Article 11

Silent Sustained Reading and Literacy

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Abstract

Research has pointed to different outcomes for Silent Sustained Reading in classrooms. One view is that students who enjoy reading for its own sake also read more books and develop better literacy skills in reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, and writing. The second view is that without accountability, students' reading skills cannot be gauged. Furthermore, it does not improve struggling students' comprehension and fluency. The third view is that there is no benefit to SSR. The author maintains that in today's mandated curriculum aura, where reading has taken a backstage and test-taking skills have dominated the classroom time, it is important that to develop life-long learners, SSR be allowed to be used as deemed appropriate by the classroom teacher empowering both teachers and students.

Key Words: Silent Sustained Reading, Voluntary Reading, literacy, Struggling or Successful Readers, Accountability

What Does Research Say about Silent Sustained Reading (SSR)?

Introduction

Evidence of the value of free voluntary reading or recreational reading continues to accumulate, and testimonials from several areas persist that those who do more recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Krashen, 2004). According to literacy expert, Richard Allington (2002), a prominent literacy expert, once students have mastered basic reading skills, the surest road to a richer vocabulary and expanded literacy is wide and sustained reading. However, in these days of high accountability, many teachers are so busy trying to follow the federal and state guidelines that they don't have time to allow recreational reading in their classes. Fisher (2004) quotes one of the teachers involved in a study on Sustained Silent Reading, "Non-accountability is definitely the most difficult concept for me to grasp in terms of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). As a teacher, I'm accountable for everything – standards, state tests, student attendance- everything. For SSR, this non-accountability is a different idea and I'm not sure how I will know if my students are reading. I see them reading and they seem to like it, but how do I know what they are getting out of it" (p.147). So, there is an emerging argument on how to implement SSR to get the most effective use of this instructional time.

History

SSR was originally conceptualized by Lyman Hunt in 1967. Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) was based on six guidelines that allowed students to read self-selected materials (a book, magazine, or

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newspaper) silently; teacher modeled reading silently; students read for the entire time period; a timer was set for this reading time; no records were kept, and everyone participated in this reading time (Pilgreen, 2000). Five decades later it can be found as referenced by many different names: Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Positive Outcomes While Enjoying Reading (POWER), Students And Faculty All Read Independently (SAFARI), but perhaps the most commonly used name is Silent Sustained Reading (SSR).

Three Different Viewpoints

Review of this strategy showed mixed results and the emergence of three different ideologies. Most researchers demonstrated a positive correlation between reading habits and SSR and stated that in-school free reading programs show outstanding results in promoting the development of reading comprehension. According to these researchers, in-school silent reading programs are consistently effective (Gardiner, 2001; Krashen, 2000; Trelease, 1989). Other researchers raised the issue of non-accountability and recommended implementing SSR with interventions or with certain guidelines. Studies by these researchers propose taking the silent from SSR and recommend implementing voluntary reading as social practice (Pilgreen, 2000; Preddy, 2007; Reynolds, 2004). The third group of researchers - Collins, 1980; Langford & Allen, 1983; Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984, and Reutzel and Hollingsworth, 1991, to mention a few - used by the National Reading Panel to make its recommendations - has either no positives or no changes to report about reading comprehension or fluency. The National Reading Panel (2000) was unable to find a positive relationship between programs and instruction that encourage large amounts of independent reading and other guided oral reading.

Support for SSR without Intervention

There is substantial literature to support the effectiveness of Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) without intervention despite the National Reading Panel's findings. Eight million young people between fourth and twelfth grade in America struggle to read at grade level and some seventy percent of older readers require some form of remediation. But most of them don't have trouble decoding or reading the words; their most common problem is the issue of comprehension (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006).

