

NO MORE INDEPENDENT READING
WITHOUT SUPPORT

DEAR READERS,

Much like the diet phenomenon *Eat This, Not That*, this series aims to replace some existing practices with approaches that are more effective—healthier, if you will—for our students. We hope to draw attention to practices that have little support in research or professional wisdom and offer alternatives that have greater support. Each text is collaboratively written by authors representing research and practice. Section 1 offers a practitioner’s perspective on a practice in need of replacing and helps us understand the challenges, temptations, and misunderstandings that have led us to this ineffective approach. Section 2 provides a researcher’s perspective on the lack of research to support the ineffective practice(s) and reviews research supporting better approaches. In Section 3, the author representing a practitioner’s perspective gives detailed descriptions of how to implement these better practices. By the end of each book, you will understand both what not to do, and what to do, to improve student learning.

It takes courage to question one’s own practice—to shift away from what you may have seen throughout your years in education and toward something new that you may have seen few if any colleagues use. We applaud you for demonstrating that courage and wish you the very best in your journey from this to that.

Best wishes,

—*Nell K. Duke and Ellin Oliver Keene, series editors*

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CONTENTS

Introduction Nell K. Duke vii

SECTION 1 **NOT THIS**

1 **Is There Enough Time? And Is Time Enough to Support Independent Reading?** Debbie Miller

Finding the Time 1

- *How Can You Find the Minutes?* 3
- *What Benches Are You Guarding?* 4

More Than Just DEAR or Sustained Silent Reading 7

SECTION 2 **WHY NOT? WHAT WORKS?**

11 **Why Independent Reading Matters and the Best Practices to Support It** Barbara Moss

Does Independent Reading Influence Student Achievement? 11

If We Know Independent Reading Is Effective, Why Don't We Do It? 13

A New Reason for Independent Reading: The Common Core State Standards 15

What Practices Are Critical for Effective Independent Reading? 16

- *Students Need to Be Given Classroom Time to Read* 16
- *Students Need to Be Able to Choose What They Read* 18
- *Students Need Explicit Instruction About What, Why, and How Readers Read* 19
- *Boost the Number of Texts Students Read* 24
- *Students Need Access to Texts* 27
- *Students Need Teacher Monitoring, Assessment, and Ongoing Support During Independent Reading* 30
- *Students Need to Talk About What They Read* 35

Why Independent Reading Matters Most for Striving Readers and English Learners 36

The Last Word: An Overview of Independent Reading Implementation by Teachers 38

SECTION 3 BUT THAT
**41 An Instructional Framework for Supporting
Classroom Independent Reading**
Debbie Miller

A Recommended Day in the Reading Block 42

How Much Time Did We Find? 44

Making the Most of Independent Reading 47

- *Provide Purpose: What, How, and Why Readers Read* 48
- *Keep It Authentic: Do Readers Do This in the World?* 48
- *Support Choice: Teach Students How to Choose Books* 49
- *Provide Explicit Instruction About What, How, and Why Readers Read* 51
- *Tactics Teachers Can Use to Keep Things Hopping During IR* 55
 - *Tactic 1: Get books in their hands.* 55
 - *Tactic 2: Organize your books for easy access.* 57
 - *Tactic 3: Start with small chunks of classroom IR time.* 57
 - *Tactic 4: Monitor IR.* 58
 - *Tactic 5: Differentiate instruction and create accountability through conferring.* 59
 - *Tactic 6: Use a catch to refocus the group.* 61
 - *Tactic 7: Invite students to reflect on and share their learning.* 61
 - *Tactic 8: Use partner reading and book clubs to get students talking and reading independently.* 63
 - *Tactic 9: Assess students' progress as independent readers.* 64
 - *Tactic 10: Support independence through assessment choices.* 68

The Kind of Independent Readers We Want Our Students to Be 69

Afterword Ellin Oliver Keene 71

References 73

INTRODUCTION

NELL K. DUKE

When districts around the country eliminated time for Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), and other independent reading periods in response to the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000), I didn't know what to think. On the one hand, reading—a lot—is clearly essential to becoming a strong reader; if students who choose not to read at home aren't given time to read at school, when will they read? On the other hand, I'd sat through many hours of DEAR and USSR that seemed like at best a waste of time and at worst a surefire way to further turn students off reading. I even came to refer to DEAR as “Drop Everything and Find Waldo” as I watched students spend this valuable time searching for the stripe-hatted Waldo in the popular *Where's Waldo?* books—without ever reading a word.

