

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From autumn 2005 through summer 2008, one hundred and three teams, involving one hundred and forty-five schools from English-language boards, were guided by a project team from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project. A parallel project was undertaken in French-language boards and included forty inquiry teams.

Schools were involved in a large-scale collaborative teacher inquiry project designed to address the gender gap in literacy achievement. Included were both elementary and secondary schools, some of which worked with small samples of boys and some of which worked with the entire population of boys in the school. Teachers and administrators examined which strategies mattered most in terms of their effect on boys' engagement with and achievement in literacy development. Of high importance was the fact that this project was closely aligned with ongoing provincial initiatives concerned with resource and staff development. Teacher inquiry was meant to be a key *complement* to school reform and literacy-based initiatives presently underway in schools and districts.

As part of a series of Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives to raise the achievement of boys, schools were given funding for investigations carried out over three years. It was to be the largest teacher inquiry project undertaken in education in Ontario. The report contains significant findings on teaching practices that yielded promising results for boys. It also chronicles the growth in data literacy among participating teachers and presents evidence of greater commitment to ongoing collaboration at the conclusion of three years.

By all accounts the Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project has been successful. Improvements in the level of boys' interest, engagement, and achievement in reading, writing, and oral language have been noted. School teams report, through their data, increases in boys' confidence to engage in literacy activities. Tribute is paid to the teachers and administrators in schools and district offices who worked collaboratively to determine what works best for the boys in their schools. We have the evidence that talk works – before, during, and after reading and writing. When we allow boys to make choices, their interest and enthusiasm can be kindled. One main lesson was learned: “if boys' interests are to be valued (and there is conclusive evidence that they should be), we need to embrace a broader definition of “reading materials” when selecting the range of materials used”. We cannot continue to do the same things with the same materials. However, providing good materials is only one part of this complex puzzle. What we do with them matters more. Teaching isn't everything, it is the only thing.

Eight key learnings were identified in this project.

- 1. The power of teaching with a wide variety of materials:** Obtaining and making available and accessible a wide range of materials of interest to boys

increased their motivation and engagement. These materials were enhanced when they were used by teachers in instruction and assessment activities.

2. **The role of social interaction in boys' learning:** This project demonstrated the value and the role of social interaction in boys' learning. Working in social learning contexts provides boys with the opportunity to talk about issues, increasing interest and engagement.
3. **The importance of regular and consistent provision of choice for boys:** This project demonstrated that promising results were obtained when boys' opinions were surveyed and their student voices considered. Boys performed well when they had opportunities to choose their reading resources and to have a say in how they responded to their reading and writing. Not only is this an effective way of identifying interests, concerns, needs, and areas for improvement, it is also an important way to actively engage students in their own learning. By listening to student voices, teachers were better able to respect, respond to, and make decisions about student learning.
4. **The importance of student talk:** Talk allows individuals to communicate, share ideas about topics and relevant issues, and make sense of the books they are reading. Such conversations provide a solid foundation for reading and writing activities and help boys develop confidence and a sense of competence.
5. **The value of using differentiated approaches:** Differentiated approaches to instruction and assessment recognize and respect the unique needs of boys. In this project teachers used a variety of indicators and tools in order to collect data to assess the knowledge, interests, attitudes, and learning styles of individual students. A variety of instructional approaches were used to provide boys with opportunities to develop necessary skills and to celebrate current strengths.
6. **The importance of clear assessment strategies:** Clear assessment strategies helped teachers provide focused, precise instruction. Assessment that included multiple qualitative and quantitative data sources and tracking of performance over time provided teachers with information that enabled them to respond effectively to the individual learning needs of students.
7. **The benefits of information and communication technology:** Used in moderation, information and communication technology can be a powerful stimulant to feedback and affirms student choices and responses. Use of this technology was a complementary instructional strategy that motivated and engaged students. It provided immediate feedback and respected the everyday reality of boys who routinely use computers and engage in online activities such as blogs, wikis, and games. New media and technology provided boys with increased opportunities to become engaged in reading activities. Videos, computer social networks, and computer games supported boys' literacy development. Specifically, blogs, wikis, smart boards, interactive video/audio conferencing, and gaming activities stimulated and sustained interest and motivation.
8. **The need to engage parents/guardians and the community as partners:** It was important to include parents in their children's education, and the inclusion of male role models from the community in reading was a real success.