Educators realize that they need to ensure that research-based reading programs are implemented in the schools to support so many struggling readers. According to Krashen (2006), research strongly suggests that free reading is the source of our reading prowess and much of our vocabulary and spelling development, as well as our ability to understand sophisticated phrases and write coherent prose" (p. 43). Krashen reports that tests of reading comprehension showed positive results after the implementation of SSR. These tests showed that students in SSR outperformed comparison students (Pilgreen, 2000). Again, Krashen shares two powerful examples that mention an ESL student, Lomb Kate, possibly the world's greatest polyglot (speaks17 languages!) who credits FVR for much of her language acquisition, as well as Richard Wright who also attributed his language development to novels, not English grammars. Wright says, "I wanted to write and I did not even know the English language. I bought English grammars and found them dull. I felt that I was getting a better sense of the language from novels than from grammars" (Pilgreen, 2000, p.ix). Similarly, Stephen Krashen (2001) clearly favors giving choice to the readers.

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Nationally recognized expert in the area of reading aloud to children and author of *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*, Jim Trelease (1989), devotes a full chapter to Silent Sustained Reading, read-aloud's natural partner. In 1994, 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students who reported reading for fun at least once a week had higher average reading proficiency scores than students who reported never or hardly ever reading for fun. According to Trelease (1989), Silent Sustained Reading is a powerful means of developing reading comprehension ability, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. It is pleasant, promotes cognitive development, and lowers writing apprehension.

Gardiner (2001), who conducted action research in his English class, found in his research that many students and teachers felt that they did not get the leisure time to read for pleasure, and running an SSR program is the cheapest way to build literacy in schools. Furthermore, he portrays the good and successful reader in his research and makes a case for SSR without any intervention.

Many other supporters of SSR (Fisher, 2004; Beers, 2003), it is important to provide unadulterated time to students to read silently because students want to read books of their choosing. According to Kylene Beers (2003), "Giving students time for daily, uninterrupted, sustained silent reading is critical. Studies show that giving students as little as fifteen minutes a day for SSR can impact attitudes, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension" (p.199). One of the critical factors is the impact of SSR on students' overall literacy, reading capacity, and writing fluency. The more these students read good models of exemplary writing, the more they improve their internal comprehension of excellent writing.

There are some disadvantages to this methodology, despite these researchers' good intentions to continue the tradition of silent sustained reading which has been prevalent in many American classrooms for decades. Some students will get marginalized with this group's emphasis on reading silently and without accountability. I believe that many minority, ESL, and struggling & reluctant readers will be left behind. This group of students might not get the support needed to make good choices in the selection of books to read and to benefit from the activity until someone walks them through the process that good readers follow automatically. Therefore, educators need to ensure that there are research-based protocols in place before implementing SSR in all classes. In addition, the oral literacy that comes from the social aspect of learning will not be realized that accompanies the silence. SSR proponents certainly empower good readers and teachers who support choice and autonomy for their students. The group that will benefit will be the strong readers who like to read naturally.

The Results of No Child Left behind and Accountability Measures

Many administrators and principals are pulling this program out of schools despite the availability of the above-mentioned research, because they want "real" teaching going on in their classes. Edmondson and Shannon (2002) describe a conversation with a reading teacher who reports that she cannot implement SSR in her class anymore, that she is supposed to be getting ready for Reading First initiative, and that she is to stop Silent Sustained Reading in her class and "do more teaching." Administrators in her school wanted a research-based reading program in line with the state and federal guidelines that refer to the NRP (2000) report.

Many teachers are afraid that in the aftermath of NCLB, the days of accountability, teacher merit pay, and standardized testing in many ways, they don't have time for their students to read for leisure. Broemmel,

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Boruff, and Murphy-Racey (2007) report, that under these conditions, the teachers are so daunted by the thought of "covering the curriculum that the school day schedule allows very little time for students to actually read" (p.65).

A new high school principal warned teachers that students should be "focused on the instruction at hand" rather than "sitting around reading" during class time (Fisher and Ivey (2005). In a discussion about these policy changes, the principal explained, "students have to be taught. We need more time focused on direct instruction."

