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Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Work Plan Support Booklet

"It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of school by understanding it."
Laurence Stenhouse

You're on your way ...

Congratulations! Your school team has worked hard to create a Work Plan focused on learning more about Boys' Literacy. The Teacher Inquiry process begins now in earnest as you work with your team. This booklet and the DVD are the first components of the support materials. We are eager to provide support to you throughout the process. Contact us: teacherinquiry@oise.utoronto.ca

What is Teacher Inquiry?

Teacher Inquiry is a process in which individuals and collaborative teams of teachers work together with a view to improving student achievement. It places the teacher/practitioner directly at the centre of the learning environment with students. Through a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, acting on classroom data, and ongoing reflection and dialogue, meaningful changes in classroom practice can be made. The result will add to the body of knowledge of effective teaching and assessment strategies.

Teacher inquiry is a systematic process that consists of five phases:

1. Defining/Refining the essential question - why is this inquiry important and meaningful?
 - Requires reflection, insight and understanding
2. Developing the work plan - create a critical path of dates/timing, events/data gathering, and responsibilities.
 - Requires flexibility, reflection and constant review
3. Collecting data - what types of information will support the inquiry about your essential question?
 - Requires triangulation - a variety of sources, perspectives and times
4. Analyzing data - be systematic, constantly review congruence of collected data.
 - Requires organization, revisions and connections
5. Writing your report - document your expedition, raise new questions, and reflect on how this will impact practice.
 - Requires data and findings for dissemination

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IMPLEMENTATION OF PHASE ONE

Defining/Refining your essential question

Throughout all the phases of your teacher inquiry, you will continually need to ask yourself if the data, the analysis and the process you are following, answer your essential question or whether you need to revise again... and again as needed.

It is suggested that you spend about 30 minutes considering the following to refine your essential question...

Does your question help to focus your research? How do you feel about it personally?

Are you excited about your question? Will it inspire you to further investigations and more questions?

Will your question help you to learn? Can you predict possible results that will have future applications?

Will your question help you to understand the topic better? Does it require analysis, synthesis and application of learning?

Is it do-able? Can it be accomplished in a specified timeframe?

Is it close to practice? Will it relate directly to your classroom and students?

Sample Essential Questions

Does the use of graphic novels improve boys' literacy?

Will the use of more non-fiction books and materials and the implementation of activity-based teaching improve boys' literacy skills?

Will integrating the arts into the 3 Rs Framework - Retell, Relate, Reflect - enable boys to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in reading responses?

Would an infusion of resources that engage male students, coupled with teacher dialogue, improve the reading skills of our male students in the junior grades?

What effect will enhancing parental involvement have on boys' literacy in Grades K-2?

Will there be an improvement in boys' reading, both in performance and attitude, if they are involved in the active choice of what they read and choice of a reading response mechanism?

DVD: Getting started with teacher inquiry

We are providing you with a DVD entitled "Getting Started with Teacher Inquiry." It has been developed to provide your team with some basic insights into what you can expect as you begin your teacher inquiry process. Two educators, Megan Borner and Sandra Fraser, outline some lessons they have learned when conducting teacher inquiry in the classroom, with school teams, and at the district level. The DVD is divided into the following sections:

What is teacher inquiry?

The role of teams in the inquiry process.

The role of the principal.

Thinking about the essential question.

The task of collecting information.

Teacher inquiry in secondary schools.

Planning for teacher inquiry.

The impact of teacher inquiry upon professional practice.

A final thought...

You may want to view the entire DVD or watch parts and then discuss. The section on working with your essential question is quite lengthy and would lend itself to a break and some talk time between sections. We hope that you find the words of these experienced educators both useful and relevant to the work you are doing.



IMPLEMENTATION OF PHASE TWO

Developing the work plan

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As part of tracking your progress in a systematic way, use post-it notes with ideas, thoughts and questions. Think about the timing for each phase and develop a critical path such as the example in the table below. As you design your plan, think about the components. Are they organized in logical and sequential steps? How will you monitor your progress?

With your team members, consider some of these questions. You may want to use them to develop a checklist as you design your work plan and make changes along the way.

