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SSR—WHAT TO DO WHEN THE INTEREST IS GONE

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In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) was viewed as a sure-fire method of developing a student's ability to read silently without interruption for relatively long periods of time. According to Robert A. McCracken, the goal of sustained silent reading is achieved almost immediately if the practice becomes a complement and not a supplement to the teaching program (McCracken, 1971). This concept has been widely accepted. Throughout the 1970's until the present time, SSR has continued in schools and classrooms as an integral part of the total reading program. It has provided the practice or drill of silent reading.

Recently, teachers have expressed concern because, despite the adherence to the established rules of SSR, the interest in silent reading has begun to diminish after several months. Students who have developed a love for reading and have mastered the mechanical skills involved continue to have an appreciation for the knowledge and pleasure gained through reading. However, students who experience difficulty when reading or who are low achievers are the focal concern of teachers implementing SSR. These students have shorter attention spans and do not begin or attend to silent reading after a brief period of time. Additionally, students experience too many classroom disruptions when reading independently. They then cause disruptions which disturb the entire class. A disruptive situation may occur when SSR is initially conceived but, if the condition persists, the teacher must then decide what can be done to reestablish SSR.

Because students experiment with different behaviors, they need to be guided into situations where reading is respected, quiet is expected, and the students see each other and the teacher in a productive and enjoyable environment (Cline & Kretke, 1980). Teachers must realize that not all students have the desire to become proficient in reading. Some students, especially the low achievers, cannot work independently and require the structure of a teacher asking questions and guiding the silent reading.

What should a teacher do when students lose interest in SSR? The first step would be to discover why they lost interest. This sounds relatively simple but oftentimes the teacher may find the reasons to be multicausal. Consequently, many alternatives or options need to be considered.

The most logical decision for a deteriorating program is

the elimination of SSR. This is a drastic move since many students enjoy recreational reading because there are no mandatory reports or sharing of reading material. However, an option could be the suspension of SSR for a short while. By suspending the allotted silent reading period, the teacher is free to utilize time to engage in an alternative program. He or she may decide to use the time to read aloud to the students. By doing so, the teacher becomes a model of fluent oral reading. Also, students will grasp the concept of comprehending through oral reading as well as the awareness that reading is a form of communication similar to conversation. Subsequently, students frequently decide they want to read what the teacher has read aloud.

Time could be spent presenting a book review to the class. A synopsis plus personal reaction could be given by the teacher. Students who are avid readers could indicate, and then interpret and evaluate their choice of books to peers. The conclusion to the book or story should be omitted to enhance interest so students will be motivated to read to find the ending.

A third alternative could be grouping the students who conscientiously read during the specified time and enjoy SSR. This choice would be consistent with the current trend to meet the individual needs of students. Different levels of student ability and maturity must be considered as well as each student's right to determine whether he/she will read for pleasure during SSR. The teacher would need to explain to the group who chooses to read that it is necessary for her to work with the students who have lost interest in independent silent reading. Students implementing SSR would have no role model to emulate while reading silently but their reading habits should be established by this time so they would be able to read without the presence of a model. Another option might include a paraprofessional, volunteer, or teacher aide to guide SSR. The children are then away from the teacher with whom they frequently associate questioning, reporting and an evaluation or grade.

Alternative four would be the revitalization of SSR. At all times sustained silent reading should be promoted as a privilege. An advertising campaign in which the students would plan, develop and implement the strategies involved could be incorporated. Other classes could be invited to participate in making the advertising project a joint venture. Some suggested techniques would be designing and constructing bulletin boards to enhance the concept of SSR as well as dramatizing a book or books that are exceptionally appealing to students.

Community resources should be utilized. The local librarian could speak to the class concerning the variety and depth of materials within the city library. Students could plan a field trip to view the assets of the library and to select books for reading. Additionally, community leaders, such as the mayor, or business persons and other professionals, should be invited to demonstrate the vital role reading plays in their lives.

The classroom setting may be rearranged so a specific quiet area can be designated for reading. A unique setting which departs from the traditional classroom structure could be provided. Carpets

and cushions, a rocker for reading, or a reading niche could be included so SSR will be viewed as a positive complement to the reading period, not a negative supplement, such as reading silently after assignments are completed, or enforcing independent reading after the students have been disciplined.

The amount and type of reading material within the classroom should be expanded. Children's magazines, contemporary magazines, newspapers, informational booklets, and comic books in addition to paperback and hardback books could be included. Parents as well as students, and people within the community should be encouraged to donate books and magazines to the class or the school library. A rotation plan for providing a variety of books for the students may be arranged with the school and town librarians. A "swap shop" within the classroom or with another class could be conducted. Time must be provided for the used books to be scrutinized so students may make appropriate selections. An SSR "Salebration", a used book fair so students may choose from a variety of books, new and/or used, would add a dimension to SSR.

Strategies for enhancing and intensifying the material which had been read previously by students or teacher should be provided. Let the creativity of individual children be demonstrated through posters, mobiles, puppets, dramatizations, murals or the identity of a favorite storybook character.

Guidelines, not "rules" (the term "rules" has an unsavory connotation), to follow when SSR is resumed should be reestablished. The guidelines should be composed by the students who have more influence on their peers than does the teacher who is viewed as the authoritarian figure in the classroom. The guidelines should be printed on a large chart, clearly visible during SSR.

The teacher should not monitor students as they read. Although he or she can remain aware of the classroom situation during SSR, the teacher read without interruption, verbally and physically ignoring students unless it is necessary to prevent trouble.

Reading unshared is reading forgotten. Although reading is a highly personal process, there are times when students have the need to share what has been read. However, not all students will want to share what they have read. No mandatory sharing is required, and sharing should and must be spontaneous. Time, other than during SSR, should be allocated so students can share orally the reading that has appealed to them. Some students may opt to participate in group discussions, while others may wish to participate in sharing by means of writing, or through another method.

When examining the causes of SSR failure, all factors including the classroom teacher must be carefully analyzed. Perhaps the teacher needs to be re-inspired. Teachers must possess a commitment to the concept that practice and example, i.e., an exemplary role model, are necessary components of a successful reading program. The teacher's example and enthusiasm are powerful strategies for instruction. Students need a role model and, frequently, imitate the teacher. A teacher's behavior should demonstrate constantly the belief that reading is a highly valued activity.

As students experience success in reading, they will view SSR as an enjoyable learning situation. The more they read, the more interested and competent they will become and, subsequently, will derive more enjoyment from reading. To sustain this circuit of pleasure and competence in students, each teacher needs to exude enthusiasm for reading books and use every means possible to instill a love of reading in students. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers should be encouraged to initiate SSR in their classrooms. Teachers in other grades should continue to implement SSR throughout the grades so reading will become a healthy, satisfying, sustaining habit.

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