

## R<sup>5</sup>: The Sustained Silent Reading makeover that transformed readers

*This SSR adaptation can increase students' wide reading, metacognitive awareness, and comprehension.*

**A**t first glance, it looks as if all is well during a Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) block. The class is still and quiet. Students sit calmly with open books, appearing to read intently. But take a closer look and you'll recognize a handful of disengaged readers doing anything but reading. These students move from bookshelf to desk, from desk to restroom, and then back to the bookshelf to switch books. Others sit staring at and flipping the pages of a book, maybe even reading words, but neglecting to make meaning of what they have read. These disengaged readers like to share their progress with the teacher frequently, stating, "I'm on chapter 2 now," then later, "I'm almost to chapter 3." Add to these students those who are reading books well below their ability level, or those stuck reading the same genre, book after book, and you begin to get a clearer picture of what is actually occurring during this silent reading time.

### A cause for concern

Even a few disengaged readers in a classroom is a cause for concern, especially given the research that suggests a powerful link between time spent reading and reading achievement (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999). Furthermore, those who read by choice report reading more than other students (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), perform better on standardized reading tests (Gottfried, 1990), and make higher grades in school (Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998).

Our students as a whole seemed very far removed from the engaged, enthusiastic, and self-motivated students described by these researchers. We were certainly aware of McQuillan's (1998) observation that students needed access to appealing, interesting text and time to silently read books of their choice to attain high levels of literacy. And although research suggests middle class families such as those in our school have more access to books (Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986), we found that many of our students had outside interests competing with time to read, and a handful of them, when given the opportunity, didn't actively engage in reading at all.

### Who we are

Our collaboration began in December of 2003. The two of us, Michelle, a university instructor, and Nicki, a third-grade teacher, wanted to examine the metacognitive awareness or ability of third graders to monitor and guide their thinking during the reading process and to determine whether direct instruction in metacognitive strategies would benefit all learners.

Furthermore, Nicki was worried about the growth of students in two groups she had identified from guided reading: her advanced readers, those who were performing well above grade level, and her "fake" readers, those who read the words in a text without attaching meaning, or literally pretended to read. We hoped that in our quest to find out more about third graders' metacognitive awareness, we would also discover how to engage our disengaged readers and purposefully accelerate our highest readers.

## How we gathered data

We chose to use the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) designed for grades 4–8 to help explore our action research questions. We chose the DRA 4–8 for two major reasons. First, the DRA 4–8 provides data regarding engagement as well as metacognitive awareness, both of which were central to our research questions. Second, Nicki’s students had already been assessed with the DRA K–3 and some of them were reading beyond the scope of its K–5 range. Because it has texts ranging from level 20 (grade 2) to level 80 (grade 8), the DRA 4–8 would allow those higher readers to continue to show growth, while providing a bridge for the below- and on-grade-level readers.

The DRA 4–8 has three major components, two of which were significant to this study: engagement and comprehension. To determine each student’s level of reading engagement, we administered the DRA Student Reading Survey to all students. The survey has two sections, wide reading and self-assessment/goal setting. The wide-reading survey asks students to list what books they have read recently, differentiating between what has been read at school and at home, and what authors and genres they enjoy reading and why. The self-assessment survey asks students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop a written plan to improve areas of need. A rubric is used by the teacher to determine whether the student’s written response in each area is at one of four levels: intervention, instructional, independent, or advanced. The goal is to have each student be at least independent in each area. Once a level is identified for both wide reading and self-assessment/goal setting, the scores are then totaled to obtain an overall engagement score.

The next component of the DRA 4–8 that was essential to our study was comprehension. Short fiction and nonfiction texts are available for students to read, ranging from reading levels 20–80 (second to eighth grade). After a text is selected by the teacher or student, the student reads a few pages orally for fluency evaluation. This determines if the text level is appropriate for the student to continue to read. Then, the student writes a prediction about the book and develops questions he or she anticipates will be answered during the reading. The student reads the remainder of the book silently and

then responds to several written prompts and questions. These assess the student’s ability to summarize, answer literal and interpretive questions, and reflect on the text, as well as his or her metacognitive awareness while reading. As with engagement, each area of comprehension is assessed using a four-point rubric to determine whether the student is at an intervention, instructional, independent, or advanced level. Therefore, the teacher receives separate data on prediction, summarization, literal comprehension, interpretation, reflection, and metacognitive awareness for each student.

