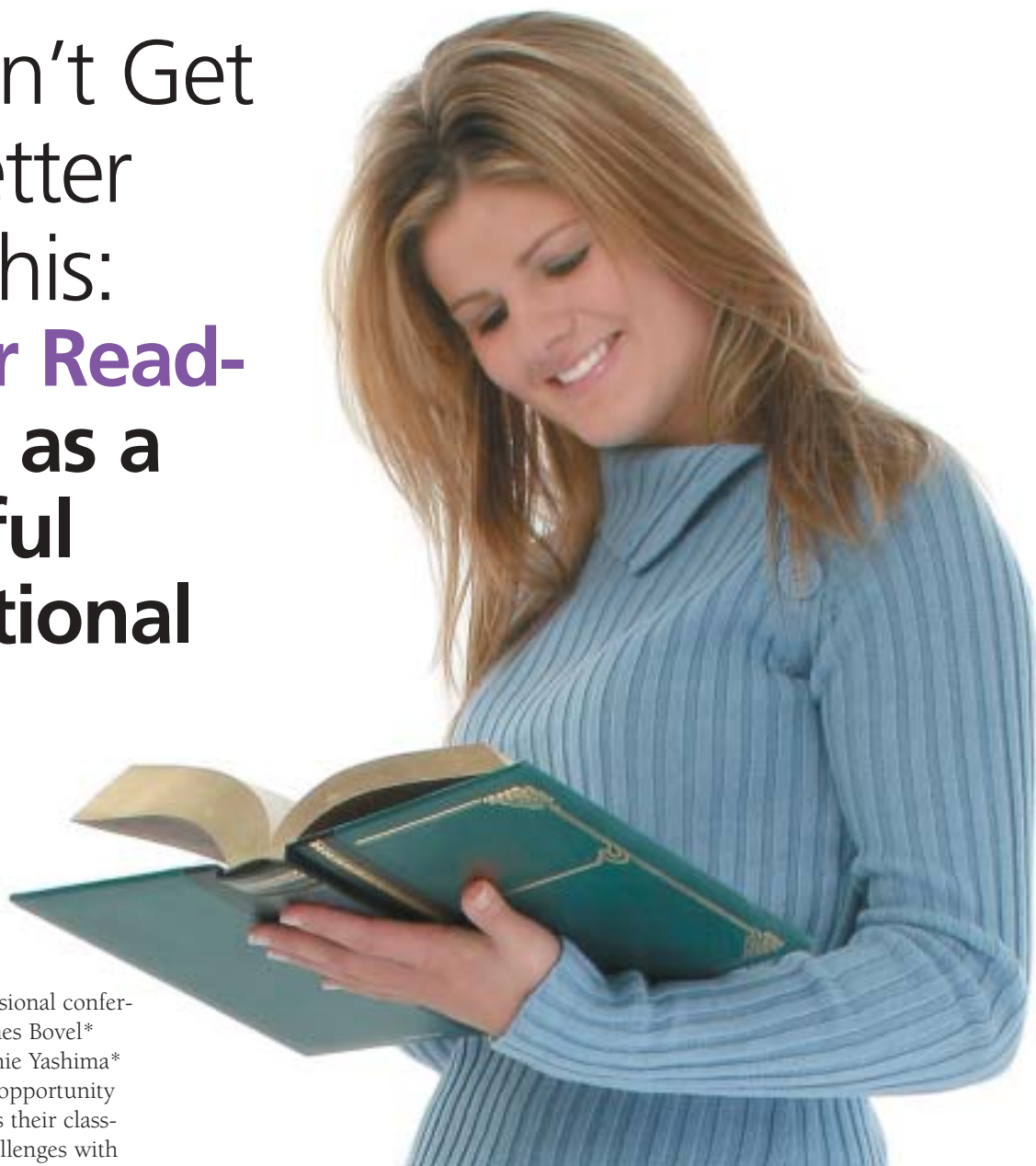


It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This: **Teacher Read-Alouds** as a Powerful Instructional Tool



At a professional conference, James Bovel* and Connie Yashima* have the opportunity to discuss their classroom challenges with literacy expert Lucy

Calkins. Although James teaches grades 3-8, and Connie teaches grades K-2, their concerns are similar.

Calkins listens as they try to frame their challenges in a positive way. "With such diversity in age and ability, how do we help students connect content with real life? What can be done to build a powerful repertoire of background knowledge? What methods can we use to ensure that our students invest more in the learning process?"

*Not their real names.

"How can we empower struggling readers and writers? What should we do about the number of students coming to our classrooms with limited English skills? How about those who can read but don't?"

"And finally, so many of our students come to us with aching hearts and stressed-out lives. How do we fit in time to create classroom communities that help us bond as a class?"

As Calkins listens, her eyes begin to twinkle, and a smile lights up her face. "It's as simple as changing one

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part of your program. Consider putting teacher read-aloud at the heart of your instruction throughout the day.”¹

Calkins isn't the only one offering this advice. Many experts agree, including Jim Trelease, Mem Fox, and Mary Lee Hahn. In fact, Laura Robb bases an entire literacy program for at-risk emergent readers on reading aloud.² Like the authors of this article, you will find yourself mesmerized with the infinite array of teaching and learning possibilities afforded by reading aloud to students.

