



Boys' Learning
Research group on men and their families.



ARTICLE



LEARNING HAS NEVER
BEEN SO EASY



SCHOOL MADE EASY
ARTICLES

IDEAS SCHOOLS COULD USE TO INCREASE BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT

A good quick tool for teachers and parents.

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USING MENTORING

Mentoring is important because boys are strongly influenced by peers. The arguments about why males need a mate, and what mateship means to males, appear in West (1996). Boys want very much to be accepted by other boys. They are influenced by other boys to go out to play sport, see movies, or work. And they do so much more than girls do, according to Paulin and Dean.

Mentoring is raised by a number of reports, including Annette Macdonald's. It aims to harness boys' powerful need to look up to older boys. Mentoring has been shown to benefit the mentor and the mentored.

Strategies using mentoring include:

- Paired writing sessions, with an older boy or an older girl encouraging a younger boy
- Getting male teacher education students to take an interest in one or two boys. A personal visit to the school could begin this. It could be followed up with phone calls and e-mail messages. In Sweden, this works successfully: students visit boys in their homes or in family restaurants. The scheme is supervised to avoid risk and harm to boys.
- A secondary school could adopt a resource-deprived school in reasonable proximity. Boys would visit the school and see first-hand the environment boys inhabit. They could provide assistance in listening to boys read, coaching in sport, and so on.
- Having a Primary School Activities Day in which secondary boys teach the skills they have learned to primary school students. This is done at Gordonstoun. A similar scheme has been observed at King's in regard to football coaching. Mentoring has been found to increase skills and confidence in both the mentor and the mentored.
- Bringing former pupils back to School specifically to proselytise active reading. Some might work for an honorarium, or position of status within the school.
- Identify underachieving boys, especially in Years 8 and 9. Allow boys to choose a teacher mentor to discuss homework, deadlines and other matters.
- Using Year 12 boys to mentor a younger boy who is underachieving, as done in Boswells School in Chelmsford.

USING GAP STUDENTS

The King's School, Parramatta has a small number of Gap Students who are in transition between their own schooling and university or other career path. They fill a range of positions in the School,

especially in coaching sport. The Gap students at the School seem to have been taken in hand by the Physical Education, Personal Development and Health Department. The males concerned are close to the boys in age, but have plans to attend university and have been out in the world. They are in many ways ideal role model material, and no doubt they are very useful in guiding the boys toward sporting success. An acceptable masculinity is therefore associated with sport, rather than with academic pursuits. I would encourage schools to consider:

- Selecting Gap students with a view to using them to mentor underachieving boys. Perhaps four such boys might be selected in any Form. The boys would select a Gap student themselves. The mentor would visit the boy in some acceptable place once a week and hear him read.
- Attaching some Gap students to academic departments as well as Physical Education. Some might make contributions in art, music, science or History for example.

REFLECTING ON GROUPINGS IN THE SCHOOL

UK research shows that boys often underachieve because of the 'sets' or learning groups they are in (Klein, 1995). Thus schools could:

- Examine the learning sets in the School
- Experiment with groupings which exposed boys who are quietly underachieving.
- Pinpoint boys who are underachieving, and provide learning support for them in smaller groups.

HARNESSING FATHERS' INFLUENCE

Fathers have a strong influence on their children. Yet fathers are underplayed in research literature on the family. Buckingham points out that boys deprived of a father (e.g. because of divorce) often suffer academically. The proportion of children with low academic competence was found to be almost twice as high for sole parent families as couple families. Australian sole parent families are mother-headed in approximately ninety per cent of cases.

This evidence suggests that schools should

- Work harder at understanding the roles that fathers play in boys' lives
- Encourage fathers of boys to stay in their children's lives after divorce. This could be done through seminar(s) or a fathers' group.
- Provide talks by well-known figures on better fathering.
- Run fathers' websites.

