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Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation

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Abstract

This study analyzed characteristics of classrooms where recreational reading is being implemented. It scrutinized those classrooms that housed successful programs and looked for common elements among them. Specifically, we explored the physical, teacher, student, and program factors within these classrooms that contributed toward their success. Focusing on the responses from 33 participants, the article summarizes the elements most frequently mentioned under each of the four major components. Finally, we discuss how these factors contribute to the successful implementation of recreational reading.

For decades, educators have theorized that incorporating recreational reading into classrooms sets the structure for children to practice reading, as well as supports their literacy development. While the format and implementation of recreational reading programs may vary, several follow the same basic principles. SSR (sustained silent reading), DEAR (drop everything and read), SQUIRT (silent, quiet, uninterrupted individualized reading time), and USSR (uninterrupted sustained silent reading) merge fundamental elements of modeling, self-selection, and self-pacing. The incorporation of recreational reading into the total reading program is based largely on the thesis that reading is an accrued skill. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that practice makes one more proficient. The popularity of these programs has been supported by research (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Nagy, Campenni, & Shaw, 2000)

showing that there is a positive correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement.

Additional studies have lent support to establishing recreational reading programs. Research has demonstrated that those students who read by choice read more than others (Aranha, 1985; Dully, 1989; Dymock, 2000; Wilmont, 1975), and that children who engage in recreational reading programs perform better on standardized reading tests and achieve higher academically (Block & Mangieri, 1996; Fisher, 2001). In essence, they concluded that SSR enables children to develop their ability to concentrate for longer periods of time. There also appears to be a positive correlation between the amount of time children spend on recreational reading and scores on standardized comprehension tests and vocabulary development (Block, 2001; Gallik, 1999; Krashen, 1993). Further, children engaged in recreational reading for only 15 minutes a day improve in both ability and attitude toward reading (Collins, 1980; Taylor, Fyre, & Maruyama, 1990; Wiesendanger & Bader, 1989).

In 1985, The National Academy of Science's document "Becoming a Nation of Readers" supported advocates of recreational reading programs enthusiastically when the panel recommended the practice stating that "research suggests that the amount of independent, silent reading children do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 76). This did much to reinforce the idea that recreational reading programs improved reading achievement, resulting in more programs implemented in countless American school districts. Educators reasoned that since large numbers of students rely on the school day for their recreational reading, it should therefore be incorporated into the curriculum (Fisher, 2001).

However, not all the research supports the implementation of recreational reading programs. There are a number of studies (Collins, 1980; Dwyer & Reed, 1989; Ivey & Broadus, 2001; Langford Allen, 1983; Manning & Manning, 1984; Summers & McClelland, 1982) whose findings reveal that SSR has no positive impact on attitude or achievement. The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) report also challenged the claim that SSR has positive effects, and noted the absence of quantitative evidence supporting its implementation. While the panel concluded that beginning reading instruction should include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, guided oral reading, use of computer technology, and comprehension strategies, they failed to advocate the use of sustained silent reading as a sound educational practice. The panel suggested that replacing the use of the silent reading time in the classroom with direct instruction should produce better test results.

Many leading literacy researchers and educators have debated the findings of the NRP (2000) report. The results have been the basis of numerous controversial discussions that accuse the panel of ignoring existing non-experimental findings favoring recreational reading. There is evidence that the NRP report has impacted the literacy curriculum in American schools, resulting in less emphasis on recreational reading in the classroom (Fisher, 2001). In spite of the numerous studies favoring recreational reading programs and the acknowledgment of the importance of children engaging in the reading process, since the NRP report many teachers have forfeited silent reading altogether in favor of implementing more direct instruction into the classroom. Teachers and administrators want to implement a research-based literacy program that aligns with state and federal guidelines, and are not eager to incorporate a practice that the NRP report does not completely support. While we acknowledge that instruction in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and guided reading are important components of a complete reading program, we feel that eliminating recreational reading from the classroom entirely may be the equivalent of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Knowing that the value of incorporating recreational reading has come into question, it nonetheless seems prudent to assume that reading books independently is a valuable component of reading instruction. Educators can not ignore the evidence that providing a framework for recreational reading in classrooms might give students their only opportunity to apply what they have learned and develop a love for reading. Literacy experts agree that children need to participate in the process of reading in order to become better readers, and that reading silently develops their proficiency.

