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Building Student  
Literacy Through

# Sustained Silent Reading

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# Preface

I didn't like high school English. Everything we read was chosen by the teacher. We read at a rate assigned by the teacher, discussed the parts selected by the teacher, and answered questions the way we thought the teacher wanted them answered. Consequently, I didn't enjoy reading and seldom finished assigned books, except one.

It was 1969 and the teacher let us choose any book we wanted to read. Advertisements for Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* bombarded me, so I chose that. Caught by the excitement and suspense, I read every single page, gave my book report, and scored the highest grade I had ever received in English class. I felt good.

The teacher, far too progressive for a rural midwestern town, resigned after his first year. I, along with other students, returned to teachers who assigned every book for the year. They were good books: Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, Shakespeare—core curriculum in many school districts—but not the books I wanted to read. I simply wasn't ready for those books, so I didn't read them.

In college as a math major, I determined to avoid unnecessary exposure to English teachers, which was easy until an injury forced me to spend a week in bed. A friend visited and brought a couple of paperback novels. I accepted them (I couldn't be rude), but later tossed them on a shelf with a chuckle.

Later, the chuckle turned to boredom; I picked up one of the books and started reading, evoking the feeling I had three years earlier when reading *The Godfather*. I wondered if I would like other books and started looking around, asking librarians and teachers. By

the end of my sophomore year, I was reading one book after another. I dropped my math major, signed up with an English advisor, and registered for extra literature courses. I even read the books the teachers had assigned (and I had skipped) in high school and became a fan of Thoreau, Emerson, and Shakespeare.

By the time I graduated with a degree in English education, I knew I wanted to do things differently from my English teachers. I needed and wanted to teach core books and classics, but I also wanted to give my students choices about reading all year.

Giving students choices about what they read and time to read those books through sustained silent reading (SSR) is the central concept of this book.

SSR is a program that has been important to me throughout my career and has grown in importance. In an age when even math tests require reading, SSR is a gift for both teachers and students. In fact, when I interviewed for my current job, I answered all the questions the panel asked me. When they asked, “Do you have any questions for us?” I only had one. “I have used sustained silent reading in my classes for years. Is it OK if I do that here?” The answer was yes and I took the job.

SSR has become part of my identity as a teacher and as a person. I’ve often overheard students talking about me, saying, “He’s the one who has you silent read every day” or “He lets you pick the books you read.” My students know they are going to read every day, and they know I am going to read with them. They see my books on my desk (“I didn’t know English teachers read things like that!”), and they hear me talk about books all the time.

I don’t want my students to experience the frustration and boredom I had experienced with reading. I am so thankful that I discovered how much I love reading, and for all that reading has given me. I want to offer my students similar opportunities, and to share with parents and teachers how the SSR program works in my classroom. I’ve written this book as if we were standing in the hallway between classes, chatting about reading, books, and students. Let’s talk . . . .



# Introduction

## *Why Use Sustained Silent Reading?*

It was 1977, the first day of my teaching career, and my schedule consisted of three sections of a class called Basic Communications I and two sections of its sequel, Basic Communications II. Some students in these classes lacked interest in reading and writing, were learning disabled, or had been recommended for extra help by a prior English teacher. Most, however, had failed every other English class. For an English credit and graduation, I was their last hope.

As I waited for students to enter Room 211, the burden loomed large. What if I couldn't motivate them? What if they didn't earn passing grades? What if I couldn't find a way to teach them?

My background offered no help. My neatly typed student-teaching units on *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Huckleberry Finn* remained in the file cabinet. The curriculum for the Basic Communications classes required making our way through a series of workbooks. Having reviewed my teacher's edition, I could see how it led us through each workbook, page by page. I intended to do what I'd been told.

When the students entered the classroom, my fears were realized. Most showed up without pencils, paper, or interest. Most were quiet and filled the rows of seats from the back of the room. Some acknowledged me with a nod or a shy, "Hello." One slammed his backpack on the desk and asked, "You the new English teacher?"

“Yes, I am.”

“I knew it. They always give these classes to the new guy.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Nobody else wants to teach us. Like last year, I had that new lady and she failed me.”

