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Independent Reading: Trends in the Beliefs and Practices of Three Classroom Teachers

Lauren R. Brannan and Rebecca M. Giles

Abstract

Reading is arguably the most important skill taught in today's schools. Contradictory perceptions of how best to teach reading continue to alter perceptions regarding the importance of students' engagement in independent reading during school. This study sought to determine the current perceptions regarding independent reading through an exploratory analysis of the teaching practices of second-grade teachers. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to collect semi-structured interview and observation data from three participants. Two overarching themes (quantity of reading and quality of reading) emerged from data. Results revealed that teachers not only value the amount of reading that students engage in, but the quality of that time spent reading.

Introduction

Reading is a skill that transcends many areas of our daily lives, making it perhaps the most important skill to be learned. Yet, there has been little consensus about the best approach to reading instruction (Chall, 1967; Halford, 1997; Pearson, 2004; Pressley & Allington, 2015; Strauss, 2013). As the pendulum swings from supporting one approach to reading instruction to another, the United States continues to fall below other nations in regards to growth in reading achievement (Education Commission of the States, 2011; Pressley & Allington, 2015). Studies have found that as the pressure to perform on standardized tests and other accountability measures mounted, teachers began to rely on commercial reading programs, which allocated little time for students to read independently at school (Allington, 2006; Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). Research, however, has consistently shown a connection between the volume of reading that students engage in and reading achievement (Allington, 2009; Allington, et al., 2010; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2003; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 2004; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Topping, Samuels, & Paul, 2007), regardless of their initial level of achievement (Allington, 2006, 2013).

The amount of reading children engage in contributes to growth in their vocabulary and thinking skills, as well as general knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001, 2003). Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) found that exposure to print, a construct very similar to reading volume, can predict students' ability to spell and their vocabulary knowledge. In fact, Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) cited reading volume as the primary source of children's vocabulary differences. Students who read more not only have higher reading achievement, but they demonstrate more knowledge of content (Krashen, 2006). The implementation of independent reading in the classroom is one approach elementary teachers use to increase students reading volume (Miller, 2002; Sanden, 2012, 2014; Taberski, 2011; Towle, 2000).

Independent Reading

Independent reading, in which choice, authenticity, challenge, and collaboration are made possible through authentic reading experiences, requires that a block of time be set aside for students to read self-selected texts independently, or with a partner, to practice reading skills and strategies while the teacher provides scaffolding through individual student conferences (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2011; Towle, 2001). Independent reading is often a component of reading workshops, which include a focus lesson, small group instruction, independent reading, and share time (Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2011; Towle, 2000). This format follows Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) Gradual Release of Responsibility Model, which illustrates the process of cognitive apprenticeship, where experts make their thinking visible and provide scaffolding as novices learn new skills (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1987). During independent reading, teachers support students' reading independence, focus on student growth, and show a commitment to student-centered practices (Sanden, 2012, 2014).

The commonly agreed upon components of independent reading are as follows: 1) a sustained amount of time for reading, 2) reading appropriately leveled text, 3) participating in reading as a social activity, 4) eliminating the requirement of silent reading, 5) reading with a purpose, 6) teacher-student conferences, and 7) access to a large variety of quality text (Miller, 2002; Sanden, 2012; 2014; Taberski, 2011). Although some of these components overlap with programs such as Sustained Silent Reading (Pilgreen, 2000) and Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning, 2012), the collective use of all components during independent reading offers powerful differences. A detailed description of each component follows.

Time to Read

Independent reading consists of a sustained amount of time each day that is set aside for students to read (Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2000, 2011). The time allotted for reading can occur in a single span or be divided into two separate blocks of time (Taberski, 2000). While Routman (2003) recommended setting aside thirty minutes or more each day, Taberski (2011) noted that the amount of time allocated to read should be each individual teacher's decision. Time spent reading, however, should follow a focus lesson, in which the teacher demonstrates a reading skill or strategy (Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2011; Taberski,

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2000). This creates an opportunity for students' authentic independent practice of the skills learned during the focus lessons and establishes relevance for the period of time set aside for reading.