Further, the limitations of basal readers support using trade books as reading materials for students (Block & Dellamura, 2001; Duke, 2000). Advantages include the wide variety of books available to teachers, ensuring that each student will find a book that matches his or her interests and ability level and that trade books offer a wealth of vocabulary, and sophisticated sentence structure because they use authentic language. Additionally, the research that has shown the positive effects of recreational reading simply cannot be ignored. Further, while the NRP (2000) report did not endorse recreational reading programs, a closer scrutiny reveals that it does not negate the positive influence independent reading may have, nor the possibility that wide independent reading impacts vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Rather, the report called for better designed studies.

Consequently, because of the importance many professionals attribute to recreational reading, this study analyzed characteristics of classrooms where it is

being implemented despite the NRP (2000) report. However, instead of focusing on programs as a whole, we scrutinized classrooms that housed recreational reading programs and looked for common elements. By having classroom teachers describe the aspects that they felt contributed to its success, we sought to determine their common threads and key elements. Specifically, in this study we explored how the 1) physical factors, 2) teacher factors, 3) student factors, and 4) program factors within classrooms that housed recreational reading programs contribute toward making them successful.

Method

We used the multi-site case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) that explored the viewpoints of teachers who were implementing successful recreational reading programs. Duke and Mallette (2004) advocate using case studies as a way to situate findings within a specific context. The instrument (Table 1), developed by the authors, focused on four factors: 1) program, 2) physical, 3) teacher, and 4) student. We felt that these contributed toward making recreational reading successful in the classroom. It was given to a six-person panel of literacy experts for their feedback and the authors made changes based on their input. The instrument yielded a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .9, which exceeds the .7 minimum required for the reliability to be acceptable (Pallant, 2007). Incorporating the multi-case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), we sought to determine common elements among these four factors that contributed to the successful implementation of recreational reading programs.

Table 1. *Recreational Reading Survey and Interview Questions*

General Questions:

1. Number of years I have implemented a recreational reading program ____.
2. Number of years I have taught ____.
3. Grade level I am currently teaching ____.
4. Circle one: I am implementing a recreational reading program (a. by choice, b. not by choice). Please explain.
5. Circle one: I (do, do not) feel that all children participate in the recreational reading program and that it benefits their literacy development.

Survey and Interview Questions:

Directions: Please answer the following eight statements. There are two under each of the four categories.

Physical Factors

1. The physical factors in the classroom are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.
2. List the physical factors in your classroom that you feel contribute to the success of the recreational reading program.

Teacher Factors

1. The teacher factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.
2. Explain how the teacher can facilitate the success of the recreational reading program.

Student Factors

1. The student factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.
2. List three things students can do during recreational reading to improve their time on task behavior.

Program Factors

1. The program factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.
2. Explain how the program factors can facilitate the success of the recreational reading program.

98 teachers from middle class school districts in western New York and central Virginia, who were enrolled in a graduate program in Literacy, were given the survey (see Table 1) which took approximately 60 minutes to complete. Of the 98 teachers, 90 finished the survey, a 92% completion rate. Of these 90 respondents, a total of 33 teachers indicated that they were implementing recreational reading programs that incorporated the basic elements of seeking, self-selection, and self-pacing in their classrooms as children selected their reading material from appropriately leveled text and read at their individual pace. The participants' grade levels ranged from teaching first grade through sixth grade. Their average length of teaching was five years, all indicated they had voluntarily implemented the program, and the average length of implementation was four years. These teachers perceived that all of their students participated in a program that helped children's

literacy development. Focusing on the responses from these 33 participants, we conducted follow-up interviews within each of their classrooms to clarify statements or elaborate on ideas. They also opened their classrooms for us to observe and interact with their students.

We next established a list of codes (see Figure 1) and developed a form to use when assessing each teacher's response to the questions on the survey. With the assistance of graduate students, information was entered into a database and sorted by criteria. All responses were recorded and summarized to analyze each of the four factors on the survey. In order to gain a deeper insight into the process, we included excerpts from the teachers' report.

