
RAPID RESEARCH REPORT

Francisco Ramos
Stephen Krashen

The impact of one trip to the public library: Making books available may be the best incentive for reading

It is well established that children read more when they have more access to books (Krashen, 1993). Children in many schools, however, have little access to books because of the poor condition of some school libraries (Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, & Li, 1995; Krashen, 1996; Pucci, 1994). Here we describe a program, developed by bookless teachers, that attempted to improve students' access to books.

Twenty second-grade and 84 third-grade Hispanic students in an inner city school in Los Angeles, California, USA, served as subjects. All children came from print-poor homes. At school, their access to books was limited to a weekly 30-minute visit to the school library, where they were allowed to check out only one book per visit.

To provide the children with greater access to books, four teachers organized monthly visits to the neighborhood public library during school time, but before it was open to the public in the morning. This allowed the children to explore the library, share books, and not be constrained by the need to remain quiet.

The trips to the library significantly increased access to books: Each student was allowed to check out 10 books, which suddenly produced a substantial classroom library for use during sustained silent reading time. In addition, students were allowed to take the books home. Reading the new books was voluntary, and there were no reading logs or written assignments connected to the reading. Students' parents were, how-

ever, asked to sign a form each day, confirming that they had seen the book the child brought home, in order to avoid losses and subsequent fines from the public library.

Two anonymous surveys were run 3 weeks after the first visit to the public library, one for students and one for their parents (see Table). It was clear that the children enjoyed their visit; most reported reading more, that reading was easier, and that they wanted to return to the library. Parents' responses were consistent with the children's responses and tended to show even more enthusiasm.

During parent-teacher conferences, held 7 weeks after the first visit to the library and 2 weeks after a second visit, parents assured teachers that the level of interest in reading continued.

When asked what they thought contributed to their children's increased interest in books, 22% of the parents felt that the fact that students went as a group, with their friends, was an important factor. But 67% of the students asked their parents to take them back to the library after the first visit, on their own.

There are, of course, other explanations for our encouraging results. Both parents and children could have been attempting to "please the experimenter"; that is, give responses that they thought we were looking for. The results are so strong, however, that we must conclude that at least some of the increased enthusiasm is genuine.

While we plan to continue to bring children to the public library, we do not feel that the implication of our study is that schools should simply take more advantage of the public library to supply a print-rich environment for children. The solution must come from school. We were lucky to have a cooperative, well-supplied public library close to the school. Others are not so lucky.

The clearest implication of our study is that simply providing interesting books for children is a powerful incentive for reading, perhaps the most powerful incentive possible. This conclusion is consistent with research showing that extrinsic incentives for reading have not been successful, while improving access to books has been successful in encouraging reading (Krashen & McQuillan, 1996). Our study not only confirms that providing interesting reading itself is an excellent motivator, it also shows the powerful impact even a single exposure to books can have.

Authors' note

We thank Jose M. Estrada, Dorothy McGuire, and Isela Mendez, the other participants in this project, who enthusiastically took on the task of facilitating students' access to books.

Ramos is an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles, California, USA, and a doctoral student at the University of Southern California, where Krashen teaches courses in reading education.

References

- Allington, R., Guice, S., Baker, K., Michaelson, N., & Li, S. (1995). Access to books: Variations in schools and classrooms. *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, 5, 23-24.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Krashen, S. (1986). *Every person a reader*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Krashen, S., & McQuillan, J. (1996). *The case for late intervention: Once a good reader, always a good reader*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Pucci, S. (1994). Supporting Spanish language literacy: Latino children and free reading resources in schools. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 18, 67-82.

Reactions to library visit

Child survey (n = 93)

- First time visited the public library: 52%
- Returned to the library since the visit: 62%
- Returned to the library since the visit; had never been there before: 23%
- Would like to return to the library with the school again: 75%
- Reading more since the library visit: 75%
- Feel reading is easier now: 82%

Parent survey (n = 75)

- Child more interested in reading since visiting the library: 96%
- Notice improvement in child's reading: 94%
- Child spends more time with books: 94%
- Child reads aloud to family member daily: 96%
- Would like the library visiting program to continue: 100%
- Child has asked parent to take him/her to the library since the visit: 67%