

Sustained Silent Reading Why Run a SSR Program in your School / Classroom?

It has been given numerous names: sustained silent reading (SSR), drop everything and read (DEAR), free voluntary reading, uninterrupted sustained silent reading, sustained quiet reading time, high intensity practice, positive outcomes while enjoying reading (POWER), and fun reading every day (FRED). No matter what you call it school silent reading programs are a powerful tool in increasing student literacy. Many provinces, school boards, individual schools, and teachers have placed student literacy on top of their lists of priorities, however too few are taking advantage of this valuable program. In an interview with one teacher who had a successful program in the Grand Erie District School Board (which has since been cancelled) I was very disappointed to learn that most schools have abandoned their reading programs for a focused approach to reading instruction. This brief background followed by a guide for running a successful program hopes to provide educators with the incentive to revisit SSR programs, and how they lead to increased student literacy.

Reading creates background knowledge. “What students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content” (Marzano, 2004). When students are learning new information they relate it to what they already know. What they already know is termed background knowledge. For example when teaching a lesson on aquatic life, a student may refer to the different fish they saw when watching “Finding Nemo” or those they saw at the local aquarium. There are two different ways to gain background knowledge: directly and indirectly. Direct experience is very powerful and can be gained through field trips. Students may gain valuable background knowledge on the importance of recycling after visiting the local recycling plant. It is difficult, however to provide a variety of direct experiences through our public education system. Indirect experiences are much easier to provide students in the classroom. “Reading is one of the most straightforward ways to generate virtual experiences” (Marzano, 2004). By reading students can gain background information on a variety of topics, aiding them in learning new material in the classroom. Reading results in more improved learning.

Reading creates learners. My father recently retired from working 35 years at the same job, as did many people in his generation. In my generation, we may each work in a number of different fields before we retire. Today’s students will have to learn and relearn new information many times throughout their lives. It is crucial that they leave their formal education equipped with the skills to be life long learners. “To become lifelong learners, children need an engaging curriculum; safe, caring communities in which to discover and create; and a significant degree of choice about what, how and why they are learning. A DEAR program can contribute” (Lee-Daniels & Murray, 2000). Reading is essential for continuous learning.

Reading creates readers. Most children are excited as they learn to read. It is something they see their parents and older children do and they want to do it also. While I sit and read in the evening my 15 month old daughter gets out a book and ‘reads’ along. She has even started ‘talking’ as she turns the pages; she wants to read like mommy. It is in the middle and high school years that negative attitudes begin to develop towards reading (Worthy et al., 1998). Teachers wish that students would see reading as a cultural practice among teenagers along with text messaging and listen to their MP3 players (Parr & Maguiness, 2005). When the love of reading is instilled at a young age, children will read for a lifetime.

When a school begins a SSR program the first key is to get everyone on board. I highly recommend that every teacher in the school be given a copy of Steven Krashen’s article *Free Reading*. This article should be required reading for every teacher in a school starting a SSR program, and it is a great review for teachers already running a program. It is short, provides a great synopsis on the research, and offers a testimonial with 10 quick tips which related to the 8 keys for a successful program (expanded further in this report). More in-depth background on the impact of reading can be found in Krashen’s book: *The Power of Reading*. Krashen has developed a Reading Hypothesis that specifies the impact a free voluntary reading program can have on students.

The Reading Hypothesis:



Research shows that the best way to develop reading is not with drill and skill practices out of context, but by reading itself (Pilgreen, 2000). Free voluntary reading is not meant to take the place of other conventional reading teaching; however it is a valuable addition to any language arts or English program.

So what is involved in a SSR program? Many believe that it is just “letting kids read”, but there is much more to a successful program. There is a designated opportunity for independent reading, access to good books and lots of encouragement from teachers (Krashen, 2005). Janice Pilgreen (2000) completed an extensive review of the literature

and from this developed 8 keys to a successful SSR program: Access, Appeal, Conducive Environment, Encouragement, Staff Training, Non-Accountability, Follow-up Activities, and Distributed time to read. This will be discussed in detail.

As there is more to a SSR program than simply letting students read, staff need to be educated and dedicated for a program to be successful. Persistence is the key to success. Critics of SSR programs cite the few studies that fail to show the effectiveness of free voluntary reading. These studies all were performed on programs which ran for only 8 to 10 weeks (Krashen, 2006). Teachers of successful programs will often note that in the first few weeks little reading takes place as students need to become familiar with the program and still haven't found a good book yet. "If SSR classes are observed in the middle of the school year, about 90% of the students are reading and that the probability that students will actually read is increased when several factors are present – among them access to interesting reading material and teachers who read while children are reading" (Krashen, 2005). SSR programs can be run on a school wide level, a department level or in individual classrooms. It is important to pick the level that will work in your school and make it successful. A school wide program may seem like an unattainable goal, but having SSR as part of language arts classes may fit nicely with a school's current format.

