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Maximizing the effectiveness of reading aloud

A systematic approach to reading aloud can yield important academic benefits for children.

Two decades ago, in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), reading aloud gained a new level of emphasis. It was called “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (p. 23). Since that time, parents and teachers have heard much more about the importance of reading aloud. Trelease’s *Read-Aloud Handbook* (1982) became quite popular. Programs such as Reading is Fundamental produced public service announcements touting the benefits of reading aloud to children. The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association promoted reading aloud through their parent guide (2004). The Reach Out and Read program began using pediatricians as an avenue to provide parents books and tips for reading aloud to their children (www.reachoutandread.org).

With such widespread promotion, most parents and teachers have come to believe that reading aloud to children is an important part of early literacy development (Roberts & Burchinal, 2002), and many parents and teachers spend a good deal of time engaged in read-aloud activities (Teale, 2003). Despite this common acceptance of the importance of reading aloud, many children continue to start school with extremely limited experience with books (Anderson-Yockel & Haynes, 1994). The most frequently cited barriers to reading aloud are lack of time (Smith, 1989) and limited access to children’s books (Dickinson, McCabe, &

Anastasopoulos, 2003; Strickland, 2002). Adams (1990) explained that children may begin school with as little as 25 hours or as much as 1,500 hours of read-aloud experiences.

Effects of reading aloud to children

The public interest in reading aloud to children sparked a new wave of research. Some of the findings were surprising. For example, despite being labeled, the “single most important activity” (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 23), Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) found that reading aloud accounts for only 8% of the variance in reading ability in the primary grades. The researchers suggested that more studies should be conducted to determine what specific behaviors during read-aloud sessions contribute to later literacy development. Meyer, Wardrop, Linn, and Hastings (1993) found that there are low to moderate negative correlations between time teachers spend reading aloud and their students’ reading achievement. That is, in classrooms where teachers spend more time reading aloud to children, students’ reading achievement tends to be worse than in classrooms where less time is devoted to read-aloud activities. In classrooms where reading aloud was taking place, there were fewer interactions with students, and students spent less time reading on their own. On the surface, these studies seem to indicate that reading aloud may not be particularly beneficial to children.

On the other hand, there is ample evidence of the benefits of reading aloud to children. For example, several researchers have demonstrated that reading aloud to children can increase their vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; De Temple & Snow, 2003; Brabham & Lynch-Brown,

2002; Sénéchal, 1997; Sharif, Ozuah, Dinkevich, & Mulvihill, 2003). We also have evidence that reading aloud to children can increase their listening comprehension skills (Morrow & Gambrell, 2002; Stanovich, Cunningham, & West, 1998; Teale, 1986). We know that reading aloud to children can promote their syntactic development (Chomsky, 1972). It is also clear that reading aloud to children can increase their ability to recognize words (Stahl, 2003). Reading aloud promotes a variety of skills and abilities related to emergent literacy, and, in fact, children's own emergent readings demonstrate evidence of having had books read to them (Elster, 1994).

So, how can we make sense of these apparently contradictory findings? We can start by examining the conditions under which reading aloud to children has been effective. The most positive results of reading aloud have typically been found with researcher-designed methods, as opposed to naturally occurring methods. This suggests that teachers and parents could be more productive in their read-aloud activities if they employed some of the more systematic methods that researchers use.

Maximizing the effectiveness of read-alouds

Given the pressures of accountability in today's school climate, it is essential that instructional time be spent wisely. To ensure that reading aloud does not get lost in the press for higher student achievement, teachers must maximize the effectiveness of their read-aloud activities. To make read-alouds as effective as possible, Teale (2003) suggested that teachers consider (a) the amount of read-aloud time, (b) the choice of text for read-aloud activities, (c) the method of reading aloud, and (d) the fit of the read-aloud in the curriculum.

Time for reading aloud. To determine how much reading aloud is appropriate, teachers should consider what reading aloud adds and what, if anything, is given up. Often, multiple instructional goals can be accomplished with one read-aloud, which can actually save instructional time. Different children have different needs based on their prior experiences, so the amount of read-aloud time appropriate in a high-poverty school may be different than what

would be appropriate in a school with a more affluent population. Teale (2003) recommended that teachers reflect on the amount of time spent to ensure that it is time spent wisely.

Choosing text for reading aloud. It is important to consider the quality of books selected for read-aloud activities. Books that are well written, books with engaging characters and plots, and books that offer the teacher many opportunities to model fluent and expressive reading are the best choices. Including an assortment of text genres exposes children to more literary variety. Teachers should consider the instructional goals of the read-aloud when selecting books. For example, alphabet books are excellent for teaching about letters, and storybooks are useful for developing vocabulary. Informational books can help children develop content knowledge and enhance their motivation for reading. Word play books are useful for developing metalinguistic abilities such as phonological awareness.

