

Chapter 5

Getting Boys Reading for Pleasure

Summary

Chapter 5 considers the 'gender gap' in reading for pleasure in UK primary schools and reviews recent government initiatives aimed at addressing it. Strategies used in schools that have successfully engaged boys' interest in books and reading are then discussed and illustrated by case study examples, particularly the use of reading journals, literature circles and interactive whiteboards. The importance of providing reading role models for boys is emphasised and examples of good practice highlighted.

The Gender Gap

The gender gap in attainment in English at KS1 and KS2 is well known, though in the figures for the 2007 Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) the gap between girls and boys is wider in writing, especially for the older pupils (11% at level 2+ and 15% at level 4+), than in reading (8% and 6%, respectively). The gap between boys' and girls' reading attainment is not a phenomenon confined to the United Kingdom, as the PIRLS and PISA surveys make clear, but the gap in English schools is particularly marked. Internationally, England ranked 27th out of 35 countries in difference in the achievement of boys and girls in the 2001 PIRLS survey, and the difference between the scores of boys and girls when reading for literary purposes, as opposed to information purposes, was particularly high (Twist et al., 2003: 24–25, 28).

The schools inspectorate Ofsted's survey *English 2000–05: A Review of Inspection Evidence* (2005) also identified boys right across the primary age-range as causing particular concern with respect to attitudes to reading, wider reading and reading for pleasure: 'Boys tend to give up independent reading more easily than girls and, as they get older, seem to have greater difficulty in

finding books to enjoy' (p. 32). In my own survey of 1400 pupils in schools where reading for enjoyment was successfully promoted, I still found a significant gender gap. For example, in response to a prompt such as 'Reading a book is something I like to do', 77% of boys said 'often' compared with over 91% of girls, and 7% of boys said 'never' compared with just over 1% of girls.

It has been claimed that 'sex is the major factor in studies of children as readers, being more strongly linked than either social class or ability and attainment with how much children read' (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993: 1). Not only are there differences in how well boys read, what they read and how much they read, but also in how they discuss their reading and how they perform in particular kinds of assessments of reading. Researchers in this field have also identified particular aspects of English as a subject which tend to alienate boys. The emphasis on reading narrative fiction, and usually realist fiction dealing with everyday interpersonal relationships, puts boys at a disadvantage. Boys' reading interests outside school, particularly as they get older, tend to be more in fantasy fiction than realism, and more in non-fiction genres than those of girls. My own research recorded significantly more boys enjoying non-fiction than girls, 72% as opposed to only 57% of girls.

In addition, English subject teachers' preference for personal responses to fiction reading doubly disadvantages boys because of their notorious reluctance to display emotional involvement with their reading in public. This can lead to what Elaine Millard has called 'a dissonance between the literacy they [boys] practised skilfully at home and that demanded from them by teachers', since 'evidence suggests that there is less provision for boys to exercise their reading interests within the school environment than those that are seen as appropriate for girls' (Millard, 1997: 13).

The lack of a male reading role model either at home or at school is clearly a serious problem for many boys. The National Literacy Trust reading survey of over 8000 pupils aged 4–18 in 2005 found that 25% never saw their father read (www.literacytrust.org.uk). There is a danger that reading, especially leisure reading, is seen by boys not as a neutral activity but as a gender-specific one, associated with women and girls. In my survey of over 300 primary school parents, I discovered that their children were ten times more likely to read and talk about books with their mother than with their father. There is evidence also that representations of reading in English-speaking countries, for example on greetings cards and on children's book covers, tend to portray it as a feminine activity (Millard, 1997: 19–20).

