

### **Introduction and Rationale of Research**

The aim of our research action project was to investigate the variables which affected the reading for pleasure levels of male Rainham Mark pupils in Key Stage 3 and discover which of these factors were most responsible for declining reading levels. We wished to explore and answer two questions:

- a) Why might boys' reading levels decline as they move through KS3?
- b) What strategies can be put in place to create life-long readers from KS3?

N.B. These questions were effectively taken from a longer list after our first meeting which sought to explore the following as a starting point:

- ✓ Why do boys stop reading? What might the reason be that girls continue?
- ✓ What other factors are involved? Exams? Workload? Can girls manage it better?  
Organisation and gender divide
- ✓ What is being read by boys? Genre/topics/content/challenging/resilience
- ✓ Technological factors?
- ✓ Is reading seen as a punishment?
- ✓ Pilot study viable?
- ✓ What about the transition between KS3 and KS4?

We wanted to consider the factors involved in why boys in particular begin to stop reading for pleasure and if there were any reasons in particular that girls continued. We initially began our research thinking that workload and school pressures would be two key factors, coupled with technology. We wished to know what was being read by the boys in Rainham Mark Grammar School and if reading was seen as a form of punishment.

To begin investigating our theory, we planned a pilot study to assess reading for pleasure levels of a preliminary sample of students, before distributing the questionnaires to a larger proportion of the year group. After the initial pilot study we noticed an interesting pattern in female pupils' reading levels and so decided that including them would allow us to see differences in reading level patterns and the factors influencing this.

The aim of the data collection and analysis in our project was to allow us to quantify any correlation between parents' reading frequency and preferred genre and the children's reading patterns, coupled with the identification of other potential factors which affect reading levels. This project report aims to identify the issues contributing to declining reading for enjoyment levels and thus allow the school to take informed action and construct provisions which should be taken to prevent, and hopefully reverse, declining reading levels in boys as they move up the school from Year 7.

## **Methodology**

After receiving valuable training at the Institute of Education in London (henceforth referred to as the IoE), we met as a research group to discuss not only the most appropriate ways forward in garnering research data but also those that would yield the most valuable data to assist us in making recommendations in the future. We therefore chose, as a starting point, and as mentioned above, a questionnaire that would be distributed to the whole of the Year 8 cohort as document to be completed by parents. In addition, it was decided that weekly meetings would be useful in keeping on top of the data collection.

Furthermore, we decided that a clear strategy would be to have direct conversations, debates and discussions with the Year 8 cohort themselves during form time; these conversations took the form of Diamond 9 debates.

Finally, with enough data collected, we would then be able to move forward in answering the questions that have been outlined above, with the aim of putting strategies in place for future male pupils.

### **Questionnaires:**

The questionnaire purposes were twofold: the first was to explore whether there was any correlation between parental reading levels and those of their children and to secondly consider a possible correlation between subject enjoyment and reading levels. A letter was drafted by Miss Gale for ethical purposes, outlining our research and aims coupled with it. In addition, the responses were not only confidential, but also completely anonymous and consent signatures were obtained for those responses we intended to reference in this report.

While the majority of the questions in the questionnaire were closed in order to make data analysis succinct, we did feel that having open-ended questions were important in order to allow parents to offer their own opinions, which were deemed as highly valuable.

The questionnaires were distributed to the entire Year 8 cohort of 2014-2015 and well over half of the pupils/parents returned the form to us. This was after they were distributed to staff members who have children (SRK's offered valuable feedback for amendments prior to distribution). This therefore allowed for a wide insight into opinions of reading for pleasure levels. (See *Appendix A*)

### **Diamond 9s:**

Further to these questionnaires, we also wished to explore the opinions of Year 8s themselves and we decided that the Diamond 9 discussion/debate format would be not only the most appropriate but also the most enlightening. Two student researchers went into the Year 8 form bases during an agreed upon registration and small groups of pupils (mixed ability and mixed gender) were observed discussing and debating the statements that pertained to the notion of reading for pleasure. These discussions were recorded. The data analysis that follows comments further on both the questionnaire element and that of the Diamond 9s (see *Appendix B*).

