the-spot sharing of thoughts, comments, or criticisms). All of these activities allowed the boys to gather their understanding, talk with peers in small groups about what they had read, plan their writing using graphic organizers both individually and in pairs or groups, and then ultimately write more effectively to communicate the connections they had found – text to text, text to self, and text to world. Finally, the school used writing portfolios to showcase ten samples of the boys’ writing in various genres as a culminating activity. All of these strategies contributed to this school’s plan to make reading and writing connections part of the habitual practice within the school.

– Queen of Peace Catholic Elementary School

## TRY THIS!

Try the “Reading Challenge” from Land of Lakes Senior Public School. Here’s how it worked:

Students were asked to set a “secret” personal goal of reading ten or more pages a day, five days a week, for eight or ten weeks, for a total of at least four or five hundred pages. A written “contract” was signed by both the student and a parent, sealed, and handed in. The school facilitated the achievement of the goals by instituting forty to fifty minutes of uninterrupted silent reading in class on most days. At the end of the reading time, students came together and coloured in on a class bar graph the number of pages they had completed, without revealing their secret individual goals. Each year, students were amazed to see that they could reach their secret goals by the halfway point of the challenge. Their enthusiasm for stories motivated them to read more than their daily goal, as they were eager to read on to finish a chapter or a book. Readers at all levels were able to meet their page goals because the school provided a variety of books appropriate for different skill levels. The students enjoyed filling out the bar graphs that showed the reading progress of the class as a whole, as this was set up to be a social time when they compared notes on their progress, discussed and traded books with each other, and recommended books to their classmates.



## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Research evidence relating the amount and variety of pleasure reading to student achievement is powerful and compelling. Recent studies in Australia (Australian School Library Association, 2003) and the United States (Campbell, Murphy, & Holt, 2002; Cullinan, 2000; Krashen, 2004) conclude there are strong links between positive attitudes to reading and the amount of free voluntary reading students engage in. Independent readers score higher on reading achievement tests and have greater content knowledge than non-readers. Haycock (2003), in looking at data from research studies on Canadian school libraries, noted that well-stocked school libraries and the presence of teacher-librarians contribute to higher student achievement. A report entitled *Reading for Change* (Kirsch et al., 2002) drew evidence from the 2000 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests of fifteen-year-olds to conclude that students who read widely outside the curriculum gain motivation and experience from reading, and also that the degree of reading engagement is a crucial factor in reading achievement. Reading is intrinsically valuable and needs to be central to the curriculum rather than viewed as an add-on.

### REFLECTIONS

1. What opportunities do you provide for regular uninterrupted reading or writing periods in your classroom or school? How can you work more opportunities into the school day?
2. Consider modelling good reading practices by reading a book of your own during individual reading periods.
3. How can you make the classroom reading area or library a more welcoming environment for boys?
4. What artefacts can you give the boys in your classroom as a physical reminder of strategies or a physical way to track their reading progress?

# Teach with

# purpose

## Understanding boys' learning styles

*“Mrs. B., can we read a story out of the math bin today, the funny one where all the numbers get lost? ’Cause I have a good connection that I’d like to share.”*

— A student, Smith Public School

*“The interactive reading kits are great! They help the children learn in different ways about so very many different things. They really put the interest back in learning.”*

— A parent, Upsala Public School

*“We learned that to sustain the boys’ interest and focus, we must start with topics and materials that will engage their interests; keep lessons active; break skills down into small chunks; keep lessons short and to the point; model; make goals and requirements explicit; give lots of time for practice; provide opportunities to re-teach each lesson; and let the boys know about their successes.”*

— A team member, Kensington Community School

*“I am truly pleased about the achievement of our students, in particular the academic gains made by our male students, who now seem to achieve success at least as well as our female students do. The success can be attributed to a triad of practices: the implementation of non-fiction reading and writing strategies in science; increased library instruction and resources; and increased literacy practices throughout the school. Removing any one of these would be detrimental to student success.”*

— An administrator, St. Augustine Catholic High School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Design a balanced literacy program with high-yield strategies.
- Use direct, targeted instruction and specific strategies.
- Use differentiated instruction.
- Use a variety of active learning experiences, such as competitions, games, contests, and group activities.
- Use a variety of graphic organizers.
- Teach metacognitive strategies for students to use when reading.



# **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

## **Overview of Best Practices**

Inquiry teams found that boys were more successful when there was a strong, balanced approach to literacy using high-yield strategies modelled by the teachers and practised with intention. Boys needed to see, hear, and feel what competent reading, writing, and oral communication was like, and they needed to be challenged at an appropriate level and to experience success. Strategies such as read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading were used to help boys succeed.

Teachers' focus on direct, targeted instruction and clear, precise strategies based on evidence of boys' learning needs led to success for many of the boys in the teacher inquiry project. At Holy Family Catholic School, teachers held conferences with individual students, offering regular, positive feedback to help them set their reading goals, and worked with them on before-, during-, and after-reading strategies. At G. B. Little School, teachers reported the importance of "teaching specific text features, especially for non-fiction", and "direct teaching of fictional texts, since boys in general did not prefer this genre". Teachers used direct strategies in a systematic fashion to:

- activate prior knowledge;
- support the processes of reading and writing;
- engage students in goal-setting;
- teach the forms, features, and stylistic elements of texts;
- teach metacognitive skills.

To help students apply these strategies, the teachers used mnemonics, such as "retell, relate, reflect" (3 Rs) and "answer, prove, extend" (APE).

Differentiated instruction was a major focus among schools. Teachers differentiated their resources, their placement of students in groups, their themes, their instructional and assessment practices, and their feedback to meet boys' learning needs. Providing shorter tasks for boys and giving them plenty of feedback was one strategy that proved to be helpful. At Bishop Allen Academy Catholic High School, teachers structured their seventy-six-minute teaching periods into smaller sections to enable interactive and varied learning. A single class period could involve a combination of any of the following: Internet browsing and reading; conducting research for independent study projects; reading and discussing a group of articles; conducting debates; viewing online videos; writing reviews of events, movies, or documentaries; and completing independent work.

Debates, games, and other forms of friendly competition were found to motivate boys. At Holy Family Catholic School, the students self-monitored the number of books they read by keeping a running total in their reading log. The totals served as a competitive incentive among the boys. At St. Joseph High School, the school team capitalized on the boys' spirit of competition by designing a soccer-themed culminating activity called the

“Literary Cup”. Students from several classes worked in groups to research information about a soccer-playing country and then presented their research to a panel of judges. The winning class received a pizza party.

Many teachers used graphic organizers to introduce key content and vocabulary; to help students visualize connections between words, concepts, and meanings; and to support boys’ demonstrations of their thinking. Such organizers were hugely successful with the boys.

Teachers found it was important to provide tools for boys to think about how they were engaging with texts and instruct them in metacognitive strategies for monitoring comprehension, including what to do if meaning broke down. The teams found that giving boys power and a measure of control over their thinking helped to improve the boys’ independent reading skills. At Rosethorn Junior Public School, a focus on metacognition transformed the boys from reluctant readers to “more independent readers choosing their own literature and setting goals to improve their reading skills”.

## Examples of Best Practices

This teacher inquiry project worked with science classes at a variety of grade levels and course streams, including Grade 9 Academic and Applied, Grade 10 Applied, and Grade 12 College Preparation Physics. Instructional activities were designed to foster increased academic achievement around non-fiction text. Teachers helped students decode informational texts and use specific strategies to write their own non-fiction texts in forms such as summaries, lists, and reports. Most teachers found that focused teaching of targeted instructional strategies for non-fiction reading and writing skills increased the quality of the student writing. Students became more comfortable with reading and writing non-fiction texts and showed more interest in real-world applications of the concepts learned. The inquiry team also created a website, at <http://stau.ycdsb.ca/boysliteracy>, that features materials and activities for teachers to download and modify for their own instructional needs.

– St. Augustine Catholic High School

The team at Bellmoore Public School used direct teaching strategies to support shared, guided, and independent reading. Teachers customized goals and strategies for their classrooms and their students rather than using general goals such as “to move 8% of the male students from level 2 to level 3 in reading”. Using specific anticipatory activities or guides before reading activated prior knowledge, elicited curiosity, provoked lateral or next-step thinking, and grounded new learning, resulting in richer and more critical responses from the boys. The teachers found that when the boys’ attention was gained through pre-reading activities or discussions, the boys began to forge stronger connections to their reading and the topic or content area being studied. One team member commented, “We are very encouraged by the results gathered over the last three years. We have seen the gender gap decrease as well as seeing an increase in student engagement.”

– Bellmoore Public School

In this cooperative project for Grades 7–10, teachers in two schools focused on targeted instructional strategies such as the use of graphic organizers, sticky notes, read-alouds, predictions, inferences, and visualizations. Teachers also encouraged students to connect their reading to real-life situations and experiences. The students were able to make connections – text to text, text to self, and text to world. Differentiated instruction was implemented to good effect with the boys, who needed to choose their own ways to learn and to demonstrate what they had learned. In addition, students were encouraged to use metacognitive skills and strategies before, during, and after reading. Anecdotal feedback indicated that students were able to identify strategies that were successful for them and were able to articulate their progress in reading. Overall, the boys believed they were now better readers.

— Father Leo J. Austin Catholic High School and St. Bernard Catholic School

The teachers at St. Alphonsus decided to focus on a specific group of boys who had struggled in their reading and writing and had scored at level 2 in their reading results. The teachers introduced and then reinforced the use of the “3 Rs” framework (retell, relate, reflect) to foster the development of higher-order thinking skills in reading responses. They gave the students reading response journals to practise this strategy, allowing each student to choose which journal entries to submit. The teachers observed that when the boys were given assignments with step-by-step instructions, clear expectations, and a formula to follow, they were more likely to complete the assignments with a “high degree of effectiveness”. Their learning needs were also supported by the introduction of the “APE” (answer, prove, extend) strategy to help them to write at a higher level. The boys’ writing did improve, with some of the boys who were writing at level 2 when the project began reaching level 3 for most of their writing assignments by the end of the project. In addition, the teachers helped the boys to produce a recurring newsletter, *Boys Writing for Boys!*, which provided a real purpose for their writing.

— St. Alphonsus Catholic School

The inquiry team at this school decided to join the Silver Birch Award reading program (part of the Forest of Reading program run by the Ontario Library Association; see “Try This!” below). A Silver Birch reading club for interested students from Grades 5 and 6 met once a week. During the meeting, students would write trivia questions about the books they had read since the last meeting, and then they would team up and try to answer as many as possible. Prizes were awarded to the winning group. After reading a Silver Birch selection, students completed a reading response form to rate the book in various categories and reflected on what the book made them think about (making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections). For each book they read, students would get their Silver Birch tracking sheet signed by a teacher. In April, all students who had five signatures could vote for their favorite book. The voting process for the in-school competition was similar to the province-wide voting process, with ballot boxes and returning officers. In addition, all students who had received five signatures were invited to a celebration to hear a Silver Birch author speak.

— Tom Longboat Junior Public School



## TRY THIS!

Check out the Forest of Reading program sponsored by the Ontario Library Association, at [www.accessola.com/reading](http://www.accessola.com/reading). In the program, students read nominated books in their age category and then vote for the best books at the end of the school year. Many schools in the teacher inquiry project built on boys' enthusiasm for friendly competition by using the program's contest framework and the high-quality Canadian materials endorsed by the program to get the boys reading and enjoying their reading.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Pashler et al. (2007, pp. 13–14) suggest combining graphics (e.g., graphs, figures) that illustrate key processes and procedures with verbal descriptions to improve the effectiveness of instruction. This integration leads to better learning than simply presenting text alone. Presenting the verbal description in an audio format rather than as written text when possible allows students to use the visual and auditory processing capacities of the brain separately, rather than potentially overloading the visual processing capacity with both the visualization and the written text.

Duke and Pearson (2002) recommend a model of instruction for enhancing comprehension that includes the following components:

- explicit description of the strategy
- modelling of the strategy by the teacher and other students
- collaborative use of the strategy
- guided practice in using the strategy with gradual release of responsibility
- independent use of the strategy

## REFLECTIONS

1. How do you plan for the systematic teaching of reading and writing skills to individual boys?
2. How can you divide new learning into smaller segments that are more readily understood by boys?
3. How can you help your students to reflect on their learning at appropriate points?
4. What forms of active learning can you introduce in your classroom or school?

# Embrace the arts

Using the arts to bring literacy to life

*“I like the roles of illustrator and wordsmith because I get to draw about my reading.”*

— A student, Chester Public School

*“My child enjoyed expressing his creativity through drama.”*

— A parent, St. Alphonsus Catholic School

*“Watching the boys act something out or demonstrate their learning through drama leaves me wondering if I should incorporate these strategies in math and science. The growth in student engagement is so noticeable.”*

— A team member, Holy Saviour School

*“During the project, we have witnessed the value of integrating the arts into the curriculum. Although we have experienced positive results in both male and female students, of particular note is the improvement in boys. They clearly have become more engaged in language arts activities that allow them to ‘act out’, to become a character in a book or illustrate their comprehension through tableaux and other drama activities. Many have had the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and understanding through music and visual arts. We take time each month to celebrate learning through the arts. Boys have taken a lead role in sharing their arts-based learning in front of an audience of over nine hundred students.”*

— An administrator, Hawthorne Village Public School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use drama-based activities such as role plays, readers’ theatre, and puppetry.
- Use music and poetry.
- Use visual tools, visual arts, and tactile approaches to learning.
- Use dance and other kinesthetic approaches to learning.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

Experiences in the arts play a valuable role in the education of all students. Research shows that the arts motivate and engage students, giving them the confidence to learn and to increase their academic success. These findings are crucial as schools look to develop their students' skills and competencies to equip them to survive and thrive in the future. While studies have shown that the arts help keep students in school, the arts are also beneficial in their own right: they help students to:

- build a strong work ethic;
- foster empathy through role playing;
- learn teamwork skills;
- enhance their creativity;
- develop their artistic skills and aesthetic judgement.

The inquiry teams found that boys' engagement was enhanced with the use of the arts. The team leader at San Lorenzo Ruiz Elementary School noted that "awareness of boys' developmental needs and learning styles helped us shape instructional time by building in movement, drama, and more visual strategies". Other inquiry teams discovered that allowing boys to use tactile and kinesthetic activities in response to their learning, such as creating posters, enacting a dramatic scene, putting on a puppet show or dance performance, or making or composing music, helped to stimulate their interest, build mental models, and support comprehension. Using arts activities such as readers' theatre, role play, and poetry provided boys with an authentic reason to read or write, offered the opportunity to increase fluency, and also had the potential to be a lot of fun.

The staff at King's Masting Public School found that activities such as role play and readers' theatre supported increased comprehension and dialogue around texts that the boys were reading and studying. At Five Mile School and Gorham and Ware Community School, the inquiry team used hands-on literacy games, such as word-tile manipulatives for vocabulary practice, and allowed the boys to move about the room as they worked. The principal at Holy Saviour School stressed the interconnectedness of movement, drama, and literacy. "Boys who are athletically skilled are also the ones acting in school plays, playing musical instruments, and showing interest in visual arts and art techniques. When school provides a comprehensive arts program along with a good physical education program, boys' interest in literacy is heightened."

Visual arts proved to be good for boys in a variety of ways. Teams found that students' reasoning and organizational skills were improved through the use of visual tools such as mind maps. They also found that studying art works can serve as a source of information for writing, spark student interest, and stimulate imagination and vocabulary. At Holy Spirit, St. Kevin, and St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic Schools, the inquiry team found that the boys in their classes were drawn to colour, variety in print forms, and different textual features in texts, so focusing on these helped to engage the boys.

