

Reading for Pleasure Matters Most

(Original title: Full-Functioning School Libraries: Even Better Than We Thought)

Stephen Krashen

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In a recent paper published in the Bookseller, Bayley (2022) quotes chief executive of the School Library Association, Alison Tarrant, as saying that “the full functioning school library ... “does reading for pleasure but also does reading for learning and information literacy...”.

Guess what? There is recent evidence showing that “reading for pleasure” makes a strong contribution to both “learning and information literacy” and language and literacy development.

First, language and literacy development.

Those who do more self-selected reading, as many of us know, spell better, have larger vocabularies, better grammar, write better, and of course read better, and several studies confirm that pleasure reading has a stronger effect on literacy development than formal “study” does. This has been widely documented (eg. Krashen, 2004).

An example (from Lin, Shin and Krashen, 2007): “Sophia” was a secondary school student, once classified as limited English proficient but eventually considered fluent in English. Her school administered an English reading test at the beginning of each academic year as well as the end, expecting an improvement over the course of the school year. Sophia, however, got worse, scoring lower in the spring than she had in the fall. But when she took the test again in the following fall, her score was clearly higher than it was in the fall the year before.

What did she do over the summer? Self-selected pleasure reading in English, books she found in the local public library, averaging about 50 books each summer. Early favorites were the Nancy Drew and the Sweet Valley High series, and Sophia then moved on the Christy Miller series and other books by Francine Pascal, the author of the Sweet Valley series. No book reports, and no “study”.

According to Sophia’s mother, Sophia was so busy with school work during the school year that she had very little free time for pleasure reading. Her mother joked that it might be a good idea to keep her daughter home during the school year so she could continue to improve on standardized tests of reading.

Pleasure reading as a source of knowledge

In addition to of the positive effect of pleasure reading on language development, we now know that self-selected pleasure reading is an important source of knowledge. Those who read more, know more.

The breakthrough study was done in 1993, by Stanovich and Cunningham. Subjects were first and second year university students in the US who were administered a series of tests designed to cover a number of topics, including science, social studies, current events, personal finance, health, “daily living technology,” cultural knowledge, and “multicultural literacy.”

An example of a finance question was “What is the term for the amount of money charged for a loan and calculated as a percentage of that loan?”, a science question was “In what part of the body does the infection called pneumonia occur?”, for social science “Where is the Panama Canal?”. Subjects were asked if they recognized names such as Linus Pauling, Isaac Newton, and Bertrand Russell. In short, the tests as a group included the general knowledge we would like secondary school graduates to have.

Subjects were also asked about their familiarity with current authors and magazines, using author identification (e.g. Stephen King, Maja Angelou) and title recognition tests (Forbes, Ladies Home Journal). These two measures combined made up a measure of “print exposure.”

Print exposure was by far the best predictor of the combined tests of knowledge described above. Of great interest, high school grades was a much weaker predictor and did not reach statistical significance. Performance on tests of reading comprehension, mathematics and analytic thinking (Raven Matrices) reached statistical significance but were far weaker predictors than print exposure. Exposure to TV had no value as a predictor of general knowledge (table 1).

**Table 1: Predictors of performance on tests of general knowledge**

Predictor	Beta
High School grade point average	.2
Raven Matrices	.16
Math	.165
Reading Comp	.112
Television	-0.039
Print exposure	.72

From: Stanovich and Cunningham (1993).

Beta: the effect of a predictor controlled for the effect of all other predictors.

A plausible interpretation of these results: reading current popular authors and magazines results in more general knowledge than “study” (as reflected by grade point average).

What about homework?

Increasing the amount of homework assigned to students is a common way of attempting to stimulate more learning, but it is not supported by research. Kohn (2007) concludes that “... there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. At the high school level, the correlation is weak and tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied.” He also found that “no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits.”

Kohn (2006, p. 175) point out that the only homework some teachers give “is to ask children to read books of their own choosing ... a “satisfying policy ...because sustained reading ... helps children to become more proficient readers... (and) the research supporting that conclusion is as powerful as the research supporting homework is weak,” citing Krashen (2004).

## Conclusion

Self-selected pleasure reading shows promise of being a very efficient and pleasant way to stimulate more subject matter learning and more literacy and language development. If so, full-functioning school libraries are far more valuable than we ever thought.

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