

A Skill for Life

Steve Gardiner

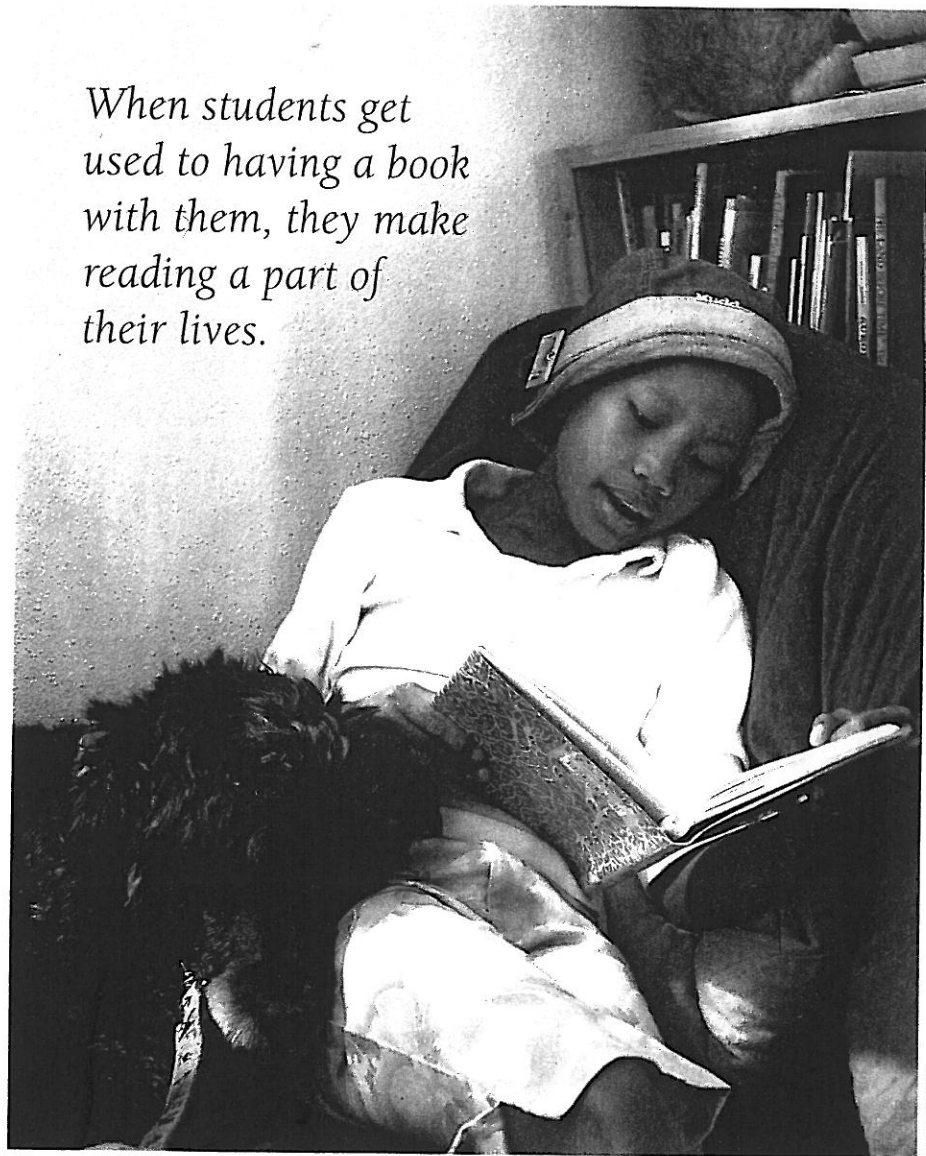
As educators strive to reach mandated student achievement standards, we may be forgetting the most important building block in student literacy. We write learning objectives, create computerized reading programs, and schedule day-by-day instruction, but we often ignore the fact that human beings most frequently succeed at activities they enjoy.

We don't need to spend a lot of money or design complicated programs to help students learn to enjoy reading; we just need to give them time to learn that reading can be enjoyable. When that component is in place, students will not only score high on state accountability and college placement tests but also develop the attributes of what I call *good adult readers*.

When I discuss reading with my new classes every fall, I explain the traits I've seen in friends and colleagues who are good adult readers. These successful readers

- Sometimes read more than one book at a time.
- Sometimes reread part or all of a book.
- Plan to have a book along when there might be waiting time.
- May quit reading a book if they choose.
- Sometimes enjoy sharing things they've read with others, and sometimes enjoy keeping things they've read to themselves.

When students get used to having a book with them, they make reading a part of their lives.



