

Out of the Shadow of SSR: Real Teachers' Classroom Independent Reading Practices

When the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) failed to find conclusive evidence that increasing the amount of reading students do notably impacts reading ability, the gasp emanating from literacy teachers was almost audible. The NRP had been assigned the task of reporting on accumulated research on reading practices; however, several questions remained unanswered in the wake of their startling conclusion. For instance, are teachers providing reading time for students in ways that are consistent with a model like Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) on which the NRP's conclusions were based? How does independent reading happen in elementary classrooms? Most important, was the NRP study—on which decisions regarding the teaching of reading are still being made—a valid examination of the independent reading that occurs in today's classrooms (Garan & DeVogd, 2008)? Answers to these questions hold great significance in understanding the connection between conclusions reached by the NRP and decisions regarding classroom implementation of independent reading.

This article describes a yearlong qualitative study (Sanden, 2012) exploring how highly effective teachers understand and implement independent reading in their classrooms. In spite of a call by the NRP (2000) for further inquiry, little research consideration of independent reading has occurred in more than a decade. Attention to the ways that highly effective classroom teachers perceive independent reading and utilize it with their students seems to be especially lacking. Therefore, this inquiry began with this overarching question: What are highly effective teachers' understandings and perspectives regarding independent reading, and how are those exemplified in classroom practice? This study was a result of my concern, reflected in

the literacy field (e.g., Allington, 2005; Edmondson & Shannon, 2002; Krashen, 2001, 2005), over the far-reaching impact of the NRP conclusions on the classroom use of independent reading.

The National Reading Panel and Independent Reading

Pearson and Goodin (2010) explained that the NRP did not suggest that independent reading was not a relevant classroom practice. Rather, the NRP did not find conclusive research evidence allowing decisions to be made regarding its use. However, that was not the message received by thousands of educators who interpreted these results as an edict that student reading didn't matter. For example, Timothy Shanahan (2006) stated in his International Reading Association President's Message in *Reading Today* that based on the NRP results, "research doesn't show that encouraging reading improves reading and that sustained silent reading (SSR) is probably not such a good idea" (p. 12). Classroom teachers were especially dismayed; many had been building libraries and teaching independent reading strategies for decades, and suddenly the outcomes of those efforts were being questioned by a report carrying the weight of a government-appointed entity.

The NRP's message received a similarly blurry interpretation from many decision makers. Pearson and Goodin (2010) explained that policymakers often rushed to judgment and used the NRP report to reduce independent reading time in favor of more direct reading instruction in schools. Teachers who included independent reading as a central element of literacy learning felt the legitimacy of their practices being threatened. In the decade since, many teachers have felt pressured to shift time they

would have devoted to independent reading to more research-based activities (Allington, 2005).

One troubling aspect of this fallout was the limited scope of the NRP examination. Their investigation of independent reading consisted of only 14 studies, most of which were based on SSR or similar programs. The NRP explained typical requirements for SSR: a) students are provided with a regularly scheduled amount of time each day; b) students

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are free to read material of their own choosing; c) students do *not* participate in follow-up discussion or accountability requirements; and d) teachers and other adults model their own reading behaviors, reading as students read. These components are consistent with those listed by Pilgreen (2000), who investigated 32 studies about free reading to determine common characteristics of SSR. The “Eight Factors for SSR success” (p. 8) are listed in the left column of Table 1. It is important to note that in spite of some commonly held misconceptions, SSR is not a generic term for independent reading. Garan and DeVoogd (2008) explain that SSR in its pure form is a specific version of reading that contains elements not

necessarily integral to all classroom uses of independent reading.

Despite the fact that the NRP focused primarily on investigations of SSR and similar programs that contained its defining elements, conclusions in the NRP report continue to threaten *all* classroom uses of independent reading. That is a wide brush with which to paint all independent reading if SSR does not represent a majority of independent reading activities in today’s classrooms. What is needed is a more complete picture of how teachers understand and implement independent reading. This expanded knowledge might prompt exploration of the possibilities for promoting students’ reading achievement with versions of independent reading that differ from SSR. Backed with this knowledge, teachers using independent reading as a classroom practice may be better positioned to reclaim its credibility in elementary literacy instruction.

