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# Developing an Independent Reading Program within the Framework of a Biblical Worldview

## **Abstract**

Students today, especially middle and high school students, are reading less for pleasure than they used to. Research studies have proven that reading helps students grow academically and encourages them to see the world differently. So, to encourage students to read, some schools are giving students time to read in independent programs such as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), Accelerated Reader Program (ARP), or even implementing reward programs to improve students' reading ability. Many researchers have described what aspects of independent reading programs work and what aspects do not. Their conclusions show that there are aspects within the programs that motivate students to read. Although Christian school teachers also want students to be motivated readers, their goals for their students are expanded due to their Christian worldview. The goal of this paper is to discover what a successful independent reading program looks like in the context of biblical, Christian education.

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by

Kristin M. Contant

B.A. Dordt College, 2002

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
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Sioux Center, IA  
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Developing an Independent Reading Program within the Framework  
of a Biblical Worldview.

by  
Kristin Marie Contant

Approved:

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Faculty Advisor

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Director of Graduate Education

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Date

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### **Abstract**

Students today, especially middle and high school students, are reading less for pleasure than they used to. Research studies have proven that reading helps students grow academically and encourages them to see the world differently. So, to encourage students to read, some schools are giving students time to read in independent programs such as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), Accelerated Reader Program (ARP), or even implementing reward programs to improve students' reading ability. Many researchers have described what aspects of independent reading programs work and what aspects do not. Their conclusions show that there are aspects within the programs that motivate students to read. Although Christian school teachers also want students to be motivated readers, their goals for their students are expanded due to their Christian worldview. The goal of this paper is to discover what a successful independent reading program looks like in the context of biblical, Christian education.

Upon hearing that it is time to read independently in any classroom, some students immediately take out their books and enthusiastically engage in the reading while other students look for any excuse to put off reading. The questions arise from this group of unhappy students: “Why do we have to read independently? Isn’t this just a waste of time?” These questions seem valid and demand answers. Research studies shows that reading independently is beneficial to students if the reading program is set up correctly.

The amount of time students read independently correlates strongly to academic success, but students are reading less for pleasure in middle school and high school than they are in elementary schools (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007). Middle and high school students test scores are suffering as a result. Independent reading programs have been created in response to students’ lack of reading motivation and skill, but research studies disagree on which programs are effective.

Not only are independent reading programs vital for academic success, they are also critical in establishing beliefs and identity. Reading helps students establish the way they see the world (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003). As students develop, they begin to wrestle with the big questions of life as they begin to discover who they are, as they begin to find independence and understand interdependence, and as they begin to develop confidence in their ability to make wise choices and decisions. As they read, students are constantly confronted by these identity questions as the authors, poets, historians, song writers, and film makers wrestle with the same questions through various forms of literature.

Educators agree that it is important for students to be strong readers to ensure academic success. Additionally, educators agree that reading helps establish beliefs and identity. Independent reading programs should be designed and adopted to address both critical issues. The Christian school teacher has the responsibility to ensure academic success as well as to use these different forms of literature within an independent reading program to challenge students with the “big” worldview questions and to encourage age-appropriate learning and nurture faith development (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003).

This study will answer the question “What does a successful independent middle school reading program look like within the context of Christian education?”

### **Research Objective**

This research seeks to discover what a successful independent reading program looks like in the context of biblical, Christian education.

### **Research Questions**

1. What characteristics of independent reading programs help students become more successful readers and better motivate them to become life-long readers?
2. What characteristics of independent reading programs help students establish beliefs and identity?
3. What are the goals or purpose of language arts/literacy in a Christian school classroom?
4. What are the characteristics of an independent reading program that support the goals or

purpose of language arts/literacy in the context of a Christian classroom?

### **Definition of Terms**

These definitions are provided to give the reader a consistent understanding for potentially unfamiliar terms. If no citation is noted, the definition is the researcher's own.

**Accelerated Reading Program (ARP)** is a computer-assisted program that schools across the United States use in hopes of improving students' reading ability and reading motivation. After students have completed a book, they are required to take a computerized comprehension test to receive points or prizes (Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008).

**Christian Perspective** is a perspective where an individual recognizes the sovereignty of God and believes that God created the world perfectly. Yet this individual also recognizes that, because of man's disobedience, sin entered the world. God graciously redeemed His people by sending His Son to die for their sins. In appreciation, the Christian strives to obey and serve God.

**Drop Everything and Read (DEAR)** or Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) requires students to read self-selected reading material independently for a set length of time. Usually no follow-up assignments are required after students are done reading (Lee-Daniels & Murray, 2000).

**Independent Reading Programs** are programs that have been developed to encourage students to read independently. These programs vary greatly by school and grade level.

## Literature Review

### The Current Trend in Reading

Students in elementary schools tend to read more for pleasure than do middle and high school students. A large scale study by the US Bureau of the Census surveyed approximately 17,000 people across the United States over a 20-year time span and measured the amount people read. This study found that elementary students read more than adolescents and that half of young adults from ages 18-24 did not read books for pleasure at all (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007). The number of 17-year-olds who read nothing for pleasure doubled in the last twenty years while the amount they were assigned to read in schools has stayed the same (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007).

In a recent study, *Scholastic* (2008) interviewed 501 children, ages five to seven, and their parents in 25 cities across the country. This study found that although children and their parents saw reading as an important skill, the amount a child read declined after age eight. Thirty percent of children, ages five to eight, were high frequency readers, meaning these children read every day for pleasure. By the time students were ages 15-17, only 17% were high frequency readers (Scholastic, 2008).

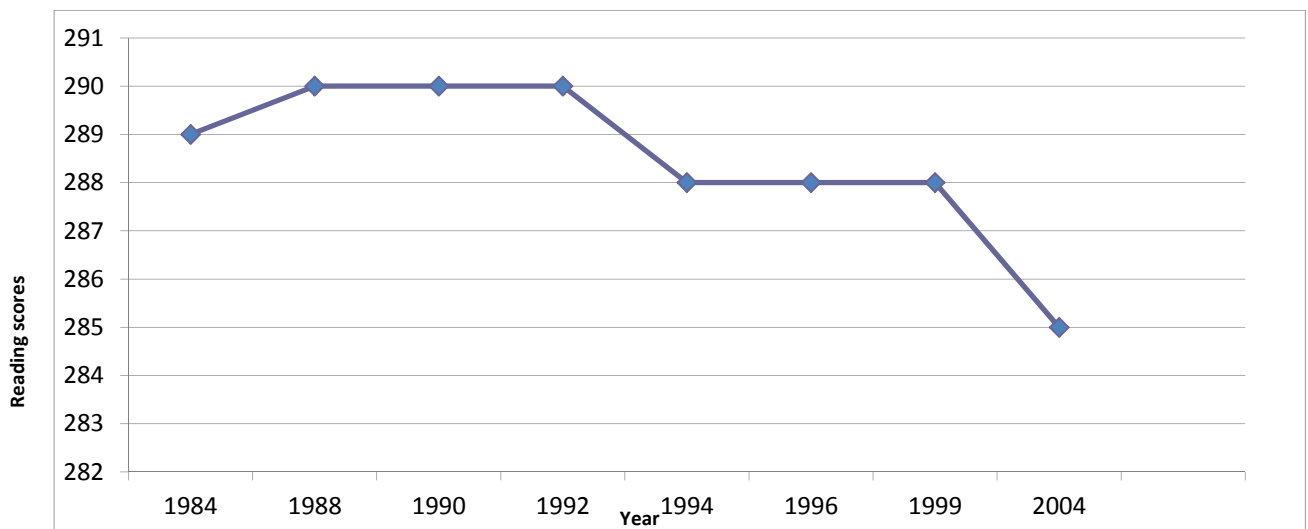
There are many reasons why children are not reading more; the primary reason children ages 9-17 give for not reading is that they have trouble finding good books (Scholastic, 2008). Students who have a difficult time finding good books are less likely to think that reading is important or enjoyable and are less likely to read often. Some 37% of students, ages 15-17, that were surveyed said they were not reading for pleasure due to lack of time, while 31% said they

would rather do other things, and 27% admitted to having a difficult time finding books that they like (Scholastic, 2008).