Debbie Miller and Barbara Moss help us see how to do independent reading right—to live up to its promise as a means to support reading development and engagement. Moss updates us with some very important research that shows the positive impact independent reading periods in school can have if done well. Miller helps us see how to find time for independent reading and how to provide students with the kind of supports that will make independent reading effective.

It is a privilege to edit a book by these two renowned writers and thinkers. I expect that you will leave their book with a renewed sense of purpose and new strategies for fostering independent reading in your classroom. Now off we go; it's time to read.

SECTION 1

NOT THIS

Is There Enough Time? And Is Time Enough to Support Independent Reading?

DEBBIE MILLER

Finding the Time

Children learn to read by reading . . . but not without instructional support. It's well known that in order to become thoughtful, strategic, proficient readers, children need to read. A lot. When children read extensively, they learn about themselves, other people, and the world; they learn that reading is something they can do that empowers them to control their lives, connect with each other, and make the world a better place. For children to develop the habits and identity of thoughtful, strategic, proficient readers, they need to practice and, to make their practice productive, they need the tools that we can provide through

**For the evidence
that independent
reading is
essential
to student
achievement**

see Section 2,
pages 11–14

instruction. This extensive independent reading practice framed by instruction needs to happen in classrooms every day.

Maybe you're thinking, "I hear you. If I had more minutes in the day, I really would give independent reading time a try. But my day is jam-packed as it is—I can't imagine squeezing in one more thing." I get it—with all that's being asked of teachers and children, it's no wonder you might feel overwhelmed, out of sync, and just a little frantic.

But what if there were a way out? What if there were a way—at least for part of the day—where things slowed down, your students had their hands and minds on great books, and you had the pleasure of conferring with them about their reading and themselves as readers? No rotations, activities, or worksheets—just you, your kids, and books.

To learn the practices to support independent reading

see Section 3, pages 41–69, and the research that informs these practices in Section 2

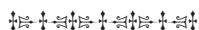
If you could find a way out, would you take it?

Eighteen brave teachers in a K–5 school just outside Baltimore did. I was scheduled for a three-day visit, and on the first two days I worked with children in classrooms, demonstrating in each a short focus lesson, thirty to sixty minutes of independent reading and conferring, and a reflection time where children reflected on their reading and what they'd learned about themselves as readers that day—the instructional framework I call "readers' workshop."

Over a luscious crab cake dinner the night of day two (this was Baltimore after all!), teachers, their literacy coach, and principal had a "come to independent reading" moment. They realized they'd been doing all this stuff "about" reading, but kids never got to actually read and practice what teachers were working so hard to teach them. They had Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time at the end of the day, but there was no instructional focus for this time—kids would grab a book and read until the timer sounded. And teachers just tried to keep them on task.

“We don’t really know our children as readers,” teachers reflected. “We’ve learned more about them in two days than we’ve learned about them all year,” they told me. They explained that during DEAR time, teachers read, too. Because this was the only time children read independently, teachers weren’t able to confer with children and find out about them as readers. “Plus,” they told me, “we realize our children don’t have anything specific to practice during DEAR time, and we’re not even sure they’re really reading. So yes. We’re in! How do we get more time for independent reading?”

My answer? First, let’s find the minutes. And then let’s figure out how to use them well.



How Can You Find the Minutes?

In Eduardo Galleano’s short story “Bureaucracy 3,” he writes:

At a barracks in Seville, in the middle of the courtyard of that barracks was a small bench. Next to the small bench, a soldier stood guard. No one knew why the bench had to be guarded. It was guarded around the clock—every day, every night, and from one generation of officers to the next, the order was passed on and the soldiers obeyed it. No one expressed any doubts or ever asked why. If that’s how it was done, there had to be a reason.

