14 The Case for Late Intervention: Once a Good Reader, Always a Good Reader

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Krashen and McQuillan review much of the research demonstrating that children and adults *can* become good readers, even if they do not do so in their early elementary years. The solution? Late intervention focusing on massive free voluntary reading. The authors begin by discussing the case for free reading, and move on to explore evidence that there is no critical period for learning to read, examples of home-schooled children who became successful late readers, evidence from "recovered" dyslexics (see Fink, chapter 13), and Malcolm X as a specific, historical case. Krashen and McQuillan respond to five possible objections to late intervention focusing on massive free voluntary reading. In concluding, they observe that their arguments for late intervention are not arguments against early intervention, but rather evidence that "once a poor reader, always a poor reader" is not necessarily true. People can and do become good readers later, by reading a lot about whatever interests them; the repeated act of reading itself makes them good readers. Thus the title of this piece, "once a good reader, always a good reader."

The usual solutions proposed for the "literacy crisis" include a focus on "skills" and early intervention. Some early intervention programs have produced good results. There is, however, another option that has not yet been seriously considered, one that has considerable research support—late intervention focusing on massive free voluntary reading.

The Case for Free Reading

There is strong evidence that free voluntary reading is effective in developing literacy. Those who read more read better, write better, spell better, and develop better grammatical competence and larger vocabularies (Krashen, 1993). This conclusion holds for first- and second-language acquirers (see, e.g., Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). In addition, free reading is pleasant; it is, in fact, a positive addiction (Nell, 1993).

In arguing that free reading is an effective late intervention, we will present evidence showing that there is no "critical period" for learning to read; that, therefore, late intervention is possible; and that free reading has served as an effective late intervention in a number of cases. We will also treat possible objections to this approach.

There Is No Critical Period for Learning to Read

Elley (1992) studied reading ability in thirty-two countries and reported "some advantage for an earlier start, but it can be said that countries which begin instruction in reading at age seven have largely caught up with the five- and six-year-old starters in reading ability by age nine" (p. 37). Consider Table 1, which summarizes the test scores (for nine-year-olds) for four countries that begin reading at age seven.

It is very significant that all of these countries also rank among the highest in economic development and reported a plentiful supply of books in the home and school library, and reported that public libraries and bookstores were available locally. This suggests that a late start is not a problem when children have access to reading materials.

Table 1

Reading in Late-Starting Countries

			Rank Among 32 Countries		
Country	Age Begin Reading	Score	Reading	Economic Development[a]	Books[b]
Finland	7	569	1	5	135
Sweden	7	539	3	2	174
Norway	7	524	7	3	157
Iceland	7	518	8	4	118

Source: Elley (1994).

Note: Mean reading score for all 32 countries was 500.
[a] Indicates rank calculated from GNP, expenditures for education, life expectancy, and other variables.
[b] Indicates average number of books in the home.

Successful Late Readers: Home-Schooled Children

Learning to read late did not prevent many eminent men and women from eventual success. Einstein is reported to have learned to read at age nine, Rodin at age ten, and Woodrow Wilson at age eleven (Schulman, 1986). In addition to these famous cases, there are also several cases of children as old as eleven learning to read without any apparent harm to their eventual literacy development and educational success. These accounts are of home-

schooled children who learned to read well after they would have been expected to read in a regular school setting, in one case five years after the equivalent of first grade and with little or no formal instruction.

Of course, this kind of evidence has limitations: Home schoolers are often required only to submit a portfolio-style assessment of their children's progress, and we do not have a precise picture of how much formal instruction took place. It is clear, however, that in some cases there was no formal instruction. Stein (1994) states that her son, K.S., enjoyed being read to but showed no great interest in reading. Having read Smith's *Reading Without Nonsense,* she was committed to allowing him to read when he felt ready. K.S. would identify "very basic stuff—a label here and there," but never read anything else. One day, Stein writes, they were working on a science project together, and K.S. began to read the directions by himself: "He proceeded to read to me, almost effortlessly, a 100-word paragraph which contained words like 'solenoid, 'nonmagnetic, 'rectangle,' 'lengthwise,' 'downward,' and 'workable'" (p. 24).

Sheffer (1987) cites the case of A.A., who was designated as having a Specific Learning Disability at the age of eight, halfway through the first grade. She was pulled out of school by her mother, who then "let her totally alone" and "never gave her an assignment or pressures" (p. 4). By the age of ten, she began to read books and comic books.