- Who are the stakeholders who need to be involved (parents, other teachers, principal, vice-principal)? How can they help with our inquiry?
- What is the setting for the data collection (classroom, home)? Where will our team meet?
- What data are relevant? What types? When to collect? What kinds of data do I have? What kind of data do I need? The next issue of the **“Work Plan Support Booklet”** will focus on collecting and analyzing data.
- Do we need to do a literature review and find out what others have learned about this topic?
- How can we schedule our inquiry work so it is embedded in our daily practice?

STEPS/EVENTS	TIMELINES	PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	RESOURCES/SUPPORT
Schedule team meetings	March 2006	The teacher and team members	
Refine the question			
As a team develop indicators of success			How to develop surveys
Set up study groups			Research articles and books



WORKING TOGETHER: Teacher inquiry teams

This section is designed to provide ideas for developing a strong collaborative team which can be both productive in its work and satisfying to all its members. For some, this may be the first opportunity to work together on teacher inquiry; for others, it may be a familiar process albeit with some new members in your work group.

What will your inquiry team do for its members?

Your team is meant to be a source of support for you as you individually work through the inquiry process in your classroom. Some aspects of team support could change over time; other aspects will remain the same. In short, your team is there to:

- Give helpful advice to you as you update them at regular intervals about your progress;
- Collaboratively refine the essential question so it is manageable and measurable;
- Give candid feedback to you as you address the essential question;
- Collaboratively create a work plan for the inquiry process;
- Collaborate on ways to collect data in keeping with the inquiry question and classroom contexts;
- Collaborate in analyzing the data;
- Collaborate on reflecting on your practice and
- Collaboratively develop the interim report.

Richard DuFour (*Whatever It Takes*, 2004) reminds us that as a 'team' member in a professional learning community, you have individual and collective responsibilities to create an interdependent work group.

Your work together is a 'task' but with a 'human dimension'. It is essential that your school team set aside regular time within meetings to reflect on those processes of working together effectively. This is always a challenge in the press of finding time to meet. Resources allocated to the process in your school should help with that.

Establishing norms:

An important first step is for the group to establish group norms or practices for working together. We have successfully used the following snowball technique which is practical and not very time consuming. This activity would take approximately 30 minutes.

1. Each team member determines individually a "pet peeve" usually resulting from a previous team experience (for instance, some people routinely have side-bar conversations which don't show respect for their particular colleague speaking at the time and can side track the group).
2. Each team member briefly expresses their "pet peeve experience" and then together the group will identify a norm which would prevent your inquiry team from experiencing the same challenge.
3. Hence, the 'snowball' of collaborative experience is transformed into a set of working norms.

PS...we strongly encourage two norms for the end of each meeting:

- ⇒ determine someone to summarize any key understandings emerging from the team meeting
- ⇒ set a date for the next meeting!

WORKING TOGETHER: Connecting with a “critical friend”

Your team may be very large, spanning several grades, departments and even schools. We recommend that each team member have a ‘critical friend’. This is a compatible colleague who is also engaged in the inquiry process. Your critical friend is someone with whom there can be frequent, regular and more informal communication.

Trust and confidentiality are hallmarks of this relationship. Classroom inquiry can be a lonely endeavour and you and your critical friend can be mutually empathetic and attentive as you brainstorm solutions to problems.

Try this:

When you meet with your critical friend, think about how you would explain your essential question to each of these different audiences.

- A. A colleague who has a very different philosophy of teaching and learning (think of a real person you know).
- B. One of your students.
- C. Someone who is not an educator.

What questions would these people ask? Does this help you understand or possibly focus your inquiry in new and different ways?

(Adapted from Hubbard and Power, 2003. *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, p. 34)

LEADING THE INQUIRY: The role of the principal

One of the important responsibilities of principals is to act as the chief ‘architect’ of their school culture - one in which productive relationships can thrive.

(Adapted from Dennis Sparks “Results” National Staff Development Council, 2003.)

Assistance and support in the development of team norms and practices of trust and mutual respect, continuous improvement, team-focused collaboration, clarity of thought, the candid expressions of views and interpersonal accountability are critical in the initial stages of your inquiry process. While your principal may not be directly involved in your inquiry, it is important that principals perform the following tasks:

- meet regularly with your team contact;
- take steps to support regular team meetings;
- support the process of acquiring necessary resources;
- is visible in classrooms to observe the inquiry in action;
- make your work ‘public’ by allocating time for updates at staff meetings and in staff newsletters.

