

# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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**What Should We Teach?** Pages 32-35

## Ten Minutes a Day for Silent Reading

**Improving students' attitudes toward reading is just one of the many benefits of sustained silent reading programs.**

*Steve Gardiner*

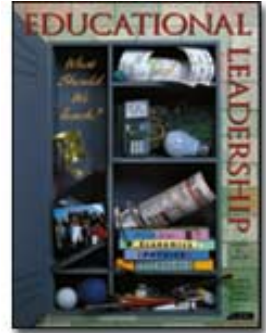
Rachel is asking to leave the room again. She asks often. She doesn't want a drink of water or a trip to the restroom. She wants to go to the library to check out a new book for our silent reading program. Even though we only read for 10 minutes a day in class, Rachel finishes several books each week, and I'm frequently writing library passes for her.

Classrooms in the United States have had sustained silent reading programs for more than 25 years. Proposed by Lyman Hunt at the University of Vermont in the 1960s, sustained silent reading programs became popular in the 1970s. I became interested in these programs in 1978 when I realized that many students couldn't tell me when they had last finished reading a book. They blamed their inability to finish a book on a lack of leisure time and on their belief that most books were boring.

I began setting aside time for my students to read in class every day. I also conducted surveys about their reading habits, asking such questions as

- How many books have you read in the past year?
- Do you have a bookshelf in your house? If so, how many books are on it?
- Do you have your own bookshelf? If so, how many books do you personally own?
- Have you seen your parents read books?
- Do your parents read magazines or newspapers?
- Have your parents ever recommended a book to you?

I learned that students who read frequently on their own had better literacy skills and better grades in my English classes. I also discovered that if students had time to read during class, they quickly found books that they enjoyed and looked forward to reading. In fact, within the first two weeks of the semester, many students are in their seats and reading before the tardy bell rings.



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During my second year as a teacher, my principal came to observe my classroom. He sat quietly as we read our books—I always read with the students—and then proceeded through the day's lesson. Later in the day, he called me to his office. During his evaluation, he did not comment on how I taught my lesson; he only asked me to justify the time I had "taken away" from my students by having them read silently for 10 minutes. As a novice teacher, I fumbled for an answer. I didn't do a good job of justifying my program, but now, more than 20 years later, I still designate time for silent reading every day, and I have hundreds of success stories to support the value of silent reading programs.

## **What Is Sustained Silent Reading?**

Sustained silent reading programs have gone by many names, including SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), FVR (Free Voluntary Reading), DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading), SSRW (Sustained Silent Reading and Writing), and POWER (Providing Opportunities with Everyday Reading). Each program is slightly different from the others, but all share the same guidelines. Students should read silently every day, choose their own books, have uninterrupted time to read, be able to choose not to finish a book, observe the teacher modeling good reading habits, and not be required to take tests or write book reports on what they read (Hopkins, 1997; Kornelley & Smith, 1993; Trelease, 1995; Valeri-Gold, 1995). As Stephen Krashen (1993) points out, sustained silent reading "is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time" (p. x).

## **Beyond Better Attitudes**

The primary goal of silent reading programs has always been to increase students' enjoyment of reading. Researcher Janise Arthur (1995) investigated the connection between sustained silent reading programs and attitudes toward reading, with special attention to aliterates—those who can read but choose not to. She found several studies that correlated daily reading opportunities with improved attitudes, which in turn produced other benefits.

Studies of children in kindergarten, primary, and middle grades who have demonstrated a voluntary interest in books were not only rated to have better work habits, social and emotional development, language structure, and overall school performance, but also these children scored significantly higher on standardized reading tests. (p. 2)

Sustained silent reading programs do more than improve students' attitudes toward reading. Studies show that students who enjoy reading also read more books and develop better skills in reading comprehension, spelling, and vocabulary.

One such study used the Nelson Denny Reading Test to assess rates of improvement in vocabulary and reading comprehension among a group of high school students in Colorado. Students who had completed an 18-week silent reading program showed an improvement of 1.9 grade levels, more than four times the control group's rate of improvement. Among students in the silent reading program, the percentage of those who read one or more books

per month doubled from 12 to 24 percent during the same period (Kornelley & Smith, 1993).

