

Reading Aloud: A Worthwhile Investment?

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Some kids call her "The book lady." Most teachers I know simply call her "amazing." Teri knows more information about more young adult books than anyone else I know. She knows authors, publishers, genre, students' reading interests, and trends. She's been a part of this journal since 1999, and I'm pleased to report will continue her role as trade book review editor under the new editorial leadership. The new editors asked her to do this because she's the best. And she's the best because she doesn't seem to understand the concept of being too busy to take on one more task. Twice during these seven years, I asked her to step far beyond her role as a column editor and to really help shape an entire issue. Look back to the just-published March 2006 issue on multicultural literature and further back to the December 2001 issue that, in part, spotlighted young adult literature, and know Teri's help made those issues far more than I could have ever done alone. I must offer here, publicly, many thanks to Teri for seven years of *never* missing a deadline, of always providing our readers with great information, and for, above all else, always being a good friend.]

In light of the tremendous pressure teachers face to ensure that all their students meet state and federal standards in reading and language arts, I am often asked these days if reading aloud is a valuable classroom activity, especially in grades where students are already expected to be independent readers. For decades, educators have discussed the value and importance of reading aloud,

especially in terms of promoting positive attitudes toward books and reading.

Now, however, knowing and understanding the research is key to defending classroom practices. How does reading aloud affect comprehension and, ultimately, test results? What research supports this classroom practice?

What We Know

Go back in time with me for a moment to the report issued by the federal government in 1985. Okay, so some of you were students then and not teachers. However, this landmark publication, entitled *Becoming a Nation of Readers** (1985), made perhaps the strongest statement in support of reading aloud: "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23). The report went on to state unequivocally that reading aloud was essential not just at home with young children but at school with older readers (p. 51).

Here we are 20 years later. Can we make these same statements with certainty? Has the research in the intervening years borne out what *Becoming a Nation of Readers* declared in 1985? Some of the essential studies on reading aloud (see sidebar) confirm what *Becoming a Nation of Readers* said with some emphasis. Reading aloud is still an essential tool to not only motivate readers but to assist in helping students meet standards.

* References included in this article are listed and annotated in the sidebar, "To Learn More: Benefits of Reading Aloud" on pp. 51–52.

TO LEARN MORE: BENEFITS OF READING ALOUD

Allen, Janet. 2000. *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse. Chapter 4, titled “Life is short—eat dessert first! The value of read aloud beyond primary years,” reviews some of the research by Regie Routman, Donald Graves, and Jim Trelease, along with Allen’s commonsense advice about including read-aloud as part of a comprehensive reading program.

Anderson, Richard C., Hiebert, Elfrieda H., Scott, Judith A., & Wilkinson, Ian A. G. 1985. *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Champaign-Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading. As noted above, this report from a national reading panel stated emphatically that reading aloud was the most important activity for developing readers.

Beers, G. Kylene, & Samuels, Barbara. 1996. *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon. In addition to chapters targeting other strategies and populations, there is a chapter on reading aloud that recounts the research as well as presents tips on effective use of read-aloud in the middle school.

Beers, Kylene. 2002. *When Kids Can’t Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6–12*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Down to earth, practical advice based upon solid research is part and parcel of this professional text that contains information about reading aloud, including a bibliography of good books to read aloud to middle and high school students.

Carlsen, G. Robert, & Sherrill, Anne. 1988. *Voices of Readers: How We Come to Love Books*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. Carlsen and Sherrill examined the reading autobiographies of hundreds if not thousands of adult readers to draw some conclusions about the strategies and activities that led adults to a lifetime of reading. The chart on page 152 indicates that having teachers read aloud was an effective strategy for students ranging in age from 6 to 18.

Davidson, Judith, & Koppenhaver, David. 1993. *Adolescent Literacy: What Works and Why*. New York: Garland. This report from the Center for the Study of Adolescence discusses reading aloud as a prime example of “readership.” Readership is defined as those lessons that help students become independent readers and negotiate text effectively. “Reading aloud . . . is a popular activity in effective adolescent literacy programs . . . [that] provides listeners with a common text . . . [and] makes them aware of language in new and special ways” (p. 230).

Eaton, Anne T. 1924. On Reading Aloud. *Horn Book*, 1(4), pp. 42–46. Just to demonstrate that reading aloud is not a new-fangled invention, read this piece from the first volume year of *The Horn Book*. Eaton presents reasons for reading aloud and states unequivocally that reading aloud is an enjoyable experience for every individual.

Fox, Mem. (2001). *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Though Fox aims at parents, especially parents of young readers, her commonsense advice and her down-to-earth examples are good to share with parents and administrators who work with older readers as well.

Gibson, Karen. 2004. *Students’ Favorite Prereading Activities, K–5*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Houston, Houston, Texas. This replication of a study conducted by Mary Livaudais in the 1980s confirmed that students, in this case in grades kindergarten through fifth grade, reported that having a teacher, parent, or famous person read aloud was one of their favorite activities before they read.