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2007) found that the lack of time reading for pleasure has affected students in a variety of ways. Reading test scores on standardized tests for 17- year-olds or seniors declined compared to other age groups from 1988 to 2004. From 1992-2004, the average reading scores for seventeen-year-olds dropped five points (See Figure 1) (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007).

Figure 1

*Trend in Average Reading Scores Age 17*



Note. Adapted from *To read or not to read: A question of national consequence*, by National Endowment of the Arts. (2007). Washington, D. C.

## **The Research on Reading**

The research on the importance of reading is clear. Researchers Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) explained the importance of reading for cognitive development.

Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond its immediate task of lifting meaning from a particular passage. Furthermore, these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Accumulated over time – spiraling either upward or downward – they carry profound implications for the development of a wide range of cognitive capabilities. (p. 137)

These researchers also stated that those who read for pleasure at an early age will be exposed to more new words and develop greater skill in their literacy development than non-readers (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001).

Readers who struggle to decode words are exposed to less text than strong readers due to reading frustration or being asked to read material that is too difficult for them. Reading for these students becomes unrewarding so they may avoid reading. Strong readers, conversely, tend to find reading easy and rewarding and are, therefore, exposed to more text. Consequently, the strong reader develops stronger reading skills while the poor reader's reading skills do not improve. This concept is called the "Matthew Effect," a term taken from the Bible where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003).

Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) believed that the presence of or lack of independent reading may help explain the widening achievement disparities between those who are good readers and those that are not.

When students are given opportunities to read, they are able to practice and improve their fluency and comprehension skills. There is a clear link in normally-achieving and high-achieving readers between how much students read and their success with reading fluency (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). However, students who have a very low reading ability benefit more from guidance and support in reading instruction than independent reading alone (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Kuhn (2004) compared two teaching techniques with 24 second graders: repeated reading and repeated reading with wide reading (or independent reading). The students attended a low-to-middle socioeconomic-status public school and were at or below a first grade reading level according to the Qualitative Reading Inventory (Moss & Young, 2010). They were placed in small groups of six; some of the students in the class were instructed using repeated readings, another group did repeated readings plus wide reading while a third group was the control group. The results of the study showed that students in the repeated reading and repeated reading with wide reading groups improved in their ability to recognize words, but only those who were part of the wide reading groups also improved in fluency and reading comprehension. The research confirmed that the amount of time a student spends reading directly correlates to reading fluency ability and is a better predictor of reading skills than intelligence, background, and gender (Moss & Young, 2010).

Reading volume not only improves reading fluency ability but also helps vocabulary development. Between 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students need to learn around 32,000 words, averaging approximately 3,000 words per year. On average, vocabulary instruction is limited to 700 words per year, so students must learn the rest of the words without direct instruction (Moss & Young, 2010). Students can learn new vocabulary through television, conversations, and books.

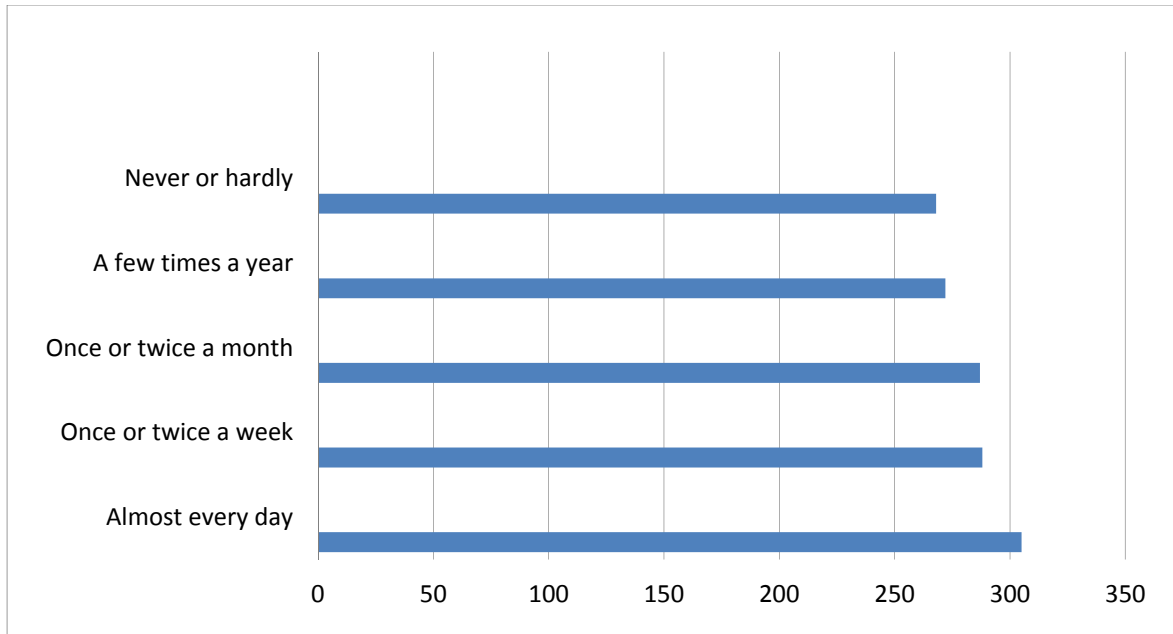


Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) claimed that students learn the most unfamiliar words through print. Because of this, students who read high volumes often have a better understanding of vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). Researchers agreed that vocabulary is not learned as well through direct teaching as it is through language exposure. Therefore, reading is the best way to improve a student's vocabulary (Krashen, 2004).

In addition to improving vocabulary through reading, research studies have shown that the more time students spend reading, the better they are able to perform on standardized reading tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessed 12<sup>th</sup> graders to see if there was a correlation between how much students read for pleasure and reading test scores. The average score for a 17-year-old who read for pleasure almost every day was 305 while the average scores for a 17-year-old who never or hardly ever read for pleasure was 268. The results were similar every year the study was conducted (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007) (See Figure 2). There is a correlation between how much average 17-year-olds read and how well they do on standardized tests.

