

Free Reading

By Stephen Krashen -- School Library Journal, 09/01/2006

If there were a surefire way to help kids become more literate, would you ignore it? Of course not. But that's exactly what's happening across much of our nation. Try searching the literacy information that's available from your state's department of education, and you will be lucky to find a single mention of this method. Or peruse the National Reading Panel's 2000 report, a federally funded study of research-based reading practices, and you'll discover that this approach is scarcely mentioned. What technique am I talking about? It's called free voluntary reading, and it may be the only way to help children become better readers, writers, and spellers.

Free voluntary reading, or reading because you want to, is the kind of recreational reading that most mature readers do most every day. In schools, this approach is often called sustained silent reading, or SSR. Although some educators and parents think that students who read for pleasure are "merely enjoying themselves," there's a huge amount of research that supports the importance of free voluntary reading. In fact, 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. The secret of its effectiveness is simple: children become better readers by reading. Is free voluntary reading the only program students will ever need to become accomplished readers? No. But research has shown that 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.

How does SSR work? In SSR, we take anywhere from five to 10 or 15 minutes out of each school day, usually during language arts class, and let students read essentially whatever they want (within reason!), including comics, catalogs, manuals, graphic novels, and magazines. There are no book reports, no assignments, and no grades. And students aren't required to finish their selections if they don't want to: they're free to choose something else to read. During SSR time, library media specialists and teachers also read for pleasure.

Instead of making learning to read a pleasure by embracing SSR, we've made it a pain by subjecting youngsters to massive doses of phonics instruction. But the real challenge of transforming today's children into competent readers isn't about teaching them the basics (sooner or later, nearly all children get them). It's about helping students develop richer vocabularies, understand complex oral and written language, and become proficient writers and reasonably accurate spellers. In other words, it's about moving children to higher levels of literacy.

The agony and the evidence

Over the past 20 years, I've reviewed scores of studies that have compared students in classes that include SSR with those that don't, and I'm confident that children who read for pleasure do as well or better than their SSR-deprived peers. And the longer the program, the greater the gains. In eight out of 10 studies that tracked pupils in long-term SSR programs of 12 months or more, students who read recreationally outperformed their counterparts in classes that lacked leisure reading—and in the other two studies, there was no difference between the two groups.

Research has also shown that SSR is at least as effective as conventional teaching methods in helping children acquire those aspects of reading that are measured by standardized tests, and pleasure reading provides a great deal that these tests don't measure. Study after study has confirmed that those who read more know more about a wide variety of topics. Plus, according to both students and teachers, SSR is a much more pleasant approach than regular skill-building instruction.

The most negative research result one comes across is that some SSR and comparison groups make the same gains. For the most part, studies that show no difference between the two groups are short-term, some lasting as little as eight to 10 weeks. Many short-term SSR programs are effective, but there's a good reason these programs aren't even more successful. It takes readers time to find a book that's right for them and that leaves students with less time for reading. When we give readers more time, the results strongly favor SSR.

The federal government disagrees. The National Reading Panel (NRP) report devoted only about six of its 600 pages to recreational reading, declaring that just 14 studies met its review criteria, which include that the study must have been published in English in a peer-reviewed journal and it must "focus directly on children's reading development from preschool through grade 12." (By my count, there were more than 60 studies that should have qualified.) NRP reported that sustained silent reading was better than traditional instruction in four of those studies, and there was no difference in the remaining 10. That's not a negative finding—it simply shows that SSR is as good as traditional instruction and, at times, superior. Yet the report concluded that "the handful of experimental studies" in which voluntary reading was encouraged "raise serious questions" about its efficacy.

NRP's report is seriously flawed. For instance, it overlooked many studies of effective, long-term SSR programs as well as the importance of recreational reading for students in English as a Second Language classes. I've also been told by educators who attend my workshops that NRP's findings on recreational reading have led to the elimination of SSR programs and reduced library funding. What follows are a few of the many notable SSR studies that NRP missed.

During the last four decades, there has been overwhelming evidence that SSR works. One seminal study that should have been included in the report is described in Daniel Fader and Elton McNeil's *Hooked on Books: Program & Proof* (Putnam, 1966). Fader, a former professor of English language and literature at the University of Michigan, and his colleague, McNeil, encouraged adolescent boys in reform school to read newspapers, magazines, and paperback books and to talk about their readings in class. After one year, the researchers discovered the boys' reading comprehension scores on the Scholastic Achievement Test had increased by more than an entire grade level, or twice as much as the scores of those students who didn't read for

pleasure. How hooked on books were these recreational readers? Fader saw some of them reading in the bleachers at basketball games, instead of keeping their eyes on the action!

NRP also skipped over a 1983 study by Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai, which showed that free voluntary reading has a powerful effect on second-language learners. Elley, of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and Mangubhai, of the University of the South Pacific, studied fourth- and fifth-grade Fiji Island students who were learning English, with daily classes of 30 minutes. The students were divided into three groups: the first was taught with traditional methods that emphasized drill, repetition, and grammar; the second engaged in free reading for the entire half-hour period; and the third group participated in what we call “big books”—a method in which the teacher reads an enlarged version of a good book to the class several times and then students discuss, draw, enact, and read the story together, before eventually writing their own versions of the tale. After two years, the free-reading and shared-reading groups were far superior to the traditional group on tests of reading comprehension, writing, and grammar.

