



A Review of Students' Text Selections in Sustained Silent Reading

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present investigation was to sample the range of texts selected by 21 students in sustained silent reading in a single fourth-grade classroom. Using a sampling technique developed by French and Foster (1992), single pages from sampled texts were evaluated. The evaluation found that most students were reading fiction (n=14), with some reading information texts (n=4) and comic anthologies (n=3). We found the range of reading levels spanned the grade levels from 1.3 to 11.5. Further analysis indicated boys and girls were distributed evenly across all categories. However, we also identified that the students, especially girls, did not read books commensurate with their levels of reading ability. Implications for classroom implementation of sustained silent reading are offered.

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Since its beginning as a classroom strategy, a student's self-selected-reading choice has been a critical element in sustained silent reading (SSR) (McCracken, 1969; McCracken, 1971; McCracken & McCracken, 1978). Students spend time reading selected texts for a certain period of the time scheduled by the teacher in order to begin the promotion of a life-long recreational reading habit (Routman, 1991). More recently, SSR has been included as a method for the development of fluency in reading studied by the National Reading Panel (2000). In this context, the assumption is made that regular practice in silent reading of appropriate texts should promote fluency in reading. However, the recommendations of the National Reading Panel as well as the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement do not support SSR as a primary method to foster fluency as compared to direct instruction. According to Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001), "although silent, independent reading may be a way to increase fluency and reading achievement, it should not be used in place of direct instruction in reading (p. 29). Although the NRP recommendations have been challenged by some (Krashen, 2001), it is important to note that the inclusion of SSR in the National Reading Panel in itself demonstrates the importance of the practice as a point of research and study.

SSR is different from free reading in that students are required to read during this allocated time (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997). Implicit in SSR is the notion that students will select texts of interest to them, that they will read silently at the independent level, and that they will access a wide range of selections (Brozo & Simpson, 1999). According to Krashen (2001), the key elements of successful SSR programs include allowing students to read from a variety of books, using intrinsic motivators rather than grades or points, and making silent sustained reading a daily practice.



In this regard, the first purpose of this paper is to present the results of a brief investigation in which we sampled the texts one group of fourth grade students selected for sustained silent reading. Specifically, we wished to find out what books were read, whether able readers choose books at levels different than less-able readers, and what types of books were selected by boys versus girls. Secondly, we hoped to offer suggestions for classroom guidelines relative to the selection of appropriate materials during SSR.

The context of the study was the development of a school/community literacy center in this elementary school. The literacy center is the focus of a university reading center/school collaboration funded by a state literacy grant. As part of this school-wide initiative teachers have been encouraged to include self-selected recreational reading activities as part of their school day. Many have chosen to implement SSR during their daily schedule of activities. While exploring SSR in this setting we hoped to determine:

1. The range of selections. What types of books/texts did the students select?
2. The level of difficulty of the texts selected. How great was the range of readability levels of the texts selected?
3. The lexical complexity of the selected texts. For the purpose of this paper, we evaluated the number of words on a selected page, as well as the average length of these words. We used a single-page artifact technique that has been used in a study of clinical portfolios at the affiliated university reading center (French & Foster, 1992).
4. Reading level. Did children of different reading ability levels choose instructional level texts as suggested by Brozo and Simpson (1999)?
5. Gender preferences. Did girls seem to choose different books than boys?

Method

At the end of a single SSR period, we asked each child in the class (n=21) to mark the last page he/she had read. Using the spell check tool in MS Word, readability levels were calculated for each page. The use of the reading ease score as well as the Flesch-Kincaid reading grade level, provided by the MS Word program, is acknowledged by Fry (2002) as one means of differentiating between texts.

Following this collection of SSR artifacts, we compiled information on the readers from their school files. Specifically, we coded the pages with each student's Gates-MacGinitie comprehension score. We used grade equivalent scores to divide the students in to three levels: above level, at level, and below level. Grade equivalents of 6 and higher were considered above level, those 4 and 5 were considered at level, and those below 4 were considered below level. In this classroom, three students were considered above level, seven were considered at level, and eleven were found to be reading below level.

Pages were also coded as to the gender of the student. In this class there were thirteen girls and eight boys.

Table 1 was created to illustrate the range of books read by the students.