Mason (1993a) reports that her daughter, K.M., "could not/did not want to read" at the age of eight and a half. Having tried earlier to push her to learn math, and finding that the pressure made her "hate arithmetic," Mason decided not to intervene with her daughter on reading. Then it happened: around her ninth birthday, "she began to read and two months later she could read at the level of her literate friends. Then she extended her reading, and now (age 15) she reads the way very literate adults do" (p. 28).

Mason (1993b) also describes the case of her son, D.M. The summer D.M. was ten, Mason reports that he could read only a word or two. In the fall, he began "to read store signs and notices with a vengeance." Then at night, "sometime past midnight, he read his way through a fat Spiderman annual his older brother Luke gave him for his birthday last year." He also began reading the sports page of the local newspaper. One day, Mason took him to the local science museum, where he began to read aloud "long paragraphs of technical writing discussing 'atmospheric conditions' and 'helium gases in the stratosphere'" (p. 11).

Davies (cited in Sheffer, 1987) states that her son, K.D., also began reading at the age of ten. "From reading only a few words," Davies writes, K.D. "jumped into whole sentences, often containing fairly difficult words," and now reads mainly comic books at age twelve (p. 5).

H.K. (Kerman, 1993) was reading at a "bare Cat in the Hat level" at the age of ten and a half. Her mother reports:

"During the course of the next year, she did learn the basics about reading, although I shall never know how, since she refused instruction as much as always. We continued to read outloud to her, and she rarely read to herself. My main consolation was that she loved books and didn't think badly of herself. At the age of fourteen, she started to read Scott O'Dell's books. The first one took her two months to read. Two months later, she had read four or five of them. Within six months, she was reading full-length adult fantasy novels, almost entirely feminist by such authors as Mercedes Lackey. She reads voraciously now at the age of 16" (p. 27).

Finally, there is the case of W.M. (Mott, 1993), who at eleven and a half, still did not read despite "sit down lessons with phonics and slogging through books word by word" (p. 11). When his mother decided to take "all hands off his learning, he taught himself when he was ready." She reports that at the age of thirteen and a half, he reads at a ninth-grade level.

These cases have several features in common. As noted above, little or no formal

instruction was required, even for a child diagnosed as "learning disabled." Second, no pressure was put on the child by his or her parents. Third, all of the children made rapid progress once they began to read of their own volition. Finally, all had the advantage of having access to a great deal of reading material.

Recovered Dyslexics

Fink (1995—96) studied twelve dyslexics who had become "skilled readers" and were very successful. One was a Nobel laureate, and the sample included three M.D.'s, two Ph.D.'s, one Ed.D., one J.D., two M.F.A.'s, one M.Ed., and two B.A.'s. Nine of the twelve have published creative scholarly works. (This does not, of course, imply that all former dyslexics achieve success; Fink deliberately selected highly successful subjects.) All twelve had been raised in working-class or middle-class families. All had developed basic literacy three to four years later than their peers; eleven of the twelve, in fact, reported that they "finally learned to read" between the ages of ten and twelve (p. 273). The one exception did not learn to read until the twelfth grade.

All of these individuals were "avid readers," reported Fink. "Although they had persistent troubles with basic, lower-level skills (letter and word recognition and phonics), they rarely circumvented reading. On the contrary, they sought out books . . . " (p. 272). According to Fink, their stories "revealed a common theme: in childhood, each had a passionate personal interest, a burning desire to know more about a discipline that required reading. Spurred by this passionate interest, all read voraciously, seeking and reading everything they could get their hands on about a single intriguing topic." This "high interest contextual reading" (p. 277) may have been the reason for their literacy progress and success.

Malcolm X

The case of Malcolm X confirms that reading in areas of interest can cause profound literacy development well beyond elementary-school age. As he describes in his autobiography, Malcolm X had early success in school and was president of his seventh-grade class. His life on the streets, however, "erased everything I'd learned in school" (El-Shabbazz, 1964, p. 154). In prison, in his early twenties, he describes his literacy level as very low. The change came in prison: "Many who hear me today somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies" (p. 171).

These prison studies consisted largely of reading: "In every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge . . . " (p. 173).

Malcolm X specifically gives reading the credit: "Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, 'What's your alma mater?' I told him, 'Books'" (p. 179).