## Examples of Best Practices

This school decided to embrace the arts. The inquiry team investigated the effect of the integration of drama, dance, music, and visual arts on boys' motivation, comprehension, and overall fluency in reading. The team found that the changes had a profound and positive impact. Boys were more highly motivated when they could actively participate in authentic arts activities in all areas of the curriculum. Weaker literacy students were able to "star" at monthly Arts Beat assemblies, proud to share their learning through one of the arts. Professional artists were invited in to help plan and co-teach some of the various units. One student commented, "I liked wearing the costumes that the Canadian Opera Company brought. I learned about singing a story rather than just saying it. Wearing costumes makes you 'feel' more like the characters." Both boys and girls stated that they understood texts better when shared reading was followed by arts-related activities.

– Hawthorne Village Public School

The inquiry team at the Provincial Schools for the Deaf found that using kinesthetic approaches to language activities, such as manipulatives and puppets, was highly effective in supporting the literacy learning of students with hearing impairments. The inquiry team assembled backpacks containing manipulative materials that supported the students' written instructional materials. Parents were invited to weekend workshops so parents and child together could explore the backpack materials. Another goal for the project was to produce a DVD that would have voice and American Sign Language (ASL) lessons and activities to be sent home with students, providing visual support for literacy.

– Provincial Schools for the Deaf

The inquiry team at St. Michael focused on the implementation of a kinesthetic learning environment. Teachers observed that the boys in their classrooms were more relaxed, more comfortable, and more productive in a high-tech, hands-on kinesthetic environment. Initially the teachers created a reading pit with a "racing" theme and literacy centres in each of the inquiry team's classrooms. Because of the marked improvement in reading scores in the first year of the project, the teachers decided to make this environment accessible to all students in Grades 5–8 by creating a separate literacy room with a gaming theme. The parent council and private businesses made significant donations towards the creation of the room. The teachers used gaming circles and drama techniques such as readers' theatre

to build boys' fluency, self-esteem, self-confidence, and academic, communication, and social skills. Currently the school community is in the process of designing a new school facility, and the renovation committee has recognized the value of the gaming room for the students and has ensured its place in the new facility.

– St. Michael Catholic School

The class chosen for this inquiry project was predominantly made up of boys characterized by the inquiry team as boys "who did not like to read and who would vocalize their dislike of school on a regular basis". In the first year, the teachers built their classes around a suggestion to conduct research into the local history of the area. The boys gathered research, developed the material into a play, and performed it at the local Historica Fair. The following year, the same boys, now in Grade 6, participated in a special unit on the *Titanic* to stimulate interest in non-fiction. They researched a real person from the *Titanic* guest list and then role-played that person at a final dinner on the ship. Afterwards, the students watched *A Night to Remember*, the original film made about the event, and then compared and contrasted the real events with what was depicted in the film.

– St. Paul the Apostle Catholic School

The inquiry project at Agnes Macphail focused on the integrated use of graphic novels, media literacy, and technology. The school purchased a number of graphic novels for the junior division and invited a professional comic artist to the school to show students how to plan and produce their own comics in small teams. The school ended up publishing an anthology of their results, using a desktop publishing program, to showcase the graphic texts created by the boys. The teachers noticed how excited the students were about reading graphic novels, the increased motivation they displayed during independent reading time, and their excitement around the graphic text project.

– Agnes Macphail Public School



## TRY THIS!

Have your students experiment with tableaux in small groups. Let them take on the roles of characters in a given scene from a book they are reading. Students should first review and discuss in some depth the relationships between characters and think about how they might move and talk. When you call out “Freeze!”, students move into still positions that re-create the scene. You can move about the room, tapping an individual student on the shoulder to activate or “unfreeze” him or her. In this moment of action, the person you tapped addresses his or her thoughts to one of the other frozen characters. On another agreed-upon signal, all the players could unfreeze and begin to act out their scene using improvised dialogue arising from their actions.

(Adapted from Peterson and Swartz, 2008.)



## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Researchers from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005) conducted a study on the effects of participation in *Learning Through the Arts™* (LTAA), a Canadian program for school-wide arts education. The study followed 6000 students and their parents, teachers, and principals over a three-year period. The results yielded

*strong indications that involvement in the arts went hand in hand with engagement in learning at school. In interviews and on surveys, LTAA students, teachers, parents, and administrators talked about how the arts engaged children in learning, referring to the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social benefits of learning in and through the arts. (p. 120)*

*... The issue of engagement requires further elaboration. By engagement, we mean the sense of being wholly involved. This word comes from the French term engagé, which, when used to describe a writer or artist, means morally committed. It is this commitment – the physical, emotional, intellectual and social commitment – which emerged again and again in written and oral reports of the LTAA experience by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and artists. There were thousands of comments about such things as joy, attentiveness, and motivation. The eloquence of one student's comment may reflect the essence of the relationship between involvement in the arts and learning. This Grade 6 student observed that, "Music brightens up the mind. When you learn something new, you feel good, and that makes you feel good in other subjects like math". (p. 124)*

### REFLECTIONS

1. How can you design activities to allow for elements of imagination and fun?
2. When can you allow boys to get up and move around and yet still remain focused on the task at hand?
3. When can you use role play with your students to help them explore and understand a variety of issues and experiences?
4. How can you use boys' interest in the visual arts or music to enhance their learning?
5. In what ways do you work to enhance your own professional development in the arts: drama, dance, visual arts, and music?
6. What community and educational resources can you use to support the arts in your classroom or school? Think about guest artists, arts councils, museums, and local arts organizations.

# Let them

# talk

**Appealing to boys' need for social interaction and talk**

*“I love reading for information so that I can come to school the next day and tell you about it!”*

– A student, Graham Bell-Victoria Public School

*“I really enjoyed reading To Kill a Mockingbird. I read it at the same time as my son so that we could discuss what we had just read. I found it helpful to be involved with his study. It gave me the ability to help him to understand the text, characters, and plots.”*

– A parent, A.Y. Jackson Secondary School

*“Through the years that Worthington has been involved in the Boys’ Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, my thinking has done a 180-degree turn. I now allow my students opportunities to share with a partner when they read. Boys really love to read like this – it is difficult for them to read quietly, without sharing. These allowances have made reading much more enjoyable for everyone in my class and easier for me to manage.”*

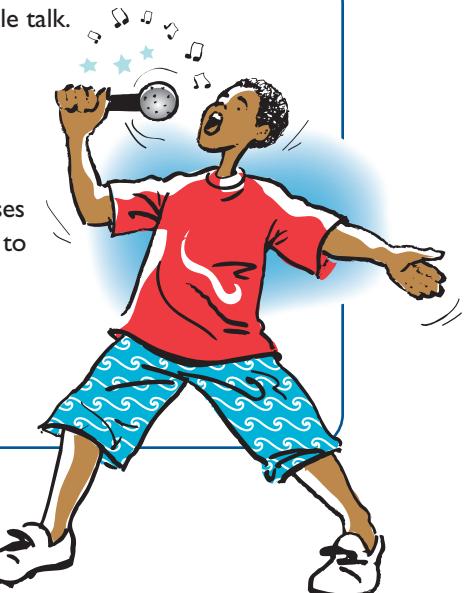
– A team member, Worthington Public School

*“Across the school we are seeing the ‘power of talk’: talk between students about the texts they are reading, talk between students and teachers around the reading strategies they are using, talk between teachers around effective reading instruction, and talk using a consistent language that we’re a school community that is all about getting better as readers.”*

– An administrator, King’s Masting Public School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Model and encourage the use of purposeful, accountable talk.
- Allow talk to scaffold reading and writing activities and responses.
- Use talk to build social interactive networks and a sense of community in the classroom.
- Use well-formulated questions that require oral responses that are more than simple one-word or yes-no answers to deepen understanding.
- Establish boys’ literature circles and book clubs.
- Monitor the ratio of teacher talk versus student talk to ensure as much of the latter as possible.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

Talk is a precursor to reading and writing responses and an easier mode of expression for many students. The desire to share insights and experiences is a natural part of children's conversation, both inside and outside the classroom. Enabling conversation in the classroom helps students to make sense of new knowledge and new ideas, allows them to explore relationships between what they know and what they do not know, increases their understanding, and empowers them as individuals. At Rene Gordon Elementary School, the inquiry team noticed that as the time given for talk increased, their students began to use a more "common language, identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, supporting their opinions more frequently with evidence from the text, and making deeper, more meaningful connections and inferences". Boys in particular prefer oral language activities, so it is essential to seek out opportunities for interesting conversation and cooperative learning activities in the classroom. As well, students who are learning English as a second language need to be immersed in language and given opportunities to talk to acquire the vocabulary and structures they need. Teachers can use talk to develop student competence through the use of:

- reading and writing conferences;
- reading buddies;
- literature and information circles;
- talk as a means of helping students understand the steps and requirements of a task.

Besides supporting the growth of academic learning, activities that involve talk also provide other benefits for students. Analyses show that talk results in improvements in student self-concept, social interaction, time on task, and positive feelings towards peers (Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck, & Fantuzzo, 2006). Peer influence is a great stimulus in any learning situation. When West Hill Collegiate Institute surveyed its students on how they made their book selections from the school library, the students said that "oral recommendations from other students were a big factor".

Some schools established boys' book clubs, which provided a regular time for boys to meet, read, and talk about books and a variety of other text forms. Different approaches were tried by a number of schools, using either the more traditional format of reading followed by a book discussion or a more active format in which the boys read and then talked and did physical activities together. Findings show that the latter approach seemed to encourage greater engagement and enthusiasm. At Kensington Community School, the spring session of the boys' book club, "Words in the Playground", was held outdoors, where the members ate, read, discussed current interests, and enjoyed a few minutes of physical exercise.

Teachers at San Lorenzo Ruiz Elementary School, Laggan Public School, and St. Edward Catholic School all commented on the value of letting the students lead in their reading lessons. They learned that boys engage in discussion more readily, and the quality of discussion about books appears to be richer and more authentic, when there is less direct intervention from the teacher. They recommended that discussions in class be peer-driven and peer-focused, with as little adult intervention as possible.

## Examples of Best Practices

At Egremont, talk in partners and in small and whole groups replaced commercial worksheets as students and teachers explored and discussed the big ideas and issues in a variety of texts. This team's findings reinforced the belief that "accountable" talk is an essential process for engaging boys and helping them to process and communicate their thinking. Allowing boys to share their thinking prior to a related written assignment improved their ability to communicate in writing for that task. Many boys who had not been able to achieve the provincial standard in traditional assessments demonstrated through conversations about literature that they were capable of thinking deeply and critically. One student described his improvement in the following words: "I read better now, I think, because of these conversations. They make me understand reading more. I think it's because now I talk about the book and I'm not just reading words, so then it can make sense in my brain. P.S. I love conversation."

– Egremont Community Public School

In this school, boys now love literacy. They love reading and writing, speaking about their ideas, and synthesizing information in creative and expressive ways. However, at the start of the inquiry project, many of the boys in Grades 4–8 were disengaged from literacy, had very little self-confidence around literacy, were reluctant to express their ideas, and would not admit that they did not understand what they were reading. One key strategy the inquiry team introduced was to honour the boys' need to talk, specifically in a literature circle or a whole-class discussion. Through the literature circles, teachers focused on specific reading strategies for inferring, making connections, and synthesizing, and on writing strategies related to developing ideas, organization, and voice. As a result, they found that boys were able to identify deeper meaning and demonstrate higher-level thinking. The well-defined roles and protocols that supported student discussion in these structured activities were important supports for the boys' responses. The "talk" process as a whole was emphasized and validated in each grade to reassure the boys that they were indeed learning. Through modelled, shared, and guided practice, the boys found that they were quite good at a subject that they thought they hated.

– Adelaide Hoodless Public School

This team explored a variety of strategies to get the boys in their classes talking, including “knee to knee, eye to eye”, oral rehearsal, drama activities, and the use of “phoneme” phones. They worked on refining talk around books and eliciting connections, visualizations, predictions, and wonderings from students. They taught the students that talk is an excellent strategy for supporting writing. When they made talk an integral part of writing and built an effective structure for talk time, the inquiry team found that boys talked more and were more excited to express their ideas. Because the boys had something to say, when it was time to write, everyone was writing. The team found that teaching students that talk is an integral part of the writing process and modelling purposeful talk leads students to internalize talk and use it as a metacognitive writing strategy. Talk leads to and promotes reflection, clarity of ideas, and more focused, higher-level writing. The team asserted that in their experience, talk is the “hands-on” part of communication, comparable to manipulatives in math.

— Canadian Martyrs, St. Nicholas, St. Vincent de Paul, and St. Mark Schools

This inquiry team focused on allowing students to demonstrate their understanding and comprehension through oral communication more often. The teachers explored giving boys opportunities to express themselves orally during classroom activities and to “talk through” their ideas multiple times before writing. In addition, teachers adapted their assessment and evaluation practices to allow forms of oral expression, such as allowing verbal replies during tests or allowing boys to demonstrate their learning through interviews rather than written work. Their findings revealed that boys demonstrated more sophisticated patterns of thought, greater richness of language and extension of ideas, greater spontaneity, and an increased ability to “think on their feet” when they were allowed to communicate orally more often. The team concluded that “overwhelmingly, boys performed beyond expectation when expressing ideas orally”.

— Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Southwood Secondary School, and Huron Heights Secondary School

This team focused on developing student participation and social book talk. Students enjoyed visiting the Boys’ Book Nook, where they were allowed to engage in discussions and recommend texts to peers and teachers. “Accountable” talk was incorporated into lessons, and the links between reading and writing were made concrete. During their literacy block, the boys practised debating authentic and relevant issues, and then were able to transfer this learning into non-fiction persuasive writing. One student commented, “Boys’ literacy has helped me a great deal in reading. When I’m in boys’ literature circles, I feel I can talk openly about what I’ve learned from the book and read passages to others so maybe they can have the same interest I do.”

— St. Peter Catholic School

## TRY THIS!

### Accountable Talk

“Accountable talk” is student conversation centered on learning. You can teach students to have conversations about text, to respond to each-other and to articulate their thinking.

Make a chart with a menu of conversation prompts. Make sure you model each one when you add it to the chart. When your chart is complete, hang it on the wall so that students can refer to it. You can also make a rubric in order to evaluate student participation – and allow students to rate themselves after discussions.

#### Accountable Talk Prompts

- I wonder why ...
- I have a question about ...
- I agree with ...
- I disagree with ...
- That reminds me of ...
- I don't understand ...
- I predict ...
- I figured out ...
- I liked/disliked ...



(Lerner, 2008, p. 6)

### Sample Activities

**Bookends:** Have pairs of students meet before and after a lesson. Before the lesson, they discuss what they know and any questions they have about the topic. After the lesson, they meet again to discuss and confirm their learning.