Appropriately Leveled Text

As part of a reading workshop, student read texts each day that are appropriately leveled (Towle, 2000). With teacher guidance, students choose the books they would like to read (Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2000; 2011). This ensures that students are reading texts that they can read successfully, but with adequate challenge (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, Routman, 2003). Many teachers use a commercial leveling system to level texts in their libraries. Book levels, however, should not be the sole method for choosing appropriate books for children (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) encourage teachers to consider students' interests and backgrounds as well.

Reading as a Social Activity

During independent reading, students may read alone or with partners for an extended period of time (Sanden, 2014; Taberski, 2000; 2011). Sanden (2014) observed some students purposively placed with a partner during independent reading. This is consistent with the collaborative piece of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Fisher & Frey, 2008) that recommends students have the opportunity to work collaboratively before they are ready to practice a skill or strategy independently. Sharing reading experiences with one another is also an expectation within independent reading; thus, Sanden (2014) also observed students sharing information with one another about their nonfiction texts and text-to-text connections they were making.

Productive Noise

Although silent reading is a goal of independent reading, it is not required, as young readers may need to subvocalize as they read (Taberski, 2011; Wright, Sherman, & Jones, 2004). Whisper phones, telephone-shaped devices that allow students to whisper into one end and hear their voice through the other end, or other devices are useful in keeping the noise level down in the classroom during reading time. As a result, independent reading time may not be silent, but may consist of a low hum of students reading quietly and working collaboratively with other students.

Connection to Direct Instruction

Independent reading is designed for readers to enter with a purpose—to practice the skills and strategies demonstrated by the teacher (Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000; 2011). Students often practice these skills and strategies through written response, where the students keep a written log of readings and may use some sort of graphic organizer or sticky notes to track their thinking (Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2011; Taberski, 2000; Towle, 2000).

Student-Teacher Conferences

While students in the class are reading independently, the teacher conducts reading conferences with individual students (Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2011; Taberski, 2000; Towle, 2000). This component aligns with the guided practice stage of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model that describes how the teacher provides scaffolding so that students may work toward independence (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Conferences provide the teacher with the opportunity to conduct reading assessments, provide scaffolding or provide individualized instruction (Miller, 2002; Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2011; Taberski, 2000; Towle, 2000). Conferences may include activities such as having a conversation about what the student is currently reading, the student reading quietly while the teacher takes a running record assessment, the teacher modeling specific reading behaviors, or the teacher providing guidance to a student who is reading quietly.

Access to Text

Independent reading also requires teachers to have an excellent, organized classroom library (Routman, 2003; Taberski, 2000; Towle, 2000). Routman (2003) recommends including a variety of text types and genres in a classroom library. She also recommends emphasizing students' interests and deemphasizing leveled books.

Significance and Purpose

Following their review of fourteen empirical studies where students were involved in self-directed reading through Sustained Silent Reading or Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reader (NICHHD, 2000a; 2000b), the National Reading Panel (NRP) released a report claiming that there was not enough experimental evidence to support the practice of encouraging students to read independently for a specified period of time during the school day. The panel stated, "at this time, it would be unreasonable to conclude that research shows that encouraging reading has a beneficial effect on reading achievement" (NICHHD, 2000b, p. 23-24). In the publication *Put Reading First*, based on the findings of the NRP, Armbruster and colleagues (2001) suggested that teachers instead encourage students to read outside of class. As a result, many classrooms discontinued their programs that designated classroom time to read (Allington, 2013; Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). Although independent reading, which connects students' autonomous reading practice to direct instruction and incorporates teacher scaffolding, is significantly different from programs such as Sustained Silent Reading and Accelerated Reader, its national prominence waned drastically in light of the NRP's negative implications. This study sought to determine the current perceptions of independent reading through an exploratory analysis of the independent reading practices of second-grade teachers with varying experiences.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research study:

Research Question 1: What are teachers' beliefs about providing students with an allocated time for reading self-selected texts each day in their classrooms?