It is important to know that over 7000 students drop out of high school every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). One of the reasons for this drop out is that the students do not have the literacy and/or cognitive skills to keep up with the increasingly complex high school curriculum. Many of these students become disenchanted and disengaged readers and ultimately drop out (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Many teachers and researchers are looking for alternate research-based ways to engage these disenfranchised and reluctant readers to reach these struggling readers and in their quest to continue to allow these students reading time in school. These teachers are recommending that SSR be implemented with some kind of intervention or accountability measure built into it. This group proposes that it is important that teacher or adult-led literacy discussions during SSR time be provided to engage disenchanted readers (Pilgreen, 2000; Preddy, 2007; Reynolds, 2004).

Marilyn Reynolds (2004) reports her success with Sustained Silent Reading program with her "reluctant teen readers." With the kind of students she has (juvenile offenders), she recommends that keeping a reading log or some tool to help kids keep track of their reading on a daily basis is a great way to keep kids engaged. Before she started SSR program called SAFARI in a juvenile detention facility, she found that only four out of her fifty students read for pleasure. However, "by the end of the second week most students were reading something of interest to them, and they looked forward to SAFARI time…They were becoming a community of readers" (p.47).

According to Pilgreen (2000), in studies that lasted less than 7 months, 5 showed positive results in reading comprehension, 13 showed no difference, and there were 3 negative reports. However, in studies that lasted between 7 months and 1 year, the 3 showed positive results, 8 showed no difference, and there were no negative results. But studies that lasted more than one year, positive results in reading test scores were shown in 8 studies, 1 showed no difference and again 0 negative results.

Leslie Preddy (2007), a Perry Township Media Center Director, captures a poignant moment of one of her struggling students when she is able to read at her own level after going through the Sustained Silent Reading Program and enjoys some measure of success by blurting, "*Does that mean I am not stupid?"* – Seventh-grade student (p. xiii). Her book's title *SSR with Intervention,* speaks for itself.

Other researchers report on the success of reading with strategic implementation of other measures such as metacognitive conversations and writing in journals after reading, providing opportunities for instructional conversations, and teacher modeling to increase student engagement and on-task behavior (Methe and Hintze, 2003; Reutzel, Fawson, and Smith, 2008; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz, 1999; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Without accountability, non-engaged readers remain passive and inactive. Wherever possible, they avoid reading, minimize the effort they invest in reading, and derive little enjoyment from it

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(Guthrie & Wigfield (2000)). This group's ideology has its own biases – both positive and negative. It empowers students and teachers. It also sits on the fence by trying to appease the school administrators and the federal or state education authorities who bring in NCLB and the NRP's report into the picture. This group's belief system favors the minority students who will benefit from SSR with intervention. They will profit from the modeling of the teacher and some form of an adult-led literacy or social conversation in the classes. However, there are also many authors who will earn revenues by recommending books they themselves have written. For example, Marilyn Reynolds writes teen novels for troubled adolescents. Jim Trelease has written books that promote read-alouds from books he recommends, thereby creating a market for his own books. However, the good reader will be penalized by being accountable for his reading just because someone else needs intervention and support. This reader might end up being disenfranchised because of unnecessary supervision and accountability measures. Much of the research in this group comes from individual teachers who want to keep administrative forces and government interference out of their classrooms.

National Reading Panel Report and SSR with no Significant Impact on Reading Practices

SSR is scarcely mentioned in National Reading Panel's federally funded study of reading practices. Most of the studies that made through all the filters in place by NRP, only about fourteen were selected the first time and then those studies were further trimmed, most of which were conducted in the 80s. This report encouraged many schools to discontinue using SSR because the report raised the specter of some students who are not engaged in reading during SSR time. Collins' (1980) analysis of the impact of SSR on the reading achievement of 220 students from ten classrooms in grades 2-6 for fifteen weeks did not show any significant differences in vocabulary or comprehension when they were administered various standardized tests to measure the reading growth.

When Reutzel and Hollingsworth (1991) compared reading practices of sixty-one 5th graders and fifty-three 6th graders, they found no significant difference between skill and drill and SSR. Langford and Allen (1983) scrutinized the impact of SSR on the reading attitudes and achievement of eleven 5th and 6th graders. The results showed that the SSR group had performed slightly better in word reading, but the data was not statistically significant. Furthermore, the data did not reveal any significant differences in reading attitudes because of the intervention. Rosenshine and Stevens (1984) identify behaviors such as "day-dreaming, socializing, doodling, not paying attention, sharpening pencils, and the like" as being indicative of non-engagement (p. 78).