The scores are then totaled to determine an overall comprehension score. Scores on each component (engagement, fluency, and comprehension) are combined with the text level read to determine the student’s overall reading level. These data provided us with a comprehensive view of each student’s needs as well as a measure of class trends and concerns.

## What we found

The data on students’ engagement from the Student Reading Survey confirmed our classroom observations and teacher instinct. Our students were reading only a narrow range of genres and mostly nonchallenging texts. Many of them had a poor view of reading and lacked strategies to monitor comprehension. Although only 24% of the students scored at the intervention and instructional levels for wide reading, it was clear that their book choices were limited by genre and series. When we disaggregated their selections, 86% of the students reported reading fantasy books and 52% were reading realistic fiction. In contrast, only 10% were reading nonfiction books and only 19% were reading mysteries.

We needed to get these children interested and engaged in other genres, especially nonfiction. We also needed to introduce them to some new series, authors, and age-appropriate books. The Magic Tree House books and Junie B. Jones were the most common books listed as recent reads.

The Student Reading Survey area of self-assessment/goal setting demonstrated a more startling need: 67% of our students were at the intervention or instructional level. Our students had a very limited view of the nature of reading, and they often regurgitated “teacher lingo” without any

understanding of what it meant. For example, when asked on the survey to list what he did well as a reader, one student wrote, "I clarify, predict, and ask questions." This sounds very sophisticated but these same words were printed on a poster in the classroom and had been the focus of several guided reading groups who used the reciprocal teaching method. In addition, most of the plans to improve reading were simplistic and showed that students were not metacognitive or aware of the thinking process as they read. For example, on one survey a student wrote that his strengths were "connections, retelling, comprehend reading the words." When asked in the survey what he needed to do to become a better reader, he wrote, "connections," and his plan for improving was "connections, read more, retelling, comprehend." Like this student, many others repeated what they did well as a reader in response to what they needed to do to become a better reader. We knew we had a long way to go in self-assessment/goal setting.

The comprehension data demonstrated that our students would benefit from direct instruction in comprehension strategies and in metacognitive awareness, both related to our original action research questions. In the areas of prediction and summary, 61% of our students were at either the intervention or instructional level, 39% scored at these levels in literal comprehension, 56% in interpretation, and 50% in reflection. In the area of metacognitive awareness, 89% of our students scored at the intervention and instructional levels.

## What we concluded

Because our students lacked the strategies to monitor comprehension we decided that we needed to integrate metacognitive units across the literacy block. The comprehension data led us to implement units of study in making connections, predicting, questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. We determined that direct instruction in these strategies would benefit all learners, potentially enhancing the achievement of our highest readers and laying a foundation for our lowest readers. Furthermore, by teaching a strategy throughout the day and for a significant amount of time (sometimes more than a month), we hoped that students

would be more likely to acquire it and use it independently.

The same data led us to redesign the SSR block to be more purposeful and focused. Our students had a very limited view of reading. We needed to ensure that they were engaging in reading, and we wanted to gradually release responsibility to them as they learned each strategy (Pearson, 1985). We felt that we needed to restructure SSR to achieve these goals.

During the 1990s SSR; Drop Everything And Read (DEAR); and Uninterrupted, Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) were commonly used as the independent reading block in many schools. During SSR, the teacher is expected to read and be a role model for students. Students read materials of their own choosing for a specified amount of time. In SSR, there are no accountability measures and there is no required follow-up activity (Pilgreen, 2000). The rationale for SSR was to have students practice reading at their independent reading levels to develop fluency, increase vocabulary, enhance comprehension, and improve wide reading (Krashen, 1988; Pilgreen, 2000). We were well aware of the strengths of SSR but equally aware of possible weaknesses. Students often read inappropriate reading material (too hard or too easy), and many students were fake reading during this time. The lack of response or feedback left some students without a purpose for reading. And in our situation, many students were unable to engage in their texts because they lacked strategies needed to monitor comprehension. They viewed reading as decoding words and answering questions when they were finished (Beers, 2002; Wilhelm, 1997). Likewise, the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) reported that it was unable to locate many studies on the efficacy of independent reading programs such as SSR. Studies that did exist failed to convince the panel that the programs increased the amount of reading or improved fluency and overall reading achievement.

