RESEARCH
PROFESSIONAL PAPER

THE VALUE OF INDEPENDENT READING

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Introduction

Independent reading libraries have an enormous impact on literacy development and in helping students become avid readers. They allow students easy access to books they *can* read and *want* to read, while providing teachers and administrators with the means to implement effective in-school independent reading programs.

This paper outlines findings from decades of research on independent reading and a continually growing body of evidence showing the many ways independent reading libraries and programs benefit students.

Research has firmly established the correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement (Allington, 2014; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Krashen, 2004 and 2011). Indeed, the effects of reading extend into quality of life: high levels of leisure reading and reading proficiency are associated with greater academic, financial, professional, and civic benefits (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

Authentic literature in the form of trade books and other publications at an appropriate reading level is central to children's literacy development. Yet teachers can no longer rely on traditional sources of books for their students. Weekly or less frequent class trips to the school library are insufficient to support comprehensive literacy instruction (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). Also, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have severely limited access to print material outside of school (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2010 and 2013; Neuman & Celano, 2000 and 2012). Experts Reutzel and Fawson view an independent reading library as the "organizational hub" of a balanced, comprehensive language arts program: "If the classroom library is adequately provisioned, thoughtfully put together, and interactively used, it will form the foundation for literacy success." (2002, p. 8)

Indeed, researchers have found that students who have access to a collection of quality books in their classrooms read 50-60% more than students who don't (Neuman, 1999; Capatano et al., 2009). "Well stocked, high-quality classroom libraries can generate interest and motivation for reading, support differentiated instruction through better matching of students with texts, and provide the means to the practice necessary to develop expert reading skills." (Capatano et al., 2009, p. 60)

Independent Reading Libraries Play A Vital Role in Young Lives

The presence of a high-quality independent reading library within schools and classrooms has numerous positive impacts on students' reading habits, attitudes, and proficiency. This section outlines the research-demonstrated benefits that students derive from having direct access to high quality book collections.

Research into effective literacy instruction has often noted that the best teachers of reading have an extensive collection of books in their classrooms (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 1998; Reutzel & Fawson, 2022). In large-scale national studies, researchers found that students in more effective teachers' classrooms spent a larger percentage of reading instructional time actually reading; additionally, exemplary teachers were more likely to differentiate instruction using their book collections, so that all readers had books they could read accurately and fluently, with understanding and motivation (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

Increases reading achievement

Enriching the print environment in school and classroom libraries results in children reading more—and the more children read, the better readers they become (Krashen, 2004).

Voluminous reading is critical to the development of reading proficiency (Allington, 2014; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). "Time spent reading, including reading silently, has consistently correlated strongly with reading achievement." (Reutzel & Juth, 2014, p. 29). According to Atwell (2007):

> "Every measure that looks at pleasure reading and its effects on student performance on standardized tests of reading ability—*and* science *and* math—tells us that the major predictor of academic success is the amount of time that a student spends reading. In fact, the top 5 percent of U.S. students read up to 144 times more than the kids in the bottom 5 percent." (p. 107)

In reviewing two decades of research on recreational reading, Block and Mangieri (2002) found that students who engaged in recreational literacy activities during school hours read books outside of school more frequently. Additionally, even with only 15 minutes of in-school reading per day, students significantly increased their reading performance, with average and below-average readers experiencing the greatest gains.

Independent reading programs have been in place in schools since at least the mid-20th century, known in both practice and the research literature by a variety of forms and names, including Silent Sustained Reading (SSR). Generally all share the goal of helping students develop the ability to read independently without interruption for substantial periods of time. In a review of 32 studies of these in-school free reading programs, Pilgreen (2000) concluded that they:

> ". . . provided at least the same or better benefits for students in the areas of comprehension and motivation than traditional skills classes did. This is an astounding finding, particularly when we consider which alternative is more enjoyable for students. Clearly, free reading is less work than skill and drill and a good deal more fun." (p. 6)

If they have appealing books available, kids would read more. In one large-scale study, Neuman (1999) placed collections of high-quality trade books in 350 schools with a total enrollment of 18,000 students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The outcome was a 60% increase in time spent reading.

School and classroom libraries allow for teachers to build independent reading programs into larger language arts curricula. The features of an effective in-school free reading program will be discussed later in this paper. Here it is important to note that it is a large collection of diverse, appealing books representing a range of difficulty levels that forms the backbone of an independent reading program—and that voluminous reading in school has long been established as one of the most effective ways of increasing reading proficiency for all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds or ability levels (Allington, McGill-Franzen, et al., 2010; Krashen, et al., 2012; Pilgreen, 2000).

