



Reading Champions

The dads and boys Galactic Reading Project

A study of the impact of involving male family members in a boys' reading project

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Executive summary

Introduction

Reading Champions is a Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded initiative delivered by the National Literacy Trust (NLT). It provides schools with a framework to motivate boys to champion reading to others and to become reading role models for other pupils within school. For a number of years the project has encouraged schools to work with dads, male carers and other family members to involve them in their child's reading. Despite this, few schools use the Reading Champions framework to involve parents.

The purpose of this project was to explore a specific and more structured way of involving male family members, by using and adapting aspects of the existing Reading Champions framework. We worked with one primary school to create and test a new model which aimed to engage male family members with their boys' reading.

Christ the King RC Primary School in Islington was the school selected to take part. The school was chosen as it was already a member of Reading Champions and in terms of social and economic background, the school's catchment area reflected the target audience that the project is increasingly seeking to reach.

The aim of this project was to demonstrate that involving male family members in a boys' reading project would make an impact in four different ways:

- The boys that took part would enjoy reading more, have more positive attitudes to reading and read more often than they did before they took part.
- The male family members that took part would feel that their involvement had resulted in their boys enjoying reading more.
- The male family members that took part would feel that they have a better relationship with the school and are more engaged with their boys' education.
- There would be an increase in the reading level of the boys that have taken part (beyond the anticipated level of progress).

Project activity began in October 2009 and finished in March 2010. Activity took place with a group of seven boys. Boys were recruited by the literacy coordinator on the basis that they would benefit particularly from being supported with their reading at home.

All the boys that were recruited were in Years 3 and 4. The literacy coordinator contacted the boys' parents by telephone and asked if there was a male family member who was willing and able to be involved in the project.

The male family members that worked with the boys were made up of two dads, one granddad, and three brothers (two of which had previously attended the school and were now at secondary school, and one that was significantly older).

Project structure

The project was called the Galactic Reading Project and was comprised of two parts:

Events in school

There were five events that the pairs attended. Four of these were held in school, one was held at the local library. Each event had a different theme, for example, football or International Day. The boys and men worked together in pairs on activities which linked with this theme. All of the events lasted for one hour and were held on a Friday afternoon.

Reading at home

Each pair agreed that in between the events they would read together for 10 minutes several times a week. The pairs all received a Galactic Reading Project booklet at the first event to record their reading. Every time that the pair read together for 10 minutes, they made a note of this in their booklet. The number of reads per week was not specified, but all of the pairs were expected to have fulfilled the required number of reads to work through the awards system which corresponded with the events that took place.

By participating in the events and reading at home, the pairs were working towards three awards that were represented as bronze, silver and gold coloured planets on a map of space. When a planet was reached, a certificate was given to the pair, with both the dad's and the boy's name on it.

One event took place every month between October 2009 and March 2010. Each event took place on a Friday afternoon from 14.00 to 15.00. Some of the activities that took place at the events involved reading, but reading was not the main focus of the events.

The five events were based around the following themes:

- Event 1: Making rockets
- Event 2: Trip to the library
- Event 3: Football themed event
- Event 4: Paper aeroplane event
- Event 5: International Day themed event

The events – key findings

From running the events with the dads, the following key findings were identified:

- **Putting any pressure on the dads at the first event should be avoided:** The most important thing at the first event is for the dads to become comfortable with the environment.
- **Competitions are popular:** An element of competition in the activities that took place during the events was very popular with both the dads and the boys, helping to create a team spirit amongst the pairs.
- **Making something together to take home was popular:** Activities which involved each of the pairs producing something together which could be taken home were very popular. The final product was less important than the fact that the pairs had made something together that could be kept.
- **Reward and recognise:** A whole-school assembly, a display in the school reception and awarding certificates in front of the group, all contributed to the boys (and dads) feeling that they were doing something special that they should be proud of.

Impact on the boys and dads

Below are the main findings relating to the impact that the project had on the boys and dads.

- The boys were positive about reading at the beginning of the project, but they felt even more positive at the end. The boys themselves stated that they now read more. The literacy coordinator believed that the project had a positive impact on the boys' attitudes to reading and had helped them to develop as readers.
- The dads felt that their involvement had led to their boys enjoying reading more.
- It was not possible to show that there had been an increase in the attainment of the boys (beyond the anticipated level of progress) as a direct result of taking part in Galactic Reading Project.
- Most of the dads felt that their relationship with both the school and with their boys' education had improved. However, this change was greatest where the dad involved in the scheme was the principle male care giver for the boy.

This project worked well, not only to motivate the boys to read, but to engage male family members with their boys' learning. The success of the project can be largely attributed to the following points.

- The project had a structure that was easy to follow.
- There was a sense of fun within the project.

- We were realistic about what could be achieved over two terms and how much could be expected of the boys and the dads.
- The project was a major undertaking, but utilising other agencies within the school community and the local authority made the project more manageable.

Practical implications

This was a small project and the findings were specific to the small group of dads that were being worked with. However, some of the principles could be applied to any group of male family members involved in a similar scheme and are worth noting.

- Recruitment and retention is key:

The most difficult aspect of the project was persuading the dads to attend the school events and to take part. Having a clear plan of what will happen at each event and informing the dads of this, so that they know what is (and what is not) expected of them, will help to allay any fears. Being flexible about who attends (for example, brothers, granddads) will also help you to recruit enough men to take part. In order to make sure the dads continue to attend, be clear about when each event will take place and be persistent in reminding the dads of these dates and times.

