

**Destination: A Reading Community**

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“The single most important predictor of academic success is the amount of time children spend reading books” (Atwell, 2007, p.130).

### **Context**

Time. There is never enough time for everything. In my fifth grade classroom, I am expected to not only teach my students the skills they need, but also help them learn content from various subject areas. My curriculum includes math, reading, writing, spelling, social studies, and science. There are technology requirements as well as character development goals. Fitting it all in is an overwhelming task. In a perfect day, it is probably possible. However, interruptions are inevitable. Students leave the room for band lessons, counseling sessions, or to lead the morning flag salute. There are special subject classes, bathroom breaks, trips to the nurse, assemblies, announcements, phone calls, peer problems, and some students who just want to tell a story or need some extra attention. We are constantly racing against the clock.

I teach in an elementary school in a small, suburban town in South Jersey. This year I have seventeen fifth graders in my charge. There are five special education students who have in-class support in reading for one hour a day. An educational assistant, who is shared between two classes, assists the students when she is in the room. Curriculum is often reflective of best practices, and teachers are expected to implement it.

During the 2005 – 2006 school year, a Language Arts committee was formed and directed by the Board of Education to develop a “...differentiated rigorous curriculum which challenges all students to reach their full potential at each grade level” (School district’s language arts curriculum, 2006). This group of teachers and administrators from each school worked together for a year and developed benchmarks, new courses, and a summer reading program. The

elementary school subgroup wrote a philosophy stating that the district is committed to providing a balanced literacy approach to language arts instruction.

Balanced literacy includes reading workshops, writing workshops, and word study lessons. Teachers are expected to spend 135 minutes a day on language arts. My schedule this year allows for 90 minutes of instruction on most days. Having time to cover every requirement is even more difficult. In addition, the district added a foreign language course in grades three, four, and five in December of 2007. This blocked out two 30 minute periods in each six day cycle, once again chipping away at my limited instructional time.

Reading workshop instruction is broken down into three parts: mini-lesson, guided reading groups, and independent reading. Independent reading is not clearly delineated. One guideline under the district's reading philosophy states, "Students will read appropriately leveled texts during daily independent reading." Another parameter is, "The focus of our reading instruction is the development of good reading strategies at increasingly sophisticated levels." The section in the curriculum that breaks down reader's workshop suggests that the fifth graders engage in independent reading while the teacher is meeting with guided reading groups. However, in their own definition of independent reading, the committee says the teacher should use that time to confer with individual students about the books they have chosen. The committee's report also states that independent reading is not SSR (sustained silent reading). This is confusing. How am I supposed to be meeting with guided reading groups while conferring with a single student? If I do not meet with individual students during independent reading or model reading, then is it merely SSR?

Independent reading is one piece of the reading workshop that I value but admittedly have not done consistently. Reading instruction is so important. I began wondering if providing time for

independent reading in the class every day impacts the students in a positive way or if I should continue to use the time I have for direct instruction. With time in class so limited yet so full of curriculum, every activity must be valuable and important. Therefore, I wanted to explore this issue. **What happens when I dedicate 20 minutes of class time to independent reading every day?**

In an effort to stress the importance of independent reading, I begin the school year with mini-lessons related to classroom routines and expectations about reading. But as the pace quickens, time to read shortens or becomes non-existent. Having time to begin with a whole class mini-lesson, then moving to small group meetings, and finally working on vocabulary development and spelling skills seems next to impossible. To find the time to sit back and read for a set number of minutes every day adds more to an overloaded reading block. Often, I just ask the students to read for homework because I do value independent reading. But is this as effective, and does it have the desired impact?

As a reader, I know how important it is to have a chunk of uninterrupted reading time every day. I finish more books in the summer when my time is less structured with work or other commitments than I do during the entire school year. When I read for an hour or so, I can easily get into my book, its characters, and the plot. I think this is true for my students as well. If I give them time to read in school, will they be more likely to read at home? Will they read more books overall? Will my students choose reading over other activities like watching television or playing video games? If the fifth graders read more, will their motivation and enjoyment for reading increase?

As a teacher, it is difficult to justify allowing my students to choose a book and read with no follow-up or evaluation. What if the book is not on the child's level? I believe I should use the

precious, little time I have with my class for direct instruction. The special education teacher is in the room for in-class support during our reading time. I will feel as if I am not drawing on her expertise if we just allow the children to read. She might think that this use of classroom time does not meet the IEPs (individualized education programs) for the special education students.

How much time is enough? Fifteen minutes seems to be too small of a window for readers to get lost in a book. On the other hand thirty minutes could be challenging for some readers as well as difficult to find in our busy schedule. Will my students with attention problems be able to sit for any length of time and not only read but also refrain from distracting their neighbors from reading?

Structuring this time in the classroom is another issue. If it is too constricting, it could disengage readers instead of motivate them. If it is too loose, some of my students will take advantage of the free time to socialize. I am also required to determine a grade at the end of every marking period. Independent reading does not easily lend itself to being graded.

The more I utilized independent reading in my classroom the more I realized I was exploring a new question. **How can I make independent reading work in my fifth grade classroom?** The time was still an important factor but working out the structure and expectations in the classroom became more crucial to me and my teaching but especially to my students.

### **Literature Review**

SSR (sustained silent reading), USSR (uninterrupted, sustained silent reading), DIRT (daily independent reading time), and DEAR (drop everything and read) are just some acronyms given to a practice that has been around since the 1960s (Chow & Chou, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). This is the routine of providing time for students to read books on their own during the school day. It has also been referred to as free reading (Krashen, 2006) or independent reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The president of the International Reading Association, Linda Gambrell, thinks students should read for fun during the school day and teachers should encourage this practice (2007). Various studies have concluded that a daily, dedicated independent reading program is valuable (Krashen, 2006). Yet, some current literature and research demonstrates conflicting views on its effects and offers numerous methods of approaching this practice.

Many goals can be accomplished with an independent reading program. Students are motivated to read and also "...develop better skills in reading comprehension, spelling, and vocabulary" (Gardiner, 2001, p. 33). Chow and Chou (2000) found that the average reader is most likely to reap the rewards of independent reading. However, another study shows that an entire classroom can be helped. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) studied a third grade classroom and the effects of a sustained silent reading program on the students. Every single child in the class improved on the DRA 4-8 (Developmental Reading Assessment) when it was repeated later in the year. "Research shows that the highest achieving students are those who devote leisure time to reading..." (Atwell, 2007, p.130).

Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) noted the 2000 work by Pilgreen, who studied SSR programs and found key features that enhanced their success. "These factors are access, appeal,

conducive environment, encouragement, staff training, nonaccountability, follow-up activities, and distributed time to read” (as cited in Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006, How we did it section, para. 2). Chow and Chou have developed a list of essentials that help ensure a successful in-school reading program. These include: “teacher as role model, long term project, availability of materials on a wide range of topics and readability, ownership and communities of readers, and other factors” such as the school staff’s interest in a reading program and a school environment that is favorable for reading (2000, Key elements of successful SSR section). While most of the fundamentals of a thriving independent reading program outlined by these researchers correlate, there are still many variations in carrying out this practice in a classroom.

Time for reading is limited in my classroom, and the experts disagree on what is appropriate. Some teachers set aside an amount of time for reading that ranges from ten to thirty minutes each day (Hopkins, 1997). However, others incorporate this practice into their reader’s workshop daily, and students spend from thirty to sixty minutes on independent reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Towle, 2000). In some schools independent reading time has become a school wide program where adults and children stop and read for a set amount of time (Hopkins, 1997). Independent reading is encouraged in my school district’s Language Arts curriculum, but the amount of time necessary is not clearly defined. As the students graduate to the next grade, there is less and less time for luxuries like independent reading. Finding ten minutes a day to read can be challenging, but setting aside almost an hour is next to impossible. In past years I might have offered twenty minutes of independent reading if we could find the time, but it was not consistent or structured. Because I value it, I have often assigned independent reading for homework. What could be better than curling up with a good book on a cozy chair at home?



How students choose what they read varies from classroom to classroom and school to school. Teachers may provide a list of books available to the children. Other children are directed to choose books only on their reading level. Still, there are those classrooms which allow readers to choose any books they like (Atwell, 2007; Hopkins, 1997). Nancie Atwell (2007) says, “Starting in kindergarten and going straight through until the end of high school, free choice of books should be a young reader’s right, not a privilege granted by a kind teacher” (p.13). I want to be a teacher who encourages, not discourages the love of books and the habit of lifelong reading. In my classroom I have guided children towards picking books according to their interests. I try to help students find a genre, series, or author they might like. There are numerous books on my classroom shelves for all levels of readers spanning countless topics. I do not like to prevent readers from attempting a book above or below their levels. Occasionally, a special education student may want to read a difficult book because his or her peers have recommended it, or it has become a popular movie. That is understandable. On the other hand, I would not want my students to continuously choose books that were much below grade level. “We know that students will get better at reading and learn more through their reading when they are provided with reading materials that they can negotiate nearly effortlessly” (Ivey, 2000, p. 43). Students need to do most of their reading at a “just right” level where they are reading books they can understand. This will help them to grow as readers (Atwell, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

There are many ways to organize the time and activities during the period and after the students have read. Some teachers give total freedom to the children. They can read whatever they want and do not have to do any kind of written or oral work related to their books (Hopkins, 1997). Some educators carefully structure the time and do not allow children to get up out of

their seats to use the restroom or pick a new book (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). Other programs are not as rigid. There are instructors who require students to complete journals, book talks, or participate in a discussion (Atwell, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Teachers may guide these activities with questions, or they let the children negotiate their own paths (Hopkins, 1997). Teachers may be conferencing with students about their books and their reading abilities (Atwell, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Towle, 2000). Kelley and Clausen-Grace's (2006) research project involved the teachers checking in with students and assisting them when needed. The researchers also added some new ideas to the model, which gave the children a chance to talk about their reading.

In the past I have used reading journals with my students. I loved talking with them about books. Each week students would write a one page letter to me, and I would write a one page letter back to them. As demands on my time increased, class size grew, and support decreased, I abandoned these journals. I started them up again a few years later but did not find them as effective when I could only reply with short comments. This year I am using them again, partly because of a directive from the reading specialist. During the first marking period, the children merely provided me with summaries of their reading. They were not using the journals to delve into their books and talk about reading strategies or insights. After I addressed this with my students through a mini-lesson, the quality of the journals rose. Nancie Atwell (2007) suggests using "letter-essays" as a way to talk to students about their reading (p. 76). Students write a letter to their teacher about a book they recently finished. This makes sense as it provides a forum for the children to reflect more deeply on a favorite book as a whole piece of literature. I would like to move my fifth graders toward this task during the fourth marking period.

Hopkins (1997) believes that teachers need to read alongside their students. This could be a problem in my classroom. How can I sit with my children for twenty minutes every day and read? There are colleagues to confer with, papers to grade, plans to write, and parents to email. Inevitably, the phone rings, or an announcement is made. Yet, how can I *not* read with them? I believe in its value, and moreover, I would love to have the time to read every day. I surely would be more up to date on my children's literature than I currently am. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) agree that teachers should not only act as role models, but should also be instructing students through mini-lessons, individual conferences, and small group meetings.

Research on independent reading in classrooms has had some confusing results. Klump (2007) reports that there is no research that proves sustained silent reading is valuable. "Despite a number of advocates who affirm that SSR works, there are studies which show that SSR makes no significant difference on reading comprehension or it has a negative effect" (Chow & Chou, 2000, Does SSR really work section, para. 1). With limited time in the classroom, it is frightening to think that moments spent reading might not have the desired outcomes. The National Reading Panel [NRP] examined studies of independent reading programs but did not find enough evidence of reading improvement to be able to advise schools to begin a program. However, the NRP advocates for further research (Klump, 2007).

Allington (2005) believes the National Reading Panel's study was not staffed or funded appropriately, and the time spent examining research was limited. He also says that the summary the NRP provided was unclear and contained misleading information. Edmondson and Shannon (2002) have discovered that because of NPR's report, some schools have stopped their practice of independent reading. How scary that misinterpreted results, poor research, and even miscommunication can lead to a total 180 degree change in direction! Other researchers, like

Krashen (2005), feel that there has been research done which shows evidence of students gaining in reading ability after participating in independent reading. He also noted that long-term programs are more likely to yield positive results. Programs that last for more than six months show more encouraging outcomes (Chow & Chou, 2000). It makes sense to me that longer is better, but in reality we are only with a class for ten months – just barely long enough to note change before starting all over with a new group of students. To really see growth we need the entire school community - parents, teachers, and children - to be on board. Will my study be able to document enough growth to convince me of the value of in-school independent reading?

Some researchers and teachers, such as Gardiner and Yoon (as cited in Klump, 2007), “suggest that the primary purpose of sustained silent reading is to encourage students to read more and to increase their enjoyment of reading rather than to have a direct effect on reading achievement” (para. 7). There are other experts who do not believe that independent reading is a valuable use of a teacher’s limited time with students (Klump, 2007). I tend to feel this way as well. I want to encourage reading and find time for my students to read, but I do not want to give up the precious little time I have with them. There are reasons why independent reading works and does not work. “Those factors include the purpose for SSR, varying types of SSR, and length of time that SSR is implemented” (Klump, 2007, para. 9). These are points I need to plan for before independent reading becomes a permanent fixture in my classroom.

Allington (2005) says that, “Good teaching, effective teaching is not just about using whatever science says ‘usually’ works best. It is all about finding out what works best for the individual child and the group of children in front of you” (para. 1). This is so important to remember whenever new research states that something is or is not the best practice to be used in schools. In my experience I have witnessed a technique or strategy working with one class but

not another or with an individual student but not his peer. I can already see that my current class will devour extra independent reading time and class management will not be an issue. On the other hand, last year's class and some students in particular would have had difficulty using an independent reading block effectively. I certainly would not have been able to meet with guided reading groups during that time or even read myself.

As teachers we need to constantly assess how we are delivering information and find new ways of increasing students' learning and achievement. Through our own unofficial research and more traditional methods, we learn about a new class each year and plan accordingly. "Sometimes it isn't a question of whether or not to use a practice but how to implement it more effectively. Teachers need to carefully and consistently monitor and guide the developing reading habits of their students" (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006, Improving motivation section, para. 1). Independent reading, SSR, DEAR, whatever it is called, seems like an important strategy and valuable tool for the classroom. The real test will be in deciding how it looks and monitoring how it works in my fifth grade classroom year after year.

## Methodology

I began my data collection at the start of the second marking period in early November. I continued my work until the end of the quarter in January. Due to the holidays and other interruptions, it was important for me to collect data for this length of time. I kept a log of the minutes the students spent reading independently each day. In the beginning of my study, I tried to offer twenty to thirty minutes of reading time every day, but because of scheduling complications this was not possible. The students and I finally settled on fifteen minutes of independent reading time at the start of every Language Arts lesson.

Students wrote letters to me in weekly reading journals. Each student picked a day of the week to hand in their journals. This provided me with approximately four or five journals to respond in each day. This was a manageable amount. At first I tracked their responses on a chart and noted who expressed an interest in reading, who recorded a summary of the book, and who possessed a deeper understanding of their book. The tracking helped me see how many students were consistently writing summaries. This led to a class mini lesson on the content of their letters. After, the letters were richer with discussions of genre, characters, and plot development. As time went on, I stopped coding the entries and spent more time responding to my students' letters.

Students maintained reading logs. These charts were kept in folders in a magazine file on the windowsill. Fifth graders recorded their finished books on their charts. I completed a "status of the class record" two to three times a week, in which I asked each child to tell me the title of the book and the current page he or she had just been reading at the close of our independent reading session (Atwell, 1998, p. 107). My lesson plans documented mini-lessons taught to the whole class once a week before an independent reading session.

Discussions with stakeholders were also important to me. I met with our reading specialist, Maria Sobel, on January 8, 2008. I also surveyed the parents of my students. Every parent participated. Students completed a computerized survey similar to the parent survey. I emailed the district fifth grade teachers for input on their experiences with independent reading in their own classrooms. My students and I had two discussions about independent reading, one before the data collection began and one after it ended. Because so many students wanted to give me their feedback on reading in the classroom, I composed an informal survey with four questions to collect their thoughts after our second class meeting in January. This also guided my process. Finally, I took part in our school inquiry group monthly meetings. The topic of the group was Balanced Literacy which mainly focused on guided reading but also spent some time exploring independent reading (See Appendix C for interview and survey questions).

The most important method of data collection became my own personal journal. I reflected on and questioned my process and discoveries in my journal at least three times a week and many times more. I did not expect this to become such a large piece of this investigation, but it did. My own deliberations guided me and helped me adjust my teaching and my expectations daily and weekly. It is where I could really see the effects of independent reading in my classroom.

Throughout the data collection period, I reviewed the information I was gathering and used it to formulate changes in the classroom. Following data collection, I began to analyze what I accumulated. I read through my data by type. For example, I looked at all of the student surveys, then the parent surveys, and then the teacher feedback. I used my journal entries to help me keep a chronological perspective in mind. I highlighted interesting material. After, I went back again and coded the highlighted words according themes. Categories emerged, and I was

able to make sense of my findings. Pulling it all together was a daunting task, but it also gave me the opportunity to review as well as consolidate my beliefs about independent reading in the classroom.



## Findings and Implications

Deciding on how to structure the independent reading time in my classroom was just as difficult as finding the time to have children read. I held a class meeting and asked my students, “What are your thoughts about independent reading?” Instantly, Jessica piped up, “We need more time.” Everyone quickly agreed with her. I believed they were immediately on board with me and ready to journey into independent reading. We discussed how to structure independent reading in our classroom. My fifth graders decided on the following rules: room must be silent, read a book on your own level, and no moving around. Right away I struggled with the difficulty of fitting this time into our jam-packed day. Some days of our six day cycle had blocks of time well suited for independent reading. Others did not. As I became increasingly convinced of its value and importance, I finally decided on working time to read into our language arts block. The children liked knowing that there was a set time they could count on and plan for every day. Making it part of our daily routine was important. To help the students become lifelong readers, I needed to teach them to value it and schedule for it if necessary. I realized that they need to plan at home to “fit in” reading time as well. Even Meg’s mother wrote back to her in her reading journal in December and said:

“I think if we want to read together we need to put it on the calendar! We let our schedule get out of hand then find our time has run out.... Let’s pick a cozy winter day – maybe with a fire – and read Journey. We have days off coming up.”

At first I planned on providing twenty to thirty minutes of independent reading time every day. Quickly I found that during a one hour reading block this was not possible. I wondered if a mere fifteen minutes would be enough, but I decided to make the time needed. In order to make it a priority and demonstrate to my students how valuable I think it is, we finally settled on doing independent reading at the beginning of every reading block for fifteen minutes. Once we carved

out this time and made it a habit it was almost easy to do it. The children responded well and liked knowing that time to read was provided for each and every day.

My role during independent reading was another perplexing piece of this time period. I tried to do it all – conference with students, complete a status of the class chart, respond to reading journals, listen to children read, model reading, and help some fifth graders choose appropriate books, all while still maintaining a quiet classroom and trying to keep interruptions from the rest of the school at bay. I even attempted to meet with guided reading groups during the independent reading time period. I found that I was frustrated and felt ineffective. I turned to my colleagues for advice.

Other fifth grade teachers in the district had their own unique way of running independent reading sessions in their classrooms. Most tried to teach a mini-lesson first that guided the students' post-reading responses and use of journals. Others used a form of book talks or book recommendations to kick off their reading block. The amount of time varied from teacher to teacher, but everyone reported that lack of time was a major concern.

Maria Sobel, Central School's reading specialist, believes in a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. "The primary and most important role of independent reading in the classroom is that the more a kid reads the better reader they become." She thinks that children also need to be required to read at home because some do not read due to lack of time or interest. According to Mrs. Sobel, reading in school tends to "foster a love of reading and help kids become lifelong readers." She does recognize the difficulties in providing for this time but encourages at least twenty minutes of uninterrupted reading time each day. She feels the teacher should make status of the class charts, response journals, and mini lessons part of the routine of

independent reading. She also sees her role and that of the classroom teacher as one that is interacting with the children while they are reading.

As I continued to build an independent reading classroom, I reflected on the variety of approaches to this process. Finding the time was difficult enough, how to structure this time was perplexing as well. After a few weeks, some students still could not find a book or did not like reading. They were challenging. I began to realize that I needed to advance in whatever way was most beneficial to my class and even to go one step further and differentiate my approach with individual students. After this realization, positive changes occurred. The class was excited about independent reading time. Many students quickly slipped into their books and barely came up for air.

Sydney was a struggling reader before fourth grade but made a lot of progress last year. However, she remained an uninterested reader when she started fifth grade. I worked with her individually to help her choose a new book. Knowing Sydney was the second oldest of five siblings I introduced her to Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. She connected with the characters right away and powered through every Judy Blume book she got her hands on.

From my journal on November 27, 2007:

“Sydney had to go to the library at the start of independent reading for another book. She came back and shuffled by me very loudly so I’d look up. She knew I didn’t want anyone talking while the kids and I were reading. When I glanced up from my book she flashed me her next Judy Blume find, Double Fudge. She was so excited! And so am I. She’s a reader!”

I realized that some of my students just needed me to provide them with time to read and leave them alone. Sydney needed to share what she was reading. Brian and Kenny needed to get hooked on a series. By offering each child what he or she needed, I was finally able to begin to develop a classroom of readers. Differentiating the reading block for each student was crucial.

Luckily Kenny, one of my students who avoided reading, became interested in a series recommended by a friend. He was off and reading and has been ever since. Brian, on the other hand, was constantly trying to get out of reading. He left for the bathroom as soon as independent reading began. I decided to introduce him to the “Time Warp Trio” series by Jon Scieszka. The books were short, on his level, humorous, and had a few pictures. Once again, I realized that knowing my children’s literature was important. I needed to be able to quickly pull out titles from my shelves that I could recommend to my students. Having a variety of books on different topics and levels readily available in my classroom was crucial as well.

From my journal December 10, 2007:

“I talked with Brian today. I said, “I don’t think this independent reading is working for you.” He said, “No it isn’t.” I asked, “Why not?” Brian replied, “Well. I can’t think. I need it totally silent or I feel distracted.” I had him shut the doors since one problem was the noise in the hall as the third graders went to lunch. Then we talked about his book choice. I found Knights of the Kitchen Table of the “Time Warp Trio” series for him and talked a little about it. He sat in the back in my chair and started reading. It was nice and quiet. I am anxious to see how he’s doing. I hope he likes it. I really need to keep reading children’s literature. It’s so important that I am able to help with book choices.”

From Brian’s reading journal January 8, 2008:

“Dear Miss Rogers,

I am really enjoying the series of the Time Warp Trio. Those books are on my level and are very funny. I have two books at my desk that I have yet to read. I am actually excited to read the whole series of the Time Warp Trio. I feel obsessed with the Time Warp Trio. I am actually excited about independent reading for the first time ever. I feel confident about reading now.

From, Brian”

His entry gave me hope to go forward and continue to help develop readers. A very rewarding instance was when Brian bounced into our quiet room during independent reading one day and yelled, “They have 11 of them!” He was so excited to find more books from the series in our school library.

The key elements for independent reading in my classroom were mini lessons, book talks, and reading journals. Beginning with a mini lesson helped unify the class and gave me assurance that I was still teaching reading skills. The students seemed to absorb the skills and apply them more readily to their own reading. In the past when my classes were all reading the same teacher assigned book, students were not as likely to make use of the reading skills I taught. Having the freedom to choose their own books seems to have made a difference. Students loved giving short book talks on favorite reads. We even added a *Books We Love* display (Atwell, 2007, p. 33) so students could easily find titles recommended by their peers. This has been used regularly and is always filled. Often students tell me they are reading a book because a classmate said it was worthwhile. Reading journals were important because each student was able to have his or her own voice. I could reply to them in writing, and we would essentially carry on a conversation about reading. They continued to share passages, characters, settings, and genres with me in person or in their journals. They began to ask what I was reading, what my classroom assistant was reading, and what we liked to read. They wrote in their reading journals about choosing books recommended by friends. I realized that they were sharing books just like adults do! I hope this will lead them to be lifelong readers.

A unique make-up of this class is that there were many avid readers in September. By acknowledging how important reading is and giving my readers an outlet for reading each day, I not only encouraged their wonderful habit but also supported and respected it. I also used “Book Challenges” during long weekends and breaks to keep everyone reading. The challenges set goals for the students to read a certain number of pages and provided chances to earn prizes. I have done this in the past but seemed to have had greater participation in this voluntary activity

this year. My readers took advantage of this time and often read over 1000 pages each. They were proud of the recognition they received for their efforts.

One of the problems of encouraging reading and turning students into readers was that some did not put down their books to learn new subjects. Two of my most habitual readers were constantly behind in their homework and schoolwork. I would often find a few students still lost in their books after the class was dismissed for lunch or when we had moved on to another subject. As glad as I was about the amount of reading taking place, I needed to help the children strike a balance between obligatory and desired activities.

At the end of the marking period, we had another class meeting about independent reading. I said, “How’s independent reading going?” Everyone answered, “GREAT!” They shared how much they love reading in school, and Sydney said, “Reading doesn’t always happen at home.” Everyone agreed again and listed some of the distractions they face. I used to think that reading for fun was something the students could and should do at home. I realized that they do not have time there either. If I value it, I need to provide time for it. Some noted that they have read as many as three times the number of books from the first marking period. By tracking the number of books they read, I saw that as a class their reading increased by 56 percent. Some did not read as many books because they read more challenging books. Others admit they forgot to record all of their titles. I expect the actual percentage to be higher. At the end of the second marking period, all the parents of my students reported that their fifth graders were reading the same as or more than the first marking period.

From my journal January 31, 2008:

“I feel like independent reading is really making a community of readers in my classroom – something that I didn’t think was possible unless we are all reading the same book. It’s gratifying when someone will say on a reading journal, “I chose this book because Riley recommended it. I liked the last one she recommended too!”

Overall, I can see that we are a community of readers - something I felt like we were missing without doing the shared novels. Kids are loaning books to classmates and recommending books. They see themselves as readers and as good readers. Some are really using the mini-lessons. They tell me when they see a simile or how they used a specific comprehension technique. Riley has been using sticky notes on her own to mark where in Knots in My Yo-yo String she is finding shades of Maniac Magee. I think they not only see reading as fun but also important. I know I am lucky with this class. Even my reluctant readers have found books they like and are into reading.”

Evolving into a community of readers has been a happy surprise. When the district administrators directed the teachers to move away from class novels, I was so disappointed. I loved having common books that we read as a class. We could talk about the authors, themes, plots, and characters. We could relate what was happening in the books to other subject or real-life situations. Losing the community reads, which is when all students read and discuss the same novel, was a huge letdown. Independent reading has replaced what I was missing in my reading program. We can still talk about elements of books, author’s style, and themes. Even though many students are reading the same books, we do not all have to have the same titles on our book lists. We can discuss as readers because we are readers.

I have found that my role is to provide dedicated reading time each day for my students. Brett said, “Don’t scramble it in.” More than half of the class asked for more time, specifically “longer and uninterrupted.” I need to let them know how valuable reading is. I also need to set up and manage the classroom, so it is conducive to reading. By checking in through status of the class, mini lessons, and reading logs, I show my children that I expect them to read. By providing time for us to discuss books, having children do book talks, and responding in reading journals, I demonstrate to my students that I value talking about books as much as reading them.

When I do these activities, I see that the children want to read more. The entire class reported liking reading or loving reading in the student survey. Students described the following improvements in their reading: developing a love of reading, reading more, getting into books

more, enjoying it, reading faster, learning new words, reading challenging books, and choosing better books. These are wonderful changes, and as an educator I need to continue to provide for these improvements.

There is no doubt in my mind that independent reading has become a cornerstone to the teaching of reading in my classroom and will continue to be so in the coming years. In September I need to teach my new students what I expect during independent reading and help the non-readers fall in love with books while still providing an environment favorable to reading for my readers. As difficult as it can be to keep up with reading journals, I will still require my fifth graders to write letters to me each week. This is where conversations between readers begin. I can help guide them toward new books, cheer them on as they conquer a reading hurdle, or even share in the excitement of a page-turner. Since readers need to talk about their reading, book talks and our *Books we Love* display will also be at the heart of our reading block.

Keene and Zimmermann said, “Students need to spend abundant time every day reading increasingly difficult text, and they benefit from having a purpose and focus for their reading, as well as the common language that the strategies provide to articulate their thinking. *Nothing* should stand in the way of time to read independently” (2007, p. 28). In my classroom nothing will stand in the way of our independent reading time and my goal of developing a community of lifelong readers.



## **Obstacles**

The biggest obstacle to independent reading is time. Our school year is filled with curriculum requirements, and our days are filled with interruptions. Each year my schedule is different, and there is a period of adjustment where I try to figure out the best way to work in different subjects and activities depending on the needs of my students. The schedule changes daily so the time of day to read is not consistent. Occasionally, there are special assemblies or projects, which shorten our reading time. Just fitting in independent reading wherever we could did not seem to impact my students and their reading habits as much as actually scheduling a set time every day. When students knew when to expect independent reading, they could plan for it and look forward to it. It also helped me as they were sure to remind me that it was time to read!

My colleagues can be hindrances in carrying out a well planned, consistent independent reading program. Some adults come into the room to chat with me or ask a question. During independent reading a fourth grade teacher stopped by, interrupted the silent atmosphere, and not only talked to me but also talked to his students from last year. Some special subject teachers begin their sessions late or dismiss the entire class late. The art teacher often keeps a few students behind to help her clean up or finish a project. This also cuts into our scheduled reading time. I need to ask the teachers to stick to the schedule as best as they can.

