

# A media study with pupils and parents

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A school's investigation into the television viewing habits of its pupils has proved to be a valuable component of its Media Education programme. As well as introducing elements of questionnaire design and data processing, the results have relevance for PSHE work and have led to the involvement of parents in the questionnaire study and the follow-up meeting.

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Work on Media Education has been developing in this school over a number of years. In an attempt to involve the parents more, we arranged an Open Forum at which the BBC, ITV, IBA, and the LEA were represented, along with the independent producer Philip Whitehead. To publicise this event, and to focus attention on to the subject of children and their use of television, we devised a questionnaire for parents and a viewing diary for children. These were offered to every school in Derby, and were used by just three of them, including Moorhead Primary School. The results were then returned to parents and members of the public at an Open Forum.

When children are asked to list programmes watched, we have found the results unreliable. For example, programmes may be listed by a variety of names, and peer pressure influences the choice of programmes which a child (as with an adult!) will publicly admit to watching. The diary method we have used eliminates both these factors, and yields, we believe, a more reliable result.

The children's diary consisted of a listing of all programmes transmitted between 3.30 and 10.30 on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in the second week of February, 1988, together with a separate record for breakfast-time television.

## The recording system

In discussion with the older children, it had become apparent that they recognised several different levels of viewing. At one level there is total involvement with the programme. At the other end of the scale there is listening to the soundtrack whilst engaging in other activities, looking at the screen only when stimulated to do so by interesting sounds. We asked all the children to record whatever they watched by entering either a C or a P against the programme – C denoting complete attention, P denoting partial or background attention.

We suggested that the very young ones might simply record 'viewed' or 'not viewed', but many of them used the differentiating record, which caused no

difficulty for the older children. A total of 151 children took part, their ages ranging from four to 11, as follows:

Age	Number
4	7
5	16
6	16
7	21
8	32
9	25
10	23
11	11
All ages	151

**Processing the data**

If a programme was watched only briefly, it has not been included, and where the diary included a number of programmes being watched simultaneously it was discarded. However, the diary was included even if no programmes were watched.

It is interesting to note that our survey results closely match those of the IBA's survey of this region on the same days.

We used the INFORM databank program, listing programme numbers into

separate fields according to day and type of viewing (Mon. C, Mon. P, etc.). Age and sex made up the final fields. Pairs of children working in shifts fed the data in and also did random checks to ensure accuracy.

The data was retrieved by taking a printout of all records containing a particular programme number. By printing such a list for every programme in turn, viewing charts were built up. Children sorted each list of records into C/P groups and each of these into boy/girl groups: although this could have been done by computer, we found it quicker to use child labour!

**The parents' survey**

Even though the questionnaire forms were anonymous, it was anticipated that there might be a tendency for parents to understate the time their children spent watching television. However, after converting the children's record of programmes watched into minutes of viewing we found that the parents' estimate of

**Time spent viewing**

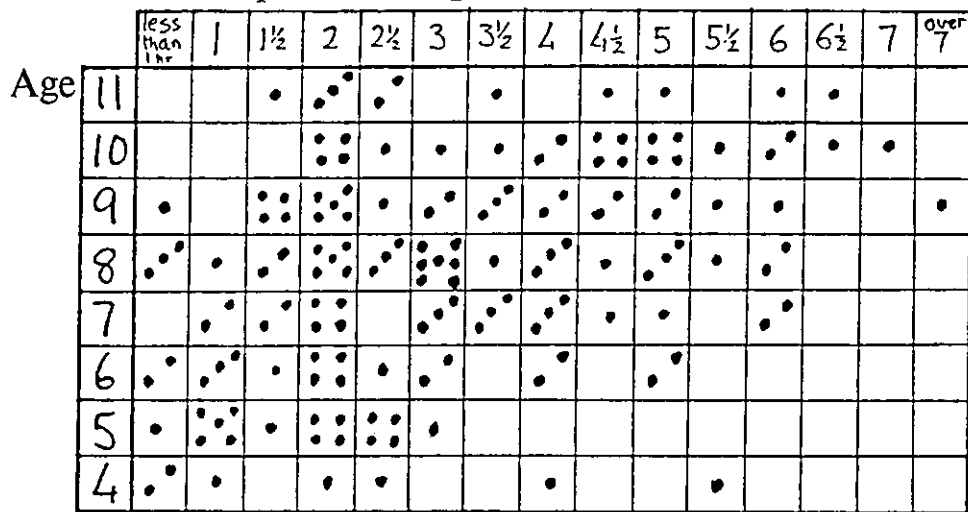


Table 1. Hours of evening television viewing based on records for three weekday evenings in February. These figures are derived from the programmes watched, and do not include use of videos. On average, 'concentrated' viewing occupied 60% of the time; for the other 40% the television was providing a background only. The calculated overall average was just over 3 hours.

viewing time matched, on average, the average viewing time recorded by the children. This was three hours a day, in line with the national average as described in *Schoolchildren and popular television* (DES, 1983).