Our data and the overwhelming evidence that demonstrated the positive relationship between wide reading, vocabulary acquisition, and a students' performance on standardized tests (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Krashen, 2004; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1988) solidified our belief that a structured time for students to independently

practice reading was critical to engaging readers and developing a literate culture—both predictors of reading achievement (Allington, 2006; Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993). Because there is also evidence that students who spend more time reading in school perform as well or better on standardized tests of reading comprehension than other students (Krashen, 2004), we wanted to add to the total amount of time students were reading. Therefore, we set out to retool the SSR block. We wanted this time to be purposeful, focused, metacognitive, and pleasurable.

## How we did it

We realized that our students were unaware of the reading process, had some deficiencies in comprehension, and lacked the ability to self-assess and set goals. In addition, we had a handful of fake readers who went through the motions of reading during SSR.

Michelle had experienced success with reading workshop, so we decided to combine some of these elements and add in those components that would make the reading process more visible to our students (see Table 1). We reviewed Pilgreen's (2000) research in which she analyzed successful SSR programs and identified eight common factors. These factors are access, appeal, conducive environment, encouragement, staff training, nonaccountability, follow-up activities, and distributed time to read. Access and appeal were not an issue for our students. The classroom library housed over 1,500 books across genres. A guided-reading group had organized the library to make it more appealing. The physical environment was not a concern either. We had couches, a chair, pillows, and even lawn chairs available for students to use while they read for a specified amount of time. Students reported feeling safe and relaxed while they read.

We agreed with the assertion that teachers enhance motivation by serving as reading role models (Gambrell, 1996), but felt Pilgreen's model, which promotes the practice of teachers reading silently alongside students, limited the amount of support a teacher could provide. Instead, Nicki modeled a love for books through read-aloud, shared reading, and book talks throughout the course of each day. She shared her knowledge of books and worked

hard to match students to books that she thought they would be interested in reading. This freed her up to monitor and support students during the independent reading block while maintaining students' views of her as a reader. When asked, "Is your teacher a reader?" 100% of the students responded "Yes." When asked, "How do you know?" they gave a number of convincing responses such as, "She talks about all of the books she reads all the time," and "She reads to us all day."

Staff training was ongoing as we read professional materials, implemented strategies, and reflected on the outcomes. Over time we built students' reading stamina. We started out having them read for 10 minutes and then increased the time gradually, based on their requests for more time reading.

While we agreed that a quota approach to accountability, such as setting minimum pages read or other book requirements for students, was counterproductive, we wanted a way to monitor student choices, provide encouragement, and support book choices when they were reading for pleasure. Therefore we needed to keep track of the books students were reading and confer with students on their strategy use. In addition, we wanted to have students keep logs about their reading to help them gather their thoughts for discussion. The logs were never perceived, nor used, as evaluative tools for individual students but they did provide us with a great deal of insight on the group's progress.

Next, we brainstormed a list of stumbling blocks in traditional SSR drawn from our staff training, professional reading, and our own experiences. These included students choosing a new chapter book every day, chronically reading books well below their independent levels, getting stuck in the same genre or series, fake reading, and general avoidance behaviors.

## Overview of the R<sup>5</sup> process

We strategically designed several structures and practices to help negate the obstacles of SSR. The result was R<sup>5</sup> (read, relax, reflect, respond, and rap). Three days a week, students spend 10–25 minutes reading self-selected texts. After reading, they reflect in writing on their use of metacognitive practices taught during minilessons, guided reading, and read-aloud. Conversations about books