**Mock Press Conference:** Direct boys to come up with questions and answers very quickly on a topic. This might become an improvised or rehearsed scene similar to some of the sketches on the CBC television program *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

### Investigation

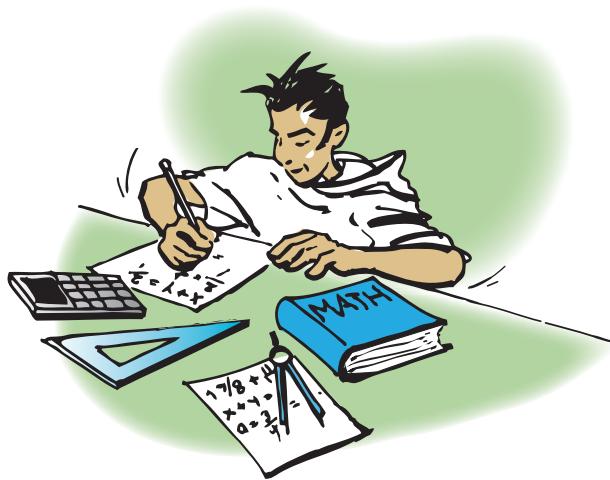
Investigate the merits of using talk to scaffold your boys' learning. Teach one lesson on a given topic and assign a writing task without allowing the boys to talk. Teach a second lesson and promote conversation and talk as a rehearsal for the writing task. Which approach results in the most robust writing?

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Pashler et al. (2007) write that “when students have acquired a basic set of knowledge about a particular topic of study and are ready to build a more complex understanding of a topic”, teachers must find “opportunities to ask questions and model answers to these questions in order to help students build deep explanations of key concepts”; that is, explanations “that appeal to causal mechanisms, planning, and well-reasoned arguments” that illustrate deep meaning. Examples of deep explanations include “those that inquire about causes and consequences of historical events, motivations of people involved in historical events, scientific evidence for particular theories, and logical justifications for the steps of a mathematical proof. Examples of the types of questions that prompt deep explanations are *why, why-not, how, what-if, how does X compare to Y, and what is the evidence for X?*” (p. 29).

### REFLECTIONS

- 1.** What can you do to establish a supportive climate in your classroom that encourages students to engage in open communication with you and with their peers? How can you encourage the expression of diverse opinions, positions, and feelings without fear of censure?
- 2.** Do you teach and model a variety of oral language strategies? Consider teaching and showing students how to share ideas and feelings, listen to the ideas and feelings of others, ask and answer questions, and support their opinions.
- 3.** What different forms of talk can you explore with your students? Consider exploring conversations, personal stories, poetry, discussions, interviews, reflective talk, persuasive talk, and oral reporting.
- 4.** How can you ensure that the acoustics in your classroom are supportive of learning through talk?



# Find positive role models

Influencing boys'  
attitudes through the  
use of role models

*“I really liked how those authors (and one illustrator) came to the school and we got to pick books for the library.”*

– A student, Howick Central Public School

*“I noticed that my son is more encouraged to read when his father takes an interest in the book he is reading. My son enjoys sharing and talking about the book with him.”*

– A parent, Oakwood Public School

*“As a male, I realize the importance of not only encouraging my male students in regards to literacy but also of modelling literacy on a daily basis. I will often complete the same writing assignment that my students are working on and share it with them. I can tell that this puts the boys in my class at ease with reading and writing, which are often perceived as something that girls are better at.”*

– A team member, Queen of Peace Catholic Elementary School

*“It has been very gratifying to observe students stretching and applying their literacy potential as they engaged enthusiastically in the activities. The guest-speaker program has provided some excellent male role models.”*

– An administrator, St. Joseph High School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recruit role models from within your school.
- Search for role models from the community as both heroes and mentors.
- Ensure that students see you and other adults enjoying reading.
- Help boys identify the characteristics and qualities of positive role models and effective mentors in texts.



# **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

## **Overview of Best Practices**

A crucial component of growing up is developing a strong sense of identity. Schools are in a crucial position to model positive behaviours and introduce students to the people who are role models in our society. It is important to provide role models from both within and outside the school whenever possible. A team member at Adelaide Hoodless Public School articulated this concept: “The best resource for boys is an advocate and literacy role model who can provide them with engaging texts, validate their choices of text, encourage their ideas and approaches, and motivate them to improve.” At West Hill Collegiate Institute, a visiting author discussing modern African history struck a chord with one young man, who was inspired to read *Shake Hands with the Devil* by General Roméo Dallaire. It was the first book he had ever read just because he wanted to. His teachers observed that this young man’s sense of personal achievement was immense.

Inquiry teams mined many sources to provide positive role models to build boys’ self-esteem and encourage boys in their pursuit of their literacy-related endeavours. Boys welcomed and benefited from having other males from the school or the community share in the reading and writing in their lives. At Oakwood Public School, the team recruited baseball and soccer players from the local secondary schools and colleges to read to boys. Schools distributed e-mails and letters through the students to recruit older siblings in high school or postsecondary institutions. Current mentors were encouraged to spread the word to their friends. To publicize their mentor program and outline the role of mentors in the school, schools held information sessions for parents and the community and posted articles in a community newsletter or on a board website.

Possible mentors could include:

- fathers, grandparents, uncles, and elders;
- businessmen and other central members of the community;
- servicemen;
- sports organizations with athletes who support literacy;
- authors, illustrators, poets, and artists.

## **Examples of Best Practices**

This teacher inquiry team took its cue from the Toronto District School Board publication *Access Success! A Boys and Literacy Achievement Initiative for Grades 6–10* (Coulter et al., 2004), which states that “utilizing role models may be our most powerful tool in motivating boys to become lifelong readers” (p. 33). The students in the project met after school in a peer-tutoring arrangement in which high school boys were paired with struggling readers from the middle school. The high school boys received volunteer hours for their efforts, and the middle school boys were delighted to be with the “cool” basketball stars from the high school. The program had near-perfect attendance. The high school team also made an effort to bring in adult role models. Boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter came to the school in response to one boy’s e-mail invitation and spoke to the boy’s Grade 10 class.

From the full Grade 10 population, 18 boys who had scored lower than 60% on their first-term English course were selected for a special group. For them, the school organized a series of motivational speakers – all men making a substantial living by communicating. In one session, a student teacher in physical education was still completing his presentation when the school bell rang. None of the students moved to leave, but all sat spellbound while the young man finished his presentation.

– Don Mills Collegiate Institute and Don Mills Middle School

The inquiry team for these schools established buddy reading groups and a home role-model reading program to support their students. The older students became buddy readers for the primary students, and they read high-quality picture books together. Kindergarten teachers encouraged potential role models in their students' homes, especially males, to read aloud to the children. Newsletters were sent home and information evenings were held for the parents to familiarize them with the program. One of the greatest joys for the team members was hearing the fathers, who themselves were often reluctant readers, express enjoyment in reading with their children. The fathers began to see the importance of their reader role in the lives of their children.

– Robert Moore School, Donald Young School, and Sturgeon Creek Alternative Program

This inquiry project focused on raising the profile of male role models through a book bag program for the home and special events and boys' book clubs at the school. The overall plan was to get the students motivated to read and involve fathers and the community. The school set up book bags for the students to take home and read with their fathers or other men in their lives. The inquiry team organized visits from community members, including an RCMP officer, firefighters, a veterinarian, a paramedic, news anchors Tom Hayes and Mark Dailey, author Eric Walters, cartoonist Log McQuaig, and athletes such as members of the Toronto Marlies, to share information about their jobs and the importance of literacy in their lives. The highlight of the initiative was an event called the Male Reading Role Model Days. The fathers seemed pleased to be personally invited to the school to read with their children or small groups of students.

– William G. Davis Junior Public School

Lakeshore and Tecumseh focused together on the use of positive role models to support the boys' reading abilities and attitudes. The schools created an "All About Me" questionnaire that all students in Grade 2 and Grade 8 completed. Teachers then paired the younger and older students according to their interests. The Grade 2 teachers found that after listening to the older role models read aloud in front of others, the younger students were more willing to share their reading and writing in a group situation. One team member observed, "It was amazing to see how focused our at-risk readers were when they met with their Grade 8 reading buddies." A comment by a Grade 2 student reveals the power of the role model strategy: "My reading buddy was so cool. He had the same interests as me, like hockey, and cool hair."

– Lakeshore Public School and Tecumseh Public School

## TRY THIS!

Mentor was originally the trusted friend of Odysseus in Homer's *Iliad*; the name has since been associated with the idea of a faithful and wise adviser. Some famous fictional and real-life mentors over the years have been Merlin to King Arthur, Fra Luca Pacioli to Leonardo Da Vinci, and Professor Dumbledore and Rubeus Hagrid to Harry Potter. There are a number of activities related to role models and mentors that you could pursue, depending on the age of your students. Have your boys look for examples of mentoring relationships and role models in the books they are currently reading or find other titles that reflect these types of relationships. Then have them identify the qualities and characteristics of effective mentors and act out scenes depicting these interactions.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

In *The Joys of Teaching Boys* (2008, pp. 76–79), Dr. Christopher Spence describes a successful mentoring program, Boys to Men, that is intended to guide, support and nurture at-risk boys. Started in the Toronto District School Board at Oakdale Park Middle School in the early 1990s, the program now has more than fifty chapters in Toronto and twenty chapters in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. The program is built around the creation and maintenance of strong, caring relationships between adult male role models and male students. The mentor may be a teacher, coach, staff adviser, administrator, or educational assistant. Each mentor works with a small group of students with common interests. Typically, they begin with a focus on homework, reinforcing the importance of academic achievement, and then the sessions expand to leadership opportunities. Participants are monitored for attendance, academic achievement, and behavior, and their progress is shared with parents and teachers. Boys to Men has demonstrated that student achievement improves when students feel connected to caring adults within the school setting, and that this connection creates a greater sense of accountability and responsibility among students.

## REFLECTIONS

1. Who in your school or board could be recruited as male role models for your students? Think of older students, administrators, superintendents, custodians, school psychologists, and male teachers.
2. Who in your community could be invited to your school to talk to boys about reading? Think of chefs, firefighters, mayors, store managers, grandfathers, elders, mechanics, athletes, servicemen, authors, and veterinarians.
3. What are some qualities possessed by male role models that you could introduce to boys in your classroom or school? Think of qualities such as persistence, resilience, and self-efficacy.
4. How can you help your boys to examine male characters in fiction and male subjects in non-fiction to ascertain the qualities that they possess that are worthy of emulation?
5. How might you use male mentors from the school or the community to help your struggling students?

## Read between

# the lines

Bringing critical-literacy skills into the classroom

*“My favourite assignment was the ‘In the Trenches’ scrapbook. I got to learn how those guys lived with all the mud and rats and stuff. The pictures made me realize how bad it was. I wonder if Afghanistan is like this?”*

— A student, St. Anne Catholic High School

*“It’s great to see my son actually reading! I now realize that as long as he can relate to what he reads, he actually enjoys it and will do it. I certainly see him reading more now than ever before, and I love to read how he thinks and feels about what he has read as I check and sign his reading response journal each week.”*

— A parent, Queen of Peace Catholic Elementary School

*“One of the significant findings of our inquiry was the impact of both text selection and literacy activities on boys’ thinking. As we explored text that we would use for critical literacy in our classrooms, it became apparent that the importance of selecting texts that students can relate to, that present multiple viewpoints, and that sometimes challenge the status quo was paramount.”*

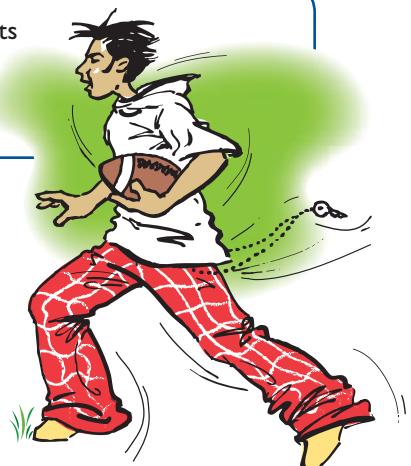
— A team member, F. W. Begley, Northwood, Kingsville, Eastwood, Harrow Senior, and Lakeshore Discovery Public Schools

*“If you want to know what students are really thinking and learning, ask them! The other day, I watched an intermediate class working in groups to create mind maps as a response to the novels they had chosen to read. The level of engagement and the quality of discussion were phenomenal.”*

— An administrator, San Lorenzo Ruiz Elementary School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ➔ Help students examine how print and other forms of texts present particular views of the world.
- ➔ Teach and model critical-literacy strategies.



# **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

## **Overview of Best Practices**

*Critical literacy* means that students adopt a critical or questioning stance in regard to what they are reading, hearing, or viewing. All students need to acquire more than the ability to decode words and make meaning from text. They need to be helped to exercise their critical thoughts and perceptions and understand how texts are constructed and how texts try to inform, persuade, entertain, and influence the reader.

Students need learning opportunities that develop their abilities to become competent consumers and users of information. An approach focused on critical literacy is an approach in which students use their literacy skills to explore, discuss, and investigate the various social, political, and historical content in the print and multimedia texts that surround them at school and in their world. At St. Paul School, the inquiry team used picture books with social justice themes as resources for their teaching. Exploring the multiple meanings in texts and finding connections between texts and between texts and personal experiences yield the type of intellectual challenges that boys enjoy. Boys need to learn to have deep conversations around how texts present particular views of the world, and through these conversations, they should come to understand that they have the power and responsibility to make a difference in the world.

In their article “Critical Literacy: Policy and Practice” (2005), Sinfield and Hawkins reference the report *Literacy for Learning: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario* (Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario, 2004). They point out that this report establishes the importance of critical literacy and

*emphasizes that traditional texts (such as books, magazines, and newspapers), electronic texts (including web pages, web logs, Internet chat, and text messaging), and the pervasive messages found in advertisements all require children to develop critical skills so that they can analyse the impact of the ideas contained within texts and understand how texts attempt to position them as readers to take on particular viewpoints and perspectives. (p. 27)*

## **Examples of Best Practices**

The essential question chosen for investigation by this grouping of schools was “How does an intentional instructional focus on critical literacy affect boys’ literacy achievement?” The literacy activities they employed included:

- ➔ think-alouds;
- ➔ accountable talk;
- ➔ problem-posing questions;
- ➔ action strategies, such as role play and radio call-in, that deepened boys’ understanding.

The activity of problem-posing questions allowed students to discuss significant issues to which they could relate. They enjoyed being given a voice on issues for which there was no “right” answer and in an environment where opinions based on thinking were valued. When they were allowed to demonstrate their thinking orally and actively, the boys in the study were more engaged and able to demonstrate their higher-order and critical thinking. As part of the focus on critical literacy, some classes ran student-initiated social action projects directly connected to the issues in the text being studied. The Grade 2 class partnered with the Humane Society to rescue an animal, and the Grade 4 class initiated a school-wide environmental awareness project.

— F. W. Begley, Northwood, Kingsville, Eastwood, Harrow Senior, and Lakeshore Discovery Public Schools

This teacher inquiry project focused on critical literacy through the use of graphic novels for the boys in Grades 7–12. The goals were to increase the level of engagement, foster completion of tasks, and improve comprehension skills. The team of teachers developed an instructional resource document on the use of graphic texts for Grades 7 and 8 and another for Grades 9 and 10. Key characteristics of graphic texts they identified for teachers to discuss with their students included:

- the use of colour to create mood;
- the use of both images and words to convey the characters of the protagonist and antagonist;
- the use of visual features;
- the integration of visual and text components;
- the use of dialogue and heroic patterns.

— Parkside Collegiate Institute

The team at St. Patrick used a critical-literacy approach, within their balanced literacy program, to help the students to explore and understand the gender stereotyping implicit in media and popular-culture texts as part of their understanding of textual analysis. In this way, the boys could examine the gender stereotypes evident in these reading materials and at the same time could be buffered from sharing more personal experiences around gender stereotyping. The approaches used at the school helped the students to understand that all texts are constructed, to read texts from a variety of viewpoints, and to develop their understanding of gender stereotypes.

