

# Raise Reading Volume Through Access, Choice, Discussion, and Book Talks

*Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey*

Independent reading outside of school is important, but how do you increase it? Six elementary schools found a solution, and here's a hint: It's more than just getting lots of books.

Regular and sustained independent reading fuels reading development (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011). First, students need to engage in deliberate, distributed practice if they are going to improve (Hattie, 2009). Strategies teachers teach are not likely to stick if students do not practice. Second, there are strong correlational studies indicating that reading volume has a strong positive relation with overall achievement, dubbed the Matthew effect in reading by Stanovich (1986). There is strong evidence that students who read early and more often in turn become more proficient readers and thereby read more often, hence the reference to Matthew 25:29 and the maxim “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

This article describes an intervention designed to increase out-of-school reading volume by using a four-part in-school model and describes the perceptions of participating teachers. The Reading Volume Program (RVP) leveraged four crucial factors—access, choice, classroom discussion, and book talks—to forward voluntary independent reading outside of the academic environment. We begin this article with a review of voluntary independent reading and its effects on learning. We continue with a description of each component of the intervention. After presenting findings, we discuss the implications and make recommendations for building the capacity of students and teachers for successful implementation.

## Reading Volume and Learning

It is hard to get good at doing something you rarely do. Whether it is a physical skill such as passing a soccer ball or a cognitive one such as reading, proficiency requires regular practice. Reading development is predicated on increasing readers' fluency

and stamina as they apply constrained and unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005). Constrained reading skills are those associated more closely with automaticity and fluency; they include phonemic awareness, alphabets, and phonics. Unconstrained skills draw on the reader's stamina and include vocabulary and comprehension. Both constrained and unconstrained reading skills respond positively to the effect of practice in reading connected texts, both in and out of school.

One measure of reading volume is print exposure, which begins with book sharing with young students and progresses to measures of independent reading, leisure reading, and knowledge of book titles among conventional readers. In a study on exposure to print, Mol and Bus (2011) performed a meta-analysis of 99 studies involving nearly 8,000 students from preschool through college. One particular finding stands out as something reading educators have intuitively known all along: Reading volume is associated with better oral language skills, spelling, reading comprehension, and general knowledge. Moreover, the effect size increases as students move through the grades. Effect size is a statistical tool that gauges the magnitude of an influence, in this case, time spent reading. Although the effect size in preschool and kindergarten is moderate at 0.35, it strengthens to 0.38 in grades 1–4, grows in importance to 0.48 in grades 5–8, and is strong in grades 9–12 at 0.61. These authors call this as a snowball effect, as the gains build exponentially.

*Douglas Fisher* is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University, CA, USA; email [dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu).

*Nancy Frey* is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University, CA, USA; email [nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu).

Mol and Bus (2011) further addressed its crucial importance for students who struggle:

Leisure time reading is especially important for low-ability readers. We found that the basic reading skills of children in primary and middle school with a lower ability level were more strongly related to print exposure as compared with higher ability readers. When low-ability readers have experience with books at home, they practice basic reading skills more, and as a result they become more accurate and fluent in reading text than their lower ability peers who are less exposed to print. (p. 287)

The reciprocal relation between the amount of print exposure and the steady growth of reading skills is central to the belief that reading gains in turn spur further gains, a phenomenon that Stanovich (1986) called bootstrapping.

### **Out-of-School Reading**

The correlation between reading volume outside of the school day and measures of reading achievement is striking. Anderson and colleagues' (1988) iconic study of 155 fifth-grade students' out-of-school reading volume is instructive. The researchers monitored the number of minutes students spent reading books outside of school and correlated this to students' standardized reading scores. This allowed them to further project the annual number of words read per year by calculating each student's reading rate combined with the number of minutes read, yielding an annual volume. It should come as little surprise that students who read more typically had higher standardized reading scores. For example, students who read books for an average of 21 minutes a day outside of school reliably scored in the 90th percentile on reading achievement tests and were projected to read more than 1.8 million words annually. In contrast, students who read for one minute per day had test scores in the 10th percentile and were projected to read only 8,000 words per year.

