

# Celebrating the Magnificent Read-aloud: Unending Classroom Possibilities

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## Introduction

The practice of reading aloud has steadily and swiftly evolved, and it is now one of the most important, vital, and common classroom practices used by primary teachers. Meller, Richardson, and Hatsch (2009) refer to read-alouds as planned oral readings of children's books that are a vibrant part of literacy instruction in the primary grades.

In balanced literacy classrooms, the read-aloud has a prominent position and is built in as part of the literacy block or routine. In some classrooms the daily read-aloud, which was once reserved for a single reading, often takes place several times throughout the day. Over time children in the early grades grow accustomed to this routine and come to school eager and expecting read-alouds. Little did we realize how much this important pedagogy would evolve into such a dynamic and critical practice and experience for teachers and children alike.

In the past a read-aloud was done in a rather swift and terse manner, often without a lot of planning and reflection. Today, the intentional and deliberate decision-making that goes into the selection of the text, the interactive strategies, questioning techniques, and more provide unlimited possibilities for whole group classroom instruction. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter will be to explore the following:

- Background on reading aloud, including the evolution and changes in classroom practices from past to present.
- Ideas for the selection of texts that align with instructional goals and maximize every moment of instruction.
- Purposes for reading aloud, along with strategies to implement before, during, and after the read-aloud, including formative assessment.

## Evolution of Read-alouds

During my career I have experienced and participated in thousands of read-alouds either by reading a text to children or observing teachers and children in action. As a result of these experiences, I know reading aloud is a joyful experience children look forward to. The beauty of reading aloud is it allows children to sit back, listen, and not be concerned with decoding the text. Rather, children are actively participating and involved in their learning as they listen to their teacher and peers create and construct new meaning. To help students construct meaning, the teacher stops and asks questions to elicit meaningful discourse and discussion.

Read-aloud Practices	Then	Now
Text Selection	more narrative than nonfiction, private teacher choices	informational text, more complex, teacher collaboration, and sharing of choices
Purposes and Strategies	less interactive	more interactive, promoting classroom discourse and risk-taking
Frequency	not always part of a daily literacy routine, done sporadically	done daily to several times a day, integral to the literacy block
Questioning Techniques	questions that require students to remember and have some level of understanding	questions that require students to analyze and evaluate as well as find evidence, argue, give opinions, and debate
Language Focus	lots of listening	shared talking and social discourse
Length of Instruction	approximately 10 minutes, terse	up to approximately 20 minutes, pace is deliberately slower
Who's Reading	mostly prekindergarten and primary English language arts teachers	prekindergarten, primary, intermediate, upper grade level, and content-area teachers

There has been a thoughtful evolution in the read-aloud practice over the last several decades. For example, there have been changes in the selection of texts from narrative to nonfiction (Duke 2004, 2007; Bradley and Donovan 2010); children only listening to text to now participating in interactive read-alouds (Barrentine 1996); and the use of strategies before, during, and after the read-aloud (Kindle 2010). Further, the read-aloud takes more time than in the past as the teacher pauses while reading to give children time to reflect and interact with the text and others. The table above represents some of the changes in practice of the read-aloud from the past several decades to today.

The onset and development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) helped create an even clearer shift in thinking about all classroom instruction. This shift has involved the use of more informational and complex text and an emphasis on close reading, finding evidence from text, building argument, developing opinion, and more (Shanahan 2013). With these shifts came a new direction for the read-aloud (Policastro and McTague 2015). These gradual but distinctive changes have been a revealing voyage with interesting detours and skillful maintenance.