Some of the strongest arguments for establishing a SSR program in your school are testimonials from teachers who have witnessed a successful program. Perks (2006) participated as a literacy coach is helping Noble High School develop and implement a school wide literacy plan. Part of this plan was a SSR program. Educators at Nobel High were impressed by the response of students. "Book sign-outs in the library have almost doubled. In addition, the school culture around reading has visibly changed. Students can now be seen reading outside of classroom. Staff members frequently recount moments in which they overhear students talking about books in the hallway". It is great to see improvement in standardized testing scores; however the physical response of students is often more rewarding for teachers.

Sustained Silent Reading 8 Keys to Success

Janice Pilgreen (2000) has created a Stacked for Success program based on 8 factors. These steps are based on the criteria consistently found in successful sustained silent reading (SSR) programs. Robert J. Marzano (2004) has condensed them into 5 steps which are also effective, but for the purposes of this summary Pilgreen's model will be used as an outline.

ACCESS

Access refers to the ease with which students acquire reading material (Marzano, 2004). It is important that this is the responsibility of the teacher and not the student. Students who are not intrinsically motivated readers will not seek out reading material on their own. There are a number of different sources for students to find reading material; the classroom library, school library, public library and their personal collections. It is the role of the teacher-librarian to ensure that materials are available for all students in the library. Students should be given time to visit the school library as needed to acquire new reading material. In school with students from lower socioeconomic areas the school may be the only exposure students have to a variety of reading material making them even more important. "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" (Krashen , 2006).

The school library is a resource that should be used to its fullest potential however for SSR programs the classroom library plays a very valuable role. Reading materials in the classroom are accessible to the students and can be arranged to meet student needs. Katz (2005) suggests first sorting books in the collection by genre: fiction, nonfiction, poetry and periodicals. They can then be further subdivided in large categories if needed e.g. Mysteries, historical fiction, etc.

There are differing views in the literature regarding the level of reading material students should be permitted to read. Krashen (2005) cautions against focusing too heavily on the reading level of the material children select. He argues that what looks easy isn't always easy for the reader, Reading level is an average, an easy book can provide a taste on a topic lead to related books on similar topics, and children who appear to be reading books that are "too hard" may in fact be finding highly comprehensible sections of these books that are of real interest to them, skipping the parts they don't understand but getting meaning and enjoyment from the parts they focus on. Katz (2005) suggests that students should be guided to reading material within their own independent reading level. To make these easier for students the genre piles in the classroom library should be further

divided into reading levels, using a sticker system. Students select their own books from their independent reading level. Katz (2005) further goes on to outline a 'Goldilocks Method' of helping students select reading material at their appropriate level. Teachers will differ in their opinion of students and reading level, however I believe it would be useful to provide students with the 'Goldilocks Method' but I would not discourage them from reading any book, appropriate for school, that they are interest in reading. I may use this opportunity to recommend another book that is on the same topic that may be more appropriate.

Goldilocks method (Katz, 2005)

Is the book too EASY?

Have you read it many times before?
Do you understand the story very well?
Do you know almost every word?
Can you read it smoothly?

Is the book too HARD?

Are there more than five words on a page you don't know?
Are you confused about what is happening in most of this book?
When you read, does it sound choppy?

Is the book JUST RIGHT?

Is the book new to you?
Do you understand a lot of the book?
Are there just a few words on a page that you don't know?
When you read, are some places smooth and some choppy?

In some schools it may be difficult for teachers to build effective classroom libraries. They may find lack of funding a barrier and often find themselves purchasing material with their own money. Worthy, Turner & Moorman (1998) suggest asking students to donate their used books, loaning them, to the classroom library or for the school year. This can help develop a sense of ownership in the classroom library. It may take some creative thinking on part of the teacher but an effective classroom library can help increase student access to a variety of reading materials.

APPEAL

Appeal means that students are free and encouraged to read information that they find highly interesting (Marzano, 2004). Reluctant readers often become that way due to a lack of material which they find of interest to them. For students who have difficulty finding material activities such as those described by Marzano (2004) may be very effective. He provides an example of an elementary teacher who helped students

narrow their interests by asking them a series of questions:

- What is your favourite TV show?
- What is your favourite movie?
- If you could do anything, what would it be? Why?
- If you could go anywhere, where would that be? Why?
- If you could learn more about any person, who would that be? Why?
- What types of stories do you like to hear? Why?

Students can use the answers to these questions to narrow down a topic they would like to explore in their free reading time.