Inquiry Methods

This inquiry reflected a practitioner-based epistemology that honored and utilized teacher knowledge to form conclusions regarding classroom independent reading practices. I identified expert practitioners, observed their actions, and asked them to explain their methods. My teacher background allowed me

Table 1. Comparison of SSR practices vs. practices of teacher participants in this study

Eight Factors for SSR Success (Pilgreen, 2000)	Independent Reading Practices of Teacher Participants in Current Study
Access to books and classroom reading materials	Access to books through extensive and organized classroom libraries
Reading materials that appeal to students, including self-selection “regardless of the teacher’s preferences” (p. 9)	Reading materials that appeal to students and are appropriately leveled
Quiet and uninterrupted environment	Conducive environment that includes teacher and peer interactions and reading-related noise and movement
Encouragement to read that includes follow-up activities and/or “adult modeling of reading” (p. 13)	Encouragement to read that includes before-, during-, and after-reading interactions with teachers and peers
Staff training	Professional learning opportunities
Students read freely without an emphasis on assessment (p. 15)	Accountability for reading, such as written requirements or follow-up discussion
Follow-up activities that engage readers in creative, thoughtful, and non-evaluative ways	Before-, during-, and after-reading activities with purposeful learning objectives that generate enthusiasm for reading
Distributed and regular time to read	Reading time offered on a daily basis

to place the activities I viewed in a context that promoted understanding of the practitioner experience. In my role as a university-based researcher, I was careful in all phases of this study to demonstrate my respect for teachers' classroom authority and expertise and to acknowledge that it was their perspectives on which I was basing my investigations. My goal was to utilize my former-teacher and current-researcher perspectives to gain greater clarity of teacher viewpoints and classroom situations and to privilege teacher knowledge in creating reasonable and useful implications from the results.

Snow (2001) and Ruddell (2004) emphasized the possibilities for expanding the educational research base with the wealth of knowledge possessed by teacher practitioners. Collins Block, Oakar, and Hurt (2002) pointed out that examining "the processes of expertise in action" (p. 179) in the form of the practices of highly effective classroom

teachers holds great promise for increasing professional knowledge. Honoring and making use of the expertise held by skilled classroom practitioners prompted a clearer understanding of independent reading in their classrooms.

Teacher Participants

This study relied on the collective knowledge of eight inservice elementary teachers who were designated as "highly effective" through a multi-phase, purposeful selection process. To choose the participating teachers, principals from 99 elementary schools located within two driving hours of a major metropolitan area in the northwestern United States were asked to complete a form nominating teachers whom they would label as highly effective in teaching literacy. The form contained a checklist with attributes, drawn from previous studies (e.g., Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998),

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

Classroom teachers looking for support in creating independent reading programs that are aligned with the teacher participants in this study may find the following online resources useful:

- Read/Write/Think.org contains an instructional plan specifically designed to enable children in early primary grades to make good book choices for independent reading. Included are links to state standards, ideas for preparation, steps to enact five complete lessons, and more. The plan can be found at <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/choosing-right-book-strategies-916.html>.
- Booksource's Classroom Organizer is a tool for assembling and organizing your classroom library. Some options of the program include importing your student roster, allowing students to check out and return books, and running reports on student and title activity. The basic version of the program is free; more information can be found at <http://classroom.booksource.com/?Source=IRA>.
- The Children's Choices Project, co-sponsored by the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council, presents an annual list of newly published book choices voted on and reviewed by children themselves—a great incentive for young readers. Annotated lists are available online each year at <http://www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/ChildrensChoices.aspx>.
- The International Children's Digital Library proposes to promote literacy for all the world's children by providing online access to books from around the world in a multitude of languages. The current collection consists of 4643 digital books in 61 different languages, providing an excellent resource for teachers of readers whose first language is not English. To utilize this free collection, visit <http://en.childrenslibrary.org>.
- A video titled *Sharing the Text*, from the Annenberg Learning Series, demonstrates an excellent option for holding students accountable for their reading through peer book discussion. In this video, students are seen interacting with their peers in book discussion groups while their teacher alternately participates, assesses, and supports students in their conversations. The 20-minute video can be found at http://www.learner.org/vod/vod_window.html?pid=1984.

that might cause them to consider a teacher highly effective, such as: a) observed teacher behaviors, b) teacher enthusiasm for reading, c) students' reading achievement at the end of the year, d) teacher involvement in improving his or her own practice, e) students' enthusiasm for reading, f) the desire to have their own child (i.e., the supervisor's child) placed in these classrooms, g) the teacher's ability to reach students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, and h) positive feedback from parents.