Elley replicated these findings eight years later in Singapore, following roughly 3,000 children, ages six through nine, in programs that combined shared reading, free reading, and language experience (an approach in which children dictate their stories to teachers, who then write out the texts for the students to read). At first, parents and some administrators were concerned that these children wouldn’t do well on tests. They needn’t have worried. Over the course of the studies—from one to three years—the free-reading students outperformed their traditionally taught peers on tests of reading and listening comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, grammar, and writing.

Another key study that NRP’s report omitted was Fay Shin’s 2001 examination of the impact of a special summer program on struggling sixth-grade readers. Shin, an associate professor at California State University, Long Beach, used the bulk of her grant money to buy comic books and books from R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* series—materials that would appeal to these middle schoolers living in California’s San Joaquin Valley. The students did SSR for two hours a day, talked about their books among themselves, met with teachers for individual conferences, and also discussed selected novels, such as *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (Houghton, 1960) by Scott O’Dell. Another group of students followed the school’s standard language-arts curriculum. At the end of the sessions, when students took the Nelson-Denny Test, a nationally normed test, both groups made the same gains on the vocabulary section. But those in the free-reading group did much better than their peers on the comprehension section, gaining more than one year after just five and a half weeks of reading. They also gained about five months on the Altos test of reading comprehension and vocabulary, while the scores of children in the comparison group declined slightly.

Have books, will read

If free voluntary reading is so good for children, how can we get them to do it? The best way is by making it easy for children to get their hands on books. Many studies have shown that children with more access to books read more, and as we have seen, those who read more, read better.

A study by Jeff McQuillan strongly confirms this “more access > more reading > better reading” relationship. McQuillan examined predictors of performance on the fourth-grade version of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading examination, given to children in 41 states. McQuillan discovered that there was a very strong correlation between an individual state’s average NAEP score and its students’ access to books. The study took into account the quality of public and school libraries and the number of books available in students’ homes. McQuillan concluded that if children had access to reading materials from any of these sources, they would be much more likely to become successful readers. And that finding was statistically significant even when McQuillan factored in the effects of poverty: among groups of children living with equal levels of poverty, those with access to books do better than those without.

Schools can undo at least some of the effects of poverty by providing children with books. But thus far, schools have not only failed to level the playing field between affluent and poor schools, they’ve actually made the disparity worse. Studies have shown that children from low-income families attend schools with inferior classroom and school libraries. The school libraries available to children in low-income neighborhoods are open fewer hours, have fewer books (and allow fewer books to be taken out), are less likely to contain reading materials that children are really interested in, and are less likely to be staffed by a certified librarian. In several studies, Keith Curry Lance and his colleagues have found that the presence of a certified librarian was related to higher reading scores (for more on Lance’s studies, see “Dick and Jane Go to the Head of the Class,” April 2000, pp. 44–47, or [click here](#)).

To help children get beyond the basics, we need to make sure they have easy access to books. For children of poverty, libraries are their only chance. To paraphrase what researchers Elley and Mangubhai said more than two decades ago, instead of making pious pronouncements about the importance of literacy and investing more in measuring the problem, we need to make the most obvious and reasonable investment—and that means improving libraries for children who need them the most, children of poverty. Encouraging students to read for pleasure and providing them with interesting reading materials may not guarantee that every child will become a dedicated, highly literate reader, but it’s clearly a necessary step in the right direction.

The Secret of Her Success

Elizabeth Hamming thought she’d give SSR a shot. It was Read Across America Day and Hamming, a librarian at Lynden High School in Washington, had persuaded her school to read for pleasure... for all of 30 minutes. The experience was such an unexpected hit that Hamming soon launched a weekly schoolwide program. Now, three years later, everyone, from the custodian to the coach to the kids does SSR twice a week, for 20 minutes a session. *SLJ* caught up with Hamming and asked her what advice she would offer media specialists eager to set up their own free reading programs. Most of her recommendations come from *The SSR Handbook* (Boynton/Cook, 2000) by Janice Pilgreen, with a forward by Stephen Krashen. Here are Hamming’s 10 tips:

- 1. Get your boss on board.** “The principal’s support is absolutely crucial,” says Hamming.
- 2. Share the research.** Make sure your colleagues know that pleasure reading “results in significant increases in every aspect of literacy.”
- 3. Consistently set aside time for SSR...** even if that means starting small. With one struggling class, Hamming began with just seven minutes of SSR each day and gradually increased the amount of time to 25 minutes daily.
- 4. Learn to live with occasional failure and discomfort.** Students may forget their books, and there will be teachers who aren’t crazy about the program. Be patient and gently persistent.
- 5. Make it a cinch for students to get their hands on good books.** It’s impossible to overstate the importance of this point.
- 6. Find out what really appeals to kids.** Hamming conducted a building-wide survey to determine students’ interests—and then bought a couple hundred dollars’ worth of reading materials that reflected their passions.
- 7. Invest in in-class libraries.** “This has been key for a lot of teachers,” says Hamming.
- 8. Create a kid-friendly reading environment.** It’s fine for students to slouch at their desks while reading or, depending upon your classroom or library, to stretch out on the floor and get comfy—but “you’ve got to watch that they’re not falling asleep,” cautions Hamming.
- 9. Constantly encourage colleagues and students.** Let teachers know that the program is voluntary and pleasurable, and there’s no testing or book reports. That “has to be constantly reinforced,” says Hamming, “because we’re so programmed to evaluate.” It’s also fine to sometimes use SSR time to talk to students about their books and to recommend other titles you think they’ll love.
- 10. Be a super model.** It’s important for kids to see you reading something you enjoy—rather than marking papers or entering grades.

Author Information

Stephen Krashen is the author of The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research, second edition (Libraries Unlimited, 2004).

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