Objections

There are five possible objections to this simple solution: (1) poor readers simply do not read well enough to read on their own; (2) the gap between good readers and poor readers is too large to make up with free reading—early intervention is thus the only way; (3) poor readers don't like to read; (4) if readers read what they want to read, they will read only junk; (5) as a practical matter, poor readers often do not have access to a great deal of reading material.

Can Poor Readers Read on Their Own?

Juel (1994), in a study of poor and good readers among "lower middle class" students in Austin, Texas, notes that poor readers improve, bui feels that their attainments come "too late" (pp. 125–6). This conclusion is based on the assumption that the basal reader is the only path for improvement. If this is true, poor readers are indeed out of luck.

Inspection of Table 2 (from Juel, 1988) reveals that the poor readers in her sample read at the grade 2.6 level by grade 3 and the grade 3.5 level by grade 4. Thus, by grade 3, the poor readers could read well enough to be able to read many interesting texts, such as the Sweet Valley Kids series, written at the second-grade level (see Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, for evidence that this series is effective even with adult second-language acquirers), and many comic books (Casper and Archie are written at the second-grade level). At the time of this writing, the most popular author of books for children is R.L. Stine. His Goosebumps series is considered suitable for children ages nine to twelve.'

Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, and Fletcher (1997), and Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, and Fletcher (1996) present similar findings: Poor readers stayed well behind good readers on tests of reading comprehension between ages eight and fourteen, but the poor readers continued to improve until age twelve, when curves for both groups appeared to begin to flatten, with a plateau reached at around age fifteen (a higher plateau for the good readers). As Francis et al. note, however, their results do not suggest that reading ability cannot be improved after a given age (p. 15), and they reported a great deal of variability in the age of plateau. What is lacking from these reports is whether any of the poor readers ever had a chance to get involved in a great deal of truly interesting, comprehensible reading. Indeed, this possibility is not even suggested as an option.

Table 2

Reading Comprehension in Grades 1 and 4

RC (ITBS)[a]	Poor Readers[b]	Good Readers[c]
Grade 1	K6	2.4
Grade 2	1.7	3.8
Grade 3	2.6	4.8
Grade 4	3.5	5.9

Source: Juel, 1988.

[a] Denotes Reading Comprehension (Iowa Test of Basic Skills).
[b] I Includes readers in the bottom quartile, n = 29, 24 in grade 4.
[c] Includes average or good readers, n = 86, 30 in grade 4.

Instead, the usual prescription is early intervention with an emphasis on phonemic awareness.

Can Poor Readers Make Up the Gap?

Juel (1988, 1994) calculated that by grade 4 good readers had read 178,000 words in school (basal), while poor readers had read only 80,000 words. Juel also reported that good readers read more at home. Let us assume that by grade 4 good readers have read about a million words more than poor readers have. It is not difficult to make up this gap: Comic books contain about 2,000 words each; fifty comics thus contain about 100,000 words, about 10 percent of the gap. One Sweet Valley Kids novel contains about 7,000 words; fourteen of them contain 100,000, another 10 percent of the gap. Once these texts are comprehensible, a few "lost weekends" can make up a good part of the gap. Note that reading one comic per day would add about 500,000 words of reading in a year.

Even if the poor reader waited longer, and the gap became as large as ten million words, it could be made up. Progress accelerates once readers can read novel-length works with enjoyment, such as Stephen King's books that probably run over 150,000 words. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) reported that some fifth graders read over ten million words per

year, just as many readers of this paper did (and still do).

Reluctant Readers

Juel (1988) reported that the poor readers in her sample disliked reading. There is a simple, powerful way of overcoming dislike of reading—providing children with extremely interesting texts. This approach is supported by case histories of reluctant readers who became enthusiastic readers by reading comic books.

Haugaard (1973) relates that her boys were extremely reluctant readers, three boys "who, one after the other, were notoriously unmotivated to read and had to be urged, coaxed, cajoled, threatened and drilled in order to stay in the super slow group in reading" (p. 84). But when her oldest son discovered comic books, things changed:

"He devoured what seemed to be tons of the things. . . . The motivation these comics provided was absolutely phenomenal and a little bit frightening. My son would snatch up a new one and, with feverish and ravenous eyes, start gobbling it wherever he was—in the car on the way home from the market, in the middle of the yard, walking down the street, at the dinner table. All his senses seemed to shut down and he became a simple visual pipeline" (p. 85).