Figure 2

*Average Reading Scores by Frequency of Reading for Fun (Age 17 in 2004)*

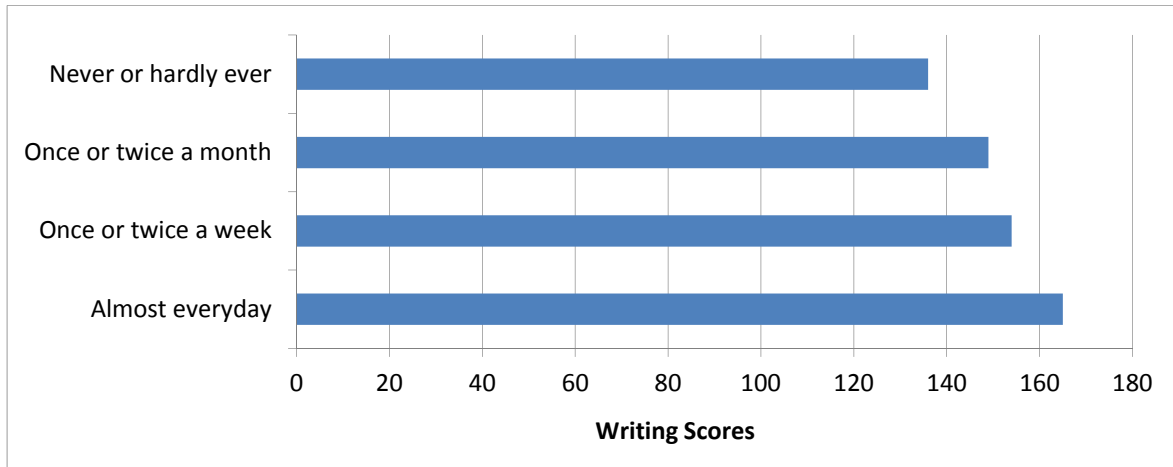


Note. Adapted from *To read or not to read: A question of national consequence*, by National Endowment of the Arts. (2007). Washington, DC.

Although reading and writing are separate skills, the NAEP (2007) found there is also a link between the amount a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student read for pleasure and the score he/she received on a standardized writing test that required students to write a narrative, informative, and persuasive paper. Those seniors who read almost every day scored, on average, 29 points higher than those who never or hardly ever read (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

*Average Writing Scores by Frequency of Reading for Fun (grade 12 in 2007)*



Note. Adapted from *To read or not to read: A question of national consequence*, by National Endowment of the Arts. (2007). Washington, D. C.

The NAEP study (2007) further examined whether there was a correlation between the number of books a student had available at home and a student's math, science, civics, and history test scores. Test scores in every subject area were shown to increase with the amount of books a student had at home. For example, students who had more than 100 books at home had an average math score of 163 while students who had one to ten books at home had an average score of 126. The results were similar for the science test scores. Students who had more than 100 books at home had had an average score of 161 while students who had one to ten books at home had an average score of 122. While the increase in test scores could be attributed to the amount of money a student's family might have to spend on books, it is more likely that parents who value books and reading teach children to value books and reading (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

The more students read, the more general knowledge they gain (Krashen, 2004). Some 268 college students were studied to determine if differences in general knowledge could be attributed to reading volume (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003). The researchers accounted for each student's general ability by putting students into four groups based on grade point average, performance on an intelligence test, a comprehension test, and a standardized test in math. Then they created a test they called the "Practical Knowledge Test," which measured knowledge that was relevant to daily living versus academic knowledge. The results showed that the more students read, regardless of ability, the more general knowledge they had (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003).

Reading ability was also found to affect students' future success. Poor readers were more likely to drop out of high school than good readers; good readers were more likely to have better college and job opportunities. Moreover, 63% of employers ranked reading comprehension skills as "very important" for high school graduates. Unfortunately, 38% of employers found that students were deficient in reading comprehension (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007). The US Department of Education surveyed full-time workers in 2003 and found that 59% of workers who were proficient readers earned above \$850 a week while only 13% of those who scored poorly earned above \$850 per week (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007).

Independent reading not only helps students improve academically but also encourages students to see the world differently. Reading can challenge students to think about meaningful topics in an engaging way. "That is what good stories do: give light, truth, and bubbling" (Schmidt, 2011, p. 35). Adolescent readers are constantly looking for "truth" and books that relate to them. When they find books that help them construct their view of the world or relate to

them, they are more likely to find reading meaningful (Frey & Fischer, 2006). One genre of literature that can help students develop their view of the world is historical fiction.

Literature can provide students with an awareness of place, which will give students a clearer sense of who they are and a greater appreciation for diversity (Wasta, 2010). Historical fiction books which portray children engaged in activities that are appropriate for the time period and place with descriptions of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation can help students connect to the time period and culture. Students also gain knowledge of the basic geography of the area and begin to understand how the culture shaped the character. This will hopefully propel students to reflect on how their own culture and environment shaped who they are (Wasta, 2010). Books can encourage students to reflect, but the “voice” of the authors needs to be authentic.

Various forms of literature provide students with learning opportunities that help them understand identity formation, gender roles, and ethnic associations (Richardson & Eccles, 2007). In a research study (Richardson & Eccles, 2007), European-American and African-American seniors in high school to one year post-high school were interviewed in five visits through inductive and narrative analysis. The researchers found that reading allowed the adolescents to explore who they were. For example, one African-American male realized through reading about specific historical figures to resist stereotypes of African American males. An African-American female realized the importance of resisting the stereotypes of female dress and occupational ambitions (Richardson & Eccles, 2007).

Reading can also challenge stereotypes of culture and differences. Endo (2009) noted that Lisa Yee, an author of adolescent literature, wrote books that dealt with themes that are universal to all American pre-adolescents, but she was also able to weave in information on her race and what it meant to be an Asian-American. Through these books, readers become aware that there are many similarities between all American adolescents, but they can also understand or be sympathetic to cultural and racial differences.

In an analysis of adolescent literature, not all cultures were well represented. From 1940-1973, Mexican-Americans were one of these under-represented groups (Murray & Velazquez, 1999). Many of the books written about them were written by European Americans who often encouraged the stereotypes of Mexican-Americans. In the early 1990s, more books with Mexican-American themes and written by Mexican-American authors were published to combat the issue. These books give students a more realistic cultural understanding of Mexican-Americans (Murray & Velazquez, 1999).

Books can challenge students' ideas on specific issues. Judy Blume's book, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) is about a sixth grade girl trying to figure out who she is, finding her place, and wrestling with who God is (Krasner & Zollman, 2010). Adolescents throughout America related to those themes, and Blume's book became a best seller (Krasner & Zollman, 2010). Some adolescents found a "friend" in Margaret because she seemed to understand what they were going through. Novelist Alison Pace could relate to Margaret because she knew what it was like to have parents who each had a different religion. She also felt uncertain about who God was and did not know how respond to people who asked her questions about her faith (Krasner & Zollman, 2010). Many others girls who read this book felt a

connection to Margaret too as they too struggled with their identity and with an understanding of who God was (Krasner & Zollman, 2010).

Authors have also used adolescent literature to challenge students' views on current issues such as homosexuality. From 2004 to 2009, the release of books dealing with homosexual males had substantially increased (Crisp, 2009). The demand for books dealing with this subject matter increased during this time partly due to the growing acceptance of same-sex attraction in popular culture through television shows such as *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Crisp, 2009). Many of the books written during this time period helped readers with their understanding of homosexuality, but Crisp (2009) believed that some of the books could reinforce the stereotypes if not read critically. He stated that "It may feel rewarding to look at the range of ways in which gay males have started to 'appear' in literature, but it is important to remain cognizant of the ways in which authors and publishers work to create -- and readers attempt to confront, embrace, or reject -- depictions that feel 'affirmatively' queer" (Crisp, 2009, p. 346).

Independent reading can also help students relate to the characters and themes within books. When children need courage, they can look back to a character in a book who displayed courage. The characters and themes from the Harry Potter books have become inspirational to many children around the world (Nylund, 2007). In one study, Nylund (2007), a therapist, used the characters and themes in the Harry Potter books in therapy with children. One of his patients who was an orphan, like Harry Potter, felt a close connection to Potter. The patient also struggled with his sexuality and felt that Potter understood what it was like to be misunderstood like he was. Tilsen, Russell, and Michael (2005) reported similar situations in their study of a boy with

Asperger's who found a parallel between his life and the clash between the villain and the hero in Harry Potter. This parallel gave him a sense of camaraderie.

