

July 31, 2000

Dear Sir/ Madam

Please find a record of various activities regarding boys and their fathers that I have tried at my school.

As well as these, I am currently organising a father/ son day at Emu Gully for boys in year 4. This will be similar to the day described below, however I intend to turn it into a literacy camp day with the boys and their dads going through a number of activities until lunchtime and after lunch, sitting down and composing a story together which they will then share with the group. Year 4 is an ideal year level to target as it is then that literacy skills either accelerate or diminish.

Fathers are Fine at Rangeville State School

Rangeville State School, situated in Toowoomba on the Darling Downs in Queensland, draws its 750 students mainly from Anglo Saxon middle class families. The school has confirmed its commitment to providing a high standard of educational excellence and equity by offering unlimited opportunities for fathers to involve themselves in their children's education- both in and out of the classroom. In an effort to address the rhetoric surrounding the Boys in Education debate, one of the school's year 7 teachers, Mrs Deborah Mulligan, has instigated a number of programs which run concurrently throughout the academic year. These programs are aimed at targeting literacy skill acquisition and relationship building with peers and fathers.

The programs are based on Deborah's philosophy that learning outcomes improve when-

- a) parents are actively involved in their children's education, and
- b) teachers are trained to recognise the general differences in learning styles between boys and girls, and apply these in the classroom.
- c) quality teaching occurs when teachers understand and accept the general behavioural differences in the genders.

Real Men Read

Concern over the over-feminisation of the teaching work force and the fact that many boys complete the whole of their primary schooling never having been taught by a male, or read to by a male, prompted the Real Men Read initiative. In conjunction with a male colleague in the adjacent room, the two teachers introduced a scheme that drew on a pool of 60 men. This involved inviting fathers- or significant male adults- into the classroom to read to the students. The Dads were asked to bring along a book or a magazine that they may have read as a child of 12 years and read aloud an extract from it. This then promoted discussion within the group (led by the adult male) about the importance of being literate in a functional sense as well as the pleasure derived from the act of

reading as a hobby. This program has been a great success, with most fathers being more than willing to move out of their comfort zone and read to a class of thirty adolescents.

“I was very nervous about having to read to all these children but the importance of the program far outweighed any reservations I had. After I’d finished, I realised that these kids soaked up every word I said. They love to be read to and I felt very proud that I was able to contribute. It’s funny, you don’t realise how your actions as a parent impact on your children,” commented one father.

Not all fathers elected to read to the class. A small percentage of them simply came in and spoke about their life and how reading, for purpose and pleasure, impacted upon it. These sessions were, in fact, quite poignant as the men reminisced about their primary school years and how they wished they’d co-operated more with their teachers and taken their studies more seriously.

Many of the fathers took it upon themselves to bring along a range of genre that they read as both adolescents and adults. Newspapers, poetry books, biographies and assorted magazines were all introduced. Examples of each type of genre were acquired from the school library. Two photos were taken to record the event- one of the father reading or talking to the class, and another of the father and his child. The photos were displayed in a prominent place in one of the classrooms. One father (an army helicopter pilot) even read a piece of poetry that he had written himself. He then went on to discuss the cathartic effect writing can have if you suffer undue grief.

In general, the children are used to having their mothers participate in their academic life. These women are very visible around the school campus. Many mothers, when able, involve themselves in parent/child reading sessions, especially in the early to middle primary years. This involvement seems to diminish- for various reasons, in the upper school. To have Dad- or a significant male- in the room is a real novelty for most of these students. These men are great role models for the boys as far as the acquisition of literacy skills and life skills is concerned. Many teachers read to their students and that’s great but we must be careful not to send out the message that reading is something only teachers- and/or women- do.

### Single Gender Classes

There is sufficient evidence to support the notion that boys are not achieving at school as much as their female counterparts. Clearly teachers must take on the challenge of righting this wrong and be flexible enough to explore new teaching strategies.

As well as the Real Men Read program, the two teachers have also divided their two classes into single gender classes two days a week. This was initially met with a bit of resistance by the boys who interestingly claimed they “...needed the girls in the same room to calm them down.” This program has been operating since early in February and has been quite successful in providing meaningful learning outcomes for both genders. The dynamics of the two classes are totally different. The boys are more vocal and like to compete for the teacher’s attention.