Comics, in this case, were a conduit to other reading: Haugaard's eldest son gave his comics away to one of his younger brothers and went on to science fiction and books on electronics.

Sustained silent reading (SSR) studies confirm that reading itself is a wonderful motivator. Those who participate in SSR read more on their own than those who do not (Greaney & Clarke, 1973; Pfau, 1967; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993), and McQuillan (1996) also found that free reading in school had long-term effects on adult bilinguals. Greaney and Clarke's study is especially interesting: Sixth-grade boys who participated in an in-school free reading program for eight and one-half months not only did more leisure reading while they were in the program but also were reading more than comparison students six years later.

Reading aloud can interest even the most hard-core reluctant reader. Trelease (1985) tells the following story:

> Assigned at mid-year to teach a sixth-grade class of remedial students, Mrs. (Ann) Hallahan shocked her new students by reading to them on her first day of class. The book was *Where the RedFern Grows.*
>
> A hardened, street-wise, proud group (mostly boys), they were insulted when she began reading to them. "How come you're reading to us? You think we're babies or something?" they wanted to know. After explaining that she didn't think anything of the kind but only wanted to share a favorite story with them, she continued reading *Where the Red Fern Grows.* Each day she opened the class with the next portion of the story and each day she was greeted with groans. "Not again today! How come nobody else ever made us listen like this?"
>
> Mrs. Hallahan admitted to me later, "I almost lost heart." But she persevered, and after a few weeks (the book contained 212 pages), the tone of the class's morning remarks began to change. "You're going to read to us today, aren't you?" Or "Don't forget the book, Mrs. Hallahan."
>
> "I knew we had a winner," she confessed, "when on Friday, just when we were nearing the end of the book, one of the slowest boys in the class went home after school, got a library card, took out *Where the Red Fern Grows,* finished it himself, and came to school on Monday and told everyone how it ended" (p. 9).

Fat Kids Who Don't Like to Read: What about Incentives?[2]

"Asked about the likely results of Pizza Hut's popular food-for-reading program, educational psychologist John Nichols replied, only half in jest, that it would probably produce 'a lot of fat

kids who don't like to read'" (Kohn, 1993, p. 73).

Incentives, such as pizza and other prizes, are widely used to encourage reading in schools. Rohrbeck, Hightower, and Work (1991, cited in Kohn, 1993) report that 81 percent of the elementary school teachers they surveyed use incentives to improve reading. Research on rewarding reading, however, does not provide convincing support for this practice.

Adler (1989) reported no difference in gains in reading between sixth graders who received pizza certificates for each 250 pages read and a comparison group. Niemeyer (1988) showed slight losses in reading achievement for both experimental and control groups in an incentive program for third and fifth graders. Prizes were given based on the number of pages read. Robbins and Thompson (1989) found no significant gains for first, second, and third graders reading over the summer vacation; students received points for small prizes for each book they read. No control group was used. In Robbins and Thompson (1991), both experimental and comparison students (grades 1-6) gained, but there was no difference between the rewarded and nonrewarded students. Scores for rewarded fifth graders actually declined, even though most of the children in the rewarded group rated themselves as "good readers" and were already regular pleasure readers. Carver and Liebert (1995) found that after a six-week, in-library program where incentives were used generously to motivate students to read (sixty Pizza Hut pizzas, tacos, ice cream, and over three hundred fast food coupons for only forty-two students!), students made no gains in reading. (Students had, however, a very limited range of reading material available; their failure to gain may not have been because of the incentives.)[3]

Several studies appear to show that incentives work. In several cases, however, no comparison group was used, and students in the rewarded group engaged in activities known to promote literacy, such as sustained silent reading and hearing stories (Accelerated Learning Systems, 1993; Christmas, 1993; Potter, 1994; Voorhess, 1993). Peak and Dewalt (1994) used a comparison group, but the comparisons had traditional reading instruction, which has been a steady loser when compared to programs that include or focus on free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993). In Harrop and McCann (1983), the advantage of the rewarded group was very small, and there were methodological problems: Harrop and McCann performed t-tests on post-test scores rather than comparing gain scores or using analysis of covariance (there were substantial differences between the groups on the pretest). In addition, the same teacher taught both sections, which raises the possibility that the comparison students knew about the incentives the experimental group received, possibly leading to a demoralizing effect.

