

**Non-Engagement in Sustained Silent Reading: How extensive is it? What can it teach us?**  
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The claim has been made that a disturbing percentage of children don't read during Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time: Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, and Smith (2008) state that "There has been a long-standing concern that some students may fail to make good use of SSR time" (p. 195) and the title of the book *Are They Really Reading?* (Marshall, 2002) presupposes that a significant amount of fake reading goes on during SSR. To deal with this problem, some authors claim that SSR must be supplemented by heavy monitoring to make sure students are really reading.

It would be odd to discover that large percentages of students are not engaged during SSR, because the research shows that students in classes that include SSR consistently outperform those in classes without SSR (Krashen, 2004; 2007). This would be impossible if students were not engaged in reading during SSR.

Mysteriously, few of the current SSR critics mention the enormous research support for SSR. The Great SSR Debate of the previous decade, stimulated by the National Reading Panel report, seems to have faded from memory. The only way we know that SSR won this battle is because claims that SSR doesn't work no longer appear with frequency in the professional literature. But these claims have been replaced with another, that many students don't read during SSR.

I will conclude in this paper that many of the studies cited in support of this claim generally don't support it, and sometimes show just the opposite. When there is real evidence of non-engagement, there is a plausible reason: The basic principles of SSR have been violated.

Reutzel et. al. (2008) provide a list of studies which they say show that many students are not engaged during SSR. We will examine their list study by study, then add a few more that make the same claim.

**The first group** consists of studies that provide no useful information on non-engagement.

Gambrell (1978) presents guidelines for doing SSR that, she suggests, will help keep students interested ("Even SSR can get stale after a while if a little variety and spice aren't added," p. 330), but does not present evidence demonstrating the presence of large numbers of non-readers, nor does she claim that it is a problem of major dimensions.

Moore, Jones and Miller (1980) hint at a problem with non-readers in SSR: "There are, of course, students who may not always be cooperative" (p. 449), and, as Gambrell does, suggest that "creative activities are necessary for maintaining enthusiasm" (p. 447), but do not provide any data that non-engagement is widespread other than this observation, nor do they claim that it is widespread.

Robertson, Keating, Shenton and Roberts (1996) carried out interviews with 17 teachers and did 18 class observations in nine schools in England, all claiming to be doing SSR. Despite variability in implementation of SSR, "The children, it was stated by all staff, enjoyed [SSR] generally, although one or two children found it difficult to conform and needed more support to keep on task" (p. 34). This is one or two children out of 19 classes, in nine different schools. One teacher, in fact, noted that one problem was "the difficulty of stopping" (p. 34).

Stahl (2004) questions whether children in SSR actually engage in reading. He cites his own observations of one pair of children "who were taking turns and turning pages in a shared book, looking as if they were sharing reading. When I came close enough to listen to what they were saying, however, I heard them talking about what they were going to do that weekend" (p. 206).

First, Stahl is discussing shared reading, not sustained silent reading. Second, his conclusion was based on one observation of two children.

Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) claimed that many of their third graders "were fake reading" during SSR time, a nasty habit that they claimed they eliminated with rigorous control, monitoring, and required

reports. But Kelley and Clausen-Grace never tell us how serious the problem was. We only know that they had "a handful of fake readers who went through the motions of reading during SSR" (p. 151). We don't know how many were fake reading nor how long it lasted.

It is very hard to conclude much of anything about non-engagement from these studies.

### **Studies that provide actual evidence of non-engagement**

The second group of studies give us some reason to agree that students were not as engaged in reading as they should be. These studies also provide some plausible reasons why.

#### **Books too hard, little access, fear of evaluation**

Marshall (2002) discovered that "fake reading" was taking place in her SSR sessions with middle school students (grades 6,7 and 8). According to Marshall, "the majority of the students were not reading" (p. 20). Unfortunately, she does not provide more detail than this, but "a majority" is more than the "handful" noted in Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) above and is a cause for concern.

Seven weeks into the semester, she held an "open, honest whole-group discussion" and said: "I have a feeling some of you are not reading during our SSR time, and I would like to find out why. No one will get in trouble. I just want to hear from you so I can try to help, so everyone will want to read. Can you tell me what exactly is happening during our SSR times?" (pp.19-20).