- Making the men feel at ease is important:

The first session is crucial in forming the dads' impressions about the project. Keeping this event fun, involving the boys from an early stage and having non-reading related activities for the boys and dads to take part in, will all help to make it a success.

- Use the school based events to support the reading that is taking place at home:

Events in school take time and effort to organise. Rather than using these solely as an opportunity for dads and boys to read together, use them to encourage and motivate boys and dads to read together at home. Establishing paired reading as a habit can have a lasting impact, the events should be used to promote and encourage this habit to develop.

If you work in a school and embark on a literacy project to involve male family members, do get in touch with the NLT and share your experiences with us.

Outline of the project

Introduction

Research shows that when families are engaged with their child's reading, they can significantly boost their child's confidence and achievement in reading. For example, studies have shown that children whose parents participate in reading activities at home, e.g. shared reading, are better readers (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004) and have more positive attitudes towards reading than children of non-participating parents (Rowe, 1991).

Reading Champions is a DCSF-funded initiative delivered by the NLT. It provides schools with a framework to motivate boys to champion reading to others and to become reading role models for pupils within school. For a number of years the project has also encouraged schools to work with dads, male carers and other family members to involve them in their child's reading and nominate them as Reading Champions. Just like the boys, male family members are rewarded with a certificate and badge for the activities that they have undertaken to inspire children to read.

However, many schools find involving male family members in their work challenging. In order to help schools to involve this audience, the Reading Champions website features examples of ways that other schools have involved dads in the work that they do.

Despite this, Reading Champion nominations for parents have remained low and few schools use the Reading Champions framework to involve dads in school.

Rather than continue to simply provide advice, we wanted to explore a specific and more structured project for involving male family members by using and adapting aspects of the existing Reading Champions framework.

The purpose of the dads and boys project was to work with one primary school to create and test a new model which would prove to be effective in engaging male family members with their boys' reading.

How the school was chosen

Christ the King RC Primary School in Islington was the school selected to take part. The school was chosen as it was already a member of Reading Champions and had used the project to great effect, being runners up in the Reading Champions School of the Year competition in 2007. In terms of social and economic background, the school's catchment area also reflects the target audience that the project is increasingly seeking to reach.

“A large school situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage. The pupils are from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of pupils learning English as an additional language is much larger than that found in most schools. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities is average, although an above average percentage has a statement of special educational needs. A significant number of pupils join or leave the school at unusual times.” (Ofsted, 2007).

Despite these challenges, the school is extremely effective. In its last inspection in 2007, the overall effectiveness of the school was rated as Grade 1 (Outstanding).

In the initial stages, the literacy coordinator at the school, Rachael Boyce, was approached by the Reading Champions Project Manager, Nick Batty, to discuss the possibility of running a project specifically to involve dads in their boys’ reading. The idea greatly appealed to Rachael who had already included an aim to involve parents more in their children's reading in the school’s literacy plan for 2009/10.

Aims of the project

Project activity began in October 2009 and finished in March 2010. Activity took place with a group of seven boys and seven male family members. Each boy and male family member formed a pair¹.

For the purposes of this evaluation the male family members will be referred to as ‘dads’. However, the term dad is being used purely for brevity and simplicity. As is explained below, the majority of male family members that took part were not fathers to the boys: where it has been necessary to refer specifically to the participants who were the boys’ principle male carers, the term ‘father’ has been used.

The aim of this project was to demonstrate that involving male family members in a boys’ reading project would make an impact in four different ways:

- The boys who took part would enjoy reading more, have more positive attitudes to reading and read more often than they did before they took part.
- The male family members who took part would feel that their involvement had resulted in their boy enjoying reading more.
- The male family members who took part would feel that they have a better relationship with the school and are more engaged with their boy’s education

¹ Throughout this document, the word ‘pair’ is used to refer to the partnership between a dad and boy working together.

- There would be an increase in the reading levels of the boys who had taken part (beyond the anticipated level of progress).

Project management roles

The project was organised and run by the Reading Champions project manager in collaboration with the school literacy coordinator.

The role of the Reading Champions project manager was to:

- Construct a project framework and create a structure of reading events in consultation with the literacy coordinator.
- Plan the event activities, attending and running the events with the help of the literacy coordinator.
- Create and provide any materials, including ongoing provision of certificates.
- Manage the evaluation of the project.

The role of the literacy coordinator was to:

- Recruit the dads and boys to take part and ensure that they attended the Reading Champion events.
- Inform and engage project stakeholders, such as the public library service and the School Library Service.*
- Gather ongoing evidence by keeping a log of activity and taking photos to create a portfolio at the end of the project.

* Islington School Library provided books for the group to use. The School Library Service manager also attended the reading assembly at the end of the project. The school's contact at the nearby public library was also extremely important for the second event.

Project set up

How the boys and male family members were recruited

Boys were recruited by the literacy coordinator on the basis that they would benefit particularly from being supported with their reading at home. Each boy that took part had to be partnered with an older male family member. It was not possible to recruit dads as partners for all of the boys that were initially selected by the literacy coordinator and this meant that some boys were unable to take part. The opportunity was therefore offered to a second wave of boys who it was felt would also benefit from the project.