Focusing on strategies good readers use will enable you to teach effectively as you read aloud.

Inoculate With Passion

As teachers, we would be wise to follow children's book author Gary

Paulsen's wise advice, "Read like a wolf eats."³ Instead of spending all of your time pouring over teacher's guides, creating activities that are used up in minutes, and grading endless papers—begin reading. The more you read, the more voracious your own reading appetite will become. You just won't be able to get enough.

Permit yourself to be inoculated with the joy that such reading brings. But don't stop there. Keep your students in mind. How will you use what you know to help them learn what

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good readers do? Examine your own reading life so you will know reading from the inside out.

To keep read-aloud at the heart of your reading instruction, become more metacognitive as you read. Highlight vocabulary words. Make notes to help guide the listeners. Use sticky notes to mark where you use specific reading strategies such as activating prior knowledge, determining important ideas, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, synthesizing, and asking questions.⁴ Pause to wonder, clarify, question, and respond. Focusing on strategies good readers use will enable you to teach effectively as you read aloud. You will find yourself eager to intentionally model what you do as a reader as you converse about the shared experience of reading aloud.

Now, use your enthusiasm about reading to inoculate your students against aliteracy (being able to read but choosing not to do so). Acquaint them with your favorite authors and illustrators. Show them the books you are reading now and the ones you want to read in the future. Let them hear you agonize over which book to read next. Invite them and their parents to join a book club.

Just Let Them Talk

Lucy Calkins is convinced that the most powerful way to help students think about and make meaning from text is to engage them in talking about what they read.⁵ Vygotsky emphasizes the role of language in learning as well, stating that “the more complex the action [comprehension], the greater the importance played by speech Sometimes speech becomes of such vital importance that, if not permitted to use it, young children cannot accomplish the given task.”⁶

Students talking during read-aloud? What will they talk about? Encourage them to tell what is happening inside their brain as you read.⁷ What do they hear, visualize, think? What questions do they have? What connections are they making? What new understandings are being created? Engage the students in finding clues, analyzing

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plot, and getting to know the characters.

Ask fewer literal questions, and instead, emphasize open-ended literary questions. Such questions will enable students to discuss multiple possibilities, listen to varying perspectives, and examine the text more carefully. Your questions will lead students to raise further questions.⁸ On some days, there will be more talk than reading as you allow your students to follow a thread of important thinking.

Other ways to get students engaged with the text include using props such as music, pictures, maps, diagrams, and food. Use your creativity to keep the students thinking and talking. Robb cites a 1982-1983 study in which Shirley Brice Heath found that children who did well throughout school had parents who read aloud and interacted with them as they read. This contrasted with children who did well with workbooks and drill sheets in the early grades but began to fall behind by 3rd grade. These children had parents who read aloud but failed to include interaction while reading.⁹ Thus, to maximize the benefits of reading aloud, let students talk about the text.

Learning Without Trying

Every day, it seems the challenges of teaching and learning multiply. Students are expected to learn more, produce more, and test better while support from outside of school seems to diminish. It weighs heavily on the hearts of many teachers that they don't have time to do things like read aloud to their students. There is just so much

that needs to be taught and learned. In actuality, reading aloud provides many opportunities for instruction and strategy practice; it enhances both teaching and learning.

Rather than something to fill empty time, reading aloud should be the heart and soul of daily instruction. It should be an intentional teaching tool to help all students gain valuable reading strategies to use in their own lives. Use read-alouds to help students construct for themselves what good readers and writers do. Here is a small sampling of some strategies for reading aloud:

Read-aloud is a natural venue for modeling before, during, and after reading strategies. For example, a teacher may model the strategy of prediction by doing a picture walk through the book before reading a word of it. During the reading of the book, the teacher may model how readers monitor for understanding as they read. When the book is finished, the teacher can have students do a think-pair-share to discuss how their predictions matched what really happened in the story and how predicting helped them to understand the story better.

Reading aloud is also the most effective way to introduce students to the structures of text. Before you begin to read, help students to become acquainted with the book. Use the cover, dedication, and table of contents to introduce the book. Survey chapter titles and illustrations. Read the information on the back cover. Get to know the author and illustrator by reading author/illustrator notes. Use the book to show the different structures for fact and fiction books.

In addition to teaching reading strategies, read-aloud can also be a great way to teach writing strategies. It provides an exceptional opportunity for teachers to point out specific techniques, interesting vocabulary, and writers' craft used by authors. Students can record these ideas in writers' notebooks to use in their own writing.

Although reading aloud should be at the heart of reading instruction, it is

not the only step in the process of teaching literacy strategies. Instead, it is more like a lid that opens a treasure chest full of tools to be used by readers and writers. It is a time to introduce strategies and model them. Eventually, the teacher will turn over the responsibility to the students as they use the lessons learned in read-aloud during their own reading and writing. These strategies will enable students to experiment with and perfect their own literacy skills.

