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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the frequency of teachers' oral reading to students at the first, third, and fifth grade levels. Forty-eight teachers completed a survey designed to determine their frequency of oral reading to students, and their attitudes and beliefs about the practice. The results indicated that teachers viewed oral reading in a positive light and were aware of the many benefits of this practice. Furthermore, teachers at the first grade level read aloud to their students more frequently than do teachers at the third grade level. The questionnaire is appended. (Contains 41 references.) (Author/RS)

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Who's Reading Aloud? Teachers' Oral Reading Practices and Beliefs at the Elementary Level

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Abstract

"Reading aloud to children in both the home and in the classroom is a practice that has been recommended for decades" (Jacobs, Morrison & Swinyard, 2000, p.171). The present study investigated the frequency of teachers' oral reading to students at the first, third, and fifth grade levels. Forty-eight teachers completed a survey designed to determine their frequency of oral reading to students, and their attitudes and beliefs about the practice. The results indicated that teachers viewed oral reading in a positive light and were aware of the many benefits of this practice. Furthermore, teachers at the first grade level read aloud to their students more frequently than do teachers at the third grade level.

Who's Reading Aloud? Teachers' Oral Reading Practices and Beliefs at the Elementary Level

A caregiver settles herself into a rocking chair and positions an eight-month-old baby on her lap. She opens the cover of Beatrice Schenk de Regniers' classic, May I Bring A Friend? and begins to read.

The King and Queen invited me

To come to their house on Sunday for tea.

I told the Queen and the Queen told the King

I had a friend I wanted to bring.

The King told the Queen,

"My dear, my dear,

Any friend of our friend is welcome here."

So I brought my friend...

The child, clutching a small, stuffed bear, uses his other hand to bat and swipe the monkeys, lions and animals pictured in the book as the adult reads the familiar refrain. Occasionally, he responds with coos, babbles, and smiles. The caregiver takes turns listening and then acknowledging his responsiveness in a positive way (Soundy, 1997). "Although the child has not yet acquired language, he is participating in a communicative act, one in which he is learning the forms of social interaction and seeing the visual representation of his environment on the printed page" (Soundy, 1997, p. 149).

"How important it is to teach children to lose themselves in the dream of a story. We want our children to gulp down stories—to thunder across the finish line at the Kentucky Derby or live alone in a thatched hut and work at the mill" (Calkins, 2000, p. 25). "As teachers, librarians, and parents, we have become cheerleaders for the cause of reading aloud. There is an armload of literature, both academic and anecdotal, to support our enthusiasm, and for many of us our love of books stems from significant memories of being read to as a child" (Knoth, 1998, p. 22).

Reading books to children is a powerful way of introducing them to a lifelong relationship with quality literature. When we demonstrate the delight and inspiration that we get from reading, we send children a strong message—reading matters. "We can't *teach* enthusiasm for reading, students must *catch* it from us" (Danielson & Rogers, 2000, p. 40). To pass on this love of reading, we must show students the impact that reading has had on our own lives and encourage students to feel that power as well. "She who reads, leads, or can so if she desires. This is the power of lifelong reading" (p. 35).

Becoming a Nation of Readers, the report of the National Commission on Reading, stated that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Heibert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1984, as reported in Wood & Salvetti, 2001, p.76). Teachers and caregivers can enrich the lives of children by providing an abundance of good books, offering a routine that includes daily storytimes,

and finding time for spontaneous book sharing. "Put books in children's hands, whether it is potty time, free-play time, or nap time. Read them stories and let them play with and touch the books and see the pictures and print" (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 551). Children will learn that words tell stories. They will begin to recognize letters and sounds, and without seeming to try, they will build a foundation for literacy (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Being surrounded by storybooks and supportive adults helps children in their active acquisition of literacy much as being surrounded by oral language is a necessary factor in learning to talk. The concepts of literacy develop gradually. In a natural language environment, saturated with good stories, meaningful conversations, and abundant writing materials, the process can begin even before a child goes to school (Wan, 2000). "As children hear more and more stories, and as they become aware of people reading and responding to print, they are motivated to do likewise" (Mooney, 1990, p. 8). They want to get their own messages and meanings from labels, notices, books, and signs. It is from these concrete experiences that young children "make connections between the abstract knowledge they are constructing and their environment. Children make inferences from books and compare what happens in stories with what they know about the world" (Kupetz & Green, 1997, p. 25).