All boys that were recruited were in Years 3 and 4. The literacy coordinator contacted the boys' parents by telephone and asked if there was a male family member who was willing and able to be involved in the project.

Below are the reasons given by the literacy coordinator for selecting each boy.

Boy 1: *“Boy 1 was chosen because he is a little bit below average with his reading.”*

Boy 2: *“It was more behaviour element with Boy 2. Sort of a settling thing...to sort of stabilise him though. His reading was a little bit below average but he’s really come on...so although he didn’t finish year 2 below average, we wanted to keep that momentum going and thought if we could get some home help... [it would] develop him to get that support.”*

Boy 3: *“Boy 3 has sort of fluctuated. He was picked out because of his attainment.”*

Boy 4: *“Boy 4 was chosen because of his EAL issues. Home is really supportive but they struggle with English not being their first language. I knew Y was his big brother so I asked if he could come.”*

Boy 5: *“Boy 5 was picked out because home was very supportive...They’re very supportive at home with school work and [other] things.”*

Boy 6: *“Boy 6’s dad’s actually away a lot...[but his brother] was one of the first ever Reading Champions. I thought it was a lovely way to get [his brother] back involved in the project at a different level...as a reading dad, a reading role model if you like.”*

The result was that six pairs took part in the project. The male family members that worked with the boys were made up of two dads, one granddad, and three brothers (two of which had previously attended the school and were now at secondary school, and one that was significantly older). There was an additional seventh pair as one boy, without a male family member to attend, was partnered with the literacy coordinator. As this boy did not take part in the reading at home, he has not been included in the evaluation.

The recruitment of elder siblings was achieved through cooperation between the literacy coordinator and the relevant secondary schools. Not all secondary schools felt able to release a pupil to take part which prevented some pairs from being able to take part. However, two schools were able to release the pupils for the required hour on a Friday afternoon.

The target had been to work with ten pairs on this project, but recruiting that many dads proved difficult. Only around a third of those families contacted were able to attend the events. Two reasons for non-attendance were identified:

1. The timing of the sessions.

Due to work commitments, it was difficult for some dads to attend the sessions. All events were held on a Friday afternoon. Although a weekday afternoon may not immediately seem like a convenient time to hold the event,

it was convenient for the primary school who already did buddy reading on a Friday afternoon. The secondary schools were also more comfortable to release the elder brothers that were taking part early on a Friday. Workplaces were also more flexible with dads leaving earlier on a Friday.

2. There was a fear among some dads about coming into a school environment and being involved in a reading project.

Primary schools contain more female than male members of staff. They can be an intimidating and alien environment for men, especially those who have had negative experience of education themselves.

Given this, recruiting the dads was a time consuming process for the literacy coordinator.

“I spent a good few hours after school phoning. At least three hours to get [hold of] people to talk to them.”

Where parents already had some contact with the school, they were much more willing to take part in the project. Had there been more time, there may have been scope to establish a dialogue and try to engage some of the dads at home before inviting them in to school. For example, running an “extreme reading” competition with the dads and the boys, or sending basic “dad and lad” type activities home, e.g. instructions and equipment for making something. It would have been interesting to see if this approach had increased recruitment.

Project structure and delivery

The project was called the Galactic Reading Project and was comprised of two parts:

Events in school

The pairs participated in five events. Four of these were held in school, one was held at the local library. Each event had a different theme, for example, football or International Day. The boys and men worked together in pairs on activities that had been organised which linked with this theme. All of the events lasted for an hour and were held on a Friday afternoon.

Record of reading

Each pair agreed that in between the events they would read together for 10 minutes several times a week. The pairs all received a Galactic Reading Project booklet at the first event to record their reading. Every time that the pair read together for 10 minutes they would make a note of this in their booklet. The number of reads per week was not specified, but all of the pairs were expected to have fulfilled the required number of reads to work through the awards system which corresponded with the events that took place.

10 minutes was agreed with the literacy coordinator as an appropriate amount of time. It was deemed short enough for the boy to be able to remain focussed, and for the dad to be able to read with his boy enough over the period of time to fulfil the required number of reads.

Awards

By participating in the events and reading at home, the pairs were working towards three awards that were represented as different coloured planets on a map of space. The bronze planet was reached after two events and 15 reads, the silver planet after four events and 35 reads (an additional 20 reads on top of the bronze), and the gold planet after six events and 65 reads (an additional 30 reads on top of the silver). This progression is shown on the map in Figure 1 below.

When a planet was reached, a certificate with both the dad's and the boy's name on it was given to the pair. The whole group (all seven pairs) worked through the project together, with bronze, silver and gold planet certificates being awarded to all of the pairs at the same time.

After the five events, and once everyone had reached the gold planet, a celebration event to congratulate the dads and the boys on their achievements was held and the final gold certificate was awarded in a whole-school assembly.

The booklet contained instructions and information about the project. So that the pairs had a visual representation of the journey they were on, the map below was also included in the booklet. An A2 version of this map was also displayed in the school's reception, along with a display about the project to track the group's progress.

Figure 1: The Galactic Reading Project map



Project timeline

Summer Term 2009

July 2009

- Initial meeting between literacy coordinator and project manager to discuss and plan project

Autumn Term 2009

October

- Dads and boys recruited to take part
- Initial event took place with dads and boys to explain project

November

- Event 1: Making rockets

December

- Event 2: Trip to the library

Spring Term 2010

January

- Event 3: Football themed event and awarding of bronze certificates

February

- Event 4: Paper aeroplane event

March

- Event 5: International Day event and awarding of silver certificates
- Celebration event: Trip to the theatre for dads and boys
- Presentation of gold certificates in reading assembly

Evaluation methods

The project was mainly evaluated through several qualitative interviews, as well as a focus group session.