Other adults that work with the students in my classroom can be obstacles. I felt it was my responsibility and in my students best interests to help the reading specialist and special education teacher understand my goals and expectations of independent reading. They seemed to. But there were times when they would have lengthy conversations with me instead of listening to a child read or helping a student select a book. The special education teacher felt a pull to have her students participate in a fluency program during independent reading each day.

So, those children who might have benefited the most from independent reading were constantly missing it. We continually talked about and negotiated for the best way to utilize the time in the classroom for maximum learning opportunities.

Students can be roadblocks. Sometimes children need to leave the room for band lessons, the nurse, or early dismissal. Some students are chronically late and interrupt the class with their arrival. There were a few fifth graders this year who tried to avoid reading by lingering at the book shelves or leaving for the bathroom at the start of independent reading. By talking about this behavior or directing the students to exciting, appropriate books, I was able to overcome this stumbling block. After some practice, my class slipped quickly and easily into independent reading. I was lucky, but I know that in the future I might not have as many willing readers. I will need to address each issue individually and do what I can to establish a reading environment.

Parents and administrators can be impediments to running an independent reading classroom. I was fortunate to have support from both parties. However, as parents and school leaders change, this might not be the case in the future. Although it might look like I am not actively teaching as the students are sitting around the room with their noses in books of their choice, I recognize the value of this time. Helping parents and school decision makers understand the importance of having time to read is crucial.

Assessment of independent reading can be a difficult hurdle to clear. As much as my district is trying to move towards formative assessment, letter grades are still required at the end of every marking period. Assessing the time spent reading in a fair manner is puzzling. I continue to tweak and utilize rubrics and checklists, but there is a part of me that just wants to allow the children to read. At this point the number of books read, minutes spent reading, or book talks

given do not factor into my students' grades. However, completing weekly reading journal entries is counted toward their homework grade for language arts. How to assess is an ongoing issue that I will continue to revisit in the months and years to come.

Obstacles are inevitable, but creative solutions help keep them at bay and keep the focus on the value of reading in the classroom.

### **Emerging Questions**

I still have questions about independent reading. My fellow fifth grade teachers in the district share these concerns with me. How do we assess the time spent reading? Should we? There are a variety of rubrics and charts that can be used. How do we know if the children are actually reading and understanding what they read? I trust them to abandon books that are too hard and actually read their books during the time provided. Maybe the students need more guidance during independent reading time.

This class was easy. I was lucky to have readers. Was it peer pressure and good modeling by peers that created this classroom? What will happen next year? The size and needs of the class matter. It is easy to give independent reading time, but it is hard to find. However, my current class asked for it! Last year the class never enjoyed the opportunity to read. Could it have been different had I focused on it and reflected on it?

I wonder if tracking the number of books students read is as valuable or as accurate as tracking the number of pages read or even the number of minutes spent reading. There are so many variations in children's reading speeds and abilities. Does it even matter if I track it differently? I also wonder how their fluency changed and wish I had tracked that from the beginning of my study to have something to compare it to. According to the special education teacher, Missy, a special education student in my class, made huge gains in fluency during this school year. Was it because of independent reading? How much did that play a role in her improvement? I would like to think that by encouraging Missy to read every day and helping her to choose books on her level I was able to positively impact her reading ability.

In a few short months, my students will leave fifth grade and elementary school. Will they take their joy of reading with them into the summer months and continue to read? As the

demands of middle school begin in September, will they be able to hold on to their habit of independent reading? I hope that my students have started on the path of lifelong reading and will carve out time each day to read, but I know the time constraints are even more rigorous in the upper grades. Without teachers providing time to read in school, will they read at all at home?

Recently, I read some of Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann's second edition of Mosaic of Thought. There seems to be a change on the horizon in the direction of how to teach comprehension. "Anything that stands in the way of allowing time to practice reading is a serious problem" (2007, p. 39). This is powerful, and I wonder if the shift in teaching reading will begin again. For years small group instruction was the norm. Then whole language and teaching with novels became best practice. Guided reading has brought reading groups back into focus. Are we already starting to see a return to using real literature and allowing children time to read? I wonder if the bulk of my reading block will be a well managed independent reading program.

Every year presents a new set of challenges. My schedule will change as well as the make-up of my class and the support by provided by the special education teacher. I may need to spend more time setting up my independent reading program next year. Will I have to begin with small chunks of time and build up to a whole block of independent reading? Will I need to implement more check-ins and student interviews, or maybe will I be blessed with avid readers again? I may have to continually amend my expectations and routines according to the class. But I will not adjust my belief in the value of independent reading.

### **Conclusion**

I suspected it would be beneficial to the students to have more time to read in school. At the very least I knew they would read more – even if it was only during the extra time I provided each day. What was surprising was how a community of readers emerged. The children began to talk about books and reading more than I anticipated. They recommended books to their friends and learned who read genres they liked. They even tried new books based on a peer’s excitement over a series. Just the other day during math class, Aidan called across to Jessica and asked how she liked the book she was reading. She responded enthusiastically and explained the part she had just read. Aidan nodded knowingly. He had recommended the book to Jessica. Some reluctant readers became avid readers, and that was so exciting. As a class, we talked more about what we were reading, what we liked and why, and how to read.

As a teacher, I learned that I need to make reading a priority. It does not matter if there is no time. It is important enough to find it somewhere somehow. I also need to make time not only for the children to read but to talk about reading. Using the journals is a great way to do this and gives me the opportunity to hear each student voice. It can be time consuming, but it is so valuable. Even allowing the children time to share with each other whether it is through small group meetings or with a book talk is crucial. I also saw how I was able to connect with my fifth graders on a different level. There is something so personal about sharing books we like, and I was able to know my children better and allow them to know me better as well. This contributed to our reading community.