Marshall's students told her why they were not reading: "... the main reason (they were not reading) was that I had provided them with books that were too difficult for them to read independently ...." (p. 20). Marshall discovered that her students were poor readers: Her sixth, seventh and eighth graders were reading at the fourth and fifth grade level (p. 32), had few books in their home (none had more than ten, p. 31), and had little experience with libraries and bookstores (p. 32, 33).

She also discovered that her practice of having group discussions in which she asked students "informal questions about what they were reading, whether they liked their books, and whether they had recommendations for others" (p. 6) was counterproductive; the discussions "made them feel as if they were being 'tested'" (p. 8).

#### **Too young, too early in the school year.**

Lee-Daniels and Murray (2000) noted that in DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), "...some students were not reading at all. Some were just scanning the books. Some constantly pointed out that they were bored. Some were reading, but they could not tell you what they had read" (p. 154).

Lee-Daniels and Murray mention that only a few were "intrinsically motivated" to read but do not tell us how many students were "not reading at all."

If it were the case that there were indeed a large percentage of non-readers, Lee-Daniels and Murray give us reason to suspect why: The students were second graders, which means many may not have been at the independent reading stage. Also, Lee-Daniels and Murray examined readers only three weeks after the school year began. Results might have been quite different if they had looked at the children in the middle of the year (see below).

#### **Dedicated readers who don't read during SSR: rigid conditions, distractions, finish every book, books not interesting**

Byran, Fawson and Reutzel (2003) is a detailed study of an intervention carried out with three fourth graders who were considered to be "unengaged" during SSR time. Byran et. al. provide some statistics: Eleven out of 24 children involved in the study were considered to be unengaged during SSR, which is definitely a cause for concern.

Interviews, however, revealed that all three of the children who were interviewed were clearly highly engaged readers. One even claimed that she "enjoyed silent reading time" and "was able to provide lengthy and specific descriptions of the books she was reading" (p. 59). All three had extensive knowledge of children's literature and one student, James, "was always reading more than one book ..." (p. 62).

The fact that these children were engaged readers on their own time but not during SSR strongly suggests that there was something seriously wrong with the SSR setup.

SSR was rigidly enforced: Students were not allowed to leave their desks during SSR time, and could get up only to select a book. Their desks had to be free of everything except the books they were reading (p. 56). Byran et. al. point out that "Despite school-wide posters requesting no disruptions during SSR time, disruptions were frequent, with people often entering and exiting the classroom. The teacher frequently served as the catalyst for these disruptions" (p. 53) and also added to the disruption by occasionally calling out to students to stop talking, etc. (p. 67).

Interviews with the students provides evidence that readers might have been forced to finish every book they started. One of the three students interviewed, James, was apparently not aware that he could discard a book that was not interesting for him and start another (p. 61).

Interviews also revealed that the books available to the children were not what they wanted to read. One student told the researchers that the books he wanted to read were "rarely available" in the school library as they were usually out on loan (p. 60).

When we consider the conditions for SSR imposed in the program, it is amazing that only 11 students were not engaged in reading.

Cipiti (2010) observed eighth graders in a once a week 20-minute SSR session for three successive weeks and reported a great deal of fake reading, which was confirmed by the self-report of the students on a questionnaire: Overall, 77% of the 25 students engaged in obvious fake reading.

The observations took place in February, suggesting that SSR had been going on for several months previous to Cipiti's observations. But other aspects of the organization of SSR may have contributed to the high fake reading rate. As was the case in Byran, Fawson and Reutzler (2003), an indication that this might be so is the existence of students who like to read outside of SSR but who are unengaged during SSR time: Of the three students interviewed, two were clearly engaged readers outside of school (Renee, Tristan). One the students interviewed, Tristan, told Cipiti that he used to be uninterested in reading but "one book changed it. It was a long book, but I read it in a couple of days though" (p. 64). Tristan had clearly found a "home run book" (Trelease, 2006).

For one of the students interviewed, the problem was comprehensibility: When asked what he liked to read, Timothy, said "he had trouble understanding the books he was trying to read in SSR" (p. 72), indicating that the selection of books was not right for him.

Another problem seemed to be access to interesting reading material:

First, only book reading was allowed (p. 36), which eliminates many forms of reading that eighth graders are attracted to, e.g. magazines, graphic novels.

