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How Teachers Can Guide Library Book Selection to Maximize the Value of Independent Reading Time

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HOW TEACHERS CAN GUIDE LIBRARY BOOK SELECTION TO MAXIMIZE
THE VALUE OF INDEPENDENT READING TIME

Abstract

This article shares a classroom application to support literacy development through a teacher-guided library selection program. Twenty students participated in the program which demonstrated the importance of the relationship between the school librarian and classroom teacher. These professionals worked together to guide students to choose library books at their recreational level for independent reading time. The effectiveness of this program was demonstrated by comparing the results for students who participated in the program with similar students who did not participate. Students who were in the teacher-guided library selection program showed higher running record scores and greater confidence in their reading than students who were not guided during their library time to choose appropriate books. Suggestions for teachers are discussed.

Introduction

It's time for our scheduled trip to the library to gather books for our weekly DEAR time. I see children frantically grabbing books, seemingly at random, based on a decorative cover or a current movie in the theaters. I know student choice is important, but I can't help but wonder if there is a better way to guide children to choose appropriate books so that they can read and enjoy them independently when they are back in the classroom.

For years, educators have acknowledged that children need to read in order to develop into better readers (Yopp & Yopp, 2003). Many educators provide opportunities to read within schools by utilizing an array of programs such as DEAR time (Drop Everything And Read) and SSR time (Sustained Silent Reading). Although these programs include some variation, all share the guiding belief that providing time for children to read independently is vital to encourage lifelong reading habits. The essence of independent reading is to provide an opportunity for students to read daily and silently for an uninterrupted period of time (usually 15–30 minutes) with books of their own selection while the teacher models silent reading.

Research shows the positive impact of effective recreational reading programs. Recreational reading promotes healthy reading habits and is directly associated with positive self-esteem, along with motivation, which plays a key role in reading improvement scores (Wilson & Casey, 2007). Most reading professionals concur that students benefit from time spent reading (Allington, 2005; Yopp & Yopp, 2003). Confusion around the efficacy of independent reading programs was introduced when the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) reported that there was no conclusive evidence that

independent reading in schools impacts reading ability. This report led some educational leaders to favor the use of class time for direct instruction over independent reading time (Pearson and Goodin, 2010). Since then, researchers have been examining what factors make independent reading more or less effective, and book choice has become one salient factor.

During SSR, children are usually encouraged to select and explore books on their own. Children's individual book selection is often based upon their interests which is critical to stimulate reading (Hall, Hedrick and Williams, 2014; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). However, these decisions sometimes disregard the actual difficulty level of the book and whether this level is appropriate for the individual child (Reutzel, Jones, and Newman, 2010). Teachers may provide strategies for students to utilize so they can be more successful in choosing an appropriate book. One approach widely used, according to Wutz and Wedwick (2005), is the five-finger rule, in which children read a page of the book and keep track of the words they do not understand. If they hold up all five fingers on one hand before the end of the page, the book may be too difficult for them to read independently. This technique requires accurate metacognitive judgments from young children in order to be successful, though. Another book-selection trend is the Goldilocks rule. With this rule, students are reminded to ask questions to themselves such as, Is the book too easy, too hard, or just right? Again, this technique clearly lacks precision. The final popular selection method is to have students simply choose books from their assigned recreational reading level, revealed to them by their teacher. In this final method, the teacher or school librarian may have sorted the books by level and marked them with colored dots or other indicators to help children match their reading levels.

Recently, teachers and researchers have been studying ways to structure the book selection process more deliberately so that children are guided to books for that are at their recreational levels and that also match their interests. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a program designed to structure SSR book choice and how this program impacted reading achievement and attitudes towards reading.

