# If You Build It, They Will Come:
# A Book Flood Program for Struggling Readers in an Urban High School

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Running Head: IF YOU BUILD IT

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While the focus on recent reading initiatives has been on "early intervention" in the primary grades, there are thousands of older struggling readers for whom such programs are clearly of no benefit (Krashen & McQuillan, 1996). Students who are already in junior high or high school and are still not proficient readers need instead "late" intervention in order to "catch up" to their age peers in reading. Research has shown that rapid progress in reading is possible if students are exposed to a rich source of reading materials and given the opportunity to read books that are both interesting and comprehensible (Krashen & McQuillan, 1996; McQuillan, 1997a). In this chapter, we describe the implementation and initial results of one such late intervention effort, the Sequoyah Scholars "book flood" program at Anaheim High School in Anaheim, California.

## A Diverse, Urban Setting: Anaheim High School

Anaheim High School (AHS) is typical of many urban secondary schools with low-achieving students. The majority of its 2,400 students participate in Federally-funded free or reduced lunch programs, and nearly half (48%) are designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP), the vast majority from Spanish-language households. The school is situated in a largely working-class area of Anaheim, California, in the shadow of such well-known tourist attractions as Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. English classes at the school are tracked, resulting in a small group of Honors and University Prep, and a much larger group of "regular" and Title I/remedial students. In the spring

1998 administration of the Stanford 9 test, 68% of the school's ninth graders scored below the 25th percentile on the Total Reading subsection. Virtually all of the students in the Title I program scored below the bottom quartile. That same spring, only one-third of the ninth graders at AHS met the district's standard of a 2.0 GPA, and most of these were in the Honors and University Prep classes.

Under the leadership of site coordinator Jeannie Beckett, the Title I reading teachers at AHS created the "Sequoyah Scholars" program for the approximately 420 students served by the school's Title I grant. The demographics of the Title I students match those of the school as a whole: 92% are Latino/Hispanic, about half are LEP. Fewer than 10 of those served by the program are identified as special education students. Students in the Reading component of the program are placed at one of three levels:

- Advanced English Language Development (ELD): Students who are Limited English Proficient, and who received core curriculum equivalent to English I. Students are at a variety of age/grade levels, 9-12.
- English I/Reading Improvement: English-only students and those who have been redesignated or were initially determined to be Fluent English Proficient.
- English II: Students who successfully completed either Advanced ELD or English I.

Students in Advanced ELD and English I/Reading receive instruction in two hour blocks each day. English II students have a typical, single class period daily. Identified nineth-grade students receive a letter in the summer notifying them that they have been selected to participate in this special program. Follow-up phone calls are made to parents. The overall program has several components, including a parent institute, field trips, a

computer writing lab, tutoring, and support services provided by a bilingual (Spanish/English) paraprofessional and the program coordinator. Five teachers form the core "team" of instructors for the program, and meet regularly to discuss students and curricular implementation (see below).

The Problem: Students Who Don't Read Very Much (And Don't Have Much to Read)

Teachers in the Sequoyah Scholars Program were committed to the idea that the primary goal of the Title I intervention was to increase the amount that students read. Underlying this goal were the beliefs that, as Smith (1994) has stated, we "learn to read by reading," that students who read more would become better readers, and that better reading would be reflected in all areas of literacy, including writing competency. These beliefs were founded upon considerable research support which has shown that more reading does indeed lead to better reading among students of all ages (Krashen, 1993, McQuillan, 1998). In addition, the Program embraced the notion that the amount of reading students did, particularly pleasure or "free voluntary" reading, was closely related to students having ready availability of books in their environments. Students who had more easy access to books would tend to read more. Again, these beliefs were based upon considerable research support (Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998; Elley, 1991; 1992).