Second, students were required to bring their own books to SSR. If they didn't bring their own book, they had to choose a book from two shelves of books in the classroom. But students didn't always remember to bring their own books, and the books on the shelves, according to one student, Tristan, were "usually uninteresting" (p. 64). This is supported by Cipiti's observation that "the majority of off-task students were either without a book, had picked a random book from the classroom library, or were reading a textbook ..." (p. 65).

Tristan agreed, saying that SSR should have "a better collection of books from which to choose" (p. 65). Throughout the entire interview with Tristan, "interest was the main topic" (p. 67). Cipiti concluded that "This strongly suggests that off-task behaviors during SSR can be significantly limited if students are

actually finding and reading books they find interesting" (p. 68).

Third, the sessions were only once a week (p. 36), and were long, 20 minutes.

## **Discussion**

I list below the factors that were present in the studies that provided evidence for non-engagement. The factors are violations of the guidelines that experienced teachers have suggested for SSR as well as results from other studies.

**Books not comprehensible.** This is the most obvious condition for successful SSR and was violated in Marshall (2002) and for at least one student in Cipiti (2010).

**Books not interesting** (Pilgreen, 2002; Guideline 2, Book Appeal; Gardiner, 2005, p. 74; Gallagher, 2009, p. 34, 84).

Interest is a crucial guideline for SSR programs: Books have to be interesting. In fact, it may be the case that reading material has to be more than interesting for literacy development and language acquisition to occur. It may be the case that they have to be compelling, so interesting that the reader is not even aware of what language he/she is reading in (Krashen, in press).

This guideline was violated in two ways in classrooms observed by Byran, Fawson and Reutzel (2003) and by Cipiti (2010): In both studies, students complained that the books available were not interesting, and students appeared to be required to finish any book they started, a sure-fire way to reduce and even eliminate interest in a text (see Miller, 2009 p. 24, 58, who advises students to abandon books that are "too hard or too boring" p. 58 and Atwell, 2007, who comments that "abandoning a book that a reader doesn't enjoy (is) a smart move, not a character defect," p. 17). Also, in Cipiti, only book reading was allowed, which might be a mistake in light of evidence that "lighter" reading can be of enormous benefit (Krashen, 2004; for arguments in favor of allowing only book reading, see Gardiner, 2005; pp. 35-36; Atwell, 2007; p. 123).

When students are required to bring their own books, as was the case in Cipiti (2010), the chances of finding reading material that is interesting and comprehensible is reduced: Students may forget their books, and are denied the chance to find new reading interests.

Von Sprecken and Krashen (1988) reported that more reading tended to take place in those classrooms in which more books were available in the classroom library and in which students were not required to bring their own books. (see also McQuillan et. al., 2001, p. 74: Classroom libraries were set up for high school students doing SSR "to give students who 'forgot' their book easy and direct access to reading materials.")

Finding the right books is clearly a crucial element in overcoming non-engagement. As one of Gardiner's students remarked, "I sometimes like SSR and I sometimes don't. When I find a good book that I actually like and enjoy, I love it and even read at home, but when I have problems finding a good book, I don't really like it" (Gardiner, 2005, p. 91). Combining this guideline with the previous one, McQuillan et. al. (2001) note that providing books that were "both appealing and comprehensible" was one of their "steps to progress" in their successful SSR program (p. 73).

**Rigid reading conditions.** Gambrell (1978) advised that SSR should be done in a comfortable environment and children should have a choice of where to read: "... you may have students decide *where* (within limits) they want to do their Sustained Silent Reading - some classrooms have great nooks and crannies which children much prefer over a desk and chair. Some students might like to go to the library for SSR if that can be arranged" (p. 331). (See also Pilgreen, 2000, guideline 3, Miller, 2009, pp. 50-51; Atwell, 2007, p. 24). This condition was clearly violated in the classroom Byran, Fawson and Reutzel (2003) observed.

**Non-accountability.** There will be more reading engagement if there is minimum or zero accountability: This is Pilgreen's sixth guideline (Pilgreen, 2000; see also Gardiner, 2005, p. 65) and was violated in Marshall (2002). The interesting aspect of Marshall's study is how easy it was to violate this guideline, as

Marshall did not intend to test students on what they read but only wanted to see if the students liked what they read. Even the perception of accountability can hurt SSR.