(Delong, Black and Wideman, 2005. *Action Research for Teaching Excellence*, p. 56.)

In a recent talk while in Canada, Professor Jack Whitehead referred to the process of teacher inquiry as an ‘expedition’ (Grand Erie District Board, November 2005). This seems like an apt way to describe your team activity over the next few months! As you and your team focus on a boys’ literacy strategy which has piqued your interest and concern, there will no doubt be changes, refinements to your question, revisions to your data collection process, and modifications to your team strategy. We hope that you and your team find your inquiry experiences as rewarding as countless other teachers have.

ON MY OWN JOURNEY: Focus on the classroom teacher

In this section, you will find helpful ideas to assist you with your classroom inquiry.

Keeping your cool as you chronicle your experiences!

Shared dialogue among colleagues is one of the most energizing aspects of the teacher inquiry process. For your sharing to be meaningful to your team, you need to chronicle your inquiry experiences, observations, and reflections.

Getting it together: How do you best organize for undertaking this chronicle in order to save time and energy? Consider the three components of successful classroom chronicles (purpose, audience and format), then see how easy it is to get started.

Purpose: a clear focus for your observations

What is your purpose for this chronicle? Establish whether you wish to focus on your own knowledge of boys' literacy; to support your students' learning and achievement; or to fulfill the accountability aspect of your project. In this Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project, you can easily accomplish all three!

Audience: for self and for others

You will be recording behaviours, intentions, actions, reactions, and results as you experience, in a more heightened fashion, your own work in the classroom and that of your students. Writing regularly and systematically will allow your ideas to grow. This classroom chronicle will be your most immediate and vital record of the project, so first and foremost, the audience should be you!

Second, your chronicle will also be the source of your contributions when you and your colleagues compare findings in the teacher inquiry project. While you may not wish to share the actual chronicle itself (things do get messy), there will be aspects that you will wish to report or summarize. In some inquiry projects, findings are shared with other staff members and parents.

Format: the physical form needs to be portable and accessible

Paper: A compact paper notebook or binder is a simple start. For example, if you are focusing on several specific students, you may choose to dedicate a page to each student. Record the name at the top and then note the key strategies you are using on the left. If you are interested in pursuing one particular strategy for a period of time, you could use double sided entry pages to accommodate your focus for instruction on one side and then the student reactions on the other.

Electronic: You may choose a computer in the classroom or one at home to make your regular entries. If your board has interactive capabilities, there may be the chance to be part of a web blog where you and others within a school or across schools may explore aspects of your inquiry and support each other.

Time stamp: Each entry needs to be dated to accurately record your progress.

So how do I get started? Here are three simple questions to frame your chronicle:

1. What happened in my classroom today?
2. Why did it play out that way; i.e., what factors affected the teaching and learning?
3. What might I do to improve the situation?

Taking stock: Take care to build in opportunities, at planned intervals, for summary reflections, or conclusions. You may take note of both the progress of your students and the challenges they continue to face, how your original intentions have flourished, or how they morphed into other directions. Perhaps certain strategies had no effect whatsoever or lost their effect over time! This is where the true learning can be experienced. How did research inform your plan?

Whatever time and effort this chronicle will consume, remember that this teacher inquiry chronicle identifies you as an intentional professional and will lead you to the use of more refined and sophisticated teaching approaches and the joy of increased student achievement - a reward in and of itself!

As a teacher involved in the inquiry process reflects: *"The difference between my recent classroom inquiry and my usual classroom practice is that I looked more closely at what happened, asked myself harder questions and I wrote about it all. These differences took a lot of time but I think I'm a better teacher for it."*

(Hubbard and Power, 2003. *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, p. xv)



SOUNDINGS ON BOYS' LITERACY

This section offers further information to deepen your knowledge of boys' literacy.

The University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education, found that the strategies that improved the academic achievement of boys could be grouped into four different areas:

Pedagogic Strategies – include approaches which are classroom focused, relating to teaching approaches and preferred learning styles.