- Focus group with the dads:

A focus group was held with five of the dads that had taken part in the project. In order to ensure attendance, a £20 incentive was provided as a "thank you" for those who took part in the session. The five who attended were the two fathers, a granddad and the two secondary school age brothers.

- Interview with the literacy coordinator:

A 30 minute interview with the literacy coordinator took place after the last event in March 2010. This focused on a range of issues relating to the management of the project.

- Surveys of the boys that took part:

All of the boys that took part were surveyed at the beginning of the project to measure their attitudes to reading. As the children were in Years 3 and 4, emoticon (happy and sad faces) were used to represent feelings of agreement or disagreement with a statement.

- Interviews with the boys:

Each boy was interviewed one week before the final event (Event 5). The interview lasted between five and 10 minutes. Each child was asked questions based around the survey. Their answers were recorded and later transcribed.

- Ongoing observations

Each event was written up afterwards by the Reading Champions project manager. This allowed quotes and ongoing comments to be captured. Each event was also followed by an informal discussion between the Reading Champions project manager and the literacy coordinator, which allowed for a sharing of views on how the event had gone. These are also included in this report.

Challenges in evaluating this project

The surveys that the boys filled in at the beginning of the project sought to measure the boys' attitudes to reading. The results showed that the boys already had very positive attitudes to reading, even though most had been identified as needing support. It could therefore be questioned whether these surveys accurately represented the boys' real feelings or if they were giving what they thought was the "correct" answer.

However, this also meant that little useful data, in terms of the impact that the project might have had, could be drawn from these surveys. Therefore, when the same surveys were re-done at the end of the project, it was decided that it would be of more use for the boys to complete the surveys whilst being asked questions verbally about the reasons for the answers that they were selecting.

Although this proved more successful, it was still challenging to elicit their true feelings, as the boys became distracted or lacked the necessary skills to effectively communicate their views with any more than just a "yes" or "no".

Though some meaningful data was gathered, this raises a question as to how children's attitudes towards reading might be captured more effectively in the future.

Activity

This section looks at the content of the events that the dads and the boys took part in, what worked well and what worked less well.

Main findings from the activities:

- **Putting any pressure on the dads at the first event should be avoided:** The most important thing at the first event is for the dads to become comfortable with the environment.
- **Competitions are popular:** An element of competition in the activities that took place during the events was very popular with both the dads and the boys, helping to create a team spirit amongst the pairs.
- **Making something together to take home was popular:** Activities which involved each of the pairs producing something together which could be taken home were very popular. The final product was less important than the fact that the pairs had made something together that could be kept.
- **Reward and recognise:** A whole school assembly, a display in the school reception and awarding certificates in front of the group, all contributed to the boys (and dads) feeling that they were doing something special that they should be proud of.

Below is a list of the events that took place and the activities that the pairs took part in. Each event took place on a Friday afternoon from 1400 to 1500.

One event took place every month between October 2009 and March 2010, though due to other school commitments and school holidays the events were not held on a set week during each month.

The Galactic Reading Project booklets were brought to each event. At each event the booklets were looked at with the Reading Champions project manager. The dads discussed with the project manager what progress had been made, how many reads had taken place, what was being read and whether it was being enjoyed. This also gave an opportunity for the dads to raise any issues around the reading which they wanted to discuss.

At the end of every session, a period of time was scheduled for each pair to read together and choose more books for the reading that they were doing at home. However, much of the reading at home was not based around books that were provided in the sessions, but reading materials such as newspapers, magazines or other books that the boys were reading in school.

Some of the activities that took place at the events involved reading, but reading was not the main focus of the events. The aim of the events was to allow the dads and boys to spend time together on an activity, to help build relationships between the dads and the school, and to make a clear link

between the reading that the pairs were doing at home and the Galactic Reading Project.

Introduction event

The introduction event was split into two sections. The first 30 minutes were just spent with the dads on their own. After a short icebreaker, the project was explained to the dads.

This was followed by a discussion about how to choose a book, and advice for the dads about reading with their boys. The importance of reading was also discussed and a brief true or false quiz about reading was held at the end of the 30 minutes. Each dad was then asked to sign a form to say that they understood the project and agreed to take part.

For the second half of the session the boys joined the dads, books were chosen from the School Library Service books that had been provided, and the pairs read together.

Evaluation of introduction event

The introduction event was an important one for the success of the project, as we needed to ensure that the dads understood and were enthused by the end of the session, an aim which was fulfilled.

One dad attended this introduction event, but did not return to the group again. The reason for this is not known.

Comments made during the focus group illustrated that the introduction event was the least popular. There were various changes that could be made to make this event more successful:

- By keeping the explanation of why the dads were there more brief and involving the boys sooner. It was clear that the dads felt far more comfortable when they were working with their boy.
- By not putting the dads under any pressure at all. Some were fearful of the school environment, possibly due to their own negative experience of education or because they felt that they would be put under pressure to read or demonstrate their own literacy abilities. Although it was made clear to the dads that they would not be required to read anything during the session, the icebreaker activity involved standing up and all carrying out hand and leg actions together. On reflection, this did not put the dads at ease.
- By keeping the introduction event as fun and informal as possible whilst still conveying the key messages about the project.