"Childhood reading is very much about bringing forth imaginary spaces that we then inhabit as havens" (Birkerts, 1999, p. 142). Allowing oneself to be transported to another time and place, engaged in an imaginative exercise, is a

complete environmental experience. Books are magical, producing an altered state of being (Gallas, 1997). In being read to, children become "aware that their memories, understandings, and past experiences help them to recreate those presented in the writings of others" (Mooney, 1990, p. 22). As children become familiar with ideas, events, and feelings through being read to, they begin to make their own narratives in their heads and want to create and record their own texts. Thus children are motivated to be readers and writers (Mooney, 1990).

Reading to children enables the teacher to "demonstrate the nature, pleasures, and rewards of reading, and to increase children's interest in books and their desire to be readers" (Mooney, 1990, p. 21). "We also read aloud to demonstrate to our children and to mentor them in the habits, values, and strategies of proficient readers, and to help them experience the bounties of thoughtful, reflective reading" (Calkins, 2000, p. 27). The most important habit we need to model is engagement in the text.

> Just as the real effects of television watching are subliminal, and derive from our contact with the very structure of the medium (the basic McLuhan argument), so is the real power of the childhood reading encounter to be found far less in the specific elements of story or character, and far more in what is accomplished by the engagement itself. Creating a world fully fledged from markers on a page is an attainment that feeds the growing child's sense of self in ways we cannot begin to guess at. I would go further: no amount of compensatory feel-good

> activity can compensate for the loss of this primary sense of agency. It throws wide the doors to inwardness, and nothing could be more important (Birkerts, 1999, p. 143).

"Our goal is for the literature to 'link our souls like pearls on a string, bringing us together in a shared and luminous humanity' " (Calkins, 2000, p. 26).

"Research indicates that reading prepares the mind, nurtures the spirit and educates the soul" (Wan, 2000, p. 152). It is one of the most influential factors which parents and teachers can offer children. "To really read a text, read it with understanding and insight, we must move inside of the text, pulling our lives along with us and incorporating the text and our lives into a new understanding of the world" (Gallas, 1997, p. 252). Anything less is not a complete and informed reading. Anything less is only peeking, or browsing, or dallying with a text (Gallas, 1997). "Reading aloud to young children offers them a legacy of cognizance and creativity" (Wan, 2000, p. 152).

Many educators claim that the aesthetic experience, the emotional, imaginative quality of reading, "plays an important role in motivating reading and in the development of lifelong reading habits" (Winograd & Smith, 1987 as reported in Murphy, 1998, p.91). Children need to learn "how to look at, to savor, the structure of image, idea, feeling, attitudes, during the process of evoking {the literary experience} from the text" (Rosenblatt, 1968 as reported in Murphy, 1998, p. 91). "When taking an aesthetic stance, the reader focuses attention on what is being created during the actual reading, the experience

itself—the happening" (Murphy, 1998, p.90). Students who do not enjoy reading, who do not learn to savor it, will never be committed to it. "One danger in overlooking the aesthetic experience of reading is that we may fail to deal with the problem of aliteracy (the lack of the reading habit)" (Harris & Hodges, 1981 as reported in Murphy, 1998, p. 91). "Clearly, our enthusiasm, insights, and high expectations can entice children to become more actively involved in literacy" (Murphy, 1998, p. 93). "Children read not because they are told—let alone ordered!—to read, but because they see adults around them reading, and using that reading productively for their own purposes" (Otto, 1992/1993 as reported in Murphy, 1998, p.93). By being powerful oral readers and good storytellers, "we can help children experience the beauty and power of language; we can help them relive the aesthetic experience" (Murphy, 1998, p. 93).