The role models that boys find in children's stories, should they read them, also seem to have changed over time so that 'uncomplicated, unreflective, anti-intellectual and non-reading males became the fictional role models for a generation of boys' (Reynolds in Bleach 1998: 6–7). Paradoxically, a publishing house, Elliott and Thompson, recently founded to provide books just for men and boys, promises to present a diet of just such hero figures, according to the

newspaper article reporting on it, headlined 'Forget the namby-pamby girly stuff, here are ripping yarns for real chaps':

Problems with boys reading less and later than girls, teenage male crime and the rising male suicide rate, were clear signs that boys needed stronger role models, said Mr Elliott. 'I think we need more books demonstrating what I would call masculine principles and masculine emotions.' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2003: 3)

Concern about a widening gender gap in British schools has also prompted direct government intervention. The UK government set up a scheme in 2007 called 'Boys into Books' as part of its efforts to close the 'reading gap' between boys and girls. As noted, this scheme promised to 'put a boys' bookshelf in every secondary school library in the country containing positive, modern, relevant role models for boys' in order to encourage boys' reading (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk). An official booklist was published shortly afterwards by the School Library Association, containing a mix of classic and contemporary fiction genres such as spy, thriller, science fiction and adventure stories, along with non-fiction, and secondary school libraries were able to select 20 free books from it to stock their boys' bookshelf (www.sla.org.uk). In launching the scheme, the Education Secretary acknowledged the importance of reading for enjoyment:

We know there is a clear link between reading for pleasure and academic performance – not just in English, but across the whole curriculum. Beyond this, of course, reading can enrich their (children's) lives by freeing their imagination, inspiring creativity and developing intellectual curiosity. Boys tend to read less than girls, and some lose the reading bug completely after they change schools at 11. This initiative will help boys re-acquire the reading habit, and try out a wider range of great books. (www.dfes.gov.uk)

Pause for Thought

Can the 'gender gap' in reading ever be closed? Would initiatives aimed at encouraging boys to read for pleasure have a corresponding positive effect on girls' reading habits too, thus preserving the gap? Would it be right to exclude girls from opportunities to develop enjoyment in reading if they were offered to boys only? Does the 'gender gap' matter, as long as the majority of boys and girls are positive about reading and there is an upward trend in the reading attitudes of both?

Successful Schools

In schools where reading for pleasure is an established part of the school culture and teachers are enthusiastic about books, as described in earlier chapters,

this tends to be infectious for boys as well as girls. Many of these teachers report that they do not target boys with specific techniques but use the same approaches and extend the same opportunities to both sexes. For example, the subject leader at one successful school does not feed boys simply with texts specifically aimed at them, such as football-related books. Football books have a place on the class bookshelf like everything else, but she aims to widen the genres read by boys and to encourage girls to read football books too. There is a wide range of books available for a wide range of readers of both sexes. For this teacher, it is a question of being aware of what is available, getting to know what actually interests individual boys, talking to them about their home reading and reflecting this in book ordering. She finds, for example, that boys enjoy books with male heroes, with word play, visual gags and so on. Older boys also like more substantial texts such as Cornelia Funke's *The Thief Lord*, Terry Pratchett's *The Carpet People*, the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* series by Michelle Paver and *The Edge Chronicles* series by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell, Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* books, but also picture books such as *Two Frogs* by Chris Wormell.

However, successful schools also report that some of the approaches they use for promoting reading for pleasure do work particularly well for boys. Using books on CD and audio tape proves to be an effective way of getting boys in particular hooked on fiction. For example, using the unabridged readings of the *Harry Potter* books with reluctant readers was particularly successful with boys in one school. The boys followed the printed texts as they listened to the CDs and in this way worked their way through some lengthy books, with resultant gains in attainment as well as attitude and self-image. As their teacher commented: 'They've really come on. They feel they're really making progress and always they're keen to show me what page they are up to'. As a result, the teacher expanded this initiative to make more books on CD available in the school library. Another teacher played audio tapes of stories such as Francesca Simon's *Horrid Henry* at lunchtime, when younger children were eating in the classroom, and found that this proved especially popular with boys. Boys making their own recordings of shorter fiction books on tape or CD has also been used as an effective motivator for reluctant readers (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993: 127–128). This is an extension of the traditional fiction and non-fiction book-making activities which teachers have used for a long time to involve children of all ages in the world of printed books.