Therefore, it is essential that students are exposed to books in which the subtexts include a broad spectrum of information. In reading, students will expand historical, cultural, geographical, and sociological knowledge at varying levels and will grow academically. Students' development of identity and worldview will also be challenged and expanded through reading. While many books rich in information are available for reading, the challenge is getting students to read them.

### **Studies of Independent Reading Programs**

Currently in the United States, many schools are responding to the lack of reading by middle school and high school students. However, instead of requiring students to read books independently, many teachers are teaching reading skills in isolation and giving worksheets in hopes that students will become stronger test takers (Gallagher, 2009). Consequently, teachers have less time to teach novels and are asking students to put them to the side (Gallagher, 2009). Gallagher (2009) believed that "When schools remove novels from the students' curriculum and replace challenging books with shorter pieces and worksheets, they are denying students the foundational reading experiences for developing those regions of their brains that enable them to think deeply" (p. 40). Other educators agree with this statement. Moss and Young (2010) found that classroom libraries show a teacher's commitment to reading novels beyond the textbook and encourage lifelong reading skills. Educators also felt that the best way to encourage students to



read is to set up independent reading programs. These programs all require students to read, but are set up differently with varying results.

**Silent Sustained Reading (SSR).** Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), also known as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) or Daily Independent Reading Time (DIRT), is a program that was implemented in public schools in the 1970s (Chua, 2008). These programs require students to read for a length of time, often beginning at five minutes and increasing to 30 or more minutes in one sitting. Students may read anything during the time from novels to comic books. Usually no follow-up assignments are required after students are finished reading (Lee-Daniels & Murray, 2000).

The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) studied a variety of research studies on independent reading programs similar to SSR and DEAR. They looked at studies that focused on reading comprehension and vocabulary, bypassing studies that looked at fluency. After looking at many studies, the panel agreed that the more a child reads, the better reader the child becomes; however, they wondered if children who are good at reading choose to read more, which then improved their reading scores (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Although the researchers noted programs such as SSR could be beneficial, they concluded that there was not enough significant data to recommend the program. Although this recommendation was given in 2000, many educators still feel that the advice is valid. Teachers and administrators continue to question whether it is a waste of time to give students time to read in school (Garan & De Voogd, 2008).

Krashen (2006) has been researching SSR for 20 years; he was frustrated with the NRP's findings because his research found that students who are in SSR programs do as well, if not better, than students who are not given time to read. When looking at ten long-term studies (12 months or more) on SSR, he found that eight of the studies showed that students who were in SSR programs out-performed peers that were not in those programs (Krashen, 2006). His research also showed that even though students in SSR programs did as well on standardized tests as students who were not in the program, the students in the SSR programs gained skills in other areas. Students' background knowledge was greatly increased, and teachers and students agreed that SSR was much more enjoyable than conventional teaching methods (Krashen, 2006).

Short-term studies (eight to ten weeks) were also completed on SSR, but the results were not as positive. These studies showed that there was little difference between programs like SSR and conventional programs (Krashen, 2006). Krashen (2006) believed this was due to the amount of time students took to find books at the beginning of SSR programs, which left little time for students to read. His conclusion was that SSR programs are the most beneficial when students are given enough time to read.

In other research on SSR, Chua (2008) studied secondary school students and how SSR influenced "students' after-school reading habits" (p. 182). As part of his research, all students were required to read a book of their choice for the first 20 minutes of every day. Teachers monitored the programs but also read during the 20 minutes and encouraged students to reflect on their reading. Three times in a 12-month period, Chua (2008) gave these secondary students surveys on their reading habits, classmates' reading habits, reading habits after school, and attitudes towards leisure reading. Students answered that they always or sometimes read for

leisurely activity during the SSR period: 77% in the first survey, 88% in the second survey, and 89% in the last survey (Chua, 2008). Students also commented that there was less unnecessary talking between classmates during the prescribed SSR time as the year went on. The first survey showed that 65% of students felt that half or more of the students talked during the SSR period, but, on the final survey, only 23% of students felt that half or more of students talked during the SSR period (Chua, 2008). These findings showed that the program did improve students' pleasure while reading during the allotted time. However, Chua also (2008) surveyed students to see if they read more after school during this study. Around 24% of students reported that they read one hour or more after school for the first survey, but only 18% of students reported that they read one hour or more after school by the last survey. Chua (2008) found that the positive effects of students' reading habits after school did not improve during the implementation of the SSR program.

Educators Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) studied SSR and found that many teachers have become frustrated with the program. The time given for students to read often becomes a catch-up time for teachers to work; engaged students automatically read, while other readers look for an excuse to stop reading. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) believed that the goal of every SSR program should be to engage all readers and that with some modifications, a SSR program will engage more students in reading.

**Accelerated Reading Program (ARP).** Accelerated Reading Program (ARP), a computer-assisted program that 40,000 schools across America use, is another popular independent reading program (Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008). The goals of the program are to give students effective reading practice; to personalize the program to fit every student's needs; to assess

reading practice, vocabulary, and literacy skills; and to build a love of reading (Renaissance Learning, 2010). Students are assessed using the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) to determine their reading level and then are given a list of books at their level to choose from. After students have completed a book, they must take a computerized comprehension test. Students receive a determined number of points if they get over 60% correct on the test. Some schools require students to reach a set number of points while others give prizes for points (Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008).

Several studies indicate that ARP is not beneficial to students. Researchers Thompson, Madhuri, and Taylor (2008) studied a group of high school students to determine if students valued ARP. The study found that students had a negative perception of the program and many read less after they completed the ARP program than they did before they began the program. Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Ciplewski (2000) researched whether or not students were more motivated to read in middle school if they were part of an ARP program in elementary school. A Title Recognition Test was given to 7<sup>th</sup> graders to determine how much they read for recreation. The conclusion was that having ARP in elementary school did not motivate students to read more in middle school. In fact, some of their research found that ARP may have lowered some students' reading motivation (Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Ciplewski, 2002).

Some teachers who have used the ARP program have concerns about the program because students can only get points on books that are on the approved ARP book list (Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Ciplewski, 2002). Therefore, students sometimes bypass quality, high-interest literature when the books are not on the approved list. Some teachers do not allow students to discuss books after the designated reading time due to fears that other students may learn the

answers to the tests without reading the book. Furthermore, some students have also found ways to share test answers with other classmates (Pavonetti, Brimmer & Cipielewski, 2002).

Several studies on ARP showed mixed results. Luck (2010) (as cited by Nunnery, 2006) described a study that looked at 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders in a high-poverty elementary school. Students were randomly picked to be part of the ARP program and others were put in a control group which used basal readers. The study found that ARP was the most effective in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and had no impact on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders.

While some studies showed ARP to be ineffective, others showed ARP to be an effective reading program. One study (2006) focused on ARP to determine its effect on reading achievement in urban elementary schools in grades three through six. This study determined that compared to the control group, students in ARP programs significantly improved in reading growth rates (Nunnery, Ross, & Aaron, 2006). Based on the research by Howard (1999), Luck (2010) determined that at-risk 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> graders benefitted in vocabulary and comprehension when ARP was used as intended.