When children and adults share reading in a one-to-one setting, "the chances are maximized that they will be attending to the same objects and events and interpreting the situation in similar ways" (Wells, 1986 as reported in Wood & Salvetti, 2001, p. 77).

> Children are thus guided in the essential task of creating the whole of the text meaning just from the words. There is no accompanying video, as in television, and no real-world context to aid understanding, as in conversation. Building meaning solely from the text itself, as it is read aloud by the adult, is a whole new chapter in a child's use of language (Wood & Salvetti, 2001, 77).

Exposure to and interaction with the world of books and stories are foundational to literacy development. Too often it is assumed that this aspect of literacy will (or should) be addressed before children enter kindergarten. However, many children enter school lacking this background (Wood & Salvetti, 2001). Project Story Boost, an experimental early literacy program designed by Wood and Salvetti (2001), represents an effort to provide qualitative read aloud experiences in the school setting to children who have had little or no access to these experiences outside of school. "Ensuring that children who are less experienced with storybooks obtain that experience appropriately is an instructional priority" (p. 77).

"Reading to children is to literacy education as two aspirins and a little bed rest were to the family doctor in years gone by" (Hoffman, Roser & Battle, 1993 as reported in Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 299).

> Read-alouds showcase reading as a pleasurable activity, develop positive attitudes toward reading, expose children to the sounds and rhythm of language, develop children's understanding of how stories are constructed, show models of good reading, provide exposure to printed language, promote language development, entertain listeners, and develop children's appreciation for literature that could not be gained through their own reading abilities (Hopkins, 1998, p. 310).

"Reading storybooks with a caregiver is an important event in children's lives" (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 163). Because these early book sharing events are

crucial for literacy development, teachers should understand and consider the types of early book sharing experiences children have had at home in order to plan meaningful book sharing events for children in school settings (Kragler & Martin, 1998). "One dominating characteristic described how caregivers interacted with their children in book reading on a daily basis" (Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990 as reported in Kragler & Smith, 1998, p.164). During these interactions, caregivers constantly reflected on which decisions to make about how they would proceed through the books with their children. Kragler and Martin's (1998) research details six strategies showing how caregivers interact with their children.

(1) Caregivers discuss. "While reading with their children, caregivers used dialogue to strategically manipulate language to accommodate conceptual and linguistic development of their individual children" (Bruner, 1978 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 164). Bruner (1978) termed this caregiver behavior as "scaffolding."

> A caregiver focuses a child's attention on familiar information ignoring what the child may not understand. Then the caregiver provides a model of the expected dialogue from which a child can extract selectively what is needed for filling a role in discourse. This conversational nature of book reading invites caregivers to scaffold book language for children (p.164).

(2) Caregivers simplify books. At times, "caregivers reduce the complexity of language by conceptually simplifying words" (DeLoache &

DeMendoza, 1987 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 164). For example, "tummy" may replace the word stomach. To accommodate a child's conceptual understanding, a tiger may be called a "kitty." Once children are comfortable with a format, "this simplified communication level becomes a 'launching platform' for teaching children new concepts" (Bruner, 1978 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p.164).

(3) Caregivers elaborate and extend books. "As children acquired more sophisticated oral and print language skills, caregivers would not only read the print, but elaborated on concepts introduced during book reading" (Altwerger et al., 1985 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 164). Some of the concepts that caregivers use to extend books come from the illustrations. For instance, in sharing a book about farm animals, a caregiver can point out a cow's udder and explain the purpose of the udder (Kragler & Martin, 1998).

(4) Caregivers make connections and predictions. Parents spend time connecting and relating their children's experiences to related concepts in books. "While making these connections and reading with their children, caregivers frequently asked their children what was going to happen next in the story" (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 165). In addition, while using a predictable text, caregivers may ask their children to predict the repeated word phrases. While reading Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear? by Bill Martin Jr., caregivers may want their children to predict what phrase they will see next (Kragler & Martin, 1998).