In successful schools, playscripts are regularly used as motivating reading material for children of all ages and both sexes, in whole class and group settings. The evidence suggests that these texts again appeal particularly to boys' liking for oral language alongside written. These are texts that obviously cry out for performance, whether in the form of recording on video and audio tape or classroom drama activities, and this clearly has boy-appeal. Performing play texts puts reading into a collaborative, social context that is more supportive for reluctant or unconfident readers than the normal individual engagement with literary texts, which can be unmotivating.

The reading of any literary text can be made more appealing to all pupils, but especially boys, by an active approach that includes drama techniques such as role-play or simulation, as illustrated in the previous chapters. For example, a text like Anne Fine's *Flour Babies*, about a class who have to look after sacks of flour as if they were babies, for a secondary school science project, lends itself to a real-life simulation where children are given exactly the same task. For boy readers of this novel this is a particularly challenging and engaging activity which foregrounds gender and can lead to lively debate about the roles of boys and girls more generally. One Year 6 teacher carried out this project with her class, getting them to keep diaries of their flour-baby minding, as in the book, and starting each literacy session on the book with readings from the pupils' real diaries which were compared with the fictional ones in the story. She commented at the end of the project that 'the boys were always fully involved. The project has brought the book alive for them and shown that it's fun'. Diana Sparkes has given an account elsewhere of a similar project with older pupils in an all boys' school (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1998: 38–40).

For another subject leader in a successful school, it is the approach of never rejecting any reading pupils do – whether at home or at school – which is particularly effective with boys. Recognising non-fiction, non-literary and non-print texts that boys (and girls) read for enjoyment as legitimate reading material is vitally important. This means placing such material in the school and classroom libraries, and maybe giving boys some responsibilities for ordering, cataloguing and organising it. As Hilary Minns has said: 'It is surely now time to validate this reading, so that boys can identify themselves as competent readers of a variety of texts' (in Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993: 71). In this school, children can bring in magazines and other non-fiction material from home for pleasure reading, and these are used successfully, along with electronic texts, in silent reading. Children are also encouraged to read at home every night, not necessarily to parents, and reading on a website, for example, is quite acceptable to have signed off on a child's reading record as reading at home for that evening, something which has proved popular with reluctant boys. The only requirement is that children read a mix of texts and not just one type. As the Education Secretary said in launching the National Year of Reading for 2008: 'Books, magazines, comics – the reading matter is less important than children learning to love reading. This is about far more than a book at bedtime – we want to make reading an integral part of everyone's lives' (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk).

Lessons from the children

The comments from some of the boys in my Reading Survey confirmed the need to accommodate a range of reading materials in the classroom which reflect children's home reading preferences and tastes.

- *I like reading at home but not very much at school because some of the books are boring and I want harder books.*
- *I only like Captain Underpants books.*
- *I like blood and guts books.*
- *I start to feel sleepy when I read. I'd rather read comics, funny books and newspapers, also magazines.*
- *I like comics and drawn books the best.*
- *Reading a book is boring. Reading a comic is fun.*
- *I don't like reading, only reading the papers and a magazine. I am good at it but don't like it.*

Not only did some of the boys feel that their home reading was often not recognised in school, but also sometimes that they could not talk about it there.

- *I like comics and Simpsons books. That's all I like, not any other books except Goosebumps. I never talk about it because they never let me.*

It is difficult to see boys such as these widening their reading to 'other books' in a positive way if they are not allowed to share the reading interests they currently have.

Pause for Thought

Which of the children's comments or drawings about reading in this and the previous chapters do you find most revealing and why? How would you respond to the points the children make?

Some schools take the approach of meeting gender issues in reading head on by encouraging debate that challenges stereotypes. A text such as Anne Fine's *Bill's New Frock*, where the main character becomes a girl for a day and experiences among other things the different kind of reading material offered to girls and boys at school, offers plenty of scope for animated discussion with Year 3 or 4 children. Other activities can lead to passionate debate about gendered reading material, such as asking older KS2 children to sort through books, looking at covers, blurb, first pages and author notes, and decide whether they are aimed mainly at girls, boys or both, and what features suggest this. Boys can then be asked to read the 'girls' books' and vice versa. At the resultant reporting-back session, the boy and girl readers can discuss whether their prejudices were confirmed or not.

