



Read Alouds Move to the Middle Level

SUMMARY

While reading aloud has long been shown as a successful way to improve students' literacy skills at the pre-school and elementary levels, less is known about the practice and results at the middle level. Here, the authors observe reading aloud in middle-level classes to see how it's done and speak to teachers involved with the program to find out how it is working.

Let's take a hypothetical walk around a school to see what type of instruction is occurring. We stop and visit one class where a teacher is reading aloud to students. The teacher introduces the book, provides background knowledge on topic, structures and vocabulary, and sets a purpose for reading. The students make predictions. The teacher starts reading the book aloud, stopping to verify predictions, clarify points and ask questions.

An excellent example of a read aloud lesson in an elementary school, you think. Except this is not an elementary school. This is a middle school

and read alouds are part of teachers' daily instructional practice. While reading to and with children (another term for read alouds) is a common practice at the earlier grades and has much evidence to support its use, the practice of reading aloud to older children is not as well documented.

This article presents research on reading out loud, especially to middle-level students. It provides suggestions for best practices using this technique with middle-level students and describes how the practice was used in several classroom situations. It concludes with suggestions for professional development on how to best implement this practice.

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READING ALOUD TO CHILDREN

Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985) reported: “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (p. 23). The working definition of reading out loud is the teacher (or someone else) reading to students, whether or not they see the text.

Reading aloud provides adult models of good readers. Children learn reading strategies and vocabulary words while building background knowledge (Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004). Adult interaction motivates children to read themselves. Children develop sense of story and an understanding of different literacy styles (Bruneau, 1997; Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004). Read alouds develop emergent literacy skills, phonological and print awareness, beginning phonics skills (Allor & McCathren, 2003) and decontextualized speech (Beck and McKeown, 2001). In the early

grades, listening skills are more advanced than reading skills. Reading to children provides access to information, characters, places and facts at lower grade levels than if children read by themselves (Coiro, 2003). Meyer, Stahl, Wardrop and Linn (1999) state: “Reading to children has been suggested to facilitate children’s vocabulary, initiate them in the language of literature and contribute to their development of sight vocabulary” (p. 56).

Reading to children develops literacy routines that draw children’s attention to information in the text. Children with limited exposure to read alouds often find it difficult to sit still (Meier, 2003). Children respond by calling out, commenting on matters not related to the text and having conversations that are not related to the story. Teachers respond to “off-task” behaviors by engaging children in other activities that are fun and educational, but do not stress the centrality of the text (Meier, 2003).

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READING ALOUD TO ADOLESCENTS

Children of all ages benefit from being read to (Sharpe, 2005; Koralek, 2006; Albright & Arial, 2005). Reading out loud is not just for the early school years. Students approaching the middle level encounter greater content material, and new and exciting vocabulary. Teachers whose voices are engaging will “hook” students into new subject matter. The teacher brings “life to text — a voice to a text” (Ivey, 2003).

In the upper grades, reading out loud can connect children to the theme or content being studied. It affects children’s behavior. Reading out loud motivates children while making text more comprehensible for children with reading difficulties. Reading picture books is an ideal technique for content-area teachers because of the short format, in-depth treatment of topics, and visual and content appeal of the books (Alvermann and Phelps, 1998 as quoted in Albright, 2002).

Reading out loud can be used to develop interest and motivation; introduce new topics; illustrate the applications of content area concepts; contribute to students’ personal growth and social response; and develop knowledge of expository text structure (Albright, 2002). Children

make connections between school and the real world (Albright & Arial, 2005). A high school teacher in France achieved success by reading to a class of underachieving students. Students became interested in books read to them, which they could not read on their own. They began to talk about the books and how they related to their own lives (Leveen, 2006).

Albright and Arial (2005) summarized research on read alouds at the middle level. Teachers read aloud to model aspects of fluent reading, make texts more accessible to students, and ensure students were exposed to important information. For middle-level students with decoding problems, read alouds let the students concentrate on meaning — not pronunciation — of unknown words.

Reading out loud helps second language learners develop English literacy (Kelly, 2006). Kelly used read alouds to develop oral fluency with adult Chinese English language learners. This activity taught students the meaning of words in context, proper stress and intonation of English, as well as developed thinking skills in English.

SOME EXAMPLES OF READ ALOUDS AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

With a plethora of novels and diverse subject matter, teachers at the middle level feel overwhelmed. They question whether there is enough time to complete the demands of the curriculum and still have the time to read aloud. For many middle-level children this becomes the best part of their day. An engaging question or a powerful excerpt from the book and the teacher has the students sitting on the edge of their seats. For example, *Number the Stars* (1989) by Lois Lowry is an introduction to the Holocaust where no one dies. Although many themes could be developed, a powerful one is friendship, hence the question: “What would you do if some evil person or a government threatened to hurt your friend *and* you if you helped him or her? After a brief discussion, the teacher reads how Annmarie ripped her Jewish friend’s Star of David necklace from her neck as the Nazis came into her bedroom. “She grabbed the little gold chain, yanked with all her strength, and broke it. As the door opened and light flooded into the bedroom she crumpled it in her hand and closed her fingers tightly. Terrified, both girls looked up at the three Nazi officers who entered the room.” The teacher asks, “What will happen next? Did Annmarie do the right thing?” “Would you have

done the same?” Reading aloud brings life to this story of fear and friendship.