(5) Caregivers use prosody effectively. They use the "prosodic features of the voice, the melodies, and rhythm of language to draw attention to the drama of the story" (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 165). While reading The Three Little Pigs, retold by James Marshall, for example, caregivers may use a low pitch to characterize the wolf, "Little PIG, little PIG, let me IN!" They may use a high pitch to characterize the pig's answer, "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!" "Prosodic features of the caregivers' voices are often the first linguistic variations to be learned by children during oral language acquisition" (Buss, 1984 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 165).

(6) Caregivers manage. "Caregivers used various techniques to maintain their children's engagement during book sharing" (Martin, 1998 as reported in Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 165).

> For instance, they pointed to words or illustrated concepts and asked questions. Caregivers would also help their children point to objects in the pictures or point to words. They shared control of the book-sharing event by allowing their children to hold the book and turn pages. Additionally, caregivers maintained physical contact with their children without restricting the children's movements. Most caregivers knew to end the book reading when their child lost interest in the book (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 166).

"Knowing appropriate strategies for sharing books with infants and toddlers could mean the difference between having a pleasant experience, for both the

adult and child, or one that you might prefer to quickly forget" (Kupetz & Green, 1997, p. 23).

> While most preschoolers enjoy the experience of being read to, some do not. For example, Wells (1995) found that 11% of preschoolers were reported by their mothers to enjoy being read to 'not at all' or 'not much.' The prevailing wisdom provides little guidance as to what parents should do when a child is not enthusiastic about bookreading. Will serving broccoli daily to a youngster who dislikes it make the child into a broccoli eater (or, better yet, into a broccoli lover) or will it serve to solidify the child's negative attitude? (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994, p. 295).

Reading to young children can be problematic unless caregivers and educators recognize the parameters, face the challenges, and work together to transcend the difficulties (Kupetz & Green, 1997).

"Book sharing is one example of a wonderful opportunity teachers have to develop and build children's literacy awareness and language" (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 168). By using similar strategies caregivers have used, "teachers can ease children's transition to school learning as well as continue to support their literacy development" (Kragler & Martin, 1998, p. 168). To help children gain the most out a text, or internalize the text, the "think aloud" technique is useful. Thinking aloud leads students to a better understanding of the text and more enjoyment of the literature. When children think aloud, they verbalize their thoughts as they read, or are read to (Oster, 2000). "Readers' thoughts

might include commenting or questioning the text, bringing their prior knowledge to bear, or making inferences or predictions" (Oster, 2000, p.64). "We have to make students 'insiders,' able to see the way the author has chosen to put the text together" (Routman, 1994, p. 33). "Reading affects our behaviors, perspectives, and outlooks. It moves us to reflect and consider who we really are as people" (Danielson & Rogers, 2000, p. 39).

Reading aloud is cost effective and requires little preparation. Nonetheless, it is sometimes neglected just because it is so easy and pleasurable (Routman, 1994). "By reading aloud, we model fluency and enjoyment of reading. We expose children to quality writers, multicultural texts, and a variety of genres" (Danielson & Rogers, 2000, p. 38).

What books are best? Suggested criteria for the selection of material suitable for use in read alouds include the appeal of the book to the child, the worth of the idea, the appropriateness of the story's shape and structure, the effectiveness of the language, the authenticity of the story, the help illustrations give readers in gaining meaning, and the appropriateness of the book's format (Mooney, 1990). Most importantly, high-quality, age-appropriate children's literature is used for read-alouds.

> Even the youngest children can be connoisseurs of books. They do enjoy a wide variety of literature. It is the sound of the reader's voice that gets the young child's attention even before he can focus on the pictures. The warmth and security of being held and the melodic, soothing sound of the

reader's voice make for a very pleasurable combination (Kupetz & Green, 1997, p. 24).

