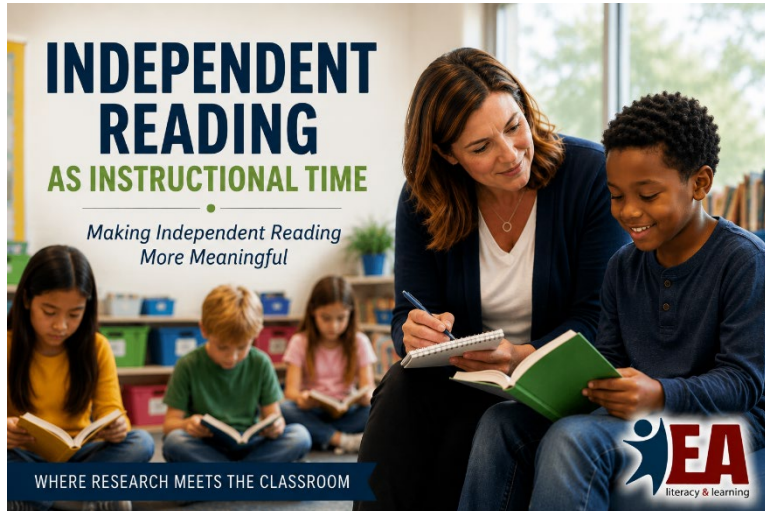


Independent Reading as Instructional Time

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Walk into almost any classroom, and you will likely find some form of independent reading built into the literacy block. Whether it is called DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), or simply independent reading, the goal is usually the same: giving students time to read.

As literacy educators, most of us would agree that students need opportunities to engage with books. The question is not whether independent reading belongs in the classroom. The question is how we can make the most of that time.

Over the years, I have observed independent reading blocks that were highly productive and others that looked productive on the surface but provided little insight into what students were doing as readers. That experience led me to revisit the research and ask a simple question:

How can independent reading become a more meaningful part of literacy instruction?

The answer is not to eliminate independent reading. Instead, it may be time to rethink how we use it.

Why Independent Reading Matters

There is a reason independent reading has remained a part of literacy instruction for decades. Students need opportunities to apply what they are learning as readers. They need time with books, time to build stamina, and time to experience reading for themselves.

Research supports this idea. Students who read more are exposed to more words, more ideas, and more opportunities to build vocabulary and background knowledge (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2019). Independent reading can also support motivation, particularly when students are allowed to choose texts that match their interests and reading identities.

More recently, Bus et al. (2024) found that independent reading in school had positive effects on word recognition and reading attitudes. In other words, there is value in giving students opportunities to spend time engaged with text.

As educators, we probably find that unsurprising. We have all seen students grow more confident as readers when they find books they enjoy and have time to read them.

What Research Reminds Us

At the same time, the research reminds us that independent reading is not a replacement for instruction.

One finding from the Bus et al. (2024) meta-analysis is particularly important. While independent reading showed positive effects on word recognition and reading attitudes, it did not produce significant gains in comprehension on its own.

That does not mean independent reading lacks value. It means that reading alone is unlikely to be enough if our goal is deeper comprehension and stronger reading achievement.

The National Reading Panel reached a similar conclusion years earlier. While acknowledging the potential benefits of independent reading, the panel found insufficient evidence to demonstrate that independent silent reading alone reliably improves reading achievement (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000).

This is where the conversation becomes important for educators.

The question is not whether students should read.

The question is what happens while they are reading.

Think About the Readers in Your Classroom

One of the challenges with independent reading is that not all students experience it in the same way.

Some students pick up a book and immediately become immersed in the text. Others spend several minutes deciding what to read. Some have the skills to read independently but struggle to stay engaged. Others are still building the foundational skills needed to access text

successfully.

When we look around the room, it can appear that everyone is reading. In reality, very different reading experiences may be taking place.

Consider two students sitting side by side during independent reading. One is fully engaged with a text, making connections and reflecting on the author's message. The other is turning pages but retaining very little. From across the room, both students appear to be reading.

Without teacher observation and interaction, those differences can be difficult to identify.

That is one reason I believe independent reading should be viewed as an instructional opportunity rather than simply a quiet classroom routine.

What Teachers Do During Independent Reading Matters

One of the strongest messages emerging from both research and classroom practice is that what teachers do during independent reading matters.

Some teachers have been encouraged to use DEAR time to model reading by reading a book themselves. While teacher modeling certainly has value, I would argue that independent reading time provides an even greater opportunity.

It provides an opportunity to learn about readers.

During independent reading, teachers can:

- Confer with individual students.
- Listen to students read.
- Monitor comprehension.
- Support text selection.
- Check progress toward reading goals.
- Gather evidence about student strengths and needs.

A brief conference can reveal a great deal about a reader.

A teacher may discover that a student is struggling with vocabulary, choosing books that are too difficult, or abandoning texts after only a few pages. Another student may be decoding accurately but missing the meaning of what they read. A third may be ready for more challenging texts but continues to choose books well below their ability level.

Those insights can directly influence future instruction.

Rather than asking only whether students are reading, teachers can use this time to understand how students are reading.

Accountability That Supports Thinking

Independent reading should be accountable, but the focus should be on student thinking rather than task completion.

The most meaningful forms of accountability often involve opportunities for students to think, talk, and reflect about what they are reading.

Consider:

- Reading conferences
- Goal reflections
- Oral retells
- Partner discussions
- Written responses
- Sticky-note reflections

These approaches provide valuable information about student thinking while helping students process what they have read.

The goal is not to create more work.

The goal is to create more thinking.

Small Shifts Can Make a Big Difference

Independent reading does not need to be removed from the literacy block. In many classrooms, it simply needs to become more intentional.

Imagine walking into two classrooms during independent reading.

In one classroom, students read quietly while the teacher catches up on paperwork.

In the other, the teacher moves from student to student, asking questions, checking understanding, and taking notes on readers.

Both classrooms appear calm and productive.

However, only one is actively using independent reading time to inform instruction. Sometimes the shift is surprisingly small.

A teacher who conferences with just two or three students each day can learn a tremendous amount about readers over the course of a week. Those observations can help identify misconceptions, guide small-group instruction, and inform future lessons.

Small instructional moves can make a meaningful difference.

Final Thoughts

A better question than *"Does independent reading work?"* may be *"How can independent reading be structured so that it works better?"*

The research points to benefits for word recognition, reading attitudes, reading volume, and engagement (Bus et al., 2024; NCTE, 2019). At the same time, it reminds us that independent reading is most powerful when it is paired with purposeful instruction, meaningful feedback, and ongoing teacher support.

Reading time matters.

What students do with that time matters even more.

But the greatest impact may come from how teachers use that time.

Independent reading is most powerful when it extends instruction—giving students opportunities to apply what they have learned while giving teachers opportunities to learn more about their readers.

When independent reading becomes an opportunity to observe, confer, support, and respond, it becomes more than a classroom routine. It becomes a meaningful part of literacy instruction.

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