Provides ready access to books

Access to a wide collection of books within the classroom has been shown to result in increased reading volume, achievement, and motivation (Allington, 2014; Kelley & McClausen-Grace, 2010; Neuman, 1999).

In her large-scale review of studies of independent reading programs, Pilgreen (2000) found that the one single factor that all successful programs included was ready access to books; texts were provided directly to students instead of requiring them to furnish or borrow their own. Some of the best programs offered "book floods" or large collections of reading materials placed within each classroom where students also did their reading.

Krashen, Lee and McQuillan (2012) conducted three multivariate analyses, all controlling for the effects of poverty, that confirmed access to books in schools and public libraries was a significant predictor of reading achievement, as evidenced by results on the 2007 Grade 4 NAEP and 2006 PIRLS, a reading test given to fourth graders in 40 countries.

Yet research also shows that independent reading libraries are particularly beneficial to children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many scholars agree that the most effective way to improve the reading achievement of economically disadvantaged children is to increase their access to books (Allington & McGill-Franzen et al., 2003 and 2010; Krashen, 2004 and 2011; Neuman & Celano, 2012).

There are alarming disparities in print access between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Education found that 61% of low-income families owned no books for their children while Krashen (2004) showed that students from high-income backgrounds had access to not only significantly greater numbers of books, but also many more books that they like to read. In 2001, Neuman and Celano researched print access in four Philadelphia neighborhoods, two middle class and two low income, and discovered stark differences on multiple measures, including that the ratio of books to children in more affluent neighborhoods was 300 books to one child, whereas in poorer neighborhoods the ratio was 13 to one. When they followed up a decade later, Neuman and Celano (2012) discovered the gap in reading material had grown even greater, and the impact more devastating: students with abundant access to print read proficiently while students lacking access "seemed to develop avoidance strategies, merely tolerating reading without the cognitive involvement associated with reading for comprehension." (p. 23) Not surprising then is this unfortunate statistic: while 2013 NAEP results reveal the good news that fourth graders from both high- and low-income backgrounds have improved their reading performance over the past decade, the gap in proficiency

levels between higher income and lower income students has widened by nearly 20 percent in the same 10 years, and worsened in nearly every state (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

Independent reading libraries offer a way to remedy the disparity. According to Krashen, better libraries result in better reading—and money invested in libraries is associated with greater reading achievement, even when factors such as socio-economic status are controlled. Effects of poverty can effectively be countered by investment in books. "Poverty per se is of course devastating. But schools can counter the effects of poverty in at least one area: access to books." (2004, p. 70).

Allows for students to assume more agency in their learning

For decades, psychologists have explored the important role that agency, and the related concepts of self-efficacy, autonomy, and locus of control, plays in the learning process. Autonomy support in classroom practice has been widely shown to influence student motivation (Guthrie, Klauda & Ho, 2013). Teachers support autonomy by providing opportunities for choice and self-direction; giving positive feedback regarding competence, and minimizing external controls and pressures. (Guthrie et al., 2013; Stefanou et al., 2004) "Clearly the goal for educators is to create and foster classrooms that support students in becoming truly autonomous and self-determined as learners." (Stefanou et al., 2004, p. 99) Agency is part of the network of non-cognitive factors that impact a student's academic success (Farrington et al., 2012). By developing agency, students utilize effective strategies and cultivate positive attitudes that help them navigate barriers to success in and out of the classroom (Raikes Foundation, 2012).

Independent reading libraries generate a sense of agency when students are allowed to choose books and read for extended periods of time on their own. By exercising that control in their reading lives, students develop into more competent, gratified readers. "Giving students control of what they read is one step in making them lifelong readers and lifelong learners and a major stride toward helping them take control of their lives." (Gardiner, 2005, p. 128)

When students are allowed to choose books—the authors they read, the topics they learn about, the genres that appeal to them—they assume agency as well as follow their own personal interests. And interest also has a significant motivating effect on reading not just a particular book, an instance of situational interest, but on reading in general (Guthrie et al., 2006).

