

The Power of Reading Choice, Time, and Pleasure

“I was lucky enough to grow up when ... the most wonderful thing a teacher might say was, ‘Go to the library and pick out a book.’ ”

– Dr. Bill McBride,
Educator, Author, and Speaker

Key Findings

- » Children who read for pleasure are likely to do significantly better in school than their peers who rarely read. Sullivan & Brown (2013) demonstrate that pleasure reading is linked to increased cognitive progress over time. They recommend that educators and policy makers “support and encourage children’s reading in their leisure time.”
- » Sullivan and Brown (2013) found that children between the ages of 10 and 16 who read for pleasure made more progress in vocabulary and spelling as well as math than those who rarely read.
- » “The research base on student-selected reading is robust and conclusive. Students read more, understand more, and are more likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read” (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).
- » Self-selected reading is twice as powerful as teacher-selected reading in developing motivation and comprehension (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).
- » Wilhelm and Smith (2013) demonstrate that pleasure is always at the heart of engaged reading and that pleasure is multi-faceted. Their interviews with avid teen readers revealed that teens read deeply for a wide range of reasons: play, intellectual, social, and “inner work” (psychological and spiritual exploration).
- » As essential aspect of becoming a real reader is knowing yourself as a reader—made possible through wide reading driven by access to abundant books and personal choice (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014; Miller, 2013; Tatum, 2009; 2013; Allington & Gabriel, 2012).
- » “Self-selected independent reading involves a set of strategies that are learned. Development of these strategies should be one of the primary goals of a reading/language arts program. However, the skills of self-selected reading do not develop by simply offering students the books of a library and asking them to pick books. ... Students who read avidly—especially young students—have been taught how to select books that interest them (Hiebert, 2014).

- » According to a 2007 National Endowment for the Arts study:
 - » Nearly half of all 18- to 24-year-olds read no books for pleasure.
 - » Less than one-third of 13-year-olds read daily.
 - » Teens and young adults spend 60 percent less time on voluntary reading than the average.

- » “For virtually all children, the amount of time spent reading in classrooms consistently accelerates their growth in reading skills” (Anderson, Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988).

- » Barry Gilmore (2011) acknowledges that there are many competing interests for students’ time these days—television, the Internet, social media, and so forth. But he also maintains that educators “play an enormous role in developing attitudes toward reading.” He suggests that we’ve unintentionally hurt our secondary students by: 1) adhering to the canon of Western Literature, and 2) failing to spark our students’ interest through choice.

- » The [Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report™: Fifth Edition](#) confirms what we’ve long known: independent reading, both at school and at home, builds successful readers. What’s more, the research shows that giving our students a say in what they read is key.

- » The report adds to the abundant data we’ve had for years that demonstrates that in-school independent reading built around time to read books for fun creates kids who love to read. Seventy-eight % of children ages 12-17 who are frequent readers, defined by the report as kids who read books for fun five to seven times a week, reported that they have the opportunity to read a book of choice independently during the school day. Only 24% of infrequent readers – those reading for fun less than one day a week – say the same. In addition, 91% of children ages 6-17 agree “my favorite books are the ones that I have picked out myself.” We might deduce that independent reading programs that invite reading choice and promote reading pleasure give rise to kids who not only read but, more importantly, who *want* to read.

More to Know: Pleasure Is Essential

Jeff Wilhelm and Michael Smith (2014) investigated the pleasure that avid adolescent readers take from their out-of-school reading in their book, *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them*. They demonstrate that pleasure is not incidental to reading—it’s essential. They found that the young people with whom they worked spoke of their reading pleasure with remarkable sophistication—and their pleasure supported the intense and high-level engagement with texts that schools seek to foster. The authors write:

“In our study of the out-of-school reading lives of 14 eighth graders who were avid readers of texts often marginalized in schools (romances, vampire stories, horror stories, dystopian novels, and fantasy), we strove to understand the nature and variety of reading pleasure. We found that our participants were remarkably articulate about why they read what they read.

