WHY READ ALOUD TO MIDDLE SCHOOLERS?

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Dave Kommer

Ashland University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Jayne Violette

July 31, 2004
INTRODUCTION

An integral part of any intermediate language arts program involves reading aloud. A sweeping statement perhaps, but one borne out in research into effective literacy training. After all, a major goal of many educators is the promotion of lifelong reading habits that not only assist students functionally into adulthood but also bring the joy and enrichment that good literature bestows. Reading aloud is essential in accomplishing both goals.

The benefits of reading aloud are legion, acknowledged by the public and careful researchers alike. As Graham (1998) notes, “the research on the value of reading aloud to children is the most copious, the most sustained over time, the most incontrovertible” (p. 4). Following certain procedures can maximize these benefits and recommendations crafted by practitioners and literacy experts. Reading aloud in and of itself will not teach students how to read, but when used properly, it is one of the most potent assets an instructor has to motivate, to inform, to model, to instruct and to inspire. Used properly, with preparation, entertaining delivery, and follow up, the read aloud experience can be the highlight of the instructional day.

This project was birthed from my personal love of reading and my desire to see my students infused with the same passion for literature. As an eighth grade reading teacher, I saw a vast majority of my students declare themselves either haters of reading or hesitant readers, with very few lovers of reading. I wanted to change as many as possible into young adults who wanted to read, who could see the fun of reading, and I
chose reading aloud as my main avenue to accomplish my goal. I saw the students open
their eyes to the revelation that books can be positive experiences, not pure drudgery. I
worked hard to find literature that would appeal to teenagers, with lots of action and
vocabulary they were able to comprehend. I want to encourage as many other teachers as
possible to use this simple act to foster a true love for books, while also fulfilling their
duties as instructors, presenting vocabulary and information, making connections to
proficiency standards and encouraging higher thinking skills. Reading aloud is as close to
a panacea for our literacy problems as I can imagine.

Frequency of Reading Aloud

Reading aloud as a source of a myriad of benefits when used properly is well
documented and an encouraging news flash for educators. Something so easily
implemented and inexpensive yet efficacious can be inaugurated into every middle
school classroom with potentially explosive results in literacy development. Trelease
(1989) uses the example of first year principal Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr. of Boston’s
Lewenberg Middle School to illustrate the possibilities that reading aloud offers. In 1984
Mr. O’Neill had the unenviable job of turning around a low performing school ready to
be closed. He decided to resurrect the school using sustained silent reading at the end of
the day and oral reading at the beginning of the day. By 1988, Lewenberg had the highest
reading scores in the city of Boston with a fifteen page waiting list of children who
wanted to attend. Reading aloud was not the only factor in this success story, but it was a
crucial part of the winning combination.

At the present time, reading aloud, especially at the intermediate level, is not the
norm. Jacobs, Morrison and Swinyard (2000) found “that reading aloud declines from a
mean of about five days out of ten for kindergartners, to about three out of ten for six
graders” (pp. 183-184). Trelease (1989) estimates that only 30 percent of teachers
regularly read aloud to children based on his extensive experience in the field and by
librarians’ observations as well. Hoffman, Roser and Battle (1993) used a questionnaire
by 537 pre-service teachers to ascertain the frequency of reading aloud in observed
classrooms. Their findings included a higher percentage of teachers, 69%, reading to
intermediate classes, but they noted that these were classes accepting pre-service teachers
for training and therefore tend to represent the best and not the normal classroom
practices. Even in these results, the researchers found little follow-up associated with the
read aloud. Rycik estimated that one fourth or less of older students is read aloud to,
based on his personal experience of twenty years in middle school and ten years at
Ashland University instructing pre-service teachers (personal communication, June 24,
2004). Most data point to a 25-30% estimate of intermediate teachers who read aloud to
their students. With the benefits associated with reading aloud, is this acceptable?

Why Read Aloud?

What are the benefits of reading aloud? Intermediate students should be able to
read on their own, so when there are so many other things to do why take valuable
instruction time, a recommended 20-minute period (or longer) every day for reading
aloud? (Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993) Many intermediate teachers believe that they
must prepare students for mandated tests and therefore must teach skills directly
(Stevenson, 1996). But reading aloud lends itself so readily to numerous proficiency
outcomes, while also providing concrete benefits beyond teaching to the test. As the
Commission on Reading in 1985 so directly stated in their report called *Becoming a*
Nation of Readers, “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades” (Trelease, 1989, p. 2).