Books with rhythmical language may be the first books children encounter. Nursery rhymes allow even the youngest child to explore the rhythm and music of the language. The nonsense words and the catchy rhythms and rhymes invite language play. Consider the alliteration of "Diddle, diddle, dumpling" and "Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater." They call out and beg to be said again and again (Kupetz & Green, 1997). The possibilities for creative play with nursery rhymes are endless.

Children love the repetitive language of predictable books such as The Chick and the Duckling, written by Mirra Ginsburg and Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin, Jr. These texts have consistent and simple structure and offer repetitive language patterns and phrases that invite children to actually participate in the story (Kupetz & Green, 1997). To share the sheer joy of reading, educators recommend rereading old favorites. When we revisit books, "we show readers the richness that is there in literature for those who have the eyes to see. We simply get out of the way of the text and let the words work their magic" (Calkins, 2000, p.26).

In addition to picture book reading, "scholars have proposed that early childhood educators can play an important role in addressing the problem of poor expository text achievement by including much more expository text in early childhood curricula" (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 296). Children who read

narrative or 'story' texts with ease tend to struggle when confronted with expository, or information books, about science or social studies topics (Duke & Kays, 1998). Researchers argue that "expository text can not only prepare children for *later*, but also capitalize on their *present* interests, background knowledge, and home literacy experiences" (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 297).

> Texts that are effective for developing language and comprehension ability need to be conceptually challenging enough to require grappling with ideas and taking an active stance toward constructing meaning. The point is that young children can handle challenging content. Yet the limits of young children's developing word recognition ability make it difficult to provide challenging content in the books they read on their own. However, because young children's aural comprehension ability outstrips their word recognition competence, challenging content can be presented to young children from book selections that are read aloud (Beck & McKeown, 2001, p. 10).

The read aloud is an effective vehicle for reading across the social studies and science curriculum. In order to increase young children's experience with expository text, the first step is to examine what young children actually know, and can learn, about the language of these reputedly-difficult texts (Duke & Kays, 1998). "Several studies suggest that young children *are* capable of learning from and about non-narrative, expository texts given exposure to such texts" (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 298). Furthermore, children actually *enjoy* these

interactions. "There can be no question about the importance of developing children's fluency with many discursive forms, including informative book language" (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 315). "Informational books have emerged as a genre of literature that is very attractive, exciting, and popular" (Vardell, 1991 as reported in Jacobs, Morrison & Swinyard, 2000,p. 188).

> Information books typically report and explain facts about the surrounding world—about nature, transportation, particular cultural groups and so on. Many of Gail Gibbons' books are considered informational books, as are books in Harper Collins' *Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science* series or Dorling Kindersley's *Eye-Openers* books (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 296).

These books "arouse the natural curiosity children have about the world around them. Informational books may encourage children to ask more questions and seek answers, leading them to even more reading" (Jacobs, Morrison & Swinyard, 2000, p. 188).

"Reading aloud to children both in the home and in the classroom is a practice that has been recommended for decades" (Jacobs, Morrison & Swinyard, 2000, p. 171). Many early childhood advocates have noted the advantages for children who have been read to.

> Research supports this notion with some of the positive effects shown to be: (a) readiness to benefit from formal literacy instruction, (b) a greater ability to attend to text and school-type learning, (c) an increase in print

> related knowledge, and (d) heightening of young children's motivation and desire to interact with books and learn to read (Robinson, Larsen & Haupt, 1996, p. 249).

According to studies led by Becher (1986) as reported in Wan, 2000, reading to children is important because it:

> promotes a bond between children and parents, and establishes reading as a valued personal activity, exposes and develops shared topics of interest, promotes positive social-emotional interactions among family members, familiarizes children with a variety of language patterns and an expanded vocabulary, and serves as a source of data from which children construct knowledge about rules that govern the reading process (p. 151).