These results appear to hold over a student's academic career. Fifty-four first graders were followed for 10 years to monitor their reading and general academic performance (Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). Their free reading volume was measured using

the author recognition test (Stanovich & West, 1989), a checklist designed for students to identify authors from a list of 40 well-known authors and 40 foils (names of people who are not authors). The author

recognition test is used because it intentionally features authors from children's and young adult best-seller lists that are not commonly taught in school and is considered a valid indicator of reading volume (Moore & Gordon, 2015). Sparks et al. found that as early as second grade, print exposure was a strong predictor of students' 10th-grade scores on the reading portion of the ISTEP, the state achievement test taken by these students. This replication study mirrored the results of a smaller longitudinal study conducted by Cunningham and Stanovich (1997).

### **PAUSE AND PONDER**

- In your experience, what factors seem to encourage and discourage out-of-school reading? How do you address them?
- What other benefits do you see for students who read widely outside of school?
- Is it really voluntary reading if students have to turn in a reading log?
- The schools in this article had to figure out ways to sustain the RVP. What advice do you have for sustaining such efforts?

### **A Difference Between In- and Out-of-School Reading**

It is important to note that each of the studies discussed in the previous section examined reading outside of the school day. It goes without saying that reading, which is to say eyes on text to make meaning, should occur at high rates throughout the school day. Emergent readers, who are not yet reading independently, should participate in book sharing with their teacher every day, with equal attention placed on vocabulary, decoding, comprehension, and print referencing (Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009). Comprehensive reading programs in elementary school should include a rich array of experiences as students are read to and with, and there should be compelling purposes for reading independently. Yet, simply supplanting reading minutes outside of school for those conducted within the classroom is not sufficient; it is a zero-sum game. To raise reading volume such that these benefits can be realized, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers find ways to drive students toward daily reading outside of school as they simultaneously provide focused reading instruction during the school day.

When faced with students who do not read at home, teachers often devote time for students to

read at school. This seems reasonable as it should provide students with the practice they need for reading development. Yet, this could result in the perception that reading is something one does only in a classroom. Learners need deliberate, distributed practice that extends beyond the school day and year. This led us to wonder if there were ways to ensure that more students would read more often outside of the school day. If we could accomplish that, students would get the practice and resultant general knowledge building they needed.

## The RVP

Based on our review of the professional literature on increasing reading volume, we proposed a short pilot program that had four main components: access, choice, classroom discussion opportunities, and book talk recommendations. Our target, however, was to encourage more out-of-school reading and to glean the perceptions and recommendations of participating teachers.

## Access

If there is little to read in your house, you are less likely to read. To raise the volume of reading outside the school day, students must have access to texts. There have been a number of efforts to flood students with reading materials (e.g., Elley, 2000) to address this need for access. To ensure that all students had texts to read at home, we had to guarantee that their classroom libraries were robust. The International Reading Association (2000) recommended a minimum of seven books per student in the class. Therefore, a classroom library for a group of 28 students would need nearly 200 texts for students to read. Because the emphasis was on out-of-school reading, participating teachers devised systems that allowed their students to take classroom books home.

In addition, we expected that school libraries would be additional resources. The International Reading Association (2000) recommended a ratio of 20 books per student for school libraries, which is the number we used for the RVP. To meet these expectations, the schools that implemented this program required additional resources from the district office to ensure that they had a sufficient number of print and digital books in the school library available for students.

However, Neuman's (2017) study of 15 child-care centers in an urban area serving 501 children demonstrated that there was little impact from a book flood alone, noting, "The results of our study suggest that access to such books may be necessary, but it was clearly insufficient to enhance early literacy skills" (p. 18). Thus, the RVP had to meet an initial threshold of access to texts but could not stop there.