Similar to Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998), administrator nominations were a starting point for determining teacher effectiveness. I developed an evaluation guide that identified attributes of highly effective literacy teachers using common principles from recent scholarship (e.g. Mohan, Lundeberg, & Reffitt, 2008; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998). I compiled the characteristics recognized by these researchers, identified commonalities, and consolidated them to form a list of practices demonstrated by highly effective teachers of literacy. These principles included: 1) excellent classroom management, 2) balanced literacy instruction, 3) implementation of instructional density and higher-order thinking activities, 4) extensive use of scaffolding, 5) encouragement of self-regulation of literacy skills & strategies, and 6) high expectations for all students. During a full-day observation in each classroom, I used the guide to record components of the nominated teachers' literacy instruction. Of the 12 nominated teachers who agreed to participate, eight displayed behaviors in their classrooms that corresponded to this list of practices and subsequently agreed to continue as study participants.

Table 2 lists demographic characteristics of the study participants and their teaching contexts and provides a brief explanation of the circumstances in which independent reading occurred in their classrooms. While the demographics and practices of these teachers might mirror those of many elementary teachers, there is considerable diversity in schools, students, and teaching populations. Teachers can interpret these findings in the context of their experiences to consider independent reading in their own classrooms. (All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data typical of a qualitative research design provided rich descriptions of these teachers' perspectives and uses of independent reading. Data included semi-structured interviews (Freebody, 2003) with each teacher on two separate occasions. Initial predetermined questions based on an interview guide (Seidman, 2006) were followed with open-ended conversations on topics raised by participants or stemming from observed classroom episodes. For example, the first interview queried:

1. What does the term *independent reading* mean to you?
2. In what ways do you currently use independent reading with your students?
3. What experiences have influenced the decisions you make about independent reading in your classroom?
4. What are some of the pros and cons you see in using independent reading with your students?
5. What impact do you think independent reading has on your students' reading growth?

In the second interview, topics stemmed from data already collected and included such questions as:

1. What is your reasoning for the balance of reading and reading-related activities in your classroom?
2. In what ways do you provide support for your students' independent reading before, during, or after independent reading episodes? Is *independent reading* truly independent in your room?
3. How important is each of the programs (AR, Reading Counts, Daily 5, your basal series) in supporting independent reading in your classroom?
4. In some models of independent reading, there are certain characteristics that their creators consider important to students' success with independent reading. Tell me if that is or is not an important part of your reading program and why.

Table 2. School, teacher, and student demographics & independent reading (IR) contexts

Student	Highest education level	Years in ed.	Grade level	School type	Low-SES level (school)	# ESL	Daily IR episodes
							(In addition to these scheduled episodes, most teachers required or encouraged students who finished an assigned task to read while waiting for others to finish.)
Tammy	Master's	30	1st	Urban	67%	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (20–30 min): Content reading—students read from unlevelled nonfiction tubs; some read silently while others discussed books with table groups; teacher conferred with students about their books Episode 2 (25 min): BOB (Bag of Books) reading—students read leveled selections alone; teacher conducted small-group instruction and individual conferences
Jennifer	Bachelor's	30	1st	Rural	39%	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (45 min): AR reading—students selected books marked with an Accelerated Reader (AR) level, read the books, took AR quizzes, marked progress charts; teacher conferred with students about their book choices and quizzes
Sara	Master's	18	2nd	Rural	53%	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (55 min): Students independently completed assigned reading tasks, one of which was IR; teacher and assistant worked with small groups of students; teacher occasionally conferred with students about books Episode 2 (15–20 min): DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time)—students read independently and/or took AR quizzes; teacher helped with AR quizzes, conferred with students about their books
Naomi	Master's	22	2nd	Suburban	21%	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (30 min): Students read self-selected books; teacher conducted clerical tasks (attendance, lunch count, etc.) Episode 2 (35 min): Following a teacher-led mini-lesson, students completed a reading assignment, then read independently; teacher conducted group lessons and individual conferences
Penni	Bachelor's	8	3rd	Urban	58%	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (15–20 min): Students read self-selected books; teacher conducted clerical tasks (attendance, lunch count, etc.) Episode 2 (variable): Students chose either Read to Self or Read to Someone from the Daily 5 system, occasionally accompanied by a written requirement; teacher conducted small-group instruction, occasionally discussed books with students in the small group
Amanda	Master's	5	3rd	Rural	46%	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (25–30 min): Daily 5—students chose literacy activities based on individual goals and then participated in selected activities; “Read to Self” component was mandated once each day; students read and reflected on self-selected books; teacher conferred with individual students about their reading Episode 2 (25–30 min): Repeat of episode 1
Elizabeth	Master's	23	4th	Suburban	21%	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (40 min): Following an assigned reading-related written assignment, students read silently; teacher conducted small-group reading instruction
Francis	Master's	16	5th	Suburban	57%	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Episode 1 (30 min): Students rotated between IR, reading responses, assigned written tasks, and small-group instruction conducted by the teacher or teaching assistant Episode 2 (30 min): Repeat of episode 1

During the final months of the study, teachers selected students of varied reading abilities for interviews. Students answered questions that included the following:

1. Do you ever read by yourself in your classroom?
2. How do you decide which books you'll choose to read by yourself?
3. What does your teacher think of reading? How do you know?
4. Do you think getting a chance to read by yourself at school makes you a better reader?

