IBSC ACTION RESEARCH PROGRAM 2016-2017
COLLABORATION AND THE POWER OF LEARNING GROUPS

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the IBSC action research initiatives have provided opportunities for teachers to explore new trends in boys' education and to look at better ways of equipping boys with the skills required to navigate a changing world.

Although there is still much debate as to how 21st century skills should be taught in schools, it is generally accepted that skills such as writing and communicating effectively, critical thinking, creative problem-solving, research skills, leadership, **teamwork and collaboration**, competent use of technology, environmental awareness, global awareness and multiculturalism are essential (Liberty Concepts, 2013). Many past action research projects have researched one or more of these skills, if we look back over the topics covered:

- 2015–16: Boys as Global Citizens
- 2014–15: Boys as Makers
- 2013–14: Character Education
- 2012–13: Creativity through Digital Technologies
- 2011–12: Mining Key Pedagogical Approaches
- 2010–11: Languages, Leadership and Libraries
- 2009–10: Boys and Writing
- 2008–09: Boys and Masculinity
- 2007–08: Positive Relationships/ Positive Learning
- 2006–07: Boys and Digital Literacy
- 2005–06: Boys and Reading (Graphic Novels)

Collaboration and the Power of Learning Groups

Milton Chen, of *The George Lucas Educational Foundation*, makes the point that twenty-first-century learning builds upon such past conceptions of learning as "core knowledge in subject areas" and recasts them for today's world, where "global perspective and collaboration skills are critical." (Edweekorg, 2015) A survey conducted by NACE lists the top 10 skills employers seek when hiring graduates – and number 1 on that list is "the ability to work in a team structure", followed by the ability to make decisions and solve problems.

Google's *Project Oxygen* presented a list called *The Big Eight* – ranking the traits of the company's best managers. Interestingly, technical skills such as the ability to write computer code ranked much lower than managers' ability to make a connection, communicate well with and listen to their team. "What

employees valued most were even-keeled bosses who made time for one-on-one meetings, who helped people puzzle through problems by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who took an interest in employees' lives and careers." (Nytimescom, 2015)

The concept of collaboration or working effectively in groups is certainly not a new one. Vygotsky's research into learning as being inherently social was already influential during the 1980s, and a book like Michael Schrage's *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration* was first published in 1991. (Interesting to note is Michael Shrage's recent comment that if he rewrote *Shared Minds*, he would "invest more care and thought into understanding collaborative cultures" and look at ways in which collaboration becomes " a value and a behavioral norm" as much as a core competence. (Hbrorg, 2015)

Several past action research projects have raised the question of collaboration, and researchers often found that boys do not work particularly well in groups and may lack the necessary skills to do so. Effective collaboration during projects in itself had a significant influence on the success of the project, i.e. were the positive findings the result of the project itself, or as a result of the collaborative learning taking place? Either way, this opens up an opportunity for worthwhile research.

Students are assigned group-work tasks all the time in schools. However, not all of these groups become successful "learning groups". (Krechevesky et al, 2013) Group work can be an activity that is dreaded by both students and teachers alike: a time when disruptive behaviour may occur; a time when high achievers work hard to ensure that their group mark is not endangered by the 'coasters'; a time when individual effort goes unrecognised; a time of conflict. This may be the result of students lacking the necessary skills to learn together; of poor choice of task set by the teacher, i.e. a task which is not worthy of group learning; teachers allowing poor structuring of groups rather than making use of intentional structures; and so on.

In *Visible Learners* (Krechevesky et al, 2013), the authors describe the real potential of successful learning groups where "members are engaged in solving problems, creating products and making meaning; students and adults learn from one another by encountering new perspectives, strategies, and ways of thinking. Members of learning groups also learn with one another by modifying, extending clarifying, and enriching their own ideas and the ideas of others. In such groups, learning is purposeful, social, emotional, empowering, and representational." (p. 61)

If collaboration is considered an important part of the curriculum, then we as teachers need to ask ourselves what skills we need to deliberately teach our boys to enable them to participate meaningfully and successfully in collaborative thinking and learning groups. These skills might include learning to listen to others; involving all members of the group, not just the leader or the more vocal students; valuing all ideas and contributions; developing confidence around risk-taking and making mistakes; vigorous questioning of ideas; learning how to accept criticism; and learning how to give constructive feedback. In addition, we need to ensure that we are providing opportunities for meaningful group learning: exploring meaningful topics with real-world connections, and setting aside enough time to think and respond and develop ideas. (Ritchart, 2015) A further interesting option might recognise that some people find it very difficult to work in groups, and how effective group learning needs to take

these differences into account. A text like Susan Cain's *Quiet* (2013) might be useful as a starting point for discussion here.

Action Research projects designed around this topic might examine ways of teaching the skills needed for small groups of students to become successful learning groups within classrooms, or they might extend projects into wider contexts, including online collaboration opportunities. The topic is accessible to teachers of all subjects, across a wide variety of age groups.

Who should apply?