— St. Patrick Catholic Elementary School

## TRY THIS!

If you teach adolescents, look for critical-literacy resources that are being posted in the library folder of the Ministry of Education GAINS website, at [www.edugains.ca](http://www.edugains.ca).

Visit the International Reading Association web page on critical literacy, at [www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus\\_critical.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_critical.html), for a number of programs and resources. Conference sessions on critical literacy are available for free. An affiliated program, ReadWriteThink, offers lesson plans that promote critical literacy, at [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org).

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

In his monograph “Boys’ Underachievement: Which Boys Are We Talking About?” (2008), Dr. Wayne Martino recommends the following strategies for getting boys to think about what it means to be a boy (p. 2):

- Develop “a critical literacy approach that encourages boys to question taken-for-granted or common-sense notions of what it means to be a boy”.
- Use “texts in the language arts classroom to raise questions about the effects of stereotypes of masculinity on both boys’ and girls’ lives”.
- Have “an understanding of the social construction of gender [in order] to address the links between homophobia, sexism, and the ‘policing’ of masculinity” in class.

## REFLECTIONS

1. How can I create a learning environment that is safe and supports deep and independent thinking and learning?
2. How can I teach and model critical literacy so that my students will develop the skills to dig deep for meaning as they interact with texts of all types?
3. How can I engage my students in taking a critical stance towards texts they encounter?
4. What creative authentic learning experiences are appropriate for my students to experience in order to develop a sense of how they can take action to make the world a better place?
5. How can I help students develop their own voice and opinions?
6. How can I encourage my students to think about gender stereotypes as they interact with texts of all types?

(Questions selected and adapted from the main web page for “Critical Literacy”, a webcast produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, in partnership with Curriculum Services Canada.)

# Keep it

# real

## Making reading and writing relevant to boys

While doing a procedural writing task on how to make a sundae, one Grade 3 student said, “*This is not writing. This is too fun to be writing.*”

— A student, High Park Public School

“*In our family, literacy is always present through talking, games, outdoor walks, labelling what we see around us, and reading a wide variety of books and other print material. My husband and I have always read to our kids and always taken them outside and talked about what they see in the neighbourhood.*”

— A parent, Worthington Public School

“*The way we learn is more important than what we learn. When you are teaching a child to read, it has to be built into their lives so that literacy is all-encompassing. What they read doesn't really matter. Literacy is developing experiences and relationships with texts of all forms. Every question has an answer, and it is just out there somewhere waiting to be found and, in finding these answers, we learn about ourselves. More importantly, we reaffirm what we already think we know.*”

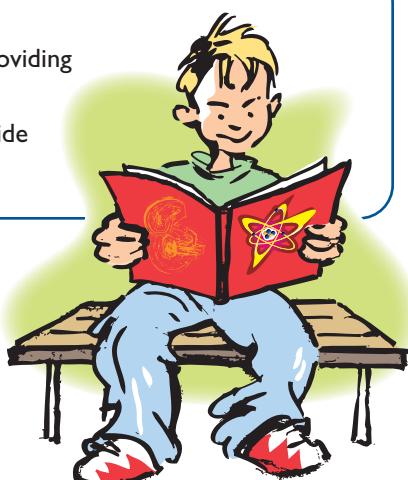
— A team member, Smith Public School

“*It is amazing to see how reluctant readers become so engaged when their personal literacy interests are honoured at school. Teachers need to broaden their conception of literacy and include resources such as games, manuals, and playing cards to appeal to their male populations.*”

— An administrator, Pineland Public School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use real-world themes and resources.
- Foster ownership of assignments and topics by providing choice and involvement in decision-making.
- Use authentic activities in the classroom and outside the school.



## PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE

### Overview of Best Practices

Boys need to be engaged in work that is meaningful to them and that has a clear purpose they can see. Integrating authentic learning and assessment tasks helps all students to make connections between their personal interests and the curriculum in the classroom. As the inquiry team at Kensington Community School explained, “Make literacy relevant, keep it real, and do not marginalize the boys’ world outside of school.”

One aspect of “Keep it real” pursued by many teams was to foster students’ sense of belonging in their schools and choice in their learning. In some cases, this meant that the course material was chosen to reflect the student population. At West Hill Collegiate Institute, a new Black History course generated robust reading among students, and the senior English class replaced *Brave New World* with *The Kite Runner*. In other cases this meant that the teacher did not select one book for all students in the class to read but instead allowed individual students to select books on topics or genres of personal interest to them, or to demonstrate their learning in ways they chose themselves. As a teacher at St. Edward Catholic School commented, “We realized that giving students more ownership in their education/exploration is a good way to increase self-esteem, which directly impacts one’s ability to retain and apply information to one’s own personal growth and success.” The emphasis on ownership extended to allowing boys to choose topics of interest to them to discuss or write about in the classroom, such as cars, snowboards, video games, physical survival, drugs, gangs, and musicians, and accommodating boys’ interest in non-traditional styles, forms, and themes, such as humorous writing, rap songs, and war.

Another aspect of this strategy was the addition of non-fiction materials to balance the total complement of resources and the exploration of related topics in authentic, real-world contexts. At St. Basil’s Catholic School, the inquiry team reported that they increased the focus on the real world and “addressed the lack of non-fiction by purchasing primarily science and social studies materials” for their reading program. They also implemented strategies from the resources *Make It Real: Strategies for Success With Informational Texts*, by Linda Hoyt (2002), and *Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K–3*, by Tony Stead (2001).

Inquiry teams helped their students to organize and construct their own knowledge by planning more authentic and complex activities in the classroom, such as:

- solving the problem posed in the book;
- writing the next book in a series;
- connecting reading to community issues.

Teachers also designed assessment activities that allowed for more project work and performance assessments linked to real problems, real audiences, and real products. Secondary school departments collaborated with each other to create assignments that linked English with other subject areas, such as construction and technology, history, and science.

Research shows that the provision of authentic problems and projects, in and of themselves, like the simple provision of resources, does not guarantee learning; however, such problems and projects do afford more unique opportunities for integrated learning for many students (Barron et al., 1998).

## Examples of Best Practices

This team engaged their students by using non-fiction texts and “wonder boxes”, in which students placed questions they had throughout the year. In the final culminating project, students independently selected a non-fiction text to answer a question that had been filed in their box. Students investigated what they had been “wondering” about and then presented their findings by making posters, murals, sculpture, wall hangings, written reports, and other forms to represent their thinking.

– Queen Elizabeth, Admaston, and Central Public Schools

The inquiry team at this school introduced a course at the Grade 12 level with a focus on sports in literature. While it was originally intended as a boys-only course, the four girls who enrolled enjoyed it just as much as the boys. One activity the team used to “keep it real” was to have the class view a live streaming video of Roger Clemens’s Congress hearing related to his steroid controversy, which inspired a class discussion about ethics in sports and led to all students doing follow-up reading about other athletes embroiled in similar controversies.

– Bishop Allen Academy Catholic High School

The focus on authentic learning encouraged a number of teachers at this school to create assignments that were more connected to the real world and the digital world. Teachers talked to their students about their reading choices and habits and found that they were very interested in computers and all things electronic. The school tapped into that real-life connection by creating blogs for the students to use for class writing. Students loved connecting their learning to the digital world they used outside of the classroom. For an Aboriginal conference celebrating Earth Day, they created pictorial and video works, such as photo essays, to persuade people to be more environmentally friendly. The students knew ahead of time that their work was going to be used for a real purpose, and this knowledge energized their work.

– Our Lady of the Valley School

At the beginning of the project, the boys at this school conveyed their preference for writing about real-life and hands-on experiences. They were eager to write about topics relevant to them and topics with which they had a real connection. They also preferred writing forms that could be completed in a short length of time, such as rap songs or procedural pieces. In response, the school developed a school-wide Write Week based around persuasive writing. They motivated the students with a performance by a rap artist. The inquiry team found that boys' writing improved during activities that were highly motivating and grounded in the real world, coupled with direct instruction about the writing form and supported with the use of visuals such as anchor charts, word walls, and graphic organizers.

— High Park Public School

At this school, the “Faces and Places of Kensington” project took students, teachers, and literacy support teachers outside the classroom, bringing literacy to life. The students went into the community with maps and questions they had prepared and interviewed members of the community, took photos, made notes, and read signs and street names. Back at the school, they engaged in multi-literal modes to present their work and findings at an open house for the whole community.

— Kensington Community School

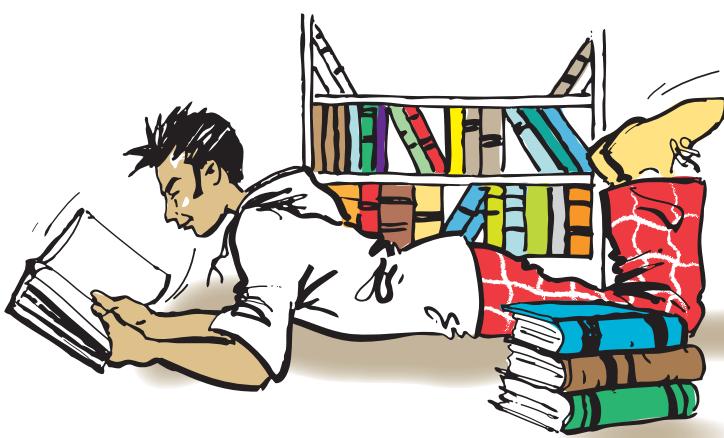


## TRY THIS!

In designing activities and courses featuring authentic learning and assessment activities, keep the following tips in mind:

- Start small, think big – change one activity at a time and assess its impact before enhancing or modifying your approach.
- Focus on complex and real problems, issues, or questions.
- Clarify learning outcomes and expectations for the activity – design the activity with the ‘end in mind’ and communicate these expectations to learners.
- Provide challenging activities and situations – design opportunities for learners to try out their own thinking, challenge their own mental models, rethink their assumptions, etc.
- Help learners to ask their own questions about the issue, the subject matter, and the discipline as a whole – people often learn most effectively when they are trying to answer their own questions.
- Help learners make connections between the discipline or subject and the broader area of focus – situate the discipline, topic, area of study in a broader, interdisciplinary context.
- Encourage opportunities for learners to collaborate and learn from each other.
- Invite expert guests to contribute to the course, collaborating with learners on tasks or providing feedback on learner activities.
- Provide appropriate scaffolding (i.e. supports for learning) that help learners to self-evaluate their own performance, take stock of their own insights, and learn from their efforts and mistakes.
- Ensure there is a product or deliverable required at the end of the activity.
- Provide effective and timely feedback, i.e. individual (self), peer, and instructor-based assessment.

(“Authentic Assessment”, 2008, p. 2)



## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

At Fredericton High School in New Brunswick, Michael Gange, winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, takes his journalism students

*into the press box when he does play-by-play for the local hockey team or the national university hockey championships. Gange gets press credentials for students and takes them to the political conventions that often occur in Fredericton, New Brunswick's capital. Students travel on the politicians' buses during election campaigns.*

*Along with practical assignments, Gange exposes his students to the theory behind the practice. For example, they will look at how two media outlets, such as the local radio station and The Globe and Mail, cover the same event.*

*The students also discuss the choices the various media outlets make about the stories to feature and the angle to take – their news judgement, in other words ...*

*Students bring their own life experience to the table during these sessions and what they have learned out in the field. The theoretical and the practical reinforce one another and enhance the learning experience for students.”*

(“Opportunities for Real World Journalism”, 2005)

### REFLECTIONS

1. How can you make more opportunities in your class for boys to share their interests and backgrounds?
2. Do you allow boys to read and to write on authentic topics of their own choosing?
3. Do you allow boys to write in their preferred styles and forms, e.g., exaggerated, humorous, silly writing; rap songs, procedural writing, short scenes?
4. Do you allow boys to write about war, weapons, aggression, and other edgy themes?
5. What can you do in your classroom and/or school to build on boys' real-life knowledge and skills to enrich their own learning and the learning of others?
6. How can you make your assignments more grounded in the real, modern world?

# Get the Net

Using technology to engage boys  
and facilitate their learning

*“I feel that using a projector, a computer, and an interactive whiteboard makes me a better reader and writer because it makes lessons fun, unlike looking at a chalkboard.”*

— A student, St. Paul Catholic School

*“For students with disabilities, assistive technology has the capacity for increasing the opportunities for academic equality and social participation within a general classroom environment, which in turn increases their odds of a lifetime of social, economic, and academic independence in an otherwise exclusionary society.”*

— A parent, E. C. Drury High School

*“I feel that I have drastically changed the way I teach and that the students are getting more from my class than ever. The use of technology in the classroom has boosted the engagement level, and now I rarely deal with behaviour issues during our literacy block. The boys are putting more effort into their work, and their marks are beginning to reflect this change.”*

— A team member, W. J. Watson Public School

*“This action research has taught us so much about gender and genre. Boys and girls no longer fit old stereotypes. The boys’ exposure to the Internet, the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, and computer/video games has excited a passion in them. Boys are reading all the time without picking up a book.”*

— An administrator, St. Gregory Catholic School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use a variety of software programs, such as desktop publishing, presentation, music creation, reading, and visual learning software.
- Use assistive technology.
- Use technological and online tools, such as multimedia, audiobooks, wikis, and blogs.
- Create venues for computers and gaming activities in the school.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

The gap between the school environment and the world beyond the school has increased dramatically for today's generation of boys. Outside of school, students interact with a variety of technology and media products, but inside the school, many students are routinely expected to sit still and listen to the teacher or read from a textbook rather than use the multimedia, multi-textual, and collaborative modes of learning that are available today. All teachers need to hone their computer skills to model for both boys and girls the computer-related attitudes and skills that will be so critical to their future.

The boys in the inquiry projects, at both the elementary and secondary levels, responded to the implementation of new technologies in the class with astounding enthusiasm. Teachers worked to incorporate skills students already associated with fun and leisure at home and then harness and direct that embedded interest to their school-work. Boys, as strong visual-spatial learners, made use of educational software programs to help themselves read. Listening to audiobooks via MP3 players allowed boys to access books beyond their reading level and enabled them to join in oral discussions and book talks at their level of comprehension. A teacher from the team at Don Mills Collegiate Institute and Don Mills Middle School reported that even competent readers preferred to read large books on an e-book reader because reading the text in book form was "a long, lonely, linear experience". Other teams encouraged boys to read newspapers online, view or listen to podcasts, and participate in reading club chat rooms. The inquiry teams also discovered that technology provided greater flexibility within the classroom and school for creating differentiated learning experiences that addressed the boys' individual needs and interests.

Teachers in the inquiry project also explored the use of computers and other technologies to support oral communication by, for example, broadcasting reviews over the school's in-house TV station, and to reinforce writing skills by using blogs for writing journal entries, using wikis to combine students' knowledge on a topic, and using digital voice recorders to allow boys to speak their thoughts before writing.

Students with special needs thrived when given the opportunity to work with assistive technologies, such as graphic tools and organizers and dictation software, that gave them the ability to write tests and write and edit in-class compositions electronically and allowed them to receive instant feedback. The first challenge related to incorporating these new technologies was obtaining the necessary equipment. The second challenge was ensuring that each teacher's knowledge and expertise kept pace with these advances. For some of these advanced technologies, teachers needed expert training and support before they could be expected to work comfortably with the technologies to assist their students.

Some schools recognized that playing computer games can be beneficial for students, and that establishing gaming centres in the school can form part of a setting and culture of information-seeking behaviours. By decoding images and recognizing their references, students can develop the ability for critical thinking about the visual world. Many games involve contributing to forums and discussion boards to share strategies, questions, and ideas, and to write stories that revolve around characters and scenes from the games. Playing games can also help students develop and transfer skills and abilities related to inquiry-based learning. A few schools created a physical space to house computers and related gaming activities. In other cases, gaming centres were set up within classrooms to house activities, which were periodically changed to offer fresh challenges.

