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Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry

Work Plan Support Booklet – December 2007

Introduction/Overview

"Ongoing growth depends upon an alliance of key education partners working towards a shared goal of improvement and effectiveness. Focused discussion, resulting from this process, will facilitate a more precise improvement planning strategy and a shared understanding of what makes schools effective."

Dr. Avis Glaze

School Effectiveness Framework: A Collegial Process for Continued Growth in the Effectiveness of Ontario Elementary Schools (draft) 2007.

The fall is flying by and we hope that your teams are now deeply involved in year three of the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry. This Support Booklet addresses some key information on a wide-ranging and diverse set of topics designed to spark your thinking, sharpen your focus, and deepen your skills related to the use of new types of text and working with your data. Thanks to those teams who are contacting us through the Teacher Inquiry e-mail address, teacherinquiry@oise.utoronto.ca, with their revised action plans. We will answer any further inquiries and we urge all of you to respond to the questions that we asked of you in our Feedback Reports distributed in the last month.

Message to Team Contacts, Principals and Board Contacts

An important request: We are trying to keep up with changes in staff, inquiry team contacts, and principals of project schools. By now, every team should have received, through their school contact, a *Teacher Inquiry Team Feedback* report, sent via e-mail last month. If your school team contact has not received this email, please contact us so we can resend it to the appropriate person. We appreciate the impact that staff changes can have on the momentum of your inquiry work, and trust that this is easing now that year three is well underway.

Our EQAO scores, related to boys/girls achievement, continue to be a challenge provincially. Our Teacher Inquiry projects are, in many cases, making a steady trajectory upward as they focus on improving boys' achievement and attitudes through various strategies. We found the following kernel in reading the EQAO provincial report which indicates that while we have much work yet to do, there has been some improvement, particularly in the area of non-fiction reading and responding.

"On all but two questions on the reading assessment, female students performed better than males. The two questions males performed better on were from the non-continuous text, "Guide Dogs for the Visually Impaired in Canada" (Booklet I, Section A, Question 3) and the narrative informational text, "The Scourge and the Hamilton" (Booklet I, Section A, Question 10)." From Strategies for Success: Junior Division, EQAO Provincial Report, 2007.

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INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES: Words and Pictures: Considering Multi-genre Texts for Boys

by Larry Swartz

Recently, at a conference, I stood beside a teacher who was browsing over a book display. She turned to me and lamented, “There’s nothing here for boys!” She had been hoping to find some titles for her ten-year old son. “Really?” I answered and offered her a few suggestions from the books in front of us. Happy with my recommendations, the teacher walked away with *Bone* by Jeff Smith and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick because she knew her son would like books with lots of pictures.

“When we claim that boys don’t read,” David Booth (2002) asks, “are we really meaning that they don’t read what we want them to read?” (p. 41) If we consider the range of texts that engage boys, we can understand that boys’ reading is varied and personal and the books that we choose for them, might not be the one’s they’d choose for themselves. The industry is paying attention to the needs and interests of boys and so the notion that there are no books for boys is a myth. Instead we need to ask: Which boys? Which books?

A Multi-genre Approach to Texts

Research informs us that male readers prefer non-fiction to fiction; however, we must recognize that there is a wide range in the topics male readers enjoy. In recent years, a number of books featured at bookstore displays reveal a multi-genre approach to informational texts where instructions, narratives, poetry, lists, and diagrams are found between the covers. For example, *The Dangerous Book for Boys* by brothers Conn and Hal Iggulden which allows readers to choose: a topic (e.g., treehouses, fishing, secret codes), a text format (e.g., lists, instructions, diagrams), a title (e.g., Five Pen and Paper Games, The Laws of Cricket) or a story (e.g., Scott of the Antarctic) that appeals to them. Judging by recent Top Ten lists, *The Dangerous Book for Boys* has sparked a sensation for many male readers because of “the timeless qualities of an ideal young man: curiosity, bravery, and respectfulness...It celebrates trial and error, vindicates the noble failure.” (Von Drehl, 2007, p.41). The popularity of the anthology has prompted not only a sequel (*The Dangerous Book for Boys Yearbook*) but the publication of a condensed format (*The Pocket Dangerous Book for Boys: Things to Know*).