“Our data also convinced us of the importance of choice. Students should have regular opportunities to behave the way adult readers do and choose their own reading. They know the kinds of texts from which they will take pleasure. At the same time, teachers should expand the possibility of pleasure by introducing students to new books they might not select on their own. If we want students to embrace reading now and always, then we need to keep at the forefront of our attention the rich, complex, and profound pleasures of reading.”

Wilhelm and Smith also found that the reading pleasure their students experienced was multifaceted and led them to read for a number of reasons—at times, for sheer fun and enjoyment, but also for the profound intellectual, social-emotional, and psychological benefits they received from reading. For this reason, Wilhelm and Smith maintain that students must be free to choose at least some of their own reading in school.

Report from a Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) Program

Jeff McQuillan (2001) reports similar breakthroughs with pleasure reading in SSR (Silent Sustained Reading) at a diverse high school in Anaheim, CA. Most of the students were Latino; many came from economically deprived homes and had limited access to books in their homes or communities:

“Fundamental to any SSR program is, of course, a set amount of time each day for students to read to themselves. Pilgreen and Gribbons (1998) point out that successful SSR programs must be carried out on a regular and frequent basis and not as an occasional activity or tacked on as ‘filler’ on Friday. The teachers started off slowly, allotting ten minutes a day during the first few weeks of the semester. Most students weren’t accustomed to having time for pleasure reading in class, and some needed to work into the habit gradually. No other reading materials (e.g., textbooks) were allowed, and students were not permitted to work on homework or class assignments. Within four to six

weeks, the time spent reading was gradually increased to 15 and then 20 minutes. Several teachers noted that many students can sit, do nothing, and avoid reading for ten minutes, but when the SSR is 20 minutes, it is almost impossible for students to do nothing. At that point, they start reading. In some classes, students would read 30 minutes, complaining if they were given less time! Teachers report that 90 to 95 percent of their students were, in fact, reading their books, consistent with other reports that have found that, when properly implemented, almost all students take advantage of the SSR time provided (p. 75).”

Not only did these formerly disengaged students who disliked reading become “thoroughly enthralled” with their reading, but they also made progress as readers and writers, showing increased achievement scores in vocabulary development and writing proficiency. In multiple ways, more reading led to better reading.

The Thrill of Personal Choice

Students are thrilled when they get to choose their own books. Research has frequently found that self-selection is the hook that snags both children and teens and convinces them to read:

- » Allowing students to self-select their books results in more involvement and thus more motivation to read (Sewell, 2003; Gallager, 2009; Pruzinsky, 2014).
- » Self-selection allows students more latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in, as well as developing an ownership of the reading process (Kragler, 2000).
- » Students choose books that match their personal interests—both narrative and expository texts. Kids are also drawn to books that their friends or other trusted readers recommend (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006).

Hiebert (2014) cautions, however, that children benefit from help—they grow into self-selection with parent or teacher guidance and thoughtful scaffolding.

The Value of Time

Students need extensive time to read. Allington & Johnston studied exemplary first and fourth grade teachers in six states and found that extensive reading is critical to the development of reading proficiency. “Extensive practice provides the opportunity for students to consolidate the skills and strategies teachers often work so hard to develop. The exemplary elementary teachers we studied recognized this critical aspect of instructional planning. Their students did more guided reading, more independent reading, more social studies and science reading than students in less-effective classrooms” (Allington, 2002).

Closing Thoughts

Veteran award-winning teacher Nancie Atwell (2007) also considers reader’s choice, time, and

pleasure essential. Indeed, in her classroom and school (Center for Teaching and Learning), choice is a given: “Kids choose what they read because children who choose books are more likely to grow up to become adults who read books. Students who read only a steady diet of assigned titles don’t get to answer, for themselves, the single most important question about book reading: why does anyone want to? (p.27). She writes:

“Every day, smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading. There it is: the P word. I know, because I’ve felt it, too, that there’s a sense of uneasiness among teachers and parents about an approach like a reading workshop. Shouldn’t there be some pedagogic strings attached here? Some paper and pencil and small-group activities that look like schoolwork? Because otherwise, isn’t reading class, well, too enjoyable?”

“We need to get over it. When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy and love reading.”

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