

## ***Hey, dad, let's read!***

**Scott Bowman (St Patrick's School, Geelong West)**

I was particularly interested in working with fathers. As a male primary teacher and a father of young children myself I've been really interested in how fathers are involved with their children. As most of us would experience now we're finding there are more fathers that are separated and fathers who are working and our lives aren't nine-to-five anymore, so fathers are working different hours.

The first thing I wanted to know was whether as a school we could engage more directly with fathers. Was there a way that we could become more 'father friendly' and could we do it in a way that wasn't going to be a huge project? One of the other outcomes I was looking for was whether we could get fathers and children to interact more productively. The kids in my class have a good relationship with their fathers, even those with fathers who are separated, but we do find that they're not spending a lot of time and the fathers are saying that themselves. So was there a way we could engage the fathers with their own children? And finally we wanted to know whether fathers could actually feel more involved with their children's direct education. I know from experience that the dads at our school are particularly helpful as they probably are at most schools, but it's often with the working bees or the fete, but it's not often directly relating with their children so I wanted to see whether there was a way as a school we could get fathers directly involved with their kids.

I find that most of the kids I teach want to go straight to independent reading as soon as they can read, but what a lot of the research shows and what I'd heard and what I'd been reading about was reading aloud to children even into late primary and early secondary is actually proven to be beneficial. So there was the relationship with fathers and their children reading together, there was the focus on reading aloud as a tool for literacy but also the school community relationship as well. So it started off as a wellbeing project and kind of became a three-pronged area still under the umbrella of wellbeing but with a number of different facets to it.

I started off by researching about fathers reading to children; about the benefits, about ways we could interact with fathers and the ways that schools could interact. After I'd gained a fairly extensive research base I looked at running some workshops. Part of the idea I had as a project was I wanted to actually see the results; I wanted to get something to happen that could be done and then we could actually see whether the fathers were engaging, so I settled on the idea of doing reading workshops. We had two reading workshops about a month apart both around 7:30 at night on a different night of the week and they only went for about an hour. Each workshop included a bit of get-to-know-you time so the fathers were interacting with each other, a presentation from me about the research base, strategies they could use and the commitment I wanted them to make. Then we had some time at the end when they were actually looking at books that I felt would be beneficial for fathers and children, so I tried to find some 'father friendly' books. In between each workshop, mostly because of the research project base, I actually asked them to commit to reading four times a week. I settled on four times a week rather than four nights a week because, again, we had separated fathers and fathers who worked so I really wanted to find a way that all fathers could be involved. At the end of eight weeks we had a reading celebration which coincided with the end of the term so it was a good finish off for our kids as well and I invited the fathers to come with their children and to just enjoy a night together. We had a footy theme so all the dads came in their footy gear and we did some reading-based activities like making paper planes by following written instructions, drawing pictures by following instructions and learning some magic tricks and also some footy games as well. We finished off with hot dogs and a soft drink and at the end our dads ran through a banner that the kids had created to show the dads in the end actually that the kids had appreciated what they'd done. So we kept it within that one term, the eight weeks, and we tried to make that commitment by asking fathers to keep a diary of their experiences. Partly that was for the research base but also in hindsight it was good because people felt that what they were doing was both formalised but also a commitment. I think if I'd just said "try to read" perhaps they wouldn't have been as engaged.

I found that within my own classroom just doing this activity has made a huge difference to the way that fathers feel involved. One of the big things that you can't of quite objectify; at the end of the reading celebration night

on the way out, quite informally the fathers actually lined up to shake my hand and say thanks for putting this on, and that was a real moment for me because one father stopped to shake hands and the next thing I knew they were all standing waiting for their turn. It obviously touched a chord with the fathers; they felt more involved, they felt they were an integral part of the school community and I think the kids too felt they were involved. As an unexpected outcome if you like one of the things I was looking at; the project asked for collaboration and because I was doing a small project in my class I decided that the students could be my collaborators. So some of the different things we did with the project is the kids would decorate the letters themselves and the envelopes and they would take them home and mum wasn't allowed to see them, so it became secret men's business we called it. The kids were involved in picking the books. I would read some books that I thought might be good and we'd discuss whether we felt dads would like to read them and then the kids started picking out their books. So the students actually felt like they were not just receiving the help from dad but they were actually helping dad to become involved as well. So from that point of view there was a huge growth in the kids' sense of efficacy if you like as well as fathers'. Also I found just our school community links were greatly enhanced; that fathers feel much more welcome to come into my classroom and join in because of the work we've done with them.

So one of the barriers was my own intellectual sense of trying to make it... you know, it has to be big to be successful, so keeping it small was one of the big things I struggled with at first but ended up being one of the greatest reasons for its success.

I'm actually planning on doing it next year and extending it to mothers, maybe mums and maths, and we have our grandparents and those sorts of things like most schools, but I've found that in doing the project I've seen a whole different way to engage families. So I'm changing my teaching but also changing the way that I run the classroom to become much more 'family friendly'.