

Do Students Read During Sustained Silent Reading?

The authors investigate students' reading during SSR at the middle school level.



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A common complaint about sustained silent reading is that many students don't read; they spend the time flipping the page of a book, pretending to read, or simply staring off into space. This observation is occasionally used as an argument against SSR: why bother having SSR if students don't read? It is also used as an argument in favor of reading incentives: Without rewards, it is maintained, students will not read. This is a first attempt to determine if a significant number of students do not read during SSR, and, if such students exist, what the causes might be.

We observed eleven language arts classes during SSR time at the middle school level (two sixth grade, three seventh grade, and six eighth grade classrooms). All classes except one were heterogeneous with regard to student performance and included some intermediate, but not beginning, acquirers of English as a second language; one seventh grade class (7c in Table 1) consisted of ESL students who were allowed to read in either English or their primary language. The middle school is located in a middle class suburb of Los Angeles, and has a school library with 3,445 volumes, well below the California average for junior high schools of 9,634 volumes and the national average of 9,697 volumes (White, 1990), resulting in about 4.5 books per student, also well below the state and national averages. A public library branch is, however, located across the street. About 14% of the student body is limited English proficient.

All classes were observed near the middle of the academic year, just before or just after the Winter break. Observations made at the beginning of the year, it was reasoned, would not give a true picture of reading activity, as students may not have been used to the routine

and may not have found reading material yet. Also, all observations began five minutes after SSR began, in order to allow students time to obtain a book and get settled.

Two observers, the school counselor and one of us (DVS) remained in each classroom for ten minutes, making one visit to each class. Students were determined to be actively reading if the following criteria were met:

- (1) They were silent with a book in front of them;
- (2) Their eyes were apparently moving from line to line and from page to page;
- (3) They appeared to turn pages of their book at a rate appropriate to the number of words on the page.

There was 100% agreement between the observers as to whether students were actually reading.

There were, in addition, other signs that children were really reading. Many students' expressions indicated comprehension, such as smiles, frowns, signs, biting lips, etc.. Also, observers noted students nudging other students, pointing out passages for them to read, and students were overheard whispering to each other about their reading. This kind of behavior was not recorded, but it was frequent.

Our results (Table 1) showed that most children, 90% of the total sample, were reading during SSR time, an encouraging result. Nevertheless, it was not 100%, and despite our small sample of classrooms, we were able to

make some progress in determining why reading was more common in some classes than in others. We were unable to investigate some factors: length of SSR was about the same in all classes, and the level of comfort (chairs) was similar in all classes. Table 1 analyzes the 11 classes in terms of factors that varied among the classes: number of books and magazines present in the class, whether the teacher read while the students were reading, whether students had to bring in their own books, and whether teachers made deliberate efforts to promote certain books.

Because of the small sample size, it was not appropriate to do a true multivariate analysis to determine which factors predicted greater involvement in reading. To get some idea whether the factors we included had predictive value, we assigned points as follows:

1. If a classroom included 400 books or more, it received one point. We based this figure on Smith, Constantino and Krashen (forthcoming), who found that the classroom libraries in Beverly Hills contained an average of 392 books, while those in Compton and Watts had about 50.
2. If the teacher was reading while the students were reading (FVR modeled), the classroom received one point. There is clear evidence that children read more in SSR when the teacher also reads (Wheldall and Entwistle, 1998).
3. If students were not required to bring their own books for SSR, the classroom received one point.

Table 1. Sustained silent reading in a middle school

| class | number of books | number of magazines | FVR modeled | students must bring own book | bookshare | percent reading | points |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|-------------|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------|
| 6a | 400 | 75 | no | no | yes | 93% (25/27) | 3 |
| 6b | 500 | | no | no | yes | 96% (25/26) | 3 |
| 7a | 22 | | no | yes | no | 80% (20/25) | 0 |
| 7b | 85 | 12 | yes | yes | no | 90% (19/21) | 0 |
| 7c | 58 | | yes | yes | no | 90% (18/20) | 0 |
| 8a | 70 | 40 | yes | no | no | 96% (22/23) | 1 |
| 8b | 12 | | no | no | yes | 96% (22/23) | 2 |
| 8c | 60 | 20 | yes | yes | no | 81% (13/16) | 0 |
| 8d | 8 | | yes | yes | no | 82% (14/17) | 1 |
| 8e | 100 | | yes | no | no | 86% (18/21) | 1 |
| 8f | 38 | | yes | no | no | 93% (25/27) | 1 |
| overall percentage reading = 90% (221/246) | | | | | | | |

4. If teachers made deliberate efforts to promote certain books (bookshare), the classroom received one point.

The correlation between the number of points a classroom received and the percentage of students reading was statistically significant and high ($\rho = .74$, corrected for ties, $p < .01$, one tail test), confirming that these factors do indeed play a role in encouraging reading. Our analysis however, was crude: It assumed that all factors had the same weight. It is very encouraging, however, that even in classes that received no or few points, at least 80% of the students were reading, consistent with the claims that free reading is an intrinsically pleasant activity that children will do if they have access to interesting reading material, time to read, and a place to read.

References

Wheldall, K. and Entwistle, J. (1988). Back in the USSR: The effect of teacher modeling of silent reading on pupils' reading behavior in the primary school classroom. *Educational Psychology*, 8, 51-66.

White, H. 1990. School library collections and services: Ranking the states. *School Library Media Quarterly*, 19, 13-26.

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