

VOLUNTARY, SELF-SELECTED READING: A Thing of the Past?



RICHARD L. ALLINGTON
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

I GREW UP on a small dairy farm. I attended Pioneer School, a one-room elementary schoolhouse. After competing 6th grade I began attending the town middle and then high school in Cedar Springs, Michigan. While I walked or rode my bike to the country school almost every day, getting to middle and high school required that I ride a school bus the roughly five miles to town. I mention this because it was in that one-room country school that I became a reader.

Pioneer School had no library, other than a collection of approximately 100 copies of old issues of National Geographic magazine. While I did read those magazines when I was nearing the time that I would no longer attend Pioneer School, it was the bookmobile that brought me most of the books that I read. While students were typically allowed to check out two books on each and every two week visit of the bookmobile, I was allowed to check out six books at every visit. Six books were never enough to keep me reading for two weeks, so I also read books selected by some of my classmates.

At Pioneer School there was time every day to read, even time to read self-selected books! Once I was 'hooked into reading,' though, I also read at least as much at home as I read in school. Mr. DeGraw, my teacher at Pioneer School, also read aloud to us every day after we returned from the playground after lunch. I don't recall much about the reading lessons I participated in although I know I learned to read with Dick and Jane. We didn't have workbooks to complete, just a few questions that Mr. DeGraw asked as we read aloud from the series. And we had the books we selected when the bookmobile

visited the school.

I tell this autobiographical story because my childhood of reading is what led this farm boy to college and then to teaching, first teaching elementary school children and, for the last 45 years, teaching elementary school teachers about teaching reading. It also seems to me that my experiences at Pioneer School matched much of what we now know is important in the development of readers.

Creating voluntary readers: Critical aspects of the schooling experience

Below are the four aspects of school reading experiences that research tells us are critical should we want to develop voluntary readers. These are not ordered by any demonstrated sense of importance but rather all work together to develop voluntary readers.

Easy access to books.

I begin with ease of access to books if only because when access is restricted it becomes difficult to engage in voluntary reading! For me, easy access means classroom libraries, books available at each school entrance/exit point, as well as a school library. I cannot explain why some schools have many books and others have only a few, often these schools are in the same district! What I have observed, however, is that schools that enroll many children from low-income families always have fewer books available than schools that enroll mostly children from middle class families. It is easier to understand why the

communities where many children from low-income families lack bookstores than why the schools these children attend are so frequently book deserts.

Neuman and Celano (2001) reported that, “For every one line of print read by low-income children, middle-income children read three.” (p. 19) Or you could say it differently, “For every one book available to children from low-income families, there are three books available to children from middle-income families.” Our recent research has focused on improving the access to books during the summer months for children from low-income families. We have been running book fairs each spring in high-poverty urban and rural schools and children are allowed to select 10 to 12 books that they receive on the last day of school. What we have found is that poor children who are selected to attend the book fairs add as much or more reading growth as do children attending summer school (Allington, McGill-Franzen, et al, 2010). Just improving poor children’s access to books eliminated the major source of the rich/poor reading gap.

James Lindsay (2013) reports on a meta-analysis of research studies that provided primarily poor children with free books. He concludes that when one examines the outcomes of rigorous experimental studies, where access was manipulated amongst populations of randomly assigned subjects, the impact of increasing book access on reading achievement produced an effect size of $d = .435$. Ease of access also increased motivation to read with an effect size of $d = .967$. In other words, improving the access that poor children have to books produced larger positive effects on reading achievement than almost all other potential interventions.

Choice (or self-selection).

Access is a critical factor but choice follows right on its heels. Lindsay (2013) also reports that allowing children to self-select the books they will receive roughly doubled the achievement growth when compared to adults selecting the books that children received. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) also noted the large impact on achievement that providing children choice of the books they would read for science lessons. Self-selection of books to read would seem to be a first-order priority. Not only does it improve reading achievement but choice also improves motivation to read. In the long run, if schools don’t allow much in the way of choice about what will be read by students, the question left unanswered is, “Where will children acquire the proficiencies

needed to self-select books that they can read and that they want to read?”

Perhaps one result of schooling where teachers select almost every text that students read was recently reported by the National Endowment for the Arts (2007). That report noted that only one of five 17 year olds read for fun or pleasure. That report suggests a crisis currently exists, a crisis that has been developing since the 1980s. While America has been worried about how our students compare to students from other nations on international tests (such as PISA), we’ve created K-12 schooling where most graduates no longer read voluntarily!

School time for self-selected reading.

