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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SSR: AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

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An activity which has become increasingly popular in many school systems in recent years has been Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). In this program both teachers and students engage in reading self-selected material for a given period of time daily (McCracken 1971). Advocates of SSR stress the importance of the student viewing reading as a holistic activity and that if children are only taught isolated skills, they will develop a narrow perception of what the reading act involves. They argue that when children actively engage in the reading process, they view the mastery of skills not as an end in itself but rather as a means of attaining a broader goal. Research conducted to determine the effects of SSR has produced mixed results. Evans and Towner (1975) found no significant difference in achievement when comparing forty-eight fourth graders using SSR with those using selected commercial materials over a ten week period. In a three week study, using thirty-four junior high school students, Vacca (1976) produced similar findings. Likewise, a five month study using high school students conducted by Reed (1977) as well as a one month study by Oliver (1973) showed that improvement in reading was not significantly greater for those students involved in SSR. Since these studies were conducted during a time period of six months or less, the researchers suggested that different findings may have occurred had the experiments lasted for a longer time span. However, in a six week study, Wiesendanger (1982) reported that the group involved in the SSR program achieved significantly higher in both word recognition and comprehension. An interesting aspect of the study was that SSR was combined with systematic skills instruction. Lawson's (1968) findings indicated that SSR was more effective if this was done. He concluded that when students were taught systematic skill instruction in addition to having free reading, they achieved significantly higher than either those in a classroom that included a large amount of free reading or in a class with emphasis on skills instruction but with no free reading. Furthermore, Oliver (1970) advocated implementing a ratio of 80% practice to 20% instruction in order to develop independent readers.

When analyzing the results of long term studies, it is evident that the findings are skewed in favor of SSR. These studies have shown that achievement has improved significantly with those students involved in an SSR program. In a one semester study, Mil'on

(1980) found that students gained slightly in vocabulary and comprehension. Pfau (1966) conducted a two year study using first and second graders and found significantly greater achievement in favor of the SSR group as did Langford (1978) whose study lasted for a six month period.

The results of previous studies have focused on the effects of SSR on reading achievement per se. However, during the recent decade there has been a deepening concern about the habits and attitudes of the students toward reading. As a result, an increasing number of school systems have included the development of a positive attitude toward reading as one of their long range objectives. Changes in attitude may indeed have long term effects on reading achievement. It is reasonable to assume that if the student has developed a positive attitude toward reading, he will read more. One might postulate that the more one reads, the more proficient at reading one will become. Consequently, it might behoove the school to implement techniques in the curriculum that develop and sustain a positive attitude toward reading.

One's attitude toward reading has been deemed a critical factor in determining the success of one's reading program. When measuring how SSR affected attitude toward reading, Milton (1980) found that students involved in an SSR program showed a less favorable attitude toward reading than they had prior to the implementation of the program. He attributed the failure of the program to the following factors. The faculty was not part of the decision-making process. Adequate inservice was not given the staff regarding the implementation of the program. Some teaching areas were inappropriate for carrying out SSR. A second study whose findings showed that SSR had a negative effect on attitude was conducted by Mikulecky & Wolf (1977). They concluded that the attitude of seventh graders toward reading declined slightly when SSR was implemented.

While the two previously mentioned studies were composed of junior high and senior high school students, Cline (1980) included students from grades three to twelve and found that attitude toward reading had improved. Likewise, in studies conducted by Pfau (1966), Lawson (1968), Petre (1971), Hanson (1972), Wilmot (1975), Vacca (1976), Wolf (1977), and Langford (1978), students involved in SSR had developed a more positive attitude toward reading when compared to those students in other programs.

Conclusions:

In summary, when analyzing the results of the major research findings, one may make the following conclusions:

1. The effect of SSR on word recognition and reading comprehension appears inconclusive. Of the eight studies summarized, four (Evans & Towner, Vacca, Reed, Oliver) reported findings that showed SSR either made no significant difference or had a negative effect on word recognition and reading comprehension, while four studies (Milton, Pfau, Langford, Wiesendanger) reported students involved in an SSR program achieved significantly higher results.

2. SSR appears to have positive effects on attitude toward reading. Of the eleven studies conducted, nine reported (Cline, Pfau, Lawson, Petre, Hanson, Wilmot, Vacca, Wolf, Langford) that SSR had a positive effect on reading attitude, while only two (Milton, Mikulecky & Wolf) reported that SSR had a negative effect.

Implications

It has long been known that the success of an SSR program has been dependent on both the teacher and children reading, availability of materials on a wide range of topics and readability levels, as well as daily scheduled sessions (McCracken, 1970). After summarizing the available research conducted in the area, it appears that several additional factors may be instrumental in determining whether or not the program implementation is successful. In order to better determine what the significant factors affecting the success of SSR are, it seems logical to scrutinize the previously mentioned studies and compare their procedures along with their findings. In so doing, the following questions arise:

1. Is it possible that the effects of SSR on reading comprehension and word recognition are more likely to be evident only after a period of at least six months? Four of the five studies (Evans & Towner, Vacca, Reed, Oliver) conducted for five months or less reported that SSR did not improve reading comprehension or word recognition. Yet the studies conducted over a time span of six months or more (Milton, Pfau, Langford) reported that children enrolled in SSR had achieved significantly better results in reading achievement.
2. Would better results be obtained if SSR were combined with systematic instruction in the skills area? One short term study (Wiesendanger) reported significant findings in favor of the group involved in SSR. In this experiment, SSR was combined with systematic skills instruction. Perhaps educators should not view SSR as a replacement for reading instruction but rather an activity whereby the skills taught are reinforced through practice.
3. When measuring the effects of SSR on reading attitudes, is it possible that the younger the child the more likely that his attitude would be improved? In analyzing the studies (Milton Mikulecky & Wolf) that showed children involved in an SSR program had not improved in their attitude toward reading, one should note that both studies reported findings based on junior high and senior high school students. All studies (Pfau, Lawson, Petre, Hanson, Wilmot, Vacca, Wolf) that included elementary grade children reported they viewed reading more positively after being involved in an SSR program. It may also be that while attitude of the older child toward reading may be possible to change, it may take a greater period of time to do so. Hence, it seems logical to introduce SSR to children when they are enrolled in the primary grades.
4. Is it necessary to provide in-service training to teachers

before the implementation of the SSR program? From the results reported by the Milton study, it seems evident that teacher input can be a critical factor in determining the program's success. The attitude of the teacher toward SSR may be very significant, particularly if the SSR program is to be implemented throughout all grade levels of an entire school.

5. Finally, because an SSR program appears to have significant effects on attitude, is it more likely that the benefits of SSR are long range? Perhaps, more than with other techniques or programs, educators should be particularly interested in the long range benefits of SSR. It seems that since SSR helps children develop a positive attitude toward reading, reading habits may likewise be affected. One study (Hanson) reported that habits of children involved in an SSR program had improved. If children's reading habits can be improved, then incorporating an SSR program into the curriculum would have long lasting positive results and the true effects of SSR should be measured only after a period of years, instead of months.

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