“Why was that?”

“Because English class sucks.”

He laughed and most of the others laughed with him. Class had barely started and he had already succeeded in doing what he did best—making himself the center of attention. I would write his name, “Don,” on several passes to the principal’s office before the semester was over.

We settled in. I passed out the workbooks, loaned enough pencils to write names on the front of the packets, and gave instructions for the first three pages. When the bell rang, we stacked the workbooks on a shelf, and the students left the room.

By the end of the day, I was wondering how I would ever teach the way I wanted to and overcome the poor attitudes, histories of failure, and blank looks of boredom. They hated my class, and they hated school. I didn’t know what I could do, but I knew I couldn’t give up so early in my career.

Each day I passed out the workbooks and gave instructions. I tried telling stories to give some life to the lesson, but they weren’t interested. We moved on, worksheet after worksheet. By the end of two weeks, I was depressed.

I remembered the discussions in the American Literature classes during student teaching. The short story collections and novels had sparked lively exchanges; final papers had been a joy to read. Now, discussions consisted of me talking while students looked at me. Or not. Writing assignments consisted of three-line paragraphs with no capital letters, no punctuation, and no main idea. I tried helping them as a group. I tried helping them individually.

One day, Tom—bless him for being so honest—said, “I know there should be some commas and periods in there somewhere, but I

don't have any idea where. If I put them in and they're in the wrong place, I'll look stupid, so I just leave them out."

I'm sure others felt the same, but couldn't or wouldn't say it.

What could I do? How could I develop their confidence in themselves, and perhaps more important, some interest in what we were doing in class?

I spent the weekend trying to figure out how I could change something, anything, on Monday morning to help us all get through the next week. I remembered I'd heard another teacher talk about something called sustained silent reading. I decided to try it.

On Monday, I explained to each class, "We are going to start silent reading in class every day before we work in our packets. Choose a book from home or check one out from the school library tomorrow." I arranged with the librarians to help us look for books and by midway through each class on Tuesday, everyone had a book. We spent the remainder of class reading. On Wednesday, we read first, and then finished workbook pages. And each day after that, we read for the first 15 minutes, and then hustled to get through the daily lessons.

It didn't take long to see a change. Classes settled down sooner. They grumbled less about the workbooks. We even talked about the books they were reading.

It was better, but there were still problems. Kids left their books at home. They lost interest and complained about the books they chose. They fell asleep and couldn't remember what page they were on. Bottom line, it was still English class; Don had defined that in precise terms.

I still thought we were on the right track. With constant reminders, most students brought books to class; most remained quiet and read during the silent reading time. I don't know if research was available in the late '70s to tell me about the effects of SSR. If it existed, I didn't know about it, but within a month of starting SSR in my classes, I knew I was doing something that felt right.

During reading times, I sometimes looked around the room,

amazed at the faces, concentrating, trying to read and comprehend. They liked the idea of choosing their own books with quiet time to read them.

About this time, a new grumbling began in the room when I asked them to put their books down and get the workbooks off the shelf. They often asked for a few extra minutes. Sometimes I allowed it, sometimes I didn't. Then someone asked, "Could we read the whole period on Friday?"

I bargained. "If we read for 15 minutes every day, then work hard in our workbooks Monday through Thursday, we can read all hour on Friday." It was the first time I saw them truly excited as a group.

We read every day. They were remembering to bring their books. We talked about our books and shared funny stories and memorable characters. It took less time to get settled each day. Occasionally, someone would already be reading before the tardy bell rang. I was enjoying it, and that made me enjoy the rest of our work more.

One day, a note from the school secretary explained that every new teacher was required to have three formal, written evaluations. The principal would stop by my room for one period sometime in the next two weeks. Two days later, he walked into my classroom during the passing period.

When he sat down in a vacant seat, I was nervous. Things had been going well. I liked my students. I had developed a routine that gave me a sense of belonging within the school and within my own classroom. But he was the principal, and I was young, unsure, and untenured.