Methods for reading aloud. There are several general methods that should be used to make read-alouds effective (Teale, 2003). For example, teachers should encourage children to use their background knowledge to develop understanding of the text and ask questions that keep children engaged. Reading in a lively, engaging way, using voices, gestures, and expressions can enhance understanding. It is helpful to encourage children to predict what will happen in a story, but teachers should be careful to help children confirm or refute their predictions using the text. Especially for younger children, it is important to focus on important ideas from the text and avoid discussions that are too tangential.

Dickinson and Tabors (2001) suggested that teachers and parents should engage children in both immediate and nonimmediate talk. Immediate talk focuses on answering literal questions and labeling pictures. Nonimmediate talk extends beyond the text. It includes discussions of word meanings, making predictions and inferences, and relating the text-to-personal experiences. It is important that individual children have multiple opportunities to engage in nonimmediate talk during read-alouds.

Examining book reading in the classroom. Dickinson et al. (2003) suggested that it is important

for teachers to examine their own book reading in the classroom. For example, it is helpful to have a designated read-aloud area in the classroom, and that area should be inviting and comfortable. There should also be plentiful time for adult-child book reading, and there should be strong connections between home and classroom read-aloud activities.

Read-aloud activities should be integrated throughout the curriculum. Teachers should match read-aloud texts to curriculum goals and consider how the book fits into the unit being studied. Developing connections across books makes learning more connected and meaningful. Teachers can extend the read-aloud experience beyond the book itself through activities, discussions, and projects. Finally, using research-based methods of reading aloud should increase the likelihood that read-aloud activities will achieve the desired results.

Research-based read-aloud methods

Although substantial research efforts have been devoted to examining the effects of reading aloud, only a few researchers have developed and tested specific techniques for reading aloud to children. Three methods that have emerged as particularly compelling approaches to reading aloud are dialogic reading (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, & Angell, 1994), text talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001), and print referencing (Ezell & Justice, 2000). These methods incorporate critical elements of language development, vocabulary growth, and knowledge about books in ways that promote learning without detracting from children's enjoyment.

Dialogic reading

Dialogic reading, developed and refined by Whitehurst and his colleagues (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Whitehurst et al., 1988; Whitehurst et al., 1999), provides a simple structure for making parent-child or teacher-child read-alouds more effective and productive. This method is most commonly used with preschool children, but it is appropriate for older children as well. Dialogic reading is based on three principles: (a) encourag-

ing the child to become an active learner during book reading, (b) providing feedback that models more sophisticated language, and (c) challenging the child's knowledge and skills by raising the complexity of the conversation to a level just above his current ability (De Temple & Snow, 2003).

According to Whitehurst et al. (1988), as parents or teachers begin using dialogic reading, the emphasis should be on asking "what" questions, following answers with questions, repeating what the child says, and providing help and praise. As the read-aloud interactions become more sophisticated, specific types of prompts are implemented. Completion prompts are fill-in-the-blank prompts (e.g., "When Lucy reached the shed she...."). Recall prompts require the child to remember specific details from the story (e.g., "Can you remember what they saw at the zoo?"). Open-ended prompts are statements or questions that encourage responses in the child's own words (e.g., "What do you think she should do next?"). *Wh-* prompts are *what*, *where*, and *why* questions. Distancing prompts are statements or questions that require the child to relate the content of the book to life outside the book (e.g., "Have you ever lost something special like Adam did?"). Table 1 provides more examples of prompts. As children become accustomed to this type of dialogue, eventually open-ended questions become enough to sustain meaningful storybook interactions.

Text talk

Text talk, developed by Beck and McKeown and their colleagues (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Beck et al., 2002), is a read-aloud strategy that focuses on vocabulary development. (See Table 2 for an explanation of the text talk strategy.) This strategy is most typically used in the primary grades. By engaging children in meaningful discussions about books, teachers can use text talk read-alouds to provide a context for teaching new words. A teacher begins a text talk lesson by reading a story aloud and engaging in rich discussion with children. The teacher then targets several words from the story to discuss in more depth. Deep learning of these words becomes the focus of the lesson.

Selecting words to teach. The selection of appropriate words is one of the most important aspects of a good text talk lesson. The teacher should choose

TABLE 1
Examples of prompts to use during a read-aloud

Prompt type	Example
Completion	When the little pig wouldn't open the door, the wolf said.... The last little pig's house wouldn't blow down because....
Recall	What did the wolf say? What was the first little pig's house made of?
Open ended	Why wouldn't the little pig open the door for the wolf? What was the real reason the wolf wanted the pig to open the door?
Distancing	Has a stranger ever come knocking on your door? What kind of house would you like to build when you grow up?