In other successful schools, where boys' achievements in reading have given rise to particular concern, they are sometimes targeted for specific measures. These can be designed to improve boys' engagement with books and reading at classroom level, as in the first case study example below.

Case Study School

This Year 6 subject leader targeted boys strongly in her own teaching, partly through having a teaching group in which boys outnumbered girls by 5 to 1. She picked very specific books for shared reading which she knew would be exciting, 'boy-biased' and 'very strong male books'. She planned her Literacy Hour teaching around books such as *Stormbreaker* by Anthony Horowitz, David Almond's *Skellig* and *Kit's Wilderness*, and books and stories by writers like Paul Jennings and Robert Swindells. She used many drama strategies, such as hot seating, during the Literacy Hour and also got pupils to do author searches on the Internet, which boys in particular enjoyed. She also included creative activities that involved making things, such as constructing a Dr Who-style Tardis 'time machine' in the classroom during a project on science fiction books, which the boys were very excited by. The attitudes of boys to reading were much more positive after these activities, to the extent that a boys' book recommendation board, complete with pictures of the books suggested, was set up in the school's new library, and this informed stock purchases.

Initiatives can also be aimed at the whole school level, as in the second example below, from the DfES website. In both cases, though, the measures are ones that do not harm girls' attainment in and attitudes to reading.

Case Study School

Because of concern about a wide gender gap in the KS2 reading SATs, this junior school set itself the task of getting boys to enjoy fiction as well as non-fiction, to be more reflective readers, and to understand the importance of reading in the workplace. A further aim was to involve parents more in boys' reading. The initiative had the backing of the school governors, the senior management, all teachers and teaching assistants, and parents.

To begin with, parents of boys completed a reading interview form with their sons. These were designed to raise awareness of reading at home and to help guide teachers in advising pupils on their reading choices. With this information, a 'Boyzone' was created in the school, where new books that catered for boys' reported interests were made available and promoted through eye-catching displays in classrooms and the library. A 'reading bag check' was also carried out each day, in a light-hearted way, to make sure that books were taken home for reading!

Twice-weekly reading sessions were introduced, 'Magazine Monday' and 'Fiction Friday'. These were intended to benefit both boys and girls. These sessions involved group and individual reading and discussion with the teacher, but also time for boy-girl pairings of pupils to discuss each other's reading either of fiction or magazines. Boys and girls swapped books and magazines, and tried to work out what made them appeal to male or female readers. Two files, 'Girl Power' and 'Boys' Best Bets', were set up to which pupils could contribute reviews on a voluntary basis.

Finally, fathers of both boys and girls were invited to school to give talks in assembly about the reading that they did in the workplace each day as part of their job. Other

assemblies featured Year 6 boys modelling how to write reflective comments about their reading in journal form.

The initiative was judged to be successful, not just because it was effective in improving boys' performance in the KS2 reading SATs, but also because 'it was fun and enjoyable ... it became "cool" for boys to be seen reading and to give opinions on books', and because 'girls and boys valued each other's tastes in reading, fiction and non-fiction and different styles and genres'.

(www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement/goodpractice/primarycs/primarycs2)

Reading Journals

To overcome boys' reluctance to enter into discussion of personal responses to texts in the public setting of the classroom, interactive reading logs have proved very effective. Here boy readers can express their emotional reactions to books privately in a way that does not compromise their socially constructed masculine identity. When teachers are able to respond to pupils' comments in these journals, a two-way conversation about reading can develop. As Alison Street and Myra Barrs put it:

Reading journals can be an important way of establishing the kind of discussion of books which boys find difficult to contribute to orally. They provide a space to explore experiences of books and stories. They can become real relationships on paper, where teacher and pupil establish a genuine dialogue about reading. (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1998: 9)

Reading diaries and letters addressed to the teacher about books read can work in the same way.

The advent of weblogs, or 'blogs', has added another dimension to this approach. It is well known that computer- and internet-related settings provide boys with an environment where they often feel more comfortable at expressing themselves, whether because of the anonymity this can provide or because new technology is seen as a male territory. Writing blogs about their reading has the same interactive potential for boys and their teachers as the traditional reading journal but also offers the opportunity for sharing responses with a wider audience of peers. Bloggers can assume a different identity online, if they wish, so that they can share their thoughts with others without being recognised personally. Online discussion groups can also enable boys to join in sharing of responses to books.

