

Creating a Successful SSR Program in a High School Classroom

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Abstract

This study details one teacher's silent sustained reading program in a high school classroom. Not only did the program provide time for students to read independently, but conferences, projects, and different methods of generating interest in books were also utilized to change the reading attitudes of reluctant readers. The study found that the combination of these methods created a successful sustained silent reading program with reduced off-task behavior and increased literary engagement among students.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Structuring My Program	4
Advertising the Books.....	5
Conferences.....	8
Projects.....	9
Conclusions.....	10
References.....	12



Introduction

It matters, if individuals are to retain any capacity to form their own judgments or opinions, that they continue to read for themselves... why they read must be for and in their own interest.
(Bloom, 2000, p. 38)

Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) is defined as a block of time set aside in the course of a school day for students simply to read. This program is not commonly used in high school classrooms because many people,



teachers and administrators included, view this method as a waste of time, primarily because there is no scientific proof of its importance. Even teachers who would like to implement this program feel the pressure of state tests and content standards, or simply feel guilty about using class time in this way. Marilyn Reynolds (2004) expressed these guilty feelings when she first began her SSR program. She wrote, “Was I simply self-indulgent because I spent part of my own classroom time reading for pleasure?” (p. 5). Reynolds realized that she needed to ground her program in the basics of theory and personal research, which was also the purpose of my own study. I wanted to determine whether SSR is beneficial for high school students, particularly those who are reluctant and uninterested readers. Can the use of SSR change students’ attitudes towards reading for pleasure?

For the past two years I have reserved Fridays for SSR in my 11th and 12th grade English classes, devoting the entire 47-minute class period to independent reading. I surveyed my students and found that 21% of them spend less than one hour a week reading for pleasure at home; thirty-five percent reported never spending time reading. High school students have many commitments outside of school, and even students that might like to read often don't have the time. So, if students aren't reading at home, it is crucial that they have time in the classroom to pursue reading for pleasure. Through my research I found greater evidence that providing time for SSR is critical. According to Gallagher (2003):

- The average amount of time spent reading for all grades is 7.1 minutes a day in public schools around the nation.
- The peak reading years are the fourth and fifth grades. High school students spend about as much time on literature-based reading as kindergartners.
- Students in the top 5 percent of national reading scores read 144 times more than students in the bottom 5.
- Students in the highest-performing states in the NAEP reading study engaged in 59 percent more reading than those states in the bottom quartile.

The first place that I turned to for help was the students themselves.

For my study, I decided to look closely at the reading behaviors and attitudes of my fifty-three 11th grade students. At the beginning of my data collection I asked the students to classify themselves in one of the following categories developed by Kyleene Beers (1996): motivated readers (“I love to read!”); dormant readers (“I would read, but just don't have the time.”); uncommitted readers (“I think I might read sometime in the

future.”); and unmotivated readers (“I don’t like reading. I’m not going to enjoy it, so why bother.”). I numbered these four phrases and put them on the board. I asked students to write the number of the phrase that best described their attitude towards reading on the top of an assignment they were completing. I was pleased to see that many of my students were motivated or dormant readers; I didn’t need to convince these students of the pleasures of reading. It was the twelve uncommitted and ten unmotivated readers that I wanted to reach.

Structuring My Program

My initial goal for SSR was to provide time for independent reading and to promote reading for enjoyment. Since the majority of students admit that they do not make time to read outside of school, I thought that giving time for that purpose would help them to read more. In order to emphasize that reading could be solely for pleasure, I put few restrictions on Friday SSR. I wanted this to be time for “no pressure” reading where students could read without the threat of a test looming over their heads.

Despite the many students who did use this time for what it was intended, there was still a group who were not reading as much as I would have liked. I saw common problems developing during Friday SSR. These included: sleeping; “fake reading” or staring into space with an open book; avoiding reading by searching for a book in the library, etc.; and working on other assignments. Clearly my SSR program needed more structure and simply giving students the time to read would not turn them into readers.