Sanacore (2006) discusses the importance of involving students in building a great classroom library that contains materials that appeal to them. This includes a balance of fiction and nonfiction resources. He suggests a variety of ways to determine materials that will appeal to the students:

- Observing children browsing, choosing, and sharing materials from the classroom library and school library media center
- Talking with individuals and with small groups of students and encouraging them to reveal their current interests and potential interests
- Administering informal, user-friendly inventories to determine students' attitudes toward reading
- Encourage learners to post their thoughts and interests on a blog and to interact with teachers and classmates about reading
- Using artifacts in portfolios to determine students' developmental growth and passionate interests in literacy.

Many school libraries do not stock the materials that are of greatest interest to students: cartoons, comics, magazines, popular series titles. It is only recently that some libraries began to carry graphic novels. Free choice is a key component in SSR, it aids in promoting independence for adolescents (Parr & Maguiness, 2005) and increases enjoyment while encouraging voluntary reading (Worthy, Turner & Moorman, 1998)

CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT

When I was purchasing my new furniture I made sure I had one piece that was my "comfy reading spot". I looked for the perfect light and the perfect place to curl up and read. It is often difficult to create that perfect environment in the classroom, but there is not much that students need to read, in terms of the physical environment. The first basic requirement is silence. If the teacher is comfortable students can be permitted to sit wherever they like, as long as everyone is quiet and reading. Pilgreen (2000) mentions a teacher who created a "Do Not Disturb" sign for the door of the classroom. If the entire school participates in SSR at the same time this can be easier to maintain, however if it is performed on an individual class basis, it may be helpful to let the office know when you have your SSR time, and for them to hold all pages to the classroom if possible. Pilgreen

(2000) also suggests using a bell timer so no one has to keep track of reading time and can become engrossed in their material.

ENCOURAGEMENT

By simply providing students with materials and a place to read, many reluctant readers may still not read. Encouragement takes place by providing feedback to students regarding their reading and topic selections (Marzano, 2004).

One of the most important features is to have everyone believe in the importance of SSR. This begins with the teacher. “The beginning of the end of many SSR programs occurs when teachers stop modeling reading during SSR” (Perks, 2006). When in teachers college I had a teaching placement at a secondary school in Windsor, Ontario. Once a week the entire school participated in a DEAR program. During this time everyone in the school read; students, teachers, administration, custodians, and office staff. With the exception of one secretary who was answering the phones everyone in the school was reading. This was a powerful tool to show the students the importance of DEAR time. Sanacore (2006) outlines a program that while the students are reading the teacher is also reading for pleasure, conferencing with children about their reading, and encouraging them to share their reading with classmates. “These positive demonstrations send a clear message to all that actual in-school reading is an important instructional priority”. From my reading I personally feel that it is very important for the teacher to model reading for pleasure so perhaps conferencing should be done in a time other than that designated for independent reading.

Some teachers take SSR time to read their own pleasure reading material while others take encouragement a step further and use the time to familiarize themselves with what their students are reading. “That’s the only way to really be able to be familiar with the kids. Whichever grade you go into, you have to read what they are reading. Otherwise, you’re still teacher up there...” (Worthy, Turner, & Moorman 1998).

The school teacher librarian also plays an important role in encouraging and recommending books to students. When possible the teacher librarian should team up with the classroom teacher to ensure the success of SSR. On different days the teacher librarian could join different classes during their reading time, sitting in and reading their own material. It is even more important for the teacher librarian to be aware of what students are interested in reading. “I need to be a constant reader who is able to provide on-demand book talks throughout the day” (McNeil, 2006). Other members of the school should be encouraged to join in during SSR time. The principal could rotate classrooms and read with the students, to reinforce to the students the importance of free reading. Parents should also be involved as they can become important partners in increasing student free reading.

STAFF TRAINING

“Staff training involves providing information and training that engage all members of a school’s staff in the success of an SSR program” (Marzano, 2004). It is important that all staff in the school need to know about the SSR program, even if it is not running in their classroom. “Many faculty members wish that students came to them fully literate. Others do not see teaching literacy as their job” (Meltzer & Ziemba, 2006). Literacy is not solely the responsibility of the language arts and English teacher, everyone plays a key role.

Some schools have very successful schoolwide programs however this is not the case in all schools. It is still possible to have a SSR program in individual classes. Perhaps it is designated that SSR will be part of the language arts or English program. If students are only reading in language arts class, other teachers can still provide valuable support for students. Perhaps the visual arts teacher could have a collection of books on artists which students may read. The history teacher can take a few moments in one class to mention some historical fiction or non-fiction books that they have particularly enjoyed. Worthy, Turner and Moorman (1998) made the observation that to some parents, administrators and other teachers self-selected reading was viewed as ‘enrichment’ rather than instruction in the classroom. A program will not be successful until this view is changed and all staff members believe in the program.