Another story with spellbinding passages of friendship and peer pressure is S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967). Students at the middle level are searching for identities. They feel pressured to conform to peer groups. The teacher asks the class for their definition of a gang, then reads aloud the thoughts of one of the characters, Ponyboy. “You take up for your buddies, no matter what they do. When you’re a gang, you stick up for the members. If you don’t stick up for them, stick together, make like brothers, it isn’t a gang any more. It’s a pack. A snarling, distrustful, bickering pack.” The teacher asks the class if that is true. Have they ever had those thoughts? The discussion gets passionate as students relate their feelings about gangs.

Brown and Fisher (2006) describe a balanced literacy program implemented in their school. One part of the program was reading aloud to students. In addition to teachers reading out loud daily to students, the school purchased CD players and books on disk. Students listened to and read the books during independent reading time. Students who listened to the books made growth in reading on the statewide tests. Some students

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Teachers are not the only ones who can read aloud to middle-level students. Children themselves can read to the class. A student who writes an excellent piece can read it to the class. The teacher can discuss what made it a good example of a text and why it was worthwhile listening to. This builds fluency in terms of intonation, expression and rhythm as they read.

OBSERVATIONS OF READ ALOUDS AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

Authors Getman and Press observed three intermediate general education classes. The children were a mixture of African-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian, which is typical of the population of the area. Some students spoke little or no English. There were several inclusion children with appropriate IEPs in each class. Two of the teachers were the regular classroom teachers; one was the academic intervention teacher who was conducting a whole-class intervention. In the first class, Mrs. Perez was helping students form text-to-text connections among several books by author Janell Cannon. Mrs. Perez had previously read aloud other books by the author. After reviewing these books, she introduced the new book *Pinduli* (2004). Mrs. Perez had the students

figure out the theme of the book by synthesizing information and using the “Stop and Jot” technique to note clues to the theme. Mrs. Perez read the text and had students look at the pictures. She modeled “think-alouds.” She stopped and asked questions to clarify the text. Her reading was done with emotion and used dramatic effects to enhance comprehension. Most unknown vocabulary was defined in context. Other words were noted for later discussion. After the initial read aloud, possible themes and clues hinting to them were listed on the board.

In the next class, *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992) by Cynthia Rylant was read aloud. The aim of this lesson was to determine important details while taking notes on the text. This skill is especially useful when students take the state English language arts exam. As Ms. Cantelmo read the book, students jotted down ideas on a graphic organizer divided into: **Events** (sequence to be used for retellings) or **Thinking** (questions, wonderings, or reactions to help with clarification of the text and information on character traits). After the read aloud, the class discussed their notes and determined how the notes helped them remember the story and important details about it. Students generated questions based on their notes and realized that some questions were not answered in the text.

Lastly, Mrs. Kelly's class was involved in an interactive read aloud using the text *Would You Salute?* (2005) by D. Kelly Steele. This book is about a half-Jewish child during the Holocaust who must make some important decisions. The aim of this lesson was to form text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. In this class some children took notes on laptop computers during the read aloud. This was an interactive read aloud and Mrs. Kelly interrupted the reading several times to discuss important aspects of the text. For example: "How would you feel?" "How did kids feel then and now?" "What would you do?" This text was part of a unit of study on the Holocaust. The children had learned about and completed independent research on aspects of the Holocaust. During and after the read aloud there were many connections to the social studies content area. There were several points in the book where Mrs. Kelly asked a question. The students used the "Turn and Talk" technique to expand and clarify text issues. Children using computers added information they had recorded in their notes.

All the teachers we observed indicated that they felt the read alouds helped their students develop their literacy skills in a positive manner. Author Getman is the literacy coach

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METHODOLOGY

Implementing Reading Aloud at the Middle Level

As professors of literacy, we want graduate students to learn the effective use of reading aloud as a strategy to improve instruction for middle-level students. Teachers, as well as others with responsibility for literacy and professional development — including principals, department chairpersons, and literacy coaches — can generate interest about the implementation of the read alouds at the middle level. Following are some suggestions to share the advantages of read alouds:

1. Teachers and administrators can model the read aloud strategy at faculty and department meetings. Use intonation, facial features and gestures — all the techniques that teachers need to use when reading to students. Serve as a role model for how to effectively read aloud to an audience.
2. Convene a professional learning community, an action research project, or a building committee focused on the use of read alouds as a strategy to increase comprehension. The group could develop a selection of materials correlated to content areas that can be used for reading aloud. These materials should be of different lengths, genres, topics, reading levels, etc. Materials should also be from many points of view and include multi-cultural literature.
3. Invite authors to provide readings for students, and include faculty members. This shows teachers how the author wants his or her book read.
4. Encourage colleagues to practice reading selections to each other before they read them to students.
5. Encourage content-area teachers, who may have little background in literacy instruction, to teach content-area reading and listening skills through read alouds. Offer to co-teach a literacy lesson in a content classroom, modeling read aloud and the teaching of content-specific vocabulary. This will help students to comprehend both fiction and non-fiction materials.
6. Request that the library or resource center order tapes, CDs and videos of books read aloud by famous people. Include a copy of the book itself. This will engage readers at all ability levels. Similar materials are available as computer programs.
7. Explore developing cross-age and peer tutoring programs where students select, practice, and read their favorite texts to other students. While this type of program is used widely at lower levels, there is no reason it could not be implemented at the middle level.

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at this school and was the person most responsible for implementing the program to the extent it is used. Principal Mary Bosco is extremely supportive of the use of read alouds, both in terms of professional development and in supplying materials used for the program. This support is vital for any program to succeed.

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