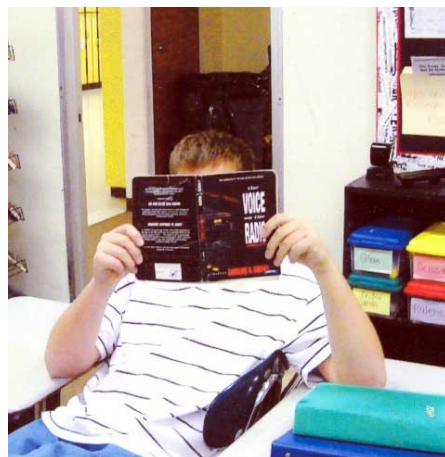
I gave them a short survey asking what problems they saw with our SSR program, what suggestions they had for change, and what would motivate them to read more. The majority of the students thought that the day of the week was a major concern. I had

initially chosen Fridays for SSR thinking that it would be a good way to end the week of regular classroom instruction. Upon pressing my students further I learned that some of them felt too giddy for the weekend to settle into reading on Fridays. I wanted to make SSR a time that would be the most conducive to reading for my students, so I then let each class vote on the day that they would rather have SSR. This was an important step in restructuring my program because I let the students know that their input was important and that I was willing to change in order to make this program work.

The second thing that I learned from the survey was that many students wanted more rules to accompany SSR. Some students wrote that having a reading goal or knowing that participation would be graded would motivate them to use SSR time more productively. Although this went against my initial idea of “no pressure” reading, I thought that structure would be beneficial to some students. The unmotivated and uncommitted readers didn’t already see reading as something pleasurable and they needed a reason to “buy in.” With these students in mind, I developed a set of guidelines that highlighted the appropriate on-task behaviors and included a reading goal. The goal was to finish a minimum of one book per grading period. It was my hope that the unmotivated and uncommitted readers would read because they now knew they had to, but would eventually read because they found they wanted to.

Advertising the Books

One thing that I have taken for granted as a lifelong reader is how I choose books that are right for me and that I know I will enjoy. I noticed that this skill does not come naturally for



many of my unmotivated and uncommitted readers. Non-readers are unfamiliar with different authors and genres, and they don't know how to use the book itself to determine whether or not they might enjoy reading it. These students also have unformed ideas about the types of books that might interest them. Frequently, the only criterion that they can give me about what they would like to read is that it be "something good." I have observed these students arbitrarily choose books from our classroom library and become further discouraged about reading when they don't enjoy them. If I was going to turn these students on to reading, I had to discover a way to help them find "something good" to read.

When I initially surveyed the class, one of the things that I asked was "What would motivate you to read more?" Overwhelmingly, I received responses such as, "finding a book I really like," "good books," "more books that catch my attention," and "to know something would be a good story." At first I was surprised; I had good books, and lots of them! What I realized was that I wasn't doing a very good job of advertising what I had. The books were neatly lined up on bookshelves and bookracks, but that wasn't very helpful for these students.

One student suggested on the survey that I could "explain a book to everyone every Friday," and I began to give "book talks" throughout the week. I would sometimes find a particularly interesting passage and read it to the class, and other times I would tell a little about the story and give my personal reactions. From the very first time I gave a book talk I noticed that this method did generate interest. My first book talk was for *The Bleachers* (Grisham, 2003) which had sat in the class library for the first few months of school unread. After the book talk during first period, the book was checked out and

there was a waiting list! The book had been there all along; I just needed to bring it to the attention of the students.

Another method that I used to generate interest was a “book pass” (Allen, 2000). Although book talks had been effective, the students only heard about one book. With the book pass students were able to sample large numbers of books at a time. I started this activity by explaining how I looked over a book to decide whether or not I might like to read it, giving examples such as reading the blurb on the back and skimming the first few pages to determine the book’s layout. Each student was then given a book and a chart on which to record information about the books they looked at. I gave the students two minutes to record the title and author of the book and a comment on whether or not it looked like something that would interest them. When the two minutes were up, the students passed their book to the person next to them and started the process over until they had looked at approximately twenty books. The students kept the charts so that they could refer back to them when they were looking for a new book.

In order to make my books more visible, I also tried different display methods. I bought plastic pamphlet holders, which were the perfect size for displaying new books. I also took thin wire and hung it clothesline style across an unused chalkboard, hanging books over it to make them more noticeable. A bulletin board in the room easily became a spot for students to post book recommendations. Not only did these methods make books more visible, but they also contributed to the reading climate of the classroom. When you walk into a room with books prominently displayed it communicates that reading is of value there. Nancie Atwell (1998) states, “[A classroom library] also provides a crucial demonstration: supplying books for students to choose and read,

creating a literary environment for them, are high priorities of their teachers and school” (p. 37).

Conferences

Most of what I had read about SSR suggested that teachers should read along with the students to show that they value reading and to provide a model for what literary engagement looks like.

