

# THE BELIZE BOY SMARTS PROJECT



*Real education  
should educate  
us out of self into  
something far finer;  
into a selflessness  
which links us with  
all humanity.*

Nancy Astor

If you are interested in supporting this project, please contact:



**Mr. Oscar Reyes - Manager of Schools, Belize**  
**[oreyes\\_506@yahoo.com](mailto:oreyes_506@yahoo.com)**

1. To assist in teacher professional development:

Currently, several senior teachers are completing their PhD in the U.S. and are in need of financial assistance.

2. To identify schools in Belize that would like to partner with a school in another country:

School partnerships might involve a sharing of ideas and experiences between students and teachers or a specific social responsibility project.



**Mrs. Dina - Principal at Delille Academy, Belize**

If you would like to communicate your appreciation of Mrs. Dina's *YouTube* interview or offer support at the Delille Academy:

**[delilleacademy@yahoo.com](mailto:delilleacademy@yahoo.com)**

# Gender and Social Justice



## THE BELIZE BOY SMARTS PROJECT

*Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer; into a selflessness which links us with all humanity.*

Nancy Astor • • • • •

**Those** of us who are passionately concerned about boys' struggles in schools know that we are not alone in our region, our province, our country.

**We** know that we are not alone in the developed world.

**And** we also know that, just as the jet stream winds help circulate the air around the globe, the systematic issues around boys' education reach far and wide.

**Over** the years I have been particularly keen to advocate for boys from low socio-economic backgrounds who have consistent patterns of school disengagement, though I have tried hard to avoid lumping all boys and all boys' schooling issues into one large gunny sack, with a single label.

A *Boy Smarts* approach encourages teachers to practice inclusiveness with boys from low-income families and

discourages stereotyping low-income families as drug-prone, at odds with the law, or hopeless at disciplining offspring. Those who study the complex and multifaceted nature of poverty know that low parental employment and education levels are not the cause of poverty, but rather reflect the impact of poverty.

**In** the USA for example, a study by the *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future* shows that schools with large percentages of low-income students are more likely than schools with large percentages of wealthy students to have many teachers unlicensed in the subjects they teach, teacher turnover problems, teacher vacancies, insufficient classroom materials, limited access to computers and the Internet, as well as inadequate facilities such as modern science labs or clean bathrooms.

**We** also know that despite gifted minds being equally distributed across the socio-economic stratosphere there is often less support for gifted students among the poor. A holistic approach challenges social structures or sociopolitical systems of power and privilege that disadvantage some children and advantage others.

**This** past spring, while working with school principals in

## Kids learn best in a safe classroom where they have a voice, some say over the direction that learning takes.

Belize, where boys are disengaging from school at alarming rates, I realized just how deeply issues of gender, education, socio-economic class and social justice are connected.

**International** data reveals that socio-economically underprivileged boys perform far below average in schools. Of course, the same is true of girls from such backgrounds, but often boys' disengagement is rooted in a masculinity politics that places them in a hostile relationship with traditional classroom learning and the formal structures of schooling.

**In** Belize, even more obviously than in the Canadian school systems where I have done most of my work, boys struggling to find their place often see striving for academic success as a girl thing. Where there is little upward mobility, and where social status is linked with a certain kind of masculinity, studious boys are often ridiculed, often with homophobic taunting. Some boys also disparage the achievements of girls.

**Beneath** their cocky veneer, I have found that disengaged boys feel anger toward the school system. They often report that they feel as though they have no voice, that they are punished harshly, and that no one in the school cares about them.

**Evidence** suggests that 50% of children in Belize are being abused in homes and schools, where corporal punishment is culturally and legally sanctioned.

**Approximately** 60% of teachers in Belize have no formal training to teach.

**School** principals in Belize know the patterns of boys' disengagement from school only too well.

**Boys** who drop out of school make their way on the streets where drug misuse and violence becomes a way of life.

**History** has taught us that authoritarian systems that rely on oppressive and heavy-handed sanctions ultimately



Boys' disengagement is rooted in a  
**masculinity politics**

that places them in a hostile relationship with traditional classroom learning and the formal structures of schooling.



increase public alienation, discouragement, and dissent. Schools characterized by long-established authoritarian styles of teacher-student relationships clamp down on those who rebel. Sadly, this punitive approach, which further reinforces rigid authoritarian structures within schools, drives boys to resist in oppositional ways, to act out, and to drop out.

I know, from years of experience, that kids learn best in a safe classroom where they have a voice, some say over the direction that learning takes.

**Youth** who are marginalized also need a vocabulary for understanding oppression – theirs and others – along with opportunities to actively resist such oppressions so that they can focus on their learning.

**Belize** is fortunate in having passionate, caring educational leaders such as Mrs. Dina from Dangriga Town. Mrs. Dina leads staff to care for and teach 400 students sent to her school because of their poor achievement and behaviour problems.

As I listened to the stories told by passionate and caring school leaders such as Mrs. Dina, I caught their sense of hopefulness, their fervent belief that kids will thrive if we help everyone to succeed.

To learn more about the *Belize Boy Smarts Project*, you can see and listen firsthand to Mrs. Dina about these struggles on the main page of our website where you will find a *YouTube* interview posted.

She has not given up on these boys.

We have much to learn from such leaders.



I will be returning to Belize early in 2009 to meet with the same school leaders.

My goal will be to identify and acknowledge improvements while continuing to explore the social justice work that has just begun—to meet the varying needs of boys, of girls, of all of us.

If you are interested in further supporting this project, visit [MentoringBoys.com](http://MentoringBoys.com) for details.

**Consider** reaching out to those boys, girls, educators, and families you may never meet—but who breathe the same air, suffer and hope and dream similar dreams for the next generations. • • •



To see & listen firsthand to a *YouTube* interview offering hope & optimism visit [www.MentoringBoys.com](http://www.MentoringBoys.com)



Thank you to Dr. Debra Isaac of Calgary and Oscar Reyes of Belize for initiating this project.