- Run activities for fathers and boys, perhaps with a reading and sporting focus. Getting boys to jog their fathers' memories often works.
- Bring men into schools in a number of ways. There are Grandparents' Days etc held by some schools. Rather than these one-off activities, it would be more productive to bring grandfathers into the school in a more continuing and systematic way e.g. for weekly sessions to hear boys read or watch them perform in some special activity. Fathering could be the subject of a debate 'That fathers are irrelevant in the lives of boys today'. [The title is intentionally provocative.]
- A father-and-son weekend camp could work, if planned by the boys and the fathers themselves. Assistance might be obtained from Burnside or similar agencies to help fathers get down there with their sons.

MONITORING BEHAVIOUR

Researchers such as MacCann have pointed out that, if classroom behaviour is not checked, boys' performance deteriorates. The need for strict day-to-day classroom management, combined with outstanding teaching, is consistently emphasised by researchers. [See for instance the New Zealand report by Judith Aitken and the comments by Dr David Kemp, cited as West et al., 2000). Informal comments from boys suggest that strict discipline is accepted as part of 'the way things are around here'; or in educational terms, the culture of the school.

MORE ACTIVE LEARNING

Teachers could usefully reflect on the need for active learning, and how it could be increased. The most useful advice comes from Geoff Hannan, who stresses less teacher talk, more student learning. Refer also to the discussion 'blah, blah blah' later in this Report.

Some suggestions include:

- Starting lessons with a 'take 5' approach: 'write down 5 things you learned about Hannibal's battle strategies last lesson. Compare with your partner. How many of these had never been used before?'
- Ending lessons with an activity which sums up the key learning idea: 'Tell your partner: what was the most important thing you learned about veins in this lesson?'
- Visits to institutions such as Elizabeth Farm or the Power House Museum in which the intention is for the students to learn in a context designed to provoke curiosity, rather than for teachers or guides to retail information.
- Boys sometimes prefer to learn by means of debates, role-plays, and investigations. Boys in a study at the University of Wolverhampton wanted to learn in these ways (Bleach, 1997)

- Teachers at the School and boys themselves might take up this question and find useful answers.

THE NEED FOR STRUCTURE

Most boys need structured learning more than girls do. They don't cope well with long explanations and vague instructions.

Instead the school could:

- Set up models of structured lessons with say 3 minutes to do an introductory activity, followed by 5 minutes of discussion in pairs, and so on.
- Vary the partners with whom boys are working so that every boy works with all the other boys in the class. (and the girls, too, if applicable).
- Make sure that assessment tasks provide sufficient instructions so that under-achieving boys can identify the steps they need to follow to complete the work.

INCREASING REWARDS

As boys are often disengaged from schooling, they need more incentives than girls to work well at school. Boys seem to need praise as much as girls, but get it less often. The reasons for this might require an investigation into the ways males relate, and the frequency with which praise is associated with acceptably male activities such as sport, rather than feminised activities such as reading and writing. A man gets praise from another man on rare occasions; and when it does come, it is noticed a great deal. Because of the power sport has in a most men's lives, sport is usually the context for a man to praise a younger man. (See Drummond, various works, and West, 1996). The school could review its pattern of rewards for good academic work, and check with boys on how they would like to be rewarded. Some teachers may be able to suggest other possibilities. But in all cases, there is no point in using a technique if it fails to have the right effect on boys' academic achievement.

IMPROVING LITERACY

Dr David Kemp, Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs has underlined the importance of literacy for boys. Some of the details are discussed in Kowaluk (1999). In sum, there has been sufficient evidence provided that boys' imaginations are being captured by sport or computers; but 'real men don't read'. The School could work harder to provide support for readers and boys struggling with reading.