## Examples of Best Practices

At the beginning of the project, some of the students at this school were disengaged, possessed little self-confidence, and were not motivated to work on improving their literacy skills. The use of assistive technology was critical to engaging them. While the students were initially apprehensive about using the new software programs, once they had achieved some measure of control they did not want to give up the programs. The assistive software enabled the boys to improve their reading comprehension, organize their ideas better, and increase the quality of their written work. It also enabled teachers to see what their students were capable of. The results gathered by this team suggest that a classroom well equipped with technology increases students' credit accumulation, and that when the computer programs are integrated into the curriculum, the students receive the full benefits of assistive technology.

— E. C. Drury High School

The teacher inquiry project at this school focused on a class of twenty boys. The team wanted to investigate whether incorporating more technology would help the boys improve their literacy skills. With the purchase of new resources and new technologies, such as interactive whiteboards, digital cameras, data projectors, and opaque projectors, the teachers were able to try something new with their instructional practices. These resources became a catalyst for changing the rigidness of the language programs. One of the teachers explained, “The technological learning curve that I have been on the past three years has taken me places I never imagined possible in my teaching practice. The opportunity to use differentiated instruction to magnify individual talents has not only taught me different strategies to use in my classroom, but has also given me a deeper understanding of each student's capabilities and personality.”

— St. Paul Catholic Elementary School

At W. J. Watson, the teachers' initial investigation revealed a strong preference among boys for using computers to do assignments. Building on this information, the school purchased laptop computers, digital still and video cameras, and an interactive whiteboard for use with their Grade 8 boys. They also introduced software programs such as a desktop publishing program for comics, music creation software, and presentation software. With the introduction of these new resources, student interest increased dramatically. The teachers reported that the students became quite self-sufficient, using problem-solving strategies to fix any computer issues that developed. Technology grabbed their interest because they used it constantly in their lives, and learning how to use the programs and being able to solve their own problems made them feel independent and empowered. The team also noted the difference that technology made in students' ability to express themselves. During a unit on heroes, the students had to write a persuasive essay about their hero and do a presentation on the same hero. All of the boys chose to use technology in some capacity for their presentation. When the inquiry team compared the students' marks for the essay with their marks for the presentation, the results were telling. The average mark for the essay was 62.7%, whereas the average mark for the presentation was 76.7%.

— W.J.Watson Public School

The essential question posed by the inquiry team at this school was whether the use of graphic organizer software would help improve their junior boys' reading comprehension. Boys seemed to enjoy creating and using graphic organizers, which helped them make sense of their world by organizing information. Use of the software generally allowed for greater differentiation in both instruction and assessment. One student commented, "I think this is a good program to use because when you write things down it'll help you get organized for a story or a paragraph and it also has a whole bunch of things to start you off so it's easier. You don't have to write it all down." The teachers observed that with the help of the software, the students were able to demonstrate higher-level thinking regardless of their writing ability. However, the visual nature of the electronic organizers did not appeal to all boys, so the teachers found that they needed to be aware of each student's needs before assigning work using the software. Accommodating different styles of learning promoted academic success for all their students.

— Roden Public School

This inquiry team, working with students in Grades 2 and 3, improved the boys' literacy through the use of technology. They taught the boys to research non-fiction topics using the Internet or encyclopedias on CD-ROM. The boys also used the computers for transferring rough copies of written work into a word processor and employed a desktop publishing program to publish a book with accompanying illustrations. The teachers observed that when the number of pencil and paper tasks was decreased, students were more engaged during writing activities. The school's quantitative data results also showed growth in reading. One teacher observed, "I now have the boys rushing over to show me ideas or quotes from a book as often as the girls always have."

— St. John French Immersion Catholic School

## TRY THIS!

### Getting Audiobooks

St. Patrick's School recruited community members to audiotape books for the students to listen to. These tapes augmented the bank of audiobooks that the school had purchased to accompany novel study and other curricular work.

### Writing Blog Entries

Traci Gardner (2008) writes the following on the National Council of Teachers of English Inbox blog:

*Here are ten tips that make a blog entry grab readers:*

- Choose an attention-getting and accurate title.
- State your opinion clearly.
- Back things up with specific stories and examples.
- Keep it short.
- Chunk your text.
- Use visual clues.
- Include photos, video, and/or audio.
- Link to outside sources.
- Go with an informal, first-person style.
- Proofread!

Read more in “Tips on a Good Blog Entry” at  
<http://ncteinbox.blogspot.com/2008/10/tips-on-good-blog-entry.html>.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Sarah Schmidt reports that “researchers at the University of Victoria followed a group of boys, ages 11 to 16, for 19 weeks at a video game design camp” where the boys were learning how to create their own games. “They concluded that even though girls consistently outscore boys on school standardized tests for reading and writing, the boys exhibited high level literacy skills while engaged in” designing video games. The researchers, Madill and Sanford, suggested that “designing video games – and even playing them – helps develop sophisticated operational, cultural and critical literacy skills” (Schmidt, 2006).

### REFLECTIONS

1. How can you increase the use of technology to support literacy in the classroom and the school? Think about giving students access to a wide range of technological tools and resources in all areas of the school – the library, the cafeteria, and so on. Be sure to consider resources in a variety of formats, such as audiobooks, CD-ROMs, and e-book readers.
2. How can you give students more options in the types of technology they use to complete their assignments and assessments?
3. How can you make more frequent connections between print and non-print media, such as connecting books to websites and podcasts?
4. What technology tools (hardware and software) are available in your school to support students with diverse learning needs?
5. What can you do to ensure that your students understand and practise ethical use of technology?
6. Have you considered online safety to protect your students from inappropriate online content?



# Assess for success

Using appropriate  
assessment tools  
for boys

*“The ChecBric helped me because it shows how you did in different places, and then you know what you need to improve. Also, at the bottom of the ChecBric the teacher gives you feedback and tells you exactly what you need to improve in certain areas of your writing.”*

— A student, Minto-Clifford Public School

*“Excellent presentation at the workshop. I found that I was able to clarify my understanding of the comprehension strategies. Seeing the exemplars helped too. I was able to guide my son towards level 4 and let him take it from there, using a variety of strategies.”*

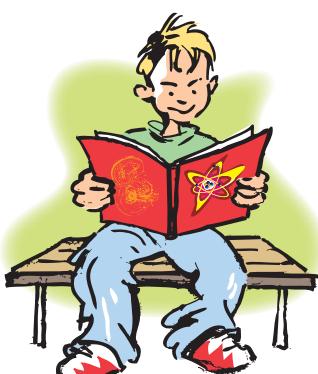
— A parent, St. Michael School

*“One of the most profound changes to our instructional and assessment practices is that we now see these two as inseparably connected. Instead of seeing assessment as a chore that we need to complete, we see it as the motor that drives our instruction and the GPS that tells us where we need to go with each of our students.”*

— A team member, Holy Rosary School

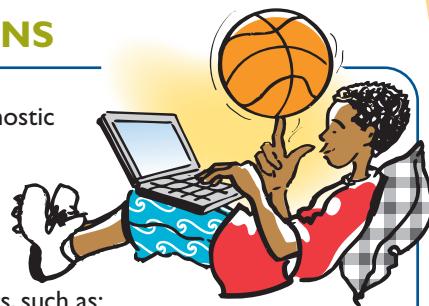
*“Our PLC (Professional Learning Community) team meetings operate very much in the same manner as a medical team at Sick Kids’ Hospital in Toronto. The medical team gathers together to look at all the data and develop a plan that includes a specific medical strategy. An approach(es) is put into place in order to support the strategy, and health targets are set for the patient. A timeline for re-assessment is noted, and all members understand what their jobs are. Everyone on the team is critical to the health and well-being of the child. The same is true in education. Yet our focus is literacy.”*

— An administrator, Echo Bay Public School



## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct attitude and interest surveys and diagnostic assessments before determining the type of instruction and intervention to use.
- Use frequent assessments for learning and offer praise and feedback.
- Introduce differentiated assessments for students, such as:
  - oral, peer, and self-assessments;
  - projects and performance-based assessments, including the use of multimedia.
- Maintain consistent tracking over time.
- Develop and adopt common assessment tools throughout the school, such as checklists, ChecBrics, rubrics, surveys, and exemplars.
- Use school-wide teacher moderation for assessing student work.



## PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE

### Overview of Best Practices

During the initial stages of the project, most of the inquiry teams used a variety of attitude and interest surveys and diagnostic assessments to establish a solid foundation of knowledge in order to set clear learning goals for the boys in their classes. That is, teachers assessed for boys' learning. Working in partnership with teachers, boys even examined data on their attitudes, interests, and EQAO scores and engaged with teachers in designing their future steps for learning. At Southwood Park Public School, teachers gathered qualitative data through videotaped interviews with several boys from each class. During the project, many teams made extensive use of data walls, electronic trackers, and other tracking measures to monitor their students' achievements more regularly. For example, the team at Holy Name of Jesus School developed a data wall with Canadian Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and EQAO test results and report-card grades for all staff to view and update. The teachers at the school visited the data wall on a monthly basis to discuss where they needed to focus their efforts with at-risk students and to engage in discussion around the impact of instructional strategies.

During the inquiry project, teachers employed a greater range of authentic assessments with the boys in their classes, shifting from the one-size-fits-all model to multiple and varied assessments, including both qualitative and quantitative measures, to gather evidence of the boys' learning. Differentiated assessments were designed to meet boys' preferences for demonstrating their knowledge and skills in concrete ways through oral and multimedia assignments as well as written assignments, and through project- and performance-based assessments. Boys were given more choice and more voice. Some schools provided shorter tasks and more frequent feedback for boys.

Many schools opened up the summative or culminating assessments by allowing boys to select from a range of forms to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. It is important to note that allowing differentiated assessments does not mean “going easy” on boys. One team member at Dr. G. J. MacGillivray Public School was firm in stating that boys should not be permitted to submit an incomplete assignment; teachers need to have high expectations and ensure that their students complete the work. Empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning through choosing the type of assessment, through using self- and peer assessments, and through monitoring their progress and setting goals helped to develop students’ metacognitive awareness and increased their level of engagement.

To ensure greater consistency in assessing and evaluating student achievement both within and across classrooms, teachers and students worked together to establish criteria, guidelines, and rubrics. When teachers planned and assessed on a collaborative basis, consistency across the grades increased. Schools as a whole embarked on consensus marking or teacher moderation of the assessment of common writing tasks and reading responses to enable teachers to better understand the boys’ handling of the tasks and to further their own assessment literacy. For example, teachers at Foxboro Public School used consensus marking based on several samples of boys’ writing. The inquiry team at Queen Elizabeth, Admaston, and Central Public Schools participated in joint marking of writing, isolating several key areas for follow-up teaching after each session. At High Park Public School, the use of common rubrics, assessments, and practices allowed teachers within a division to collaboratively assess student work and to discuss next steps for improvement. Collaborative assessments proved to be a powerful job-embedded strategy for the inquiry teams.

## Examples of Best Practices

At this school, teacher inquiry team members investigated whether regular, targeted, and individualized feedback would translate into improved writing performance among boys. Working together to implement the *First Steps® in Writing* program, the inquiry team took responsibility for all students becoming successful learners. There was agreement that none of the teachers could opt out of the writing task, the collaborative assessment, or the subsequent reporting of student results to parents. The teachers engaged in collaborative marking of the CASI [Comprehension Attitude Strategies Interests] reading assessments and moderated the writing tasks using a common ChecBric. Students then received a graded sample of their writing outlining strengths, weaknesses, and next steps. For the first time, “egg-carton school walls began to crumble” as all teachers regularly shared their students’ work. The assessment process for writing became consistent, aligned from grade to grade, and transparent for teachers, students, and parents. The director proudly declared, “The number of Grade 3 boys achieving at or beyond the provincial standard in writing has risen from 21% in 2005 to 55% in 2007, exceeding both the board and provincial averages for males in the 2006–2007 school year.”

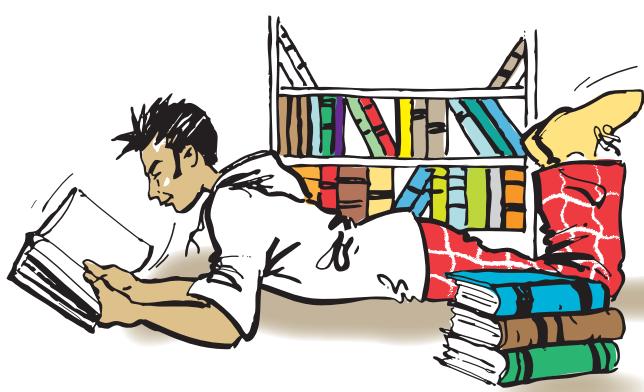
— Minto-Clifford Public School

This team's analysis of their data over the three years of the project showed that boys improved their literacy skills through reading high-interest materials and through the use of differentiated assessments. For example, boys in the intermediate division were asked to read a selection of graphic novels and then demonstrate their creativity, reading comprehension, and writing expertise by completing a two-page book report comparing the graphic novel of their choice with a short-story version. This was combined with an oral presentation in which they were asked to interpret the imagery in the graphic novel. Similarly, at the Grade 10 level, the Independent Study Unit was altered to include a comparison of *Go Ask Alice* (author anonymous) with the graphic novel *Juice* by Eric Walters. Teachers remarked on the difference in engagement and quality of work: the students' average mark for that component was 76%, compared with 58% for the previous class on the same component.

— Bear Creek Secondary School and Holly Meadows Elementary School

All nine schools in the Equal Opportunities School Group had been identified by the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board Task Force on Poverty as serving extremely large populations of students living at or below the poverty line. The inquiry team's research revealed that these students were much more likely to have up to two years' delay in the acquisition of language skills. The team members focused on improving the oral literacy skills of their Kindergarten boys, in the expectation that this would improve reading scores. The goal was to have 75% of the students reach PM [Price Milburn] Benchmarks 5 and 6 by the end of their Kindergarten year. The teachers used a combination of observation surveys, PM Benchmarks, running records, and early learning pre- and post-testing. They moved from using assessments mainly for reporting and measuring how students were doing to using them to help decide what to teach to whom, and what resources and strategies would be most effective. The use of a data wall helped the teachers to identify patterns and plan the focus of instruction. They utilized SMART [Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely] goal setting and common assessment tools at designated times across all nine schools. Data revealed a steady increase in the number of students reading at PM Benchmarks 5 and 6, from a low of 22.4% in June 2005 to 40.6% in June 2006 to 61% in June 2007.

— Equal Opportunities School Group



As part of their work on differentiating instructional approaches, the Echo Bay inquiry team also altered their assessment practices accordingly. Teachers structured their assessment in cycles of four to six weeks. They used student attitude and interest surveys to determine starting points and then set targets, engaged in ongoing formative assessment to drive their instruction, and reassessed at the end of the cycle to determine next steps. Staff were trained to administer DRAs and running records as diagnostic tools. All students were placed on a tracking board. The students who were identified as being most at risk were given special instruction in Focused Literacy Intervention Blocks. Targets and timelines were set for each of these students, and targeted assessment tools were used. The work in literacy was such a success that the teachers expanded the approach to mathematical literacy.