Research Question 2: What are teachers' practices when implementing the independent reading?

Methods

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to collect semi-structured interview and observation data from three participants. Purposive sampling was employed in order to select teachers who implemented independent reading in their classrooms. Three white female second grade teachers were selected from three different schools in a large school district in the Southeastern United States. Participants were selected on the recommendation of their administrator or reading coach, based on their implementation of independent reading and their agreement be interviewed. Table 1 provides a description of the participants' education levels and teaching experience.

Table 1
Research Participants

Teacher	School Type	Highest Degree	Teaching Experience
Jacky	Small rural	Master's	16 years
Gwen	Large urban	Master's	2 years
Andrea	Large rural	Bachelor's	3 years

Note: Teachers' names are pseudonyms.

Interviews were scheduled during each teacher's planning time and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. Observations of each teacher's independent reading time were conducted the same day teachers were interviewed and lasted approximately 30 minutes. An observation guide was used for focusing the observations and consisted of a list of each of the components of independent reading. Coding the data progressed in several stages using MAXQDA 12 software. In the first stage, initial coding emerged directly from the data, rather than forcing data into preexisting categories. Each line in the transcripts was coded line-by-line in order to begin to uncover meanings directly from the data. The second stage, focused coding, identified the most significant and frequent line-by-line codes (Charmaz, 2006). This procedure involved categorizing the codes that were collected during the first stage into more meaningful or significant groups. The third stage, axial coding, involved the development of major categories and subcategories using the categories generated during focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, theoretical coding was used to develop a coherent theory from the various pieces of data as the researcher theorized how each category and subcategory of codes was related to one another.

Findings

Interview and observation data revealed common beliefs and practices among the participants. The beliefs described by each teacher led to the identification of two overarching themes -- quantity of reading and quality of reading were both highly valued by each of the teachers. The observed practices of each teacher provided additional support for these two themes. Observational data also confirmed that each participant implemented each of the components described in the review of literature. To protect the identity of the participants, the pseudonyms Jacky, Gwen, and Andrea were used.

Quantity of Reading

The theme of quantity of reading emerged as participants described their beliefs about the importance of a daily, designated time (20-30 minutes) for students to read from organized classroom libraries, book rooms, and school libraries. Observations confirmed these descriptions, as Jacky, Andrea, and Gwen were observed providing time during the school day for students to read self-selected texts from "just-right" book bags, the school library, the classroom library, or a school book room. Andrea described her beliefs about students' quantity of reading as follows: "I believe that the more they read both at school and at home, that it just helps them better with their skills of reading and with their comprehension." Providing time for students to read at school was a priority for each participant. Jacky stated the following:

> A lot of students won't read at home. Don't have the support at home to be encouraged to read. Any class time that you can give. I know it's hard sometimes to try to find the time for that independent reading, but I believe that it's extremely important for them.

Jacky also emphasized the impact of higher quantities of reading:

> I believe that students should read at any opportunity they have. The more they read, the more they'll succeed. The better they are in writing, the better they are with using their strategies of decoding and context clues. I believe that any time they have, they should be reading.

In addition to a designated period of time for students to read, the teachers admitted providing other opportunities for students to read throughout the day. Gwen stated:

> We normally read right after they eat breakfast. They get their morning work and then they're reading. I don't have any objection to them reading when we're not doing anything. I say, 'If you're done, you need to take out a book.'

Andrea emphasized the importance of students also reading at home. She explained that she sent home a reading log each week for students to record their daily reading and return at the end of the week.

Quality of Reading

The quality of reading theme emerged as participants described their beliefs about meaningful independent practice and a transition to independence through reading conferences. Participants valued the level of engagement and success with text as opposed to only the amount of time spent reading. Various strategies, including providing appropriately leveled texts, requiring reading response activities, and holding reading conferences, were described as supporting students' quality of reading. Observations of these strategies provided more detail about how the teachers put these beliefs into practice.