Suggestions include:

- Assess the reading habits and preferences of boys in the danger years, around Years 8 and 9. Use the data to improve strategies for boys' literacy.
- Have a Book Week in which every teacher talks about books he/ she read in her/his mid-teens. However reluctant the sports-oriented teachers are to do so, it is they whose influence may be the most valuable.
- Provide a wider range of non-fiction material: stories related to TV stories, war themes, science fantasy, nature investigations.
- Try getting boys to learn by means of individualised instruction on cards or through a contract with a teacher.
- Using older boys to visit younger boys to listen to their reading and provide academic encouragement.
- Working with boys to provide suitable incentives and rewards for readers

REVIEWING THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

As the New Zealand Report noted, there is in many schools an anti-learning culture (Aitken, 1999:40). Boys form strong friendship groups, and the boys may do extreme things to stay in the group. In one Sydney example, a group of boys all walked out of an exam at a pre-arranged time to show how little they cared about exam marks (Flood, 1999)..

In general discussions about boys and English, boys' persistent problems have been noted (see for instance Kowaluk, 1999 and West, 1998). Boys in the Boys and Sport Project commented that they feel their school values more highly football and other sports than it does academic achievement. They point out that there is a difference between what the school says will happen and what actually happens. The school could do a small survey to find out what boys as a whole think about the priorities of the school, and make adjustments according to this and other research.

IMPROVING WRITING AND ASSESSMENT

Most boys feel frustrated by an emphasis on terms like 'Discuss...' and perhaps even 'Account for...' and Explain...'. By the end of Year 12, students should be able to know how to act on instructions like 'Discuss'. But in earlier years, they need to be shown how to provide an argument for a point of view and marshal evidence within ordered paragraphs. Boys also respond well to Geoff Hannan's strategies :

- List the reasons why...
- Provide arguments for...
- What are the 5 steps in which the story develops...

[And this one, which doesn't neatly fit it anywhere]:

- 'I bet you I can write down more factors of the number 9 than you can in 1 minute'
- 'Bet you can't remember why the Romans conquered Gaul'.

LISTENING TO BOYS' LEARNING NEEDS

Evidence is provided in this report that more boys than girls feel school is a complete waste of time. The School could improve the enjoyment and satisfaction boys have of school by:

- Ensuring that boys' learning needs and preferences are listened to and acted upon.
- To this end, doing classroom research with the boys about how they prefer to learn.

USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The research shows that boys often favour learning that is related to computers. Accordingly the school could

- Ask boys how to improve teaching in each subject
- Provide more opportunities for computer-assisted learning
- Continue assistance given to teachers and others in the School who help boys learn on computers

INCREASING CHALLENGE

Writers on boys' education write convincingly that boys respond to risk and challenge. Teachers can respond in two ways:

- Provide challenges to boys to coax them to respond. Class debates provide such a challenge. Class competitions can be used in moderation.
- Boys need also to be encouraged to develop ideas carefully, Geoff Hannan's '5 steps' are designed to extend boys' initial response and develop writing and thinking skills.

RAISING EXPECTATIONS

This is the key to much of the work being done on raising boys' achievement in the UK. Research suggests that teachers expect less work from boys, especially in English. If 'real men don't read', then neither teachers, on the whole, nor most boys seem to want to be readers. It is a good point whether teachers like boys who are reflective, or introspective rather than outgoing and action-oriented.

Suggestions could include:

- Making sure that schools have people on hand who actively promote reading
- Expecting boys to take part in music or art or drama
- Making a suitable range of reading available to boys in homes. As in so many other things, this would necessitate working closely with mothers and fathers.

TEACHER EDUCATION

At school level, much needs to be done to give teachers positive information about masculinity. Teachers can benefit by learning how to work with boys' interests and abilities. Universities should ensure that student teachers are informed about positive aspects of masculinity, and that university texts offer positive ways of working with boys and girls. The connection between the number of male teachers and positive outcomes for boys needs careful attention. A range of masculinities should be available to boys within the school, rather than a tough, stereotyped one.

ASSESSMENT

Care should be taken so that assessment does not inadvertently favour girls. Some work may need to be done with many boys so that they can increase their literacy and verbal reasoning.

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