With CCSS, text selection practices for read-alouds took a remarkable turn as narratives were traded for

informational and complex texts. The shift demanded at least 50 percent of the texts used for classroom instruction be informational and complex texts (Policastro and McTague 2015). With this change in practice, teachers had to rethink their choices, and schools needed to look into access to these types of books. Informational texts in many classrooms were sparse at best. During this transition, many schools made a lot of great changes. For example, I saw and continue to see informational texts covering new territory and knowledge for students and teachers alike. When working with a school that decided to read the text *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* by Michelle Markel (2013), teachers learned side by side with their students about the 1909 shirtwaist makers' strike. The music teacher researched the period and music of the time. The math teachers had students calculate wages earned during 1909, and the art teacher had them create strike signs after researching unions. This was just one example where the shift in text selection brought forth noticeable and marked changes schoolwide. The teacher collaboration piece added an important dimension as teachers worked together to discuss the read-aloud selection.

The purpose of the read-aloud has also changed over the years. The teacher now embeds instruction

strategically within the lesson, making the read-aloud more interactive in nature. Barrentine (1996) discusses interactive read-alouds as the teacher posing questions during the reading that enhance meaning and modeling how one can glean meaning from the text. With the noticeable change in text selection to more informational and complex text, the nature of the interaction has indeed become more rigorous. This interaction also includes a focus on language during the read-aloud. The classroom landscape has been well prepped with texts that yield and promote high levels of discussion and discourse. Thus, attention has moved from children listening to a concentrated effort of classroom dialog. Inherent in these discussions is the dialogic nature of talk. Lennox (2013, 382) states, "Before, during, and after reading, adults may use opportunities to incorporate dialogic strategies. These are strategies that actively engage children in reciprocal, conversational exchanges with participants sharing ideas with each other and listening to alternative perspectives." Children are engaged in sharing ideas with the entire group, a small group, or a partner. They are also listening and constructing new meaning as the shared talk takes on a special interaction in and of itself. Hearing everyone's ideas and having an opportunity to share is very important (Policastro 2016–2017). As the children listen to the read-aloud, they make connections to the text from their own life and background knowledge, other texts, and the world around them. As they listen to their peers, their comprehension and meaning making is further expanded and deepened.

As text selection for the read-aloud shifted, questioning techniques have expanded to reflect higher-order thinking. In the primary grades, teachers typically focused on levels of questioning techniques that had to do with "remembering" and "understanding." Remembering questions focus on recalling basic concepts and ideas while understanding questions seek to explain concepts and ideas. Today, teachers pose questions that focus on applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Although there is room for remembering and

understanding questions, the emphasis is on higher-order thinking skills that include a taxonomy for learning (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). These skills are based on Bloom's Taxonomy and include questions related to applying and solving problems, analyzing text by making inferences, finding evidence to support generalizations, developing and defending opinions through argument, and proposing alternative solutions.

Finally, important to note has been the length of the read-aloud, the frequency, and who is doing the reading. In the past, it was a quicker practice that started and stopped in approximately 10 minutes. With the new text selections and more sophisticated interactive strategies and questions asked, the read-aloud can last as long as 20 minutes or more. The length of time does not determine the extent to which a read-aloud is necessarily effective. Rather it is the thoughtful and reflective practices implemented that are important. Slowing the pace of the read-aloud and taking more time for questions and responses allow for a deeper application of the process to unfold. In addition, the read-aloud once was not part of the "daily routine or literacy block," but today it is common practice to see the read-aloud as a routine within the balanced literacy classroom. And often it is done more than once a day. Finally, once reserved as a practice for the primary and English language arts teachers, today the read-aloud is noticed schoolwide.

## Selection of Texts

Selecting texts for a read-aloud has become a thoughtful process. Teachers are deliberate decision-makers to the type of text (e.g., narrative, nonfiction) and the complexity of the text. Lennox (2013, 383) states, "Teachers have an influential role in choosing books. Selecting the right book contributes towards successful read-alouds; the repertoire should include a variety of well-illustrated, quality literature, fiction, poetry and information books." Often teachers are collaborating in teams to choose texts, which enhances the expertise of the teacher (Hattie 2015). What I have observed in the schools is capacity

building through collaboration. What this means is that within both literacy and grade level team meetings, school leaders and teachers are discussing and deciding upon the forthcoming texts. Often books are selected as part of a schoolwide theme. Moreover, the read-aloud is shared publicly so all can celebrate it. Read-aloud titles are posted outside each classroom, or the book jacket or covers are displayed prominently in the hallway in an effort to share the read-aloud practice. Thematic-based units are kept in mind during text selection, so the read-aloud can be integrated throughout the entire curriculum. Further, the careful selection of read-alouds is enhanced with the alignment to curriculum standards and instructional shifts. Selecting texts that allow students to develop arguments, form opinions, find evidence from the text, and develop debate skills will enable the shift in instruction to align with standards.

