

CHAPTER 6

Interactive Storybook Reading: Making the Classroom Read-Aloud Program a Meaningful Learning Experience

The storybook read-aloud has long been an integral component of the kindergarten literacy program. Reading to children is a vital way to encourage the development of concepts about print, story structure, and other elements of text. During story time, children learn that a book is read from front to back and that there is a difference between pictures and print. They hear new and interesting words and begin to make connections between letters and sounds. They enjoy vicarious experiences not possible in real life. They also find out that things can be learned from books and that stories can be enjoyed again and again. Story reading, perhaps more than any other activity, provides the child with a wealth of information about the processes and functions of written language. Storybook reading is a powerful element in the development of young children because it provides language instruction in a meaningful holistic context, not sequenced and isolated as subskills (Strickland & Taylor, 1989). The benefits of story reading include

- building vocabulary;
- developing an understanding of story structure;
- enriching experience banks;
- helping to make the connection between letters and sounds;
- reinforcing concepts about print;
- encouraging higher level thinking;
- teaching reading processes in a meaningful context;
- modeling fluent, expressive reading; and
- motivating an interest in reading and books.

But even the venerable practice of reading aloud has been the subject of controversy in recent literature (Teale & Yakota, 2000). Too often, the storybook

“Reading to children is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in learning to read.”

(Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993, p. 496)

read-aloud has been an “add-on” to the classroom program, with only cursory attention paid to the selection of books and the teaching opportunities it provides.

Although story reading is a pleasurable activity in itself, simply immersing children in books will not turn them into readers. Teale and Yokota (2000) caution that reading aloud is not a “silver bullet” (p. 14); the selection of materials and the way they are read will determine the effectiveness of the read-aloud program in nurturing children’s literacy development. Three keys to an effective classroom read-aloud program are

- selecting high-quality literature that extends children’s knowledge of literature, language, and the world;
- active participation by children that constructs knowledge and extends thinking; and
- rereading familiar text to reinforce children’s knowledge of the reading process and how words go together.

Selecting Books for a Read-Aloud Program

Given the quantity of excellent children’s books published today, the most difficult task for the teacher is to make selections. With so many books to choose from, it would be foolish to waste read-aloud opportunities on literature of marginal quality. Galda and Cullinan (2000) advise teachers to “choose books that capture your students’ interests...and stretch them as readers” (p. 137); therefore, it is important for teachers to be readers themselves, and to keep current in the ever-expanding world of children’s literature.

“All children need to find themselves and meet new people in the stories they read.”
(Galda & Cullinan, 2000, p. 142)

When choosing storybooks for young children, look for themes to which children can relate. Familiar situations with an unusual twist enable readers to connect existing knowledge with new ideas. Characters in books for young readers should be clearly defined and

few in number, preferably containing one main character with whom children can identify. Young readers prefer children or animal characters that think, act, and talk like children. The plot should be fast-moving and logically sequenced, with a realistic problem and a satisfying conclusion. The author’s theme or message should be subtle but appropriate to the world of a 5-year-old. Choose text that extends children’s range of vocabulary and sentence fluency, and illustrations that not only enhance the text, but tell a story in themselves.

Children need to see their own lives reflected in the books they read. As our school populations become increasingly diverse, we need to ensure that all children are represented in classroom read-aloud selections. When we read stories from a diversity of cultures, we honor all students in the class, and we teach them to appreciate both the differences and the similarities of all those around us. In selecting multicultural literature, look for books that are accurate, authentic, and that avoid stereotypes of a culture in either text or illustrations.

Although most books read to kindergarten children will be picture books, be sure to include a variety of genres such as biography, poetry, and fantasy. It is also important to expose young children to a balance of fiction and nonfiction texts. There are many beautifully crafted informational books for young children on a variety of topics to match almost any classroom theme.

Nonfiction books for kindergarten read-alouds should be up-to-date and factually accurate; avoid a combination of fact with fiction or opinion, and be sure the books have pictures that accurately portray the action, mood, and intent.

How to Read Aloud

Most of us do not spend a lot of time planning the read-aloud program. After all, there is no wrong way to read aloud, is there? There are ways, however, to make the classroom read-aloud program a more effective learning experience. Careful selection of books that extend children's vocabulary and background experiences is a first step. But it is through purposeful teaching that we also extend students' thinking and their knowledge of the reading process.