**Data Analysis**

Is there a correlation between the amount that a parent reads to their male child when they are young and how much the student reads in secondary school? Table 1

		<b>Male Reading Percentages</b>				
		<i>A lot (6-7 days of the week)</i>	<i>Most of the time (4-5 times of the week)</i>	<i>Sometimes (3 days a week)</i>	<i>Occasionally (1-2 days a week)</i>	<i>Never (0 days of the week)</i>
<b>Parental Levels of reading to their children</b>	<i>Every night (7 nights)</i>	9.3%	11.6%	2.3%	14.0%	14.0%
	<i>Almost every night (5-6 nights)</i>	4.7%	4.7%	7.0%	7.0%	9.3%
	<i>Some nights of the week (3-4 nights)</i>	0.0%	2.3%	2.3%	7.0%	4.7%
	<i>Few nights (1-2 nights)</i>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

**Conclusions**

- For the majority of male students, their parents read to them every night or almost every night when they were younger.
- Surprisingly, there seems to be very little correlation between the amount that a male student is read to and the amount that they subsequently read as a student.
- 28% of male students read never or occasionally despite being read to every night when they were a child.
- Similarly, 16.3% of male students read never or occasionally despite being read to almost every night when they are a child.
- This suggests that one should discount parents' reading levels as being a contributory factor as to why male students stop reading. If there was a strong relationship, one would expect male students who say they never or occasionally read to have been read to for a few nights a week as a child.

Is there a correlation between the amount that a parent reads to their female child when they are young and how much the student reads in secondary school? Table 2

		<b>Female Reading Percentages</b>				
		<i>A lot (6-7 days of the week)</i>	<i>Most of the time (4-5 times of the week)</i>	<i>Sometimes (3 days a week)</i>	<i>Occasionally (1-2 days a week)</i>	<i>Never (0 days of the week)</i>
<b>Parental Levels of reading to their children</b>	<i>Every night (7 nights)</i>	23.5%	11.8%	2.9%	14.7%	2.9%
	<i>Almost every night (5-6 nights)</i>	5.9%	2.9%	5.9%	5.9%	5.9%
	<i>Some nights of the week (3-4 nights)</i>	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%	5.9%	2.9%
	<i>Few nights (1-2 nights)</i>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%

### Conclusions

- To see whether this just affects male students, it seems prudent to compare the data to that of female students.
- As with the male students, for the majority of female students, their parents read to them every night as children.
- Despite this, there is a similar, albeit less pronounced trend with 17.6% of females reading never or occasionally, despite having been read to every night.
- Similarly, 11.8% of females read never or occasionally despite being read to almost every night
- This data also proved that males did indeed read less than females- 44.1% of females read a lot or most of the time compared to 32.6% of males.
- Further, the percentage of males who never read is 28% compared to 14.6% of females.
- What the above data tells us is that there must be some other factor causing students to stop reading. The fact that more males than females never read despite being read to every night implies that whatever this external factor is, it affects males more than females.

### Possible Explanations in Parental Responses:

- 'My child has read less since they received electronic gadgets'.
- 'My child used to read at least one hour a day until approximately 6 months ago. Unfortunately, the PC/ gaming took over, in my opinion, influenced by the fact that his peers are frequently using gaming systems and he wants to play alongside them'.
- 'He used to read every night- now he watches info videos'.
- The trend from these parental responses seem quite clear: students are frequently choosing to play video games rather than read a book. Those games that seem especially popular are those that involve an element of socialising. For the parents of these students, they seem adamant that the advent of gaming is to blame for the decline in reading.
- As these students grow older, they are far more likely to have access to this technology and therefore prioritise this over reading. An interesting study, and one that our data is unfortunately unable to help us with, would be to investigate how much a student plays video games for in comparison to how much they read.