When considering texts, teachers must have easy access to the books they have selected together. By creating a read-aloud library, the books are available in a central location. Several areas within the school work well, including the “book room,” the teacher’s lounge, and the school library. In one school the assistant principal decided to house the read-aloud collection in her office, a space where ongoing professional development takes place daily. The benefits of housing these selections in a school leader’s office sends a message to teachers that reading aloud is important—a priority schoolwide. Another benefit is teachers and school leaders have ongoing conversations about the books, new selections, and implementation strategies. I have also seen schools develop a read-aloud collection or library, so teachers can have access to quality resources throughout the day (Policastro and McTague 2015).

Erdos Brocius (2016) reported that the Virginia State Reading Association took on a statewide initiative to promote informational texts within schools and classrooms. From this special example, and others no doubt, all are excited about selecting the read-aloud texts. Teachers and students unite in the celebration.

Not only is the collaborative selection of texts important, it is also crucial that teacher collaboration and expertise exists in order to implement strategy instruction for the read-aloud. Most recently we worked with a group of teacher leaders across several schools from our Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant. The teachers were reporting out on the book *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña (2015). When the discussion started, the collaborative conversation centered on sharing all the things they had seen in their schools. Time and time again, we would hear the teachers saying things like, “Oh, I never would’ve thought of that idea” and “I’m going to go back and share that with other teachers and make sure that we offer that idea at our school.”

In the book *Last Stop on Market Street*, the character CJ rides the bus with his grandmother, with the route ending at a soup kitchen. He asks many questions about the neighborhoods, people, and more. The bus ride helps him see the beauty and fun in the world around him, otherwise taken for granted. One fifth grade teacher used the read-aloud as a mentor text for a lesson called *Last Stop on 63rd St*. He designed lessons that took the children on an inquiry ride through the neighborhood and the street surrounding the school, focusing on appreciating the different aspects around them. The teacher also included a service project for the students to complete. A teacher at a different school had the children write their own books called *Last Stop on Halsted Street*. This lesson had children research and write about the historic districts in the neighborhood. In both examples, the mentor text was used as an exemplar model and anchored the lessons and planning. Both of these examples were spearheaded by the power of collaboration among the teachers across schools.

While working in our ITQ grant schools, we have introduced social justice literature for classroom read-alouds. The titles included narrative nonfiction, informational, and complex texts. Having worked at a university with a mission dedicated to social justice, this alignment was quite natural and easy. One way to introduce topics of social justice is to “weave social justice concepts and processes into your existing

curriculum” (Hernandez 2016, 21). Introducing social justice concepts through literature is a subtle way to teach and empower students to understand peace, equity, and other important global issues.

When we first introduced some of these selections to school leaders and teachers, they were concerned about presenting books with sensitive information and topics and worried about how the parents would respond. As time went on and teachers worked collaboratively schoolwide to introduce and present these texts through classroom read-alouds, the level of instruction deepened. What makes these informational books special is they help children understand important content knowledge that might not otherwise be presented.

Schickedanz and Collins (2013) discuss the importance of reading informational narratives to young children. They stress that giving children the opportunity to understand the content knowledge central to the story is key. Setting the stage and building background knowledge for the read-aloud helps children increase their comprehension of the text. Building background knowledge can be as simple as talking about the topic of the book and asking children what they already know about the subject. Children love to talk about their own experiences and share with others. Showing children pictures or objects representing the subject matter is another way of assessing how much they already know. Asking prediction questions, such as what they think the text will be about can get them thinking about the topic.