Krashen (2004) believed despite the positive studies done on ARP, “we must conclude that there is no real evidence supporting it, no real evidence that the additional tests and rewards add anything to the power of simply supplying access to high-quality and interesting reading material and providing time for children to read” (p. 121). Additionally, Krashen (2001) noted instead of spending money on developing an ARP program, schools should instead invest in high-interest reading material and give students time to read.

**Independent Reading Programs and Rewards.** Many schools use extrinsic rewards to motivate students to read (Krashen, 2004). One common program is “Book It,” where Pizza Hut will give a free pizza for a set amount of reading. The goal of “Book It” is to “motivate children to read by rewarding their reading accomplishments with praise, recognition, and fun” (National Reading Incentive Program, 2010). Schools also create their own extrinsic motivation through parties, stickers, or prizes for books read. Although there are not a large number of studies on this topic, there are a few important ones that studied the use of rewards. These studies do not find that reward programs in independent reading programs necessarily motivate students to read (Krashen, 2004).

Krashen (2004) described a study in which the researcher divided third grade students into three groups: high reward, low reward, and no reward. Each student was given time to read and asked to read to a marker. The children in the reward groups were given prizes once the assignment was completed, but the children in the no reward group were asked to give their opinions on the reading. There was little difference between the high reward group and the low reward group when it came to reading beyond the assignment, but the no reward group read twice as much as the reward groups. The researchers theorized that students who read without rewards became engaged in the story without thought to page number while the reward groups’ goals were to read to a specific page; therefore, they became less engaged in the story (Krashen, 2004).

Krashen (2004) cited another study in which the researcher asked 419 middle school students and thirty-five teachers for suggestions on how to motivate students to read. While 29% of teachers felt that extrinsic rewards were the most effective form of motivation, only 9% of

students felt the same. Teachers are still under the impression that students will read if there are rewards even though students do not agree. According to research done by Krashen (2004), there are many characteristics of a successful independent reading program, but rewards are not one of them.

Independent reading programs such as SSR, ARP, and rewards programs all have one aspect in common: they require students to read. The reading program SSR requires students to read regularly for a length of time with no assignments connected to the reading material while ARP requires students to take a computerized test on the book read in order to gain points or prizes. Rewards in independent reading gives prizes for specific goals met. Each of these programs has negative and positive aspects that can be isolated to discover what makes an independent reading program successful.

### **Characteristics of a Successful Independent Reading Program**

Many schools are working to create successful independent reading programs, and research studies have found that there are specific characteristics that motivate students to read that are part of a successful independent reading program (Morison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999; International Reading Association, 2000; Block & Mangiere, 2002; Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Fisher, 2004; Krashen, 2004; Tilley, 2009; Moss & Young, 2010). The characteristics include giving students choices in what they read, having a well-stocked library, giving students enough time to read, creating a comfortable environment, having well-trained teachers, and creating some structure around the program.

The first characteristic of a successful independent reading program is student choice. Students must be able to self-select what they read from a wide range of age- appropriate, interesting, and engaging reading material (Gallagher, 2009). The teacher can ask students to read a certain genre, but students should be able to pick what book to read in that genre. “Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own books to read empowers and encourages them. It strengthens their self-confidence, rewards their interests, and promotes a positive attitude toward reading by valuing the reader and giving him or her a level of control” (Miller, 2009, p. 23).

School libraries can promote independent reading by providing a well-stocked library while teachers can promote independent reading by filling classroom shelves with reading materials to give students enough books to choose from. Moss and Young (2010) claimed that students that have more access to books spend more time reading. Students have been shown to read 50-60% more in the classroom if there is an excellent supply of books for classroom libraries (Moss & Young, 2010).

An excellent supply of books gives students many options. To maximize the reading options, the International Reading Association (2000) believed that every child should have access to a different book each day in a classroom. If there are 180 days in a school year, the association recommended that every classroom have at least seven books per student. Furthermore, they suggest that school libraries have at least twenty books per student so that students may take a variety of books home every week. Because books can become outdated or worn, the International Reading Association (2000) believed that a teacher should add one new



book per student to his or her classroom library every year while a school library should add at least two new books per student per year.

Moss and Young (2010) also recommended that students should have access to a variety of texts and books. These texts can be fiction, non-fiction, poetry, challenging texts, and easier texts. The texts should include diverse genres and consider students' reading interests. "By maintaining a flexible approach to book selection and being exposed to a variety of reading materials both in and out of school, students have opportunities for meaningful encounters with print in a multiplicity of materials" (Moss & Young, 2010, p. 48). Students are then able to compare higher and lower quality books and are better able to pick books for leisure reading.

Another important characteristic of any independent reading program is to give the students time to read. Like most activities, "practice makes permanent" so the more students read, the better they will become at it. Furthermore, often schools are the one place students are able to read without distractions.

School is probably the only significant cultural institution that both values reading and has a captive audience. True, our culture pays lip service to the value of reading, but a host of voices subvert that intent by directing youngsters' attention to other activities. Unless teachers consciously program significant blocks of time for sustained reading, children simply will not develop reading proficiency. (Bruinsma, 2003, p. 258)

Another way teachers can encourage increased reading levels is by creating a supportive and comfortable atmosphere for reading (Krashen, 2004). Krashen (2003) reported that when kindergarten students were given an opportunity to read in corners with pillows and easy chairs,

they read more. Krashen (2003) also found that parents who read regularly often allowed their children to read in bed while the parents of non-readers were much less likely to let their children read in bed. Even though some teachers may not have the room to have a reading corner with pillows and easy chairs, Miller (2009) believed teachers need to make the atmosphere in the room a place where students feel emotionally comfortable to read.

Another important component to successful independent reading programs is that teachers should be properly trained and equipped to implement an independent reading program. Researcher Fisher (2004) studied an urban high school to determine if the SSR program was effective. This high school had a SRR time built into the weekly schedule, but many teachers were not using the time properly. Data was collected, and it was found that only 720 out of the 2,200 students or 33% were actually reading during SSR time. Many teachers were using the time as extra instructional time for their class or found it hard to keep students on task. Once this was discovered, all teachers went through a 90-minute professional development seminar to learn how to use the time effectively. A science teacher commented, "I knew we had reading time in the schedule, but I never knew what to do with it. The first SSR in-service really focused me and let me know what I needed to do to help our kids" (p. 148). Along with other investments into the SRR program, the new data collected after the in-services showed that 88% of the students were engaged in reading independently during the SRR time period (Fisher, 2004).

In addition to appropriate training, teachers themselves must also be reading models: passionate about reading and willing to share what they are currently reading. Miller (2009) stated, "If we [teachers] want our students to read and enjoy it for the rest of their lives, then we must show them what a reading life looks like" (p. 110). Researchers found that teachers who

are excited about reading are better able to motivate students to read independently (Tilley, 2009). Applegate and Applegate (2004) surveyed college students who were in education programs to determine why they enjoyed or did not enjoy reading by asking them about their former teachers. The results showed that the college students' former teachers' positive reading habits positively affected students' reading engagement and motivation to read. Teachers who did not enjoy reading were less able or likely to recommend books to their students and thus affected students' reading habits negatively. Additionally, Block and Mangiere (2002) found that teachers who loved to read for recreation had a stronger knowledge of children's literature and recreational reading activities than non-readers. These teachers gave students more opportunities to read silently and had a wide range of reading material available. Teachers who enjoy reading often use innovations in their teaching and are better able to help engage students in reading (Morrison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999).