Proficiency Standards Covered (painlessly)

Taking sixth grade proficiency content standards as a norm for intermediate grades, educators can compare what is expected for their students and what they are able to teach them using read-aloud as a tool. They can rest assured that reading aloud works, because students in grades one to six scored higher on standardized reading tests after participating in a program that included listening to the text of a book while they read it (Lundsteen, 1979). Ouellette, Dagostino and Carifio (1999) found that reading aloud improves the comprehension and sense of story structure of low ability readers. In our current educational climate especially, teachers want to improve comprehension and thus raise proficiency scores overall, besides the overriding reason of wanting students to be good readers for their own personal benefit. Beyond comprehension in general, students can also learn to recognize cause and effect in their reading (Jacobs et al., 2000), which is one indicator of reading applications in the Academic Content Standards for English Language Arts in Ohio. Another indicator is the identification of “recurring themes, patterns and symbols found in literature from different eras and cultures” (ODE, 2003, p. 215). Hoffman et al. (1993) point out that choosing read-aloud that are “connected by genre or theme or topic allows readers and listeners to explore interrelationships among books, to discover patterns, to think more deeply, and to respond more fully to text” (p. 501). Thus educators can guide students in discovering the reoccurrences and then incorporating these insights into their own repertoire. In the social studies content area,
standards “emphasize an integrated hands-on approach to learning ....Incorporating read-
alouds and discussions of picture books into social studies instruction promotes the type
of learning advocated in these curriculum standards” (Albright, 2002, p. 3). Oral reading
can help improve several areas of proficiency testing without drilling and exhausting test-
weary students.

Motivation

One powerful benefit of oral reading is the motivation it provides. Human nature
dictates that people respond to stories at a basic level. They want to hear a well-crafted
tale, and they can’t help but to enjoy listening to the exploits of memorable characters.
“Reading aloud for the sheer pleasure it gives is a powerful motivator” (Freeman, 1992,
p. 4), an understandable concept to anyone who has heard a great book read with
enthusiasm. It lifts you, the listener, into a whole new world, a magical time that invites
you back again and again. And the hook is that you don’t have to wait for a reader to
reenter the magic. You can become a reader yourself and enter whenever you want. Talk
about motivation! This dovetails into Reutzel’s (1999) observation that “students’ interest
levels significantly affect their level of engagement and thus, their efforts and outcomes”
(p.1). As long as students find pleasure in the reading experience, they will continue in it
and expand their horizons. But they must have positive experiences. Educators cannot
forget the need to instill desire along with basic skills when it comes to literacy.
(Trelease, 1989). Desire often comes with success. For example, when poor readers hear
a story read aloud, they often have valuable ideas to share, which earns respect from
peers and teachers alike (Rycik, personal communication, June 24, 2004). This success
breeds future efforts and a positive cycle begins. Of course “nonreaders eschew books
because they associate them with failure, and so reading becomes a hated and dreaded chore” (Freeman, 1992, p.1). The success and pleasure that come from reading aloud counteract the failure and negativity that can accrue from drills and worksheets. Reading aloud supplies a key to that magical world of books that entices hardened nonreaders. What better way to expose children to the joys of a good story?

**Modeling**

Oral reading works as a modeling process on two levels. First, “through hearing a fluent reader reading aloud a child can hear the particular tune of continuous written text” (Graham, 1998, p. 116), which is usually more figurative and formal than spoken language. Children need to hear books in order to know what they are supposed to sound like. Eventually, children are able to imitate whole phrase structures (Graham, 1998). As Rycik points out, poor readers do not have the figurative language and vocabulary to understand text, nor the proper phraseology (personal communication, June 24, 2004). They will pick up language if they are hearing it, and if they have not been read to at home, they especially need a teacher to do so.

A second level of modeling involves an enthusiastic attitude toward reading. Teachers are often influential in the eyes of impressionable students, and if a teacher loves to read, then it must be good. Actually anyone showing a true passion for reading makes an impression, but educators can be particularly effective. Their awareness and respect for books influences children (Freeman, 1992). Students see their teacher enjoying a good book and actually becoming engrossed in the plot. And it is genuine. In the opinion of Calkins (2000), engagement in the text is the most important habit we should model for impressionable students.
Teaches Skills and Conventions of Oral and Written Language

If an educator’s goal is to explain the basics of the English language, then literature provides the best way to teach students about how written language works (Manning, 1998). Breaking down text to its grammatical roots and drilling on that is one way to explain conventions, but how much more engaging and effective to demonstrate those skills through reading aloud. “Feitelson, et al (1986) determined there were ‘significant gains in comprehending reading vocabulary range, sentence length and understanding of story structure as a result of listening to a story twenty minutes daily for five months’” (Lacedonia, p.10). Students naturally pick up on how authors craft their stories by hearing them. Children who have been read to have increased linguistic development and better understand letter/sound relationships (Jacobs et al., 2000). Along with these improvement, children who actually participate in read-alouds “demonstrate improved oral language, more complete story comprehension and increased awareness of the structural aspects of story” (Ouellette, et al., 1999, p. 73). The evidence actively supports the teaching of conventions through oral reading.