## Choice

When students can choose their reading materials, they are more likely to read. Choice is key to motivation and academic independence (Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2013). Teachers can assign reading for students to do, especially during class time, when scaffolding can be provided. Yet, to increase reading volume, teachers have to expand the amount of choice students have in what they read. Students who have opportunities to choose their own books develop elaborate strategies for selecting books and are more likely to become intrinsically motivated readers. In their studies of reading motivation, Guthrie et al. (2007) noted, "Students expressed that they like both making their own book choices, as well as having close, trusted others choose books for them" (p. 306). For the RVP, we focused on choice in reading in two ways. In some cases, students had a choice of texts based on a theme or essential question under investigation. In other cases, students had free rein to read what they wanted. They were not restricted by genre, by topic, or most importantly, by their measured reading levels. Students were free to choose any book, for any reason.

## Classroom Discussions About Texts

Classroom discussions have a strong influence on students' learning. In his book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, Hattie (2009) identified high-yield approaches that have an impact on student learning. He reported effect size, which scales the impact across multiple studies. Effect size information helps explain the impact that can be expected from a specific intervention. Classroom discussion has an effect size of 0.82, double the average for all influences on student learning. Reading researchers value students talking about texts as these discussions can motivate reading and deepen understanding (Richardson, 2010; Strom, 2014).

It is important to note what is meant by *discussion*. Discussion is not a volley of teacher questions and student answers. Rather, discussion is “a free exchange of information among at least three participants that lasts longer than 30 seconds” (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003, p. 700). Although the teacher can be a member of the discussion, he or she may be “deliberately silent” to create space for others to engage in dialogic interaction, and his or her role may instead be “mainly one of starting and keeping the ball rolling” (p. 700). Teacher questions are notably absent during a discussion, other than for clarification purposes.

Readers like to talk about what they are reading. Book clubs (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) and literature circles are used to provide students with time to talk about the texts that they have read outside of class (Daniels, 2002). Chia-Hui (2004) reviewed the benefits of literature circles and noted four positive effects: “(1) stronger reader–text relationships, (2) improved classroom climates, (3) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (4) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners” (p. 24). However, traditional book clubs and literature circles are of limited use when students are reading single titles, as they have no one with whom to partner to discuss a common text.

Essential questions can bridge this divide as a means for students reading different titles to come together to discuss their books. Essential questions are by nature broad and not easily answered (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013). Teachers can use essential questions as organizers for the discussions students have about their reading. These work particularly well in conjunction with a theme or unit of study under way in the classroom. For instance, the essential question, *What are the qualities you look for in a terrific story?* can spark conversation across genres and titles.

In addition, students can apply a range of strategies to encourage open discussion, such as golden lines, in which students share the best sentence from their reading. Another is sketch-to-stretch (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995), in which students draw quick sketches to expand their thinking and to identify concepts as fodder for their conversations. These discussions can occur as a whole class, or students can be provided time to talk about their reading during rotations, centers, or stations while the teacher is providing small-group instruction to other students. As Maloch, Zapata, and Roser (2012) pointed out,

“The two most obvious features of good discussions are ‘good talkers’ and ‘books worth talking over’” (p. 83). The RVP was designed to provide students opportunities to discuss the texts they have read but does not prescribe how teachers implement it.

### **Book Talks and Blessing Books**

When trusted others make recommendations about a text, potential readers are more likely to read it. To promote wide reading outside the school day, students need recommendations from others. Book talks conducted by trusted adults and peers can spur voluntary reading. Marinak and Gambrell (2016) called this blessing books and suggested that teachers should talk about several books that readers in the class might enjoy. These blessed books are then placed on a special shelf, facing forward if possible, for students to select. Wozniak (2011) conducted an intervention to increase voluntary reading among sixth graders in her school using book talks to anchor the program. Teachers spent 10 minutes three times a week introducing books to their students. Students were also provided with 15–20 minutes of unrestricted reading time with any book in the classroom, including short partner discussions. In this investigation, “there were no guidelines, so their discussions took on different forms” (p. 20), such as discussing what was happening in the book or making recommendations. Students were free to talk about their reading, rather than being restricted by school-bound book reports that are dutifully delivered but rarely deeply felt (White & Greenwood, 1995). The results of the intervention included positive changes in measures of reading attitude, self-efficacy, and reading outside of school.