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### **Appendix A: Implementation Plan**

During professional development week in my district this past February, I kept thinking about how I would present my findings to my peers during the 2008-2009 school year. Teachers are often asked to make presentations on work they have completed outside of the district or successful classroom innovations. I could certainly share my process and findings with my colleagues. Inviting them to be students for a small amount of time in my classroom during an in-service session and asking them to read would allow them to experience independent reading in a classroom first hand. As my peers are reading, I would model what I actually do with my students. I would help someone find a book if they forgot one, check in with another teacher on a book he is reading, and maintain a quiet atmosphere. Taking a “status of the class” by recording information about what they have read could demonstrate how quickly and easily the information can be obtained. “Students” would write a reading journal entry about their book. After, we would talk as teachers about how to manage independent reading, the record keeping, the kind of classroom routines that need to be established, and the benefits of implementing this in their own rooms. Sharing with other teachers always gives me the opportunity to tap into the expertise of my colleagues. I am sure I would also come away with new ideas and suggestions for creating a better independent reading classroom.

I have already conveyed the results of the students’ and parents’ surveys with my children’s parents by email. I can discuss these with my class and get their feedback on the responses and data I collected. I utilize a class eboard, which is like an electronic bulletin board accessible to the public, so it would be beneficial to parents to display information on the importance of independent reading at home and at school. It is essential to have parents understand that independent reading is not an activity used to fill time. It is a crucial part of learning and

developing lifelong readers. There is a place on the eboard for something called i-notes. The students can write in and recommend books. I can then post their responses on the eboard for everyone to view. This is another way of keeping independent reading going and sharing new books.

My grade level team in the district is receptive to new ideas and supportive of one another. During a grade level meeting, I can share what works and help the few who do not use independent reading establish a practice in their classroom. Sometimes we meet informally and discuss what is happening in our classrooms. By sharing the outcomes of my study, I can hopefully inspire teachers to make independent reading a focus of their language arts instruction.

After reading so many professional articles, I feel a pull to write one and outline my experiences and beliefs. I believe in the value of reading time in the classroom and sharing my learning can help ensure more students are being provided with this time. Teaching can be isolating if we stay in our classroom with the door closed. It is important to open the door, open our minds, and learn from one another.

I will continue to read professional books and articles on the subject of teaching reading. Changes are always impending, and in order to be on the cutting edge of what works in education, I need to be aware of the research and the conversation among the experts in regards to reading instruction. Reading children's literature is also crucial. I need to be able to recommend books to all levels of readers in my classroom and tap into their interests as well.

Most importantly independent reading has become a mainstay in my classroom. My children crave this time and easily slip into it when it is offered. I am prepared to continue emphasizing this practice and providing time for it for the rest of the year. Beginning in September of 2008, it will remain on my schedule, and my children will quickly learn of its importance to us as a

community of readers. Status of the class charts, reading journals, and book talks will be used to help track what students are reading, begin conversations about reading, and recommend books to peers. As I get to know my new students, I will adjust the activities and expectations accordingly. Every class is different, and I need to be flexible and creative in my approach.

Continuing an independent reading program will require some time and effort on my part. However, after seeing the positive effects on my current students, I know it is worth it. Independent reading works and will be part of my repertoire as a teacher for years to come.

## **Appendix B: Subjectivity**

During this research process, I have discovered a lot about myself. I am a teacher researcher and always have been. I just never knew it. I love trying to solve dilemmas in my classroom and with my teaching. In the past I have just used my observations and my instinct to correct problems. I have independently and informally researched educational issues over the last fifteen years and added to my growing collection of professional books. What I never did was focus on one aspect of my teaching for a significant length of time. This project gave me a chance to do that and explore a variety of professional materials including books, journals, and internet articles. I gained a much broader view of independent reading in the classroom. By doing a research project, I formalized my work. I enjoyed researching. It took up a lot of time, but I have always liked talking about education with other teachers. Reading literature on a topic of my choice gave me a chance to hear new voices, sometimes even contradictory ones. As a result, I needed to formulate my own opinions based on what I read and what I knew from my experiences with students.

I thought journaling would be a chore, but I found that I not only enjoyed doing it but was a better teacher because of it. I acknowledged problems in my classroom that otherwise I might have ignored or pondered for only a brief time. Using a journal helped me reflect daily on what was happening. I realized that until I revisited the journal I often forgot about my plans for change or implementation. We have so little time as teachers to reflect. The journal gave me a chance to do that. I hope I will continue to use journaling in my career.

I was reminded to trust my instincts. At times new practices come from the research world, and teachers are expected to jump on the bandwagon. Often something does not seem useful or appropriate for my students. But I do not want to become a stagnant, inflexible teacher, so I dive

into the new technique. My research reminded me that I do know children, and I know what strategies work. I need to look critically at new methods and implement whatever will benefit my students and me. I also doubted my question for a while. It seemed like the answer was obvious, and there would be no discussion around whether or not children should read independently every day. As I looked further into this issue, I saw opposing sides and a variety of ways of implementing this practice. The questions I had were valid and so were my concerns. By exploring independent reading, I was able to eliminate some worries and work through others. I see the value and importance of incorporating this practice into my reading block. Now I feel as if I am on the cusp of a new wave in teaching that revolves around independent reading, and it is exciting to be breaking new ground.

I love reading. I have always loved reading, but I detest when reading comes with conditions. I do not want to be told what to read, given a deadline, or assigned a follow-up project. I get lost in my books when I am not trying to answer questions or develop a lesson plan. I believe this is true for my students as well. In the past when I asked them to constantly stop and find words they did not understand or note how they have comprehended a section, I impeded the natural flow of reading and removed the joy from the experience. I knew these assignments and add-ons did not feel right to me, but in-service sessions and education professionals convinced me otherwise. When I asked the students to do real life reading – reading without strings attached – they seemed to transform more quickly and easily into readers.

I also realized why reading was never a cornerstone in my classroom. I do not put reading first in my own life. Although I enjoy it, I use it as a reward after everything else is done. I was doing that in school as well. Maybe on some level I knew how easily a good book can sidetrack me, and I was worried it would also distract my students from other tasks. Maybe this is true and

would happen, maybe not, but I was not teaching my students to enjoy reading or to value it. By setting a time for independent reading, I was putting the love of reading first and teaching my students to make it a habit in their own lives.