In a typical SSR program, teachers read silently while the students read. Some research has found that this is not the best practice; instead, teachers should spend time conferencing with students, monitoring their reading and helping them select books, or in other words, "scaffolding." Kuhn, Schwanenfluge, Morris, Morrow, and Woo (2006) studied second graders' reading achievement and found that using a scaffolding instruction method along with giving students time to read appropriately challenging texts improved their vocabulary and comprehension.

One of the components of scaffolding is student-teacher conferences. Moss and Young (2010) noted that "teacher-led conferences are the centerpiece of the independent reading program" (p. 81). These conferences should be 5-15 minutes and held with students during the

independent reading time. Teachers can monitor students' progress toward both the teacher and student's individual goals. These conferences also give teachers the opportunity to encourage students, to give them the support they need to become true independent readers, and to help students find new books to read. Gambrell, a professor at Clemson University and an important researcher in the area of literacy motivation noted,

In order for independent reading to support reading development, the teacher must be actively working with students – helping them learn how to select appropriate books, having conferences, listening to children read from books they have selected, and sharing good books that will interest and challenge students. (Moss & Young, 2010, p. 87)

Although reading independently is a one-person activity, researchers have found that teacher read-alouds help make independent reading programs successful. Read-alouds occur when parents or teachers read a book aloud to students while incorporating appropriate “pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery” (Morrison, 2009, p.111). Ivey and Broaddus (1991) surveyed 1,765 6<sup>th</sup> graders in 23 diverse schools across the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States to determine what motivates middle school students to read. The survey consisted of open-ended questions, short answers, and a checklist. After the surveys were administered, the researchers interviewed students from three of the schools. They found that students most valued the time to read independently and the teacher read-aloud as part of the instructional time (Ivey & Broaddus, 1991). Read-alouds introduce students to a variety of books and stimulated them to choose new books to read. According to Krashen (2003), students who are read to regularly from a variety of texts are more likely to check out the books from the library and read them independently.

Barrentine (1996) also emphasized the importance of using read-alouds in a classroom and felt the best way to do this is to pick engaging books that motivate students to read more.

Just as many adults have found the joy of discussing books through books clubs, students also enjoy sharing what they read. Although students read independently, research by Tilley (2009) found that it was important for students to have opportunities to discuss their books with the teacher and other students. This often motivated students to read more and exposed them to more books (Tilley, 2009). Moss and Young (2010) stated that sharing with students “can allow students to express their feelings about books as well as let their peers get ideas for books they can read” (p. 74). There are a variety of ways to do this such as having students meet in groups according to their interests or having students write and perform a reader’s theatre based on part of the book.

Another way to make an independent reading program successful is to have an informal assessment or record keeping. Gallagher (2009) emphasized that teachers can kill a student’s love of reading through both over-assessment and under-assessment of a book. Gallagher recommends short twenty-minute assignments called “one-pagers” that students complete after they finish a book. These assignments keep students accountable to the reading without requiring them to complete a lot of extra work (Gallagher, 2009). Moss and Young (2010) also agreed that some sort of assessment is necessary. They recommended that the “assessments used during this time should focus largely on student motivation and the development of interest in reading” (p. 74). A good way to motivate students through assessment is for the teacher to meet with each student individually with set questions.

Researchers Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) noted that there should be differentiated instruction for different readers. Some readers are considered “fake readers” or readers that act like they are reading or find ways to avoid reading. These readers should be monitored closely by the teacher and kept accountable for their reading. It is also important that the teacher understand these students’ interests and help them find books that engage them. The “challenged reader,” another type of reader who struggles with reading, desires to be an engaged reader but sometimes feels like giving up. The teacher should also monitor these students and give them the tools to select books that they can successfully read. Frequent feedback and encouragement is important for these readers (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). “Wanna-be-readers” are readers that often pick books that are too difficult for them, so they give up reading quickly. To help these students, the teacher should take a quick inventory of what the students are reading and the progress they are making. The teacher should conference with these students regularly to help them pick appropriate books (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Another group of readers called “compliant readers,” read because they have to, but these students typically do not enjoy reading and do not read outside the classroom. The teacher can help these readers by introducing them to new books and authors and finding ways to motivate them (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009).

Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) noted that another group of students fall under the category of “engaged reader,” but these readers are not all alike. The “non-fiction” reader does not enjoy a storyline but enjoys learning through reading non-fiction books. The teacher should let these students read non-fiction books at their reading level and maybe move them to biographies to help them follow a storyline (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). The “I can but I don’t want to” readers are good readers, but when given a choice, these readers will not choose to read for fun. The teacher can help them find books or authors that these students would enjoy and monitor

how much they read (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). The next group of readers is the “stuck in a genre” reader. Like the name suggests, they will only read one genre or author. Although these students should not be discouraged to read these books, the teacher can introduce more books to them through book talks and discussions. The teacher can encourage these readers to read the books in their genre at home but pick something different in school. The last group of engaged readers are the “bookworms.” These students love reading and will read for pleasure. The teacher can help these students by introducing them to quality literature (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009).

The final characteristic of a successful, independent reading program is for students to be given support to read from their home and family. Scholastic (2008) along with Yankelovich, a market research and analytic company, conducted a nation-wide survey of 501 children and at least one guardian per child. The survey found that 82% of parents wish their children would read for pleasure more often. Parents’ reading habits have a tremendous effect on their children’s reading habits. Parents who read for pleasure every day were six times more likely to have children that read for fun daily than parents who rarely read. The surveys also found that parents are an important source when it comes to book recommendations for their children. Carter, director for corporate research at Scholastic, said, “Parent engagement in their child’s reading from birth all the way through the teen years can have a significant impact on how often their children read and how much they enjoy reading” (Good, Sinek, & Harmeling, 2008).

Furthermore, Siah and Kwok (2010) studied 362 secondary students to determine their attitudes towards SSR. The program was new to all of the participants who were required to read a book of their choice for not less than 20 minutes a day. The study’s goal was to find factors

that contributed to SSR's success. After students had been in the program for six months, the researchers gave them questionnaires about the students' attitudes towards reading, their reading interaction with parents, and their attitudes towards the SSR program. The researchers concluded that "the more that parents are involved in their children's reading activities, the more positive their children's value of reading will be" (Siah & Kwok, 2010, p. 173). Therefore, the role of parents is essential in creating positive reading attitudes in students.

The research completed on independent reading programs and what makes them successful is important to educators, but educators who teach at a Christian school must also analyze these programs to see if they fit what Christian educators believe about teaching literacy from a Christian perspective.

### **Teaching Literacy from a Christian Perspective**

Christian teachers value reading as a tool for academic success but additionally, the Christian teacher teaches literacy to help students grow in their relationship with God while learning more about serving Him. Teachers can challenge students to confront the world and follow Christ in every area by creating a safe environment to wrestle with a variety of issues as they read a variety of genres. Teachers should also enable students to reflect the image of Christ in their thoughts, words, and deeds through teaching them commitment, responsibility, and discipleship. To do this, Christian teachers must live in joyful fellowship with God and model the love of Christ (Van Brummelen, 1988) in their own lives so that that they will be able to communicate and teach it to their students (Bosma & Blok, 1992).



Bosma and Blok (1992) purported that Christian teachers need to “create an awareness of how reading and reading materials can be used to strengthen personal worship, help us live in social relationships as God would have us, and assist us in doing the world’s work as God would have us” (p. 16). Christian teachers must treasure language and work to polish it by being knowledgeable about their subject area, communicating it effectively, and giving students opportunities to grow (Van Brummelen, 1988).