Table 1. Review of the texts selected by the 21 fourth grade students.

Book #	Title	Type	Words	Wds./ Sent.	Reading Ease	Flesch/ Kincaid
1	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	Fantasy Fiction- Juvenile	302	13.2	76.1	5.9
2	<i>Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets</i>	School Fiction- Humorous	68	11.3	78.3	5.1
3	<i>The Secrets of Droon – The Golden Wasp</i>	Chapter Book Science Fiction	102	5.6	77.5	3.8
4	<i>Halloween Treats</i>	Halloween-Juvenile Fiction	102	5.6	77.5	3.8
5	<i>Junie B. Jones is Captain Field Day</i>	Stepping Stone Book- School Fiction	92	6.1	81.9	3.3
6	<i>A Year Down Yonder</i>	Juvenile Fiction- Newbery Honor Book	249	8.0	83.8	3.5
7	<i>Mary Kate and Ashley Sweet 16-The Perfect Summer</i>	Juvenile Fiction-Series	216	13.5	72.1	6.5
8	<i>The Adventures of Captain Underpants</i>	Chapter Book Fantasy	92	10.2	69.5	6.0
9	<i>Ripley’s Believe It or Not! – World’s Weirdest Critters</i>	Information text	125	19.0	64.3	9.0
10	<i>On My Honor</i>	GK Hall large print book series	180	8.5	78.2	4.4
11	<i>Garfield at large</i>	Comic anthology	34	2.6	84.7	2.0
12	<i>Amber Brown is Feeling Blue</i>	Juvenile fiction	149	8.2	79.1	4.2
13	<i>My Dog, My Hero</i>	Fiction anthology	195	10.8	92.1	3.0
14	<i>Rose’s Journal – The Story of a Girl in the Great Depression</i>	Diary genre: Historical fiction	276	15.0	77.6	6.1
15	<i>The 8th Garfield Treasury</i>	Comic anthology	83	5.3	76.3	3.9
16	<i>Animal Smarts</i>	Information text	275	14.3	72.3	6.7
17	<i>The Ninth Garfield Treasury</i>	Comic	30	5.0	94.6	1.3
18	<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	Fairy Tale	312	22.2	80.6	7.5
19	<i>B is for Buckeye</i>	Information text/History	205	20.5	49.0	11.5
20	<i>First World War</i>	Information text/History	284	21.6	52.9	10.5
21	<i>The Lorax</i>	Stories in rhyme	38	19.0	80.6	6.7



Results

The first question we sought to address was the range of texts selected by the students. We found that 14 students were reading works of fiction. Four were reading information texts. Three were reading Garfield comic anthologies. The fiction selections ranged from best sellers (Harry Potter) and award winning titles (Richard Peck’s A Year Down Yonder) to leveled chapter books (Junie B. Jones) and popular comedy series (Captain Underpants). The information text topics included animals (Animal Smarts and Ripley) and history (Ohio history and World War I). One student was reading a diary genre title.

Of further interest was the range of readability levels in the texts selected by the boys and girls in the class. These levels are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Reading Levels According to Text

Refer to Table 1 for titles.	Text below grade level (<4)	Text at grade level (4-5)	Text above grade level (6>)	Total
Fiction texts	3, (4), (5), (6), (13)	(1), 2, 10, (12)	(7), 8, (14), (18), 21	14
Information texts			(9), (16), (19), 20	4
Comic anthologies	11, 15, (17)			3
Total	8	4	9	21

Note: (#) = girls.

As illustrated in Table 2, approximately half (n=9) of the students in the class were reading texts with readability levels above grade five. Eight were reading texts assessed to be below grade level. Only four students were reading texts that we defined as at level (4-5).

When viewed by type, we noted that the fiction selected included texts below level, at level, and above level. Whereas all three of the comic anthologies were below the grade level, all four of the information texts were above.

When reflecting on the gender of the students reading the texts we noted that boys and girls were mixed in each category. That is, there does not appear to be a cluster of one gender in any cell. Girls were just as likely as boys to be reading any of the types of text identified.

The third item of interest was the linguistic complexity of the copied pages. The number of words on the pages ranged from 30 to 312. The average number was 162 words per page. The average number of words per sentence was 11.6 or 12 words. The most difficult texts had over 20 words per sentence, where as the easiest texts had as few as five words per sentence.