Classroom observations conducted with each teacher on four occasions showed how they utilized practices related to independent reading and how their students engaged in independent reading activities. Observations were guided by a list of "sensitizing concepts" (Hatch, 2002, p. 81) that provided an initial focus for the observation and then allowed participants' views and actions to steer the investigation. For example, during the first

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two full-day observations, I concentrated on incidents such as teacher and student behaviors before, during, and after reading events, classroom conversations regarding reading topics, and incidental reading activities throughout the day. Examination of this information led me on subsequent classroom visits to gather observational data more specifically related to independent reading, with attention focused specifically on student and teacher behaviors during independent reading events. I spent approximately 21 hours conducting observations in each of the eight classrooms. I also administered a survey related to teachers' classroom use of independent reading, teacher and student demographic information, and the teachers' professional backgrounds. Information collected from the survey served as one approach to triangulation and as starting points for deeper exploration of teachers' perspectives on reading issues.

These multiple data sources allowed an integration of observed teachers' practices and their own words to represent independent reading in their classrooms. Ascribing meaning to these representations of teachers' lived experiences is consistent with the use of qualitative methods, which, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have explained, position the researcher to "make the world visible" (p. 3) through interpretation of phenomena that occur in natural settings. It was my goal to make "visible" the independent reading understandings and practices of teachers in *their* natural settings—their elementary classrooms. I relied on "member checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236) throughout the process to ensure that my accounts were consistent with participants' experiences and perspectives.

Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45) allowed data collection, coding, and analysis to occur simultaneously, with each process informing the others. I analyzed data from early observations and interviews to determine associations, and I created a list of categories to label these incidents. After the initial coding, I examined this large set of codes for the ways that they could be organized into more inclusive categories. Patterns and commonalities in the codes allowed them to be collapsed into eight categories and, eventually, three themes. This formed an organizational structure under which I could continue to collect data and to form some understandings about independent reading in these teachers' classrooms.

Classroom Independent Reading

Following a final analysis of the data, commonalities surfaced in the ways these teachers understood and used independent reading, leading me to three major conclusions about the essential components of independent reading in the classrooms of the teacher participants:

- teacher participants supported students' reading independence;
- they focused on students' reading growth; and
- they were committed to student-centered practices.

In the following sections, I outline these elements and provide representative evidence from the classroom data that supports my conclusions. I also offer examples of ways that teacher participants implemented these components in their classrooms and reference information from scholarship, allowing these elements to be considered in the context of established literacy understandings.

Student Independence and Teacher Support

One consistent finding was a desire among teachers to empower students' choices while monitoring their decision making. Each of the teachers agreed that student autonomy was a cornerstone of independent reading, and their practices often reflected opportunities for students to exercise control over their reading. However, data indicated that in conjunction with a belief in student independence, teachers assumed responsibility for students conducting activities in ways that the teachers believed were most advantageous to learning. Students' selection of reading materials was one way this balance occurred.

All of the teacher participants held a dual belief in providing students with opportunities to choose books of interest to them while at the same time expecting students to spend their time with texts at an appropriate reading level. On one hand, teachers were convinced that motivation and engagement most likely occurred when students were able to read self-selected materials. One teacher, Amanda, stated that one goal for her third graders was "freedom to choose" and learning what books they liked as readers. Penni, also a third-grade teacher, explained, "I want them to love to read, and if they're not reading what they want to read, I don't think they're gonna love it." Other researchers confirm that students were more motivated to engage in reading when provided the opportunity to select and use their own materials (e.g., Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002).

In addition, the teachers shared a belief in the importance of students reading books at appropriate levels. The majority of the teachers used a commercial system such as Accelerated Reader

(Renaissance Learning, 2013) or Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Books (2012) to level their texts, but relied on these systems to varying degrees when matching books to students. Several of the teachers taught students more independent means of determining text appropriateness, such as using the "five-finger rule" to assess a book's compatibility, in which teachers prompted students to read a single page of text and count the number of unknown words on their fingers. If the reader reached five unknown words by the end of the page, it was deemed too difficult for independent reading. Regardless of how they matched readers with books, all of the participants demonstrated a concern for ensuring that students read books the teachers considered an appropriate fit.