As teachers practice reading aloud, they refine their vision for instruction. Teachers can use what they discover to help them dig more deeply, using read-aloud to create a balance of pleasure, story, information, talk, teaching, and learning. As a result, students become better readers and writers while meeting required content standards and expectations in a rich, non-threatening,

and enjoyable environment. It just doesn't get any better than this!

The Long Farewell

When students and teachers really get to know the text through interactive read-alouds, it feels right to linger with the book. Linger increases the benefits obtained during the reading. Students are reluctant to bid farewell to ideas and characters with whom they have created relationships. Linger activities include rereading favorite passages, looking for specific information, taking another look at the content, studying literary techniques, and using the text to construct understandings of literary craft and characteristics of genre. Discussions may focus on ways what was learned can be applied to one's reading life. Students will think of projects that extend the learning. Linger is the perfect time to

teach retelling and summarizing. And often reluctant readers will pick up the text and read it independently.¹⁰

Creating a timeline of read-alouds, a Read Aloud Gallery, and birthday rereads are ways to return to favorite parts of books. You can also try book treasures. At the end of the read-aloud, each student is given a card containing a powerful quote from the book. On the card, they write the title of the book, rate it, and write an explanation for the rating. Then each student receives a simple treasure that represents something in the book (i.e., a feather for *Blanca's Feather*, kernels of rice for *Nyla and the White Crocodile*). Each student saves his or her treasures in a large, reclosable plastic bag. Throughout the year, they are given time to remove the book treasures and revisit the books. Their talk may center around text-to-text, text-to-self, or

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text-to-world connections.

Reading aloud makes it difficult to pry a book out of the hearts and minds of students. It just doesn't get better than this—until you realize that there are even more benefits afforded by reading aloud.

It Just Keeps Getting Better

Consider the benefits of reading aloud to your students. When teachers read aloud, it creates infinite learning opportunities in literacy skills and strategies as well as in the content areas. It is one of the easiest and most effective ways to model what good readers do. Teachers can introduce favorite books and authors to students. Students can be nudged to extend their reading to a new author or genre. Reading aloud can also meet the needs of a diverse student population be-

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cause it spans ages, interests, and reading levels.

Reading aloud promotes learning without trying. It is a great way to extend content area learning as students explore related books, both narrative and expository. It enhances critical vocabulary development by increasing listening vocabulary, which then overflows into speaking, reading, and writing vocabulary. It helps to increase fluency, another critical aspect of reading development, and comprehension, since most children's listening level is higher than their reading level. Attention span increases with student involvement in frequent read-aloud sessions. Grammar expertise becomes contagious as they repeatedly hear the rhythm and flow of the written word. Read-aloud also promotes the important strategy of rereading when students decide to have a favorite read-aloud reread to them or read it for themselves.¹¹

Reading aloud reaches us and our students at the very deepest level. It promotes connections between teachers and students. For a few minutes, the teacher can use voice to bring a story to life. As this happens, students hear a different voice than that of the teacher. Positive connections are created with students—they enjoy being read to. Bonding occurs as teachers and students laugh, wonder, gasp, and empathize. Important habits of mind are reinforced. The deepest hopes and fears are brought to the surface for both the reader and listeners. Students learn how to make good moral choices as they examine the ways book characters deal with difficult situations. Through read-alouds, both the teacher and the students are learning and sharing. And the more you do it, the better it gets.

Proving It

Beloved children's author (and literacy expert) Mem Fox contends that if every caring adult read aloud a minimum of three stories a day to the children in their lives, we might wipe out illiteracy in one generation.¹²

During read-aloud, you can easily

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monitor comprehension. Watch your students' faces and listen for reactions, comments, and questions that indicate that they are clarifying, inferring, or wondering about the meanings of words. Take note of other contexts in which students talk/write about the content of read-alouds. Encourage them to create projects that extend the experience. Watch for evidence of new skills and strategies that show up in your students' independent reading and writing.

Periodically, Hahn surveys her students with questions such as, "What is your favorite thing about read-aloud? What happens inside your brain during read-aloud? Did you learn anything about reading during read-aloud that you used during your own reading? What else did you learn during read-aloud?"¹³

Here is the ultimate proof of the effectiveness of reading aloud. Your students

- Read with expression and interest;
- Read for longer periods of time;
- Read for information and pleasure;
- Recommend books to one another and to you; and
- Are passionate about reading.

Just Can't Get Enough

We challenge you to carve out greater chunks of time throughout each day to read aloud to your students. Make it the heart of your reading program and your instructional day. Find time every day to read for fun. Locate irresistible information books to enhance content areas and build background knowledge. When

your students have problems, use a read-aloud that addresses the problem.

As you notice areas of weakness in your students' reading and writing, find something to read with them that will address those weaknesses. As you read like a writer, your students will begin to excel at writing. Take the time to model yourself what readers do. Read—every day, throughout the day. You'll prove to yourself and your students that it just doesn't get better than this. ✍



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