Overall, in this group, researchers reported growth in some areas but not in others. Some other studies found no differences in the experimental and control groups in reading comprehension (Holt and O'Tuel, 1989; Cline and Kretke, 1980).

In conclusion, most of these studies, that the National Reading Panel used to draw its conclusion, suggested that reading comprehension and/or fluency did not improve and stayed static. They disregarded all the studies that showed positive results in fluency, vocabulary enhancement, or comprehension augmentation. In fact, when NRP stated that the results were the same between skill and drill and SSR and reported this in very neutral tone, this information should have been looked upon favorably. Instead of spending millions of dollars on skill and drill programs, the kids should be given the opportunity to read on their own, because that

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will be cheaper, more enjoyable, and in the long run make more kids life-long readers. However, by stating that the Panel did not find any statistically significant improvement when teachers used SSR, this group disempowered teachers and students both.

Moreover, this group further exacerbates the problem by recommending that phonics teaching and guided oral reading are the ways to improve reading and fluency. In the wake of this report, textbook companies are investing thousands of dollars in reading packaged programs, such as A to Z, Reading First, Fast Forward, and Achieve 3000. Each of these programs claims that it is the only program to prepare our students for the demands of 21st century. There is an influx of and leaning towards scripted lessons. Indianapolis Public Schools and Warren Schools have both used and continue to use scripted programs in many of their elementary, middle, and high schools (personal experience and interview with a teacher (anonymous) from Warren High School). In addition, NRP did not conduct its own studies that could be more scientifically controlled. The Panel used pre-existing studies whose intentions or methodologies might originally have had a different purpose.

Conclusion

As a response to the NRP report, Edmondson and Shannon (2002) state So, apparently we are out of step with our teaching because we recommend and use many practices that have not been validated by NICHD studies or the panel's selective logic. It is quite easy for us to justify being out of step, when the one who pays the fiddler and calls the tune hasn't helped many children learn to read. Yet many children *have* learned to read well by finding the time during the school day to read a good book. We know because we've watched some do it" (p. 454).

Much of the literature reviewed suggests that there is ample evidence to promote some kind of silent or sustained reading for a particular period of time on a daily basis or few times a week for pleasure alone. However, in the aftermath of NRP Report, NCLB, and during these days of curriculum covering, benchmarks and standardized testing, in order to convince the administrators and legislators, more research is needed to find out what methods will work best in the interest of about 8 million struggling students to help them achieve 21st century literacy skills. So, there is obviously a serious lack of understanding on the part of many administrators, teachers, and researchers who disagree about the success of SSR, or the methodology in implementation of SSR. We are still asking questions about how long the SSR period should last. How many days should it be implemented? Should it be rewarded or have accountability measures to make it successful?

With thousands of students dropping out of high schools everyday (All4ed), we need to make sure that we bring some kind of relevance back to the classroom. Deborah Hicks (2001) in her article, "Literacies and Masculinities in the Life of a Young Working-Class Boy," discusses the personality of a young boy, Jake, who takes on the literacies of his home but is reluctant to read because he cannot "hybridize these literacies" to develop a reader's identity and "do" (p. 433) the school right. I believe that giving the students choice and opportunities to read extensively, the education community will be giving these children new avenues to explore this world to "read the word to read the world" (Friere, 2007).

Finally, research still shows that reading for fun has the added benefit of having access to books. It, as mentioned earlier, connects with aggrandized vocabulary beyond the zip code of where the children live.

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Reading nonfiction is valuable, but recent research has pointed that reading fiction helps build background knowledge and cements memory in keeping information that connects one event to the other and cause and effect issues. "SSR can also offer a calm, contemplative start to the school day, or an afternoon after a rowdy lunchtime. Reading lots can lead to more learning. Silent reading has value" (Quigley, 2020).

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