Literature Circles

As has been said, it takes two to read a book. In other words, until you have shared your responses with another reader you have not fully experienced the

text. Journals and weblogs are valuable in enabling boys to join a virtual discussion of books and reading, and this is an important step. However, they do so by removing the physical presence of the reading community, with all the developmental benefits that a real social setting, rather than cyberspace, can bring. A way of successfully getting boys back into such a setting used by some schools is the literature circle. This has been defined as follows:

In literature circles, children read and discuss a novel in small groups. Typically, literature circles are mixed ability and transient, formed to read and discuss a particular novel. The children choose the books they read and are wholly responsible for driving the group discussions. The teacher plays a crucial role in setting up and supporting each literature circle group but the emphasis is on the children taking responsibility. The literature circle discussion has a structured format but members of the group determine its content and direction. Each week, children read to their agreed target page at home and use previously taught strategies to remind themselves of the questions and observations they want to bring to their group discussion. After each meeting, pupils may be asked to write a response to the discussion and the group sets itself a new target page for the next week. When the book is finished, the group chooses a final presentation/review task from a list of possible activities suggested by the teacher. (Allan et al., 2005: 5)

This form of group reading has been well known for some time, but seems to have been more popular in the United States and, within the UK, in Scottish schools. Literature circles are certainly not intended only for boys nor only to benefit boy readers. They provide a way of developing the reading engagement and enjoyment of *all* children. However, the structure of the literature circle, as described above, does seem to have particular advantages for boys. In the report from which the above description comes, *Literature Circles, Gender and Reading for Enjoyment*, compiled for the Scottish Executive, the researchers asked four primary teachers to set up literature circles in their classrooms. The results demonstrated that all children in the groups gained a sense of autonomy and greater enthusiasm for reading, and this motivated them to want to set up other book discussion groups and to begin discussing their reading at home (Allan et al., 2005: 3). There were particular benefits for boys:

Boys reported that they were more frequently reading for pleasure at home, recommending books to friends and getting totally absorbed in a book. These gains meant that the boys effectively 'caught up' with the girls in these aspects ... The receptive vocabulary of the boys also improved. (p. 4)

Literature circles vary of course in how they are set up and run. Kathy Maclean, for example, gives an account of how literature circles were used with Year 4 pupils in a London primary school in the 1990s in a way that sounds closer to the guided reading promoted by the Primary National Strategy today, as discussed in Chapter 6. In these groups of inexperienced

readers, the teacher had a more prominent role in choosing the texts, recapping the previous reading done and leading the discussion through questioning. The children also combined the use of reading journals with the literature circle, recording their thoughts and impressions about each text during the sessions. Again, the finding was that the support of the literature circle and the social interaction with other known readers benefited all the children but particularly helped to develop boys into more confident and reflective readers (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1998: 19–22).

More recently, Ruth Roberts (2006) has written about her use of literature circles with Year 6 pupils in a small rural primary school. Here the pupils spend 15–20 minutes each day working in self-selected groups of five to seven based on book choice. The emphasis is on self-direction but within a framework where pupils have group-defined roles such as ‘the questioner’, ‘the summariser’, ‘the character tracker’ and ‘the next paragraph author’ (p. 18). The teacher spends time with one group each week, but otherwise discussion is unsupervised. Roberts comments: ‘Reading, talking, thinking, developing critical attitudes and learning collaboratively – the Literature Circle certainly covers several key areas in one neat package’ (p. 18). Other ways of organising literature circles are discussed online (www.literaturecircles.com).

Reading Role Models

In response to the lack of role models of male readers mentioned above, some schools have devised imaginative ways of involving male family members and men in the local community in reading-related activities. For example, they have set up opportunities during the school day for involving fathers in ‘Dads and Lads’ book clubs, as mentioned in Chapter 2, or held special ‘Grandads in School’ days when grandfathers are encouraged to come in and promote reading with their grandsons. One primary school organised a reading week when fathers were invited to read a story of their choice to KS1 and a different one to KS2 children and to talk about their enjoyment of reading and the part that school had played in that (Bleach, 1998: 29–30).