Event 1: Making rockets

This event focused on the dads and boys making and decorating paper rockets in pairs. Instructions on how to make a rocket were provided for each pair. This task was simple, but gave the dads and boys something that they could take away from the event that they had made together. The activity linked in with the “galactic” theme of the project as they made space rockets.

This event was deemed a success in the evaluation and the dads in particular seemed to enjoy it.

The two strengths of this event were:

- The boys and their dads were doing something together that they not only enjoyed, but that had a purpose and that they could take home. This was particularly clear and several children asked:

“Please can we take our rockets home with us?”

- By the end of the event the group of boys and dads were clearly comfortable working together and they were looking forward to the next event. One of the boys asked:

“Do we get to do this every Friday? I want to do this every Friday!”

Key to establishing this sense of a “group” was the effort that had been made by the literacy coordinator to get the dads to attend this event. Taking part in a reading event in school was intimidating for some of the dads. Repeatedly contacting the dads and sending home messages reminding them and emphasising that they were expected to attend was important in ensuring that they did.

There were two additional pairs at this event that had not attended the introduction session. The project was explained to them separately and they became full members of the group.

Event 2: Trip to the library

A trip to the library was chosen as the second event. Introducing the library to the pairs was considered to be fundamental to their reading journey. The library trip was scheduled for early on in the project so that the dads and boys could use the library’s resources for the home reading that they were recording in their booklets.

The library was a 15 minute walk from the school and had excellent facilities. Some of the children had visited the library before as Year 1 or Year 2 pupils. The children’s librarian was made aware that we would be attending some weeks before the event and agreed to put together an activity that was both

active and fun and that was not aimed solely at children but was something that all the boys and dads could do together.

After a tour of the library, the boys took part in a space themed treasure hunt, linking in with the project's "galactic" theme. The success of this event relied very heavily on the preparation of the children's librarian. The time and effort that the librarian had put in to plan the event so that it fitted with the wider "galactic" theme was a major reason why, in the evaluation, the library visit was deemed a great success.

Evaluation

Only one member of the group was already a library member. However, he was unsure about whether he was still a member and he had never been to this specific library before.

All the dads and boys joined the library on the day of the event. The quality and range of materials that the library stocked was something that surprised many of the dads. Several dads stated that they were not aware that the library existed and that they were impressed by the resources that it provided.

"I've lived round here all my life and I never even knew this [the library] was here."

"I am very impressed actually, I didn't know that you could get CDs and use the internet."

There was optimism that now the boys and dads were aware of the library, that this was a resource that they would use again. Comments, like the one below, at the end of the event indicated this:

"We'll definitely be going back to look at some of the books."

When asked at the final evaluation whether they had been back to the library, three of the pairs had been back to that library since the visit, with one pair going to another library that was nearer to where they lived. One of the dads said that the library trip was his favourite event.

Event 3: Football themed event

This event was designed to engage both the dads and boys through using the motivational power of football. Football had been a topic of discussion both before and after the events among the dads and the boys. Given its universal appeal among the group, it therefore seemed obvious to do an event based around this.

The event was broken up into two parts. The first part was an activity for the pairs. It was explained that every Premiership football club had a Reading Champion (each club is required to put forward a player as a Reading Champion as part of the Premier League Reading Stars initiative run by the NLT). Facts about 10 Premiership players were given to the pairs. Each

player had been separated from their favourite book. By looking at the clues on the paper, the aim of the task was to match the correct player with the correct book.

The second part of the event was a football and reading quiz. Questions were read out and the boys and dads worked in pairs to answer the questions. Papers were swapped and marked at the end.

At the end of this event the dads and the boys were awarded their bronze planet certificates for having completed 15 reads and attended the first two events.

Evaluation

Tapping into this existing interest worked well. The boys were very happy just to be doing something around football. The event made the link between football and reading and the quiz added a competitive element, something which appealed to both the dads and the boys.

Event 4: Paper aeroplane event

Making something together was popular with both the dads and the boys. Event 1 was a good example of this. The football quiz had also been popular and this type of competition seemed to hold real appeal. Event 4 therefore combined the successful features of events 1 and 3: making something together and competition.

Each pair was given instructions to read, and guidance where necessary, to make several different types of paper aeroplanes. Most pairs made four different planes in the time given. The pairs then had to select and decorate the plane that they thought would fly the furthest. At the end of the event, a competition was held to see whose plane could fly the furthest. Each boy was given one throw of their chosen plane.

Evaluation

This event was very simple, but also very effective. The competitive element worked very well and one dad referred to this event as his favourite in the final evaluation, largely for this reason:

“It was the competition part of it. There was competition between the kids and they enjoy it more when there’s a competition between themselves. But it’s up to the parents or the big kids, to have a competition between ourselves too to make the kids play better.”

Event 5: International Day themed event

The plan for the fifth and final school based event was to hold it outside, take part in a reading treasure hunt and play some ball games. Unfortunately, bad weather prevented this from being possible. The final event therefore followed an international theme. This tied in with International Day that was being held at the school on the same day.

There were seven pairs at the session. Each pair was asked to randomly select a country from an envelope which contained the names of seven different countries. The pairs were then given another envelope containing 28 facts about the seven different countries. These facts included: the population of the country, how many times the country had won the World Cup and some other selected information.