One example is with the book *Mama’s Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* by Edwidge Danticat (2015). Presenting information about a family experiencing separation through immigration is a delicate subject. Teacher leaders agreed that this informational text would require special planning in order to implement it and made sure students were introduced to the topics gradually. Currently, teachers are in the planning stages of this selection. Current events and news on immigration generated much conversation within the schools on how to proceed

with implementation. Planning the lessons ahead of time and considering the background knowledge children bring to the text is critical to the success of the lesson. Also, when teachers collaborate and plan together, all content areas are included. Further, working schoolwide allows for exploring and learning together. Should this be something teachers incorporate schoolwide, proper planning with school leaders and communication with parents are elements to consider.

There are several excellent examples that teach children other social justice topics. *Who Said Women Can’t Be Doctors?: The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell* by Tanya Stone (2013) and *Razia’s Ray of Hope* by Elizabeth Suneby (2013) can help students understand how far women have come and how much work there is yet to do in the world. A book written in verse that captures the struggle of a young girl’s dream of becoming an engineer is *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty (2013).

#### **Tips and Considerations for Text Selection**

- Have team and community shared planning meetings and make choices with the team.
- Encourage thoughtful planning around topics and themes that include social justice and more.
- Consider a range of picture books, poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.
- Consider the types of strategies for implementation during the selection process.

#### **Read-aloud Tips for Informational Text:**

- Talk about the author and illustrator of the book.
- Discuss the cover, title, photographs, and illustrations.
- Point out any awards the book has received and what they mean.
- Have students make connections to their own lives.
- While reading, stop and ask higher-order questions, such as those that prompt students to compare and contrast, argue, defend, and judge.
- For narrative informational text, always stop periodically and ask a prediction question like, *What do you think will happen next?*

### Resources for Children's Literature

Consider award-winning books and other resources for identifying the texts. See "The Book Matters! Choosing Complex Narrative Texts to Support Literacy Discussion" by Jessica Hoffman, William Teale, and Junko Yokota (2015). This reference includes associations, review journals, blogs, newspapers, media sites, school library collections, and children's literature databases. It was published in *Young Children*, an NAEYC publication that includes resources for locating complex children's literature.

## Purposes, Strategies, Tips, and Formative Assessment

Text selection and purpose go hand in hand. Duke (2004, 42) states, "Teachers can use many strategies to create authentic purposes for reading informational text." Identifying a purpose of the read-aloud lesson will help ensure children are aware of what they are learning, and they are ready for the lesson that is to take place. Whether it's to simply enjoy the text read aloud or to reinforce content or to re-examine a comprehension strategy, the read-aloud can be used in many different ways. The end result is a routine that is an integrated part of the English language arts block and content area lessons.

Teachers can vary the strategies and questioning techniques used before, during, and after the read-aloud. Formative assessment can take place during the read-aloud as the teacher collects important data, provides feedback, and assists students in their own self-monitoring (Policastro, McTague, and Mazeski 2016). Focusing on four key areas will help strengthen the classroom read-aloud:

1. **Developing the joy and pleasure for reading:** Children should have many opportunities to engage in literacy as a joyful experience; read-alouds offer this opportunity. Research supports read-alouds as a way to introduce students to the joy of reading and listening (Morrow 2003). An important goal is for students to feel successful and become lifelong readers. In order to develop

the read-aloud routine, English language arts teachers need to make sure the read-aloud is built into the literacy block. Content area teachers need to integrate it as part of their lessons. In both instances, the deliberate time set aside for the read-aloud is essential. Children easily adapt to classroom routines, and when the read-aloud routine is established schoolwide, children not only expect it but are eager and ready for it as well. It is within this routine that the habits of participating in a read-aloud develop. These habits include listening and speaking and developing the love of literacy. As the excitement grows during the reading, the children will scoot closer, get up and point to pictures, and show a definite interaction with the text. This is something that happens across grade levels.