Consistent with this research, the struggling students selected for the Sequoyah Scholars Program stated that they almost never read for pleasure and had relatively restricted access to books. In one-on-one, teacher/student conferences in the fall, students reflected mostly negative attitudes towards reading, and reported little reading outside of school. Students in the program also had significantly fewer books at home,

only about one-third the number reported in the average U.S. home for high school students. As shown in Figure 1, ninth-grade students in the Sequoyah program reported having just over 50 books in their homes (mean = 50.89, standard deviation = 71.20), substantially below the national average of 137 (Elley, 1992). It should be kept in mind that these figures include all books in the home (cookbooks, the Bible, etc.), not just those owned or read by the student. In addition, some of these books were probably in a language other than English, given that many students came from Spanish-speaking homes. In terms of access to English language reading materials, then, these urban Title I students are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to the average U.S. high schooler.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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School did not level the playing field. Anaheim High School has a books per pupil ratio of around 8:1, compared to the national average for high schools of 19:1 (White, 1990). These numbers are comparable to other urban schools and reflect the general disparity between urban and advantaged suburban communities in literacy resources (Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, & Li, 1995; Di Loreto & Tse, 1999; McQuillan, 1998; Smith, Constantino, & Krashen, 1998). It is for this reason that increased access to reading materials was a central goal of the Title I Sequoyah Scholars program.

The Sequoyah Scholars Program: Eight Steps to Success

In reviewing the research literature on successful sustained silent reading (SSR) programs, Pilgreen and Gribbons (1998) noted eight characteristics of a good "book

flood" program for elementary and secondary schools. The Sequoyah Scholars teachers worked to put all eight in place.

Staff Development--Key to beginning any new program is getting the commitment and involvement of the critical players--the teachers themselves. This step should not be overlooked. If teachers are not "on board," little change will take place in the classroom. In the Sequoyah Scholars program, the five Title I reading teachers met on a monthly basis to discuss the progress of the SSR component, including problems with book access, what to do with students who didn't participate, types of materials to allow, and so forth. They read about successful programs, participated in regular in-service sessions from local university faculty on setting up free reading programs, and reflected upon their own experiences in the classroom. All of these steps were crucial in forming a sense of unified purpose and solving problems that arose.

Appealing Books at the Student's Reading Level--Many of the Sequoyah Scholars were used to feeling frustrated when attempting to read assigned texts that were too difficult for them or held little personal interest. The teachers decided to ensure that the books available to students were both appealing and comprehensible. This was no easy task, since the books that students could read were often not interesting, and the books that were interesting were many times too difficult for them to read. Teachers experimented with various types of books, relying on student surveys, recommended reading lists of adolescent literature, and trial and error. Table 1 shows a partial list of some of the books teachers nominated as "favorites" in terms of popularity, as well as books that appeared frequently on student reading logs. Surprisingly, many of the "junior high" level series books (the *Goosebumps* series by R.L. Stine) were quite popular with

students, but so, too, were books that were generally well-liked by other high school students (*Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*). Popular authors included Dean Koontz, Stephen King, Caroline Cooney, Will Hobbs, Paul Zindel, Cynthia Voight, Walter Dean Myers, David Klaas, and Lois Lowery Nixon, among others.

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Direct, Easy Access to Books--At first, students came to class without any free reading materials for SSR time. When taken to the school library during the beginning of the year, several students confessed feeling overwhelmed by the number of choices available to them, and had little idea how to find the book they desired. To overcome this hurdle, early in the program the teachers decided to set up a classroom library in each of their classrooms. The purpose of the libraries was two-fold: first, to provide students intimidated by the regular school or public library with a smaller but focused group of books; and second, to give students who "forgot" their book easy and direct access to reading materials. Classroom libraries began with 50 to 200 books, but by the end of the year, each class had between 150 to 400 books for each of the 20-35 students in the classes. Even this number was probably not sufficient, however. As students became more interested in reading, the demand for books increased. In Gregg William's class, students had folders in which they could keep their books, if they chose to. Several students were found to be "stockpiling" the "good" books, placing three or four books in their folders to ensure they were available when they were ready to read them.

The classroom libraries also provided books not found in the school library, and were set up to display popular titles in an inviting way (with the cover facing out). The libraries thus served very effectively as "ads" for reading, surrounding students with reading materials. Most of the classroom libraries only contained books, not magazines or comics. There was some discussion during the monthly teacher planning days as to whether this was a good thing, but the majority of the teachers believed that books provided high school students with more "carry over" reading outside of class. Almost all students did, in fact, take to reading books once the program was underway.