Builds Social Relationships

Reading aloud can strongly enhance the social dynamics of a classroom. It is a shared experience that enables them to come together as a group and become more affectionate and tolerant of one another (Freeman, 1992). How does this happen? By discussing books together, the individuals in the classroom, students and teachers alike, expose their feelings and ideas about a range of topics including emotional and diverse ones, and thus bond together (Barrett, 2000). When people feel a part of a social group, they are more open to the learning experience and less likely to purposely cause
problems, which helps maintain order in the classroom. As Von Drasek (2000) notes, the very promise of reading aloud if other tasks are completed keeps students motivated.

**Introduces Great Literature**

Reading aloud exposes students to great literature that few would know otherwise. All students should hear good literature (Manning, 1998). Educators can get caught up in the logistics of literacy and forget “the very purpose of literature: to provide meaning in our lives. That, of course, is the purpose of all education” (Trelease, 1989, p. 13). Great literature gives meaning a context and provides a springboard into an understanding of deep issues. And teachers have so much control with read-aloud. They can choose the topic, the author, and the theme, taking students into worlds they would never venture into on their own. Read-alouds will cover far more territory than early hesitant readers can possibly travel on their own.

**Complements Content Areas**

Besides great literature, read-alouds can be extremely useful in content areas. They can introduce and pique interest in a topic, as well as demonstrate possible practical applications and even add an element of humor. It gives a background and conceptual framework for knowledge and exposes the listener to expository text structure. In addition it allows students to respond aesthetically as well as intellectually to content information (Albright, 2002). For example, I have personally found historical fiction to be an effective way to learn the facts surrounding historical events. Educators can use an exciting story to introduce an historical period, possibly with a high quality picture book or biography. The possibilities are endless.
Once teachers are convinced that read-alouds are valuable, they need to think about implementation. Certain practices can enhance and expand the read-aloud experience.

How to Read Aloud

*Logistics*

The question of how to read aloud can be answered on two levels, delivery and instruction. As to delivery, when reading aloud, eye contact is critical so that the reader can gauge the interest of the listeners and also involve them in the story. In order to maintain direct eye contact with all members of the class in turn, the reader should be familiar with the text and read at a slower pace (Dwyer & Isbell, 1990). Along with eye contact, readers should also be careful to set the pace. “There are rhythms in written language that make the oral rendition of a text sing and heighten the meaning” (Laminack, 2000, p. 80). The reader can depend on printed signals such as “the writer’s use of language, punctuation, capital letters, bold print, color print, line breaks and paragraphing” (Laminack, p. 2) in order to decipher the author’s intended phraseology. Of course, oral practice helps. Volume and enunciation are vital, since the greatest story in the world, read but not heard, will have no impact. Goldfinch (2002) suggests that readers move around as they read, try different voices and sound effects, omit unnecessary or possibly offensive materiel, create a comfortable learning environment, and most importantly enjoy the experience of performing a read-aloud.

*Lead-In*

In order to make the most of reading aloud, educators should prepare students with a brief lead-in time. They should elicit predictions based on the title and cover, talk
about the author and illustrator in order to foster respect for the work that goes into a book, and show the settings on a map (Manning, 1998). They may be able to personalize the story with a question that draws in the reader and elicits interest (Freeman, 1992). When crafting starter questions, Albright (2000) says that her “starter questions addressed interest, prior knowledge, aesthetic response, efferent [or intellectual] response, and content of the curriculum” (p. 4). Formulating quality questions may be somewhat time-consuming initially but they are worthwhile and permanent once chosen.

*While Reading Aloud*

Depending on their purpose, teachers have various options to choose from to enhance the read aloud experience. There are times for pure enjoyment, getting lost in a great story without prodding or pushing. At other times, the teacher may want to read non-fiction, “focusing on content knowledge by asking or answering questions, clarifying terms, helping students understand abstract concepts and linking information to the curriculum” (Albright, 2002). When reading orally, Green (2001) suggests teachers think aloud in a way that models how to improve lagging comprehension: making predictions, describing mental images, drawing analogies, and verbalizing confusing points. If less able readers can listen to an accomplished reader go through her own ways of making sense of text, they can pick up on and incorporate those strategies that work for them. Reading aloud is probably the most efficient way of modeling these strategies.

Another method of instruction to use during reading is called text talk, in which the teacher asks open-ended questions during the story so that children can verbalize and connect ideas found in the story. Too often teachers use closed questions that only ask for some fact from the story (VanKleeck, Stahl, & Bauer, 2003) We can go far beyond
concrete facts in questioning, asking for comparisons, literacy devices and elements, vocabulary words and so on. Barrett (2000) suggests we share our feelings and experiences while reading, thus expressing our humanity. None of these strategies, however, should be over employed, distracting from and defeating the message of the book. Too much of a good thing can defeat the purpose.