Effective storybook reading is an interactive process. Too often, we fail to give children the opportunity to interact with text while it is being read, insisting that they wait until after the reading is done. Sipe (1998) found that children's responses to story read-alouds that had the greatest quality and quantity of discussion actually occurred *during* rather than *after* the reading. Based on these findings, Sipe suggests that allowing children to talk during the

Elements of Effective Read-Aloud Books for Kindergarten

- Simple, well-developed, action-oriented plot that the children can relate to, preferably with an element of surprise at the end
- Lots of dialogue
- Familiar situations that may incorporate new, unusual, or different events
- A simple and satisfying climax
- One main character with whom the children can identify
- A variety of ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds that are authentic and do not reflect stereotyping
- Themes that represent suitable values
- Illustrations that support and enhance the text
- Language that is rich and melodic and extends the vocabulary of the students

story reading “may offer the possibility of scaffolding the children’s meaning construction as it is in the process of being constructed” (p. 378).

If we wait until after reading to discuss a story, we are missing out on valuable literacy opportunities. When the teacher precedes the reading by inviting predictions and personal connections, she is creating a context for the reading. Taking time to discuss and clarify difficult concepts during the reading can prevent misunderstanding further on, and encouraging students to respond during the reading enhances both comprehension and interest in the story. Pausing to confirm and revise predictions, ask questions, and make inferences lays the groundwork for independent reading. Children learn that understanding text is a process that occurs before, during, and after reading.

Before Reading

Before reading aloud, it’s a good idea to preview the book and practice reading it with fluency and expression. Plan an introduction that will provide a context for the reading. A good way to do this is to find links to the children’s personal experiences. Introduce the title, author, and illustrator. Children may be interested in other elements of the book such as a dedication or publication date.

Introduce any information that may be necessary to facilitate understanding of the story. For a fiction reading, this may include something about the main character, setting, genre, point of view, or author’s theme. This step is particularly important when the reading is a nonfiction text, to find out what the children already know about the topic and ensuring that they have enough background knowledge and vocabulary to understand the text.

Set goals or purposes for listening to the story. “I wonder” statements, such as “I wonder what the wolf wants to do with the pigs,” provide a focus for listening. Predictions invite higher level thinking and develop reading strategies. You may want to flip through the book and discuss the pictures (called a picture walk) to make predictions.

During Reading

Read fluently and expressively, varying your tone, volume, and pitch as you read. Hold the book so that the children can see the illustrations. Try to establish frequent eye contact with the students. Draw their attention to

When selecting culturally diverse read-aloud materials, look for books that

- **avoid stereotypes (negative or positive),**
- **reflect the cultural group authentically,**
- **use natural language,**
- **validate the experiences of children from that culture, and**
- **broaden our vision and invite reflection.**

(Adapted from Galda & Cullinan, 2000)

illustrations and features of text. (This is particularly important for nonfiction text.) Point out charts, diagrams, and organizational aids.

As you read, model your own responses to the story. Pause occasionally to revisit predictions that you and the students have made, to express curiosity or confusion, or to comment on something you found interesting. Invite the students to question and comment as well, but keep the discussion focused on the story.

Be sure to explain ideas or words you think the students might not understand. Feel free to improvise if you feel a concept needs elaboration or replace a word that you feel is inappropriate. Interaction with the students throughout the reading will help to ensure that they understand the text as it is read.

After Reading

After reading, be sure to allow time for discussion. Encourage various levels of response, such as “What did you like?” and “What would you have done if you were the character?” Sometimes you will want to ask questions to extend students’ thinking about the text and sometimes you will want their unprompted responses. One teacher has found that if he simply pauses after the reading, the students will start talking about the story. A key comprehension strategy for readers of all ages is to make personal connections to the text. A prompt such as “What did this story remind you of?” can help students relate the reading to their own experiences or other stories they have read.