– Echo Bay Public School

The focus at West Glen Junior School was to improve reading achievement and attitudes towards reading through a Guys Read program for boys in Grades 1–5. The inquiry team used DRA and CASI results to create cross-grade and cross-class guided reading groups based on students' needs. After experimenting with several prepared surveys on reading attitudes, the staff produced their own survey to reflect their student population. Teachers developed anchor charts, posted rubrics in the classroom, and provided consistent and constructive feedback to their students.

– West Glen Junior School

## TRY THIS!

### Assessment Logs

An Assessment Log is a chart that both teachers and students can use to track the students' learning through their formative assessments. After students receive a formative assessment back from their teacher, they take five minutes to review their own work and the teacher's comments. They then complete the Assessment Log based on their own reflections....

In their log, the students note something that they did well in the assessment, something they struggled with, and a question or comment that they have on the feedback they received and finally a "next step" to identify how they will improve.... The Assessment Log promotes reflection, attention to detail, and self-evaluation.... Teachers can use the log as a tool for parent-teacher interviews as it clearly outlines students' strengths, and areas for improvement.... The log is also a tool for communication between the teacher and the students and their parents if they have any questions or concerns regarding an assessment.

(Clarke, 2008)

### Exemplars Binders

The team at Minto-Clifford Public School prepared an "exemplars binder" containing levelled samples of student work and accompanying ChecBrics and rubrics for a range of different reading and writing assignments. They ensured that this resource was easily accessible to all staff in order to promote greater consistency across the school.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

An OECD policy brief, “Formative Assessment: Improving Learning in Secondary Classrooms” (2005), analysed research findings and classroom-level observations in eight countries (Australia, Denmark, England, Finland, Italy, New Zealand, Scotland, and several Canadian provinces). The brief concluded that classroom assessment that supports student learning occurs when teachers:

- establish learning goals and track individual student progress towards those goals;
- use differentiated instruction methods to meet diverse student needs;
- use varied approaches to assessing student achievement;
- provide feedback on student performance and adapt instruction to meet identified needs;
- actively involve students in the learning and assessment processes.

### REFLECTIONS

1. How can you assess for learning and use the results of assessments and surveys to improve boys’ achievement?
2. How can you differentiate your assessments so that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning?
3. How can you coordinate your instruction and assessment practices (e.g., curriculum and assessment mapping) so that they support one another?
4. In what ways can you involve your students in developing assessments?
5. Do you provide rubrics and exemplars for assignments whenever possible?
6. How can you ensure that your assessments contribute to developing students’ metacognitive skills so that they can self-assess effectively and identify next steps for learning?
7. How can your school use teacher moderation or school-wide assessment tools to assess and evaluate student work?



# Be in their corner

## The role of the teacher in boys' literacy

*“This is the best ever. Thanks for letting us play games. Thank you, Mrs. R., for spending time on lunch to do activities. Thank you for teaching us about all different sports. Thank you very much for boys’ literacy and getting everything set up. I will sign up again, so THANKYOU.”*

— A student, William G. Davis Junior Public School

*“He has always been different in the ways he developed and learned new skills. We have learned to be patient and then seemingly overnight, ‘He can do it!’ That’s how he learned to talk, walk, and now read and write. We are so glad that his school and teachers value him for the way he is.”*

— A parent, Kensington Community School

*“I look at the boys in my class in a little different way, not as ‘lazy’ or ‘unmotivated’ but just needing a different way to learn. I’m looking for ways in all my classes to go beyond the textbook and put control of the learning in the kids’ hands.”*

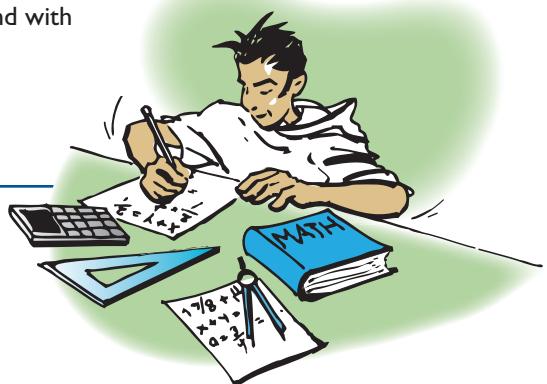
— A team member, St. Anne Catholic High School

*“The positive impact of this program reaches far beyond the test cohort of boys that we focused upon. For example, the development of a belief system that our boys could be successful was a by-product of this project. The greatest impact, however, was the belief that the boys gained in their own abilities, realizing that not only were they able to become good readers, they were expected to become good readers.”*

— An administrator, St. Mary’s Catholic Elementary School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Look at boys with new eyes.
- Believe that boys can be successful.
- Establish a genuine connection with boys and with their interests and issues.
- Listen to boys and validate their voices.
- Celebrate boys’ progress and successes.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

The examples in this section underscore the indisputable fact that the teacher holds the key to boys' learning. Teams related how they observed, interviewed, and opened dialogues with boys to get to know them better, and how this increased knowledge affected their ability to teach boys. The team at St. Patrick Catholic Elementary School declared that "teachers must acquire knowledge regarding the reasons for boys' underperformance and have a clear picture of how boys learn best". Teams also spoke about the importance of considering boys as individuals, not only as a group. The team leader at Western Technical and Commercial School commented, "I really enjoyed spending individual time with students assessing their reading. The students found it very interesting, and they really paid attention to their reading strengths and weaknesses. It gave me a handle on them." The result of such close attention was to see boys with new eyes. A teacher from Smith Public School wrote, "I have been so deeply changed as a teacher. I will never generalize about a child."

The rallying cry became "Yes! Boys can be successful!" The teams discovered how teachers can support boys' learning by listening to them, identifying their needs, and making changes accordingly. At Graham Bell-Victoria Public School, through a genuine connection with boys, the team studied the different ways boys learn and were surprised to discover the impact of visual and physical space. This led to some changes in room arrangements. The team at St. Anthony's Catholic School and Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School discovered that when boys appear to be unmotivated, the real reason may be that they are not sure how to do something and are reluctant to ask. The team at Lansdowne Public School, Sudbury Secondary School, and Wembley Public School declared, "You can't inspire a boy to read unless you know what he likes. You have to get to know the boy first. That's essential. So you talk with the boys about reading and then you find the right books."

Success was fostered by not only listening to the boys but also validating their voices and showing them that teachers cared about their successes. When boys felt that their contributions were worthwhile and valued, they tried harder and persisted longer with their literacy tasks. At Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Southwood Secondary School, and Huron Heights Secondary School, the team found that boys performed better when they saw that their teachers cared and when teachers allowed boys' voices to be heard. The administrator for St. Paul the Apostle Catholic School highlighted the significant role of teachers in these words: "I am blessed with staff members who are committed professionals, passionate about fostering a love of reading among our students, and willing to go the extra mile to ensure that it happens with all of them, especially and including our boys and our struggling students."

Finally, many schools focused on celebrating boys' interests, progress, and achievements, both within and beyond the classroom. Teachers used verbal praise and individual notes to students and parents. At Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute, the top boy readers and most improved boy readers in each Grade 9 class were recognized with certificates and book prizes in a public forum. Southwood Park Public School developed a family literacy night, which evolved over the course of the project into a celebration of student excellence in reading, writing, and media. At St. Patrick Catholic Elementary School, the value of praising boys for their accomplishments was made concrete through the following anecdote: A Grade 2 boy wrote a twenty-five-page story and read it over the PA system. The older boys burst into applause for him. He beamed at the recognition from the older students.

## Examples of Best Practices

Prior to the start of the inquiry project, the boys at Foxboro Public School were doing well in reading and math but were struggling in writing. The inquiry team began by asking the boys in Grade 3 and Grade 6 what they thought the cause of the gap in their achievement was and where they thought the teachers should begin implementing changes in order to close the gap. The boys told the team that they wanted:

- boy-friendly topics;
- a clear outline of what was expected (i.e., an exemplar);
- a shorter writing process;
- fewer things to fix after they had finished (i.e., just one next step).

In response, the team developed a framework for each writing genre and offered specific feedback, and the boys' writing improved.

— Foxboro Public School

When the Regiopolis-Notre Dame team began their inquiry project, the boys at their school were interested in sports, outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing, and computer games. There was little interest in reading inside the classroom and little to no interest in reading outside the classroom. The team decided to strive to overcome some of the misconceptions and barriers that the boys encountered around literacy by engaging and connecting with them. They decided to allow the boys to choose reading materials that were of particular interest to them (self-chosen topics in the form of fiction, non-fiction, magazines, newspapers, and how-to manuals) and that were outside the realm of "traditional" subject-related reading. Once students were given the freedom to discover their own reading interests, they read more enthusiastically and more frequently. The team also changed their instructional approaches to engage the boys. They discovered a renewed sense of mission and purpose inspired by positive feedback from the students. The team wrote, "Our students really enjoyed our informal discussions and sharing of their reading experiences; this became widely apparent in the number of wildlife stories told by students. Furthermore, sharing reading experiences, not only the content, provided a genuine connection to the reading."

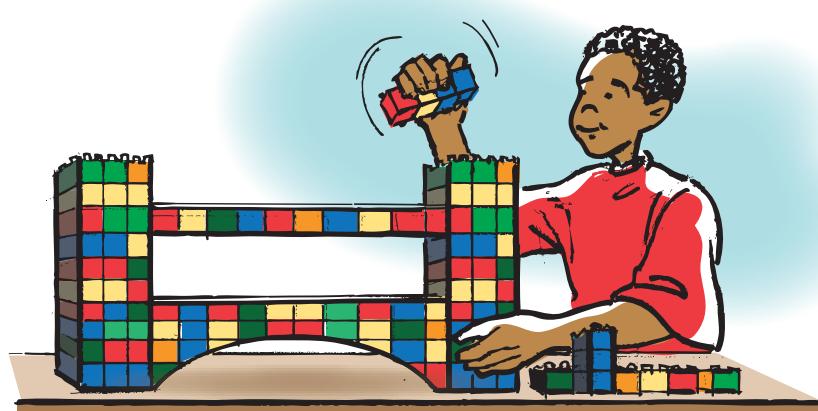
— Regiopolis-Notre Dame Catholic High School

The goal for the inquiry team at McKee Public School was to use literature circles with Stage 2 ESL learners to improve their attitude towards reading and to build reading skills. By listening to the boys' responses, looking at where their interests lay, and paying attention to when they were engaged and when they got off track, the teachers were able to keep the boys focused and talking about the books. The team spoke about how they learned to persevere in helping boys to work through the difficult patches when a text was perceived as too challenging or too boring. They also explained, "We gave them the language they could use to convey how they were feeling about a book by actively listening to them and modelling responses for them." One boy was struggling with one of the Silver Birch novels and wanted to get back to graphic novels, which he found easier to read. With teacher support, he was encouraged to continue with the Silver Birch selection. Later he came bounding into the literature circle meeting with a huge grin on his face, exclaiming, "That was the best book I ever read. It was so funny! I can't wait to talk about it!"

— McKee Public School

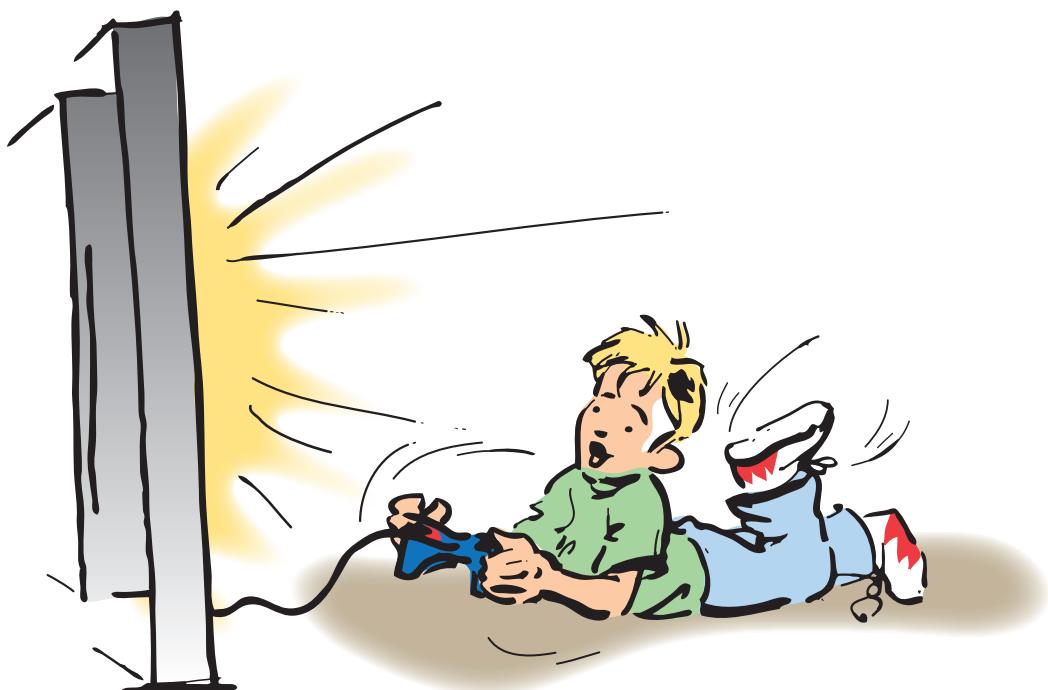
The teachers in these secondary schools worked in partnership with teachers in multiple feeder schools to establish a "caring community" approach. Focusing on the strategy "Be in their corner", secondary-school guidance counsellors worked with teams of Grade 8 teachers to help identify at-risk students who were entering the Grade 9 program. In Grade 9, these boys were paired with a mentor teacher. These partners met together outside regular classroom time to explore and expand the students' literacy experiences, attitudes, and interests. Both the mentor teachers and the students were asked to capture their experiences in journal form as part of the data collection for this inquiry. The team found that the boys performed better when they perceived that their teachers cared about them and about their performance.

— Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Southwood Secondary School, and Huron Heights Secondary School



## TRY THIS!

Psychologist Dr. Robert Brooks suggests that to foster self-esteem, hope, and resilience in students, teachers need to identify and nurture their students' "islands of competence" (areas where they are doing well). In his research and clinical work, he has found that one of the most effective ways of boosting self-worth and motivation is to communicate to students, "You have something of value to offer; your presence makes a positive difference in the lives of others" (Brooks, 2001).



## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Mem Fox writes about teachers' need to consider the whole child in her article, "Like Mud, Not Fireworks: The Place of Passion in the Development of Literacy" (1993):

*When, as teachers of literacy, we stand at the crossroads of conflicting pedagogies and ask ourselves which road we should travel on, it seems to me that we always look in the same direction for the answers. We focus on the road of texts by asking which texts are the best; and we focus on the road of methodology by asking which methods are the best ... as if texts and methods were the be all and end all of literacy instruction. But there is another road, less travelled by, which we don't notice because we aren't making the right inquiries. All the above methods focus on the page, not on the child or its teacher. All isolate themselves from the environment in which a particular child finds itself. All ignore the relationship between the child and the person teaching that child to read. All presume that the cognitive text and the cognitive method supersede the affective, that is, the heart-orientated circumstances which surround the act of learning to read. The reason is obvious.... Matters affecting the heart are far more elusive than those affecting the mind. There's no simple way to measure the role of the affective in teaching children to read. It can't be recorded in numbers. It can't be caught in a statistical net. It can't be pre-tested or post-tested. Its subjects can't be divided into control groups because the affective aspects of any given situation are unique to the situation at the moment of its happening and cannot be replicated. Measuring such indefinables as the effects of expectations, happiness, eagerness, fondness, laughter, admiration, hope, humiliation, abuse, tiredness, racism, hunger, loneliness and love on the development of literacy is so difficult, even within ethnographic research, that to my knowledge it is attempted rarely.*

*But the affective won't go away. It's always there, whether researchers admit it or not. The plain fact of the matter is that teachers and children have hearts, and those hearts play an enormous part in the teaching/learning process.*

### REFLECTIONS

1. Think about the boys in your classroom who are struggling. Can you identify and describe the nature of their difficulties?
2. Think about a time when a boy who was struggling had some success with literacy. What seemed to be the source of the breakthrough? How might you be able to duplicate that success?
3. Think about the ways you connect with the boys you teach. What fosters a respectful and positive teacher/student connection?
4. What preconceptions do you have about the literacy skills of the boys in your classroom? Do you believe that they can all be successful? How can you show them that you believe in them?
5. How can you celebrate boys' literacy successes in the classroom and the school?