Pilgreen (2000) describes the role that independent reading plays in supporting students' development of agency this way:

> "[I]n order for children to be prepared to read for enjoyment and information, they must learn to be independent in making book selections and setting purposes for reading. We can help students begin to achieve this autonomy by surrendering some control to them. To do this we must provide them with opportunities to read under conditions in which they choose their reading selections, their purposes, and their own demands for learning. This is why they need carefully orchestrated periods of time to read in school." (p. 5)

Increases engagement and motivation

Morrow and Gambrell (1998) describe motivated readers as individuals who choose to read on a regular basis for long periods of time, for pleasure and information. According to Guthrie et al. (2006), "Students with highly developed intrinsic motivation for reading report high levels of curiosity to read, involvement with a range of reading activities, preference for challenging materials, and extended amounts of time in reading activities." (p. 108)

A large amount of statistical research shows that intrinsic motivation to read—reading for interest and pleasure—drives how much students read (Guthrie, 2008). **A variety of correlational, longitudinal, and experimental studies have linked both motivation and engagement to reading achievement**. (Guthrie, Klauda & Ho, 2013) Routman (2003) claims that "[r]eading comprehension test scores are more influenced by students' amount of engaged reading than any other single factor." (p. 69)

Researchers have found that several pedagogical practices have a positive effect on students' motivation and engagement with reading, including:

· Access to many interesting, challenging books, both fiction and nonfiction;

· choice of what to read

(Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2013; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Morrow & Gambrell, 1998).

Indeed, allowing students choice of reading materials is widely advocated.
"Researchers and authors from the past 20 years agree that students should be given the opportunity for self-selected reading." (Trudel, 2007, p. 309)

According to Pilgreen (2000): "A crucial element of book appeal is self-selection, or the opportunity for students to choose what they want to read regardless of a teacher's preference…It is difficult for readers to develop a sense of ownership and purpose if someone else is telling them what to read." (p. 9) This sentiment is echoed by Atwell (2007): "The only surefire way to induce a love of books is to invite students to select their own." (p. 12) Students themselves recognize the value of book choice. Kids & Family Reading Report by Scholastic® (2014), 91% of children aged 6-17 say: "my favorite books are the ones that I have picked out myself."

According to Guthrie (2008), engagement is so powerful that it can trump even family background when it comes to reading achievement; studies have shown that students with high reading engagement but lower parental education and income have higher reading achievement than students with lower reading engagement and the same socioeconomic background. Guthrie describes the relationship between reading and engagement as a spiral, which goes both upward and down: higher achievers read more avidly and the more engaged they become, the more they achieve, just as lower achievers are less engaged and then, sadly, read less, achieve less.

This finding makes the role of choice at least as important for struggling or reluctant readers. "Freedom of choice also allows the greatest possibility that when the reluctant reader does give a book a try, he'll hit on something that he likes." (Willingham, 2015, p. 172)

Interest is another motivating factor in book selection. Choice helps students find books that are of personal interest to them—but that means books representing a wide range of topics need to be available.

Students' personal interests should be a key factor in their book selections and in the titles offered within an independent reading library—especially for struggling readers (Routman, 2003). Reading skills improve when students are reading books that draw and hold their interest, causing them to read more attentively (Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Yet even advocates of book choice warn that students likely need some guidance in their selections, at least until they learn how to choose appropriate texts based on their reading levels and personal interests (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Krashen 2004; Reutzel & Juth, 2014; Willingham, 2015).

In a 2006 study of reading motivation involving third graders, Guthrie and colleagues elicited a number of interesting findings that have implications for instruction. The researchers investigated whether situational motivation, which is transitory and context-bound (e.g., liking a specific book at a specific time), may lead to longer-term intrinsic motivation for general reading. They found that, within an instructional context that supports engagement and motivation in reading, situated motivation predicts changes in general motivation. "With repeated situational motivation experiences, students became positively disposed toward reading a range of topics and enjoying a variety of authors and books. Under these conditions, students' intrinsic motivation has increased to higher levels." (p. 109)

The findings above give support to claims by Willingham (2015) and others that even a single positive experience with what Krashen (2004) calls a "home run book" can make all the difference in creating engaged readers.

Reduces summer reading loss

The issue of setbacks to learning over summer breaks has been documented dating back over 100 years (Blazer 2011; Cooper, 2003; Gordon, 2010). "Summer slide" is especially devastating for children from economically disadvantaged families (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003 and 2010), and since the impact is cumulative—with low SES students slipping further behind each summer—consequences can reverberate throughout a child's education (Alexander et al., 2007).