Program factors (PF)	Physical factors (PHF)	Teacher factors (TF)	Student factors (SF)
Balanced program (BP)	Classroom libraries (CL)	Independent level (IL)	Buddy modeling (BM)
Schedule (S)	Book walk (BW)	Text selection (TS)	Setting goals (SG)
Location (L)	Material placement (MP)	Pretend read (PR)	Book marks (BM)
Environment (E)		Teacher modeling (TM)	Student response (SR)

Figure 1. List of Codes

Data Analysis

We used an inductive approach for analysis and assigned codes to data segments that either addressed our research questions or that raised important issues or ideas about the implementation of recreational reading programs, and assigned codes to transcript segments that captured remarks shared by multiple participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Seidman, 1991). We then constructed matrices that included highlights of data drawn from interviews that illustrated common elements across the classrooms. Each of the four factors related to recreational reading programs included representations of the categories yielded by the data.

Results and Discussion

Our results are based on the four factors: 1) program, 2) physical, 3) teacher, and 4) student, which guided our research question. For a deeper understanding of

and the teachers' viewpoints, we discuss each factor individually, and include comments drawn from the interviews. Based on teachers' feedback, we summarize the elements most frequently mentioned under each of the four major factors. Finally, in order to assist those who want to develop a program that meets the needs of their students, we discuss the contributing factors that participants felt were important to the successful implementation of a recreational reading program.

Program Factors

Participants (91%) stressed that recreational reading is not a stand-alone activity, and emphasized the importance of teaching decoding as well as comprehension strategies for students to develop the ability to read successfully. They acknowledged that incorporating recreational reading into the total literacy program gave children the opportunity to practice reading in an authentic situation, but felt it should be one element of a balanced reading program. In order to develop their reading ability, children need explicit instruction, and recreational reading programs enable children to improve and expand newly acquired skills. As one teacher wrote, "If children are experiencing difficulty with basic reading fundamentals, they need instruction in how to read, in addition to time and books." The standard amount of time these teachers implemented recreational reading was for a 20-minute period within a two-hour block for literacy. The remainder of the time included guided reading, word building, vocabulary, reading to children, and writing activities. The general consensus of opinion among these teachers was that the disabled reader will suffer if recreational reading is not part of a total reading program, and they stressed the importance of children being given time to practice reading, as well as receiving instruction in how to read.

Other important elements in SSR implementation included scheduling and location. Results (82%) from the interviews strongly suggest children are more likely to develop the reading habit if they read daily for an appropriate length of time. For example, responses indicated that the program was more effective if teachers spread a reading time block into five daily shorter sessions, rather than fewer longer ones. Their rationale was that children could more easily resume reading and were better able to remember information about the material if the time interval between sessions was shortened. As one teacher summarized, "The experience of reading daily is what develops their skills."

All (100%) of the teachers recommend adhering to a consistent daily scheduling pattern, emphasizing that time for recreational reading be established at the

beginning of the class and never sacrificed. This is particularly important for high needs children because predictability contributes to their success. One teacher wrote that “establishing the time as important and worthy of protecting allows for a more even transition and minimizes off task behavior.”

Participants (61%) also advised that changing the physical environment for recreational reading signifies its importance and children responded better when they moved their location. Suggestions included moving to the cafeteria, school library, outside lawn, or a different classroom. If remaining in one’s own classroom was the only option, allowing children to select their favorite reading place within the room may motivate them. They did stress that the location change should be consistent because children are more productive and comfortable when working in an environment that has an established routine.

Physical Factors

All (100%) of the responding teachers noted the importance of establishing classroom libraries housing a wide array of reading material, including books, magazines, and succinct, pertinent articles from newspapers and magazines that students could completely read in one sitting. This less restrictive philosophy is particularly successful when trying to motivate the reluctant reader. As one teacher noted, “Children are more likely to become engaged when they can select from a variety of materials.” One idea that surfaced was to cut out the individual stories from old multi-leveled reading series, and place each story between colorful papers in a loose-leaf binder.

