Shhhh!
Reading in the Lower School Library

BY TINA HUDAK, HEAD LIBRARIAN

This year in the Lower School’s Parrott Library, the rules have changed. Students enter quietly. They meditate briefly to still themselves, and then, they read. In silence. In stillness. I am their guide as they traverse this unknown region. It is a beautiful thing to experience.

This change came about because of a need for time, time these boys need without pressure, without grades, without judgment—and with a good book.

In the United States, students are spending less time reading for pleasure. Both genders show a decline in free-choice reading as technological access spreads (according to the Kids & Family Reading Report [New York, NY: Scholastic, 2017, 6th ed., p. 14]). In 2010, to better understand our Lower Schoolers’ reading habits, I surveyed the boys about how they spent time outside school (reported in “The Reading Habits of Lower School Boys,” in the spring 2011 Bulletin). I found that a variety of obligations—music lessons, sports, foreign language classes, etc., were filling their afternoons and weekends—and preventing boys from reading. Television and video games were not the culprit; they didn’t have time for those either. Since then the constant online access through phones to gaming and social media sites is decreasing the amount of time children spend in free or voluntary reading outside the school day. Our students are no exception to this development.

In addition to recent research and my students’ anecdotal tales, one other source indicates our students are reading less: A slow but steady decline in the library’s check-out statistics provides hard evidence of how our students are (or aren’t using) our library’s reading materials. In 2010-11, for example, Lower School students checked out 4,243 books, compared with 3,131 last year—that’s a 25-percent decline. This shift caused me to ponder these questions:

What is the priority of the Lower School library program today?
How do I best serve my students in accomplishing this goal?

The library program is and always will be about reading; but how can I best encourage boys to read?

According to another Parrott Library survey from 2013, our students prefer printed materials, whether book, magazine, or graphic novel, when reading for pleasure. I believe this preference works in their (and my) favor.

One of the earlier publications to address the issue of “busyness” or distraction in our technologically connected world is Hamlet’s Blackberry, in which author William Powers describes how even the ancient philosophers grappled with how to “quiet the busy mind” and “escape” by creating distance. Powers states, “To create the modern equivalent of ancient distance and enjoy the benefits it brings, you have to put screens out of reach.” Our students’ natural preference for print is a boon for disconnected, silent, pleasure reading. As library science professor Ruth Cox Clark observed: “If budding lifelong readers are left alone to discover that reading is a pleasure, not a chore, they move on to other authors and other genres without our intervention” (from “Readicide: Killing the Love of Reading in Our Schools,” Knowledge Quest 39:4, March/April 2011).

In early October, one month into our new library rules, I asked every student in Forms A through C this question: “Has silent reading in the library, in place of formal lessons, added to your ability to read for pleasure?” The vast majority of responses were along these positive lines:

“Yes, I now love to read whenever I have free time because it helps me enter a whole new world to explore.”

“School is somewhat stressful at times because you have to work. So, I like silent reading.”

“Having more time to read has taught me that reading is fun.”

“I have been able to read a lot more books for pleasure.”

“Silent reading has giving me opportunities to read different types of authors and books.”

“I have enjoyed having more time to read this year because I finish books quicker. Now, I can look for different books, especially new books.”

“You can focus and connect with the book and that’s what I think is the whole point of reading.”

Although a few students are still working on adapting to being quiet, to focusing fully on one book, at least one student reported: “Having more time to read has taught me that reading is fun.”

Inspired by these comments, this year we will continue to see the Parrott Library as an open book, one of each and every boy’s choosing. The only rule: Read quietly. Everything else will follow.