Another popular strategy is to invite into school men who may be ‘local heroes’ on the sports field and use them as reading role models for boys, as in the school below.

Case Study School

This school was involved in the National Literacy Trust’s *Kick into Reading* initiative with their local football club, the appropriately named Reading F.C. The local Schools Library Service did an assembly talk on the project and how children could be involved in a summer scheme of

(Continued)

(Continued)

which it was part. The school then took its Year 6 pupils along to storytelling sessions at the Central Library with the young Reading footballers. The subject leader reflected afterwards: 'It was very good, particularly for the boys, to see these young footballers promoting reading. Whether they, the boys, actually read more as a result would be quite difficult to gauge, but they're certainly more enthusiastic in talking about books'.

Reading F.C. has lived up to its name by, uniquely, training all its footballing apprentices in storytelling, so that they are able to present and create stories and poems to 8–12-year-olds in local schools, along with a professional storyteller. Parents have also been involved in two family workshop sessions to provide encouragement for family reading and storytelling. As Jim Sells, the Literacy Development Officer for the *Reading the Game* project, comments: 'The scheme provides positive male role models for reading at an age when traditionally children, and especially boys, are likely to begin reading less. The fact that the storytellers may be the same age as [the boys'] older brothers reinforces how reading can be cool'. (www.literacytrust.org.uk/Press/RTGReading)

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) also runs the wider *Reading the Game* initiative, working with well-known stars from professional football as well as cricket, tennis and wrestling 'to promote literacy and raise reading motivation for all ages'. As part of this, a *Reading the Game* DVD featuring sportsmen talking about reading has been made available to all English state schools and a Premier League Reading Stars scheme has involved setting up Saturday book clubs for readers, both boys and girls, 'who love football but might not love reading' (www.literacytrust.org.uk/Football). *Playing With Words* is a separate reading challenge run by the NLT designed to motivate older primary children, especially boys, 'to read for fun in their spare time'. Each class affiliated to the scheme has to read 100 books as a team over the course of one term, from reading lists provided, to qualify for a reward from their local football club.

In Lancashire, a local authority 'Dads and Lads' project has also tried to link reading with sporting activities to encourage fathers to become more involved in their child's literacy development. The scheme, aimed at boys aged between 4 and 13, involved dads taking home an item of sporting equipment from their son's school to practise a skill with them and also share a book or a poem about the same sport. The scheme has been developed to include 'Dads and Lads Rugby', the cricket-related 'Howzat Dads and Lads' and a football-based activity (www.lancashire.gov.uk).

Action Point

Think ahead to any major national or international sports event which will be held in the near future, such as European Championships, World Cups and Olympic Games. Brainstorm ways in which you could promote reading for enjoyment by linking it to these sporting events, for example by reading fiction, poetry and non-fiction related to different sports

and sports personalities, setting up a 'Reading Olympics' for books or for readers, complete with medals, or reviewing Internet sites about the sports event. The theme of the 2008 Summer Reading Challenge in UK libraries is 'Sport' in order to exploits links with sports activities.

Reading Champions is another NLT initiative which is specifically intended to use 'the power of reading role models to inspire other men and boys to take up the reading habit' (www.literacytrust.co.uk/campaign/Champions). This is a project aimed at males of all ages, but there is a specific School Reading Champions scheme whereby boys can engage in reading promotion activities at different levels, from writing book reviews to organising a school book event, and earn bronze, silver and gold awards. The Reading Champions are not only keen readers themselves, but men and boys within the school who actively get others involved in reading for pleasure. A *Reading Champions Toolkit*, specifically written for schools to help them set up their own schemes, is available from the NLT website (with a cover that resembles a Haynes car repair manual). To make sure the girls do not feel left out, there is also a separate *Reading Angels* scheme, though without the same external recognition in the form of certificates and badges: possibly some unintended messages about gender here!