**TABLE 1**  
**Comparing R<sup>5</sup>, reading workshop, and SSR**

R <sup>5</sup>	Reading Workshop	SSR
<p><b>Read and relax:</b> Students have a set purpose to read a book of their choice anywhere in the classroom. Students practice strategy use. Teacher does a "status of the class" and then confers with students on their strategy plans.</p> <p><b>Reflect and respond:</b> Students reflect and respond in their reading log, recording the book title and genre, as well as identifying the strategy they used and something interesting they read. Teacher circulates during this time.</p> <p><b>Rap (Share/discuss):</b> <i>In pairs</i> Teacher continues to circulate. Students pair up. They share something interesting from their book (this may or may not be what they recorded) and actively listen to their partner as he or she shares. <i>Whole class</i> Teacher facilitates sharing. Students report what their partner shared. Teacher asks the class to identify the strategy being used. Then, their partner shares what they discussed. The teacher elicits the strategy and the process is repeated with a new pair.</p>	<p><b>Minilesson:</b> Teacher conducts a quick minilesson, which may set a purpose for reading, usually in a reading area.</p> <p><b>Read:</b> Students read a book of their choice. Teacher reads, does a "status of the class" or circulates the room, and confers with students who have signed up for a conference.</p> <p><b>Record/respond:</b> Students record their book titles in a reading log and then respond to the book they are reading.</p> <p><b>Sharing:</b> Teacher facilitates a whole-class share of reading.</p>	<p><b>Read:</b> Teacher and students read a book of their choice.</p> <p><b>Record:</b> Students record their book titles in a reading record.</p> <p><b>Sharing:</b> Students may or may not share what they have read.</p>

Note. Atwell (1998), Pilgreen (2000), and Routman (2003)

(Alvermann, 1999; Langer & Close, 2001), or the rap portion of R<sup>5</sup>, occurred when students discussed reflections with partners. Partners were then invited to share one another's responses in a whole-class share. As students reported on their partner's reading, the teacher helped the class identify the metacognitive strategies being used. These discussions required students to focus while reading so they could meaningfully contribute in their pair share. The process promoted active listening in the pair share and whole-class share because students could not contribute unless they knew what had been said. The teacher called on those who volun-

teered to share, and on those who did not. This component whittled away at fake reading—students had to concentrate while reading so they were prepared to share exactly how they had applied a strategy to that text on that day.

## Description of the R<sup>5</sup> process

### *Read and relax*

Several hard and fast rules were put in place to set the tone for the R<sup>5</sup> block. The first rule was

that students had to have self-selected reading materials in their desks prior to the start of the period. If someone forgot or finished reading a book, we gave them a new selection to read for the remainder of the time. We were careful to ensure that this was not perceived as a punishment, and we tried to choose something the student would be able to read and enjoy. The second rule was that no one could get up during the block. Restroom and water breaks were given before and after R<sup>5</sup>.

These rules seemed to help all students relax and settle into reading quickly and solidly. It made a dramatic difference to most of those who had spent time avoiding reading. Their only choice now was to sit and pretend to read or to sit and read. Only one or two made the former choice, and we had a plan for them as well.

To help keep track of whether students were making good selections and sticking with longer books, the teacher logged the “status of the class” each day (Atwell, 1990). The status sheet had cells for the students’ names, the date, the title of each student’s text, and the page they were on each day. It took 5 to 10 minutes for the teacher to circulate and record information. It was time well spent. After a week, students realized that someone was noticing what and how much they were reading. It also offered us a chance to do on-the-spot miniconferences with those students who might be making poor choices or having trouble finding a book that held their interest. It was a quiet, low-key, and subtle way to provide some accountability and support right when it was needed.

After the status was taken, the teacher conducted a one-on-one conference with one or two students each day. Students shared their metacognitive goal setting and plan sheet (Figure 1) for the strategy they were studying during the literacy block. This was the teacher’s chance to provide individual students with coaching on the application of the strategy being learned. The teacher gave the students time to elaborate on how they had independently practiced the strategy in the context of reading. If needed, the teacher stepped in to help students develop or apply their plans. The teacher also provided support for any other reading need they identified in the conference. The teacher kept anecdotal records on the conferences and used these notes to track progress. We found that the ideal goal is to meet with each student every month.

## **Reflect and respond**

In order to ensure student engagement with text, as well as monitor the use of various comprehension strategies, we also had students keep a modified daily reading log (Figure 2). After reading, students took about five minutes to reflect and record the date, title, author, genre, and a brief response to their text. This section listed several prompts to which students might respond. These prompts included, I’m wondering, I remember, I’m thinking that, I feel sorry for, Can you believe, When I read \_\_\_ I was reminded of, and WOW! The prompts were crafted to lead students in reflecting on one or more of the metacognitive strategies they had used that day. After several months of use, students had the opportunity to help edit the prompts. This invited student ownership in the process.

