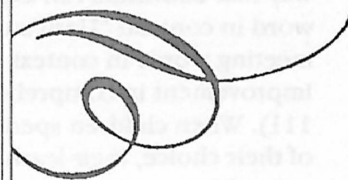


SUSTAINED SILENT READING: WHAT COULD IT LOOK LIKE IN YOUR SCHOOL?

by Anne Marie Moser



“Reading is a skill for life, and if students do not learn to enjoy reading, they are cheated of a vital part of their education.” ~ Steve Gardiner (2005, p. 69)

Enjoy reading? Unless we are living within a bubble of enthusiastic student readers, the answer to this question may be a resounding “no.” Children who love to read seem to enjoy it almost inherently, while most other students tend to become distant when asked to read, whether it is for class or for pleasure. How can we, then, as school librarians engage our students and partner with teachers to help students enjoy reading?

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINED SILENT READING

Sustained silent reading (SSR) is one way that has been tried and tested in schools across the United States as a way to encourage reading. Proposed over 30 years ago by Lymon C. Hunt, Jr. (Trelease, 2001, p. 109), SSR in its purest form has eight main factors or components:

- 1) Access – materials in a variety of formats are provided for students
- 2) Appeal – reading materials are of interest to the students
- 3) Environment – comfortable, quiet setting is provided for reading
- 4) Encouragement – teachers model the reading behavior, recommend appropriate materials, and explain the benefits of reading
- 5) Staff Training – learning the philosophy of SSR and creating practical guidelines for individual class rooms
- 6) Non-Accountability – SSR should be non-threatening, and a time for pleasure reading, not earning credit or a grade
- 7) Follow-up Activities – activities that carry over students’ excitement about reading onto other subjects

- 8) Distributed Time to Read – SSR time should be offered on a regular basis (even for small blocks of time), rather than large blocks of time every so often. (Adapted from Pilgreen, 2003, p. 43)

Although this model may seem daunting, it comes down to offering interesting and level appropriate reading materials, modeling reading behaviors by reading while the students read, and helping teachers interact with their students through conversation or extension exercises. As Gardiner (2005) states, “We don’t need to spend a lot of money or design complicated programs to help students learn to enjoy reading; we just need to give them time to learn that reading can be enjoyable” (p. 67). Too often it seems that reading in the classroom is a means only to an end: a student reads to gain information on a certain topic. The joy of the process of getting that information, essentially reading, is overlooked in the hurry to complete assignments and “check things off a list.”

CRITICISM AND PRAISE FOR SSR

Despite recent criticism, SSR has proven to be an effective tool in today’s classrooms. One of the most recent attacks against SSR was the 2001 National Reading Panel (NRP) report that states that research:

“...has not yet confirmed whether independent silent reading with minimal guidance or feedback improves reading achievement and fluency...the research suggests that there are more beneficial ways to spend reading instructional time than to have students read independently in the classroom without instruction.” (p. 3-1)

However, critics of this report, including panel members themselves, immediately spoke out against the methods used to make such statements and have since written several articles debunking the argument of a lack of research supporting SSR. Stephen Krashen (2005) has defended SSR most vocally, stating that the NRP simply missed substantial evidence of the successfulness and utility of SSR. In his own research, Krashen determined that 93 percent of the SSR students did as

well as or even better than students having no SSR time (Trelease, 2001, p. 110). Jim Trelease (2001), author and well-known literacy advocate, asserts that SSR is a way that educators can expose children to the written word in context: "Until students spend more time meeting words in context (reading), there can be no improvement in comprehension or reading speed" (p. 111). When children spend more time reading material of their choice, their learning experience becomes more enjoyable.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF SSR

There are other variations on SSR that have proved to be effective. Jodi Crum Marshall instituted a program in her school called Supporting Student Literacy which incorporated sustained silent reading, sustained silent writing, and reading aloud together in order to instill the qualities of literacy in students. She has found that these three elements working in tandem help students truly connect with what they are reading, and in turn, engage with the text and with each other during the class periods. Marshall (2002) asserts that reading aloud especially helps create incentive for reading: "Hearing short stories, poems, newspaper and magazine articles and excerpts from books provides the spark struggling readers need to explore reading on their own" (p. xvi). In her opinion, allowing children the time to read, in isolation of other activities, will not work with every student so it is important to use a more structured literacy program to provide tools for those reading experiences (Marshall, 2002).

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH MEAN FOR YOUR SCHOOL AND LIBRARY?

Matching readers with books

School librarians can play a major part in the SSR program at their schools. One of the main components, and perhaps one of the most difficult to fulfill, is the need for teachers (and librarians) to recommend and provide appealing and level-appropriate reading materials for their students. This cannot happen effectively if the professionals do not know what their students enjoy. Many students, not being avid readers themselves, do not know where to begin when given the choice to choose a book. As librarians, we can help our students and our fellow teachers decide what book is "just right." In her article "Perfect Match," Rebecca Clements (2002) discusses her experiences as a teacher trying to link her students with that "perfect" book. Some of the methods she incorporates in her classroom are reading surveys and class discussions on what students liked and disliked in books. Initiating a conversation with students about their interests, what they like to do at home, watch on TV, or read about, is

often the first step in deciding what type of book they would like to read. School librarians can offer this vital service to students by building conversations around books and topics in which the students are interested.

Being a role model

School librarians have the unique opportunity to promote reading in their schools simply by doing what many of us love the most, by reading. Students who see and hear about the adults in their lives reading are more likely to perceive the importance of the activity. In line with the role modeling theory of Albert Bandura, Yoon (2002) states that "a given behavior modeled by parents, teachers, peers, or celebrities may facilitate their learning of it. For this lens, showing a reading behavior to them may be one of the most important sources of developing their attitude toward reading" (p. 188).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, to get a resounding "yes" from students who are asked if they enjoy reading, try the following concepts of SSR:

- Modeling – students see you read, they hear you talk about reading (personal interest material – not necessarily what you are SUPPOSED to read)
- Encouraging and initiating conversation – encourage students to talk about what they read, about what they like or dislike about particular books, and share with them what you enjoy reading
- Providing stability in the schedule – a stable schedule encourages students to anticipate reading time
- Experimenting with the types of books and materials that are offered - you might find a winner in an unlikely source such as a magazine, comic book, newspaper, or graphic novel
- Knowing your students. Yes, research is good and will tell you what other people have tried and succeeded with, but each classroom is distinctive and you have the opportunity to provide unique teaching strategies. Adapt the suggested programs with what you believe will work for your school and/or classroom and, most especially, for individual students.

ADDITIONAL READINGS ON THE TOPIC:

- Gardiner, S. (2005). *Building student literacy through sustained silent reading*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
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