_After Reading Aloud_

In order to continue to maximize the read-aloud, follow-up is usually necessary. A survey by Hoffman, et al.(1993) found that teachers gave fewer than 5 minutes to discussion, either before or after reading the story. They asked for response opportunities in less than one-quarter of the observed read-alouds. Educators squander excellent opportunities by ignoring the many fine ideas available to use with the read-aloud. As Green (2001) suggests, “get them moving. Do charting and mapping. Seat them on the floor. Cut apart diagrams and reassemble. Allow them to use the board or the overhead. Let them draw what they’ve read” (p.3). Salvadore and Helper advise that kids write about books, “in journals, response logs, in letters to each other, in essays- and urge they relate the messages to their lives” along with involving parents in the discussion, possibly with parent/kid book clubs (NEA, 2003, p. 1). Reynolds (1996) varies the same idea by suggesting a literary journal in which students don’t worry about grammar but “react intellectually and emotionally to what [they] read” while being “bold, candid, and genuine, allowing [their] unique voice to emerge” since they can’t be wrong about what they write (p. 25). Milloy (2003) proposes the use of reading workshop with a mini-lesson on anything pertinent to reading, such as how to chose a book, with students then writing a letter to the teacher about a book they’ve chosen, to which she responds. Rycik
believes students need to write something every day from the oral reading in order to make them responsible for listening (personal communication, June 24, 2004). Such linking between reading and writing will build bridges that help both of these aspects of literature mature in any classroom.

Beside written responses, another option is drama. Reenacting stories can be great fun for students beside leading “toward the development of narrative competence, increased literary understanding, increased comprehension, oral language development, and the opportunity for empathetic emotional insight” (Roser & Martinez, 1995, p.184). Types of drama that teachers could incorporate include pantomime, reenactment, interpretation, improvisation, role playing, and readers’ theatre (Roser & Martinez, 1995). A variation of the pantomime is used with poetry. After reading the poem aloud, students choose phrases they like and try to convey the mood and meaning as a pantomime, thus actually experiencing the poem and the vocabulary (NCTE, 1996). Students enjoy writing a script as a group project, videotaping the enactment, and watching themselves perform. It makes a great end-of-year project.

Other post-reading activities are available as well. Many students like art-related activities, such as designing a book cover or a scene from the story. Rycik likes to read a detailed description aloud and then give students a copy of the material so they can draw it. It helps them do a careful reading of the text. He also likes to give students a copy to follow along with in order to improve comprehension. They can answer detailed questions as homework in order to do a careful reading (personal communication, June 24, 2004). With a variety of follow up activities, students will gain much from the read aloud experience.
Selecting Read-Alouds

The choice of what to read aloud can be overwhelming because of ignorance as to what is available, but once someone decides to take the plunge and begin consistently reading aloud, the search can be fun as well as challenging. Milloy (2000) notes that children’s books are at a peak of excellence, with a rich diversity, a multiplicity of themes, and authentic voice. Non fiction abounds, reinforcing units of study in the classroom. When considering read-aloud books in the content areas, Albright (2002) looks at the quality and how up-to-date the book is, the integrity of the author, the relevance to the current topic, the organization, the book’s layout, and the level of interest to the particular class hearing the book. Stories should have “rich and varied language, fast-paced action, remarkable characters, humor, obvious breaks or short chapters – not a lot of description...[not] books that kids are likely to read themselves” (Von Drasek, 2002, p. 1). Read-alouds should not be too easy or too difficult, but should expand background information and further oral language development (Reutzel, 2001). Students can be a good source of recommendations because they stimulate the interest level of the rest of the class (NEA, 2003). A multitude of books fill the criterion of a good read-aloud, and many sources, including books and internet sites, list recommendations of great read-aloud literature.

Summary

Since literacy problems abound today, I undertook this project with the hope that reading aloud could provide one ingredient in the solution to America’s literacy problem. Although practiced in only about one fourth of intermediate classrooms, reading loud
Reading Aloud

contributes to proficiency readiness, student motivation, modeling of the sound of written language and good attitude toward reading, a knowledge of the conventions of the English Language, positive social relations, and the introduction of great literature. All of these major benefits are accentuated by using a proper delivery, along with lead-in and follow-up activities. These benefits are further enhanced by selecting quality literature that lends itself to the read-aloud experience. If there were one painless, multi-dimensional method to make reading come alive to middle-grade students, reading aloud would have to be it.
Biography

Jayne Violette teaches a self-contained sixth grade classroom in Willard, Ohio. She has three children, Drew, 19, Ross, 15, and Caroline, 11, and is actively involved at her church, the Willard First Assembly of God.
References