In a study of a high school in Georgia that used POWER sustained silent reading as an integral part of its language arts program, 64 percent of the program's teachers reported that students' interest in reading had increased, and 53 percent reported that the students' reading skills improved as a result of the program (Weller & Weller, 1999).

At an elementary school with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Arthur (1995) selected at random students who identified themselves as recreational readers and those who did not; the 4th grade recreational readers had significantly higher reading achievement scores than did the nonrecreational readers.

Silent reading programs can improve reading speed as well. In a six-week study of 76 college students, students read for 15 minutes three times a week during class and for 15 minutes twice a week outside of class. Students maintained approximately the same level of comprehension, but their mean reading rate increased from 210 to 348 words per minute (Dwyer & West, 1994).

An interesting 1978 study demonstrated that readers learn new vocabulary simply by reading books. Without knowing that they would be tested on vocabulary, adult readers who read *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess were able to score 50–96 percent on a test of the words that Burgess had coined especially for the book and repeated an average of 15 times each (Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978).

Krashen (1993) reviewed studies that compared students who were in sustained silent reading or similar free-choice reading programs with those who instead studied traditional basal texts and received direct instruction in writing, grammar, and spelling. In 38 of 41 comparisons, the students in the sustained silent or free-choice reading programs did as well or better on a variety of reading comprehension tests than did the students in traditional language arts programs. The studies also found correlations between longer periods of time in sustained reading or free-choice reading programs and better results on vocabulary and reading comprehension tests.

In a typical sustained silent reading program, most middle school students can read about 1 million words and learn about 1,000 new words each year without any direct instruction in vocabulary. Sustained silent reading also helps language learners gain language skills in whatever new language they are studying, whether they are English language learners or English speakers who are learning a second language. Those who can read in a first or second language will also write and spell better in that language (Krashen, 1993).

## **What Students Do and Say**

I have received many letters from former students commenting on how the sustained silent reading program changed their reading habits, their literacy skills, and their attitudes toward reading and school. Although I stopped conducting reading surveys years ago, last semester I decided to compile some statistics and get some feedback about how the program was working.

The 52 students in my honors sophomore classes read 2–56 books each and averaged 9.8

books during one semester. The student who read 56 books set a new record, but several students each semester read more than 30 books, and at least a dozen read 10 or more. Reading almost 10 books in an 18-week semester is very productive, especially when I compare that accomplishment with the number of books read by literate adults I know.

Students in my senior English classes last semester read 2–18 books each and averaged 7.75 books. That's not bad for 76 students who swear that they are suffering from severe cases of senioritis.

I also gave both the sophomores and seniors a chance to explain their feelings about sustained silent reading. Their observations are insightful.

I liked the silent reading time because it got me back into reading. Before this class, I hadn't picked up a book unless it was required. Now I'm reading three different books at once.

This class was more like an adult English class because we were able to choose what we wanted to read.

I increased my reading speed and the ability to comprehend what I read. My papers have improved, too, in terms of spelling and grammar.

I read about nine books [this semester]. That's more than I've read in my entire life.

Silent reading helps me relax and escape from reality. Every night before I go to bed now, I read 15–20 pages. I used to hate reading, but now it's starting to grow on me. It helps me move on through life.

I read some interesting books that I would have never picked up otherwise. It gave me a love for reading literature and poetry.

One student's complaint was only about the brevity of the silent reading program.

I loved the silent reading program, but I felt that we should have had at least a few days to just read the whole hour. It would sometimes be incredibly difficult to pry myself away from my book and then have to try and concentrate on another assignment. For most of elementary school, I was unable to go to bed at night if I hadn't read at least a page. When I started junior high, I barely even picked up a book without it being required. With silent reading, I am into reading again and have found it hard to sleep without having at least tried to read.

These students' reactions support the two decades of research that document the benefits of sustained silent reading programs.

## **Ten Minutes for Giving, Not Taking Away**

Jim Trelease, who champions reading aloud to students of all ages, calls sustained silent reading the "natural partner" of reading aloud, noting that it "is one of those commonsense ideas that is so obvious and uncomplicated it is often overlooked in today's complex educational scheme" (1995, p. 140). Ten minutes of sustained silent reading does not subtract

from instructional time; instead, this time offers significant opportunities for students' language and literacy development.

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