Recently a number of books have imitated the multimodal “Dangerous Book” format including *211 Things a Bright Boy Can Do* by Tom Culter and *The Boys’ Book: How to be the Best at Everything* published by Scholastic (Yes, there’s a girls version, *The Girls’ Book: How to be the Best at Everything*). I believe that *The Encyclopedia of Immaturity*, published by Klutz would capture the attention of ‘boys of all ages’ with its tricks, puzzles, jokes, and instructions. The popularity of the ‘ology’ books (e.g., *Wizardology*, *Dragonology*, *Pirateology*) is further evidence of the appeal of this multi-genre approach to texts.

“When we claim that boys don’t read,” David Booth (2002) asks, “are we really meaning that they don’t read what we want them to read?” (p. 41).

Multi-genre books such as these tell readers that they don't have to read the whole book, front to back, but can dip in and find material on topics that appeal to them. The balance of visuals and written texts tell the readers that they can gain information in different ways. Also, boys feel daunted at the prospect of reading a complete text and so this kind of book captures their interest. Reading such books is like going to a buffet and picking and choosing dishes that we enjoy; there may be some foods that make us want more, some that we may never choose to eat again, some that we may not try - a smorgasbord approach to reading.

At a recent workshop when I announced that the annual publication *Guinness World Records* could be considered the most popular non-fiction for young people, one teacher put up her hand to argue, "But they're not reading the books; they're just looking at the pictures." "And that's not reading?" I answered. If we want to help boys read information texts filled with pictures, we need to provide them with strategies to make meaning of the print as well as the visuals. Visual literacy implies that readers learn from pictures and diagrams as well as from print. Visual literacy can move boys beyond the concrete literal interpretation of what they see to deeper understandings that draw on background knowledge and call upon their skills to infer, question, and synthesize. These popular multi-genre books tap into a variety of illustration and visual media.

Rethinking Literacy

Over the past decade, there has been heightened attention paid to literacy as it occurs outside of school. Some of the major concerns identified are recognizing that "students today have new sets of skills from their use of media and technology, that there are more texts than there ever have been, and that these need to resolve a gender gap in literacy, so that we invite texts and practices that both boys and girls enjoy and find meaningful" (Rowse, 2006, p. 14). In today's world, the screen is a primary vehicle for communication and, more significantly, language use can be governed by technology. Language is not, and clearly will not be, printed texts with incidental images, but instead texts of all kinds with colour, different fonts, and different media. Students no longer simply decode, skim, and scan, but they move across and among texts, design texts, render images and so on. Books such as the ones listed on page 10 connect to the world of literacy for the 21st century – a world that recognizes that technology has changed how we learn literacy. Our teaching practice must overtly and critically teach new skills from new technologies. For many boys who have tuned in to computer technology, it is important to understand the use of modern multi-genre texts, and come to understand their place within our classrooms.

Considering Multi-genre Texts for Boys:

For a list of multi-genre resources of particular interest to boys, see page 10.



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WORKING ANALYSIS: What's To Be Done with All the Data? - A Guide for Analyzing the Information You've Been Gathering

by Shelley Stagg Peterson

Over the past two years you've been gathering information about your students' literacy learning. Now, you're likely facing a mountain, or at least a good-sized hill of evidence/data and wondering what to do with it all.

Plans are in the works to hold meetings, either in person or online, and to create a video to support you as you work through the mounds of information. This article starts you on your way with tips for analyzing the types of data that many teams are gathering. You'll find suggestions for working with reading logs and reading surveys.

Analyzing Evidence from Reading Logs

Many boys' literacy teams have introduced students to new reading materials through their boys' literacy projects. They are determining the impact of those materials on boys' reading preferences and habits by asking boys to keep reading logs. To analyze the reading logs, you might tally the numbers of books that boys are reading of particular types (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels, magazines, comics) to see if each boy is reading a wide range of materials or the same type all the time, the numbers of reading materials read over a period of time, the number of minutes that they spend reading, or how many books they have on the go at a time. You can then look at trends across the group of boys (and girls, if you want to compare by gender).

For example, you might determine patterns in:

- ♦ types of materials read (e.g., 45% have read non-fiction, 20% have read graphic novels);
- ♦ breadth of genres read (e.g., 30% have read 1-2 different genres, 10% have read 3-5 different genres, 40% have read 6-8 different genres);
- ♦ length of time spent reading (e.g., 20% read for 0-10 minutes daily, 30% read for 11-20 minutes daily);
- ♦ number of reading materials read over a period of time (e.g., 40% have read 10-15 books in six months).