**Distributed, not massed.** Pilgreen's guideline eight is "Distributed time to read": A little each day is more effective than a lot all at once. (See also Gardiner, 2005; p. 73). This was violated in Cipiti (2010).

### **A methodological consideration.**

In one study showing lack of engagement, observations were made early in the school year (Lee-Daniels and Murray, 2000). It apparently takes some time for children to find the right books: Cohen (1999) observed 120 eighth grade students during SSR time over a two week period, and found that 94% were reading during SSR. She noted that enthusiasm for sustained silent reading was not high at the beginning of the school year, but increased after one or two months. Gardiner (2005) reported that "it is rare that a student will resist getting involved in silent reading beyond the second week" (p. 59), and McQuillan et. al. (2001) found that "by the end of the first six weeks, almost all students are actively reading books with little or no prompting from their teacher." Von Sprecken and Krashen (1998) also found high engagement, and observations were made in the middle of the school year.

Petre (1971) noted that non-engaged readers "do not read by force .. Sooner or later they pick up something from the available material. Readers are made gradually ..." (p. 194).

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this paper is not to provide a complete list of guidelines, but only to make the point that when a significant number of students are not engaged in reading during SSR, it is a sign that important guidelines for SSR has been violated. As several studies violated more than one guideline, this analysis does not provide conclusive evidence confirming the correctness of any particular guideline. Rather, the evidence is merely consistent with the claim that certain guidelines are correct, and is also consistent with the claim that "failure" of SSR, as manifested in non-engagement, is related to guideline violations.

If this is correct, it suggests that non-engagement should not result in harsher practices, such as close monitoring and increased accountability. Rather, non-engagement appears to be a sign that we are not doing SSR correctly, that we should pay more attention to the guidelines, which are, after all, very easy to follow.

This paper examined studies in which non-engagement was claimed to be present and only briefly mentioned SSR studies showing high engagement. (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 1998; Cohen, 1999 ; McQuillan et. al., 2001; see also Herda and Ramos, 2001). It also did not consider studies comparing the effectiveness of SSR and traditional methodology. Analysis of these studies should help us refine our conclusions and tell us which guidelines are indeed correct and whether some are more important than others.

### **Post-Script: Attempts to Increase Engagement**

Four studies described making changes in SSR procedures in order to increase engagement in reading. This is a positive step, but there is little we can conclude from several of these efforts. One, however, tells us a great deal.

In three of the studies, different changes were made in different studies and more than one change was made in each study, which means we cannot say which of the changes or combinations of changes were responsible for improvement. Marshall (2002) added read-alouds, writing, increased SSR time, made the conditions for reading for comfortable, did not force children to finish each book, helped more in book selection, set up a point system, and made more books available. Trudel (2007) added reading logs, mini-lessons and discussion. Lee-Daniels and Murray (2000) added shared reading, display charts and extrinsic rewards.

Second, in the same three studies, data on the changes in engagement was incomplete, although the results appear to be positive. According to Marshall, "more than half" of the students claimed they were reading more six months after the changes were made (p. 67). Unfortunately, we don't know how many were

reading the same and how many less. After Trudel (2007) made changes, "14 out of the 16 students increased their on-task percentage during silent reading" (p. 312), but Trudel does not provide details, and engagement was high before the changes were made, with students engaged an average of 84% of the time. (Trudel had, however, complained that some of her third and fourth graders spent some of the SSR time "occasionally reading but more frequently chatting and giggling" (p. 308).) Lee-Daniels and Murray (2000) noted that after changes were made two students said that it motivated them to read more (p. 155).

In contrast, Bryan et. al. carried out an intervention directed at helping the children find books that were comprehensible and interesting for them. This involved "literacy discussions" with their three subjects about what they liked to read, and resulted in a clear improvement in reading engagement during SSR. Bryan et. al. suggest that these kinds of discussions need to be part of SSR. Another view is that SSR needs to be part of a language arts approach that includes both time set aside for uninterrupted self-selected reading, as well as time devoted to discussion of books, both classics and contemporary books of interest that students select with the help and guidance of teachers, as described by Atwell (2007) and Miller (2009).

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