

Effectiveness of SSR in the Classroom

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Meaningful literacy is crucial to academic success as well as future success in life. A goal of educators, therefore, should be not only to teach children to read but to help children become lifelong readers. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has long been touted as one method that teachers can use to foster a love of reading.

However, recent literature has cast some doubt on the effectiveness of SSR in the classroom (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Pennington, 2011; Trudel, 2007-08). These articles cite the findings of the National Reading Panel (NRP) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] (2000) suggesting that there is little evidence to support the efficacy of silent reading in the classroom. In these articles, teachers also frustratingly noted that many of the students in their classrooms were daydreaming, “pretend reading,” or lackadaisically searching for a book to read rather than actively engaging with literature during silent reading time.

So what is the role of silent reading in the classroom? Is it effective? Does it accomplish the goals which are intended? Current literature relating to the effectiveness of silent reading in the classroom is polarizing and varied in context. Yet several themes emerge from the literature assessed: the various forms of implementation of silent reading in today’s classrooms, the complexities of research-based evidence for silent reading, and the necessity of independent reading. This article will explore these themes with regard to their implications for silent reading in the classroom.

Implementation of Silent Reading

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is perhaps the most well-known form of silent reading in the classroom (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Trudel, 2007). The premise of SSR is simple. Students are given a block of time, usually between fifteen and thirty minutes, to read materials of

their own choosing with little to no instructional intervention or assessment (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Krashen, 2006; Pennington, 2011; Trudel, 2007-08). In traditional SSR, teachers model literacy for the class by reading their own books for pleasure during the SSR block (Krashen, 2006). Much SSR occurs with no interruptions and no follow-up activities. SSR may operate under several different pseudonyms: self-selected reading, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), or free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2006).

There also are variations of this method. Garan and DeVogd (2008) describe implementation of SSR as occurring “along a continuum” (p. 337). In response to concerns over student engagement, appropriate text selection, and thoughtful literacy, educators have developed more structured forms of SSR. In today’s classrooms, many teachers engage in discussion with students about their reading rather than concurrently reading on their own, some teachers monitor students’ reading through checklists and reading logs, and some utilize response activities to check comprehension and support meaningful literacy dialogue. As cited in Garan and DeVogd (2008), (ScSR) (Reutzel et al., 2008) is one of these variations that incorporates guided text selections, teacher conferences, and response activities. Similar to ScSR, Trudel (2007) cites Fountas and Pinnell (2001) as providing the elements she used to implement structured Independent Reading (IR) in her classroom. In structured IR, readers keep reading logs and reflect upon their reading through discussions, conferences, and written responses; teachers guide students’ text selections, lead mini-lessons and discussions, and model reading strategies during individual conferences. Students still engage in silent reading, but the teacher serves as the “support network” (Trudel, 2007, p. 309). R⁵ is another adaptation of SSR, developed by Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006). In R⁵, students Read and Relax: enjoy self-selected material while the teacher monitors and guides as necessary; Reflect and Respond: students log their reading and write a brief response to a

selected reflective prompt; and Rap: active sharing and listening first with a peer and then with the whole class (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

No matter how it is implemented or what name it is given, the goal of SSR is to encourage reading, increase motivation for reading, and give students time to practice independent reading (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Krashen, 2006). Formats that also incorporate reflection and discussion are designed to extend thinking, deepen understandings, and support greater metacognitive awareness (Garan & DeVogd, 2008; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Trudel, 2007).

Complexities of Research-Based Evidence

The findings of the National Reading Panel regarding insufficient evidence for SSR's efficacy are concerning: If little evidence was found to support the effectiveness of silent reading in the classroom, then is SSR entirely worthless? Some educators, administrators, and researchers have taken the NRP report to indicate that silent reading has no place in the classroom (Garan & DeVogd, 2008; Trudel, 2007). In fact, Krashen (2006) recounts that many educators have seen an "elimination of SSR programs and reduced library funding" in light of the NRP's findings (p. 44). Pennington (2011) argues that SSR in the classroom should be abandoned due to its "questionable research base" (Section 1).