TABLE 2
Elements of the text talk strategy (adapted from Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)

Text talk
<p>Read and discuss the story with children. During the book reading, ask children questions that focus on understanding the story. After reading the book, conduct a minilesson about a few key words from the text.</p> <p>Introduce the target words one at a time. During each lesson, focus on three to five Tier 2 words. Choose words that will be most likely to be useful to children later. Write the word on the chalkboard or on a pocket-chart card to display.</p> <p>Ask children to repeat each word. It is important for children to have a clear phonological representation of the words. For more difficult words, you may want to have children say the word several times.</p> <p>Introduce a child-friendly definition. Explain the central meaning of the word using words the children already know. Use complete sentences and, whenever possible, include the words <i>someone</i>, <i>something</i>, or <i>describes</i>.</p> <p>Share examples of the word in contexts that are different from the context in the story. Expand children's understanding of the word by using it in a variety of contexts. For words with multiple meanings, make sure your examples use the central word meaning.</p> <p>Engage children in thinking about and using the meaning of the word. Guide children in activities that require them to use the word. You may ask them, "Have you ever...?" Or, you might ask them to agree or disagree with comments using the word. Or, you might ask children to turn to a partner and tell them something they know about the word. Be sure children use the word in their explanations.</p> <p>Ask children to repeat the word again to reinforce its phonological representation. Be sure every child has an opportunity to say the word several times, especially in meaningful contexts.</p> <p>Repeat these steps for each target word.</p>

words that can be connected to what students know, can be explained with words they know, and will be useful and interesting to students. Beck (2004) explained that there are three "tiers" of word utility. Tier 1 words are common, everyday words that the

children probably already know (e.g., *baby*, *school*, *hungry*, *ceiling*, *quickly*). Tier 2 words are less common words but ones that mature speakers of the language use and understand readily (e.g., *solemn*, *coincidence*, *trivial*, *devour*, *avoid*). Tier 3

words are relatively infrequent words that are most typically associated with a specific content area (e.g., *isotope*, *peninsula*, *filibuster*, *fricative*, *photosynthesis*). Because they are both useful and probably not already known, Beck suggested targeting Tier 2 words for instruction.

Creating child-friendly definitions. To communicate the meanings of the target words, dictionary definitions are usually not very helpful for children. Beck et al. (2002) suggested teachers create their own definitions to make the word meanings more accessible. A child-friendly definition uses everyday language to explain the meaning of the word. To create a child-friendly definition, Beck suggested teachers ask themselves, “When do I use this word?” “Why do we have this word?” Staying focused on the central meaning or concept of the word rather than the multiple meanings of the word promotes understandings. Finally, Beck et al. recommended including *something*, *someone*, or *describes* in a child-friendly definition to clarify how the word is used (see Table 3 for examples). As a resource for generating definitions that children can understand and use, Beck (2004) recommended the *Collins Cobuild Student Dictionary* (Collins Cobuild, 2002).

Using target words in other contexts. According to Beck et al. (2002), after explaining in child-friendly language what a target word means, the teacher should require students to use and interact with the word by thinking about its meaning. These contexts should be sentences or paragraphs de-

signed to make word meaning transparent, and they should be used along with (not instead of) child-friendly explanations. The goal of this portion of the text talk lesson is to make word meaning explicit and clear and to engage students in actively thinking about and using the meanings right away. A teacher might elect to ask children to use the word themselves or to respond to the teacher’s use of the word.

Print referencing

Print referencing refers to the verbal and non-verbal cues, such as tracking print or pointing to print in pictures, adults use to call children’s attention to important aspects of the text, including its forms, features, and functions (Justice & Ezell, 2004). The purpose of print referencing is to increase the metalinguistic focus of reading aloud, thereby increasing print interest. With increased print interest, “children come to view written language as an object distinctly worthy of attention” (Justice & Ezell, 2004, p. 186). Cues can be explicit or implicit and are embedded within the storybook reading interaction. They can be verbal cues (e.g., commenting or questioning about print) or nonverbal cues (e.g., pointing to each word in a line of text during reading). Print referencing can promote children’s development of print concepts, concept of word, and alphabet knowledge (Justice & Ezell, 2002). Table 4 provides examples of print references that facilitate development in each of these areas.