The next item of analysis was the relationship of the child’s reading ability and the text being read. As previously stated, existing data (Gates-MacGinite Reading Comprehension grade equivalents) were used to sort the students into three categories. Students were considered below level is their GE was



below 4. They were considered at level if their GE was 4 or 5. Those with a GE greater than 5 were considered above level. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between reading levels and texts being read.

Table 3. Comparing Selections by Ability of Reader and Gender

<i>Refer to Table 1 for titles.</i>	Text below grade level (<4)	Text at grade level (4-5)	Text above grade level (6>)	Total
Student Scores on Gates = 6>	11	2, 10		3
Student Scores on Gates = 4-5	3, (4), (6), (13)	(1), (12)	21	7
Student Scores on Gates = 2-3	(5), 15, (17)		(7), 8, (9), (14), (16), (18), (19), 20	11
Total	8	4	9	21

Note: (#) = girls.

The relationship between ability of reader and text being read provides interesting insights into the SSR process. First, one might assume students would read texts at their level of ability. This is not seen in our data. Of the three students reading above level, two were reading texts at the 4-5 level and one was reading a text below level. There were seven students whose comprehension GE was at the 4-5 level. Of these, four were reading texts below level, two at level, and one above. The most striking finding, however, was the texts selected by the less-able readers. Eleven children in this class had a comprehension score below 4. Of these, three selected texts below grade 4, but eight students were reading texts above grade 5—at least two full grade levels above their assessed reading ability.

With regard to gender, we noted the same distribution as before. However, of the eight children whose reading level was below 4, and who were reading texts above grade 5, six of the eight were girls.

Discussion

The selection of reading material in Sustained Silent Reading is of concern to those using SSR as a regular classroom practice. From the beginning, SSR programs have relied on the student’s ability to self select. This view is well stated by classroom guidelines provided by Greene (2004).

Students in my classes typically begin or end the class period with a 10-20 block of uninterrupted silent reading time. There are no restrictions on what students choose to read, as long as it's appropriate for the school environment. There is no assigned reading in SSR, no quizzes, no strategy lessons, no grading, no book reports, and little or no record keeping. It is simply an official, scheduled acknowledgment of the research showing that reading achievement is more highly correlated with independent reading than with any other single factor. (Green, 1999-2003, Sustained Silent Reading section, para.1)



The “right” of students to choose their own reading material has been voiced by Pennac (1999). Among his ten rights all readers should have is the “right to read anything.” In their continuing investigation of these rights as perceived by students in grade six, Matthews and colleagues (2001), found that students feel strongest about the right to choose not to read a particular text, and to read anything during pleasure reading.

Greene further notes improvement in students’ reading achievement and attitude toward reading. Further, there is evidence that SSR extends to positive reading behaviors in older readers (Tunnel & Jacobs, 1989).

However, where SSR programs are used in evaluation of students’ reading as recommended by the National Reading Panel, selections that are deemed inappropriate can lead to unreliable evaluations. This is seen in the changing definition of SSR relative to self-selection. Routman (2002) differentiates between selection of texts in SSR programs and Independent Reading (IR) programs. In SSR, students select books without teacher guidance, the books may be of any level, and there is no instructional follow-up. This is consistent with the original idea that there should be no “accountability” in SSR. In IR, students select books with teacher guidance. This guidance can include the teacher and student negotiating purpose for reading or the teacher directing the purpose for reading. Books selected for independent reading should be at the child’s instructional level. Following the reading period, instructional support may include oral conferences, retellings, journal writing, or directed questioning by teachers. Based on the results of these instructional activities, additional goals for reading may be set.

A recent review of SSR practices by Nagy, Campenni, and Shaw (2000) sheds additional light on this topic. Reviewing SSR programs from over 30 school systems, they found that one in five schools prescribed what could be read during SSR. In these schools, students could only read materials from approved lists. In over 35% of the schools, reading materials were recommended. These lists, compiled by teachers, reading specialists, and librarians, were made available from which students selected books. Sixty-nine percent of the responding schools reported the censorship of certain types of materials—comics, textbooks, newspapers, and of course pornographic materials.