Giles, Vickey. 2005. *Students’ Favorite Prereading Activities, 6–12*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Houston, Houston, Texas. Dr. Giles’s research confirmed that hearing someone read aloud in an exciting voice would provide reading motivation to students in grades 6 through 12.

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TO LEARN MORE: BENEFITS OF READING ALOUD (CONTINUED)

Hahn, Mary Lee. 2002. *Reconsidering Read-Aloud*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse. Hahn's book provides a basis for beginning a read-aloud program, directions for selecting appropriate read-aloud material, and other important considerations.

Krashen, Stephen D. 2004. *The Power of Reading: Insights from Research*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited. Krashen includes many of the studies on read-aloud in this professional book. He reports that children who are read aloud to at home and in school read more on their own (p. 77). Reading aloud, moreover, has multiple effects on literacy development including improved comprehension, increase in vocabulary growth, and more positive attitudes toward books and reading (p. 78).

Lesesne, Teri S. 2003. *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4–12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse. An entire chapter on reading aloud is included in this professional book. This chapter updates the one written for *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers* (Samuels and Beers, 1996).

Rycik, James A., & Irvin, Judith L. 2005. *Teaching Reading in the Middle Grades: Understanding and Supporting Literacy Development*. Boston, MA: Pearson. Stressing that reading aloud continues to serve an important purpose beyond elementary school (p. 94), Rycik and Irving cite research from

the past decade that supports this practice. Also included is information about the various reasons for reading aloud.

Sharpe, Wesley. 2000. Reading Aloud: Is It Worth It? http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr213.shtml. This online article not only provides information and research on reading aloud, there are several links to other articles about this topic and related subjects.

Sullivan, Edward T. 2002. *Reaching Reluctant Young Adult Readers: A Practical Handbook for Librarians and Teachers*. Boston, MA: Rowan & Littlefield. Sullivan pulls together into one volume much of the research into what works with teens in terms of reading motivation and the research that underpins these strategies and activities. The book contains a plethora of citations for research supporting Sullivan's assertions of the importance of graphic novels, audiobooks, and other means of creating readers.

Trelease, Jim. 2001. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin. Trelease's popular book aimed at parents discusses the research that supports reading aloud, including *Becoming a Nation of Readers* as well as more contemporary studies. Reading aloud to children, Trelease asserts, helps them develop and improve literacy skills and has a tremendous impact on vocabulary growth.

So What?

So what does the research show? Whether the reports and articles and books originate in the 1980s, 1990s, or the 21st century, one conclusion holds true: reading aloud is an effective classroom practice (Anderson et al., 1985; Allen, 2000; Beers, 2002; Lesesne, 2003). Teachers across the country should be reading aloud to their classes on a regular basis (daily is best). Reading aloud is no longer considered the domain of the elementary school. Instead, it is a desirable activity for older, more independent readers (Allen, 2000; Trelease, 2001; Rycik & Irvin, 2005; Giles, 2005).

The read-aloud may take a variety of forms (Beers & Samuels, 1996; Lesesne, 2003). It can be used to introduce students to a new topic of study; it can be offered simply for the pleasure of listeners; or it can be utilized to teach skills and strategies such as context clues, word attack skills, or main idea (Rycik & Irvin, 2005). With the preponderance of audio versions of YA novels, the read-aloud can also take the form of listening to a book on tape or CD or MP3 (Sullivan, 2002).

The materials teachers might include in read-aloud activities are varied as well. Read-alouds are not simply the domain of fiction (stories, novels)

but can and should include poetry, picture books, drama, and expository text (nonfiction) as well. Teachers may opt to read text above the reading comprehension level of their classes or simply opt to read something for sheer pleasure and enjoyment (Lesesne, 2003).

What follows is a baker's dozen of read-alouds that illustrate the marvelous range of literature available to our students—from picture books such as *Show Way* and *Moo Who?* to complex allegorical novels like *The Book of Everything* and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Books with good humor (*Born to Rock*) and books that raise goosebumps (*Dead Connection*) join historical fiction (*Second Sight*) and fantasy (*Gossamer*). YA literature is alive and thriving. I hope that some of these books will find their way into your classrooms.

Blackwood, Gary. *Second Sight*. Two children learn of an attempt to be made on the President's life. How can they persuade those nearest Mr. Lincoln that he is in danger? Alternative histories, popular in adult literature, are making their way to the world of YA.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Mr. Chickee's Funny Money*. Steven receives a quadrillion dollar bill from his friend, Mr. Chickee. Can it be real money? It is up to the Flint Future Detectives to find out if Steven is a quadrillionaire.

DiCamillo, Kate. *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Edward, a toy rabbit fashioned from china, is the prized possession of a little girl. Edward learns the true meaning and importance of love in this remarkable tale. Teach students about allegory and story construction with this slim novel.

Gallo, Donald. R. *What Are You Afraid Of? Stories about Phobias*. This collection features stories about fears. Some are funny, some intense. All would make excellent additions to literature anthologies.

Korman, Gordon. *Born to Rock*. Leo discovers, much to his chagrin, that the father he has known is not his biological father. He decides to spend the summer with his bio dad, the lead singer for a grunge punk band. Korman knows how to write funny!