You can record your results in graphs or tables. Here's an example of what a table might look like (you'd likely have many more types of texts in your table):

Grade Seven Boys' and Girls' Reading Preferences in 2005 and 2006
(In percentages)

	Graphic Novels		Non-fiction		Magazines		Adventure Stories	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2005 Boys (n = 17) Girls (n = 14)	20	8	45	39	89	78	23	19
2006 Boys (n = 12) Girls (n = 17)	32	12	55	55	75	83	12	10

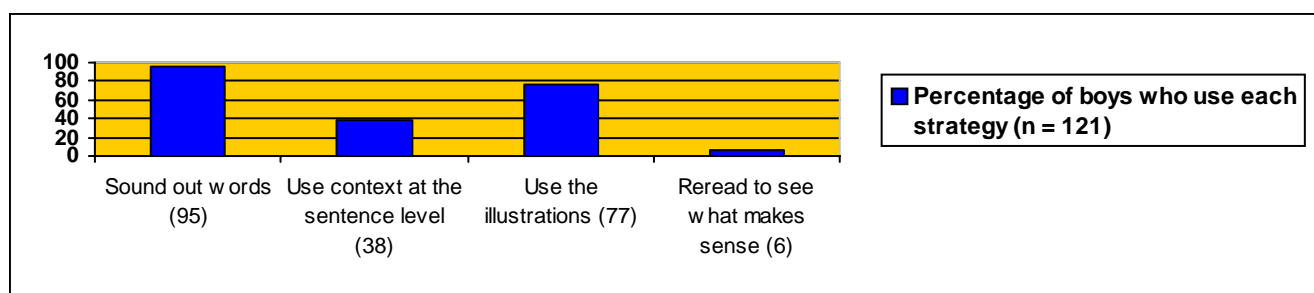
You would then write a short description of the results by saying something like the following: *Magazines were read by more boys and girls than any other text and students read fewer adventure stories than any other text. Boys read graphic novels to a much greater extent than girls did, but girls and boys had fairly similar reading preferences when it came to non-fiction and adventure stories.* These are only examples of the conclusions you can draw from the above hypothetical table.

You may also be asking your students to write in reading logs or reading journals about their impressions of the content, plot, characters, or format, why they would or would not recommend the text, what personal connections they make, or what the text reminds them of. To analyze this information you could look for trends. For example: Is there a pattern of reasons for their choosing certain materials and reasons that students like or dislike particular texts? To determine the patterns, you would read through the reading logs, circling or highlighting the reasons that students give for recommending the texts they've read. Then, you'd count up the number of times that each reason comes up for your students. Let's say that 35% of the boys recommended texts because they were funny, 60% because they had a lot of action, and 45% because they had lots of realistic photographs. The percentages don't have to add up to 100 because some students will give the same reasons for a number of texts that they read and might give more than one reason for liking a particular text. You'd likely use a table or graph to capture the percentages of each reason for recommending a text and then state that the greatest number of boys enjoyed texts because of the action-oriented plot (in the hypothetical example provided here). You could follow a similar procedure for the other types of information that you gather about your students' reading through their reading responses.

Analyzing Evidence from Reading Surveys

Reading surveys are another source of evidence common to a number of boys' literacy teams. Many paper and pencil reading surveys have limited-choice (sometimes they're called *forced-choice*) questions, so you can easily tally the number of girls and the number of boys who responded with "strongly agree" and "agree" (you can combine the numbers for these two responses to make things easier for yourselves) and the number of students of each gender who responded with "strongly disagree" and "disagree," pointing out any large percentages of students in any one of the categories. As with the results of reading log analyses, you can create tables or graphs showing the percentage of students who agreed that they enjoyed reading and the percentage of students who disagreed, indicating that they did not enjoy reading. You'd then write statements comparing the percentages of girls and boys who indicated that they either enjoyed or disliked reading. If you conducted the surveys over the three years of the boys' literacy project, you can compare and contrast the results over the years.