More specifically, Becher (1986) writes that "this practice has been shown to improve children's: (a) receptive and expressive vocabularies; (b) literal and inferential comprehension skills; (c) sentence length; (d) letter and symbol recognition; (e) basic conceptual development extension and expansion; and (f) general interest in books" (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 151).

Butler (1980) wrote, "I believe that books should play a prominent part in our children's lives from babyhood; that access to books, through parents and other adults, greatly increases a child's chances of becoming a happy and involved human being" (as reported in Wan, 2000,p. 151).

Durkin (1966) reported that children who learned to read before entering first grade were ones who were read to by siblings, parents, or another

> caring adult. Neither race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, nor I.Q. distinguished between readers and nonreaders; access to print, being read to, parents valuing education, and early writing did (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 151).

"Louszides's (1993) study indicated that a strong background of being read aloud to beginning during infancy has a positive effect on children's choices to read independently in their leisure time" (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 151).

"Trelease (1989) stated that we need to advertise reading. We need to read to our children to entice them and instill in them the desire to read. Reading aloud is simple. It is fun and inexpensive, but the benefits are monumental" (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 151).

Galda and Cullinan (1991) also summarized the importance of reading aloud to children and said,

> Being read to helps develop familiarity with the conventions of print as well as metalinguistic awareness about the print. Hearing books aloud helps develop children's vocabulary. Early exposure to books in the home helps children come to know two essential things. They learn how print works and that reading is worth the effort it takes. Being read to increases children's knowledge of the world, helping to provide a broad base of experience from which to comprehend and interpret other texts (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 152).

Cochran-Smith's study (1984) found that "storyreaders helped the children to make life-text connections: reader exchanges aimed at helping children use their knowledge in order to make sense of literature" (as reported in Sipe, 2000, p. 257). "Readers' and listeners' comments and interactions surrounded the printed and pictorial information of the text. The teacher was the significant mediator between the texts and the children" (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 156). "This work suggests that hearing stories read aloud may be a crucible in which children's literary awareness is forged" (Sipe, 2000, p. 257).

"Researchers have found that, given supportive environments, children respond to literature in a great variety of ways, through talk, art, spontaneous drama, and writing" (Labbo, 1996 as reported in Sipe, 2000, p. 257). "Evidence gathered revealed that children's story understanding can be enhanced by storyreading procedures which draw on the children's own experiences and highlight similar experiences among the story characters." (Wan, 2000, p. 156). Research emphasizes the role of talk that surrounds book reading in becoming literate.

> Evidence for the role of talking about books in enhancing children's language development comes from studies by Dickinson and Tabors (1991), Freppon (1991), Morrow (1992), and Snow et al. (1995) who concluded, for example, that 'talk surrounding the text' (Morrow, p. 253) or 'getting children to think about what was going on in the story'

(Freppon, p. 144) were keys to literacy growth" (as reported in Beck & McKeown, 2001, p. 11).

"So if story reading stimulates more verbal interaction between parent and child and, in turn, the amount of speech addressed to the child is a variable that predicts the child's language development, story reading should be an ideal vehicle for language enhancement" (Vivas, 1996, p. 190).

> To understand why reading to young children can enhance their language skills, it is necessary to pay attention to the different ways of reading. Two extremes can be distinguished here: "talking with the child" and "talking to the child." Reading in the first way results in a great deal of interaction between reader and child about the text, whereas reading in the second way provides scarce opportunities for interactions: the reader recites the text and the role of the child is restricted to listening (Blok, 1999, p. 350).

As an intensely social activity, book reading provides an interactive context, as described above, for children to acquire and practice developing verbal and conceptual skills (Neuman, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that "social guidance assists children with opportunities to participate beyond their own abilities, and to internalize activities practiced socially, advancing their capabilities for language development, independent thinking, and problem solving" (as reported in Neuman, 1996, 496). Studies on the strength of the explanatory power of parent-child book reading consistently demonstrate

relationships with outcome measures of language growth, emergent literacy skills, and reading achievement (Neuman, 1996). "Children need skillfully mediated assistance in book reading by their caregivers that can help to explain the workings of literacy" (Neuman &Celano, 2001, p. 557).