Kuiper, Guus. *The Book of Everything*. Thomas is able to see things no one else can, including the beauty in the world around him. Thomas needs as much beauty as he can find since the reality of his life is less than happy.

Lowry, Lois. *Gossamer*. Littlest is learning how to bestow dreams on humans. Her charge, a troubled young man, is in desperate need of something pleasant and happy in his life. Award-winning author Lowry demonstrates her deft hand at creating memorable characters in this slim fantasy.

Palatini, Margie. *Moo Who?* Hilda the heifer loses her memory when she is bonked on the bean. She goes off in search of her voice, encountering many animals along the way. This humorous picture book could be used to teach voice and dialect.

Pendergast, Beth. *The Penderwicks*. Winner of the 2005 National Book Award, this family story harkens back to the gentle tales of Louisa May Alcott. Four sisters spend a magical summer in a cottage on the grounds of a large estate.

Perel, David. *Bat Boy Lives!* This is a collection of the odd stories from the *Weekly World News*, one of the supermarket tabloids whose headlines manage to catch the eyes of shoppers standing in line. *Elvis Lives!* Use this book to show students how to invent the "truth" of a story based on hearsay and conjecture.

Price, Charlie. *Dead Connection*. Murray enjoys spending time at the cemetery where he talks to the dead. One chance encounter leads Murray into a murder mystery.

Vande Velde, Vivian. *Three Good Deeds*. Howard is turned from person to poultry when he plays one prank too many. In order to return to his human shape, he must perform three unselfish deeds. Can he do that?

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Show Way*. Woodson, in a gently flowing cumulative verse, tells the history of the women in her family, all of whom discovered their own "show way." While this may appear to be a simple picture book, there is much to mine for social studies curriculum.

TO SHARE MORE: GREAT READ-ALOUDS FROM THE PAST

Chodlenko, Gennifer. *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Set in 1935 on Alcatraz Island, this is the story of a young boy dealing with his autistic sister and his new apartment on the prison grounds.

Clements, Andrew. *Things Not Seen*. Bobby wakes up invisible one morning. Complications arise when his parents are injured in a car accident. How can his absence be explained?

Colfer, Eoin. *The Wish List*. Meg Finn, to atone for her life of crime, must help an elderly man accomplish all on his wish list. It is a bit of a tough job since she is trying to help after her death.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bucking the Sarge*. Luther Farrell has a former drill sergeant mother and a whole heap of trouble when he dares to challenge her.

Cushman, Karen. *Rodzina*. This historical novel examines the life of a young girl placed on the Orphan Train and headed west to find a new family. Rodzina fears her future will be one of servitude.

DiCamillo, Kate. *The Tale of Despereaux*. A mouse falls in love with a princess and ventures into the dungeon to rescue her when she is kidnapped by a rat.

Frost, Helen. *Keesha's House*. In sestina and sonnets, the author tells of several troubled teens who all find respite and hope in Keesha's house.

Funke, Cornelia. *Inkheart*. What happens when someone can read to life characters from books?

Gantos, Jack. *Jack Adrift: Fourth Grade without a Clue*. The final installment in the Jack book series finds Jack's family moved to a trailer while his dad works for the Navy.

Ghigna, Charles. *Fury of Motion: Poems for Boys*. Poems range in subject from baseball to first love.

Going, K. L. *Liberation of Gabriel King*. Gabe and his best friend Frita spend the summer confronting their fears. Little do they know that their biggest act of courage is still in front of them.

Henkes, Kevin. *Olive's Ocean*. When a school friend dies, Olive seeks a way to commemorate her.

Janeczko, Paul. *Worlds Afire*. Novel in verse recounts the tragedy of a fire at a circus in 1944 that killed more than 100 people, mostly children.

Leitch Smith, Greg. *Tofu and T. Rex*. Two teens, one vegan, one carnivore, find themselves unusual allies.

Lester, Julius. *Day of Tears*. This novel recounts an historical event in which more than 400 slaves were auctioned over the course of two days.

Lowry, Lois. *Messenger*. The final book in The Giver series brings the story full circle. See what happens to Jonas and Kira.

Lubar, David. *Flip*. When Taylor and Ryan find some mysterious disks, little do they think that they will be off on some grand adventures.

McKissack, Patricia. *To Establish Justice: Citizenship and the Constitution*. An examination of rights for various groups including people of color, homosexuals, the disabled, and others.

Moses, Sheila P. *Legend of Buddy Bush*. This finalist for the National Book Award recounts the story of a young black man accused of raping a white woman in North Carolina in 1947.

Nixon, Joan Lowery. *Nightmare*. A return to summer camp causes Emily's nightmares to grow stronger and more disturbing.

Peck, Richard. *The Teacher's Funeral*. From the opening line to the last chapter, this historical novel is filled with warm humor and wickedly sharp observations.

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Becoming Naomi Leon*. Naomi has it rough with no parents around, but her troubles really begin when her mother returns from rehab.

Schmidt, Gary D. *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*. Winner of a Newbery and Printz Honor, this historical fiction story tells of an unusual and forbidden friendship.

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