Some reading surveys have open-ended responses where students write their own responses and other surveys are interviews, so you'll need to transcribe the students' answers from tape recordings or write the responses as students talk to you. In this case, you'll follow a procedure similar to that of the responses in the reading logs, highlighting the key words that students write or say. For example, if students describe the reading strategies they use when they have trouble figuring out a word by saying that they "sound out the words" or "think about the sounds of the letters" or "say the letters to themselves silently to sound them out," they are all saying essentially the same thing – they use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to sound out words. You'd circle/highlight what the students said and then count all three of these responses as instances of sounding out words. Then, you'd tally the number of students who gave each type of response and create a table or graph to show the patterns and trends. Here's a sample graph:



You can then draw conclusions that most boys are aware that they sound out words and use illustrations to make sense of text. Very few students say that they reread and less than half use the context of the sentence when they read. Stay tuned for further support to analyze observational evidence and students' scores on reading assessments. We are in the process of putting together a video using actual evidence that some of our boys' literacy teams have been gathering to show how you might analyze these types of evidence.

CAPACITY-BUILDING: Sustainability! Or Boys' Literacy Lost?

by Micki Clemens



During the past two years, as part of the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, you have patiently and carefully laid the foundation for the implementation of specific strategies focused on improving boys' literacy skills and their attitudes to literacy. We have observed from your recent Progress Reports that significant, positive changes are indeed occurring.

Have you thought, however, about what will happen when the clock strikes twelve and the project concludes in June 2008? Will the successes you have enjoyed as a team of professionals in your school and even across several schools just evaporate? Will the boys' achievement gains - hard won by the teachers and the students themselves - be maintained and even flourish? What components of your work together over these three years can and should be shared and expanded within and beyond your school?

Research, undertaken by Ron Owston (2003), has identified some critical factors in the sustainability of innovations. There are two key types of conditions that support change and ensure that it becomes embedded in the life of the school: Essential Conditions and Contributing Conditions. Below, we elaborate briefly on three of the Essential Conditions: teacher support, student support, and administrative support and offer you some questions for reflection and action.

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS	CONTRIBUTING CONDITIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Teacher support ♦ Student support ♦ Administrative support ♦ Teacher professional development ♦ Overall perceived value of the innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Innovation champions ♦ Support within the school ♦ Support from outside the school ♦ Supportive plans and policies ♦ Funding

TEACHER SUPPORT: The Teacher is the Key!

Without the classroom teacher the change or innovation cannot occur. It is the willingness and readiness of the teacher to engage in a disciplined inquiry such as this that is at the heart of sustainability.

- ♦ How can you increase the commitment of your team members to "dig deeply" into the issues around literacy and engage your boys so that the improvement momentum can grow and be contextualized within the school?



The key to teachers' continued commitment is "the professional and personal satisfactions derived from being able to teach in a more meaningful and effective manner and from seeing the positive impact of their work on student achievement."

- ♦ Have you provided your team with the opportunity to examine the positive impacts of their work and to identify the factors and the specific instructional practices contributing to these improvements? Have you celebrated the growth of literacy that you see in those boys participating in your inquiry?

Ongoing teacher professional learning is the lifeblood of sustaining innovation. Teachers need to have and acquire pedagogical knowledge and skills, the dispositions to work with boys over time, and the appropriate technical competencies to sustain their growth and influence their practice in the classroom. They also need quality interactions among their colleagues to embrace the importance of learning from each other.

- ♦ Have you identified ways that you endeavoured in this Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry to access or construct learning opportunities for your team and for other staff to deepen their knowledge about boys and about how effective your literacy instructional practices have been? Have you documented your own learning throughout the project? The book, *On Common Ground*, referenced below, is a strong professional development resource.

STUDENT SUPPORT: Student Success is the Torch that Leads Us On!

Student enthusiasm plays an essential role in motivating teachers to continue to carry out and improve the innovation. If teachers believe that students are benefiting and support a change, Schmoker (1999) points out that teachers will be willing to devote the additional time and effort required to maximize student success.

- ♦ How have you observed, captured, and documented your students' responses to the changes and instructional practices introduced during the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry? Perhaps you have surveyed your students at intervals during this time so that you will have a record of their attitudinal, behavioural, and academic improvements. Consider polling parents or mentors and holding focus groups to collect powerful evidence of the impact of your strategies on the boys' reading and writing habits at home and beyond the school.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT: The Principal is the Gatekeeper!

Because we believe that individual student improvement and school improvement are interconnected, we posit that strong support from the school principal is an essential factor in sustainability. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that supportive principals are proactive in establishing conditions for innovation to flourish. Sustainability is about taking the change and developing the whole social environment so that the innovation can continue to grow.