Although we were initially impressed by the wide range of texts the students were reading—from Harry Potter to Captain Underpants—and from Snow White to the Ashley twins, we could see the discrepancies in the appropriateness of these choices. In the present case, if the SSR experience was to be counted as an instructional activity, guidelines for selection of texts were needed. Therefore, based on our exploratory analysis of SSR, we recommend the following guidelines when implementing SSR in your classroom:

1. Define the reading activity well. If the time reading is viewed as free time, students may not take the task as seriously as if the time is viewed as an extension of reading class time. The SSR period is an excellent time for teachers to model appropriate book selection processes while at the same time reinforcing the student’s right to self-select.
2. Help students to develop appropriate purposes for reading. By modeling purpose setting in reading, teachers can help students to better select texts for different purposes. This can take place during shared reading lessons as well as during the actual silent reading period. For example, students may choose easy texts to practice oral reading expression, and they may choose more challenging texts to work on discerning vocabulary meanings from context.



3. Help students to learn that different types of texts are read for different purposes. For example, many programs limit the use of comic books in SSR programs. However, if students come to know that comics are a specific genre read differently from novels, or information books, their inclusion may be appropriate. Likewise, reading non-fiction texts during SSR (many frilled by pictures and captions) may be appropriate if the purpose is to find information. Novels, chapter books, and picture books, may be good selections if the purpose is to practice comprehension strategies, develop vocabulary, or in the case of historic fiction, extend content learning. As previously stated, the texts selected in SSR will be varied. However, this variation may be appropriate when students can discern the different purposes for the selection of texts.
4. Help students to know that discussing what we read is what good readers do. In many cities and towns across America, single books are being read by the whole community. People from diverse occupations and roles come together to discuss what they have read. In schools, the discussion of books read has been found to increase ownership and empowerment for reading (Corno, 1992; Hunt, 1996/1997). Although SSR does not promote the use of more format ‘accountability’ measures to ensure student reading, having students discuss what they are reading can help the teacher determine whether students are selecting texts they can understand.
5. Help students to know when books are too easy or too hard. The five-finger method has been proposed as one method for helping students to recognize books that are too difficult. Another method we have used is a “private read aloud.” Students are encouraged to orally read a passage from the book to themselves. In presenting this method, students are told their reading should be smooth, and without stops. If during this oral reading exercise, the student hears himself/herself stop often, then the book is probably too difficult.
6. Encourage students to recommend books to their classmates. We forget that students are aware of each other’s abilities and likes. In this regard, we can foster a community of care by encouraging students to recommend appropriate books to their classmates. Much like the popular feature on Reading Rainbow, students should be given the opportunity to share their books with the whole class.
7. Provide varied ways to respond to texts read in SSR and independent reading. Not every reading act should be evaluated by questions. In responding to texts read in SSR, activities such as dialogues, book talks, and drawn illustrations can replace test questions. Once again, such methods can be used to gauge students’ comprehension.
8. Help students to know when it is appropriate to start over or select new reading material. Students should be taught that it is acceptable to put aside a text and select another one, if their initial choice does not coincide with their abilities or interests (Johnson & Howard, 2003). Students should be encouraged to select new texts if they feel a disconnect in the text they have selected.
9. Help student to know what a good read feels like. When a book fits, there should be a general feeling of well being with the text. The students should feel comfortable with the book and have no anxiety about reading. The teacher can model several factors that the student can use to determine whether a particular book is a good fit.
10. Move up. When students make appropriate text selections, they will be more likely to read more.



A great deal more information is needed if we are to address the concerns of the NRP regarding the appropriateness of SSR as a classroom method for fluency or vocabulary development. Central to this investigation should be the matter of text selection. Obviously, the individual choosing the text to be read will be the critical focus of future studies.

Texts sampled

- Abbott, Tony. (2000). *The Golden Wasp (Secrets of Droon, 8)*. Tim Jessell, Illustrator. Little Apple. ISBN: 0439182980.
- Aiken, Joan (2002). *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Belinda Downes, Illustrator. DK: ISBN: 0789487993.
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- Danzinger, Paula (1999). *Amber Brown Is Feeling Blue*. Tony Ross, Illustrator. Little Apple. ISBN: 0439071682.
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