**Findings**

In addition to giving a detailed breakdown of individual programmes watched, leading to a 'Top Ten', some more general results were also obtained.

*Average viewing times:* Just under half the children watched for more than three hours a day, and 10% watched for over five hours (Table 1). These figures do not include breakfast-time television, which was viewed for an average of 30 minutes a day by 19% of the children. Nor do they include the 5% of children who watched at least one video each day.

Whilst three hours of viewing is a substantial amount, our findings indicate that for 40% of this time television was providing no more than a background to other activities. Talking during programmes was the outstanding cause of argument, especially at the age of five when children most want to talk!

*Viewing times and suitable programmes:* Table 2 shows the time-limits set by parents for different ages. However, a majority of parents felt that the 9 p.m.

'watershed' system could not be relied upon, and over 60 post-9 p.m. viewings were recorded. Of the parents, 36% felt that the system of not showing 'adult' programmes before 9 could not be relied on, 28% thought that the system works well, and 29% considered that more information should be given before a programme starts.

Although 61% of parents found the PG rating system useful when choosing a video, those who attended the Forum expressed concern about the lack of information available on video covers.

*Too much TV?:* In Table 3 the answers from parents who thought that their child did or did not watch too much television are combined with their average estimated viewing times. It seems that an average viewing time of up to three hours is considered acceptable by most parents, although the age of the children is not taken into account in these results.

**Conclusion**

As a means of encouraging more parental involvement in Media Education, the surveys cannot claim any measure of success. The audience of some 60 people at the heavily-publicised Open Forum included only a dozen or so parents. However, a concerned and supportive 10% is a good base to build on.

**Latest viewing time**

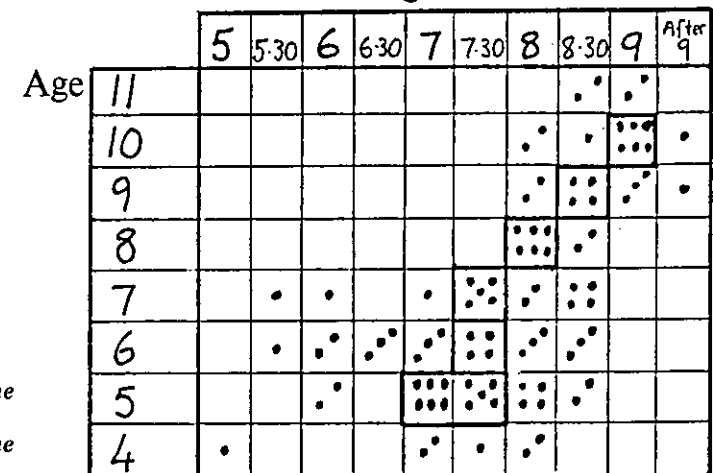


Table 2. The latest time allowed for television viewing, as stated by the parents in the survey.

Table 3. The parents' responses to 'Do you feel that your child watches too much television?' displayed against their estimates of their children's average viewing times.

Age	YES (16%)						SOMETIMES (49%)						NO (35%)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
11			/					/					/	/	/			
10				✓		✓	✓	✓	///				///	///		✓		
9				✓			///	///	///	✓			///	///	///			
8			✓	///			///	///	///	///			///	///	///	✓		
7			✓	✓			✓	///	///	///	✓		✓	///	///	///		
6			/				///	///	///	///			///	///	///	///		
5		/		✓			///	///	///	///			///	///	///	///	///	
4				✓			✓						///	///	///	///		

Average viewing time in hours (parents' estimates)

I should like to thank the staff at Moorhead for their continuing interest and involvement in Media Education, especially the Headteacher, Brian Cogley. Their commitment has ensured that it has not become just a one-off class topic, but has entered the whole school curricu-

lum. I should be pleased to hear from any school wishing to obtain further information.

Contact Barry Ecuyer, Moorhead Primary School, Brackens Lane, Alvaston, Derby DE2 0AN (0332 71162).

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