

The Power Of Independent Practice Reading

A study of why students scored high on an international reading test taken by 32 countries was written up in the January, 2008 issue of *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. The authors were more interested in what was unique about the reading lives and habits of some students that enabled them to score high. What they discovered relates directly to independent practice reading. One indicator was the amount of leisure reading students did at home and in school. Another key indicator was the diversity and length of texts students reading. Those who scored the highest read long texts that included magazines, newspapers, fiction, and nonfiction; Those whose scores were solid but not as high as the group who read long texts read shorter texts that included magazines, comic, newspapers, fiction, and nonfiction.

The choices we teacher offer students, the diversity of texts in our classroom libraries, sharing these findings with students so they know the score and can make informed decisions about practice reading, and the amount of time students have for independent reading work together to build students' ability to concentrate on a wide variety of texts.

Providing Choice

When I invite my students to write about their experiences with class libraries, and what they value about them, two matters always surface: 1) being given the opportunity to choose their own books and 2) having time to read at school.

The word *choice* always reminds me of the Arthurian Legend, "Gawain and the Loathley Lady" in *The Sword and the Circle* (Sutcliffe, 1981). The knight ,Gawain, loves and wishes to marry the Lady Ragnell who is half free of a spell that makes her hideously ugly or beautiful half of each day. Once Gawain tells his love to make the choice whether she wishes to be beautiful by day and hideously ugly at night or the reverse, he breaks the spell that is upon her. By giving the Lady Ragnell choice, Sir Gawain shows a deep understanding of a basic need all of us have--the need to choose and exercise control over our lives. The right to choose was such a powerful force that it broke the enchantment and freed Ragnell to be her beautiful self all the time. Our students, like us and Ragnell, crave opportunities to choose, for choice gives us control over our lives and supports growth in reading.

In addition to choice being a desire among all age groups, offering middle schoolers the right to choose books has extra advantages because choice:

develops students' literary tastes, enabling them to discover what they do and don't enjoy reading;

cultivates students' personal reading lives; students are more likely to read at home when they know the kinds of books that engage and interest them;

shows students that you trust them to select books that meet their needs;

builds students' self-confidence as they repeatedly choose books they want to finish;

strengthens reading fluency and reading stamina; choice makes it more likely that a student will reread favorite books and deepen their understanding of them; and

helps students learn to concentrate — because they are more likely to complete books they *want* to read.

Providing Time To Read At School

Equally as important as choice is providing time to read during class. Without exception, my own research and the research of others have shown that middle school students value class time to read because once they leave school, homework and after school activities take up most of the day and evening. Eleanor, an eighth grader, noted an added benefit of time to read at school: "People who don't enjoy reading don't read out of school. But if you have to read in school, you might learn to enjoy it." Making the time for independent reading can be a challenge. Consider the suggestions that have worked at my school and at schools where I coach teachers:

Language arts teachers with daily, 90 minute class blocks can reserve 15 to 20 minutes a week for independent, silent reading. Teachers with 45 minute classes can set aside 15-20 minutes twice a week.

Teachers with self-contained classes can schedule silent reading at least four times a week, preferably five.

Silent reading at home and at school provides middle school students with the practice reading they need to enlarge their vocabulary and background knowledge, improve reading rate and fluency, develop their imaginations, mental imaging abilities, and inferential thinking

Encourage Reflection With Book Logs

To help my students think about and share their independent reading, I have them keep a book log. Students can create this simple book log form:

Student's name at the top; title and author and date completed for each book read. Book logs can encourage students to reflect on their independent reading lives, make book-to-book connections, and reveal to you their reading tastes and habits. But they're only effective if they are used wisely. What do I mean by that? I mean that first, students have to be given three to five minutes twice a week to update their book logs. Without this time set aside, the logs suffer the same fate as home exercise machines! Students come to see them as busy work. Second, students must interact with the data in the logs. Without this social component, it seems of little value to students.

For example, about half way through the school year, book log writing is in need of an infusion of prompts. I set aside about five to seven minutes for students to review their book logs. Next, I invite pairs or groups to brainstorm for a few minutes to create a list of discussion points and questions they would be eager to answer in future book log entries. I compile all the ideas on the chalkboard or chart paper.

Prompts for Book Log Reflections

Here's the list one class of eighth graders composed:

Books we loved and reread.

The number of books read early in the year compared to the number of books read at this point.

Compare the amount of independent reading completed in past years to this year.

Think about the kinds of genres you're reading. Is it the same genre or is there variety?

Are the books very long, short, or a mixture of both?

Is there a certain author you really enjoy and seek out?

Is there a book you have reread many times or one you plan to reread? What makes this book so special that you repeatedly reread it?

Is there a book you'd recommend to a classmate? Explain why.

Once students experience that reviewing their book logs can help them gather insights into their personal reading lives, they tend to be serious about reflecting on their lists of books. **Book logs** help students discover books others enjoyed. My students value book recommendations from classmates that come from their book logs, from short two to four minute monthly oral book talks, and by reading one another's short, strong opinions about books on the graffiti board. Christa summed up benefits of sharing books this way: "I love the book talks 'cause they give me ideas for reading I would never have chosen."

About the Author

Differentiating Reading Instruction: How to Teach Reading to Meet the Needs of Each Student, reflects and offers ways to deal with the fact that middle school classes include students reading at a diverse range of instructional levels. To learn more about Robb's books, classroom libraries, recommendations, teaching and parent tips, and more, visit [Laura Robb](#).

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