The IBSC is seeking applications from individual or small teams (maximum of 2 people) of educators across primary, middle and senior school levels who are interested in conducting action research projects in their schools on the topic *Collaboration and the Power of Learning Groups.* Teams will be treated as a single entity and will design and report on a single project. Teams will also be required to adhere to the advice to develop projects that focus on a small number of participants — approximately 10-25 boys. Teams must designate a lead person who will attend all the pre-conference training sessions and be the primary correspondent for continuity. It is preferable that both team members attend the training, where possible.

The research project may be conducted as a curricular or co-curricular activity and must focus on the implementation and evaluation of either a new strategy or a planned change to an existing strategy. The implementation of these changes will take place from August – November 2016.

While no formal knowledge or experience in action research is required prior to acceptance into the program, applicants should be aware that the action research approach taken will be qualitative. Data on boys' responses to the implemented action will be gathered mainly via individual and/or focus group interviews, questionnaires, observation and written reflections, and will be reported primarily through rich description. Successful applicants are expected to familiarize themselves with the recommended action research texts prior to beginning their projects.

Applicants should be passionate about the topic, thoughtful, well-organised and prepared to collaborate online via technologies such as Google Hangouts, Google Sites, Whatsapp Groups, Skype, Facebook and Twitter. In addition to time spent undertaking action research in their schools, program participants will be expected to spend, on average, **3–4 HOURS PER WEEK participating** in online discussions with fellow researchers, reading and researching, and preparing submissions for their research report.

Requirements

Financial terms: The school must fund all travel, accommodation and conference registration costs associated with the teacher's participation in the Action Research project. In a nutshell, the **Head of School must approve all funding for the Applicant (or Applicants if a Team is applying)**, including travel arrangements for TWO annual IBSC Conferences, in 2016 and 2017. The IBSC will underwrite all other expenses, including compensation of the Action Research Coordinator, team leaders and specialist consultants working with action research teams, and costs associated with the production and posting of materials and reports.

Financial support: To ensure that the Action Research Program is open to member schools with limited professional development funds and to state/public schools, the sponsoring Head of School may request

financial support from the IBSC. A request for this financial support must be made on the *Statement of Support* submitted by the Head of School.

Expectations: It is a requirement that all successful applicants attend both the 2016 IBSC Annual Conference in Vancouver, Canada and the 2017 IBSC Annual Conference in Baltimore (Maryland), USA.

- *Additionally, when a team applies, the expectation is that **all team members will register, pay for, and attend the [2016 IBSC Annual Conference in Vancouver](#) to receive training in action research**. This attendance is vital so that teams have that initial face to face contact to establish a sense of community. Further, **all team members will also register, pay for, and attend the 2017 IBSC Annual Conference in Baltimore** to present their findings.*

In Vancouver, action researchers must be available for orientation and training beginning at **9:00am on Friday 24th June and continuing through until the conference opening on Sunday 26th June.** They must also be available in 2017 on the **day prior to, and on the morning of, the conference opening.**

From February 2016 onwards, it is expected that researchers will be actively involved in the following:

- **February – June 2016:** Researchers will participate in regular guided online discussions. These discussions will focus on selected readings on both the action research process and the research topic. Researchers will be required to complete a number of short online activities based on these readings, which will guide the development of their final research proposal.
- **June 24–26 2016 — The 2016 IBSC Annual Conference:** Researchers will attend a two-day orientation and training program in Vancouver, Canada. The training begins at 9:00 am on Friday, June 24, and concludes at 2:00 pm on Sunday, June 26.
- **June 26 – 29 2016 — The 2016 IBSC Annual Conference:** Following their orientation and training, researchers will attend the 2016 IBSC Annual Conference in Vancouver, Canada.
- **July/August, 2016 – May 2017:** Supported online through the stages of the project by a team leader and fellow researchers, researchers will undertake an action research project in their school. They will actively participate in regular online discussions during the project period, and will meet the deadlines that will be laid out for completing the stages of research and presentation of findings. The first submission, a detailed research proposal, is required by the middle of August 2016, so researchers will need to factor this in to any holiday plans after the Conference.
- **May 2017**: Researchers will submit their action research findings as a written report or alternate final product approved by the Program Coordinator. A written report will be in the vicinity of 3000 - 5000 words. The IBSC reserves the right to edit the final report in preparation for publishing on its website. Participants seeking to publish or present their projects elsewhere will be encouraged to do so, but will be required to give appropriate acknowledgement to the IBSC as the sponsoring organisation.
- **May – June 2017:** Researchers will produce a short multimedia presentation and a poster of their action research project for display and presentation at the IBSC Annual Conference. The presentation and the poster will be published with the report on the IBSC website as a resource for educators.
- **June 25 2017 — The 2017 IBSC Annual Conference:** Researchers will meet with their research team the day before the 2017 IBSC Annual Conference opens in Baltimore, USA.

- **June 25 – 28 2017 — The 2017 IBSC Annual Conference**: Researchers will attend the Annual Conference in order to present their research findings. They will participate in poster discussion sessions, and report on their projects in workshop sessions.

Questions regarding the application process should be directed to Kathy Blaisdell, Assistant Executive Director, at office@theibsc.org.

Questions about the research topic or the action research process should be directed to Margot Long, Action Research Coordinator, at longma@stjohnscollege.co.za.

References

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