This detracts from the girls' learning who are generally less competitive in the classroom and like to chat quietly amongst themselves to problem solve.

The results of this 'experiment' have not been as dramatic as expected. It was assumed that there would be a dramatic difference in the groups as far as noise level and co-operation are concerned. Whilst it was certainly true that in the first few weeks the girls' class was far more quiet and work-oriented, as time has gone by, the boys are becoming quieter and the girls are becoming more vocal! Both are generally on task, although the boys' class exhibits more pockets of inattentive behaviour (groups of 2 or 3) than the girls. The boys generally are working well and more on task without the distraction of showing off in front of the girls.

#### Father Son/ Father Daughter Fun Days

In an attempt to address the theory that both boys and girls, but in particular the former, need to spend more quality time with the significant adult male in their lives, Deborah organised a Father/Son Fun Day and a Father/ Daughter Fun Day hosted by a local education adventure group at their centre. These occurred on consecutive Sundays in May. The number of fathers and their children involved was encouraging. Out of a pool of 94 parents, 62 fathers came along with their children. Interestingly enough, the numbers were equivalent for both days. The activities were designed to encourage positive relationship building with the maximum amount of enjoyment for all. Activities included a 'Storm the Fort' flour bomb fight, go karting, indoor rock climbing and mud slides.

The aim of the day was to encourage fathers to spend time with their children and build a shared memory of time spent working together to achieve a desirable outcome. Response from the day was very positive. Fathers are obviously keen to spend time with their sons and daughters. This day out was a great experience and one that I'm sure both parties will refer to in years to come. Not only do the boys and their Dads benefit from the interaction involved, but teachers reap the benefits of teaching boys who have sound, stable relationships with the men in their lives. Feedback surveys were gratifying with a number of Dads expressing their feeling of emotion on belaying their children- "I enjoyed watching Jessica climb the rock wall and her faith in that she was safe with myself on the end of the rope." Actually the girls showed more confidence in their fathers belaying them than the boys did. Often the boys were unsure of their fathers' ability, and needed to be reassured that their Dad knew what he was doing. "Have you got me Dad" and "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" were frequent questions. None of the girls asked this.

Alternatively, it was interesting to observe that in the Storm the Fort activity, the fathers of the boys were more inclined to discipline their sons than were the fathers of the girls

An unexpected outcome from the day was that Dads reported they were glad of the opportunity afforded to meet with other fathers and network. As one man commented, "I personally got a lot out of this day. For a lot of us fathers it was the first time we had met, which is a shame as most of the boys have been all the

way through school together. I wish this activity had been around when my oldest son was in year 7...”

In the hurly burly of our contemporary lifestyles, trying to balance the scales between work and family commitments is often a trial. Fathers in particular, many times through no fault of their own, seem to miss out on these formative years of their child’s academic and social growth. As another father commented- “Sometimes as a father you can go off track and don’t realise the value of togetherness. Being together and working together as a team was a valuable experience.”

This experience will be followed up with a dinner for interested fathers at the local golf club. A guest speaker, educational consultant Rex Stoessiger, has been engaged to promote further discussion of the issues and the greater role men can play in the academic and social lives of their children.

#### Mentoring in the Classroom

This was attempted but abandoned due to lack of available mentors. Many individual men and organisations approached thought the concept was a great idea but could not translate this into actual help in the classroom due to pressures of work, time commitments etc. On reflection, perhaps the idea of what was envisioned by the mentoring process was unrealistic. It was hoped that males would be coming into the classroom on a regular basis to model acceptable classroom behaviour and spend half hour time periods with a mentee at least once a week. However, on reflection, in the unsettled year 7 timetable when there are so many disruptions to the school day, perhaps the mentors would have been just one more ‘thing’ to be worked around and would lose their educational value. I am happy that the Real Men Read program satisfies a need for male role modelling.

Deborah Mulligan has a Master of Education specialising in Children’s Literature. She has conducted workshops at conferences throughout the South East corner of Queensland. She is keen to hear from anyone who has programs operating within their school targeting boys. She can be reached at-

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