In Griffith, Deloach, and LaBarba (1984), the entire treatment and measurement period was less than twenty minutes. The researchers had three treatment groups: those promised a reward by someone familiar to the student (teacher), those promised a reward by an unfamiliar person (investigator), and a group promised no rewards. After being asked to read a passage from a self-selected book and to give their opinion of it, the students were then left alone for ten minutes at a table with the book, a crossword puzzle, and another game. Those rewarded by the familiar figure spent significantly less time reading the book on their own than the no-reward group. Those rewarded by an unfamiliar person, on the other hand, spent more time reading than the no-reward students. In this rare demonstration of positive effects of rewards, the best we can conclude is that incentives might work with an unfamiliar rewarder, a situation which is of course unlike that of either school or family and difficult to sustain in any setting.

Thus, none of the studies on incentives show any clearly positive effect on reading that can be attributed solely to the use of rewards. There is, in fact, reason to suspect that the use of rewards can backfire. As Kohn (1993) notes, "Consider the popular program that offers free pizza to children for reading a certain number of books. If you were a participant in this program, what sort of books would you be likely to select? Probably short, simple ones . . ." (p. 65).

Will They Read Only Junk?

It is sometimes asserted that "if children are left to 'do their own thing,' there is no guarantee that they will push themselves ahead to progress as readers and writers" (Stahl, McKenna & Pagnucco, 1994, p. 182). Free reading, however, is not always easy reading. Several studies show that the books children select on their own are more difficult than the reading material assigned by teachers (Bader, Veatch, & Eldridge, 1987; Southgate, Arnold, & Johnson, 1981). In addition, if what teachers consider "good" reading is more challenging reading, several studies show that "voluminous reading actually fosters the tendency to do better reading" (Schoonover, 1938, p. 117). In Schoonover's study, most of the reading done by high school students who had participated in a six-year free reading program involved books that experts had classified as "good reading."

As readers mature, they gradually expand their reading interests. LaBrant (1937), in a study of reading interests of high school students, concluded that "the theory that in a free or extensive reading program designed to utilize interest and to serve individual needs there will be fruitless reading of light fiction gains no evidence from this study" (p. 34). In addition, several studies have found a tendency for older teenagers to prefer more nonfiction than younger teenagers, which also suggests that reading interests expand as students mature (Carter & Abrahamson, 1994).

Recent confirmation that "light reading" does not exclude other reading but in fact seems to encourage it comes from Ujiie and Krashen (1996): Boys who were heavy comic book readers in grade 7 were more likely to enjoy reading in general, to read more, and to read more books than boys who read fewer comic books or none at all.

The Access Problem

The major problem facing the poor reader is the lack of access to books and other interesting reading material. There is consistent evidence that children read more when there is more available for them to read (Morrow, 1982; Morrow & Weinstein, 1982), and there is also evidence that poor readers tend to live in print-deprived environments (Constantino, 1995). Consistent with this research are current studies showing a positive relationship between the quality of school libraries and reading achievement (Elley, 1992; Krashen, 1995; Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; McQuillan, 1996b). The solution is obvious—school libraries that are stocked with many interesting books and magazines to read, that are open and available to students, and that are inviting, comfortable places to sit and read (Trelease & Krashen, 1996).

Conclusion

The kind of late intervention suggested here is the simplest kind of intervention—providing children with lots of good reading material, and the time and place to read.

Our arguments for late intervention are not arguments against early intervention. We are, however, suggesting that early intervention is not the only possibility. (In fact, it is not a possibility at all for many children.) Those who insist that early intervention is the only way assert that once a child is a poor reader, he or she will always be a poor reader. We do not agree with this pessimistic view. Once a child gets interested in reading, and reading material is available, that child can "catch up" easily and it can happen anytime. In other words, "once a good reader, always a good reader." [4]

Notes

1. According to at least one reviewer (Jones, 1993), the Goosebumps series is of acceptable quality: "none of (Goosebumps) will ever make anyone's Best Books list for their literary quality. Yet, they are widely read and, in the context of the genre, well written" (p. 30). And they are very popular: In the May–June, 1995, list of K–12 bestsellers in the U.S., R.L. Stine captured six of the top ten places.

2. Portions of this section are also published in McQuillan, J., "The effects of incentives on reading." *Reading Research and Instruction, 36, 2,* 111–125.

3. The researchers noted that "it proved difficult to attract a large number of children to take a reading test during the summer" (p. 13), despite the chance to gain one hundred free incentive points.

4. Suggested to us by Deborah Krashen (personal communication).

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