I am a planner. This is not a surprise to me nor would it be to my family or colleagues. What did astonish me was how I was not able to plan for independent reading. I could not easily figure out how to make it work. I attended at a grade level meeting and listened to my fellow fifth grade colleagues explain how they use independent reading in their classrooms. Some teachers made it the main focus of their reading program. Others did not use it much at all. Some are consistent, and yet some are spotty in their structure, activities, and time spent reading each day. There were so many variations, and I did not know which direction to go. This was surprising to me. Was it because I wanted reading to be enjoyable and without constraints like I crave my own personal reading to be? But the teacher in me wanted the children to be accountable for their work, and truthfully I also needed grades at the end of the marking period. I am not usually hung up on procedures or planning. I make quick decisions and am often happy with the results. I have learned that it is acceptable not to have everything figured out in August. I used to think that my students would not be able to adjust if I made major changes during the year. I still think that they need consistency, but if I explain what is going on and why, the students are flexible and adapt well. Through this research process I learned that I can look into an issue all year and modify routines and expectations as I go.

The issue of time will have educators struggling over and over again. There never seems to be enough of it, and each year there are more demands on our time. I now know that I control the schedule in our classroom. Some curriculum units or initiatives are due to board directives and are non-negotiable. However, I can examine what consumes the majority of our day and

decide whether or not these activities are valuable. If questioned by a parent or an administrator, I can easily justify taking a chunk of time for independent reading every day. I know it is important. I have studied it and witnessed the positive outcomes. As the teacher it is my choice, and I have the responsibility to plan accordingly. There will never be enough time for everything, but by making informed choices, I can be sure that my students' time in the classroom is well spent.

I am a problem solver, a reflector, a reader, a researcher, but most importantly a teacher. I make decisions based on what will work best with my students. If my focus stays on them and their needs, I cannot go wrong.

## **Appendix C: Interview and Survey Questions**

### *Survey Questions for District 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (via email)*

1. How do you use Independent Reading in your classroom? Please include how often you do it and for how long. What are the classroom expectations during independent reading? Are there follow-up activities?
2. Please tell me some stories of success you have found with independent reading.
3. Please share some roadblocks you have found with independent reading.

### *Maria Sobel (reading specialist interview)*

1. What is the biggest issue or problem our 5<sup>th</sup> grade readers are facing?
2. What does a good reading teacher include in his or her class?
3. What is the role of independent reading in the classroom?
4. How would you set it up in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade?
5. What are your thoughts about independent reading?

### *Preliminary Class Discussion*

1. How do you feel about independent reading?
2. How should it be structured in our class?
3. How much time should we have each day?
4. How many books have you read in September? October?
5. Is that more or less or about the same for you?
6. What help do you need from me?

### *Final Class Questionnaire*

1. What do you think of independent reading?
2. What changes should we make for our independent reading program?
3. Has independent reading changed you as a reader? How?
4. Where should we go from here?



*Student Survey*

**1. I understand what I read.**

strongly disagree   disagree   agree   strongly agree   other (please specify)

**2. During the second marking period I...**

read more than the first marking period.      read less than the first marking period.  
read about the same amount.      other (please specify)

**3. Approximately, how many minutes per do you read at home?**

0-15      16-30      31-45      46-60      more than 60

**4. When I read at home I read...**

because I want to.      because my parents or teachers make me.  
sometimes because I want to and sometimes because I have to.      Other (please specify)

**5. When reading a book at home...**

I choose my own books.      sometimes I need help choosing books.  
I always need help choosing books.      Other (please specify)

**6. How is independent reading done at home?**

I read independently.      Sometimes I read alone. Sometimes I read with a parent.  
I always read with a parent.      Other (please specify)

**7. I...**

love to read.      like to read.  
do not like to read.      Other (please specify)

**8. What changes have you seen this second marking period regarding your skills, attitude, and interest in reading?**

**9. What is your name?**

**10. How do you feel about Independent Reading? Why do you feel that way?**

*Parent Survey*

**1. My child understands what s/he reads.**

strongly disagree    disagree    agree    strongly agree    other (please specify)

**2. During the second marking period my child....**

read more than the first marking period.    read less than the first marking period.  
read about the same amount.    Other (please specify)

**3. Approximately, how many minutes per day does your child read at home?**

0-15    16-30    31-45    46-60    more than 60

**4. My child reads at home....**

willingly.    only with prodding.  
sometimes willingly and sometimes after prodding.    Other (please specify)

**5. When reading a book at home....**

my child chooses his or her own books.  
my child may require my assistance in choosing a book.  
my child needs a lot of support in choosing a book.  
Other (please specify)

**6. How is independent reading done at home?**

My child reads independently.  
Sometimes my child reads alone. Sometimes we read together.  
I always read with my child.

**7. My child...**

loves to read.    likes to read.    does not like to read.

**8. What changes have you seen this second marking period regarding your child's reading skills, attitude, and interest in reading?**

**9. What is your child's name?**

## Appendix D: Status of the Class Chart

sample

Date	Tim	Brian	Sydney	Janette	Karrie
1/4	<i>Among the Hidden</i> p.34	<i>Time Warp Trio</i> p. 75	<i>Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing</i> p. 101	<i>The Library Card</i> p. 75	<i>Meet the Austins</i> p. 88
1/7	Absent	same	same	same	<i>Among the Hidden</i> p.12
1/8	<i>The Last Dragon</i> p. 224	<i>The Library Card</i> p. 102	<i>Superfudge</i> p. 80	<i>No Boys Allowed</i> p. 54	<i>Among the Brave</i> p.112
1/10	same	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> p. 1	<i>The Holiday Concert</i> p.17	same	band
1/11	<i>Spiderwick Chronicles</i> p.175	same	<i>Sammy Keys</i> p.101	same	<i>Among the Imposters</i> p.175
1/15	same	<i>Hardy Boys #1</i> p. 201	same	<i>Among the Hidden</i> p.99	<i>Granny Torelli Makes Soup</i> p.33
1/17	<i>Ranger's Apprentice</i> p. 23	<i>Dark Angel</i> p. 57	Absent	<i>The Giver</i> p.145	same
1/23	same	same	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> p.100	same	<i>Eggs</i> p.88