Yet the NRP has been severely criticized for flaws in its research methodology, analysis, and reporting of its findings related to SSR (Garan & DeVogd, 2008; Krashen, 2006). Many critics argue that the NRP excluded a multitude of studies because they were not experimental in nature (i.e., qualitative or correlational) and/or did not fit the panel's "narrow, questionable selection criteria" (Garan & DeVogd, 2008, p. 337). In addition, critics assert that SSR was investigated as a subgroup of fluency rather than a part of comprehension, rendering its analysis

unsuitable (Garan & DeVogd, 2008). Furthermore, misinterpretations have been applied to the panel's findings and its definition of SSR. Garan and DeVogd (2008) point out that the panel "did not draw any conclusions one way or the other about SSR" (p. 338). They validate this with a quote from the NRP report:

It should be made clear that these findings [on the effectiveness of SSR] do not negate the positive influence SSR *may* have on reading fluency, nor do the findings negate the possibility that wide independent reading significantly influences vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Rather, there are simply not sufficient data from well-designed studies capable of testing questions of causation to substantiate causal claims. (NICHD, 2000, p. 13, as quoted in Garan & DeVogd, 2008, p. 338)

Contested research is not a phenomenon unique to the NRP, or to SSR. Educational research as a whole is inherently complex. In fact, Garan and DeVogd (2008) point out a "slipperiness" in educational research (p. 337). They continue: "Classrooms are not laboratories. Therefore, conditions cannot be controlled or variables completely refined" (p. 337). Because of the wide variety of implementation of SSR, as well as individual teachers' unique ideology and teaching styles, even defining SSR and normalizing it throughout a study can be challenging for research. Allington (2012) confirms this when he states: "Educational research is a slippery beast" (p. 14). Independent, rigorous, well-controlled, empirical studies are difficult to ascertain in a field with a myriad factors of influence. Allington (2012) also states that it is nearly "impossible to control for school, teacher, and community effects that might bias the outcome" (p. 33). These writers do not advocate for dismissing research; however, it should be approached with a judicious eye. Garan and DeVogd (2008) and Allington (2012) affirm that much has been learned through educational research about effective reading instruction and that this knowledge is a critical guide for practice.

Necessity of Independent Reading

Despite the controversy over the NRP's report, independent reading remains a necessity. Skillful reading and writing are critical not only to academic success, but also to success in life. The Anchor Standards for College and Career Readiness in Reading of the Common Core State Standards Initiative declare that students will “acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, *which are essential to their future success*” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, “Note on range and content of student reading,”; emphasis added). Allington (2012), Garan & DeVogd (2008), and Krashen (2006) cite a multitude of studies, excluded from the NRP report or subsequent to it, indicating that wide reading increases students' reading achievement. Krashen's (2006) reviews of the research lead him to assert 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). This is because independent reading is reading of continuous text. It is authentic and purposeful. Therefore, independent reading is vitally important for skillful reading and language development. Miller (2009) underscores this when she states:

No matter how long students spend engaged in direct reading instruction, without time to apply what they learn in the context of real reading events, students will never build capacity as readers. Without spending increasingly longer periods of time reading, they won't build endurance as readers, either. Students need time to read and time to be readers. (p. 51)

Even Pennington (2011), who argues against SSR in the classroom, doesn't contest the importance of independent reading. He writes, “Independent reading is vital to reading improvement” (para. 1). But he does provide eight reasons why he believes SSR is not effective.

His argument sheds light on the controversy surrounding SSR. The question is not “Should we advocate for silent reading?” but “How should we put it into practice?”