Reflecting the views of the other teachers, Tammy explained that her students were most successful when they were choosing their own books but "there's monitoring of that choice, and you're checking up on them." Her first graders chose new books weekly in a flurry of activity they called book shopping. Students moved throughout the room among numerous bins labeled with Fountas and Pinnell (2012) text levels, choosing new books that they would use during daily independent reading they called BOB (Bag of Books) time. During this time, students talked about their book choices with each other, with their teacher, and sometimes just to themselves. Tammy's dual role in supporting student choices while promoting reading at levels that met student needs was exhibited in comments like "Did you consider any of these books in here?" referring to a labeled bin, and "Uh oh, too easy. I'd like you to consider some on this shelf," as she reviewed a student's selections.

Tammy's monitoring of this process reflected that of the other teachers, who in various ways encouraged students to consider books they might enjoy at their appropriate reading levels. This belief is consistent with the findings of Reutzel, Jones,

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and Newman (2010), who contend that “unguided choice can become a negative force” (p. 133) when students spend much of their time with reading materials that are too easy or too hard and thus fail to make the reading gains possible with books that are appropriately challenging. On the other hand, strict adherence to book levels has been questioned by scholars who fear a narrowing of reader choices in pursuit of sometimes disconnected and arbitrary parameters (e.g., Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005; Kontovourki, 2012). In spite of her commitment to monitoring book levels, Tammy’s interview comments reflected this conflict:

I have several little people this year, for example, who were dying to read [X book], and it was four or five levels too high. But I said to a couple of them, “Okay, read a page,” and they were getting through it. Their desire was so high to read that I said, “Okay, you can keep this in your BOB bag and when you come in in the morning and we’re not working on our just right books, go ahead and give that a try.”

Tammy’s example reflected an ongoing struggle in many of the teachers’ classrooms between enabling

students’ book choices while supporting students’ reading in appropriately leveled materials.

Teachers used a number of similar ways to accommodate the divergent goals of supporting students’ choices while attending to reading levels. First, they maintained diverse classroom libraries that appealed to a wide range of interests and reading levels. In addition, they provided students with instruction on the importance of reading appropriately leveled books and on locating books that met students’ individual needs. Also, they held many planned and impromptu book conversations with groups of students and with individuals, sharing teacher and peer book recommendations. Finally, the teachers directly monitored students’ choices to ensure that the majority of students’ independent reading was spent with books at appropriate reading levels.

The level of oversight varied, with teachers at the lower grades typically providing more supervision over book choice. However, all of the teachers checked in on their students’ choices periodically to ensure that they were engaged with books at their

BY THE NUMBERS

18 According to the 2009 NAEP report, fourth-grade students who reported reading **5** or fewer pages per day scored lower than those who read more, and students who reported reading for fun almost every day had an average scale score **18** points higher than those who never or hardly ever read for fun. Students who were provided with school time almost every day to read books they had chosen themselves also scored higher than those who were given time less frequently to do so.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The nation’s report card: Reading 2009* (NCES 2010–458). Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education: Washington, DC.

94% In a meta-analysis examining comparisons of programs that emphasized free reading versus more traditional direct instruction programs, **51** out of **54** (**94%**) of the studies showed that students in free reading programs did as well as or better than students in traditional programs on tests of reading comprehension.

Krashen, S. (2004). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

2.5 In numerous specialized occupations, including wrestling, skating, and piano playing, experts typically spend **500%** more time engaged in the performance of a skill than do novices. Reading is apparently no different: studies show that more proficient fourth-grade readers engage in reading activity on average **2.5** hours per day, while the poorest readers participate with reading for **30** minutes or fewer, a difference of 500%.

Guthrie, J. T. (2004). Teaching for literacy engagement. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36, 1–28.

independent reading levels. Students' comments reflected the emphasis their teachers placed on balancing their reading interests with finding books with which they would be successful, as explained by a third grader in Penni's room:

I usually take a look at it first and see if it's a good fit book for me. It means you can really read it and not let it be too easy for you or too hard for you. Some words you get stuck on but they're not that hard. Usually on nonfiction books they look really interesting to me. Like octopuses look interesting to me so I have a couple books of those.

The evidence demonstrated that the teachers remained true to their articulated beliefs in ensuring students were reading books in which they were invested while at the same time making certain that students were engaged with texts at levels where they could be successful. Students were provided with opportunities to choose books that reflected their interests, but teachers oversaw their choices and maintained the final decision-making power based on perceived student needs.