> It is the intensity of the engagement—the quality of talk and conversational interactions between adult and child—that nurtures and helps them to construct vital literacy-related concepts. These conversations allow them to stretch their understanding of phenomena and use their increasingly rich vocabulary in other contexts. Playing with words, letters, and sounds in contexts that are meaningful to them, children begin to attend to the features of print and the alphabetic nature of reading (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 557).

"Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain" (International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998 as reported in Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 556). Further substantiation for the importance of early language and literacy experiences comes from the National Research Council's report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties*, which suggests that "opportunities to engage with print may act as a primary prevention of reading difficulties" (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998 as reported in Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 556).

Children thrive in print-rich environments. Caregivers and educators need to increase the volume, quality, and intensity of young children's stimulating experiences with good books at an early age. In addition, there is a need to provide opportunities for children to hear, see and participate in a wide range of activities with caregivers who may help them to uncover the mysteries of written language (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

> So, the immersion of children in a literate environment, observing in an unplanned (or perhaps planned) manner the behaviors of adults or older children towards books and literate activities, provides a model upon which children can draw conclusions about the basic rules of language and reading. This process is implied in the concept of abstract modeling, which poses the issue of the generation of innovative behavior through modeling influences that can generate rules underlying specific performance. All of these elements are present in the story-reading situation (Vivas, 1996, p. 214).

Parent involvement in their children's early literacy development is a crucial component to success in the classroom.

> Whether rich or poor, two-parent or one-parent, families can provide a rich learning environment for children. By having this rich, stable environment, school success begins at home. There is a direct relationship between parent behaviors at home regardless of socioeconomic status of

the family and student reading achievement (Wentzel, 1994 as reported in Anderson, 2000, p. 75).

"Home literacy experiences that appear to be associated with early reading achievement in school include children having their own books, being read to frequently, using the library, and having parents model literacy activities" (Mason, 1992 as reported in Ortiz & McCarty, 1997, p. 109). Literacy practices engaged in by parents included reading for entertainment, reading as a part of daily living, reading for general information, reading for religious purposes, and reading materials besides books (Ortiz & McCarty, 1997). "If a young child sees a parent reading regularly, then reading becomes important to the child because the most important person in their world reads" (Miller, 1986 as reported in Anderson, 2000,p. 63).

"Storybook reading is a jointly constructed social activity that occurs between parent, child, and text" (Neuman, 1996, p. 509). Reading aloud to children establishes closeness. When parents and their child read, the child receives undivided attention and affection from their mom or dad. "From the time our children are very young, we can spend at least 15 minutes daily reading age-appropriate books" (Ballantine, 1999, p. 171). "This will create positive attitudes and higher reading levels than for children whose parents do not read to them" (Anderson, 2000, p. 62). Furthermore, Snow's study (1983) shows that "children whose parents talked more during the story and whose parents initiated talks with them about books scored higher on reading achievement than

did children whose parents did not do these activities" (as reported in Anderson, 2000, p. 62).

Observations of storybook interactions between parents and children raise an important implication, according to Neuman's study (1996).

> Through the process of intersubjectivity—the sharing of focus and mutual understanding—it was evident that parents engaged children in the intimacy of conversation in drawing connections from the familiar to the novel, linking new situations to more familiar ones—sharing their worlds and personal histories (p. 511).

"These activities have been viewed as central to cognitive growth" (Tizard & Hughes, 1984, as reported in Neuman, 1996, p. 511). "Once again, it suggests the critical role that parents play in children's early literacy learning and the influence of access to print resources, opportunities, and parental interaction in storybook reading" (Neuman, 1996, p. 511).