Implications for Practice

This brings us back to the first theme apparent in the literature. SSR is a name widely used for a variety of forms of independent reading. Each implementation has its advantages and disadvantages. As described by Krashen (2006), traditional SSR lets students choose to read “essentially whatever they want (within reason!)” without concern over grades and assignments (p. 43). Students can choose to abandon materials they are not enjoying and pick up something else. Miller (2009) observes that students who are avid readers at home don’t have to switch between the literature they choose to read at home and materials they’re required to read at school. In other words, it allows students to read for pleasure (Krashen, 2006). While Krashen (2006) notes that reading for pleasure cannot be the *only* method students apply to advance as readers, he states: “Children who don’t read for pleasure have an extremely tough time developing the language and literacy competencies necessary to succeed in today’s world” (p. 43). Reading for pleasure is also paramount in increasing students’ motivation for reading. Miller explains:

Since making independent reading the core of the reading program in my classroom, I have witnessed an increase in student achievement as well as a sharp increase in student motivation and engagement.... Even if traditional instruction were able to provide equivalent gains, the improvement in students’ attitude toward reading would be cause enough to devote substantial time to independent reading. (p. 51-52)

Some teachers have identified disadvantages to traditional SSR. First is a lack of accountability; students may not actually be reading when they are supposed to be reading. Opponents of SSR point out that students may not have the basic decoding and fluency skills to

skillfully read on their own or students may consistently choose literature that is far above or below their instructional reading levels. Furthermore, traditional SSR often lacks conversational or response components that encourage thoughtful literacy (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2006; Trudel, 2007; Pennington, 2011).

More structured approaches to SSR may overcome these obstacles. As described previously, Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) and Trudel (2007) implemented methods that hold students accountable for their reading, such as logs and comprehension checks. Teacher-student conferences, peer sharing, and written responses promote reflective reading and social learning. Mini-lessons and conferences assist students in strategy use and metacognitive awareness. Guiding students in their text selections may help students utilize materials that target their instructional reading levels. Students who struggle with decoding or fluency can be encouraged to buddy-read or whisper-read (Garan & DeVogd, 2008).

Rather than adjusting SSR to suit the needs of the learners, Pennington (2011) proposes an alternative for independent reading. He contends that while “incidental learning” may take place during SSR, it is not an efficient use of class time nor is it a responsible application of a teacher’s expertise (Pennington, 2011, section 4: “SSR is not teaching”). He argues that since SSR is not backed by research, educators should abandon SSR to teach other things they value. He advocates assigning independent reading as homework with required discussion with a reading partner, such as a parent, older sibling, or child care provider. In addition, the independent reading must be within the student’s instructional reading level, consist of a wide range of genres, and be approved by the teacher and parent. These measures accomplish the goal of independent reading, while providing the social-cognitive benefits of thoughtful discussion and ensuring that students are using reading material which will enhance optimal growth (Pennington, 2011).

However, Miller (2009) cautions that too much structure can serve to demotivate readers: it discourages student autonomy and makes reading all about the teacher's requirements rather than the reader's personal interaction with the text. She recommends utilizing conferences, reading plans, and reader response that mimic the kind of natural book talk in which adult readers engage. Further, Miller (2009) states that if educators really value reading, "setting aside time for reading must be the first activity we teachers write in our lesson plans" (p. 52).

So which single method is most effective for all classrooms? That is a question that cannot be answered. In the words of Allington (2012):

In any school...you have a horde of students who differ in innumerable ways and a cluster of teachers who also differ in a myriad of ways. Expecting any method, material, or program to work equally well with every kid in every classroom is nonsensical. (p. 42)

Every student has different learning needs. And every teacher has varying beliefs, ideologies, and teaching methods. Therefore, each classroom teacher must examine which methods will be most effective to achieve the goals he or she has set for independent reading within the scope of his or her total reading instruction.

Conclusion

The literature assessed in this paper presents only a fraction of the attention that has been devoted to silent reading in the classroom. Silent reading is comprised of many variations, from a traditional free reading approach to more structured, teacher-guided approaches. Research-based evidence on the effectiveness of silent reading is complex and polarizing. Yet skillful independent reading is critical to the success of our students. It is clear further research that is well-designed and unbiased must take place to examine how the educational world can best meet the needs of every learner. This cannot stem from a "one-size-fits-all" mentality. Every teacher is unique; every

learner is unique. The goal must be to assist educators in identifying how to best help each individual become a thoughtful, lifelong reader.

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