"Just-Right" Texts. The teachers valued meaningful practice with texts that students could read with little to no support, which was scaffolded by using leveled text to guide their selection. All three teachers described use of the Accelerated Reader leveling system as the primary method for leveling their texts. Jacky and Andrea used additional leveling systems, including Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and Reading A to Z (Learning A-Z Text Leveling System, n.d.). The use of leveled text emerged as a common trend among participants, as they expressed the importance of students reading text that is "just-right" for them. Jacky described how attending to text levels that students chose impacted her struggling readers:

> Even though they want to get those higher books or those bigger chapter books because their friends have it, if they do that, they're going to struggle, extremely bad. Then, when they've got a book on their independent reading level, they are successful. They're being able to read that on their own.

The use of leveled text was observed in each of the participating teachers' classrooms. Andrea's students were observed reading from "just-right" book bags, which were plastic zipper bags that contained several books that students were able to read with little to no support. Each book in the bag was labeled with a Guided Reading level. Her students also read from books checked out from the classroom library. These books were labeled with stickers that indicated the Accelerated Reader level range. Both Jacky and Gwen's students read books from the classroom library and the school library, both were labeled with Accelerated Reader levels.

Response to Reading. Reading response activities were another common trend among the participants that connected direct instruction to independent reading. Types of reading response activities described by the participants included graphic organizers, summaries, book reviews, and journals. Gwen described her reading response activities as follows:

> If we're going over story structure, like beginning, middle, and end, I'll usually assign a graphic organizer for their seat work. I'll actually get a piece of paper and fold it for a template because if they did it on their own, it would be disastrous.

Jacky shared how her students recorded their responses in a journal:

> If we're working on character traits, then I might tell them, 'Find the character traits in your book that you're reading. Write them in your journal and we'll discuss how they found those throughout the book.'

Observations verified the teachers' statements about their reading response activities. Students in Jacky's classroom recorded their responses in notebooks that contained a variety of response types, including graphic organizers, summaries, book reviews, illustrations, and lists. The response notebooks also included examples of connections to the focus lesson; for example, a Venn diagram created from a read aloud lesson was contained in each of the students' notebooks. Gwen's students' notebooks contained many of the same types of responses, including lists of text features and recordings of the problem and solution from a story. These observations were consistent with Andrea's students' reading responses. Anchor charts on the walls of each classroom showed evidence of modeling types of reading responses.

Reading Conferences. All three participants described how the implementation of reading conferences helped transition students to independence in their reading. Each of the teachers emphasized the importance of informal assessment, conversations with students about their reading, and focusing on each student's individual and immediate needs during conferences. Andrea described a typical reading conference in her classroom:

> Basically, I sit with each student for a few minutes and they pick up right where they were reading. I would tell them what we worked on the last time that we met and what skills they're working on, and then I ask them to show me that they're practicing. I look for different things that they're struggling with, and then also I make sure I write down the name of their book that they're reading and the level, and I make sure that it is just right book for them, that it's a good fit. If not, we talk about it, and then how to pick that just right book for them so that they're not struggling, or that it's not too easy so that they can work on getting to a higher level.

Andrea's students sat all around the room in areas of their choice during independent reading. She circulated the room and met students where they were seated for reading conferences, and she kept records of each reading conference with students by using a form she had created. Each student's conference record contained anecdotal notes, assessment scores, and goals.

Conferences were reported as consisting of a very casual conversation with each student about their reading progress. Conversations included identification of strengths and weaknesses by the student and the proposal of strategies and solutions by the teacher. Gwen provided a description of the typical format of her reading conferences with students:

> We work on strengths, weaknesses, areas to improve on, how to improve comprehension strategies. With them, though, I don't really word it that way. I feel like that they would feel, A: They wouldn't understand, and B: They would think that they were weak. I would say pretty much motivational speak, 'You're doing really well. Here are some things that I see that you're doing really well with. You're motivated, you love to read this chapter book, and so and so.' Then I'll kind of point out what they need to improve on, and what I've noticed. I think they're receptive to it. We'll see in the long run.