When the bell rang, I began with my usual, "Take out your books and let's do our silent reading." They settled in and we spent our 15 minutes reading. The workbook pages that day had some exercises on spelling and questions about the sequence of events in a short passage I read aloud to them. They answered the questions, and we had one of our better discussions about the reading passage. Class ended, and the students and principal left my room. I felt pretty

**Part I**

**What Is Sustained  
Silent Reading?**

# 1

## *Creating Lifelong Readers*

Sustained silent reading is a time during which a class, or in some cases an entire school, reads quietly together. Students are allowed to choose their own reading materials and read independently during class time. Most programs encourage students to continue reading outside of class and permit students to change books if they lose interest. Most important, SSR allows an adult to model the habits, choices, comments, and attitudes good readers develop. Although most programs do not require traditional book reports, some do offer opportunities for students to talk or write about their readings. Although SSR programs share certain characteristics, teachers have adjusted the general concept to fit the specific needs of their students and schools.

Sustained silent reading is referred to by a number of different names across the country. In its purest form, FVR (free voluntary reading) allows students to read any materials they choose, including books, newspapers, magazines, and comic books. Programs include DEAR (drop everything and read), DIRT (daily independent reading time), LTR (love to read), USSR (uninterrupted sustained silent reading), POWER (providing opportunities with everyday reading), FUR (free uninterrupted reading), IRT (independent reading time), SQUIRT (sustained quiet uninterrupted reading time), WART (writing and reading time), SSRW (sustained silent reading and writing), and a host of other catchy acronyms and abbreviations.

First described by Lyman Hunt of the University of Vermont in the 1960s, SSR gained popularity in the 1970s. In the 1980s, many schools across the nation experienced rooms of quiet readers, although SSR was often criticized for the general lack of student accountability inherent in the programs. By the 1990s, SSR received strong competition from technology-based reading programs like Accelerated Reader software, which brought computer quizzes on selected books into the classroom. In the new millennium, the National Reading Panel reported that SSR programs were not an effective means of teaching reading, renewing a debate that has followed SSR throughout its history.

In spite of that report, interest in silent reading remains high, perhaps fueled by an increasing number of district- and state-required assessments and by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind). These high-stakes assessments have left many teachers and administrators looking for successful, cost-effective ways to improve student reading. Worried about the “teach-to-the-test” mentality these assessments foster, some educators are concerned that students may become successful at taking tests but cease to enjoy reading. Because SSR is inexpensive and focuses strongly on reading for enjoyment, it may be the perfect answer. A significant number of research studies have examined sustained silent reading programs, evaluating their effectiveness with students from primary grades to graduate school (see Chapter 6), and most of these studies show that SSR is successful in promoting and improving student literacy.

## What Researchers Say

The theory behind sustained silent reading is that if students read more and enjoy it more, they will become better readers, the same theory that drives the basketball player to stand at the free-throw line after practice each day and shoot 100 free throws. By the end of the season, he will be a better shooter, whether he has direct instruction

or not. While practicing shooting, he will apply what he learns each day to the next day's practice. Readers are the same. As they read each day, they encounter new words, usage, sentence structures, and ideas. Each day adds to their total experience and makes the next day better. With increased practice, reading becomes easier and—this is important—more enjoyable. Like the basketball player and his team, readers in SSR classrooms share the reading experience with their classmates and teacher. They talk about their books, trade recommendations, and see fellow students and at least one adult engaged in the reading process.

Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California, in his excellent book *The Power of Reading* (1993, p. x), describes free voluntary reading as “reading because you want to. For school-age children, FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time.”

Turning students into “highly literate people” is exactly what silent reading programs are designed to do. “Free Voluntary Reading is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education,” Krashen says (1993, p. 1). He continues, “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. When FVR is missing, these advanced levels are extremely difficult to attain.”

Krashen believes silent reading programs are the most effective way to teach not only reading proficiency, but also all the skills related to reading. Success through FVR is based on what he calls “the complexity argument.” Language, he says, “is too complex to be deliberately and consciously learned one rule or one item at a time” (1993, p. 14). This argument applies to grammar as well as vocabulary. “Not only are there many words to acquire, there are also subtle and complex properties of words that competent language users have acquired” (p. 14). Minor differences in usage may cause