The pairs were then asked to fill out a fact sheet about the country that they had chosen using the facts that they had been supplied with on the pieces of paper. Those that finished were asked to colour in a sheet containing flags of the countries in the correct colours. This allowed time for everybody to finish their fact sheets and move on to the next activity at the same time.

The following activity was a true or false quiz based around the country facts that each pair had received.

At the end of this event the boys and dads were awarded with their silver planet certificates for having completed a total of 35 reads together and attended four Galactic Reading Project events.

Evaluation

The true or false quiz again incorporated a competitive element and the event itself was a success. Part of the reason behind this success was that the dads now had a clear understanding of the types of activity that would take place at the events. Any anxieties that remained after the first two or three events no longer existed. The dads now knew what to expect and felt entirely relaxed, comfortable and able to express themselves within the school environment.

Event 6: Celebration event

As a reward to the boys for reading 65 times at home, the amount necessary to reach the gold planet, a celebration event was held. This was a day out in London for all those that had taken part. This involved a picnic and a trip to the theatre to watch “The London Eye Mystery” (a play based on the book by Siobhan Dowd).

Not all of the dads were able to attend due to work commitments, but several were able to spare at least the afternoon to come to the theatre. Everyone enjoyed the play and there was huge excitement amongst the boys about the day as a whole. This was a day that the boys had worked hard towards by reading with their dads, and it was a day that they had looked forward to.

Reading assembly

The project finished with a whole-school assembly based around reading. In this assembly the boys and dads were rewarded with their gold planet certificates. The boys that had taken part sat at the front of the school hall with the dads.

The project was explained to the whole school. The literacy coordinator, Reading Champions project manager and Headteacher spoke. The manager of the School Library Service also attended to present their certificates. The assembly ended with a PowerPoint presentation which contained pictures and quotes about the project which was set to music.

The dads and the boys had achieved so much, and it was extremely important for this to be recognised across the whole school.

Main findings

Enjoyment of reading

This section analyses the boys' reading enjoyment and reading attainment over the course of the project.

Aim:

The boys that took part would enjoy reading more, have more positive attitudes to reading and read more often than they did before they took part.

Main finding:

The boys were positive about reading at the beginning of the project, but they felt even more positive at the end. The boys themselves stated that they now read more. The literacy coordinator believed that the project had a positive impact on the boys' attitudes to reading and had helped them to develop as readers.

The evidence used in this section has come from the discussions carried out with participants rather than surveys.

When asked in post project interviews, all the boys agreed that they enjoyed reading more having taken part in the project and made comments such as:

"I've enjoyed it now than, more than last time [sic]."

(Boy)

The boys' enjoyment was also mentioned by the literacy coordinator.

"They love being with their dad. They love the reading you know."

(Literacy coordinator)

Some boys gave reasons why this was the case.

"Because last time I didn't really used to do [sic]" a lot of reading.

"I find it [reading] easier now."

There was great positivity about the reading that had taken place at home. When asked if they preferred reading alone or with their dad, the boys' replies were consistent.

"I like reading more with my dad."

When one boy was asked why this was the case, the response was:

"...it's just easier because he helps me. Like when I'm stuck on the words, he just helps me."

When asked about frequency of reading, most but not all boys believed that they read more now than at the beginning of the project and made comments such as:

"I've been reading more because of this."

(Boy)

The boys' class teachers were also asked to comment on whether they thought this had had an impact on the boys' reading habits. There was no boy that the class teachers felt had not benefited in some way from taking part and they also felt there were much wider benefits that the boys had experienced in their development as a reader.

Below are some of the comments from teachers which relate to six of the seven boys. Each comment refers to a different boy:

"He has become very motivated in wanting to read more. It has raised his self-esteem and he now sees himself as a reader. He enjoys reading a range of stories independently now."

"His self-esteem has been raised and he now likes to read a range of texts."

"He thoroughly looks forward to reading events with dad, and he's very excited to have this time with his dad. He's become motivated to read and enjoys choosing stories."

"He has taken ownership of his reading. He has responded very maturely to the project and enjoys spending time reading with his dad. [He] thoroughly enjoys reading a wide range of texts."

"He looks forward to time with Granddad and enjoys reading together. [He] particularly enjoys reading non-fiction texts."

"He has become a fluent reader during this year."

There was great positivity about the project itself from the literacy coordinator too, and this went beyond the improvements in reading that the boys had made:

“I don’t think that you can underestimate the positive self-image and esteem which has been raised through the boys having this special time with their dad and being part of this special group.”

(Literacy coordinator)

Three of the quotes above mention a wider range of reading materials now being enjoyed. As part of the introduction session, it was made very clear to the dads that this was not a project just about reading books: all forms of reading should be valued and they should read about whatever the boy was interested in. This was very much taken onboard by some of the dads. When asked about what sort of things the boys had been reading, the dads said that a wide range of reading materials had been used:

“He’s always reading Top Gear. He loves watching Top Gear and then the magazines come out. So he’s got an interest in reading comics that are all about fast cars. They get forced to read certain things in school. Me personally I think, I mean, a couple of times over the weekend, let them read what they want to read.”

(Dad)

“He loves the newspaper and reading about the football and all of that. Well he’ll read the football and then he’ll read it out to me out of the newspaper.”