Since I began my SSR program, I always read along with my students. It wasn't until I began to restructure my



program that I decided to change. As Waff and Connell (2004) discuss, reading should not be a solitary pursuit, and teachers need to feel comfortable with and understand the social nature of learning. I had been letting my students read each Friday without allowing them to converse with me or others about their reading. I realized that as much as I liked to use Fridays to read, I also wanted to better know my students as readers. I decided to conduct short reading conferences during Friday SSR because it was difficult for me to fit them in during the week.

The conferences proved to be helpful for me. I started the conferences by asking the students whether or not they were enjoying the book they were reading. This helped me get a sense of what types of books interested my students. During a conference one student pointed out that I didn't have enough books about sports. As a result, I purchased some books by Chris Crutcher and Carl Deuker that were well received by the students.

During the conferences I also asked students where they were in the book and what was going on in the story. I took brief notes about this so that I could check progress in the next conference. Knowing I would ask how they were progressing made the students more accountable for their reading. I also found that through the conferences I was able to learn about books that I had not read yet.

The conferences were also a way for me to discuss behavior issues with the students. If I saw a student engaging in off-task behavior I would bring it up during the conference. Previously, I didn't like to interrupt the other students' reading to correct these behaviors, but now I could discuss it one-on-one with the student. As a result, I saw a dramatic decrease in the off-task behaviors. I also realized that some of the off-task behavior was a result of reading problems. When I confronted a student about sleeping during SSR he explained that he had difficulty staying focused for the entire class period and that, as a result, he usually fell asleep. I suggested that he take frequent breaks to process what he had read, maybe writing a sentence or two before returning to the text. The next week he tried this and I saw him awake the whole period.

Projects

After finishing a book the students were required to complete a project. I scoured teaching books and the Internet to come up with 50 different projects from which to choose. I wrote each project idea on an index card and organized them in a file for the students to look through. My hope was that by giving the students lots of options they would find a project idea that would spark their interest. The

Beers (1996) discusses how motivated readers prefer to process their feelings about books through activities that require writing, such as connecting the book to their life or analyzing a character. On the other hand, uncommitted and unmotivated readers prefer art activities, such as drawing a scene from the book or making models of characters.

projects encompass a wide range of modalities from writing to art. Beers further explains that “these activities help them make the abstract words concrete, enabling them to establish a visual connection with the book” (p. 112). At the end of the grading period, I received a variety of projects, most of which showed thought and a connection to the book. One of my unmotivated readers spent time designing and creating a t-shirt to advertise the book he was reading. The class was impressed and he was obviously excited about the project.

Conclusions

One Friday we were unable to have SSR because the guidance counselor was coming in to do scheduling. Upon hearing the news, Erin, an uncommitted reader, expressed disappointment. I replied that she didn’t have to wait for Fridays to read. She answered, “I know that; it’s just that I look forward to reading on Fridays all week long.” This student’s statement attests to the change in atmosphere and attitudes that have taken place in my classroom. I only made small changes, such as providing guidelines, conferencing with students, and advertising my books, but I have seen a dramatic decrease in off-task behavior and an increase in engagement in previously unmotivated and uncommitted readers. When I first realized the need for change in my SSR program, I began keeping records of how students were behaving each week. The first week that I kept track, in one class of 25 I had seven students engaging in off-task behavior. Three months later the same class had only one student off task. This improvement did not happen overnight; it was gradual and happened as a result of much practice. Krashen (2004) attests to this, saying that long-term studies seem to be more supportive of SSR than short-term studies. I now have proof that spending time during the week to “just

read” is worthwhile. But, as Krashen also points out, SSR is much more than “just letting kids read”; it is “setting aside time to make sure that students have a chance to read, providing access to good books, and doing things that encourage reading” (p. 445).

Because I took the time to learn more about my students as readers they have taught me some important lessons. Carl, who admitted he had never read a book, taught me that it’s never too late for a student to become a reader. I suggested that he read *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1994) and after reading it the first day he told me he intended to finish it. Not only did he accomplish this, but he also asked if I could get him a copy of the sequel, *Forged by Fire* (Draper, 1997). As a project he decided to write to the author and share that her books had finally made him feel like a reader.

After learning that he had already failed my class for the year, he stopped handing in any of our regular class assignments. But on Fridays he would still show up with a book ready to read because he had become engrossed in the suspenseful books of Caroline B. Cooney.

Ben taught me that unmotivated readers can learn to read for pleasure.

I no longer feel guilty about devoting so much time to SSR. It is my belief that students will not be successful with academic reading until they have experienced some success with recreational reading. Having positive reading experiences helps students to look at the whole process of reading in a different way. As a teacher of 11th and 12th grade students, I feel that it is my duty to provide my students with one last chance to become readers before they graduate.

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