Conferences were held at a small group table in Gwen's

classroom where she employed the use of formative assessments and on-the-spot instruction when needed. A few of her students were completing a response sheet called "Questions to Ask While Reading." She held casual conversations with students, encouraged them to spend more time reading, and deemphasized taking multiple Accelerated Reader quizzes during independent reading.

Participants described getting to know their students as readers, including their interests and goals for themselves, and equipping them with tools for becoming more strategic independent readers. Evidence of this can be found in the description of a conference from Jacky:

> During the conference, I'll ask them why they chose those books; how are the books going; if they think it's too hard, too easy; [and] if they're enjoying the book. We discuss some of the reading strategies. I listen to them read. If they're having [an] issue with sounding out words or even context [or] if they're not understanding that, we work through those. I also look at their levels to make sure they're reading on appropriate levels for them. Then I'll check their journals, if they have put an entry on their book on their own.

In the same fashion as Andrea, Jacky circulated the room to meet with students in their chosen seating location for reading conferences. She carried with her a spiral notebook that contained anecdotal notes. She began her conferences with a question about what they were reading. She discussed the text with each student and asked more specific questions to assess their progress on practicing specific skills, such as identifying the plot and summarizing a chapter. She assisted one student with selecting a book that was a better fit for them when she seemingly realized the student didn't have enough background knowledge about Egypt to adequately comprehend the text they were currently reading. She encouraged the student to select books that she knew something about and was interested in, rather than selecting a book solely based on reading level. She modeled for the student how to preview a book before making a selection.

Each of the participants emphasized a quality of reading that was highly student-centered using "just-right" books, individual reading conferences, and meaningful response activities that tied their reading to what they learned in class. In addition, they each had classroom libraries filled with a variety of genres and difficulty levels that were arranged by topic and author so that students could easily select books of interest to them. In these classrooms, quality of reading and quantity of reading seemed inseparable. Figure 1 illustrates the two themes, quantity of reading and quality of reading, that emerged from teachers' beliefs about independent reading.
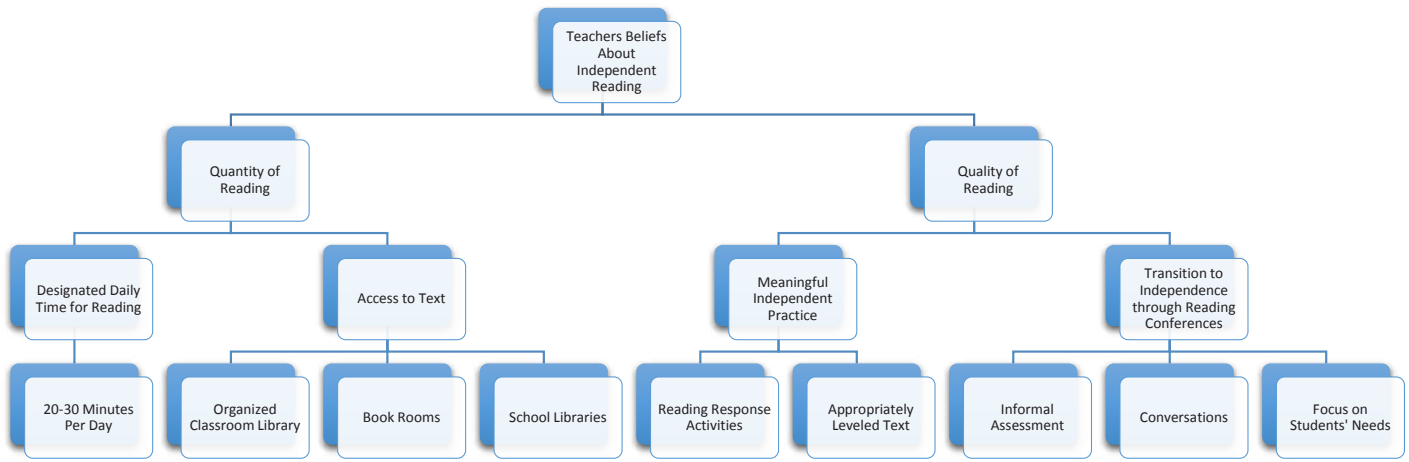
Figure 1: Diagram of Teachers' Beliefs About Independent Reading

