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## Using Read Alouds in Today's Classrooms

Read alouds benefit children of all ages and in all subjects

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by Reba M. Wadsworth

As the intimidating shadow of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) hovers over classrooms, new pressures are placed on building principals to keep the focus on a balanced reading program, even while the storm rages for them to focus on raising assessment scores. This climate places instructional leaders in the buffer zone between classroom teachers who are attempting to meet rigid demands and those making the demands. Therefore, the principal must assume the role of encouraging teachers to teach with a sense of urgency, but to continue implementing instructional practices that are educationally sound for students.

This increased focus on assessments might cause classroom environments to become increasingly more stressful as teachers work to help students meet NCLB requirements. Many teachers are already losing the passion for teaching and are looking at their days in the classroom as a test of endurance. Despite this present reality, one component of a balanced reading curriculum—the time-honored practice of reading aloud—is considered good practice by both sides of the reading debate between phonics and whole language, but it is slowly getting lost in many classrooms. As instructional leaders, we must look at the long-range gains we want for students and continue to encourage the use of read alouds throughout the school day and in all content areas.

We must constantly remind ourselves that read alouds are an irresistible invitation to welcome children into the exciting world of literacy. Read alouds are powerful because they serve so many instructional purposes—to motivate, encourage, excite, build background, develop comprehension, assist children in making connections, and serve as a model of what fluent reading sounds like. During a read aloud, a teacher reads a text aloud, and students are enveloped in a risk-free learning environment that removes the pressure of achievement and the fear of failure, allowing the freedom to wonder, question, and enjoy material beyond their reading abilities.

### **Building Background Knowledge**

It is important for teachers to read aloud even though classroom time is limited. Students come to us with a wide range of background knowledge. To address one of the goals of NCLB, we must attempt to provide *all* children with a foundation that will enable them to risk learning new concepts. In the *Comprehension Toolkit*, Harvey and Goudvis (2005) write that everything we read and learn is colored by our background knowledge. Read alouds give teachers a wonderful opportunity to directly scaffold learning for all students who lack the background for deep understanding of topics before we move them into more complex subject matter.

The read aloud and follow-up conversation allows teachers the opportunity to help students develop background knowledge and connect concepts so that all children can begin to clarify their thinking during their discussions with their peers and teacher (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Allington (2001) agrees and writes that in order for children to develop thoughtful literacy, they must be given an abundant number of opportunities throughout the day to demonstrate their understanding and to practice using comprehension strategies under the guidance of the teacher. Read alouds also stimulate curiosity in children as they are invited into a safe environment to marvel at the concepts being presented (Harvey, 1998).

While read alouds provide the perfect opportunity to support and stimulate learning, they also offer another element that is far too important for children to miss. Stop and reflect on your own school days when you experienced the utter joy and comfort of being read to. Evoke memories that bring a smile to your face and that have sustained you for many years. I am a teacher today because of my third-grade teacher, who in the 1950s invited us to sit at her feet as she put the music of *The Boxcar Children* in the air. We hungered for her words as

she inspired us and modeled for us the sounds of a fluent reader. She always seemed to know just where to pause to make us lean closer and just where to think aloud as we were confused about the decisions of the characters in the book. Each day she left us breathless and longing to hear more.

I wonder if she knew of the impact she was making on our lives. I wonder if she even knew she was modeling fluency, teaching us vocabulary that we weren't likely to read independently, or showing us the power of the written word. I wonder if she was aware that she was inviting us to practice our listening and communication skills and developing in us a passion for reading and learning. I wonder what she would do today to stimulate a classroom full of test-takers if she had at her fingertips the exceptional picture books we have available.

Now the question must be asked of us: Can we afford not to gift our students today with the same stimulating, passion-filled learning environment despite the timely demands for higher test scores?

#### **Making the Case for Read Alouds**

Many nationally known educators affirm the importance of read alouds in today's classrooms. The 1985 report, "Becoming a Nation of Readers," stated that the read aloud was the single most important thing we could do for building the knowledge required for future success in reading. Twenty years following this report, despite the "reading wars," experts still agree on this one point—that read alouds are beneficial for children of all ages.

In many speeches Lucy Calkins, known internationally for her three decades of work in the area of literacy for teachers, has stated that the read aloud is a powerful force in the lives of children and that it is still the single most important thing a teacher does during the school day. Regie Routman (2003), another nationally-known literacy consultant, finds that reading aloud to children enables them to hear the rich language of stories and texts they cannot yet read on their own. By reading aloud to students, they learn new vocabulary, grammar, and information and how stories and written language works.

Based on the research of Duffy-Hester's (1999) six research-based reading programs, Allington (2001) provides a list of 10 essential principles of a balanced reading program that supports struggling readers. One of the 10 principles promotes read alouds, stating, "On a daily basis, teachers should read aloud to students from a variety of genres and create opportunities for students to read instructional and independent level texts."

Read alouds have long been accepted in primary classrooms, but by the time students move to the upper grades—including high school—many teachers give up the practice as the day becomes more focused on content area. Given the body of research supporting the importance of read alouds for modeling fluency, building background knowledge, and developing language acquisition, Allen (2000) writes we should remind ourselves that those same benefits occur when we extend read alouds beyond the early years.

When reading aloud in a content area, the purpose is to activate and build upon existing understanding of the subject. There is an abundance of outstanding books for teachers to choose. Here are some suggestions for conducting a read aloud in a content-area class.

To prepare for the activity:

- Select the focus and gather several books on the topic;
- Arrange to read the books in order, from simple to more complex; and
- Prepare for the read aloud by prereading and marking passages that require more time to think aloud and to invite student discussion.

During the activity:

- Introduce the subject and tell the students why you selected the book;
- Introduce the book and tell how it fits into the study;
- After reading aloud, invite students to do a retelling of the text; and
- Create a reading chart that lists the books read aloud.

As the instructional leaders in the building, principals must keep in mind the varied instructional gains that can be made with a thoughtfully planned read aloud. They must also actively support teachers and encourage them to read aloud in *all classrooms* every day!

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#### On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How have we approached the teaching of reading at our school?
2. What are the benefits to reading aloud?
3. What role can parents and the community play in classroom read alouds?
4. How can the principal and teacher leaders support teachers in read alouds?
5. How can we incorporate read alouds throughout the content areas?