Individual Strategies – usually focus on mentoring and target setting to enhance students' confidence as learners and to monitor individuals' progress.

Organizational Strategies – emphasize whole school supports, where schools attempt to develop a school culture in which achievement in all sorts of areas is an expectation that is celebrated and accepted as the norm.

Socio-cultural Strategies – those which attempt to change images of "laddish" masculinity held by the peer group or perhaps the family and community and to develop an ethos which helps to eradicate the "it's not cool to learn" attitude amongst boys.

While each of these four areas can be explored independently, in practice they are not self-contained but must be integrated if the impact on boys' achievement is to be maximized.

In this first support booklet, two *Pedagogic Strategies* are highlighted.

1. Developing boys' writing:

In successful classrooms that focused on developing boys' writing skills, the researchers saw that the overall approach concentrated on moving from "learning to write" (just technical skills) to "becoming a writer". The aim was to develop an integrated approach to literacy, seeing, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, not as separate components, but interrelated.

Project teachers put emphasis on:

- more oral preparation for narrative: greater attention to paired/group talk and the use of drama and role-play as preparation for writing;
- the elements of narrative: more explicit discussion of their story lines, character, setting, structure, point of view and vocabulary in collaborative contexts;
- teacher demonstrations: modeling reading, discussing, and analyzing ideas, "thinking aloud", sharing the passion for reading;
- aligning specific text types for focus and instruction in specific school terms and for specific year groups;
- the use of the visual: as a source of inspiration for writing and as a preliminary organizer for planning and note-taking.

2. Reading:

In another project, the focus was on reading, both to raise boys' self-esteem and achievement and to emphasize reading as a pleasurable activity. A range of approaches was developed, based on more extensive discussion of texts, teachers modeling their responses to the meaning and content of books, and the development of a 'reading buddy' scheme pairing unmotivated boys in junior and under-achieving boys in primary.

The "reading buddies" project was very effective. The younger boys' reading improved and the older boys showed high motivation to work as mentors: "...After the buddy reading...at first I thought it was teaching but now I know it's about friendship too." Talk and reflection about reading, sharing ideas about what was enjoyable to read, were the means by which the technical skills of reading were linked successfully to the boys' development of greater discrimination and independence as readers and eventually higher standards of achievement.

See **Raising Boys' Achievement** - the recently released final report (May 2005) from the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/goodpractice>

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ASK US...TELL US...

As you work through the process of teacher inquiry, we invite you to connect with us using the email below. Share your successes and your concerns as they arise. We will be available to provide advice and answer your questions as quickly as possible.

Your responsibilities are two-fold:

- As an individual, to understand more deeply boys' literacy instructional and assessment strategies
- As part of your team, to support the growth and understanding of your colleagues.

As you have seen, this issue contains ideas that address all aspects of this initiative from both the individual teacher perspective as well as that of a team. Our next issue will focus on Phase three, collecting data and Phase four, analyzing data.

Best wishes on your journey!

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RESOURCES

We recommend the following resources to guide your inquiry.

Books:

Delong, Jacqueline, Cheryl Black, Ron Wideman. (2005). *Action Research for Teaching Excellence*: Barrie, ON: Data Based Directions.

Hubbard, Ruth S. and Brenda Power. (2003). *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Niff, Jean and Jack Whitehead. (2005). *Action Research for Teachers*. London, England: David Fulton.

Sagor, Richard. (1992). *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Articles:

Norton, John. (2001) Grounded in Research. *Journal of Staff Development*, 22 (3) retrieved Sept. 17/05. <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/norton223.cfm>.

Raisch, Michele. (2005) Action Research Aids Albuquerque. *Journal of Staff Development*, 26 (3).

Richardson, Joan. (2000) Teacher Research Leads to Learning, Action. Tools for Schools. *Journal of Staff Development*, retrieved Sept. 17/05. <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/tools/tools2-00rich.cfm>

Web sites:

National Staff Development Council (NSDC) - Staff Development Library: Learning Strategies and Designs - Action Research <http://www.nsd.org/library/strategies/actionresearch.cfm>

University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education. Research Report. 2005. http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderand_achievements/goodpractice



*Moving along,
next steps...*

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