Justice and Ezell (2004) cautioned that too much print referencing during reading can detract

TABLE 3
Examples of child-friendly definitions

Word	Child-friendly definition
Guardian	A <i>guardian</i> is someone who takes care of you.
Nuisance	A <i>nuisance</i> is something or someone that bothers you.
Obvious	<i>Obvious</i> describes something that is clear and easy to understand.
Expert	An <i>expert</i> is someone who knows a lot more than other people about a particular topic.
Avoid	When someone <i>avoids</i> something, they try to keep away from it or keep it from happening.
Proposal	A <i>proposal</i> is an idea or suggestion that you really want someone to agree to.
Extraordinary	<i>Extraordinary</i> describes something that is very special or unusual—something out of the ordinary.
Drowsy	<i>Drowsy</i> describes that feeling when you are getting sleepy and you have trouble keeping your eyes open.

TABLE 4
Examples of print-referencing cues during storybook reading

Type of cue	Example
Verbal cues	
Question about print	"Can you find the title of this book?"
Request about print	"Show me where I should start reading on this page."
Comment about print	"That word is <i>stop</i> ."
Nonverbal cues	
Pointing to print	Teacher points to a word on a page or to print within an illustration.
Tracking print	Teacher tracks her finger under the words as she reads the text.

Note. Adapted from Justice and Ezell (2004).

from the child's enjoyment, and they suggested three to five references during a single storybook. They suggested, however, that to promote literacy development, these print references should be used regularly, or at least once during each storybook reading session. These may include nonverbal references that call attention to features of print without requiring a response from the child (e.g., pointing to print in pictures). Finally, they also suggested that the adult should be sure to keep cues within the child's zone of proximal development.

Helping parents maximize the effectiveness of read-alouds at home

Teachers and schools can assist parents in their read-aloud efforts by ensuring plentiful access to appropriate books. This can be accomplished with school or classroom take-home books, through book fairs and book give-aways, and in connections with public library events and bookmobiles.

In addition to the methods mentioned previously, other useful ways to engage children during read-alouds are recommended by Cole, Maddox, Notari-Syverson, and Ross (1998). In *Talking & Books*, their video for parents, they suggested using the C.A.R. strategy with children: Comment and wait, Ask questions and wait, and Respond by adding a little more. "Comment and wait" involves the adult making comments that reflect a child's focus of interest in the book, then giving the child time to think before responding or asking a ques-

tion. "Ask questions and wait" includes asking both closed questions (i.e., ones that require a yes or no answer) and open-ended questions (i.e., ones that require the child to construct an answer). Parents must remember to provide a child more time to think when open-ended questions are asked. "Respond by adding a little more" involves a parent repeating a child's response and then adding one or two new words or phrases. This action reinforces a child's talking and provides new information. Waiting communicates that the adult is interested in what the child has to say.

Helping parents make the most out of read-aloud activities can be aligned with research-based practices. Researchers have successfully taught parents to implement research-based methods (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1998). Schools can do this by providing specific training to assist parents. Parent workshops and meetings are appropriate times to discuss key methods for reading aloud and why they are important (see Table 5 for suggested topics to discuss at parent meetings).

Final thoughts

Read-alouds provide a wonderful opportunity to promote children's love of literature, and they can be a treasured time together. As demonstrated through the research on dialogic reading, text talk, and print referencing, a systematic approach to reading aloud can yield important academic benefits for children.

TABLE 5
Suggested topics for parent meetings

Read-aloud topics for parent meetings

Physical engagement with books

Encourage parents to make read-aloud sessions a positive experience where children are allowed to reference pictures and to point to words as they read.

Elaborating

Parents should help children to make connections between the read-aloud story and their own life. Parents should also encourage the child to expand on ideas as they read.

Questioning

In addition to asking children open-ended questions about read-aloud stories, parents should encourage children to ask questions during storybook reading sessions.

Wait time

Waiting after a question or comment invites the child to respond, using and expanding oral language skills and increasing engagement with text.

Child-friendly explanation of new words

Encourage parents to explain the meaning of new words in ways that are child friendly—use words that children already know to help them understand new words. Discussion of how to select words to teach would also be useful for most parents.

Print referencing

Explain to parents how to call children's attention to important features of the text in ways that keep the child engaged and promote print awareness.

Educators and parents should ensure, however, that attempts to build literacy through read-alouds do not detract from children's enjoyment of good books. Socially and emotionally rewarding literacy interactions can lead to a positive attitude toward reading and can serve to motivate children to engage in other literacy activities on their own. Reading aloud to children can be a very powerful way to increase their vocabulary, listening comprehension, syntactic development, and word-recognition skills. By employing research-based methods, teachers and parents can maximize the effectiveness of reading aloud, thereby enhancing the reading experiences and the achievement of students.

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