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs of teachers who implement independent reading. Two overarching themes -- quantity of reading and quality of reading -- appeared following the analysis of interview and observation data. Topping, Samuels, and Paul (2007) found that quality and quantity of reading were both important for influencing reading achievement. Quantity of reading was revealed in the trends of daily class time for independent reading, access to books, and the encouragement of students to read at home. Quality of reading was demonstrated through the implementation of instruction and scaffolding that guided students to select texts in which they could find success, assigning reading response activities, and regularly conferring with individual students to foster increased independence.

It has been said that the best way to become a good reader is to read (Anderson, Kaufman, & Kaufman, 1976). The teachers in this study highly valued the opportunity for their students to read self-selected books in class. This belief was manifested in a daily time for independent reading and access to texts. Each teacher housed a classroom library, organized by topic and book level. The teachers also allowed their students to visit the school library and a separate book room to check out books. A study by McQuillan and Au (2001) found that providing students with easy access to books is associated with a greater amount of voluntary reading.

Not just quantity – time to read and access to books, but also quality – assessing and scaffolding while students read and ensuring a wide variety of interesting and challenging books is important for blossoming readers. The teachers valued their students' reading quality, which was evident in their descriptions of their student-centered reading programs. They described reading conferences that focused on promoting growth in each reader through specific feedback. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory, which describes how learning takes place through interaction with someone more experienced. In addition, they emphasized the importance of students reading books that provided a challenge, yet allowed the students to enjoy them without significant struggle.

The teachers' attention to the quality of students' reading

experiences was further disclosed in their description of various response activities that were often assigned during the daily independent reading time. According to Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1982), comprehension occurs as a transaction takes place between the text and the reader. Readers bring their own background knowledge with them to a reading experience, which varies the reading experience for each reader. The response activities described by the three teachers in this study provide students with an outlet for expressing their unique experience with the books read. Teachers reported the use of summaries, graphic organizers, and other written forms being used as response activities. Completed responses were then shared with the teacher during reading conferences and provided a basis for discussion and formative assessment.

All three participants believed in promoting students' responsibility for their own literacy learning by providing daily time for them to read autonomously from self-selected text. These teachers' student-centered approach was further evidenced in their use of conferences as an opportunity to work with students on identifying their areas of weakness, and setting goals. These findings are consistent with the support of students' reading independence and focus on reading growth through student-centered practices identified in Sanden's (2014) study of teachers using independent reading and described in the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This model illustrates the flow of responsibility from the teacher to the student and emphasized that before students are to be independent with a task, they must first be provided an explicit model and guided practice.

Pajares (1992) emphasized the importance of bringing attention to teachers' beliefs, as these beliefs influence teachers' perceptions and judgments, which influence their classroom practices. The participants in this study firmly believed that sufficient time (quantity) spent engaged in meaningful (quality) reading experiences would improve their students' reading ability. This belief was translated into their use of independent reading components consistent with Gambrell's (2011) strategies for engaging readers; which facilitate motivation to read. Gambrell's (2011) strategies included making sure tasks are relevant, providing students with a wide range of texts, providing time for students to read, giving students a choice about their reading activities, providing opportunities for students to discourse with other students about what they are reading, ensuring students

experience success with challenging texts, and providing incentives that reflect the value of reading. This suggests that classrooms using independent reading facilitate opportunities for gains in students' reading motivation. Students with higher reading motivation read more and have been found to score higher on measures of reading achievement (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Gottfried, 1990; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 2004; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). If motivation to read is increased as a result of independent reading, it can potentially impact students' volume of reading and ultimately their reading achievement. Thus, more research is needed to determine if independent reading contributes to an increase in reading motivation, reading volume and/or reading achievement.

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