Encouraging parents to read aloud at home is an important contribution to growing these literacy habits. Lane and Wright (2007, 673) state, "Teachers and schools can assist parents in their read-aloud efforts by ensuring plentiful access to appropriate books." Helping and supporting parents to read aloud at home will increase the home-to-school connections (Policastro 2017). One way to support parents is to set up a Read-aloud Family Lending Library. It's the perfect way to help them have access to books at home. This library can be part of the overall parent library, or it can be a separate library for the parents. Children can also take out books for their parents to read to them or take out books to read to their siblings.

2. **Engaging students in meaning-making processes during the read-aloud:** Children should have many opportunities to seek and construct new meaning and see reading as a meaning-making process (Barnhouse and Vinton, 2012) through purposeful read-alouds and classroom discourse. Reading aloud to the whole class is the perfect venue for children to experience shared talking. Hearing everyone's ideas and having an opportunity to share out is most important. Lawson (2012, 266) states, "the pleasure of

everyday discourse is in social interaction.” I have seen children respond by making connections to the teacher reading. For example, I observed a teacher reading about a character in a book, and a student naturally and authentically started talking about his father and how he had similar characteristics. It made me think how children naturally want to respond to the text the teacher is reading.

Classroom discourse typically refers to the language students and teachers use to communicate with each other, including talking, discussions, conversations, and debates. Moore and Hoffman (2012) discuss discourse as language interactions among students and teachers that form the way they both create meaning and further their understanding. It is through these meaning-making episodes that children, who would not normally be exposed to higher-level, complex texts because of their reading levels, are able to make sense of the text. Discourse allows for scaffolding and support as students construct their own meaning and draw upon their own background knowledge and experiences. This talk is important before, during, and after the read-aloud.

Teachers need to make sure they are providing opportunities for extended and productive discourse with students and among students during the read-aloud. All students should be provided with opportunities to create and respond to multiple perspectives, use background knowledge, and make new connections and meaning. Most important, the teacher must ensure the classroom environment promotes risk-taking and enables participation from all students. Creating a culture of shared talk requires a classroom environment that is safe and encourages students to take risks. Students need to know what they say will be valued by all in the classroom. Talk is promoted when it is always respected, encouraged, and developed within a zone where children explore new ideas (Policastro 2016–2017).

- 3. Engaging students in self-monitoring during read-alouds:** Children need to develop both their metacognitive and self-monitoring skills. Read-alouds are perfect for allowing children to take charge and be responsible for their own learning. Making the read-aloud interactive provides an opportunity for the listener to respond and participate in creative ways, building language and classroom discourse all along (Policastro, McTague, and Mazeski 2016). Moreover, through the interactive nature of the read-aloud, children are able to constantly monitor their understanding and learning. Whole group read-alouds provide opportunities for children to learn from each other and construct new ideas and meaning. During shared talk, children can actively monitor their learning. As they listen to the responses of others, they can “fix up” their own responses, enhance their own comprehension, and construct new ideas. Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) discuss self-assessment as a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects the lesson’s purpose, and revise accordingly. Especially effective is when the teacher stops, poses questions, and allows children time to respond using whiteboards and share their responses with others. Through this interaction, students can compare their responses with others, hear and see multiple perspectives, correct or change misconceptions, and construct new meaning.

We have also had great success with read-aloud exit slips as both “whole group exit slips” and “individual exit slips.” See examples of exit slips on page 19. By starting with the whole group exit slip, students have an opportunity to discuss what they learned and what they still have questions about. Doing this as a whole group allows students to hear what others learned and, more important, what they still need more information about or what they didn’t understand. Reluctant students will find it comforting to see and hear other students take risks publicly. Individual exit

slips allow students to focus on just their own thoughts about the text. These exit slips provide powerful tools for both students and teachers alike. This process brings forth differentiated instruction in an authentic manner. Once the exit slip information is collected, teachers can consider how to adjust instruction for the group and individual students.