Many teachers (82%) noted that asking children to bring in books from home or another source is effective only if they are already readers, but unsuccessful if they have not developed the habit of reading. One teacher emphasized that “for many of these children, there are no books at home and they do not have access to other resources.” In addition to having a sufficient amount of interesting, readable text available to help maintain children’s curiosity, teachers stressed the importance of rotating and adding new material to the classroom library. Seventy-six per cent (76%) suggested the importance of introducing the material through a book walk to increase children’s interest. One teacher wrote, “Children gravitate toward the material when I briefly discusses the book’s cover, title, author and content.” Another stated, “I use book walks to make easy material acceptable by explaining how I enjoy reading these books.”

Accessibility and placement of the reading material is also important. Teachers (79%) noted that children tended to select materials that were easily accessible, with visible covers and placed in a convenient location, rather than hidden on bookshelves difficult to retrieve. In order for a child to make significant progress independently, it is also crucial for the reader to select materials that are not only enjoyable and exciting, but readable. Most teachers (94%) mentioned the importance of developing a system whereby children could easily select appropriately leveled material at their independent reading level. One commented, "Each child must choose reading material that is both enjoyable and easily readable."

Teacher Factors

Most participants (82%) stressed the importance of teachers knowing the independent reading level of each student in their classroom and helping children make appropriate book selections by taking a supportive role. They suggested that by giving students guidelines for book selecting strategies, a high percentage were able to choose appropriately leveled, interesting material. For children who have difficulty choosing text that matches their ability level, 61% recommend that teachers model a strategy for text selection. One mentioned frequently was The Goldilocks Strategy (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992) based on the folklore tale "The Three Bears." In this strategy, teachers guide children to use criteria such as text length, size of print, familiarity, illustrations, and readers background, to determine whether the text is too easy, just right, or too hard. By modeling this strategy, teachers show children the importance of considering these elements when determining the difficulty level of a text. Although time consuming, participants felt it was worthwhile to implement, because it enabled children to select appropriate material.

While the aforementioned strategy facilitates the material selection process for the vast majority of children, 61% of the participants stressed the importance of closely monitoring and giving additional guidance in material selection to children who either "pretend read," or simply hold the book. The following comment summarized many responses. It is important to "not allow the pretend readers to fall through the cracks, because they are the very ones who benefit most from recreational reading." One suggestion for determining the suitability of text is to privately have the child read a brief excerpt from the selected material to the teacher. If it is too difficult, the teacher should allow the child to keep the material, but supplement it with an appropriately leveled text for the student to read. This

approach offers an alternative to the scenario where the teacher takes the “too difficult” material from the child and instructs him to find something easier.

Participants stressed that the pretend reader needs close monitoring and easier, interesting reading material, and that, following the session, it was important for the teacher to solicit brief feedback about the text from the student. As one stated, “I solicit a verbal critique following reading from these children and let them know I value their feedback.” Many commented that when they ask children for their opinion on the appropriateness of the material for a project, upcoming unit, or other classroom use, children had much more incentive to read it. As one teacher summarized, “The child feels important because he is reading the appropriately leveled material for the purpose of giving feedback, and understands his opinion is valued, rather than because he is incapable of reading anything more difficult.”

Responses (73%) indicated that teacher modeling is crucial, and that children and teachers must read together for the program to be successful. One teacher summarized the comments of many when she wrote, “Children learn by following the modeled behavior of others.” Participants extended the crucial influence of modeling to include before and after the reading time, and suggested that teachers should demonstrate their interest in and enjoyment of reading by commenting upon and discussing books they personally read. As one response indicated, “Children in my classroom know I love to read because I discuss enthusiastically the book I’m reading. My love for reading is contagious.”

Student Factors

Feedback from 61% of the participants stressed the importance of buddy modeling which incorporates coordinating the recreational reading program with a teacher from a different grade, and pairs an older child with a younger child to read silently from their own materials. One teacher stated that the “success of this model was apparent because the younger children wanted to sit next to their older buddies, who were given the important duty of modeling silent reading behavior for their younger partner and showing them the value of reading.” An additional benefit to this model was that it became acceptable for older students to read material that was below their grade level. Participants emphasized that the purpose of buddy modeling was not for the older student to assist the younger children in their reading, but rather uninterrupted practice for both.

About half of the participants (51%) suggested that having children set goals by predicting the number of pages they anticipate reading during the upcoming session was beneficial. One teacher commented, "Allowing children to determine their own goals gives them ownership of their own learning, which is a strong motivator." Also mentioned was the importance of having children use bookmarks as they enabled children to readily find their place from the previous session, making for a smooth transition from one day to the next.

