



# Below the Radar: Teachers, Boys and Schools

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Two university professors and four teachers from Saskatoon high schools came together to explore the issue of boys in schools. They noted the current concern about the achievement gap between boys and girls and wanted to understand better some of the behaviours associated with boys in school, e.g., disciplinary problems, disdain for reading, avoidance of completing work, and general boredom and ennui. They organized their study around the question: How can secondary teachers identify and address the needs of boys in classrooms?

## **Research Methodology**

The research group began by building a context for their study through a review of “boy issue” literature. The university professors acted

as facilitators by providing articles and ideas for discussion at group meetings. After engaging in a joint consideration of curriculum, school culture, and pedagogy through the lens of masculinity, research goals and directions were determined collaboratively.

The university professors involved the four teachers in a series of group discussions and personal discussion sessions that investigated and examined their interests with respect to boys in school. The use of action research methodology ensured that the teachers were actively engaged in all decisions and initiatives of the project. Based on their particular interests, the teachers carried out various activities and observations in their classrooms, and provided information back to the group for further consideration. Further questions and activities were then generated for the next action research cycle. Eventually, given the diversity of the topics and concerns raised by the teachers, four discrete action research cycles were created to explore each teacher’s interests individually instead of working with the entire group.

## **Narrative Inquiry and Representation**

Given the diverse, individualistic nature of the research project, it was decided that findings would be presented primarily through narrative. Four separate narratives were developed that expressed the views and observations of the four individual teacher researchers. The first narrative focused on the boys who “fly under the radar”, i.e., disaffected boys who do not buy into the dominant school culture and survive in school by doing as little as possible, without making waves. The second looked at the boy issue from a biological and social history perspective, emphasizing the need for schools to connect to the realities of socialization and genetics for both boys and girls. The last two narratives both considered alternative literacies in relationship to gender. Differences were noted in the ways that girls and boys respond to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the productivity that can result from literary studies that use digital technologies and teamwork in single-sex groups. It was also suggested concepts of literacy may have to change in our highly visual and graphic-oriented society to include media such as graphic

novels. Taken together the stories of the teachers involved in the project invited a deeper understanding of a very complex issue.

## Conclusions

The narratives offer a series of suggestions for meeting boys' needs that will work for people in different situations. However, they also make it clear that there is no quick fix to the boy issue.

*One of the most important conclusions one can draw from this work is that the situation can not be defined in binary terms. The educational situation is not one of girls versus boys, males against females, or even teachers in opposition to students. Rather, educational contexts are multifaceted and paradoxical spaces that demand a variety of perspectives, certainly in the study of the reality of boys in schools.*

The researchers point out forcefully how serious the stakes are when considering gender in the classroom and schools. One teacher tells the story of a young man who committed suicide because he could not live up to the image of a sports star that he had created for himself in high school. When he was diagnosed with diabetes and was unable to continue his involvement in high-level sport, he felt desolate and concluded that he had no reason to live. Although diabetes is a manageable disease, his identity was so integrated with the jock culture of schools and society that he lost his sense of self-worth.

The researchers invite others (teachers, parents and students) to consider the issue of boys and school in the context of their own classrooms, schools and communities. To facilitate such discussion and reflection, a discussion guide that has been developed is appended to the report.

***I have to go low on the radar screen  
not doing anything so as to save bugging.  
I have to be cool all the time.  
One slip and I might get a nickname.  
But the cool kids don't ever look like  
they have to try.***

- Student Comment

### Joe – Losing It in Grade Nine Drama

Joe, a quiet, smart, interested grade-nine student, changed from a shining star to a surly, disinterested nonentity. I remember a time when Joe would be the first student to get out of his seat in the auditorium to go down to the stage to warm up. He offered creative, original, intelligent performances to me and his audience. He answered questions thoughtfully and appeared genuinely excited about my drama class.

The day he turned, I saw him jump up from his seat to go down to the stage, then stop, and sit back down again. He waited, to be the last to saunter lackadaisically down and plant himself close to the wall, arms folded, head down, and a scowl on his face. That became Joe's demeanor for the rest of the mercifully short five-week drama module. Something wore him down. It wasn't the enthusiasm, kindness, and sensitivity of the intern who was teaching my class at the time.

- Anne Brown, Drama Teacher