## Drive the point

# home

### Engaging parents in boys' literacy

*“My dad read Walter the Farting Dog to me! We liked it. Mom didn’t.”*

– A student, Robert Moore School, Donald Young School, and Sturgeon Creek Alternative Program

*“As a parent, I felt that I didn’t have the tools or the resources to help my son begin to read. I have what I need now to help my son with reading. I had no idea even where to start!”*

– A parent, Sacred Heart School

*“This inquiry project has become the ‘springboard’ for our entire school to move forward to develop a new literacy environment for our students in the most positive way possible! Our boys are becoming accountable and more interested in reading, and our parents have shown more involvement in homework in all curriculum areas and in school events.”*

– A team member, St. Ann School

*“This project has reinforced for me the critical part that a parent plays in their child’s learning. By inviting parents into our school and giving them a purpose, our school has become an environment where everyone belongs. This sense of belonging has contributed to our children feeling safe and secure. This foundation has proven to be critical in order for the best learning to occur.”*

– An administrator, Smith Public School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ➔ Foster the involvement of parents as partners at home and in school.
- ➔ Encourage members of the community to get involved at the school.
- ➔ Provide resources for parents, such as parent-child reading kits and information sessions on how to support their children’s literacy learning.
- ➔ Create opportunities for two-way communication with parents.



# **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

## **Overview of Best Practices**

Parents play a vital role in the development and education of their children. One of the best means of nurturing student growth is to bring the family and the school closer together and create a genuine partnership between the two. Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p. 83). Research shows that parent involvement can result in:

- improved student achievement;
- reduced absenteeism;
- better behaviour;
- increased confidence among parents with respect to their children's schooling.

Setting the stage for parental engagement begins as soon as the child enters school. One team (see example from Smith Public School below) reached out to the parents before the children even came to enrol.

The focus for teams who worked on “Drive the point home” was to establish a connection between the school and the home that would build trust, increase opportunities for communication, foster more effective planning for the boys’ academic success, and, in some cases, enable the school to recruit volunteer parents as support for reading programs in the schools and as role models for the boys. Research shows that parents will participate more freely if the school environment is welcoming, so the inquiry teams worked to practise better school–family communication. The team at Canadian Martyrs, St. Nicholas, St. Vincent de Paul, and St. Mark Schools developed a pamphlet entitled “Talk On! Write On!”, outlining ways in which parents could support literacy development for their sons at home. At Laggan Public School, the primary teachers made presentations to parents on how to read to their children, how to choose material, and the importance of adopting a larger view of literacy that included comics, manuals, and magazines.

## **Examples of Best Practices**

In the spring of 2006, this teacher inquiry team invited the parents of the future Junior and Senior Kindergarten students to an information session. The session leaders distributed a summer project package to help parents prepare their children for school in September, a speech pathologist described oral language milestones, and the parents were given information about parental support agencies. When the students enrolled in September, there were fewer tears because the children were better prepared. The inquiry team then held additional parent workshops that taught the parents how to support their child’s reading. Many of the boys initially read with staccato fluency and poor expression. To change this, the inquiry team recruited fathers and grandfathers to read engaging picture books on a variety of topics to boys on a weekly or better basis. Because of the strong connections the school had with the parents, it was easy to recruit male volunteers. After the intensive modelling during the sessions, the boys read with greater

fluency and enhanced expression. The inquiry team emphasized that making the connection goes deeper than just providing workshops and information: it requires both parents and teachers to accept and value each other's role and participate in open communication. The administrator commented, "Parent information sessions have inspired large turnouts, and every day we have a wide variety of volunteers involved on many levels. We have just as many dads as we do moms spending time at our school working with children."

— Smith Public School

At St. Ann School, the inquiry team focused on engaging parents in boys' literacy through home-school activities. These reading and activity programs evolved into a school-wide effort in which every class had a rich library of reading resources that could be taken home, as well as individual student/parent reading logs that were taken home each night. In partnership with Frontier College, the school gave parents the opportunity to spend one afternoon a week with their children reading and doing activities. Families were given the chance to read in a Smart Car that was donated by the local dealership for the afternoon. The school also held successful family literacy nights during which families played literacy-based board games or word bingo. The team's findings revealed that their students' reading skills improved. In fact, the program was so successful the team recommended that all schools develop and implement a home reading program that includes:

- levelled readers;
- "word family" books;
- non-fiction, fiction, and comic books.

— St. Ann School

The inquiry team at this school strove to build an awareness of boys' literacy and to acquire the strategies to help the boys become better readers. They planned both a school-wide Literacy Day and a Boys' Literacy Night especially for boys and their parents. The Literacy Day featured guest presenters such as an author, an illustrator, a musician, and a motivational speaker. With the staff's support, the boys made posters and promoted the event. For the Boys' Literacy Night, the team invited a literacy specialist from the school board to show parents strategies to help their sons with reading.

— Hillcrest Community Public School

This team began by conducting student and parent surveys to gather information about the students' home reading environment: who read to them, how often they visited the public library, the needs and hopes of the parents, and so on. On the basis of this survey information, the team decided to start a home reading program (a "book-in-a-bag" program) to promote reading for pleasure. The Kindergarten children started school with very little knowledge about books and print, so through the program, the team hoped to encourage boys to read more. Each book was accompanied by small manipulatives such as finger puppets, plastic figures, or small toys relating to the story to increase interest and focus conversation about the story. The program was a huge success. The team also wanted to

communicate the importance of reading to the parent community in order to assist the parents in becoming reading role models for their children. Close contacts and communication were developed with most of the families. Special events were planned to celebrate reading, which were well attended and well received. Reading at home increased. The families were more involved in reading with their children. More fathers and brothers and other adult males were reading themselves and to the boys in these families on a regular basis. The changes in boys' performance at school were notable.

— Gladstone Public School

## TRY THIS!

Share with parents some of the “Tips and Tools for Parents” available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/abc123/eng/tips](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/abc123/eng/tips). The website includes ten tips for helping boys with reading.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

William Pollack (2000, p. xxxiv) offers tips for parents on listening to boys:

- Honor a boy's need for timed silence to choose when to talk.
- Find a safe place for connecting through activity or play.
- Make brief statements and wait; do not lecture.
- Share your own experiences, if relevant.
- Be quiet and really listen with complete attention.
- Give boys regular undivided attention and listening space.
- Encourage the expression of a full and wise range of emotion.

## REFLECTIONS

- 1.** How can you collect information about your students' literacy-related behaviours and experiences at home? Could you send home a survey for parents? If a written survey is not feasible, what else could you try?
- 2.** How can you support parents in their role as literacy partners? How can you convey that parental involvement is key to student success?
- 3.** What can you do to keep your parents informed of their sons' achievements beyond the regular reporting requirements?
- 4.** What opportunities does your school offer for parents to participate in workshops or presentations at the school on topics of interest to them, with or without their sons?
- 5.** What can you do to encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom, lunchroom, or playground or to share their expertise with your students?
- 6.** What does your school do to ensure parents feel welcome?
- 7.** What resources can you set up for your students to take home?

## Build a

# school-wide focus

**Building literacy  
beyond the  
classroom**

*“I think school is fantastic!”*

— A student, James R. Henderson Public School

*“The other members of our school council and I supported the Boys’ Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project but also extended it to the girls and parents as well. We had a Carousel Night and gave a free book to each child who attended. This encouraged the parents to attend our information night and reinforced the need to support reading. It was well received, and we felt proud of our efforts and success.”*

— A parent, Sister Mary Clare Catholic School

*“Teachers can become caught up in the day-to-day part of our jobs. This project gave us a chance to step outside the demands of our classrooms and let us focus on the bigger picture. We were able to find ways to motivate and improve boys’ skills across divisions. I have grown through my learning about boys’ needs, which has helped in my own teaching. I believe what we have accomplished will be sustainable at St. Andrew.”*

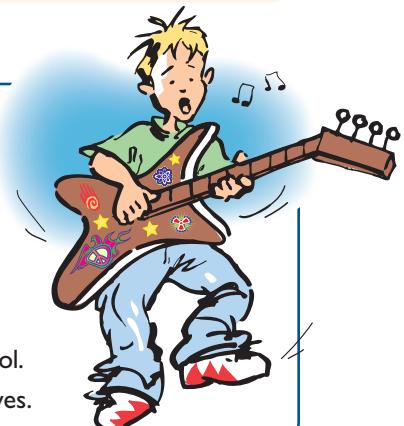
— A team member, St. Andrew School

*“It was encouraging to see teachers engaged in thinking ‘outside the box’ to create an environment that would support our most struggling students. It was gratifying to see how students responded to this environment, and how it changed their attitudes towards reading. It was uplifting to see the community and businesses join together with the school to create something new and meaningful to enhance student learning.”*

— An administrator, St. Michael Catholic School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus on student achievement for all students.
- Foster staff awareness of boys’ development, learning needs, and strengths and weaknesses.
- Expand the work of professional learning communities to include boys’ literacy.
- Foster leadership among all school staff.
- Create partnerships with others within and outside the school.
- Align boys’ literacy with other provincial and board initiatives.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

For many schools, being accepted into the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project in 2005 was a stimulus that developed into a school-wide focus. In other schools, the project was embedded seamlessly within the overall focus on success for all students. Key messages in a number of publications and initiatives from the Ministry of Education were already being examined and implemented, so schools were able to embrace the strategies relating to boys' literacy as part of overarching provincial directions. In many cases, the project also fit well with board and school improvement plans. The team from Queen Elizabeth Public School wrote, "We continued across the team to link our initiative to the board's improvement plan." At Sacred Heart School, the oral language program dovetailed with the school's involvement in the Northern Ontario Education Leaders (NOEL) project, funded by the Ministry of Education. One team member noted, "Professional development through the Catholic PLCs and internal and external board sources focused staff dialogue and classroom observation, which improved the implementation of effective instructional teaching strategies and improved the relevance of assessment for learning."

In most schools, through the structure of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) or a Professional Learning Team (PLT), teachers pursued their investigations of boys' literacy through a variety of methods, including book studies, workshop presentations, liaisons with universities or colleges, and information from provincial conferences related to improving student achievement. As a team member at Rene Gordon Elementary School commented, "We embraced the importance of PLTs and the importance of teacher learning as it related to boys' reading achievement. Regular PLT meetings allowed us to discuss boys' work and to develop common plans and teaching strategies to help them achieve success."

The focus on boys led naturally in some schools to the creation of partnerships with others within and outside the school. The inquiry teams worked within and across divisions, collaborated with other subject areas, and created cross-school partnerships within the elementary or secondary panels or cross-panel networks so that feeder schools and high schools worked together on behalf of the boys they served.

Some teams mobilized their school as a whole to hold language and literacy events, foster positive values and attitudes towards literacy, and create a whole-school atmosphere that celebrated the joys of literacy. In some schools, the teacher inquiry team was invited to share their experiences with the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project with the full school staff, at board presentations to trustees, and with other teachers on board-wide professional development days. The inquiry team at Worthington Public School reported that there was "a whole-school focus as teachers undertook to acquire a real awareness of boys' learning needs and reading styles".

## Examples of Best Practices

When this inquiry team submitted their proposal, their modest intentions were to develop classroom libraries, improve literature circle programs by providing quality titles, and make the library available to families once a month before school. This project, however, grew and became part of the daily life at the school. For example, the team:

- invited many outstanding Canadian authors to speak to students and parents;
- developed a literature circle program focusing on graphic novels;
- created displays throughout the school of students' favourite books;
- held a school-wide contest in which students submitted a persuasive piece of writing on why they loved to read in order to win tickets to a Raptors game;
- developed an online survey for parents and boys to measure the impact of the project.

The inquiry team reported that this school-wide approach gave teachers a heightened recognition of differences in learning needs between boys and girls, a greater understanding of the importance of working collaboratively to support students and their reading, a new knowledge about the potential of every student to excel in reading and to love books, and a new appreciation of the school library as the centre of the school's literacy initiatives.

– Whitney Public School



This project focused on giving students more time to read and more input into their reading materials. Time came from two sources. First, the principal facilitated keeping the library open at lunch time. Second, the school initiated a daily school-wide reading program called “Relax and Read” (“R&R”). Students lined up in the library every morning before school to sign out or renew magazines and books so they would be prepared for “R&R”. The teachers encouraged the reluctant students by bringing in interesting reading material for them to try. The Student Success Leader consulted with the teacher-librarians about which magazines worked well with students and ordered other, similar magazines. The school subscribed in bulk to two newspapers, which were snatched up early each day. At lunchtime, the library was always full, and more than 50% of the users were boys. In addition, the school targeted a group of weak readers with a program called “Read 180”, which focused on students transferred but not promoted from Grade 8. Early on in this program, the students completed a computerized interest inventory so that the computer could design a reading plan that addressed both the interests and the reading level of each student. Finally, a student/staff shopping trip became a school tradition so popular that students now beg to be included. The students now take pride in being advisers to the school and have taken ownership of their library. The inquiry team documented that the literacy gap between boys and girls in Grades 9 and 10 was closing, and literacy scores rose significantly over the duration of the project.

— West Hill Collegiate Institute

Under the leadership of two successive principals, the inquiry project at this school became the central focus for the School Improvement Plan. As the teachers involved in the project looked for new print resources for the boys, they also ensured that the books they purchased supported the interests and experiences of the girls. They established a school-wide writing framework so that all classes were studying a particular writing form (e.g., persuasive writing) at the same time. This consistent approach, paired with teacher collaboration, allowed teachers to acquire a deeper understanding of forms of non-fiction writing and what they looked like across the grades. Word walls throughout the school supported the writing activities. Discussions at division meetings enabled staff to share ideas, strategies, and trouble-shooting tips.

— High Park Public School

## TRY THIS!

Simple slogans can become the focus for entire school communities. They can help set a positive tone, establish big-picture goals, focus teachers and students, and improve discipline and student achievement. Some examples of slogans are:

- “Prepared to learn.”
- “When I read, I learn. When I learn, I am happy.”
- “Reading and writing? I can do that!”
- “School is my rocket to success.”



## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

### The 90/90/90 Schools: A Case Study

Research conducted at the Center for Performance Assessment on the “90/90/90” Schools ... considered data from more than 130,000 students in 228 buildings ... including inner-city, urban, suburban and rural schools. The student populations ranged from schools whose populations were overwhelmingly poor and/or minority to schools that were largely Anglo and/or economically advantaged.... In the 90/90/90 Schools, more than 90% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, more than 90% were from ethnic minorities, and more than 90% met or achieved high academic standards, according to independent tests ...