In 1996, Cooper and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of 13 rigorous studies of summer learning that revealed that all students, regardless of socio-economic background, lost a roughly equal amount—an average of one month of progress—in math skills, but substantial differences by family income level were found in reading. While comprehension scores of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups of students overall declined, on some measures, students from higher income backgrounds showed gains over the summer while those from lower income backgrounds lost significantly more reading skill. On average, summer vacations created a reading gap of about 3 months between middle- and lower-class students. Gender, ethnicity, and IQ had no moderating effects on the results. The researchers theorized that economically advantaged children held more ground in reading due to more opportunity to practice by having more access to books over the summer.

Drawing on the work of Cooper and others, Allington McGill-Franzen, and colleagues (2010), also speculated that a lack of reading activity was the source of disparate summer reading loss by income level and set out to study the longitudinal effects of supplying economically disadvantaged students with books over the summer months. Each student in the experimental group was provided with a dozen self-selected trade books for each of three consecutive summers. The results? The experimental group reported more often engaging in voluntary reading and had significantly higher reading achievement than the control group. The researchers concluded:

> "This study provides the best evidence to date that ensuring easy and continuing access to self-selected books for summer reading is one potential strategy for addressing summer reading setback and, therefore, addressing the reading achievement gap that exists between more and less economically disadvantaged families." (p. 423-424)

Providing books to children over the summer yields greater achievement gains and is less expensive, less extensive than holding summer school or engaging in comprehensive school reform (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003).

Prevents diminished reading habits at the secondary level

The literacy crisis at the secondary level has been investigated and discussed in great depth. Too many adolescents lack sufficient reading skills to understand and learn from the texts they encounter at school and even students at this age with average reading ability are unlikely to meet the complex and ever-increasing literacy demands of college and the 21st century workplace (Kamil et al., 2008). On NAEP, the reading scores of eighth graders across demographic groups declined from 2013 to 2015, with only 34 percent performing at or above proficient levels and almost a quarter falling below the basic level (U.S. Department of Education/NCES, 2016). The issues extend beyond achievement in reading specifically. It is a disengagement from reading at the secondary level that some experts view as a root cause of general school failure and dropouts at high school (Guthrie, 2008).

It is not surprising that this issue coincides in the middle grades with a decrease in voluntary reading and an emergence of negative attitudes toward reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000 and 2001). Data shows that less than a third of 13 year-olds read daily and the percentage of 17 year-olds who read nothing for pleasure has doubled since the 1980s. This is even while the amount they read for school and homework (15 or fewer pages daily for most students) has remained the same (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). A survey of reading habits by Scholastic (2014) indicates enjoyment of reading declines sharply as early as age 9.

But the research on adolescents and reading is not entirely bleak. Twenty-seven percent of 13 year-olds and 19% of 17 year-olds report reading for pleasure every day, and about a quarter of teens read recreationally at least five times per week (Common Sense Media, 2014). The International Literacy Association (previously International Reading Association, 2012) says teens are reading a wide variety of print and digital texts—actually, they do more reading and writing (on paper and online) today than ever before, even if it does not always involve reading texts that adults value. Wilhelm and Smith (2014) found that adolescent readers who do read avidly think deeply and speak with sophistication about books as well as derive much pleasure from them—in fact pleasure isn't incidental to their reading, but essential; pleasure, the authors suggest, is what supports the high level of engagement with texts that these teen readers demonstrate and what schools seek to foster in all students.

The decline in reading at middle school coincides with a decline in personal choices and increase in teacher control with regards to reading (Gordon, 2010). Some experts view opportunities to read independently with self-selected books as the key to re-engaging secondary level students with reading. From Biancarosa and Snow, authors of *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (2nd Ed., 2006):

> "As students progress through the grades, they become increasingly "tuned out," and building student choices into the school day is an important way to awaken student engagement...One way that motivation and engagement are instilled and maintained is to provide students with opportunities to select for themselves the materials they read and topics they research. One of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students' school day is to incorporate independent reading time in which they can read whatever they choose. Yet this piece of the curriculum is often dropped after the primary grades." (p. 16)

In a survey of sixth graders, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that what the majority of students liked best about their English Language Arts classes was having time to read silently or independently. "[A]lthough middle school students may not often choose to read in their leisure time, they value time to read in school, and they are more inclined to read when a specific time is set aside to do so." (p. 69) More recently, *Scholastic's Kids & Family Reading Report* (5th edition, 2014): 78% of frequent readers (defined as reading books for fun 5-7 times per week) aged 12-17 say that they have an opportunity to read a book of choice independently during the school day whereas only 24% of infrequent readers (who read for fun less than once a week) say the same.