Retelling: The retelling strategy is an effective tool for assessing and enhancing comprehension (Gambrell & Dromsky, 2000). It requires children to think about story structure, distinguish main ideas, and use the language of the story. However, before kindergarten children can retell a story effectively, they must be provided with frequent and consistent instruction (Gambrell & Dromsky, 2000). Model retelling of stories, clearly defining the beginning, middle, and end, as well as such information as the characters’ names and important events. As children become familiar with the process, invite them to join you in a retelling. Start the story and invite children to add to it. Provide scaffolded practice by prompting students if they falter or get off track, and by prompting students as they retell. When retelling a story, teach students to tell

Ten Teachers’ Choices for Kindergarten Read-Alouds

Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten (Joseph Slate)

Strawberry Mouse and the Big Hungry Bear (Audrey Wood)

Jillian Jiggs (Phoebe Gilman)

The Mitten (Jan Brett)

The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)

Red Is Best (Kathy Stinson)

Thomas’s Snowsuit (Robert Munsch)

The Wide-Mouthed Frog (Keith Faulkner)

The Kissing Hand (Audrey Penn)

Happy Birthday Moon (Frank Asch)

Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear (Nancy White Carlson)

- who the main characters are,
- where and when the story took place,
- what important event or problem started the story,
- what important things happened in the story, and
- how the story ended.

Extension activities: Sometimes after-reading activities are necessary, but some stories lend themselves to these activities more readily than others. Extension activities should develop naturally from the text and extend students' literacy development and higher level thinking. Some effective extension activities include

- rereading the same text,
- reading another text by the same author or about the same topic,
- dramatizing the story or parts of the story,
- adapting the story into a class-made book or informational report,
- responding through art and crafts,
- responding through writing, and
- extending through related events (such as cooking, field trips, or guest speakers).

Sometimes talking about the book is all the follow-up that is needed; often the best follow-up to reading is rereading. Always make the books available to students after a read-aloud. Research has shown that these are the books children are most likely to choose for independent reading (Martinez & Teale, 1988). It is important that repeated readings be part of all components of the reading program. There is great value in rereading a book a second, third, and even fourth time (IRA/NAEYC, 1998). A good story will present new insights to be gained from each reading. Rereading familiar texts also enables us to revisit the text to focus on the mechanics of letter-sound relationships, language patterns, and sentence structures. It helps reinforce language development and familiarizes students with genre and story structure, which appears to be particularly important for children at risk (Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990). And, of course, be sure to put the read-aloud book in the classroom library, as the children will want to peruse it again and again.

Reading aloud is an important way to develop skilled and willing readers. It gives teachers an opportunity to expose children to vocabulary and concepts they would not be able to read on their own. They learn about the language of books and the structure of story. By explaining words and ideas as

needed, you provide students with access to new and complex concepts, creating background knowledge on which to build further learning. And through sensitive guidance of children's questions and discussion of the story, you are able to bridge even the youngest students to higher levels of thinking and responding.

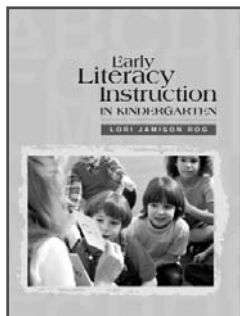
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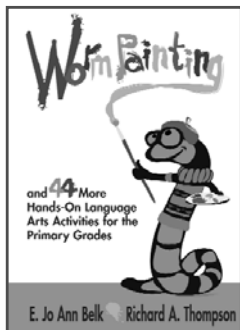
Lori Jamison Rog

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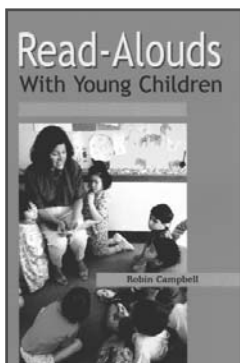
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Robin Campbell

Find out how you can greatly extend a child's literacy development through interactive classroom read-alouds. You'll discover endless opportunities for related activities, from classroom discussions to role plays, shared readings, group writing, arts and crafts, and singing songs. This book encourages you to use read-alouds as a starting point for further learning in your classroom, as well as in other curricular areas. Not only will you provide the basis for children to learn through literacy, you'll also help them retain their enjoyment of the read-aloud and encourage them to become lifelong readers.

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