Perhaps I should begin this section by arguing that there should be time allocated every day for children to read in school. I begin with this assertion because we have the research reports of Brenner, Hiebert and Tompkins (2009) noting that third graders in Reading First schools read daily for only 18 minutes on average in each 90 minute reading block! Worse they found that one-quarter of these third graders read nothing during their reading blocks! Roughly 85 percent of the 90 minute reading block had students doing something other than reading! It almost leads one to ask, “Where has all the reading activity gone?”

You begin to wonder when you notice that Foorman and her colleagues (2006) reported that time spent actually reading during the primary grade reading block explained all the reading growth that was observed. Time spent on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary and comprehension had no predictive value once time engaged in reading was recorded. No one should be much surprised by this if only because we have long known that in both developing proficiency in playing a musical instrument or developing basketball dribbling proficiencies the amount of time spent actually playing the instrument or dribbling the basketball outweighs all of the advice coaches give as Ericsson and his colleagues report (1993). This isn’t meant to imply that teaching is unimportant but rather even more powerful than teaching is reading. The two need to go hand in hand together but we seem to have lost sight of the critical role that practice actually plays in the development of literacy proficiencies.

Literate conversations with peers.

In the past 30 years we have learned much about the power of literate conversations in developing children’s pro-

ficiencies in understanding what they have read. What we've learned is that allocating 10 minutes of every hour during the school day for students to talk with each other about the texts they have been reading or writing dramatically improves standardized test performances of reading comprehension proficiencies (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003). Unfortunately, it is the rare classroom teacher who allows children to turn and talk to their classmates about what was read (Nystrand, 2006).

Talk is a primary way that children learn (Vygotsky, 1978). Unfortunately, children's talk is typically discouraged in American schools. Why doing workbook pages and skills sheets seem so overwhelmingly popular in American schools is beyond me because there is not a single study indicating that time spent doing workbook or skills pages has any positive relationship with reading growth. In other words, if you wanted to waste money and waste instructional time, then assign workbook and skill pages instead of giving children the opportunity to read and talk with each other about their reading and writing.

Summary

I opened this article with a brief recollection of my education at Pioneer School. I began that way in hopes of suggesting that there once was a time when voluntary reading was part of every school day. I began with that recollection because I see so few elementary classrooms today where I see voluntary reading activity occurring at all, much less as a part of every school day. I see more and more elementary schools where there are no classroom libraries and far too many schools where no school librarian is employed. I see too many classroom book deserts not classrooms with a full and rich classroom library.

I read the report from the National Endowment for the Arts and concluded that I am not exaggerating the lack of attention our schools are giving to voluntary reading. I understand that everyone worries that American children's reading achievement lags behind the reading achievement of too many other nations and I understand the national push to improve the reading proficiencies of American students. At the same time, I worry that in our attempts to improve reading achievement we've thrown the baby out with the bathwater. •

Richard L. Allington is a Professor of Education in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee.
Email: rallingt@utk.edu

REFERENCES

- Allington, R. L., McGill-Franzen, A., Camilli, G., Williams, L., Graff, J., Zeig, J., Zmach, C. & Nowak, R. (2010). "Addressing summer reading setback among economically disadvantaged elementary students." *Reading Psychology* 31(5): 411-427.
- Applebee, A. N., Langer, J., Nystrand, M. & Gamoran, A. (2003). "Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: Classroom instruction and student performance in middle and high school English." *American Educational Research Journal* 40(3): 685-730.
- Brenner, D., Hiebert, E. H. & Tompkins, R. (2009). How much and what are third graders reading? *Read more, read better*. E. H. Hiebert. New York, Guilford: 118-140.
- Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., Tesch-Romer, R. & Clemens, G. (1993). "The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance." *Psychological Review* 100(3): 363-406.
- Forman, B. R., Schatschneider, C., Eakins, M. N., Fletcher, J. M., Moats, L. & Francis, D. J. (2006). "The impact of instructional practices in grades 1 and 2 on reading and spelling achievement in high poverty schools." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 31(1): 1-29.
- Guthrie, J. T. and N. M. Humenick (2004). Motivating students to read: Evidence for classroom practices that increase motivation and achievement. *The voice of evidence in reading research*. P. McCordle and V. Chhabra. Baltimore, Paul Brookes Publishing: 329-354.
- Lindsay, J. J. (2013). Impacts of interventions that increase children's access to print material. In R. L. Allington and A. McGill-Franzen, *Summer reading: Closing the rich/poor reading achievement gap*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- National Academy for the Arts, (2007). *To read or not to read: A question of national consequence*. Washington, DC, Office of Research and Analysis.
- Neuman, S. B., Celano, D. C., Greco, A. N & Shue, P. (2001). *Access for all: Closing the book gap for children in early education*. Newark, DE, International Reading Association.
- Nystrand, M. (2006). "Research on the role of classroom discourse as it affects reading comprehension." *Research in the Teaching of English* 40: 392-412.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.