While the participants did not advocate giving grades or incorporating certain follow-up activities that focused on heavy accountability, they did recommend that students react to what they have read. However, they stated that children responded favorably when they implemented non-threatening follow-up activities, and that encouraging students to engage in discussions about text increased their participation and motivation. Follow-up activities included sharing responses with a partner or small peer group, journal writing, or a whole-class discussion revolving around a common theme.

Conclusion

The main goal of a recreational reading program is to provide an opportunity for children to read for pleasure. This can contribute toward enabling children to become lifelong readers by providing them with a safe, caring community, and a significant degree of choice about what, how, and why they are reading. The fact that there are literacy experts with opposing viewpoints indicates that implementing a recreational reading program in the classroom is more complicated than previously thought. Instead of debating the merits of recreational reading, the purpose of this article is to concentrate on classrooms where teachers are implementing the program and search for commonalities that contribute to its success. By focusing on the common elements, others may gain insight into how to modify their programs to improve reading attitude and promote reading engagement. Using these suggestions, teachers may then modify the original design and refine the individual aspects to meet the needs of all their students.

Within a total reading program, having children read independently as part of the daily routine may be valuable. Teachers must first determine what they want their children to achieve from the recreational reading program, whether it is fluency or more time reading silently for improved comprehension. The objective

will vary, depending on each student's individual needs. For example, goals for the more reluctant readers might include spending the entire time reading a very easy book, but for the more gifted student the goal might be to select books that are more challenging. It is imperative to understand that there are gifted, average, and struggling readers in most classrooms and the recreational reading program could help meet their literacy needs.

The results of this study indicate that there are certain factors that are common among these exemplary recreational reading programs. Within program factors, teachers stressed the importance of implementing a recreational reading program in conjunction with targeted instruction. They also noted the importance of implementing consistent scheduling and location patterns. The physical commonalities teachers noted included the importance of establishing classroom libraries that include a wide variety of reading material that rotates periodically. These findings are substantiated by Fisher (2001) who stressed the importance of classroom libraries for use as a springboard into wider reading. Additionally, participants felt that the teacher modeling a strategy for students to use in their book selection process helps ensure a positive match between the student and the material. Results also showed the importance of teachers knowing the student's independent reading level, and giving additional guidance in book selection to those students who require it.

Buddy modeling, sharing during follow-up sessions, setting goals, and using bookmarks are student factors teachers mentioned that contribute to the success of their program. These findings are substantiated by research that suggests providing students with opportunities after SSR to share their reflections aloud with their peers for discussion and feedback is valuable (Dymock, 2000; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Widdowson, Moore, & Dixon, 1999).

This study addressed the program, physical, teacher, and student factors (see Table 2) of successful recreational reading programs. In order to develop as readers, students need to read and teachers must ensure that all of their students spend time reading every day. By understanding the common elements, teachers are more likely to develop a program in which all students participate in reading and rereading text. The findings from such an inquiry improve our understanding of how to design effective recreational reading programs. These programs take planning and thought, and teachers need guidelines if programs are to succeed. Hopefully, by expanding this knowledge base, more classroom teachers may be

encouraged to develop and implement successful recreational reading into their classrooms.

Table 2. *Summary of the Four Factors Related to Recreational Reading (RR)*

<p>Program Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make RR one element of a balanced reading program. • Incorporate teaching word identification and comprehension strategies to supplement RR. • Read daily for an appropriate time length. • Schedule RR at the same time daily. • Change the physical environment.
<p>Physical Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish classroom libraries with a wide array of reading material. • Rotate and add new material to the classroom library. • Introduce the material through book walks to increase children’s interest in reading. • Develop a system where children can easily select appropriately leveled material.
<p>Teacher Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know the independent reading level of each student. • Help children make appropriate book selections by taking a supportive role. • Give students guidelines for book selection. • Give additional guidance for material selection to children who pretend read. • Demonstrate interest in and enjoyment of reading by commenting upon, and discussing books.
<p>Student Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddy modeling. • Set goals by predicting the number of pages to be read. • Use bookmarks. • React to readings through non-threatening follow-up activities. • Engage in discussions about text.



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