As well as boys who already have an interest in reading, some schools have targeted a different group to become reading ambassadors. These are boys who, for various reasons, have status in the eyes of other pupils as leaders or trendsetters. The idea is that reading can become a 'cool' activity by being associated with this influential grouping. One school issued a group of boys of this kind with pink T-shirts to announce their love of reading and to indicate their role in inspiring their classmates to enjoy reading, in this case reading newspapers. Within a month, the (dark!) pink T-shirts had become the most sought-after fashion accessory in the school; the pink-shirted boys regularly read out newspaper articles in assemblies, and other boys aspired to join this elite reading cohort. Whether being 'proud to wear pink' and 'man enough to admit you like reading' is challenging or reinforcing gender stereotypes is problematic, but the initiative certainly had a positive impact on boys' behaviour and confidence, according to the teacher concerned (Bishop, 2006: 5).

More recently the NLT has supported the launch of Star Reads in conjunction with the online bookstore Passionet. This organisation has a commitment to developing reading in schools and communities, as expressed on its website: 'We recognise that society has become more culturally diverse and remain committed to offering books with subjects and topics of interest to young people, which will fuel their enthusiasm for reading. At Passionet we realise how important it is to get urban youth excited, inspired and motivated to read' (www.starreads.org). For Black History Month in October 2006, the website launched a series of posters of 'five of today's most influential UK

urban role models', including rappers, singers, actors and DJs, recommending their favourite books. The campaign has a particular focus on black, urban youth, and is obviously not aimed at just boys, but four of the five Star Readers are men, and the website has a clear appeal for boys.

Most recently the NLT has published a magazine *Getting the Blokes on Board* (2007), which includes case studies of how early years settings, primary and secondary schools have engaged fathers and male carers in reading with their children both in and out of the classroom. These include 'Bring a Dad to School' weeks, 'Fun for Fathers' evenings of book-based activities, themed reading days involving the local library, and short training sessions for men on story reading and storytelling. The magazine, downloadable from the NLT website, also includes evidence from research about the benefits of involving dads and practical tips for how schools can begin to develop involvement. There are also features on involving fathers in their children's reading through other settings such as prisons, libraries and football clubs (www.literacytrust.org.uk).

Jackie Marsh has described other successful strategies which have been used to involve fathers in children's reading development in the primary school:

- encouraging fathers and children to visit football grounds together and note down environmental print found there, taking photographs and later making books about their visit;
- creating a home-school comic lending library to encourage fathers to share comics with their children;
- asking dads to make books about their interests and hobbies for their children;
- making a wall display of 'Dads' Favourite Books', using book covers and thought-bubbles to give fathers' responses to the texts;
- setting up a 'Curiosity Kits' lending scheme, on the model of 'Story Sacks', using non-fiction books and related artefacts, to develop book-sharing between fathers and children;
- using experienced male parents as 'parent buddies' to mentor new parents in supporting their children's reading.

(in Lewis and Ellis, 2006: 68–69)

Sometimes the male reading models for boys can be provided by older pupils from the same primary school or from local secondary schools. Reading buddies, as mentioned above, have been shown to be effective in promoting and developing reading for all children and have benefits for the older children as well as for the junior partners in terms of building confidence, self-esteem and motivation. Boys in particular seem to benefit from having other boys as reading buddies, as in the school below. Training is important, though, as Colin Noble has shown, so that the older pupils are aware of how and how not to approach their mentoring role (Bleach 1998: 26–27).

Case Study School

This primary school has been involved through the local Schools Library Service in shadowing the Kate Greenaway Medal for a number of years. This year they developed further an existing sports-based link with a nearby boys' secondary school so that a number of Year 8 boys (12–13 years) came in and did work on the shortlisted books with Year 5 and Year 2 pupils. There was also a visit to the library at the boys' school for some activities on the books. The school's English subject leader commented: 'This has been very successful, a good activity for getting the primary school boys as well as the secondary ones involved in reading, and the school will definitely continue with it in future years'.