Alongside time to read independently in school, adolescents need easy access to a wide range of interesting texts—a feature of instruction shown to have an enormously positive effect on comprehension and motivation among struggling older students (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

Independent reading libraries then can make all the difference in the engagement and success of students at the middle grades and beyond. According to Guthrie (2008):

> "In the end, if we truly want struggling readers to improve their reading skills, schools and teachers must take drastic measures. School districts must begin to put money into texts. By allocating funds for high-interest books and by adjusting curricula to allow for the teaching of such novels, they can take the first step in this important process." (p. 74)

Both Pilgreen (2000) and Gardiner (2005) point out that secondary level students have other leisure activities available to them outside of school that compete with reading—which is why opportunities to read independently in school are vital. "If reading has been associated with an attitude of enjoyment and is seen as a worthwhile activity, it will be higher on a student's list of options. The benefits of making choices about reading follow students throughout their education." (Gardiner, p. 127)

Helps students become lifelong readers

"A child sitting in a quiet room with a good book isn't a flashy, or more significantly, marketable teaching method. It just happens to be the only way anyone grew up to become a reader. And that is the goal: for every child to become a skilled, passionate, habitual, critical reader." (Atwell, 2007, p. 12)

Research has long shown the positive effects of avid, voluminous reading on academic achievement (Allington, 2014; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998) as well as on other indicators of desirable life outcomes that extend far beyond one's schooling (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). For these reasons, helping students become engaged with reading early on and for the long haul should be a primary aim of educators.

There is another variable that would aid this mission. Advocates for engaging students in regular independent reading in school point to what they note is a too often overlooked aspect of reading: pleasure. **"One of the most important results of reading for enjoyment is the creation of lifelong readers."** (Gardiner, 2005, p. 126)

Students need to have appealing, enjoyable books made available to them along with opportunities to read those books independently. "We want to be the kind of teachers who help our students fall in love with books in ways that foster a lifelong devotion to reading. If we are to succeed, then we need to keep—at the forefront of our attention and in all of its various forms—the rich, complex and profound pleasures of reading." (Wilhelm and Smith, 2014, p. 186)

Reading independently, freely, avidly and with confidence *is* pleasurable (Atwell, 2007; Krashen, 2004; Willingham, 2015). And that is the kind of experience with reading that students need to have in school. From Gardiner (2005, p. 126-128):

> "Feedback from students year after year supports the extent to which SSR [silent sustained reading] instills a sense of being a reader, of being involved in reading for life...Gaining a positive attitude about reading and education is key for students to become lifelong readers. Students who become lifelong readers are more involved, more aware, and more creative in their approaches to life...Giving readers control of what they read is one step in making them lifelong readers and a major stride toward helping them take control of their lives."

The Benefits of Reading Independently

An independent reading library is the backbone of the independent reading students do at school. Regular independent reading built into the school day aids the development of specific skills and habits that contribute to students' overall reading achievement and attitudes toward reading. Hundreds of correlational studies found that the best readers read the most and poor readers read the least; these studies suggest that the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Indeed, it is during successful, independent reading practice that students consolidate their reading skills and strategies and come to own them; reading proficiency lags without reading practice (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003).

"In the years that SSR [silent sustained reading] has been in use, it has come under the scrutiny of literally hundreds of academic studies. The vast majority of these studies have found SSR an effective method of helping students learn

needed skills." (Gardiner, 2005, p. 107) Presented below is research behind the many ways that reading independently is integral to becoming a competent, confident reader—and why access to independent reading libraries is essential to reading achievement.

Improves comprehension

Time spent reading independently is strongly associated with reading achievement. Research indicates that expanding opportunities for students to engage in independent reading during school produces improvements across reading skills, including comprehension. (Allington, 2014; Krashen, 2004 and 2011; Reutzel et al., 2012).

In a meta-analysis, Krashen (2004) found that in 51 out of 54 comparisons, students who regularly engaged in in-school free reading programs performed as well or better on tests of comprehension than those who received only direct, skills-based instruction and assigned readings. Further, Krashen determined that the longer the free reading program, the more consistently positive the results.