Focus on Student Reading Growth

Another essential element of independent reading for these teachers was a concerted focus on student growth. These teachers did not view independent reading as a supplemental activity but rather as an integral part of their literacy programs. They utilized it to provide instruction or practice of reading skills and strategies, but embedded in the act of authentic reading. Amanda referenced her own school experience in justifying her integration of purposeful learning opportunities with independent reading events, explaining,

I can remember independent reading in school; we'd drop everything and read and there was no accountability. I didn't know what I should be doing while I was reading. I wasn't asking questions, so I didn't have that structure as a student. So it's really teaching children how to read.

For some of the teachers, all or most of their reading instruction was connected to independent reading events; mini-lessons, reading conferences, and teacher modeling led directly into independent reading activities. For others, independent reading

held a lesser role in instruction, but continued to provide students with opportunities for teacher-directed practice. For all of the teachers, the focus of independent reading was student reading growth through utilizing purposeful instructional strategies and holding their students accountable for their reading.

Intentional Instruction

For independent reading to contribute to students' reading achievement, teachers understood that they must be purposeful in their instruction. I witnessed few scheduled independent reading events conducted merely for reading pleasure. Rather, the independent reading in these teachers' classrooms was deliberately aimed at increasing students' abilities. For instance, I observed Penni using the wordless book *Zoom* (Banyai, 1998) and the analogy of a camera to teach her students about zooming in on details when reading nonfiction text. As she sent her students off to read independently, she reminded them to "think about zooming in on things in your own books."

Penni followed up this mini-lesson with individual reading conferences and another whole-class session, during which students discussed finding elements such as captions, photographs, and diagrams in their own nonfiction books and magazines. Similar to activities observed in many of the teachers' classrooms, Penni's lesson linked independent reading and discussion with a specific instructional purpose. Reading scholars have advocated the

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approach of embedding instruction in independent reading events (e.g., Worthy & Broaddus, 2001), and Parr and Maguiness (2005) have pointed out the specific advantages of this strategy for reluctant readers. While all of the teachers appeared to value reading for its own sake, observations reflected their commitment to providing focused literacy instruction connected to independent reading.

Teachers utilized the instructional possibilities of independent reading in a number of ways. Sometimes they acted as exemplars of reading behaviors, modeling their own actions in rereading or asking questions. Often they required during- or after-reading activities, such as marking comprehension strategies with sticky notes, writing chapter summaries,

recording elements of story grammar, or noting challenging vocabulary. On numerous occasions, I observed teachers conducting mini-lessons before students' independent reading, commenting during individual reading conferences, or hosting small-group conferences

that included information or strategies that could be applied to independent reading. For these teachers, independent reading was an integral part of their reading instruction as they created linked opportunities for both direct and indirect instruction of reading behaviors, skills, and strategies.

Reader Accountability

In conjunction with instructional intentionality, teachers monitored and assessed students' ongoing efforts. All of the teachers emphasized the importance of holding students accountable for their reading. Second-grade teacher Sara explained,

I think you need something that shows what they're learning. There has to be some accountability. I think you have to know what they know. If they don't get it, I think you have to have some way to know what they need extra help with.

Prior to an independent reading episode in Elizabeth's fourth-grade classroom, she explained to her students the expectations for a task connected to their reading: "Your job today is to continue to look for cause and effect. You have to find it in your independent reading book today." She noted that "it's not just important in this book, it's important in all books. Cause and effect helps you with your comprehension." While Elizabeth conducted small-group instruction on a different topic, the remaining

students split time between reading their books and writing evidence on cause-and-effect sheets. Afterward, Elizabeth used students' responses to assess their engagement with the reading and their understanding of cause and effect in text. Reutzell et al. (2010) point out that a lack of accountability requirements may result in students who don't maintain active engagement. Elizabeth's example was indicative of all of these teachers' practices, which corroborated the importance they placed on holding students responsible for an end result of their reading. Other accountability measures in place across the classrooms included reading logs, story summaries, reader responses, and anecdotal records.

Student-Centered Programs

A third conclusion from this inquiry was that the teacher participants adapted their independent reading practices to meet their students' varied needs. Historically, the label *independent* reading has prompted an understanding of a silent and solitary endeavor, which may be contrary to the tendencies of young learners. In fact, research demonstrates that forcing students into reading roles that feel unnatural or at odds with their developmental inclinations might discourage the kind of self-efficacy or motivation needed for engaged readers (Swan, Codrington, & Guthrie, 2010). These teachers' methods accommodated their students' needs, allowing for oral reading and peer interactions when such actions benefitted the reading experience.