(Dad)

Dads’ opinions on their boys’ reading

Aim:

The dads that took part would feel that their involvement had resulted in their boy enjoying reading more.

Main finding:

The dads were clear that their involvement had led to the boys enjoying reading more.

The dads felt that their involvement had led to their boy enjoying reading more. A range of comments were made with reference to this:

“...because he actually looks forward to it [reading] now. And he actually looks forward to reading over the weekend. He actually looks forward to reading to me, not me reading to him.”

(Dad)

"I only have [the boy] at weekends. And sometimes you know, because I only see him weekends, I have things planned like swimming. Since we've done this project, as soon as we get home, [he says] 'Can we start reading?' ...I forget myself about reading, but he doesn't."

(Dad)

"Well before this, he didn't really read."

(Dad)

The dads also believed that, stemming from this enjoyment, there had been wider improvements which had arisen. Various comments were made in relation to this.

"He's improved his vocabulary."

(Dad)

"He's improved his reading...[and] it's improved his English as well."

(Dad)

"His reading has improved quite a lot."

(Dad)

"I've seen a big improvement with his reading."

(Dad)

We do need to take into account that over this time period the dads had become significantly more involved with their boy's reading. Improvements which may have gone unnoticed in the past were now being observed.

However, there was a strong feeling among the dads that reading with their boy had had an impact.

Boys' attainment in reading

Aim:

There is an increase in the reading level of the boys that have taken part (beyond the anticipated level of progress).

Main finding:

It was not possible to show that there had been an increase in attainment of the boys (beyond the anticipated level of progress) as a direct result of taking part in the Galactic Reading Project.

It was hoped that we would be able to show an increase in the boys' reading attainment, above the anticipated level of progress. Although the schools' own assessments showed that all the boys had made some progress in reading, it was not possible to make a direct link between taking part in this project and attainment increases over the two terms.

This was partly because it was difficult to identify significant change over the short time period that the project took place and also partly due to the difficulty in isolating what benefit this project had from any increases that would have taken place anyway over the course of two terms' teaching.

The average mean increase over the two terms for all the boys was 1.3 Key Stage reading sublevels. This falls broadly in line with what might be expected over the course of two terms of the academic year. The largest improvement of any boy was two sublevels: three boys moved up two sublevels over the course of the project.

Dads' relationship with the school and their boy

This section seeks to evaluate changes in two areas: improvement in the dads' engagement with the boys' education and improvement in the dads' relationships with the school.

Aim:

The dads that took part would feel that they have a better relationship with the school and are more engaged with their boys' education.

Main finding:

Most of the dads felt that their relationship with both the school and with their boy's education had improved. However, this change was greatest where the dad involved in the scheme was the father of boy.

Engagement with the boys' education

The dads felt that they were more involved in their boys' education as a result of taking part. When asked what they had enjoyed most about the project, the dads, who were fathers, said it was the time to bond with their child.

"[It] Just forms a kind of bond between us. He'll come at 5:30, 'Dad, it's reading time. No matter what."

(Dad)

"It's the bonding and the reading itself because never, normally we'd be out swimming or whatever the case may be, we'd be in a park or wherever. But now, there's a bonding side of it and his reading side. I'm not being funny, for

the sake of losing half a day's pay, it's actually brought me and my fellow closer together."

(Dad)

Several of the dads said that they may have read **to** their boy, but they would not have read **with** their boy had it not been for this project. One of the men, who was a father, was extremely clear that he would not have been doing any reading with his boy otherwise. When asked whether he would be reading with his son without the project, he replied:

"Definitely, definitely guaranteed. I would not be doing it."

(Dad)

Relationship with school

In some instances a relationship with the school was established through this project where one had not existed before. As the literacy coordinator pointed out:

"I'd never seen X's dad before. Never even spoken to him and I taught X for a year... So I didn't know his dad was around. I'd never met him, ever."

Some of the other dads were more familiar to the school because they dropped off and picked up their children at school. But they had not been involved with a school-based project like this before. As the literacy coordinator mentioned:

"They've been around but they haven't been in the school involved in this kind of thing."

The exception to this were the 'dads' who were elder brothers and now attended secondary school. Both these boys had formerly attended Christ the King RC School and were therefore more familiar with the school environment.

The Framework

Materials

- Certificates

The certificates were very popular and the boys were proud to receive them. As some of the comments from the dads indicated

"He was well chuffed that he achieved something."

(Dad)

“Mum keeps a book of special mentions that he [the boy] got at school. When he got the certificate, he ran home and told Mum to put it in the book.”
(Dad)

However, rather than just being a reward, the bronze, silver and gold structure seemed to encourage and motivate some of the boys to read.

“It [the certificate] does make a difference because he says ‘Oh dad, we’ve accomplished it, now we have to go to the gold planet’.”
(Dad)

“I’ve got him this weekend and he’s pushing to get the rest of it finished... It’s absolutely worked wonders for my little fellow. He wants to do his reading and for me personally, it is because of the certificates.”
(Dad)

- Booklet and record keeping

The booklet was considered useful by the dads. For the boys it had some similarity with the school reading booklet which they already had, and therefore recording reading in a booklet was a familiar concept.

There was some scepticism about the exact number of reads that were required to reach each planet. The booklet had been set up so that there were incremental increases in the amount of reading that had to be done. The bronze planet required 15 reads, the silver 20, and the gold 30. This meant to get to gold required a total of 65 reads. For those dads that had limited access to their boys this proved challenging.