As well as this kind of pupil mentoring, book-related websites run by their peers are useful in motivating boys to read and review books for enjoyment. For example, www.cool-reads.co.uk is a popular site where 'books for 10–15-year-old readers are reviewed by 10–15-year-old reviewers', in various categories of genre and theme. Founded by two boys, Chris and Tim, when they were in this age-range, and containing many reviews by them, the website has a particular appeal for boys and provides a good model for them to follow for Internet reviewing. Another website with book recommendations and dedicated to encouraging boys to read is the children's author Jon Szceiska's site (www.guysread.com). This American site is more anarchic, child-friendly and seemingly 'non-educational' in approach, very like Jon Szceiska's own books. By contrast another American site aimed at getting boys reading, www.geocities.com/talestoldtall, run by storyteller and children's author Michael Sullivan, has a much clearer educational emphasis, with articles and books for teachers.

Through all these ways of involving male readers as role models runs an *implicit* challenge to the 'laddish' attitudes and 'anti-swot' culture which prevent many boys from engaging with reading, along with other aspects of learning. In addition to the initiatives and activities mentioned above, there may be times when it is necessary also to *explicitly* confront this form of street-culture where it is prevalent in the local community, through personalised or group discussion and activities with boys which can involve fathers and older brothers.

Interactive Whiteboards

Many teachers I spoke to in my research mentioned interactive whiteboards (IWBs), linked to laptop computers and data projectors, as a medium for sharing texts with the whole class which was motivating for all readers, but which helped to stimulate boys' interest in reading in particular.

Many of the electronic texts being used with these boards were certainly boy-friendly ones, such as adventure, space and spy stories. For example the popular Longman Digitexts series, used by many of the teachers in my research, featured titles with boy-appeal such as *Feargal Fly: Private Eye*, a detective story by Louise Glasspoole; *The Lost Boy* by Louise Cooper, a mystery story; a futuristic adventure, *Last Mission* by Adam Gullain; and a space story *Danger! Monster! Aliens!* by Andrea Shavick. But the key to the success of these digital texts seemed to be their *interactivity*, that reading the texts involved pupils doing things rather than passively listening to the teacher read them, and this appealed to boys in particular. The interactivity also involved discussion between pupils, and between pupils and teachers, related to the digital texts. The texts themselves were non-linear fiction and non-fiction, which encouraged group involvement with the text through decision-making and problem-solving of a kind similar to the Choose-Your-Own Adventure books of the pre-digital era. Without this element of interaction, the activity easily became a passive one itself, akin to watching a very large television screen.

One teacher I interviewed described the IWB as 'one of the most exciting things that's happened for a long time in teaching reading', and 'one of those learning experiences where it's going to take years to become completely familiar with everything that's available to you'. Sharing interactive stories through the IWB, when children physically came up to the screen and manipulated text, images, animations, music and sounds, was a very exciting way of drawing children in, particularly those not used to having text in front of them, she believed. This teacher felt strongly that the IWB kept children, especially boys, much more on task than an equivalent print-based Big Book would do.

Overall, the consensus of the teachers I interviewed was that the potential of IWBs and electronic texts to be an effective way of engaging boys in shared reading was probably best realised when the activity demonstrated some of the following features:

- It was a collaborative activity involving the whole class and/or small groups, which promoted dialogue between pupils.
- It encouraged pupil autonomy in decision-making.
- It was presented in achievable chunks.
- It was clearly structured.
- It contained elements of challenge.
- It encouraged creative thinking.
- It provided opportunities for the use of different learning styles.
- It got off to a brisk start and developed momentum.

Case Study School

Finally, one Year 6 teacher reported a positive effect of gender difference on reading in her school, which she was actively encouraging. A growing number of boys were taking Jacqueline Wilson books out of the school library, she noticed, in order to make themselves more appealing to the girls in their year group. Perhaps this is the ultimate way to get boys engaged with books: as a way of increasing their attractiveness to the opposite sex!

Action Point

Take one of the ideas or activities suggested in this chapter for developing boys' reading for pleasure in the primary school. Plan how you could incorporate it into your teaching and how you could evaluate its effectiveness afterwards. How would you avoid any detrimental effect on girls' motivation and attitude?