And so it continued until someone, some general or colonel, wanted to look at the original order. He had to rummage through all the files. After a good bit of poking around, he found the answer. Thirty-one years, two months and four days ago, an officer had ordered a guard to be stationed beside the small bench, which had just been painted, so that no one would think of sitting on wet paint. (1992, 64)

What Benches Are You Guarding?

If you're looking to find the time for independent reading during the school day, what benches/practices might you be guarding? Which ones do you believe must stay? Which ones might you modify or stop protecting altogether? Here's how my colleagues and friends in Baltimore worked through these questions.

To learn what happened when teachers evaluated their time

see Section 3,
page 44

They asked me and their literacy coach to help them find the thirty to sixty minutes (depending on grade level) they needed every day for independent reading.

Here's a sampling of some of the actions and activities we noticed across the day and the grades that gave us all pause.

Calendar activities. Our first visit was kindergarten. Children were gathered in the meeting area doing calendar activities, dutifully filling in the blanks with their voices: "Today is _____. Yesterday was _____. Tomorrow will be _____." They found the day and date on the calendar, and sang the "There Are Seven Days in a Week" song. Next their teacher marked how many days they'd been in school on the number line, and children counted and clapped from one all the way to 106. They grouped the number of days they'd been in school by tens and ones using straws and rubber bands. And then they dressed the bear.

"What's the weather like outside?" their teacher asked. "How should we dress Paddy the Bear?" "It's cold and snowy!" the children chorused. So Paddy needed a coat with buttons. Paddy needed boots with buckles. And Paddy, even though he's covered in fur from head to toe (and staying inside), also needed a hat that tied. Dressing Paddy is hard work when you're just learning how to button and buckle and tie. Not to mention time-consuming.

Twenty-seven minutes later, we moved to grade 1. One glance at the whiteboard and I knew what they were up to. It was calendar time!

I saw the straws ready to be bundled and the number line ready to be counted, and I heard children singing, “There are seven days in a week and I know what their names are. . . .” And then I spied him. Paddy. Patiently waiting to be buttoned, buckled, and tied.

Would it surprise you that grade 2 had calendar activities that included Paddy too? I’m not against calendar activities—I’ve done all these things myself! But how much time, effort, and energy should they take? Over how many days and weeks and years? And do children need to dress a bear to figure out what to put on when they go outside to play? Might they already know?

What else did we notice?

Schoolwide morning announcements. These took up to ten minutes every day, what with announcing the day, the date, what happened on this day in history, reminders for after-school activities (tae kwon do in the gym, Scouts in room 207, jump rope practice in the lunchroom) and the upcoming food drive, book fair, and the candy/candle/wrapping paper sale. Next, birthdays were announced (birthday boys and girls trooped to the office for a Happy Birthday Pencil), the school song was sung, and a sweet-voiced child read the poem of the day.

Transitions. There was a lot of flicking of lights, and “Get quiet by the time I count to ten,” “We can’t go until everyone’s cleaned up and ready,” and “I’m waiting” kind of talk we found. Dozens of minutes a day devoted to moving from one subject to another, passing out papers, and other organizational details that took away from constructive learning time.

Lining up. In many classrooms lining up was quite the procedure. For example:

“If you are wearing stripes, you may line up.” (Then on to plaid, checks, etc.)

“If your name starts with *A*, you may line up.” (Then on to *B*, *C*, *D*, etc.)

“If you are the line leader, you may invite a child to line up.”
(Then on to that child offering an invitation, and on and on and on.)