Time to Read--Fundamental to any SSR program is, of course, a set amount of time *each day* for students to read to themselves. Pilgreen and Gribbons (1998) point out that successful SSR programs must be done on a regular and frequent basis, and not as an occasional activity or tacked on as "filler" on Friday. The teachers started off slowly, allotting 10 minutes a day during the first few weeks of the semester. Most students weren't accustomed to having time for pleasure reading in class, and some needed to get into the habit gradually. No other reading materials (e.g. textbooks) were allowed, and students were not permitted to work on homework or class assignments. Within 4-6 weeks, the time spent reading was gradually increased to 15 and then 20 minutes. Several teachers noted that many students can sit, do nothing, and avoid reading for 10 minutes, but when the SSR is 20 minutes, it is almost impossible for students to sit and do nothing. At that point they start reading. In some classes, students would read 30 minutes, complaining if they were given any less time! Teachers report that 90-95% of their students were, in fact, reading their books, consistent with other reports that have found

that, when properly implemented, almost all students take advantage of the SSR time provided to them (Cohen, 1999; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998).

Conducive Environment—Pilgreen and Gribbons (1998) note that an environment "conducive" to SSR does not necessarily require soft pillows and plush carpet. Instead, teachers can make students comfortable through setting up a structure in which they are free to take risks. This means allowing students to abandon books they dislike, read at their own pace, and be free of disruptions and distractions. SSR time in the Sequoyah Scholars program was considered "sacred time"—nothing was allowed to interfere with it. Several teachers noted that when a visitor came to the door, or an announcement over the PA came on, students would audibly groan. This is how it should be: nothing should be allowed to distract student from their reading. During mid-year conferences, several students commented that what they liked most about SSR time was the peace and quiet created by a roomful of people reading. Some said it was the only part of their day that was relaxing and enjoyable in which they could read for leisure. The Sequoyah Scholar students, many of whom "hated" to read at the beginning of the year, became thoroughly enthralled by their daily reading. Gregg Williams reported that in one of his classes, a student got up to answer the door for a visitor during SSR time. She was so involved in her book that she continued reading it as she walked toward the door, feeling her way along the wall with one hand!

Encouragement by Teacher--A key way teachers encourage reading is by setting an example: Teachers must always participate in SSR as readers themselves. This point cannot be overemphasized. The teacher serves as an important role model for the students in reading. When the teacher takes attendance or works on other matters instead

of reading, students get the message that reading is not valued. Indeed, several of the teachers observed that when they were interrupted by a call or message at the classroom door, many students simply stopped reading. This is consistent with research by Von Sprecken and Krashen (1998), who found the participation of the teacher in the SSR time was a key predictor of whether students were actually reading in their classes.

Of course, teachers did other things to promote reading. One of the most successful strategies was recommending books to students. Teachers would often do "book talks"--brief reviews of books--on new additions to their classroom libraries, or talk about a book that they were personally reading. Without fail the promoted book would disappear from the teacher's desk minutes after the talk was over. Students were also encouraged to share what they were reading with their classmates during book talk time. Again, these results are consistent with other research which has found that low-achieving students rely heavily on teachers for their reading recommendations (Fleener, Morrison, Linek, & Rasinski, 1997).

Teachers also reached out to parents to promote reading. Lupe Gutierrez taught a weekly English as a Second Language class for parents of Title I students. She displayed her students' favorite books in front of the classroom and told the parents about what students were reading. She emphasized to parents how important it was to encourage their children to read at home.

No Accountability—No grades or rewards were attached to students reading during SSR time. Such rewards have been found to be ineffective in promoting reading achievement or positive motivation toward reading (McQuillan, 1997). Instead, in the Sequoyah Scholars programm, reading was considered its own reward. Students who did

not participate initially were encouraged to read during SSR time, and by the end of the first six weeks, almost all students were actively reading books with little or no prompting from their teacher.

Follow-Up Activities--Students engaged in some non-graded follow-up activities related to their reading, but these were quite minimal. In some classes, students were asked to write a short reflection (not synopsis) on what they read that day. In most classes, students simply recorded the author and title of the books they read as they finished them (or abandoned them). Teachers encouraged students to talk about their books amongst themselves, and provided time for students to share something about the books that they were reading with the whole class.

Lost in the Book Flood

A critical component of the Sequoyah Scholar program was increasing students' access to interesting and comprehensible reading materials. As noted above, most classroom libraries began with a small number of books (usually less than 50). In late November and again in early February, the teachers used Title I funds to purchase books for their classrooms. They began their task by polling the students, asking each one to pick out a book they wanted to see added to their classroom library. That list was supplemented by some "recommended reading lists" found in Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998) and other sources (e.g. *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*).