With the Holy Spirit’s help, Christian teachers can communicate the truth of the Bible by knowing it well so they are able to integrate it into every subject area and situation, including independent reading (VanDyk, 2000). The curriculum and programs that are developed in a Christian school classroom should help students “grow in their understanding of God’s world and their place in it” (Van Brummelen, 1988, p. 24) to enable them to live as disciples of Christ (VanDyk, 2000). Students will not only be taught the theological and ethical issues related to Christianity but will also understand how to become joyful servants and good stewards of His world (Van Dyk, 2000). Independent reading must be based on a Christian worldview to show that although God created the world perfectly, it is full of sin but is redeemed by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. One of the goals for independent reading should be to lead students to develop their God given gifts, to encourage students to live self-disciplined lives, and to serve God daily (VanDyk, 2000).

Students are unique individuals created in the image of God. However, students are born with a sinful nature and constantly struggle with the forces of good and evil. Thankfully, through God’s grace, Christ’s death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit’s power to create faith, students too are able to serve in God’s community (Bruinsma, 2003). Because God created

children uniquely, students need an opportunity to bring their own gifts and knowledge into a classroom. As students continue to develop an understanding of language, it is important for them to know that language is an important way to serve God and perform tasks that are necessary for daily life including reading to understand recipes, road signs, and maps, filling out application forms, and excelling at most jobs (Bosma & Blok, 1992).

Reading gives students the skills to share with each other and express themselves, which Bruinsma (2003) proposed must be used honestly, without redundancy, and with elegance. Because the world is full of sin, it often feels chaotic. Due to the structure within language, students can communicate with each other through verbal and written communication to help find order within the chaos. Christian teachers can help students make sense of their experiences by teaching them to develop their communication skills (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003). Communication can be used to help students develop relationships, articulate their faith, and serve God.

Another goal of Christian teachers is to help students think beyond themselves. God created people to not only work individually but to also work communally. In the Bible, God often speaks of the *church* or the *people* of Israel. Teachers can help students develop skills to work more effectively within a community of learners by making time for students to share and discuss readings (Bruinsma, 2003). Students can also learn to think beyond their own worldview or present cultural experience by reading books. Stories help students delve into other people's lives and learn about other times, places, worlds, and experiences (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003). When students read, they are able to think beyond their own desires and wants and see where others may need compassion and kindness.

A Christian reading program should help students understand human experience.

Students come to class with their own set of realities and perspectives. Their lives up to that point shape how they see the world and understand literature. A Christian teacher should help students wrestle with how they view the world and challenge them to see it through the lens of faith (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003).

Teachers need to help students look honestly through these “windows” so that they can see the sin but also God’s redemption. To do this, teachers cannot shy away from stories of sin and suffering (Bruinsma, 2003). Students need to read a variety of texts and genres to help them understand the difference between fantasy and reality, to help them explore the range of human emotions, and to see how choices may affect consequences.

Another goal of teaching independent reading is to help students deepen their awareness of the world, of others, of God, and of themselves. When students read, they are able to share in journeys with characters in books and stories. Students’ perspectives are enlarged which will help them express themselves and develop insights into who they are in relation to God and His Kingdom.

...reading literature broadens our vision as we increase our knowledge of ourselves, others, culture, and history. We enlarge our perspective not in order to condemn others or to point out their many errors, but in order to explore God’s world more thoroughly, understand our neighbors better, and to work for shalom more effectively. (Gallagher & Ludin, 1989, p. 54)

Reading can also stimulate students' minds and hearts. The themes of books force students to deal with difficult issues and to examine their faith by wrestling with human paradoxes. As students learn to critically analyze books, they also learn how to discern what is right and wrong and even what reading material will bring them closer to God or what reading material will pull them away from Him. The Holy Spirit can use what students read by revealing God and bringing them closer to Him (Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia, 2003).

God gives people many blessing and gifts. One of these gifts is language. "Language learning should celebrate the wonder of language, the artfulness of literature, and the joy of clear and elegant expression" (Bruinsma, 2003, p. 61). Students should be able to experience the joy in reading and even see glimpses of the new heaven and the new earth through their reading. Gallagher and Lundin (1989) communicate this well.

Our delight in God's gifts includes our delight in the literary activities of human beings. When God finished his wondrous work of creation, he surveyed all that he had made and pronounced it "very good".." He stopped. to appreciate and enjoy what he had made. In the same way, we appreciate the beautiful language and emotion of a poem, delight in the effective metaphor, feel awe at the dramatic effectiveness of a scene in a play, or acknowledge the skill with which a novelist portrays a character. In all these acts of enjoyment we act as God would have us act. (p. 48)

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

Research shows that although students are not reading enough, independent reading improves students' academic performance and helps students develop their beliefs and identity. To encourage students to read more, independent reading programs in schools have been developed. The characteristics of successful programs are as follows: a prescribed classroom time to read, a variety of book choices, emphasis on teacher training and modeling, classroom read-alouds, a form of assessment, student conferences, and support from home. In addition to impacting academic performance through effective reading programs, Christian teachers can use reading to encourage students to grow in their faith, in their understanding of who God is, and the ways to serve Him.

### **Conclusion**

Christian language arts teachers seek to motivate students to read more in hopes that they will improve in reading comprehension, spelling, background knowledge, grammar, vocabulary, and Christian worldview perspective. Setting up an effective independent reading program in a Christian school is not only important but imperative. Reading independently fits many of the goals of a Christian literacy program.

Although Christians are given diverse gifts, language is a primary skill that Christians use to serve God. The more students read, the better their writing, spelling, vocabulary, and reading skills will be. Therefore, giving students adequate time to read is important so that students can

improve their literacy. Students can use their skills to develop relationships with others, articulate their faith, understand God's word, and serve God.

When students read independently, they are able to empathize with other characters, think beyond themselves, and see situations from different perspectives. In a Christian school environment, teachers are able to help students process and reflect upon these new ideas and emotions so that students can develop a stronger self-identity and increase self-awareness in relationship to broader life issues. Using questions helps students evaluate what they read in the books to assess their own choices and consequences.

Although an independent reading program has an important place in a Christian school, the program should be set up carefully to best help students improve in their reading and to motivate them to become lifelong readers. Giving students choices in their reading allows them opportunities to learn about their interests and develop their gifts. Christian educators are called to help students realize these gifts and develop them. Although it is important for students to choose their own books, they do not always know what their gifts are or what topics interest them. The teacher can create requirements that include asking students to read specific genres throughout the year while giving them free choice regarding what specific book they want to read in the genre. By reading books about different themes and topics, students may discover topics that especially interest them or new hobbies that can help them develop their gifts.

Research studies also recommend physically giving students a comfortable place to read and emotionally, a safe place to read (Miller, 2009). Christian school teachers are called to respect students and create a safe learning environment for them. Students should feel respected

by their peers and teacher. When they feel safe, they will be willing to take book recommendations from their teachers and friends, share their ideas freely without fear of others making fun of them, and wrestle with issues that are presented in the books.

Other ways teachers can help students feel safe is by getting to know and love their students. Sometimes a teacher can see gifts and weaknesses in students that students do not see within themselves. By getting to know the students, teachers have a better idea of what kinds of books to recommend and the types of questions to ask during and after the reading of the book. Teachers will also have an idea of where students are in their walk with God and can use literature to help students deepen their faith and increase their understanding of the world around them.