The events

- When in the school year to run the project

The project was set up in July 2009 with activity running over two terms from October 2009 to the end of March 2010. Although this was a short time period, after several events over the two terms, an impact had been achieved. As there are various other school commitments over the Summer term it was felt by the literacy coordinator that running into the Summer term would be difficult in terms of time, and it would also risk the project losing momentum and petering out.

“I think Autumn and Spring terms are definitely the most helpful. Because in the Summer term we’ve got so many trips. There are so many things to juggle and you’ve got a finite amount of time. I gave it my all for Autumn and Spring because I knew that’s how long we had as well. But I think if it had carried on I think it would have been just too much.”
(Literacy coordinator)

- Number of events

Some of the dads said that they would like to have had more events.

“I done it one week [sic] and then we had one two weeks later, we come again and then it was three weeks or five weeks or whatever. I think if it was every three weeks, it would be better.”

More events could have been run over the time period, but this would not necessarily have added to the project. It must be remembered that the purpose of the events was mainly to allow the dads to develop a relationship with the school and tie the reading that was taking place at home together with a group. Therefore, more events were not really necessary. Also, with just five events it was easier to keep the content interesting and enjoyable. If anything, four events may have served this purpose almost as well.

The literacy coordinator agreed:

“I think that it would be quite hard to keep the momentum going if we’d had more [events]. I think this was enough to really enjoy it and get a lot out of it but I think if you kept it going it was too long and then it sort of went a bit flat. So you’re kind of leaving people wanting a bit more and you want a bit more yourself.”

- Ensuring attendance

The level of organisation of the individuals varied and although the events were always held on a Friday afternoon they were not held at set intervals. Significant effort was made to ensure that all the dads attended, or that if they were unable to attend that they had sent their apologies. As the literacy coordinator stated:

“I always telephone them in the week leading up to it and then on the Thursday night before a event I would send a paper copy [of a reminder letter home with the child] as well, just saying “Don’t forget it’s tomorrow.” I also text anybody who I had a mobile for.”

This persistence is likely to have made a big difference in ensuring that the dads were aware of the event and that they attended. Rather than seeing this as a hassle or nagging this was generally welcomed by the dads.

“The texts are also a useful reminder. I have it in my calendar, but it’s a good reminder.”

(Dad)

In order to make the project a success, great efforts were made to ensure the dads attended. Although this was time consuming, the project relied heavily on the attendance of the dads and the literacy coordinator used all means possible to ensure their attendance.

- Size of group

During the focus group, feelings were expressed that the group should have been bigger so that more pupils could benefit from what everyone had agreed was a worthwhile project.

It was originally intended that the group would be made up of 10 dads and 10 boys. However, due to the issues with recruitment mentioned above, a final group of seven pairs took part in the project.

In fact, the practicalities of managing the group and the time that organising each event took meant that working with any larger group would have been problematic. As the literacy coordinator stated:

“I think that seven was a manageable number...you could give the attention that was needed.”

Working with a larger number of dads would have been difficult due to the resources needed, such as space in school and staff. Aiming to work with 10 pairs, resulting in recruiting seven that actually completed the project, was actually ideal. If this project were to be replicated, working with a group of a similar size, at least as starting point, would be recommended.

Conclusion

This project worked extremely well, not only to motivate the boys to read, but to engage male family members with their boys' learning. Where family members were already taking an interest in their child's learning, there was a feeling that the project had given their interest a definite structure which had helped, guided and empowered them to support the child more effectively.

The project was successful for four major reasons.

The project had a structure that was easy to follow.

The progress that the pairs made was represented visually on a map. The objective of attending the events and recording the reading that had taken place in order to "travel" from bronze to gold was clear and motivated the boys to want to read at home.

Being clear with the dads at the start of the project about what was going to happen and when was reassuring for them. In retrospect, it would also have been worthwhile to plan exactly what would be included in each event and communicate this to the dads early in the project in order to give them a full picture of what to expect.

There was a sense of fun.

Both the boys and the dads enjoyed taking part in the events and doing the reading at home. The events were designed not to be focused on reading, but to complement the reading that was taking place at home. Having their dads in school was exciting for the boys, making things or taking part in competitions as a pair made this even more enjoyable.

The project was realistic.

The project was realistic about what could be achieved over two terms and how much could be expected of the boys and the dads. Ten minutes could be viewed as a short period of reading time, but for nearly all of the boys no paired reading had been taking place with their dad prior to this project. Ten minutes was achievable.

Similarly, five events plus an introduction session and a celebration session was realistic in terms of what could be provided by the school. For the project to be effective, the commitment of time had to be made by the dads and boys themselves supported by the school, rather than the school.

Support

The project was still a major undertaking for the literacy coordinator, as a significant amount of time needed to be spent on it. However, utilising other agencies within the school (for example, asking the Parent Teacher Association for money to pay for a celebration event) and the local authority (for example, asking the public library service to run an event), made the project more manageable.

Both the boys, the dads and members of staff felt that the project had an impact on their reading and their relationships with one another.

“They [the boys] are enjoying it. These boys have been reading with their dads and have been inspired, you know, to keep going with their reading.”
(Literacy coordinator)

It is now hoped that, having reached the gold planet, the habit of reading together that has been established by this project continues and they keep going even further with their reading together.

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