The reaction of the students to this new infusion of books was nothing less than spectacular: Sue Snyder found students lined up at her door a half hour before school began, wanting to get a look at the new books! "Did you bring our new books?" "Did you get the one I ordered?" "Can I take this one home?" These were the same students

that, only a few months before had considered themselves non-readers. Teachers took class time to give a brief synopsis of each new book they purchased. During the next few days, Eydie Zajec's students even stayed in the classroom during their breaks to examine all the new books and to make their selections. By the end of the first day with the new books, most were checked out and were being devoured by this group of "remedial" readers. Doug Wager reported that after bringing in his new books, "I was overrun by a mob of fourteen-year-olds fighting over books. Books!"

No grade-level markings were put on the books, as is popular in some computerized book management programs. Students simply browsed through the books and determined if they liked the book and were able to read it. Teachers reported no problems with students finding books that they could understand and enjoy. The teachers did make recommendations to particular students about the kinds of books they thought they might enjoy, including books that were more "advanced" in reading difficulty than their current selections. But students were free to accept or reject any recommendation, and to abandon books they didn't find suitable to their interests.

The Results: More Books, More Reading, Better Reading

The most powerful indication of the success of the book flood program was the reactions of the students themselves. The teachers reported that most of the students began the semester with a negative view of reading. By the end of the first semester, almost all of them had read several books on their own, and continued to read throughout the school year. Teachers met with the students three times over the course of the year in one-on-one conferences, and saw that their students made progress in their depth and breadth in reading interests and difficulty.

A social science teacher reported that two of the Sequoyah Scholar students were visiting her classroom during lunch one day and that they were talking about all of the books they had been reading. The teacher's comment was, "You much be doing something right!" On year-end Title I program reviews, every one of the five Seqouyah Scholar teachers named the book flood as the greatest milestone in terms of student progress. They called it the year of "BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS!"

More formal measures of progress were also taken in terms of vocabulary growth and writing proficiency of a selected sub-sample of English I students. Sequoyah Scholar students in English I made statistically significant gains on vocabulary, writing fluency, and writing complexity (see McQuillan, 1999, for details). Since the Sequoyah Scholar program included all students at the school targeted for Title I support, there was no way to create a suitable control group of low-achieving students with which to compare these results. As such, they should be viewed only as suggestive. Nevertheless, they are consistent with other evidence that shows the impact of increased reading on vocabulary development and writing proficiency (see Krashen, 1993, for a review).

Did more reading lead to better reading? To help answer this question, we compared the number of pages students read throughout the year (recorded on their Reading Logs) with the gains in vocabulary they made. Vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading comprehension ability, such that growth in one is usually an indicator of growth in the other. Students completed a Vocabulary Recognition Test (VRT) in September and then again in May of the 1998-99 school year. The VRT consisted of 96 items, including both real words and false ones. Students simply checked the words they recognized (the "false" words were used to correct the scores for

guessing). This simple measure has been found to be a good indicator of overall vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992). The VRT used here was piloted during the previous school year on a similar group of students, and was found to have very high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .96) and to correlate well with standardized reading achievement tests (r = .64 with Stanford Nine Total Reading score).

The correlation between the gains on the VRT and the number of pages students reported reading during the school year was positive (r =.40, N = 31) and significant (p <.05). This suggests that the more students read, the higher their gains in vocabulary, a finding consistent with experimental evidence on the effects of increased reading on literacy development (Krashen, 1993). Multiple regression analysis also indicated that the number of pages read was a significant predictor of vocabulary gain scores over the school year, controlling for reading proficiency as measured by the previous year's Stanford Nine Total Reading score. An additional analysis, this time using the spring VRT score as the dependent variable and the fall VRT score as a control variable, confirmed the previous result that the number of pages students read was a significant predictor of their vocabulary score, regardless of previous vocabulary knowledge (McQuillan, 1999). Similar conclusions were reached by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) in their study of middle school readers--that is, more leisure reading is associated with better reading proficiency.