Review of Research

The effectiveness of SSR in impacting reading achievement is hotly debated in the educational field. Many researchers have found that even students who read as little as fifteen minutes a day significantly increase their reading levels, with average and below-average readers showing the greatest gains. (Block & Mangieri, 2002; Kush & Watkins, 1996; Morrow, 1986; Krashen, 2005). Others, such as those writing the report from the National Reading Panel in 2000, while agreeing that SSR may have positive implications for reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, questioned whether methodologically-sound research exists to prove causation in the relationship between independent reading and reading achievement (NRP, 2000). One way to resolve this discrepancy may be to analyze different kinds of SSR that may lead to different levels of success.

Traditional sustained silent reading has been a popular way to ensure students have time to read independently. It is comprised of a set period of time, 10–30 minutes, where students and teacher read from a self-selected piece of literature (Trudel, 2007). Some suggest that the number of minutes per day is an important variable and that

children need to read for at least 30 minutes a day for traditional SSR to be effective (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005).

Guided SSR focuses more on the texts read than the number of minutes and includes more structure with teachers guiding children in choosing texts and sometimes requiring written reflections from the children and minilessons from the teachers about choosing books (Trudel, 2007; Ermitage and Van Sluys, 2007; Pilgreen, 2000; Wutz and Wedwick, 2005). In guided SSR, students are scaffolded to choose books that are of interest to them and at the appropriate level to read independently. It is thought that students who experience success by reading books at the appropriate level may experience increased reading achievement scores and better attitudes towards reading.

The Importance of Reading on Level

Texts at a recreational (or independent) reading level for a particular student allow that student to read 95% or more of the words successfully (Tompkins, 2016). This recreational reading level is the level at which students are likely able to read and understand what they are reading without any type of scaffolding from the teacher. Pilgreen (2000) examined 32 studies about independent reading and described some factors that promote a successful sustained silent reading program. He pointed out that it is imperative that the teacher offer an abundance of books that students not only want to read but can read. Offering this wide range of readability levels ensures that all students are able to find a book that they can manage reading independently.

In some classrooms, teachers have scaffolded the children to choose from a selected genre box that has leveled books that are labeled with colored dots that signified the match to their independent reading level (Reutzel and Cooter, 2008). Monitoring of

student choices to assure match with level has been recommended by current researchers (Reutzel, Jones & Newman, 2010; Sanden, 2014) Many have argued that in order for children to become proficient readers, they must be able to choose books they are able to read independently and to experience comprehensible reading and a sense of successful reading. When children are not able to read the words and/or understand what the story is conveying, they become frustrated. This continued feeling of frustration can decrease motivation for reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

Brain research supports this ideology in that the brain's organization reflects its encounter. A chemical response to an experience when a child feels fear, anxiety, or helplessness is associated with the task negatively. This negative association can be reversed in the brain if teachers provide positively emotionally-charged experiences to change the child's attitude and willingness to try the task again (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Therefore, providing and ensuring that students are reading at their independent levels during sustained silent reading has the potential to promote a more positive, pleasurable, and successful experience for them to build upon. Educators caution that when children constantly read books that are too difficult, their reading becomes worse (Routman, 2003). Reading a book that is comprehensible ensures that the child will be able to build fluency, read for meaning, and develop confidence as a reader. Routman also argued that teachers must carefully monitor to make certain students are reading on their independent levels so that students may grow as readers and enjoy the texts they have chosen, which may lead to greater reading confidence.

Attitudes towards Reading

Research has revealed a statistically significant impact of SSR on student attitude regarding reading (Yopp & Yopp, 2003; Moore et al, 1980). Pilgreen (2000) reported that not only did students enjoy reading more for pleasure after the SSR program, but they also reported themselves to be better readers after participating in the program. Pilgreen found that almost all of the students reported that they had improved in reading, 36 percent reporting that they improved “some” and 62 percent reporting that they improved “a lot” (Pilgreen, 2000).

Wutz and Wedwick (2005) scaffolded students to choose texts at their recreational reading level. They found that this scaffolding had a significant impact on how students viewed themselves as readers. Students who rated reading as being a difficult task dropped approximately 75% after being scaffolded. This study examined how carefully scaffolded book choices may contribute to students’ attitudes towards reading within an independent reading program.

Our Project

This project began when a fourth grade teacher worked with the school librarian to create a form that would aid her students in constructing more thoughtful book choices for independent reading time. She had observed that library time appeared to include children simply pulling random books off the shelves so they could obtain their three-book allotment and get them checked out during the 15-minute visit. These random selections affected students’ independent reading time due to the fact that students had selected books that were too difficult to read independently. Consequently, they were not reading or staying on task during independent reading time. The teacher and librarian

created a library book selection form (see Appendix A). The form provided a place for the student's name, date, genre, book title, author, level, and call number. Each child completed the form during class time before the trip to the library using consultation with the teacher and the classroom laptops to help them fill out the forms. Students logged into the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) school system and searched using genre and/or author. Once they made their selections, students needed to ensure that their choices were at their recorded recreational level (which they had been told by the teacher) and noted down the call number. The call number aided in locating the books to make efficient use of students' brief library time. Once the students had filled out the forms, the teacher needed to sign off on the forms to make sure the choices aligned with the students' genres of choice, interests, and developmental levels. The forms were given back to the students and used when they visited the library that week.

This integration was conceived by the classroom teacher and librarian after conversations about the identified problem. The librarian and teacher modeled how to complete the form for the children during a scheduled library visit. During this co-taught lesson, the students were scaffolded and then monitored accordingly until both professionals deemed that students understood the procedure. A study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between a teacher-guided library selection program and students' attitudes towards reading?
2. What is the relationship between a teacher-guided library selection program and students' reading achievement scores as measured by running record scores?

Participants & Design

The school had a total population of 403 students in Grades pre-K through 5. The school was suburban, predominantly white with 51% of the students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Each of the five fourth grade classes included 20 students with similar distributions of reading scores.

The intervention group was the entire class of the teacher who designed the teacher-guided program. To determine the impact of this intervention, five students were chosen randomly from each of the other four fourth-grade classrooms to serve as a comparison group. The students in the comparison group engaged in traditional independent reading without any particular scaffolding on book selection. The comparison group was able to use the library computers' OPAC system to help them find books. However, according to observations from the librarian, most children did not use the OPAC system, but instead looked through the shelves, utilizing the genre and author stickers designated by the library. Students in the comparison group were also able to choose from their classroom libraries of books, which were sorted according to genre and theme. For the purpose of this study, students in both groups read silently for at least 20 minutes a minimum of 4 days per week in the classrooms during independent reading time.

Studying the Effectiveness

Student reading levels were measured through a running record (Nettles, 2006) which was administered in January of the school year. The purpose of this assessment was to establish the students' recreational, instructional, and frustration levels of reading. The main purpose for the running record scores in this project was to establish students'

reading levels according to the following criteria (Burns & Roe, 2007; Harp & Brewer, 2005):

1. *Independent reading level/recreational level.* Level at which the student can read with ease and understand at least 99% and above word recognition and at least 90% accuracy in comprehension.
2. *Instructional reading Level.* Level at which the student can read with ease and understand at least 95–98% of the words and understand 75–85% of what is taking place in the story.
3. *Frustration level.* Word recognition level is 90% or less and comprehension is 50% or less.

These running record scores served as a baseline to be compared with another running record that was given in June in order to assess any changes in overall reading achievement. The running record was recorded as a letter of the alphabet using the classification system developed by Fountas and Pinnell (1996). These scores also helped the teacher in the treatment group establish from which reading level students should be choosing books for SSR time.

A short survey was administered to measure students' attitudes towards reading. Students in the intervention group were asked the following questions:

1. Do you like how your teacher helps you pick out a library book? Why or why not?
2. Does reading at your level make you want to read more of the book and other books? Why or why not?

Students in the comparison group were asked:

1. How do you choose a book for Sustained Silent Reading?
2. What stands out when you pick a book?

Students in both groups were asked the Likert-style question below and asked to explain their answers:

- I think reading is hard: Always, Sometimes, Never

The answers were transcribed into a spreadsheet and analyzed for patterns. Inductive analysis was used to generate categories for responses given (Johnson, 2011), and illustrative quotes were selected to reveal the attitudes of the students.

Findings

Students' Attitudes towards Reading

The first question examined the attitudes of students towards the teacher guidance and towards reading. One interesting distinction emerged from the survey question about how often students found reading to be hard. Forty percent of the students in the teacher-guided program answered that reading was never hard. Twenty-four percent of the comparison students said that reading was never hard. This indicated that students in the guided program may have been feeling more successful in their reading.

Students who were guided in their book choice using the form were asked if they liked the guidance. Ninety percent of these students answered YES to the question, "Do you like how your teacher helps you pick out a library book?" When asked to explain why, students wrote:

- I like using the system because it gets me organized faster.
- I like our system because it helps us know the book's reading level
- It is easier than going to the library and not knowing what you will take out.
- It helps me get books faster than just wandering around the library.

- They are always at my level.
- “My level” books are going to be more interesting to me.

One student who answered NO to this question explained his answer:

- I do not like how my teacher helped me pick out a library book because if you wanted a different book, you couldn't get it because you already picked out your book and you cannot change it.

This comment reminds the reader that systems may be helpful, but flexibility may also be welcome within a system.

Students from the comparison group were asked how they picked out books.

They wrote down the following features: title, picture on the cover, illustrations, author, “blurb,” genre, back cover, thickness, reading level, first page, and size of the letters.

These responses indicated that they were using an impressive set of features to guide their choices and not choosing randomly. However, there was no system to assure that they were selecting books on the appropriate reading level.

Relationship between Program and Students' Reading Achievement

We were also interested in determining the relationship between the teacher-guided library selection program and students' reading achievement scores as measured by the running records scores. The running records of the students were recorded in January and June, and growth scores were determined for each student based on the number of Fountas and Pinnell levels gained between these two assessments. Thus a student who progressed from a Level N to a Level O was considered to have a gain score of 1 for progressing one level. Students in the guided library selection program had an

average gain score of 2.54 compared to students in the comparison group who had average gain scores of 1.84. A t test revealed that this difference was significant ($P < .05$).

Conclusions

Students who participated in the teacher-guided library selection program appeared to benefit in both attitudes towards reading and reading achievement. Overall, these students showed a higher sense of success towards reading. The scaffolding helped them to feel more organized and efficient in finding appropriate books for independent reading. The daily opportunities to read books at their recreational level may have helped to develop confidence in reading and may have helped to boost their running record scores. These results reflect those noted by other researchers such as Pilgreen, 2000 and Sanden, 2014. The system described here provides a simple way to organize these efforts in classrooms and school libraries. Teachers and librarians may wish to consider implementing a similar program to benefit students during Sustained Silent Reading.

Many educators use the research of Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and the philosophy of teaching at students' instructional levels during guided reading, so why are educators not consistently working to assure that students are reading high-interest text at their instructional levels during sustained silent reading time in the classroom? If classroom teachers partnered with their library media specialists using techniques like the one described here, library time could perhaps be maximized. This could prevent the problem of students wandering around the library and just grabbing books because it was time to go and they needed something to read for SSR time. If schools and classrooms are taking the time to give students sustained silent reading time, why not go the extra step and make sure they are reading books they can understand and sharpen their reading

strategies, providing positive and successful reading experiences (Routman, 2003). If teachers provide a modest amount of time and guidance to their sustained silent reading program to ensure students are choosing interesting books at their appropriate levels, it is more likely that the seed of an avid reader will be planted.


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APPENDIX A. TEACHER-GUIDED LIBRARY SELECTION PROGRAM
STUDENT FORM

Library Book Selection	
Date: _____	
Name: _____	
1.)Book Title	
Author	
Level	
Call Number	
Genre	
2.)Book Title	
Author	
Level	
Call Number	
Genre	
3.)Book Title	
Author	
Level	
Call Number	
Genre	
Comments:	