In their examination of 25 years of research examining the results of in-school independent reading programs, Block and Mangieri (2002) found that students who spent more time in recreational reading activities scored higher on comprehension tests in grades 2, 4, and 8 as well as had higher grade point averages and more sophisticated writing styles.

When students are explicitly taught strategies to aid comprehension, independent reading becomes the means of practice. An abundance of interesting books in the classroom promotes the use of comprehension strategies (Guthrie et al, 2000).

Builds vocabulary

Independent reading is the most powerful way to develop vocabulary. Research shows that students who read widely learn more words and word meanings and consequently grow their vocabularies. (Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2001; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Reutzel et al., 2012). One study (Anderson & Nagy, 1992) estimated that children learn an average of 4,000 to 12,000 new words per year as a result of book reading. Scott and Nagy (1994) advocate daily independent reading in school to promote the growth of a large number of different words.

In reviewing the research literature, Block and Mangieri (2002) concluded that opportunities to read recreationally in school over extended periods of time yield significantly greater word learning—even without direct instruction—due to the exposure to and decoding of new words experienced during reading. This finding echoes similar results of other researchers, including Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) who, in arguing that vocabulary development is an effect of avid reading, claim that "[m]ost theorists are agreed that the bulk of vocabulary growth during a child's lifetime occurs indirectly through language exposure rather than direct teaching." (p. 2)

According to Krashen (2004), independent reading is the most effective way to build vocabulary. "Many scholars have noted that language is too complex to be learned one rule at a time," rendering common approaches to teaching vocabulary through word parts, synonyms, etc. insufficient (p. 18-19).

Increases fluency

It is most common in elementary classrooms to practice fluency by having students read aloud and listen to model readers. However, some researchers argue that silent independent reading is a more effective way to improve fluency.

Reutzel and Juth (2012) claim that assessing only oral reading accuracy and rate reduces fluent reading to automatic and accurate word recognition. "Still some elementary teachers think that reading fluency can only be measured by listening to students read aloud and consequently do not encourage independent, silent reading fluency development. It is intrusive to require students to read orally when they want and need to read silently. " (p. 29)

According to Allington (2014), voluminous independent reading (including via accurate repeated readings of texts) is the primary source of reading fluency—and unless children read substantial amounts of print, their reading will remain laborious, limited in effectiveness, and lacking in fluency.

Researchers have found that in the course of oral reading, poor readers are subjected to frequent corrections from teachers, and this experience gets in the way of these students developing fluency. Therefore, though struggling readers may initially resist independent reading, they especially may benefit from regular opportunities to practice reading independently without interruption. (Allington, 2014; Gardiner, 2005; Trelease, 2001)

Develops background knowledge, cultural literacy, and more

"Those who read more, know more." (Krashen, 2004, p. 25) Research shows that most people get their cultural literacy—knowledge about the cultural and historical events that have shaped the world—from reading, as evidenced through high correlations between cultural knowledge, reports of recreational reading habits, and success on general reading tests (Krashen, 2004; Willingham, 2015).

Wide reading serves to develop background knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Additionally, "[s]ilent reading experience may increase an individual's ability to sustain attention and concentration, which are necessary for many types of academic and professional success." (Block & Mangieri, 2002, p. 573)

According to Cunningham and Stanovich in their seminal 1998 work, print exposure and reading volume have far-reaching effects:

> "Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond the immediate task of lifting meaning from a particular passage. Furthermore, these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Accumulated over time—spiraling either upward or downward—they carry profound implications for the development of a wide range of cognitive capabilities." (p. 8)

Characteristics of An Effective Independent Reading Library Program

At the turn of the 21ˢᵗ Century, Pilgreen conducted a large-scale study of independent reading programs and found a wide array of successful models. She concluded that "Even as a veteran teacher with a hefty number of years of teaching behind me, I was amazed by the assortment of ways in which these factors were implemented and by the numerous other possibilities they suggest for updating existing free reading programs and developing new ones." (2000, p. 7)

There is a great deal of flexibility in how to run an effective independent reading library program that accommodates the needs of students, classrooms, and schools. Independent reading library programs need not be rigid or prescriptive. However, Pilgreen and other researchers have identified certain features and practices that are particularly beneficial. They are described in the following section.