## Conclusions

The Sequoyah Scholars program is unique in offering low-achieving high school readers a chance often denied them in school: the opportunity to read for pleasure

(Allington, 1980). Teachers in the program worked hard to establish a classroom climate that encouraged reading in a variety of ways, through time, encouragement, and resources. Establishing such a program demands the commitment of both teachers and school administrators in terms of staff development, a plentiful supply of books, and a dedicated time for free reading. Most importantly, book flood and SSR programs provide tangible evidence that "just reading" is, in fact, one of the most powerful curricular interventions we can provide for low-achieving students.

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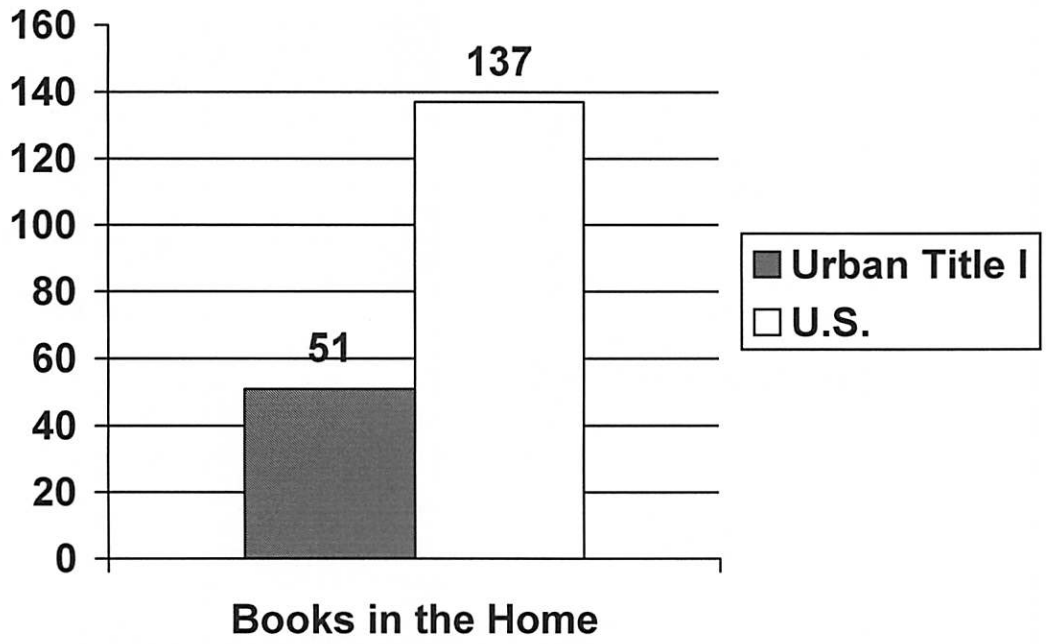
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Figure 1
Number of Books at Home of Urban Title I Students and U.S. Average




Sequoyah Scholars: N = 327. U.S. average source is Elley (1992).

Table 1
Partial List of Books Popular With Sequoyah Scholars High School Students

- *Among Friends* by Caroline Cooney
- *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* by Jack Canfield
- *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous
- *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine
- *Guinness Book of World Records*
- *Hatchet* by Gary Paulson
- *I Do* by Elizabeth Chandler
- *I Know What You Did Last Summer* by Lois Duncan
- *Ice Bound* by Dean Koontz
- *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell
- *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli
- *Maus I & II* by Art Speigelman
- *Melody* by V.C. Andrews
- *Off and Running* by Gary Soto
- *Roswell High The Wild One* by Melinda Metz
- *Sometimes I Think I Hear My Name* by Avi
- Sports and Entertainment Autobiographies (e.g. Michael Jordan, Sammy Sosa, Selena)
- *Starring Sally J. Freedom as Herself* by Judy Blume
- Stephen King novels
- *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds
- *Stranger With My Face* by Lois Duncan
- *Super Fudge* by Judy Blume
- *Sweet Valley Saga* by Francine Pascal
- *That Was Then, This Is Now* by S.E. Hinton
- *The Black Pearl* by Scott O'Dell
- *The Boy Who Drank Too Much* by Shep Greene
- *The Color Purple by Alice Walker*
- *The Crossing* by Gary Paulson
- *The Duplicate* by William Sleator
- *The Firm* by John Grisham
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis
- *The Secret Garden* by Frances Burnett
- *Top Wing* by Matt Christopher
- *True Story* Biographies
- *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls