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THE S.S. READING: DOES IT FLOAT?

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Increasing numbers of both elementary and secondary teachers have implemented Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) as a part of their program in reading instruction. Much of this implementation has occurred and will continue primarily on the recommendation of its proponents. There has been no serious examination of the assumptions by these proponents of its effectiveness in bringing about the benefits claimed for it. The tremendous importance attached to learning to read and the limited time available in which to provide instructional activities toward that end should lead us to a rigorous evaluation of SSR whenever and wherever it becomes a component of the reading program.

Briefly described, SSR is a daily, timed period of enforced silent reading. McCracken (1971) suggests that teachers adhere to the following rules:

1. Each student must read silently.
2. Teachers must read during SSR.
3. Each student selects a single book.
4. A timer should be used.
5. No reports required or records kept.
6. Begin with whole classes or larger groups of students.

According to Mork (1971), free reading, enrichment reading, library periods, and other opportunities which provided for silent reading of individually selected materials might be considered the forerunners of SSR. What is unique to SSR is (1) the structure of the silent reading periods (previously described) and (2) the outcomes to be expected from the use of SSR in the classroom. The latter is perhaps most subject to controversy.

The outcomes or benefits one is led to expect from SSR are numerous. Oliver (1970) has suggested the following as positive effects of SSR upon readers:

1. Increased attention span.
2. Improved self-discipline.
3. Increased sophistication in the self-selection of reading materials.
4. Improved acceptance and enjoyment of reading.
5. Refined and extended reading skills.

In a discussion of the effects of SSR on children, Mork (1971) has suggested that (1) children and teachers enjoy the SSR periods, (2) children read books, (3) reading is sustained over long periods of time, and (4) more ideas and information are acquired which results in more reading.

If SSR were to produce the results listed above and if they were to be long lasting results, it would be one of the most powerful instructional techniques available to the teacher of reading in both elementary and secondary school.

The Evidence

Inherent in the claims for the above stated outcomes are the implications that (1) some kind of measurement has taken place and (2) that SSR has been determined to be the cause of the effects. Unfortunately, objective data derived from controlled research which would support the claims made for SSR are almost nonexistent.

This potentially powerful technique for teaching reading receives its support almost entirely from subjective data such as: (1) the increased popularity of SSR; (2) positive comments from students who have experienced SSR; (3) positive comments from teachers who have used SSR; and (4) authoritative proclamation. All are questionable as evidence for those outcomes claimed by proponents of SSR.

Increased popularity. It is myopic to consider unproven instructional effectiveness as the causative factor regarding popularity. Sustained Silent Reading is a procedure which requires little, if any, instructional preparation on the part of the teacher. This fact alone could account for its increased popularity. If it is acclaimed by some authorities as a desirable practice and if it requires little work to initiate, then it could be popular as an "acceptable" alternative to a host of current practices. While this hypothesis may be unlikely, it is important to note that there are plausible causes other than effectiveness which might explain an increase in popularity of SSR. In any case, popularity is not an indicator of the effectiveness of SSR—it is an indicator of the extent to which it is implemented.

Positive student comments. It is gratifying to have those under one's tutelage enjoy their work in school, and proponents have noted a considerable amount of positive feedback to teachers from students about SSR. These comments, however, are not appropriate data for evaluating the effectiveness of SSR in terms of cause-and-effect. Such positive comments about SSR by students suggest only that there is something about a complex of factors which appeals to them. It may be the freedom to read what one wants to read or, on the other hand,

it might be the lack of demand for output which is appealing. The multiplicity of variables relative to positive student feedback makes it impossible to make productive cause-and-effect statements about SSR as an instructional technique.

It might be argued that it is not important to know why students like the SSR period and that it is important only that they enjoy the reading time. The ultimate goal, after all, is the development of readers who read. If, however, we want to develop readers who will read for a lifetime, then it is important to know that they enjoy the “R” of SSR so that assumptions regarding transfer of habit to daily living can be made more appropriately.

Positive teacher comments. Positive comments by teachers are also invalid when used as supportive data for the effectiveness of SSR in the reading program. Teachers cannot make cause-and-effect statements when the information necessary to do so is not available to them. Furthermore, teachers’ comments might vary greatly depending upon who is asking the questions—a fellow teacher, a principal, a college professor with vested interests in SSR and held in high esteem by the teacher, a college professor with vested interests in SSR and held in low esteem by the teacher, and so forth.

Selection bias is another problem to consider regarding the validity of teachers’ comments as evidence for the effectiveness of SSR. Those who are especially interested in seeing SSR work may tend to report those comments which support their position and to rule out as invalid or ignore those comments which do not support their position. It could be hypothesized that there is a direct, inverse relationship between the extent to which one is committed to an idea and the extent to which one assimilates negative data.

Authoritative proclamation. Much of the “truth” of SSR is derived by a method of authority. That is, something is so because someone we view as an authority says that it is. We as teachers must realize, however, that authorities in education as elsewhere, despite years of experience and impeccable credentials, can argue their preferences and beliefs as though they were fact. Apparently, such has been the case with SSR. While the instructional outcomes have been presented as *fait accompli* by recognized proponents, it is, in fact, impossible to do more than speculate given the amount and kind of data available.

One of the problems authorities in the field of reading face in assessing SSR is that they must deal with the observable and make inferences regarding the unobservable. For example, if children are sitting in their seats looking intently at a book and turning pages every so often, one assumes that they are “reading” in the best sense of the

word. In this way, inferences regarding process are made on the basis of observable physical acts. Without measurement and records of reading outcomes, however, it is difficult to know just what has happened in terms of the reading process itself. One must turn pages to read a book, but turning pages does not by itself indicate reading as a cognitive, affective process. A distinction must be made between observable behavior and assumed process.

The foregoing criticisms of the arguments in support of SSR are not intended to deny it status as a sound pedagogical practice. It may well be. Rather, it is a sincere request that the authoritative proponents state clearly that SSR is a preferred activity rather than a proven one, and that its effectiveness in achieving the positive outcomes claimed for it either be substantiated by objective measurement or explicitly assigned to the realm of belief. To continue to list as fact what is only assumed is ultimately unfair to those most involved. To sense later that what has been implemented in good faith and according to the rules does not produce the effects it promised can only result in greater frustration and pessimism among teachers responsible for the difficult task of making reading both possible and pleasurable for children.

SUMMARY

Sustained Silent Reading may well be a powerful technique for teaching reading. Unfortunately, the data which support SSR are extremely subjective and leave most questions regarding its assumed effectiveness unanswered. There is an urgent need for reading specialists and teachers to examine SSR through objective data to determine how well it works, with whom, and under what conditions.

Though it has never been well argued in the currently available literature, it is possible that the case for SSR in the reading program would best be advanced by simply describing it as a period of time and a set of conditions by which to provide opportunity for individualized, silent practice of the reading skills and attitudes developed through various other techniques of reading instruction. Honestly stated, this is perhaps justification enough. All other claims must be rigorously evaluated.

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