Silent Reading a Goal, Not a Requirement

These teachers did not consider silence a mandatory component of their students' independent reading. They held silent reading as an objective for their students, and observational data showed that many of them encouraged silent reading directly through reminders or indirectly through expectations for a reasonably quiet classroom. However, all of them, especially the teachers of the younger students, acknowledged that silent reading wasn't always consistent with their students' developmental needs. Tammy contended that reading aloud aided the reading abilities of her first graders, saying "We

expect kids to be doing some talking. I don't think kids can be silent anymore, hardly. It's almost an unreasonable expectation, especially for early readers, with sub-vocalizing and rereading, and they talk to themselves, too."

One morning I watched Jennifer's first graders select books, read independently, and then move to computers to take Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes. Some settled to read books on the floor, on a low sofa, or in a rocking chair. Some read their selected books silently and others whispered quietly to themselves. As I listened, Jennifer had a thoughtful conversation with one boy regarding an AR quiz result that disappointed him. She asked, "What do you think will help? Reading out loud? I just had a thought. How about taking it home and reading it to Kylie [his sister]?" The boy agreed and moved away to place the book in his backpack. Jennifer's conversation, as well as her students' reading behaviors, reflected her belief in prompting student reading in ways that were most appropriate for their developmental needs, which often included reading aloud. This understanding was demonstrated in the other teachers' classrooms and is confirmed by studies explaining the tendency of readers to sub-vocalize and fully vocalize speech in the act of reading (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Wright, Sherman, & Jones, 2004).

Several teachers of the younger students accommodated this strategy by allowing whisper reading as an acceptable behavior or by supplying whisper phones, pipe-like devices that students held to their ears and mouths while reading quietly. On several occasions I observed students in first through third grades utilizing this option, which allowed them to hear the vocalization of their own reading without disturbing others around them. Even the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers accepted reading aloud as inevitable or advantageous for many of their students. Francis explained:

I try very conscientiously to have them do a portion of the reading [silently] and then we talk about it, but when we're reading out loud, it allows me to hear or to see or to get into what's going on. And one of the strategies for improving fluency with reading naturally is to hear someone else read, the choral reading, the readers' theatre kind of things. Neurological impress is out loud.

While teachers held silent reading as a goal for their students, none required that independent reading always occur as a silent activity, and many recognized the advantages of oral independent reading to engage and support their young readers.

Social Interactions around Reading

These teachers discussed as well as demonstrated the positive value they placed on collaborative reading activities. By their very nature, many elementary students have a propensity to be social; I observed student interactions with literacy during every classroom visit I made over the course of the study. While individual independent reading often occurred, sometimes students were deliberately placed with a partner for reading time or had that option. Penni explained:

If they're doing what they're supposed to be doing, they're getting just as much out of that, if not more, as they are on their own. By definition it probably isn't independent, but to me it can be just as valuable as when they're sitting with a book in front of them, because if they're with a buddy, hopefully from time to time they're helping each other out or, "oh, I just realized that . . ." or whatever; they're having those discussions.

During one reading episode in Tammy's room, her students excitedly and somewhat noisily shared information with each other from their nonfiction texts. I overheard comments between them regarding text-to-text connections, the features of various bugs, and strategies for decoding a challenging word. Tammy was conducting individual reading conferences and occasionally reminded students to whisper, but she didn't end their interactions. Later, the students affirmed her confidence in their actions as they shared concepts about connections, text features, and predictions from their books.

This episode mirrored other classrooms in which teachers allowed students' social interactions to support their engagement with text. Through such events, the teachers provided frequent opportunities for students to participate in collaborative

While teachers held silent reading as a goal for their students, none required that independent reading always occur as a silent activity.

literacy learning, often through partner reading and conversations around text. In spite of their unconventional nature, these social interactions continued to be labeled *independent reading*. Other

While these teachers frequently encouraged or required students to engage in independent reading alone, they demonstrated awareness of the needs of their young readers to conduct reading as a social event.

studies confirmed the valuable opportunities for social interactions found in teacher-to-student and student-to-student discussions around independent reading (Cole, 2003; Garan & DeVoogd, 2008), providing motivation, deeper understanding, and a sense of ownership for the reading experience (Reutzel et al., 2010). While these teachers frequently encouraged or required students to engage in independent reading alone, they demonstrated awareness of the needs of their young readers to conduct reading as a social event and

appeared unwilling to prohibit students' reading interactions merely on the basis of the label *independent*. They often bowed to the inclination of their students to engage in oral reading and social behaviors and privileged those tendencies in the pursuit of developmentally appropriate independent reading involvement.

