

It's a man thing!
Evaluation report of CEDC's
Fathers and Reading project

published by ContinYou (formerly CEDC) 2001

Two colour A4 34 pages



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CEDC
Widening opportunities for learning



Project objectives and design

Project objectives

The main objectives agreed for the pilot project were:

- to set up a 'fathers and children' demonstration project in a minimum of fifteen primary schools in three different local education authorities
- to produce and disseminate materials which effectively promote partnership in learning
- to establish a minimum of ten 'fathers and children' reading events, selected by individual schools
- to involve a minimum of 150 fathers in reading with their children.



8

Programme design

A national partnership comprising CEDC, LEAs, the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) (administered through the Basic Skills Agency), and other interested parties was created. In some cases the partnerships also included libraries and adult education providers.

The pilot project was set up in the following way:

- Individual schools were identified by a number of participating LEAs.
- A class teacher and/or headteacher from each school were offered a two-day training course to support them in working with parents and, in particular, male parents and carers.
- The main focus was on groupwork to facilitate the development of participatory ways of working with an emphasis on learning styles.
- Materials for the pack were chosen to reflect male interests, as defined by recent research. Some built on ideas from research funded by News International about the use of newspapers as a means of supporting literacy and on experience from CEDC's Share project about using practical skills such as model making.
- Schools added their own incentives to the course by creating activities, such as football and computer training, to attract fathers.
- The schools were given training in the many possible ways of recruiting and were given advice about the design of leaflets and posters.
- Where available, outreach staff, such as community workers and school governors, were employed. This is particularly helpful in the case of Asian Muslim communities where there has traditionally been little involvement of men in schools other than those associated with the mosque.

Findings

Recruitment

The project has proved a very useful testing ground for developing ways of dealing with the recruitment of fathers, a task which poses greater difficulties than in reaching a gender-mixed group of parents and carers (see Lewis, 2000, p37). There was no difficulty in attracting schools to the project – teachers are well aware of the need to involve parents more actively in partnerships with the school and to focus on the needs of boys in particular. However, what the schools had not fully recognised, or been advised of at the beginning, was the amount of effort that would be required for the initial setting up of the project and, in particular, the recruitment and retention of the target group. Schools need to be prepared to run sessions at less conventional times. As one school reported:

'Despite an initial round of publicity, including recruiting at parents' evening last summer, we had no candidates. Dads said that they were working at the time the course was running or that they were the main childcare and had young children to mind.'

(Newham School report)

Selected schools in Coventry, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Rhondda Cynon Taff opted to defer implementation until the spring term, either because of recruitment difficulties or conflicts with other school initiatives. In hindsight, it might have been a helpful first step to introduce a specific role for fathers, or to set up 'fathers only' nights within established Share schemes, as a means of making initial contact and testing out which were the most father-friendly materials in the Share packs.

Positive aspects of recruitment

The teachers interviewed by telephone suggested that personal contact was by far the best way of finding suitable parents and, in the case of fathers, this often involved making the effort to contact the parent in the evening rather than directly after school.

'I locked myself in the school office after school and went through a telephone list of probable parent participants. I initially found nine dads to join the project, but only six in the end came on a regular basis. Some mums asked if they might be included as well.'

Teacher, Newham

However, in all of the schools included in the case study, the fathers suggested that the first contact had been made either through a school letter or by their children pressing them to participate in a project that interested them. Further contact through letters home, word of mouth and e-mail had helped to keep parents regularly informed.

Another factor which initially secured the interest of fathers was the offer of a 'carrot' to encourage them to participate. This included football coaching or working on the school computers, particularly using the Internet – activities which would sustain their interest over a period of time. Some fathers who had completed the final questionnaires felt that that concepts such as understanding the National Literacy Strategy, teaching reading in school, or supporting individual reading, could be explained in a workshop setting at the introductory sessions. These could then act as a lead into Share-type activities.

Of the 52 fathers who completed the first questionnaire, half suggested that their motivation was to help with reading (see Table 4 on page 14) and a

Teachers' reflections on the project

All the teachers who were contacted felt that the project had been worthwhile. One of the teachers in Dudley explained that *It's a man thing!* had given him a new status with children and parents throughout the school – he was seen as someone who was knowledgeable about which books were good for fathers and children to read together. The project had enabled the teacher to identify a group of fathers he could contact and rely upon for future projects or school functions.

Another Dudley school summed up the positive results of the project in the following way:

- The fathers' attitudes towards helping their children had changed – this was noticed by the mothers.
- The project raised parents' awareness of their child's interests and abilities.
- Fathers and sons welcomed the time they spent together.
- The activity books were very useful.
- Fathers realised that reading together can involve material other than books.
- Home-school links were improved.



17

Recommendations for future development

- LEA support needs to be much more carefully directed. Time and funding is required for central organisation and project management and teachers need funding for cover to allow them to meet together.
- Project leaders need more guidance at the outset of the project in methods of self-evaluation.
- Briefer questionnaires need to be provided for recording parents' interests and aspirations for the project at its beginning, and to enquire about responses and satisfaction at the end. These need to be simplified and incorporated into the pack of support materials.

- Teachers and parents could use diaries more systematically to record sessions. Participating parents and children alike might use a shared journal to comment at the end of each session.
- A group of schools with shared resources might improve recruitment and allow teachers to support each other more flexibly. For example, the feeder schools of a particular comprehensive school could be targeted.
- More external support will be required to enable schools to link to local adult education programmes and other agencies, including the library, to identify and build on fathers' own interests in learning.
- Partners from other agencies need to be given clear objectives and goals.
- Projects might evolve to give parents a more autonomous role and a greater say in structuring sessions. This would ensure continuity within an individual school.
- Where the recruitment of fathers is a problem, existing Share projects might evolve to include some 'fathers only' evenings.
- In some communities, fathers could be trained as mentors to support the development of new schemes. In others, it might be appropriate to train older boys from secondary school to work alongside teachers and parents and act as supportive role models for the younger boys.



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20