The FIVE common characteristics of these high achievement schools are:

1. A focus on academic achievement
2. Clear curriculum choices
3. Frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement
4. An emphasis on non-fiction writing
5. Collaborative scoring of student work

(Reeves, 2000, pp. 185–187)

### REFLECTIONS

1. How can your school make it a high priority to identify and promote strategies for literacy improvement for boys and for all students?
2. How can your school support teachers in every grade in working together to make literacy a key part of their teaching practice and of the life of the school?
3. How can the teachers and teacher-librarian in your school work together to review and organize school resources to ensure optimal literacy learning and teaching?
4. How can you work with your colleagues to establish a school-wide planning cycle to measure the progress in literacy being made by all students and determine next steps for the school?

**Split**

# them up

**Using single-sex groupings**

*“The presenter at the guys-only writing workshop made me think about the things that go on in the minds of artists, and it was amazing. He made me think about writing and being a writer. I am really inspired – what a great influence. And it was way less embarrassing than if girls were there.”*

– A student, A.Y. Jackson Secondary School

*“The Boys’ Book Club has helped support my son’s reading comprehension and has given him a lot more confidence with reading. He developed great reading strategies in a comfortable and fun environment. My son really enjoyed being a part of the Hillcrest Boys’ Book Club.”*

– A parent, Hillcrest Community Public School

*“We discovered that when creating language groups, grouping students based on gender and ability created greater levels of success. Boys were more likely to complete all work and to be more engaged in what they were doing when they were paired up with other boys, reading material that was of interest to them.”*

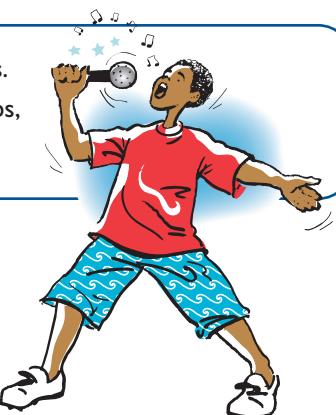
– A team member, Bear Creek Secondary School and Holly Meadows Elementary School

*“What I was struck by the most was the willingness of the students participating in gender-specific classes to engage in oral discussion. We have been reminded by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the importance of oral discussion in literacy development. Gender-specific groupings provided for much richer discussions. The boys aren’t distracted by the girls, and the girls are less inhibited.”*

– An administrator, Maynard Public School

## STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish single-sex classrooms for some subject areas.
- Create smaller single-sex groupings, such as book clubs, literature and information circles, and project groups.



## **PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE**

### **Overview of Best Practices**

During the teacher inquiry project, a few teams organized their classes along single-sex lines, and others tried single-sex groupings within their classrooms. The teams found some evidence that single-sex groupings made both boys and girls feel more at ease in lessons and improved their achievement. A student from Parkdale Public School explained, “I think that it is a good idea to have a boys’ book club because boys don’t usually have a habit of reading. Boys can become nervous or shy in front of girls but not so much in front of boys. The reading club helps us read in a really fun way.” A member of the inquiry team at Maynard Public School noted, “Single-sex classrooms are highly effective for this age group (Grade 7). Boys and girls felt less inhibited and were able to have more effective class discussions. Feedback from both gender groups stated that they felt more comfortable without the others. Not once has a parent or student complained about the gender-specific grouping.”

Some proponents of this strategy argue that boys and girls receive and process information differently, hear and see differently, and develop at different rates; therefore, different teaching styles and classroom structures should be adopted to accommodate both sexes. However, teachers should remember that there are far more similarities between boys and girls and differences among individuals within each group than there are broad, general differences between the sexes. Further research on this strategy is needed. The ruling principles should be that a range of effective and focused pedagogies and options should be used in classrooms and that schools should be organized to support learning for all students, whether that means single-sex or coed groupings or a mixture of both.

### **Examples of Best Practices**

This team tried dividing their reading classes by sex. All students from Grades 4–6 were separated into male and female classes for reading, with teachers of corresponding sex. Students reported that they looked forward to these classes each day because it gave them an opportunity to express themselves freely. For the teachers, it was an opportunity to explore subjects of interest for each sex. The strategy allowed students to be much less inhibited and helped to improve their attitudes. Participating in sex-differentiated classes was seen as a very positive experience by everyone involved.

— Howick Central Public School

This team investigated whether single-sex classes in language arts and mathematics made a difference in boys' (and girls') literacy achievement. The school divided the Grade 8 boys and girls for a 100-minute block each day. They found that the class for girls was far more successful in improving attitudes and achievement than was the class for boys. Classroom management became an issue with the boys' class. One team member theorized that the problem was due to the fact that the boys "did not have the modelling of work habits and behaviour that girls would have provided". The team determined that teaching styles for both the girls and the boys needed to be altered and that the boys required more direct and precise interventions. However, there were some positive results for the boys – they did willingly read more often than they did in mixed classes. The team recorded that CASI scores went up by 10% for the boys and 30% for the girls.

– Dr. G.J. MacGillivray Public School

This inquiry team focused on the impact of sex-based groups on reading performance, and the experiment was found to be highly effective. Boys (and girls) felt less inhibited and had more effective classroom discussions when they were separated by sex. Feedback from both groups overwhelmingly stated that they felt more comfortable without the other. In the "mixed" classes, the boys felt that the focus was always on the girls, and the girls felt that the boys were always disruptive. The inquiry team adapted their teaching styles to accommodate different learning styles for the sex-based groups, and these changes had a huge impact on raising interest and achievement. Teachers for the boys' classes placed a greater emphasis on oral communication and kinesthetic activity, which allowed traditionally low achievers to realize their full potential. The boys' teachers also placed a heavier emphasis on oral assessment and performance-based assessment, such as drama activities, rather than traditional assessments based on writing.

– Maynard Public School

During the first year of the inquiry project, this school began a "Guys Read Club". This forum proved to be an extremely effective way to encourage the boys to talk about reading materials and their own ideas. The teachers running the club invited male sports teams and authors to speak with and read to the boys, and used sex-appropriate materials and strategies to increase their reading enjoyment. The boys' reading comprehension and writing quality both improved. In the third year, the inquiry team decided to open up the club to girls as well. That year was the least successful for the boys. There was a decline in attendance among boys, and the boys were less open to sharing. After seeing the results of the project, the school has acknowledged the importance of providing boys with their own space and time for dialogue and has incorporated single-sex groupings into the classrooms through new guided-reading groups. The administrator summarized the results: "Our boys have definitely had their choices of reading materials validated, have a higher level of self-esteem, have improved their reading skills overall (supported by our EQAO and survey results), and are now much more comfortable talking about what they have read."

– Oakwood Public School

The inquiry team at St. Edward proposed to empower their students with a Boys' Book Club that would yield "comfortable, confident readers able to share and discuss their views in different settings". They ran the clubs, differentiated by division, during the lunch recess. There was considerable excitement because the club was boys-only and the school had acquired many new books specifically of interest to boys. In the second year of the project, the team reported that the exclusivity of a boys-only club was working very well. The boys were very comfortable with their peers and began to share more details with one another when they presented on their materials. Teachers noticed that they began connecting what they read to their own personal lives and comparing their personal stories with those of others in the group. The confidence level developed by these experiences in the book club paid off as boys began participating more in classroom discussions. By the end of the project, the boys' level of interest in books was much higher, as were their comprehension results as assessed through running records, the *Reaching Readers* resource by Pearson Canada, and the RAD [Reading Assessment Diagnostic].

– St. Edward Catholic School



## TRY THIS!

Try your own miniature research project in the classroom. During a specific, short group assignment, separate the boys from the girls and observe how they process the assignment and how well they do. After you have assessed their work, debrief the exercise with the whole class, sharing your notes and inviting their reflection on their processes and the quality of their products.

## WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Spence (2008) outlines the implementation of single-sex classes at Cecil B. Stirling School in Hamilton. The school proposed this organizational change to the board and then took a year to review the problems boys were experiencing. They researched the issue extensively and identified the differences between girls' and boys' learning, surveyed students in Grades 6 and 7 on their learning preferences, and conducted presentations for staff and parents to acquaint them with the background to this concept. Spence explains (pp. 88–89) that the administrators and teachers at this school have developed the following beliefs:

- Single-gender classes do not meet the needs of all students.
- Single-gender classes, however, do meet the needs of more students than traditional coed classes do.
- Boys and girls learn differently.
- Single-gender classes allow teachers to accommodate different learning styles and needs of boys and girls.
- Single-gender classes eliminate the distractions of the opposite sex.

Demers and Bennett (2007) conclude that the debate about single-sex schools and co-educational schools has “not been conclusive on the role that single-sex schooling can play in improving boys’ learning and graduation rates”. The authors go on to note (p. 2) that:

- There are improved graduation rates for some single-sex schools though success could be attributable to other factors;
- Boys appear to benefit less from single-sex schooling than girls;
- However, both boys and girls appear to benefit most by having some single-sex classes and some activities based on gender.

Anfara and Mertens (2008, p. 57) give the bottom line as follows:

*The benefits of single-sex schooling remain unclear.... What seems to get lost ... is that the exact nature and benefits of single-sex education are highly contextual. School characteristics, teaching styles and instructional practices and the curriculum ... all have significant effects on students' achievement.... Findings about single-sex education must be viewed and interpreted with a healthy dose of caution.*

**REFLECTIONS**

1. What can you do to foster and ensure a safe and supportive classroom environment and equitable learning opportunities for both boys and girls?
2. If you have taught a single-sex class, what were the positives and negatives of that experience?
3. What kinds of literacy activities might be appropriate for a single-sex grouping?
4. How can you connect the boys and girls in your classroom to other staff of the same sex in your school? To adults of the same sex in the community?



# Appendix

## Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project Teams

The Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project included 103 inquiry teams. These teams were composed of teachers and other staff, such as teacher-librarians, special education support staff, teachers of English as a second language, literacy leaders, secondary Student Success Leaders, and administrators. In most cases, teams represented one school; however, in some cases teams represented more than one school within a board.

*Me Read? And How!* is based on the final reports submitted by 97 of these teams in June 2008. The following list shows the schools included in these 97 teams.

A.Y. Jackson Secondary School, Ottawa-Carleton DSB<sup>2</sup>  
Adelaide Hoodless Public School, Hamilton-Wentworth DSB  
Agnes Macphail Public School, Toronto DSB  
Armstrong Public School, Northern District School Area Board  
Arthur Meighen Public School, Avon Maitland DSB  
Bear Creek Secondary School and Holly Meadows Elementary School, Simcoe County DSB  
Bellmoore Public School, Hamilton-Wentworth DSB  
Bishop Allen Academy Catholic High School, Toronto CDSB  
Bishop Macdonell School, Wellington CDSB  
Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Southwood Secondary School, and Huron Heights Secondary School, Waterloo Region DSB  
Canadian Martyrs, St. Nicholas, St. Vincent de Paul, and St. Mark Schools, Niagara CDSB  
Chester Public School, Toronto DSB  
Don Mills Collegiate Institute and Don Mills Middle School, Toronto DSB  
Dr. G. J. MacGillivray Public School, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB  
Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute, Toronto DSB  
E. C. Drury High School, Halton DSB  
Echo Bay Public School, Algoma DSB  
Egremont Community Public School, Bluewater DSB  
Equal Opportunities School Group, Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB

2. DSB and CDSB are abbreviations for District School Board and Catholic District School Board, respectively.

F. W. Begley, Northwood, Kingsville, Eastwood, Harrow Senior, and Lakeshore Discovery Public Schools, Greater Essex County DSB

Father Henry Carr School, Toronto CDSB

Father Leo J. Austin Catholic High School and St. Bernard Catholic School, Durham CDSB

Five Mile School and Gorham and Ware Community School, Lakehead DSB

Foxboro Public School, Hastings and Prince Edward DSB

G. B. Little School, Toronto DSB

Gladstone Public School, Upper Canada DSB

Graham Bell-Victoria Public School, Grand Erie DSB

Hawthorne Village Public School, Halton DSB

High Park Public School, Lambton Kent DSB

Hillcrest Community Public School, Toronto DSB

Holy Family Catholic School, St. Clair CDSB

Holy Name of Jesus School, Horne Payne Roman Catholic Separate School Division

Holy Rosary School, Halton CDSB

Holy Saviour School, Superior North CDSB

Holy Spirit, St. Kevin, and St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic Schools, Toronto CDSB

Howick Central Public School, Avon Maitland DSB

James R. Henderson Public School, Limestone DSB

Kensington Community School, Toronto DSB

King's Masting Public School, Peel DSB

Laggan Public School, Upper Canada DSB

Lakeshore Public School and Tecumseh Public School, Halton DSB

Land of Lakes Senior Public School, Near North DSB

Lansdowne Public School, Sudbury Secondary School, and  
Wembley Public School, Rainbow DSB

Maynard Public School, Upper Canada DSB

McKee Public School, Toronto DSB

Minto-Clifford Public School, Upper Grand DSB

Oakwood Public School, Halton DSB

Our Lady of the Valley School, Kenora CDSB

Parkdale Public School, Toronto DSB

Parkside Collegiate Institute, Thames Valley DSB  
Pineland Public School, Halton DSB  
Provincial Schools for the Deaf, Provincial Schools Branch  
Queen Elizabeth Public School, DSB Ontario North East  
Queen Elizabeth, Admaston, and Central Public Schools, Renfrew County DSB  
Queen of Peace Catholic Elementary School, Windsor Essex CDSB  
Regiopolis-Notre Dame Catholic High School, Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB  
Rene Gordon Elementary School, Toronto DSB  
Riverside Public School, Trillium Lakelands DSB  
Robert Moore School, Donald Young School, and Sturgeon Creek Alternative Program, Rainy River DSB  
Rodan Public School, Toronto DSB  
Rosethorn Junior Public School, Toronto DSB  
Sacred Heart School, Northwest CDSB  
San Lorenzo Ruiz Elementary School, Dufferin-Peel CDSB  
Sister Mary Clare Catholic School, Huron Superior CDSB  
Smith Public School, DSB of Niagara  
Southwood Park Public School, Durham DSB  
St. Alphonsus Catholic School, Toronto CDSB  
St. Andrew School, Dufferin-Peel CDSB  
St. Ann School, Thunder Bay CDSB  
St. Anne Catholic High School, Windsor-Essex CDSB  
St. Anthony's Catholic School and Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School, Renfrew County CDSB  
St. Augustine Catholic High School, York CDSB  
St. Basil's Catholic School, Bruce-Grey CDSB  
St. Edward Catholic School, Toronto CDSB  
St. Gregory Catholic School, Catholic DSB of Eastern Ontario  
St. Jean Brebeuf School, Dufferin-Peel CDSB  
St. John French Immersion Catholic School, London CDSB  
St. Joseph High School, Windsor-Essex CDSB  
St. Joseph-Scollard Hall Catholic Secondary School, Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB  
St. Mary's Catholic Elementary School, Huron Perth CDSB  
St. Michael Catholic School, Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB

St. Michael School, Ottawa CDSB  
St. Patrick Catholic Elementary School, Waterloo CDSB  
St. Patrick's School, Atikokan Roman Catholic Separate School Board  
St. Paul Catholic Elementary School, Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington CDSB  
St. Paul School, Northeastern CDSB  
St. Paul the Apostle Catholic School, Sudbury CDSB  
St. Peter Catholic School, Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB  
Tom Longboat Junior Public School, Toronto DSB  
Upsala Public School, Upsala District School Area Board  
W.J.Watson Public School,York Region DSB  
West Glen Junior School,Toronto DSB  
West Hill Collegiate Institute, Toronto DSB  
Western Technical and Commercial School,Toronto DSB  
Whitney Public School,Toronto DSB  
William G. Davis Junior Public School,Toronto DSB  
Worthington Public School, Peel DSB

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