



Logging Up Reading Mileage!

Modelling is the key to sustained silent reading

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SEVERAL YEARS ago we wrote a prescription for initiating sustained silent reading (SSR) (McCracken and McCracken, 1972; McCracken, 1971; McCracken, 1969), a set time each day when every pupil and the teacher read silently for a substantial period of time without interruption. We saw SSR then as the drill or practice of silent reading, and for some reason our understanding of it was limited to this value.

We have had reports from thousands of teachers that SSR does work. We also have had reports from some saying that they had difficulty with it. In a most unscientific way we have investigated the reported failures, the reports that some children would not or could not sustain themselves in reading. We have come to two conclusions.

1) In the majority of situations where SSR was deemed not to be working, the teacher watched the children, and the troublesome group did not read. We came to realize that children read during SSR only if the teacher was a serious reader who was not interrupted by minor disturbances.

In some classes there were aides who monitored or did clerical tasks while the children read. In these classes, some of the children watched the aide.

We came to the key notion that all adults in the classroom have to read or SSR does not work.

2) in some situations it was apparent that there were very few books from which the children could choose. SSR does not work without lots of materials available somewhere, readily accessible to the children.

We thought about the power of the teacher reading, and, as we talked with teachers who said it worked, we discovered that many of them made what they called modifications. The one thing that they did not modify, however, was the adult reading. Several teachers reported some humorous occurrences.

One teacher was aware that he ran his fingers through his hair, scratching occasionally as he read silently. He noted that several of his pupils began to do this, and finally almost all of them scratched. He stopped, and the children stopped.

Another teacher always put his book on a shelf near his desk. First one child, and then another asked and then almost every child was putting his or her book on the same shelf.

Another interrupted her reading to look up a word in the dictionary. From this one interruption, she noted that children occasionally began to look up words, and that it did not disrupt SSR as she had thought it might.

We observed one social studies teacher in junior high school begin each morning by silently reading the newspaper during the first five to fifteen minutes of his class. He told the class not to bother him. Usually he commented aloud about what he read. His pupils soon began bringing the morning newspaper into class, and soon the whole class was reading newspapers to begin the morning. This was not a conscious attempt to impose SSR, but we realized that there was a tremendous power in an adult modeling.

Teachers are models, not just by being engrossed in reading but by what is done after reading. If teachers talked about what they had read, shared the ideas encountered and their reaction to them, shared their delight in a particularly ear tingling phrase or word, used some of the ideas in the classroom, read some parts of stories orally because they wanted to share the author's exact words, pupils began to do the same things.

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We sensed that many children who have seen adults reading silently have not realized all that is involved. We are not sure that adults know fully what they do when they read silently, but we know that adults can react orally to what they have read so that children begin to have hints about what they might do when they are reading silently. As teachers react orally following SSR, they are teaching children how to read. They are teaching attitudes and skills, they are teaching children that reading is communication with an author, an assimilation and reaction to an author's ideas, and the utilization of an author's ideas. They are teaching that reading is more than entertainment. Children early and easily discover the pleasure of books; they need also to discover the self-realization, the sense of learning, the thinking, and the changes in behavior that come from mature reading.

We concluded that what a teacher does during and after silent reading defines silent reading for children. As a teaching corollary we suggest that teachers require nothing of children after sustained silent reading that they do not do themselves willingly and naturally. Usually this eliminates writing book reports, making lists of unknown words, filling in worksheets of any type, or taking rests. Sometimes this permits keeping a reading log or recording the title, author, and pages read. Usually this means talking about some of the ideas encountered. and sometimes recording the more important ideas for later use.

Book sharing among groups of pupils becomes popular if the teacher sets an example. Groups may take a particularly impressive idea or fact and give it serious study. Reading aloud to share an exciting or well written part may be routine. Sometimes students compare and contrast the concepts and content of books. Noting the significance of book titles becomes routine if the teacher regularly explains titles of books he or she has read, pointing out hidden significance or metaphoric implications.

From SSR children perceive several messages:

- Reading books is important.
- Reading is something anyone can do.
- Reading is communicating with an author.
- Children are capable of sustained thought.
- Books are meant to be read in large sections.
- The teacher believes that the pupils are comprehending (because he or she doesn't bother to check).
- The teacher trusts the children to decide when something is well written, when something important has been read (because the teacher expects pupils to share after SSR).

All seven are messages of trust and respect that are returned manyfold as children learn by modeling their teacher's behavior and responding to the books they have read during SSR.

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