An extensive collection of appealing books

Pilgreen (2000) found that book appeal is essential to successful independent reading programs—a central feature in about 80% of programs that yielded improved achievement. What is book appeal? According to Pilgreen, "Broadly defined, appeal means that reading materials are sufficiently interesting and provocative enough for students to want to read them." (p. 9) Students' personal interests should be reflected in the titles offered, to draw students' curiosity and motivate students to read them (Routman, 2003; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Books are judged by their covers; for books to be appealing to students, an independent reading library cannot appear as a haphazard assortment of donated or yard sale books (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002).

Experts recommend that the minimum size of an effective classroom library include about 10 books per student or 300 books total (Catapano et al., 2009; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). Young and Moss (2006) emphasize that offering high-quality books matters more than large numbers of them. "The richer the print environment, that is, the more reading material available, the better the literacy development." (Krashen, 2004, p. 62)

A wide variety of genres

Literary development requires that students become knowledgeable of and experienced with a diverse array of different types of texts representing a variety of fiction and informational books. (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 1999; Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Young, Moss, and Cornwell (2007) point to multiple benefits of balancing fiction books with non-fiction in an elementary independent reading library. First, broad experience with diverse text types is associated with reading achievement. Second, non-fiction allows practice with the informational and expository texts students will increasingly encounter at the higher grades. Finally, non-fiction is commonly where students' interests lie—and interest is a great motivator. "[N]on-fiction trade books can provide the catalyst that turns

reluctant readers into ravenous readers." (p. 3) Saul and Dieckman (2005) echo this idea, claiming that informational books appeal to students' curiosity, another great motivator.

Regarding the broader categories of fiction and non-fiction, it is important that the genres that make up each (e.g. fantasy, historical fiction, realistic fiction, myths, autobiographies and biographies, memoir, narrative non-fiction, expository non-fiction, etc.) are also represented within an independent reading library. Not only does this ensure that students' preferred type of book is included, but also it provides experience with a wide variety of genres, which aids students' understanding of the distinct characteristics of each (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Another consideration for the collection is relevance to the lives of students who will use it. "Including texts with characters similar in age to students in the classroom who share experiences they have had can be critical for generating interest and fostering self-to-text connections. Cultural and linguistic familiarity may be an especially important factor for literacy acquisition for English language learners." (Catapano et al., 2009, p. 63)

A wide variety of text difficulty levels that are matched to students abilities

"Another component of book appeal includes offering a wide variety of extensive range of readability levels so that all readers can find something they like and can handle independently. The goal is to be sure that everyone has access to materials that they not only want to read—but CAN read. "(Pilgreen, 2000, p. 9)

It is important that independent reading libraries contain a range of text difficulty levels so that each student has options for books that can be read successfully and that support each student's individual growth as a reader, without too much ease or frustration. "Struggling readers who need to practice reading the most often select books they cannot read." (Reutzel & Juth, 2014, p. 30). Allington and Gabriel (2012) warn that students who receive a consistent diet of too difficult text don't get the effective practice that independent reading otherwise affords; consequently, their struggles increase and the gap between them and more proficient readers widens.

Therefore, teachers must guide students toward appropriate levels of text difficulty based on diagnostic assessment. Although research shows that students read better when they read more, simply allocating more time for independent reading will likely not improve a student's skills or habits unless the time is spent with a book that can be read with fluency, comprehension, intensity, enjoyment, and a high volume of success. Appropriately leveled texts provide that kind of multi-faceted experience (Allington, 2014; Allington & Gabriel, 2012, Reutzel & Juth, 2014).

Additionally, students are more motivated to read when provided with a selection of texts of suitable difficulty level from which they can choose the books that most interest them personally (Reutzel et al., 2012).

Allows for student choice - but provides guidance in selections

Research strongly suggests that students be given opportunity for self-selection of material during independent reading so as to increase motivation and interest (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Atwell, 2007; Pilgreen, 2000; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Schunk et al., 2008).

Yet even advocates of book choice warn that students likely need some guidance in their selections, at least until they learn how to choose appropriate texts based on their reading levels and personal interests. Students who are struggling to read should be provided with a limited set of titles at his or her level to select from. Students who are struggling to find an interesting book may need some training in genres or reflection on what they enjoy and want to learn (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Krashen 2004; Reutzel & Juth, 2014; Willingham, 2015). "[U]nguided choice can become a negative force." (Reutzel & Juth, 2014, p. 30).