Because we were learning about various comprehension strategies during other parts of the literacy block, we would sometimes kick off R<sup>5</sup> by quickly reviewing a strategy, such as predicting, and we encouraged students to take notice of when and how they used the skill. Then we’d suggest that they might want to focus their log entry on that strategy. Other strategies taught were connecting with text, predicting, questioning, self-monitoring, visualizing, summarizing, and text-feature analysis. The students used the log to organize their ideas and prepare them for their rap, or discussion with a peer.

## **Rap**

After students logged responses, they shared their insights with an “elbow” partner. Next, students were invited to share something interesting that their elbow partner had described. We facilitated the whole-class share by validating worthy responses (or those made by students who needed the most encouragement), as well as by responding to and amplifying their responses. Again, it didn’t take the students a long time to realize they had to put some thought into their responses and listen actively to their partners. Allowing for talk was integral to creating a literate community (Marshall, 2002).

## **Results**

After four months, we readministered the student survey on engagement and were thrilled with

**FIGURE 1**  
**Thinking about my reading: Predicting self-assessment and goal setting**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Put a check mark by the things you do well as a reader when making predictions. Highlight the things you think you need to work on to become a better reader.

- ☐ Use title/chapter headings.
- ☐ Use the front and back cover.
- ☐ Use pictures and captions.
- ☐ Create questions that might be answered as I read.
- ☐ Use what I already know about the topic.
- ☐ Use what I know about the genre or series.
- ☐ Use what I know about a character.
- ☐ Use what I know about text structure.
- ☐ Use what has happened so far in the book.
- ☐ Make meaningful connections while I read.

Choose one or two highlighted items to improve upon:

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Tell several specific ways you plan to improve your previewing skills:

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students' progress. We wondered whether they would maintain that growth over time and whether we could build upon it. Nicki asked to keep her class list intact and looped up to fourth grade with her students, allowing us to continue our project.

Seven months after we began our inquiry, we readministered the entire DRA 4–8. One hundred percent of the students scored at the independent or advanced levels for wide reading and self-assessment/goal setting. This was in stark contrast to the 33% who scored at these levels initially. Now, 61% listed three or more genres of books read, compared to 38% seven months earlier. Seven different genres were now listed by students, including the addition of horror, comics, and historical fiction. All genres reported increased in prevalence. Now, 94% reported reading fantasy, 83% realistic fiction, and 50% nonfiction.

Comprehension also improved as evidenced on the DRA 4–8. All areas demonstrated growth: prediction, summarization, literal questioning, interpretation, reflection, and metacognitive awareness.

Now, only 5% of our students scored at the instructional level in prediction, summary, and literal comprehension—a significant reduction in each area. In interpretation, only 21% were now at the instructional level and just 11% were instructional in reflection. Metacognitive awareness proved to be the biggest area of growth. We went from 89% of the students scoring at intervention or instructional level to only 5% scoring at the instructional level (none at intervention).

## Improving motivation

Sometimes it isn't a question of whether or not to use a practice but how to implement it more effectively. Such was the case when we retooled the Sustained Silent Reading block. We found that SSR can be deceiving—what you see may not be what you get. Teachers need to carefully and consistently monitor and guide the developing reading habits of their students. Building in oppor-

<b>FIGURE 2</b> <b>Independent reading log</b>		
Title and author	Genre	Response to what I read: I'm wondering.... I can see a clear picture of.... I feel sorry for.... I really liked it when.... Can you believe...? I made a connection to.... WOW! Today in my story....

tunities for sharing ideas and discussions about text can be a powerful motivation for engaging readers. A thoughtful modification of SSR geared to the needs of a class can result in significant gains on formal assessments of wide reading, metacognitive awareness, and comprehension.

The most striking outcome we observed in the classroom was that students were sharing titles and describing snippets of their books three times a week during R<sup>5</sup>. This proved in the end to be the most motivating factor for our fake readers. A pervasive culture of avid readers was born, causing even reluctant readers to compete for the first shot at new books. Students began asking the teacher to purchase specific titles for the classroom collection. They started coaxing their parents to purchase new titles (which they actually read, rather than letting them stack up) or to take them to the public library to get books. They also began clamoring for more R<sup>5</sup> time. The emphasis on metacognitive awareness was a benefit for all learners. We saw improved motivation in every child—from the hard-core book addicts to the most reluctant read-

ers. Fake readers became engaged readers, and engaged readers became fanatics.

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