- ♦ What strategies will sustain the interest and commitment of future school administrators? Have you kept your current administrator and your superintendent consistently informed of your instructional practices and data results throughout? Have you offered to share your project with other staff to support their deep learning and understanding? If a new administrator has been appointed, how will your team communicate and enlist this person as a key champion for your boys and their literacy?

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COLLABORATION: Working Together: PLCs in Action

by Rose Dotten

As we read through your June 2007 Progress Reports, we noted that many teams commented on the work of their Professional Learning Communities as an integral part of the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry. It was heartening to read how more and more members of the school community were making significant connections with each other, progressing together towards a common goal – boys' literacy achievement – and reflecting both individually and as a community on their joint professional practice.

Reflective practice is a proven component of educator growth and effectiveness leading to sustainability and supporting school and board improvement plans. All the teacher participants in the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry initiative would exemplify what York-Barr *et al.* (2006) define as the attributes of a reflective educator: "...one who is committed to continuous improvement in practice; assumes responsibility for his or her own learning; demonstrates awareness of self and others and the surrounding context; develops the thinking skills for effective inquiry; and takes action that aligns with new understandings."



Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

Mitchell and Sackney (2001) state that "a learning community consists of a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, the problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning." Out of extensive and numerous studies in this area, findings emerge that delineate the core characteristics of a Professional Learning Community as one where teachers:

- ♦ share basic norms and values about students, learning, and teaching;
- ♦ learn new strategies and best practice from others in the team;
- ♦ engage in reflective dialogue about teaching practice and student learning through open discussion and problem solving;
- ♦ have a collective focus on student learning through inquiry-based practice;
- ♦ build trusting relationships through collaboration across grade level and department groups, working as a team to stretch and enhance individual thinking;
- ♦ demonstrate personal commitment and risk-taking but with higher morale when opportunities to share both successes and challenges are shared; and
- ♦ support each other through continuous learning, evaluation, feedback, and taking action as a result.



"A learning community consists of a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, the problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning."

Mitchell and Sackney
(2001)

As a result of the implementation and growth of successful engaged Professional Learning Communities, there is substantial proof of the significant benefits for students:

- ♦ Lower rates of absenteeism;
- ♦ Increased learning;
- ♦ Greater gains in math, science, history, and reading;
- ♦ Smaller achievement gaps between students of differing backgrounds; and
- ♦ Decreased drop-out.

How to Support and Sustain a Professional Learning Community

Inquiry-based professional development within a school involves a program of peer coaching (your critical friend), lead teachers (teacher inquiry team contacts), and study groups.

Many teams have started to work with their colleagues through study groups, focusing together, for example, on particular articles or books related to one of the strategies that the team and the school are working on. Some study groups revolve around data collection and analysis strategies while others use entire books such as *Strategies that Work* by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis to focus their work. Establishing a study group is an easy strategy to implement with significant impact on sustaining professional learning.

Three approaches that are particularly useful to use with a **Study Group** are:

1. **Jig Saw** (modified depending on the number of participants)
 - ♦ Reading articles/chapters. Individuals take turns reading the articles or chapters in a book and then go back to their group or groups for discussion and dialogue. If there is only one group, the jig saw effect is not relevant but if the entire school is involved, Jig Saw interaction is more effective and can be a useful time saving strategy and discussion motivator.
2. **PMI**

A graphic organizer can be applied to an article or book which asks the participants to choose:

 - ♦ Plus – What information is useful and relevant to me, the group, or our inquiry?
 - ♦ Minus – What questions do I still have? What do I disagree with?
 - ♦ Interesting – What can I explore and question further?
3. **Modified Literature Circles**
 - ♦ Participants read a book or article and come together in a discussion group where modified literature circle roles can be applied. It is particularly helpful to have a motivator/time keeper who can keep things moving in a timely manner or a researcher who can bring additional information.

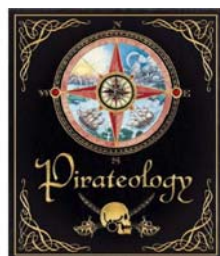
Do let us know what resources, books, or articles you have used in your school-based study groups or how your collaborative groups are working together in other ways (e.g., peer coaching/mentoring, literacy lead teachers) to make a difference.

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MULTI-GENRE TEXTS FOR BOYS

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