A great deal of advocacy and professional development will take place when a SSR program is first set up in a school, however professional development needs to be ongoing. It is not sufficient to have one workshop at the beginning when establishing a program and never revisit the issue. New teachers will enter the school, new research will be published and everyone can always use a reminder of the importance of following the 8 principles. Meltzer & Ziemba (2006) suggest that when developing a school wide plan educators should use “multiple approaches to professional development – such as workshops, peer coaching, study groups, time for sharing and examining student work, and online courses – to address a variety of teacher learning styles”. Training can take place on a school wide level, but can also be effective when educators from different schools operating a SSR program meet to share successes, failures and challenges.

NON-ACCOUNTABILITY

The factor of non-accountability is one of the most important factors in creating student who choose to read on their own, however it is also the most challenging to follow as teachers. It sometimes seems that we are programmed to be constantly assessing our students and always trying to find adequate evaluation to provide an accurate value at report card time. When students are encouraged to read for enjoyment they should feel no obligation associated with it (Pilgreen, 2000). I remember reading a number of the classics in high school, and dreaded them because the teacher assigned them to read. When I choose to go back and read those same books years later I approached them with

a different perspective and now these are among of my favourite books.

The concept of non-accountability seems at odds with the next factor of follow-up activities. Janice Pilgreen gives the following guideline: “I always tell them that if their students perceive a post-SSR activity as a method of applying ‘teacher-imposed evaluative criteria’ then it is an accountability measure”.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

“Follow-up activities are those that allow and encourage students to interact about the information they have read” (Marzano, 2004). There are times when I finish a book and I just have to tell someone about it, they need to read it. As teachers we want to foster this type of enthusiasm about reading with our students. The difficulty is providing students with this opportunity without them feeling like it is required or that they will be graded. One way to help students understand that they are not being evaluated is to limit follow-up activities at the beginning of a SSR program. It may be best to let them read and start sharing once they are comfortable.

The first way to introduce follow-up is simply by allowing time for discussion. “Allowing time for students to talk about the books that they read, then, may induce students to read what their peer are reading and improve attitudes toward reading” (Worthy, Turner & Moorman, 1998). This may take place in partners or small groups. The teacher can model by sharing the book they have selected with the class. Eventually students may want to tell the class as a whole about the book they are reading. “Most students valued the opportunity to discuss their voluntary reading in SSR times, reporting that they liked sharing their reading experiences: “like you had things to say” (Parr & Maguiness, 2005)”.

Once the SSR routine is established students can be given other ways to share their reading. Marzano (2004) suggests that students have a section of their notebook dedicated to SSR. They can create written or visual responses to their reading to help them construct meaning. The teacher can provide response questions which students may or may not choose to answer. These responses must not be required; however some students are more comfortable writing when given prompts. It may also be suggested that students use visual organizers to represent what they have read. I once had a student read a biography on Anne Boleyn. She was having difficulty keeping track of all of the characters so I suggested to her that she create a family tree. She immediately dove into the task and kept it nearby as she read.

Some students may like to show some creativity when sharing their books. Sanacore (2006) gave a list of different mediums students can use:

- Dramatizing parts of stories, poems, and information books,
- Planning and engaging small-group panel discussions,

- Organizing and performing in repertory groups for Readers Theater
- Creating and using finger puppets, glove-puppets, hand puppets, and string puppets,
- Expressing feelings through touching, pantomiming, dancing, singing, and improvising, and
- Writing in response journals.

Sanacore (2006) sums follow-up activities nicely when he concludes: “When they choose these or other options for making and sharing meaning, students need to know that their choices will be respected”.

DISTRIBUTED TIME TO READ

The final criteria, and often the most obvious, is that students must be given time to read. Students who already love to read will make the time. Those who do not, the reluctant reader, will not read unless given class time devoted to silent reading, and even then they will try everything to avoid reading. The amount of time provided varies from study to study, school to school. Krashen (2006) suggests 10 -15 minutes daily, Perks (2006) study had students and staff read for 25 minutes every day and Katz (2005) had 30 non-negotiable minutes every day.

When Pilgreen (2000) compared different studies she concluded that the amount of time in a day given to read was not as crucial as the frequency. Programs which provided reading time at least twice a week were more successful than those that gave a longer time to read weekly or bi-weekly. Sometimes when starting a program, as little as 5 minutes a day can be used to introduce free voluntary reading. Hopefully after a while teachers will encounter the reverse problem of students not wanting to put their books down. I loved the time I had to stop a student from reading during math class. This same student would not have picked up a book at the beginning of the year. I call this a measure of success.

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