### Possible Explanations in Student Voice:

- The top responses to the posed question, '*What do you think about reading?*'
  - ❖ Do other things
  - ❖ Find it boring
  - ❖ Made to read
- When pressed for clarification on these reasons, a common thread ran through student, and particularly male student, responses: There are other distractions like phones, going out with friends, social media, television.
- As with the parental responses, it seems that other things are keeping male students from reading. Gaming is, stereotypically, something that is more readily associated with males and perhaps explains the decline in reading levels.
- 'I find it boring'- the most used phrase from students. There needs to be an effort to make reading something that excites students rather than bores them. Incentivising reading seems a particularly appropriate manner in which to go about this. Book clubs, rewards, reading cards with a prize for students who have finished a set number of books are potential methods.
- An interesting student response was that they were made to read, sometimes as a punishment. Reading appeared to be associated with a form of negative punishment used by teachers to reprimand a student. If a student associated reading with something hurtful, they are unlikely to pursue it in their own time. The use of reading as a punishment must be eradicated.
- The bottom response from many students was again that they were made to. From talking to students, they meant the same thing as those that placed it near the top of the diamond, they seemingly interpreted differently.
- Many students also said that they never regularly use a library, although females appeared far more inclined to use a library than males were. Perhaps the problem lies here- a student's perception of libraries.

## Summary

- The data processed seems to point to the use of video games as the main reason as to why boys stop reading. However, in order to draw truly valid conclusions and assess the importance of each factor, many more surveys and discussions will need to be undertaken. We have begun to formulate an answer to this question but our conclusions are, unfortunately, not definitive.

## **Evaluation**

In reflecting back throughout this entire near two-year process, we have been able to gain valuable insight into our chosen topic as a team and there are certainly suggestions to be made for the school in order to encourage young male students in Key Stage 3 to becoming lifelong readers. In making necessary recommendations, however, it is important to evaluate the entirety of the process of action research with as much objectivity as possible.

To begin with, we all had our own preconceptions about the topic of boys' reading for pleasure levels and their waning interest in being lifelong readers. As well as this, we had a limited knowledge of how to actually proceed in conducting this action research altogether. The two visits to the IoE supported our process incredibly well and we were able to move forward in conducting our research with a great deal of confidence and we felt supported throughout the process by Mrs Walker in particular.

Practically, we began as a group of four action researchers – Rachel Cameron-Potter, Joseph Burton, Luke White and Miss N Gale – but the data collection and analytical element became rather time-consuming and it was necessary to bring aboard another action research member at the start of 2015: Caitlin Gray. Having the extra pair of analytical eyes, so-to-speak, enabled us to move forward at a greater rate of speed into the new academic year.

As previously mentioned, there were no ethical infringements given the overall purpose of the research in the first instance, coupled with the fact that not only were the questionnaires completely anonymous (with given consent), but so too were the Diamond 9 discussions.

In terms of the methodology of our process, we feel that again, these two key elements were the best way forward. They garnered a wide variety of viewpoints very easily and captured confirmation of our suspicions at the onset of this action research: that technology is having a profound effect on how often pupils read for pleasure, particularly those who are males in Key Stage 3. Sceptically, one might assume that parents perhaps completed the questionnaires in a biased manner, skewing their commentary to reflect the fact that they do indeed encourage reading for pleasure rather than the fact that they do not; however, given that this data was completely anonymous, we feel that it is indeed accurate and if the questionnaire were to be distributed again to the current Year 8 cohort at Rainham Mark, we would expect results that are on par with ours. The same is presumed regarding the Diamond 9 conversations referenced earlier in this report.

### **Conclusion and Implications for the Future**

In setting out to find a definitive conclusion to the questions outlined in the rationale for this action research investigation, it has become clear that creating lifelong readers in a school environment is pitted with challenges, the foremost being that of technological advancements, coupled with its availability for children, mainly boys. It is a difficult element in day-to-day life to compete with.

