

THE POSITIVES AND PITFALLS OF INDEPENDENT READING

What are the benefits of independent reading?

It's hard to avoid hearing about the positives that come to students when they engage in independent reading. Study upon study have shown that the more students engage in independent reading, the higher their academic achievement on many accounts (Ahfeld, 2020; Cueva, Irving, & Russell, 2014; Sullivan, 2013; Kim & White, 2011; Gallagher, 2009; Cullinnan, 2000). Gallagher writes, "Kids who do the most recreational reading become the best readers" (2009, 42). Students who are poor readers tend to score higher on vocabulary when allowed to read recreationally for just fifteen minutes a day and even higher on comprehension with forty minutes a day. This occurs because reading allows students to build upon prior knowledge and background. When students read books that are in the zone of proximal development, they are sufficiently challenged and learn about a variety of topics, depending on their reading choices. They are also challenged vocabulary-wise. Students are able to create a window into worlds and experiences unlike their own. This broad knowledge is helpful on achievement tests. Students who are able to read digitally also tend to score higher on vocabulary and comprehension because of the ease of finding online support (Cuevas, Irving, & Russell, 2014; Walker, 2013). Students who read complex fiction for pleasure are able to build on these reading skills to better understand more complex academic reading material (Cullinnan, 2000).

According to several studies, the result of improved vocabulary not only benefits standardized test scores, but also increases math ability. A longitudinal British cohort study showed the intellectual gains that come from reading outweigh the gains that come from having a parent with a college degree by four times (Sullivan, 2013). Scaffolded summer reading in particular has shown significant reduction of learning gaps between low- and middle-income students over time (Kim and White, 2011). In some cases, school is the only place for students to become recreational readers. For students who begin school with a vocabulary deficit, school is the only place where they are able to read and make up that shortfall.

What factors lead to student disengagement with independent reading?

Unfortunately, the intrinsic delights of falling into a good book can go sour when the pressure that comes with knowing the benefits of reading leads to pushing for more student reading time in the wrong way. Middle school has historically been a period where students begin to fall away from reading for pleasure (Cullinan, 2000). This could potentially be explained by the academic focus that begins in middle school on reading for comprehension or reading for the test (Gallagher, 2009). As a result of this focus, we tend to lean toward attempts to put external controls on reading time in place, such as rewards and deadlines for reading a certain amount

(Reischer, 2016). An example of one of these external controls is mandated reading logs. In a study comparing the effects of mandatory reading logs versus voluntary reading logs, the students in the group that was required to read 20 minutes at home a day read exactly 20 minutes and reported overall negative attitudes towards reading. The students in the voluntary reading log group on average read more than 20 minutes at home a day and expressed an increase in positive attitudes towards reading (Reischer, 2016).

Giving students the leeway to choose when, or how, or what they read has proven beneficial to students' intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes toward reading. However, when it comes to the academic gains associated with reading, it is important to guide students toward options that are on an appropriate reading level. Reaching students with just the right amount of challenge to their reading level is important because when books are too easy, they do not expand vocabulary or comprehension skills (Sanden, 2012). When reading is too difficult, there is even more concern because students can take away misconceptions, or, in the worst-case scenario, give up on reading altogether (Kim & White, 2011). If there are 1-2 words on a page that students do not know, then the book is too easy. If there are 5 or more words per page they do not know, the book is too hard. Thus, just the right amount of challenge exists when there are 3-4 words per page that students do not know (Sanden, 2012).

Another consideration for teachers hoping to instill a love of reading is to be careful not to over-teach a book. When teachers take a book and chop it up into 20 different lessons over several weeks, students tend to check out mentally. Reading books can be scaffolded, but caution should be exercised in order to maintain the pace students need (Gallagher, 2009).

How can teachers help their students become lifelong readers?

One of the most practical ways to keep students reading is to support them in creating a reading plan. Students that do not know what they want to read next might not read a next book. When mentors leverage students' interests and preferences to develop reading lists and practice planning skills, it supports the development of lifelong independent readers (Ahfield, 2020; Galliton, 2014; Kittle, 2020).

One study found that providing books for students to read over the summer that are matched to their interests and to their reading level resulted in significant reduction of learning gaps between low- and middle-income students over time (Kim and White, 2011). However, scaffolding is needed to ensure that reading is happening and that comprehension is reached. One way to scaffold is by intentionally teaching silent independent reading comprehension strategies prior to summer break and engaging parents with listening to their children talk about their reading over the summer (Kim and White, 2011).

It is not enough to hand students a reading list over the summer and ask them to read. You can get them hooked during the school year first by dedicating classroom time for students to read and talk to one another about what they read. Talking about reading not only aids comprehension but also brings significant gains in student enthusiasm for reading. When students read with their peers and mentors and talk about their reading, they make meaningful connections, reinforcing belonging and purpose (Ahlfeld 2020; Benning, 2014; Schmoker, 2019). One of the primary motivators for reading identified across literature reviews, especially for teenagers, is identity development. Teenagers read as a means of exploring their own identity. They read what interests them, but they also find new interests through reading and find meaningful ways of understanding their social world. Reading gives them ideas for how to solve relationship problems (Cullinan, 2000). So in this way, there are social emotional benefits to reading, but this is also important information for tapping into student motivation for lifelong reading (Kittle, 2020).

Engaging Strategies for Independent Reading	
Planning to Read	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practice planning skills by supporting students in setting reading goals and making reading lists (Goodreads can be used to keep track) ● A Pinterest board of books to read next. Group by authors, series, genres. Share boards with the whole class and allow students to add to boards
Building Interest in Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allowing student choice in what to read ● Make a display of high interest books with QR codes to trailers, a “Read [Call] Me, Maybe” board ● Student created Book Talk videos on a shared FlipGrid thread ● My Teacher’s Reading... posters ● Survey students on interests; then choose and wrap a book as a gift for each student
Social Engagement with Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Devoted class time for active discussions (focused talks, pairs, tables, structured debate) ● Engage family to talk with their students about what they are reading ● Book clubs

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