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- Value the freedom to read whatever book they want to read at a given time.
- When a student complains, "I don't understand this book," I ask, "How would a good adult reader handle this?" We talk about the options—rereading,

discussing the book with someone else who understands it, or possibly moving on to another book, depending on the circumstances. Through these discussions, students quickly come to understand the traits of the self-motivated

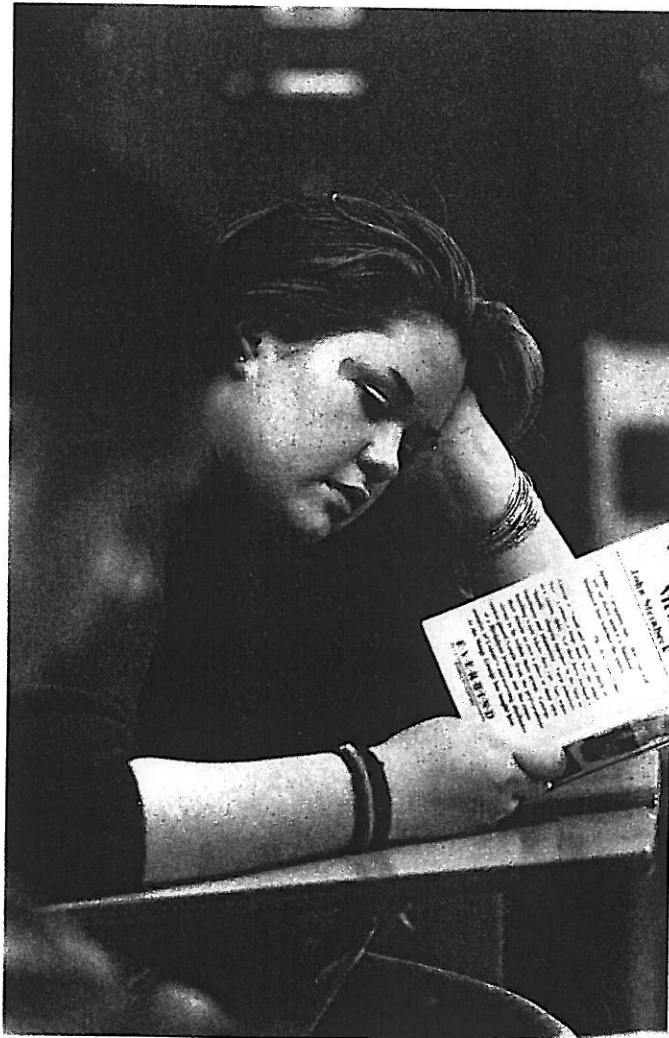
reader. The good adult reader, who reads because he or she enjoys and feels successful at reading, becomes the model for how we approach the many reading problems confronting student readers.

How SSR Works in English Class

To help my students become good adult readers, I give them 15 minutes at the beginning of class each day for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). They are not allowed to sleep, talk, or do homework. Students may bring in any books they choose, but not newspapers or magazines. Although newspapers and magazines make for interesting reading, books are, well, sustained. I want students to mull over ideas and develop reading skills over a longer period of time. I want them to get used to having a book with them, reading from it frequently and making it a part of their lives. Because teacher modeling is a powerful tool, I read with my students every day.

I have used SSR with every English class I've taught during the last 27 years. It has had a tremendous impact on students. Early in each school year, when a few students are still reluctant readers, I talk to them about why they don't want to read. I usually hear comments like "It's boring" or "I'm too busy." The joy of seeing such students take serious steps toward becoming good adult readers is the greatest satisfaction of my career.

Many teachers ask, "How do you



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read for 15 minutes each day and still have time to teach everything from the curriculum?" In fact, it works smoothly. Because we begin every class with Sustained Silent Reading, students know exactly what will happen when they walk into my room. Many begin reading before the bell rings. They continue as I take roll and get out my own book. At the end of the 15 minutes, students are already in "English mode" and ready to work with words. We transition quickly to the next activity and jump in because we are already warmed up. Students notice

this. One junior boy told me,

SSR is a great way to collect yourself before class begins. It gives students a chance to center their minds for what comes next.

A junior girl said,

Having English after lunch is difficult. The transition from a time where you're laughing with friends to a time where you're expected to work can be tough. SSR gives me a chance to get back into a thoughtful mood.

When students are in that "thoughtful mood," the remainder of class activities go faster and more easily for everyone. Not only do my students finish the core curriculum activities in English, but they also read, according to several years of surveys in my classes, about seven books per student per semester beyond the curriculum requirements. That's significant.

Students also recognize that time for independent reading is part of the balanced curriculum that develops their literacy skills. One sophomore girl wrote,

Reading is the foundation of an English class. You cannot learn grammar or spelling without being comfortable with the written word. You become comfortable with the written word by reading. I feel SSR is the most important part of our class, and I learn the most from it.

But Is It Research-Based?

Some people question the effectiveness of SSR. In fact, the National Reading Panel (NRP) concluded that most of the research findings in favor of indepen-

dent silent reading were “correlational” and did not establish whether or not more reading improves students’ reading skills. In its report, the panel recognized that independent silent reading may have a positive influence on reading fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension, but concluded that

Even though encouraging students to read more is intuitively appealing, there is still not sufficient research evidence obtained from studies of high methodological quality to support the idea that such efforts reliably increase how much students read or that such programs result in improved reading skills. (2000)

With that line of thinking, the National Reading Panel eliminated from their study most of the research that supports SSR.