According to Stahl (2004), in order for time spent reading to have a positive impact on achievement, students must be guided and monitored during that reading to ensure that reading is actually happening and the books that are read are at a suitable level of difficulty. "[D]irecting children to read may backfire if the reading material is not appropriate, that is, either not interesting or not comprehensible, or both." (Krashen 2004, p. 87)

Provides dedicated time to read as a regular activity

Researchers agree that students should be given regular opportunities to read for uninterrupted blocks of time. The recommended amount of time of individual reading sessions ranges from 15 to 30 minutes (Block & Magieri, 2002; Pilgreen, 2000; Reutzel and Juth, 2014) or at least 20 minutes—as long as is adequate for students to get into their books and maintain their own reading stamina (Willingham, 2015), what Nancy Atwell (2007) describes in urgent detail as "the zone." "Even when elementary students read for only 15 minutes a day, they significantly increased their reading abilities," with average and below-average readers showing the greatest gains (Block & Mangieri, 2002, p. 573).

Frequency of independent reading sessions is key. Pilgreen (2000) found that in 97% of successful programs, students were given free reading time a minimum of twice a week whereas Reutzel and Juth (2014) recommend daily reading.

Addresses important physical and environmental conditions

Also important is the presence of a designated reading area within the classroom. "Reading is given a place of prominence in effective classrooms, and by that I mean physical prominence. There is a classroom library, ideally one with a substantial collection." (Willingham, 2015, p.118)

Features of an exemplary classroom library area include good organization and clear labeling of shelves or tubs by genre or content and coding by difficulty level (Calkins, 2001; Reutzel & Juth, 2014; Young et al., 2007) and books on display (Krashen, 2004).

Researchers also stress the importance of quiet and comfort during designated reading time (Atwell, 2007; Krashen, 2004; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002; Reutzel & Juth, 2014; 2000; Willingham, 2015).

Does not replace comprehensive, core programs

In her research of independent reading programs, Pilgreen (2000) found support for the long held notion that students who read a lot become better readers, and that reading ability develops not through isolated skill and drill but by reading itself. Pilgreen concluded that independent reading programs provide "at least the same or better benefits for students in the area of comprehension and motivation as traditional skills classes did. This is an astounding finding, particularly when we consider which alternative is more enjoyable for students. Clearly, free reading is less work than skill and drill and a good deal more fun." (p. 6)

It should be noted here, however, that it is not recommended that independent reading replace comprehensive, core reading programs. Some researchers have lamented that typical reading instruction is deficient in actual reading, with students independently engaged with text for only about 15 minutes within a typical 90-minute English language arts lesson (Allington, 2014; Willingham, 2015). But that does not discount the importance of skills instruction. "Independent reading is far from the entire reading curriculum, but what children do during independent reading should affect, and be affected by, the entire curriculum." (Calkins, 2001, p. 69)

Rather, independent reading is an essential component of a broader English Language Arts curriculum that includes direct instruction and practice of core reading skills (Allington, 2014; Calkins, 2001; Gardiner, 2005). "Free voluntary reading is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education… the missing ingredient in first language 'language arts' as well as intermediate second and foreign language instruction. It will not, by itself, produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached." (Krashen, 2004, p. 1)

* * *

As demonstrated in the findings from the research literature presented above, children must engage in independent reading on a regular basis if they are to become competent, lifelong readers. And in order to ensure that *all* students read independently—and effectively—their schools must provide them with access a wide array of appealing books at an appropriate level of text difficulty. Independent reading libraries offer this. So that students don't lose out on the literacy skills the 21st century demands, let's make sure that students get lost in books.

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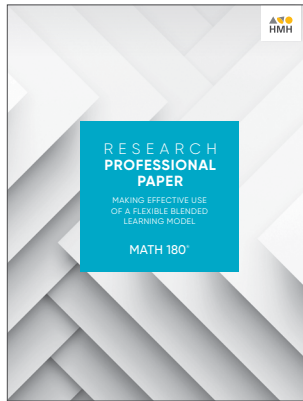
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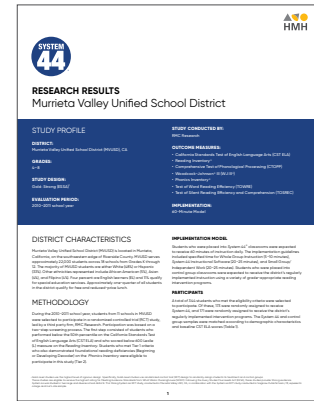
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