Christian teachers should know how to implement independent reading programs to best support student learning. Research studies found that teachers who were well-trained administered independent reading programs more effectively than teachers who were not well-trained (Fisher, 2004). Christian teachers are called to work to the best of their ability for God's glory, which means understanding the research and searching for opportunities to become better teachers. To do this, Christian reading teachers should read books and articles and attend workshops on independent reading to enhance the way they are administering an independent reading program.

Another way teachers can work to the best of their ability is to become familiar with the books students in the age group they are teaching are reading. Successful independent reading programs have teachers that can recommend books to students. Christian teachers can steer

students to books that are not only at their specific reading level, but also books that are appropriate and/or have themes and ideas that can challenge the students' worldview. After the book is read, teachers can then discuss the book through student-teacher conferences to ask meaningful questions, point them to Christ, help them develop compassion and empathy, and challenge them to serve God.

God calls Christians to live in community with others. Students do not always know how to appropriately communicate their ideas or desires with others. Student conferences are a wonderful avenue that Christian teachers can use to teach students to live in a Christian community. During student conferences, students are given opportunities to share their books and ideas with other students. Although students can get book recommendations from other students and have successful conferences where all get along, there will, at times, be friction in the conferences due to differing opinions or equality in the workload where students will not agree or get along. The teacher then has the opportunity to teach them biblical ways of working out conflict and teach them forgiveness.

All people are born into sin. Because of this, sometimes students are likely to take shortcuts when they are doing something that is difficult or something they do not enjoy. Teachers need some kind of accountability worked into independent reading programs to make sure that students are reading and comprehending. Teachers can take the joy of reading away from students by over-assessing, but there are ways to keep students accountable without over assessing. One way to hold students accountable is to have them answer a few general questions after they have finished a book. These questions can also lead them to better understand God's creation, His people, and their own walk with God (See Appendix A). Teachers can assess



students through teacher-student conferences, student-student conferences, or through student journaling.

There are, however, characteristics or elements of some independent reading programs that do not fit into a Christian perspective on independent reading programs. Some educators have students write down on a worksheet every minute that they read. Student often forget to fill out their forms and guess the amount that they read right before they turned in the sheet. Instead of inspiring them to read more, this technique creates opportunities for some to cheat and takes the pleasure of reading away from those who loved to read by making them constantly write down what they were reading. Rewards in independent reading programs can also produce negative effects. These programs can produce immediate results, but these programs do not motivate students to read more when the program is finished. Christian educators want students to see that reading and language are gifts from God and Christian teachers want students to read throughout their lives. Rewards in an independent reading program are detrimental to students' understanding that reading can be more than an assignment.

God did create students with different talents and gifts. Some students struggle with reading while others excel. A Christian independent reading program cannot be a "one-size fits-all" program which ignores the diversity of the students. Again, teachers must know students well enough to learn the best way to motivate and challenge students.

Although independent reading programs are implemented at schools, it is important for Christian teachers to work in a community with the parents of the students. Not only does research show that students do better in independent reading programs with parental support, but

Christian teachers are called by God to be an extension of the educational role given by God to Christian parents. Teachers can do this through communicating the importance of independent reading to the parents before the program begins. Throughout the year, teachers can encourage parents to take their students to the library, to share their own reading experience with students, to read with their students, to recommend books to the students, and to stay aware of what books their students' are reading. Along with teachers, parents can teach students reading discernment.

Christian educators' goals for their students reach much farther than the next test or the end of the year. They want their students to have the building blocks to continue to learn and grow in Christ for the rest of their lives. Many of the characteristics of an independent reading program in a Christian classroom help students become motivated life-long learners. Teachers can open students' eyes to the literature that is all around them and encourage students to read. Teacher encouragement, excitement about reading, and book recommendations cannot be over-emphasized as important motivators for students. Once a teacher sparks the love of reading in a class, students will motivate each other to read.

### **Implications**

For my middle school classroom, I will work to motivate my students to read through assessment, based on my research, by doing a variety of small assignments. Students will be required to read books throughout the year based on free-choice in different genres. For example, I will have tubs of books labeled according to the genres. For the first quarter, I may require students to read one historical fiction, one book of poetry, and one book of their choice. They can find the different books labeled according to their genre in my tubs. I will give book talks

and recommend different books to specific students. Students will record the name of the book they are reading in a reading log and also record the titles of the books they hope to read in another part of their reading log. Throughout the quarter, students will be required to meet with me numerous times as well as meet with other students to discuss their reading. When students are finished reading a book, they will fill out a short sheet that I have adapted from Gallagher (2009) called “one-pagers.” With the questions I asked students during our meetings and the questions on the one-pagers, I hope to inspire them to become lifelong readers and to challenge them in their relationship with Christ, how they see the world, and how they relate to other people. I also want them to grow in their understanding of what it means to serve God.

### **Limitations**

Extensive research has been done on various independent reading programs and methods but there are limitations to the studies cited. Many of the studies are grade-specific, look only at a specified subgroup of students, or do not include a control group. It is difficult to conclude that the findings of these studies would transfer to other grade levels and schools.

Additionally some of the large scale studies concluded that there are too many variables within the research which make it difficult to make accurate and direct conclusions (Chua, 2008). Another difficulty is that studies are completed on specific independent reading programs such as SSR, but because schools each launch the program in different ways, more questions need to be asked before comparisons can be made (Chua, 2008).

Because schools are diverse and have different resources, not all of the suggestions may work for every school. Some schools, especially Christian schools, cannot afford the large

quantity of books that the research suggests they have. Due to curriculum demands, teachers may not have a lot of time in their schedules to give students significant amount of time to read. There is also the possibility that teachers are asked to teach language arts when they are not trained or qualified. The demands on teachers are so great that there may not be time for teachers to carve out time to learn the best methods to teach an independent reading program or become familiar with the books that their students are reading.

Despite the limitations, utilizing the recommendations will help students improve in their ability to read, will motivate them to read in the future, and will establish clearer beliefs and a stronger sense of identity. Miller stated (2009) “To keep our students reading, we have to let them” (p. 177). A successful program may take some time to set up and monitor, but the results and positive reading energy created in the classroom will make the work worthwhile.

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## APPENDIX

### Fiction Books

1. God created the world perfectly, but due to sin, the world has been distorted. Where do you see distorting what happens to the characters? Be specific with many details. What are the lessons you can learn from this?
2. What is the theme of the book? Do you believe the author's theme is true according to a Christian perspective? Why or why not? Use scripture to support your answer.
3. Describe a major or an important minor character within your book in one paragraph. Can you relate to the character? Why or why not? Do you agree with what the character did? Why or why not? Explain.
4. God has given us the gift of communication. How is communication used in the book to help others? Be specific. How is it used to hurt others? Why do we have the ability to communicate if people can use it to hurt others?
5. Put yourself in the shoes of another character in the book. Explain the character's actions and emotions from a first person point of view in at least 1-2 paragraphs. Why is it important to be able to understand other's perspectives?
6. Name three things you learned about relationships from the characters in the book. Are these biblical lessons? Explain in detail.

### Non Fiction Books

#### Historical Non Fiction

1. How do you see Creation, Fall, and Redemption in this book. Give specific details.
2. History is God's story. How do you see God's story playing out in history through this book?

#### Autobiography

1. Explain the belief system the main person in the book had. Does this fit with what you believe to be true? Why or why not?

### Poetry

1. Christians can see the beauty of language easily in poetry. Explain how you saw beauty in the poetry. Give examples.

2. Poetry often helps its readers see something from a different perspective such as the world or human emotions. Give examples of this and explain the new perspective. Why is it important to be able to look at the world through another perspective?

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