Students can bless books, too. As Hudson (2016) noted, primary-grade students can conduct peer-led book talks, promoting interest while also learning about one another as readers. Hudson modeled book talks herself, introducing a few titles each day, and included some specifics about the title, the author, and a brief description of characters and plot. Most importantly, she added recommendations. Within a short time, her first-grade students were leading book talks each week on a rotating basis. Similarly, the RVP included three to five book talks led by the teacher or by peers each day.

### **Putting the RVP Into Action**

We identified six schools in a district in the Southwestern United States whose staffs were interested

in increasing reading volume. These six schools each educated more than 450 students in grades K–6, and at least 50% of their students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. A total of 3,846 students attended these schools, and class sizes ranged from 21 to 36 students. Of these students, 1,384 were English learners (36%), 404 had identified disabilities (10.5%), and 2,384 were Latino. We flipped a coin and offered the teachers in odd-numbered grade levels the opportunity to participate in the RVP (kindergarten teachers did not participate). The even-numbered grades served as a comparison group.

Of the 53 teachers who taught in odd-numbered grade levels, nine chose not to participate in the RVP. The remaining teachers were provided with a one-hour professional learning session focused on the 12-week program goals and components. In addition, school library media specialists were tasked with inventorying the classrooms and working with teachers to order any needed books to meet the access requirements. Three weeks into the school year, the classrooms were ready to launch the program. Each school held a family information session on the value for their children in reading at home every night. Over the course of the project, each school scheduled additional family information sessions to keep focused on reading volume. One of the principals memorably said to parents attending one of the events, “Getting your kid to read every night is as important as getting them to brush their teeth.” Another said, “It would be great if your whole family had reading time every night, some time without the TV or internet, just reading and then talking together.”

One of us visited each school every two weeks, observing classrooms and talking with teachers and students. The school principals were at each of these meetings to problem solve. At the six-week mark, Doug (first author) attended a meeting of the implementation teachers to discuss challenges and successes. Notes were collected from each of the meetings and classroom observations. In addition, we talked with the principal each time we were on campus.

We did not ask students to complete reading logs, as there is some evidence that this is demotivating for students and reduces reading volume (Pak & Weseley, 2012). Instead, beginning in week 5, we asked three randomly selected students on each visit to discuss their reading as a focus group. We asked them what they were currently reading, when they read, and to describe any favorite parts or surprises in the text.

## Early Wins

From the outset of the announcement that their schools would focus on reading volume, there was a buzz in the air. Teachers expressed excitement about a range of goals from “rebuilding my classroom library” to “hearing kids talk about books.” Teachers reported meeting with library media specialists to work on their classroom libraries. One of them said, “I need to reorganize [my library]. I used to be all leveled, with colored dots for difficulty. I want to do more with organizing by topic so that students can find things they want to read.”

When the books arrived and teachers began daily talks about books, they reported an increase in student interest. A fifth-grade teacher said,

I haven’t talked about books on a daily basis in years. The first couple of days, I didn’t get any takers for the books that I was talking about. Then, it seemed to click because I was doing it every day. Students started rushing to the special shelf to get the books. They even had a sign-up list to know who got which of the blessed books next.

A third-grade teacher at another school said,

I can’t believe how much more my students are reading. It’s kind of amazing. I thought that some would read, and I wanted a better classroom library, but wow. I talked with a parent recently who told me that her son was on his third book, and she said she can’t remember him reading any book at home last year.

Classroom observations and discussions with students suggested that they were reading the books they were taking home. In a fifth-grade classroom, three students were engaged in a book club discussion about *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate, featured on a teacher-developed book list for the theme “Unexpected Friendships.” Each student had a copy of the text, all filled with sticky notes and tabs. Students in this group also had journals with their notes written in them. Their discussion focused on the personalities of Mack and George, noting how they were alike and different. Later in the discussion, one student said, “I try not to read ahead, but it’s hard because I’m really into this. But that’s not respectful of my group, so I try not to.” When asked about reading the previous year, this student said, “I didn’t think I was really into reading. I don’t remember reading things at home.” When asked about the difference, he said, “It’s a team. We all gotta do it so that we can talk. And I got to pick the book I wanted to read, and that’s way better.”

At the halfway point in the intervention (six weeks), we analyzed our field notes and teacher and student interview transcriptions to identify preliminary emerging themes. The early wins from this program seemed to be teacher excitement and student interest. These are important factors for increasing reading volume, but both can be difficult to sustain. We remained concerned that the new books would lose their novelty and that pressures related to covering standards would squeeze out classroom discussions and book blessings. Therefore, we raised these issues with teachers in their meetings and collected their ideas for sustaining the effort.

## Sustaining Interest and Motivation

Many of the ideas mentioned focused on continued support for the four components. One first-grade teacher said,

As long as we keep talking about these four things, I'll keep doing them. Too many times, the initiative changes, and then we go in a new direction. If we focus on reading volume for a while, it will become part of our classroom norms.

Another fifth-grade teacher said,

I like that the principal comes by to ask me about this. I like to tell her about the success we're having getting students to read. There's a range, of course, but I really think that students are reading more than they have in the past.

Other ideas for sustaining the effort included the following:

- A steady infusion of additional books to talk about
- Guest book talkers, including “celebrities” such as the principal or librarian
- Additional professional learning about texts, book talks, and discussion strategies

## Determining Impact

At the 12-week point of implementation, we asked teachers for evidence of the impact that the RVP was having on students, rated on a 4-point scale. Of the 44 teachers, 41 said that the RVP had significant impact. The remaining three teachers said that it had moderate impact. None of the teachers indicated that

it had limited or negative impact. We recognized that they were talking with the researchers who initiated the effort, so we also asked for concrete evidence of the impact. The participants offered a range of data points suggesting that reading volume was an appropriate area of focus, including the following:

- Higher library checkout rates in the current year (9%) than for the same students during the same period the previous year
- Higher writing scores on district benchmark tests (4%) compared with other district schools
- Higher fluency rates (= 2%) compared with the students' past reading records or with other schools in the same district
- More students and parents anecdotally reporting reading more books

Our point is not to suggest that focusing on reading volume is the answer to reading achievement challenges. We were interested in the ways in which teachers would describe the impact that a specific, targeted focus on reading volume had on students. Given the number of responses we received, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers who focus on reading volume do see positive changes in their students. Our classroom observations also suggest that students were reading for a significant number of minutes outside of the school day. Nearly every student we talked with could tell us about a book being read and could describe the ways in which the book was being discussed in school.

Another noteworthy indicator was the contamination that occurred with the even-numbered grade levels. We had planned to compare student achievement on the state test in grades 3 and 5 with those in grades 4 and 6. However, the even-numbered grade level teachers heard about the success from their colleagues and started implementing the same four components. Principals reported that teachers in the even-numbered grades were requesting training and access to more books for their classrooms. One principal reported that a teacher indicated that she would go to the union representative if her students were denied the opportunity to participate in the RVP. Another principal said, “At this point, there really is no difference between the even and odd grades in terms of reading volume efforts, other than the number of texts in some classrooms, and I'm already looking for ways to address that.”

So, our impact study was compromised, but more students were provided opportunities to increase

their reading volume. To us, that speaks volumes about the value that educators place on this aspect of the reading curriculum. Having said that, we learned a few things about reading instruction and reading volume as we engaged in this effort.

## Lessons Learned

Although we cannot determine which component of the RVP had the greatest impact, we believe that all four components together have the potential to increase the likelihood that students engage in reading practice and have sufficient access to print such that their achievement grows. First, this can be an expensive intervention. In some places, the investment in children's literature (narrative and informational) has been limited, and ensuring access could be costly. To increase reading volume, districts need to allocate funds to a school for the purchase of reading materials. Teachers (and principals) will also have to come to terms with the fact that some of the texts will be lost or damaged. A fifth-grade teacher said,

I used to run a museum—well, a book museum—and I never let the books out for fear that they would be damaged, but that didn't allow my students to enjoy and really read. I talk about how much I care about the books and beg students to take care of them, but I know that some will be lost, and that's OK as long as my students are reading.

Second, teachers cannot be expected to confer on all of the books that students are reading. If they try, the conversations can be limited to student perceptions and personal connections. It is difficult to talk about deeper meanings in a text if one of the two people in the conversation has not read the text. A first-grade teacher noted,

I tried to confer with all of my students about the books they were reading at home. It took way too much time, and I didn't think that the conversation was very productive. I had to learn to trust the conversations that they were having with their peers. My conversations with students could then focus on the texts we were reading together, and in those texts, I could interrogate ideas more deeply.

Third, we cannot sacrifice deep reading for wide reading. Both are important. Students need opportunities to develop stamina *and* strength. Wide reading, especially reading at home, can build stamina. Teacher scaffolding of complex texts can help students develop strength in reading complex texts.

One risk in focusing on reading volume could be a reduction in the deep reading that students also need to do. We did observe some slippage of deep reading in some of the classrooms we observed, and we discussed this in subsequent teacher meetings. In reflecting on this, a third-grade teacher commented, "I guess I originally thought it was another pendulum swing. That close reading was out and volume reading was in. So, my class was devoted to reading volume, but that would end up hurting them." Another said,

It's a new way of thinking about balanced literacy. We used to think about balancing phonics instruction with fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Now we also have to think about balancing reading complex texts with support and easier texts without support to build volume.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Begin with an inventory of your classroom library. What is the ratio of books per student? Factor in your school's library collection as well. What gaps exist?
2. Survey your students about their current out-of-school reading habits. This can serve as baseline data for you to measure the impact of your efforts. The recreation subscale of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) is a great choice.
3. Identify a list of book titles you want to profile for the next month. These blessed books should include a wide range of genres and topics. You know your students best; choose books that you believe they will enjoy. You might want to consider books from the Children's Choices Reading List, published annually by the International Literacy Association: <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists/childrens-choices-reading-list>.
4. Set aside regularly scheduled times for students to talk about books with one another. Model how book talks sound, but avoid making it so structured that you inadvertently take the fun out of it. Remember, this is not school reading, so keep the fun and pleasure of reading at the center.
5. A reading volume initiative is likely to have a greater effect when multiple classrooms get involved, or even the entire school. Consider how to enlist other educators and community members, including the parent-teacher organization at your school.

## Conclusion

We have proposed a four-part model for increasing reading volume outside of the school day. We present some limited evidence that this effort was successful, but importantly, we were able to test the idea in a fairly large number of classrooms. The RVP was relatively easy to implement, and the only real costs were reading materials. The net effect of the RVP is to expand the deliberative, distributed practice students need to develop skills and knowledge. We believe that the instruction students receive from their teachers has a chance of sticking under these conditions.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

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- Association for Library Service to Children. (2018). *Book and media awards*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia> (The ALSC honors dozens of the best publications for young people each year; well-known awards include the Newbery and Caldecott medals. Explore these and other medal winners as well to identify books to add to your blessed books list.)
- Commonsense Media book reviews: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/> (Check out reviews written by parents and children and consider having your students contribute reviews as well.)
- "Book Clubs: Just for Fun," a ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan by Traci Gardner: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/book-clubs-reading-67.html> (Use this lesson plan to introduce student-selected, student-driven book clubs geared toward pleasure reading to students in grades 3–5.)

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