Perhaps if NRP members had been in classrooms using SSR for more than a quarter of a century, as I have, they would be more inclined to recognize the dramatic results it produces. What I have seen and heard convinces me that SSR is effective and valuable. My observations wouldn’t be classified as “sufficient research evidence” or as “studies of high methodological quality.” But as Krashen (2001) and others have pointed out, the research proof sought by the National Reading Panel does exist. Dozens of studies show that Sustained Silent Reading can improve students’ vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation.

Nagy and Anderson (1984), Trelease (2001), and Krashen (1993) all found strong evidence that regular SSR may be the most effective vocabulary-building tool available to educators. Nagy and Anderson noted that with approximately 88,500 words in the English language, teaching vocabulary

to students can be an overwhelming task. They concluded that

Any program of direct vocabulary instruction ought to be conceived in full recognition that it can cover only a small fraction of the words that children need to know. Trying to expand children’s vocabularies by teaching them words 1 by 1, 10 by 10, or even 100 by 100 would appear to be an exercise in futility. (1984, p. 327)

Other researchers have found evidence of improved reading comprehension as a result of organized SSR programs in schools. For example, Kornelny and Smith (1993) used the

SSR significantly improves students’ attitudes toward and enjoyment of reading. Trelease wrote that SSR creates

positive changes in attitude toward the library, voluntary reading, assigned reading, and the importance of reading. This affects the amount students read and thus their facility with the process. (p. 110)

No Reader Left Behind

To meet the requirements of legislation like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers must teach specific reading and math skills. But we must also remember that the state-mandated accountability test, although significant

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Nelson-Denny Reading Test for pre-test and post-test measurements of reading comprehension. During an 18-week semester, high school English classes that did not use SSR gained an average of .5 grade level, or one semester’s growth. Eight English classes that participated in SSR gained an average of 1.9 grade levels.

Fisher (2001) found that one San Diego, California, high school that started a literacy program including SSR boosted its statewide reading achievement scores during the most recent test year by 12 percent. The average reader in that school “improved from a grade level equivalent of 4.3 years to 5.4 years on the Gates-MacGinitie test” (p. 92).

Most important, a host of researchers, including Trelease (2001) and Krashen (1993), have found that

and high-stakes, takes a few short hours on a single day in a student’s year. Reading is a skill for life, and if students do not learn to enjoy reading, they are cheated of a vital part of their education.

We must teach reading for enjoyment both in spite of and because of NCLB. Educators don’t have to choose between creating lifelong readers and improving student performance. Sustained Silent Reading is the best approach possible for ensuring that no child is left behind. As my school principal, Scott Anderson, said,

Under NCLB, we are tested on our reading comprehension and our response to that reading. Students have to be able to analyze and respond. In other words, they have to be active readers. If our kids practice for 15 minutes every day to be active readers, I don’t see how that wouldn’t help.

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Anderson added, though, that to complete the picture, we need to support SSR by instructing students in reading strategies:

We all must use reading strategies to make sure that our students are engaging in the reading. Are they asking the questions they should? Are they organizing their thoughts? I think we need to be sure they learn those reading strategies and learn to apply

them. If students know how to read, enjoy what they are reading, and know how to use what they read, then we are going to take them to the next level.

Becoming a Good Adult Reader

Moving students to the next level includes helping them gain insights about themselves. When students leave my classroom at the end of the school year, I want them to think about them-

selves and their education differently than they did when they entered. I want them to understand that they control a significant part of their education—that they are responsible for making choices that will affect their lives. Sustained Silent Reading is a great way to foster that growth.

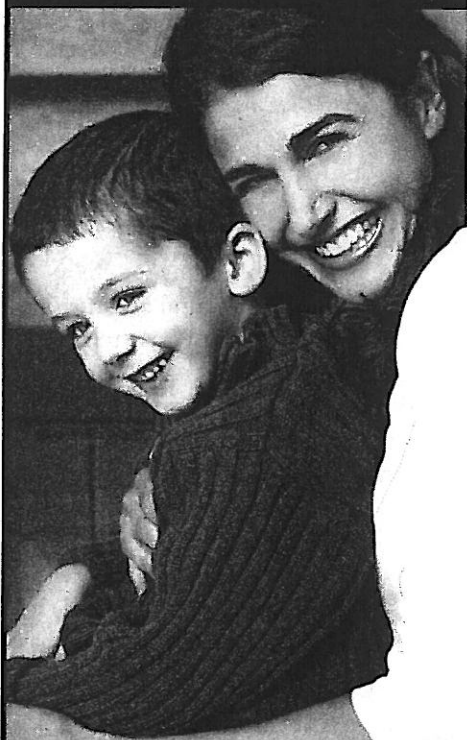
I watch it happen in my classroom year after year. Each fall, I talk about the traits of the good adult reader. As the months go by, students learn to enjoy reading. They gain confidence. They become less interested in hearing about the good adult reader, and more interested in becoming one. ■

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