It is clear, as well, that parents are generally very supportive of creating lifelong readers in their children and that they certainly view this skill as one of value. It is vital to maintain two-pronged approach between the home and an educational environment moving forward as a school.

As an action research group, we therefore suggest the next steps include:

- Launching a pilot tracking programme in Year 7 to track pupils throughout their years at Rainham Mark and consider if there are other glaring factors that contribute to declining levels of reading for pleasure.
- Approaching Key Stage 2/Year 6 teachers and work with them to develop a better approach that students would not only already be familiar with upon their arrival at RMGS, but also have the wherewithal in place moving forward into Key Stage 3.
- Investigating further at what age our students are able to access the aforementioned technology and whether having that access earlier, before coming to secondary school, has any major influence.
- Conducting a wider form of this action research to access a wider sample of students. For example, this is piece of research that could certainly be explored across an entire key stage, like that of Key Stage 3.
- Developing programming in the English department (through schemes of work perhaps?) that encompass reading for pleasure within the wider context of the curriculum. This is certainly a viable approach to be taken, given the changes in curriculum at both Key Stage 3 and at GCSE Level of study.
- In conjunction with this, it would be worth investing time in researching incentive programmes for pupils such as reading logs and journals, again, programmes which students would be already aware of in Key Stage 2.

APPENDIX A

Wednesday, 22 April 2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Year 8 cohort of students will soon be taking part in a study being carried out by a Year 12 English Action Research team which explores and addresses the question: "Why might boys' reading levels decline as they progress through lower school?"

The aim of the research project is to find new, innovative ways to create and support lifelong readers at Rainham Mark Grammar School. The research team is therefore eager to discuss this topic with students who have been at the school for at least a full academic year.

As a research team, we would be delighted if you were to complete the attached questionnaire relating to you and your child, and would appreciate it if this were to be returned to your child's form tutor by **Friday, 8 May, 2015**.

Thank you kindly for taking the time to support us in our research.

Yours sincerely,

Miss N Gale  
Acting Head of English and Action Research Leader  
Rainham Mark Grammar School



**You**

Approximately how many books do you, personally, read per month? (Please circle the appropriate response)

0      1-2      3-4      5+

Which genres of fiction books do you read? (Tick all that apply to you)

- Crime fiction
- Romances
- Thrillers
- Fantasy
- Horror
- Science fiction
- Historical fantasy
- Other
- None

If 'other' has been ticked, please list the genres:

.....  
.....  
.....

Do you prefer fiction or non-fiction?

- Fiction
- Non-fiction
- Neither
- Both are equally enjoyable

Did you and/or your partner read to your child when they were younger?

- Yes, mostly myself
- Yes, mostly my partner
- Yes, we divided the time equally between ourselves, more or less
- No

If you ticked any of the 'yes' statements:

Approximately how often?

- Every night (7 nights)
- Almost every night (5-6 nights)
- Some nights of the week (3-4 nights)
- Few nights (1-2 nights)

At approximately what age did you stop reading to your child?

Age:

- Less than 2 years
- 2-3
- 4-5
- 6-7
- 8-9

- 10+
- I still read to my child

**Your child**

What is the age and gender of your child?

Age: .....

Male:

Female:

What is your child's favourite subject at school?

.....  
.....

Does your child read for leisure, and if so, approximately how often?

- Yes, a lot (6-7 days of the week)
- Yes, most of the time (4-5 days of the week)
- Yes, sometimes (3 days of the week)
- Yes, occasionally (1-2 days of the week)
- No, never (0 days of the week)

What genres do they read most often? (Tick all those that apply)

- Crime fiction
- Romances
- Thrillers
- Fantasy
- Horror
- Science fiction
- Historical fantasy
- Other

If 'other' has been ticked, please list the genres

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Are there any additional comments you would like to add?

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**Consent**

Please sign here if you are happy with us using your results in our study.

Please note that they may be published. \_\_\_\_\_

*APPENDIX B*