Understanding Independent Reading in Real Classrooms

This examination of the perspectives and practices of eight highly effective teachers prompts a better understanding of independent reading as it is utilized in real classrooms populated by real teachers and students. Such transparency contributes to our ability to authentically conceptualize independent reading and to outline a structure through which it can be examined and used to promote classroom reading experiences. A lack of clarity regarding authentic classroom uses of independent reading may have resulted in *all* classroom reading being

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Implementing Independent Reading

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org can support independent reading.

Supporting Students as They Read Independently

This guide includes basic theory and practice for supporting students reading independently, which is the last instructional context along the gradual release of responsibility.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/supporting-students-they-read-30817.html>

A Daily DEAR Program: Drop Everything and Read!

The teacher shouts, "Drop Everything and Read!" and students settle into their seats to read books they've selected. This independent reading time helps students build a lifelong reading habit. This resource also includes a plan for literacy tutors, book sharing, and assessing independent reading.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/daily-dear-program-drop-55.html>

Modeling Good Reading Habits at Home with DEAR Time

This Tip & How To can be shared with parents and families so they can learn innovative ways to get the whole family reading. Some questions are provided as book discussion starters.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/make-time-reading-30742.html>

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

lumped into one category, at least in the case of the NRP. The evidence from the present study demonstrates that independent reading as conducted by these teachers can be a learning endeavor with many elements enacted specifically for their instructional possibilities, far removed from the model known as SSR, as defined by Pilgreen (2000) and the National Reading Panel (2000).

Table 1 places Pilgreen's (2000) "Eight Factors for SSR success" (p. 8) alongside elements of independent reading as conducted by teachers in this study, found in the right column. This comparison demonstrates differences in how independent reading is viewed and enacted in SSR-type programs and in classrooms studied here. For example, one element of SSR programs is students' freedom to choose any reading material, "regardless of the teacher's preferences" (p. 9). Under the watchful eye of the teachers in this study, students were encouraged to choose books in which they were interested, but most were compelled to follow their teachers' guidelines, such as book levels. Another guideline of SSR eliminates any evaluative follow-up activities or attempts toward reader accountability. Teachers in this study embedded purposeful instruction that included numerous measures that held students accountable for their learning. Finally, SSR calls for a quiet and uninterrupted environment. The socially engaged atmosphere in these classrooms, including numerous opportunities for student-to-student and teacher-to-student learning, encouraged reading-related noise and movement.

Implementation of independent reading by teachers in this study differed from SSR programs in important ways. The troubling aspect of this disconnect for literacy policy is that the NRP report (2000), which has wielded enormous influence over scores of literacy decisions in the decade since its release (Pearson & Goodin, 2010), formed its conclusions about independent reading almost exclusively on studies of SSR and similar programs. This clearly does not mirror the independent reading practices of these eight classroom teachers; how many other teachers' practices have been similarly excluded?

Freebody (2003) explained that the abundance of "empirical studies, theoretical accounts,

and professional recommendations" (p. 222) have turned reading into an idealization of what actually occurs in learning and teaching reading. A disconnect has developed between the theoretical characterization of reading and the situated application of classroom reading practices. Freebody also stated that the result of this disconnect is that ordinary literacy events are assessed against a series of theoretical constructs that may hold little relationship to the reading context in which they take place. SSR and its strictly limited definition, which dominated the NRP study, was found to be of questionable value in supporting student reading achievement. The subsequent overgeneralization of SSR-as-independent-reading may have resulted in a misinterpretation of the value of *all* independent reading practices.

In this examination, I hoped to address the gap that exists between independent reading as a theoretical concept and the utilization of independent reading in real practice. Pearson and Goodin (2010) explained that in the years since the NRP report was released, a serious challenge has arisen to the credibility of the classroom use of independent reading. While it is unknown to what extent practices of other teachers share the components of SSR, it is clear that the highly effective teacher participants in this study conduct independent reading in ways that differ significantly from traditional SSR programs on which the NRP conclusions were based.

An important follow-up to this inquiry is a reexamination of the impact on student achievement of independent reading experiences conducted in a manner more akin to the practices of these teachers. This would provide information, still sadly lacking, regarding the efficacy of independent reading conducted in ways other than through SSR. In the meantime, awaiting such research confirmation, classroom teachers might consider including in

The socially engaged atmosphere in these classrooms, including numerous opportunities for student-to-student and teacher-to-student learning, encouraged reading-related noise and movement.

their independent reading the components exemplified by these teacher participants. This will provide opportunities for teachers to examine the effect of these components on the reading achievement of students in their local contexts. Such combined theoretical and practical knowledge may provide an opportunity to pull independent reading out from the shadow of SSR (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008) and might go far in returning independent reading to its former position as an integral and trusted component of classroom literacy practice.

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