The reading block. Oh my goodness—this was an eye-opener for everyone! Across the grades children were doing a staggering number of things *about* reading (and math and handwriting and coloring, too) but very little actual reading. These included:

- worksheets and worksheet packets (As in the more you got done, the more there were, just ready and waiting for you. And these worksheets weren't limited to reading—they also included math, handwriting, and now and again a writing prompt.)
- test-prep materials (All. Year. Long.)
- looking up definitions of vocabulary words in the dictionary, writing them three times and using them in a sentence, and/or writing an entire story using all the words (Those were *some* stories!)
- reading, spelling, and math workbooks
- word searches and jumbles
- answering end-of-story comprehension questions from the basal reader
- centers (coloring, cutting and pasting, math activities, making paper plate and paper sack puppets, using a document camera to fill out a worksheet and project it on the wall)
- guided reading (There's nothing wrong with guided reading groups, but they shouldn't take over the entire reading block. In some instances, children did have opportunities to read independently during this time, but they had no opportunity to confer with their teacher—she was busy getting through three or four groups. In many classrooms, children rotated through centers during this time, and although some did include reading activities, there was little real reading.)

- completing accelerated reading tests or other computer programs, not to mention counting points for prizes
- endless browsing in an effort to find a “just-right” book
- schoolwide DEAR time, the last twenty minutes of the day, with children and teachers all reading during this time
- packing up to go home (In some classrooms, children started packing up and cleaning up a full fifteen minutes before the final bell.)

More Than Just DEAR or Sustained Silent Reading

Finding the time can feel like the biggest challenge to independent reading in the classroom, but time isn't the only thing we need to think about. When students sit quietly at their desk with a book or magazine during DEAR or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time, we might see them flip a page every minute or so, but we can't see what's happening inside their heads. We don't have evidence of how they're making meaning of the text, the specific ways they've grown as readers, or what they're struggling with as they read. Without that information, we can't teach them how to get better and we can't be sure that—even if they read every day—all students *are* becoming better readers this week than they were the one before.

SSR and DEAR appeal to so many teachers because they've been told that reading together creates community and that by reading a book while their students read, they're modeling what being a good reader looks like. But how much information is a student gathering from watching a teacher read? Not much. The student observes quiet eyes focused on the text for a set period of time, some page turning, perhaps a gasp or chuckle, but mostly nothing that couldn't be communicated

For the research that explains why students need more than time for independent reading

see Section 2, pages 11–13

by a photograph of someone reading. It's an intention that's on the right track, but misses the mark.

For students to do more than race through lots of books, they need a teacher to show them what behaviors they need to practice as they read, and the teacher needs opportunities to monitor and give feedback on how students are using those behaviors. With SSR and DEAR, both the students' and the teacher's process of making meaning of a text are invisible and can't influence one another. Teachers need to talk about how they make meaning of a text so that the process is "visible" to students. As students practice, the teacher monitors students' reading, through talk and writing, so that students get feedback that helps them get better. Sometimes the feedback helps students choose the right book, one that lets them experience some success. Unguided choice and lack of monitoring can mean that students see struggle while reading as their own permanent deficiency. If they don't understand when that struggle is part of the process of reading and growing as a reader, children come to accept that what they read won't make sense and that some people, like them, aren't really readers. Independent reading in silence without the kind of support described in this book means these children suffer in silence.

Just to be clear—children should have a number of opportunities to read throughout the day; some will be more structured than others. But when nonstructured scenarios are the *only* opportunities for children to

How can you structure independent reading time in a way that is effective for all children?

see Section 3,
pages 47–69

read—when independent reading stands alone with no instructional framework, such as DEAR and SSR—it's simply not enough. When we "set children loose" day after day after day, with no focus or support, it can lead to fake reading and ultimately disengagement (as you'll see in Section 2), whether it's due to lack of purpose or a perceived or actual lack of reading skill. It's our job to do everything we can to equip children

with the tools they need to stay engaged and motivated when we're not there, when they don't have a grown-up giving them the command to "drop everything and read."

The more opportunities we can give children to read, the better. My Baltimore friends understood that—they just couldn't find the time in their overcrowded day. For decades we have understood that providing long and growing periods of time for independent reading, along with focused instruction, is essential for children's growth as readers.

So now, let's look at what the research tells us about independent reading and why making it work for all children is so important.