4. **Using key strategies effectively in the read-aloud process:** Teachers have the opportunity to implement many different learning and questioning strategies before, during, and after the read-aloud. Complex texts aid in this process. Hoffman, Teale, and Yokota (2015, 9) state, “Read-alouds that engage children with complex texts rely on interactive discussions focused on interpretation of texts that may vary with the backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences of the children listening. In other words, discussing multiple interpretations of text helps children realize that there are many possible responses to complex literature.” Although an interactive read-aloud has many dimensions and qualities, it is the student-to-student interaction that is so rich. The interaction begins when the teacher introduces the text, asks questions, and begins the experience. When the teacher introduces the text, he or she can ask background knowledge and prediction-based questions. During the read-aloud the teacher continues to pose questions and allow students time to respond. One of the most important questions that a teacher can ask is, *What do you think is going to happen next?* Prediction skills are an essential aspect of comprehending text as students can confirm their responses by finding the evidence in the text. Thinking ahead and generating thoughts of what the text might be about draws on personal background knowledge. Drawing upon finding the evidence within the text also helps in developing argument and debating skills. Most important is the students have time to share, listen, and respond to each other. Encourage students to respond using whiteboards. Responses can be

in the form of drawings, text, or both. Students are quite comfortable sharing the boards with another student or groups of students. The use of whiteboards works across the grades. Most recently, I observed upper grade level students responding to the read-aloud *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander (2014). This book is written in verse and elicits interesting predictions and rigorous conversations when responses are put on the whiteboards and shared by all. As children make connections to the text and the shared talk, new and deeper meaning is constructed throughout the read-aloud lesson.

#### **Snapshot of a 20 Minute Read-aloud**

- Always practice reading the read-aloud.
- Introduce the book by talking about the author and or illustrator. (Show pictures of author/illustrator if available.)
- Discuss the cover, title, and illustrations. (Use sticky notes to remind yourself of the illustrations and more that you want to point out and discuss.)
- Point out award-winning medals and awards if appropriate.
- Have students make connections from the book information to their own lives.
- Use whiteboards and have children draw or write their predictions of what they think the text will be about.
- Allow time for the students to share responses with each other.
- As you read, stop and ask higher-order questions that require students to compare and contrast, argue, defend, judge, and more.
- Always stop periodically and ask a prediction question like, *What do you think will happen next?* Use sticky notes to remind yourself where to stop and ask questions.
- Do a group exit slip with the students to find out what they learned and still have questions about.

Formative assessment is integrated throughout the read-aloud as teachers have the opportunity to assess what students have learned. Timely feedback to students during and after the read-aloud allows for students to make adjustments to their learning (Policastro, McTague, and Mazeski 2016). Celebrating



the classroom read-aloud in these ways brings joyful learning to the children, especially when meaning making through discourse and other strategies are the focus. This kind of instruction, which includes formative assessment, puts children in charge of their own learning—a responsibility that is lifelong.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt the classroom read-aloud has come a long way over the past several decades. Today, the time for read-alouds is valued and protected as a critical and essential routine in the literacy block. Moreover, it is common practice for content area teachers to spend time reading aloud as

well. Selecting texts to read is now a collaborative process and casts a net to include more nonfiction, informational, and complex texts than in the past. The strategies implemented during the read-aloud encourage interactions that move beyond teacher-to-student questions and embrace student-to-student discourse. Meaning making is at the heart of the read-aloud as students connect their own knowledge to the text, listen to others, and construct their own meaning. Formative assessment is integrated into all aspects of the read-aloud as teachers can collect data, provide feedback, and assist the students in self-monitoring their learning. Indeed, there is much to celebrate with the magnificent read-aloud.

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## Formative Assessment: Group Self-Monitoring

Group Exit • Read-aloud

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose of the lesson:

We learned about:

We weren't sure of:

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## Student Self-Monitoring

Read-aloud Exit Slip

Purpose of the lesson:

I learned about:

I wasn't sure of:

I need to ask my teacher about:

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