"Might differential access to literacy-specific experiences contribute to growing and enduring disparities in reading performance?" (Neuman, 1996, p. 496). Although studies have shown that many poor families can and do provide rich literate environments, others have argued that differences in access may have negative consequences for low-income children's long-term success in schooling. (Neuman, 1996). "Lacking access to book materials, many young children, therefore, may not be exposed to the cognitive and linguistic richness of talk that experiences with books provide" (Neuman, 1996, p. 496). According to

past studies (Neuman & Gallagher, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1993), when "provided with access to resources and information, however, poor and minority parents contribute significantly to their young children's language and literacy development" (as reported in Neuman, 1996, p. 497).

"Consequently, concerns for access have laid the theoretical groundwork for many intervention programs that provide parents with books, reading strategies, and skills with the hope of encouraging frequent storybook reading and cognitively challenging talk with children" (Neuman, 1996, p. 497). For example, "read-aloud parent clubs (Segel, 1994), highlighting enjoyment of reading children's literature, provide workshops on models of enriched storybook reading and discussion of topics related to home literacy experiences" (as reported in Neuman, 1996, p. 497).

"It is important to strengthen the connections between literacy experiences in school and at home" (Fox & Wright, 1997, p. 402). "Close connections must be built between public schools and the families who send their children for an education" (Spielman, 2001, p. 762). Storymates, a cross-age reading program, was developed to provide a direct link between home and school literacy and to provide meaningful experiences with easy books to 9-, 10-, and 11-year-old children who had difficulty reading books written at their grade level (Fox & Wright, 1997). "Activities in school included practice reading storybooks with a teammate, exploring the narrative structure of stories, and writing retellings of familiar storybooks" (Fox & Wright, 1997, p. 396). Next, the children in the

program engaged in storybook reading to younger siblings, relatives, and neighborhood friends. "The success this group had reading storybooks helped them perceive themselves as competent readers" (Fox & Wright, 1997, p. 401). Storymates helped foster the "connection in which school literacy experiences flowed naturally into children's daily lives at home, and, in turn, home activities were meaningful, useful, and integral to literacy experiences in school" (Fox & Wright, 1997, p. 402).

Children who were exposed to read aloud experiences both at home and in school appeared to benefit more than those exposed just at home or at school (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). "Efforts to involve parents in early literacy practices have been one of the primary goals to improve the academic achievement of students" (Bowman, 1994 as reported in Ortiz & McCarty, 1997, p. 112). The rhythm of developing readers is not teach and test and then reteach or new teaching or more testing (Mooney, 1990).

> The most effective rhythm is continuous and simultaneous interacting, observing, modeling, interacting, responding, and encouraging. And the focus is always on the learners—what they do, how they do and show it, and what they are striving to do; on what attitudes, understandings, and behaviors they display" (Mooney, 1990, p. 14).

How can educators encourage parents to participate in and/or continue engaging in early reading practices? Encouraging parents to read with their young children at early ages can enhance high interest levels in text and print

once children enter school. Inform parents to take advantage of spontaneous and incidental reading activities that occur within the home. Suggest that parents capitalize on environmental print. Children who are learning to read are often curious about familiar signs, logos, and billboards they see on their way to school or to the supermarket. Encourage parents to start with informal and simple activities that may involve only one parent and the child, such as reading the weekly comic strip section together. Most importantly, remind parents to be patient. Allow children to become comfortable in a world filled with print. Children constantly observe others engage in an activity they do not yet fully comprehend—reading. As a result, they will ask many questions. Respond with answers they will understand. It takes but a few seconds to help a child make sense of the print around them. The rewards are lifelong! (Ortiz & McCarty, 1997).

In the opening of her book, Read to Your Bunny, Rosemary Wells writes to parents, "Reading aloud with your child opens the doors of true friendship. This gentle routine will soon become a pleasure for you both. Your small effort of twenty minutes every day will bear fruit for a lifetime." The text reads,

Read to your bunny often,

It's twenty minutes of fun.

It's twenty minutes of moonlight,

And twenty minutes of sun.

Twenty old-favorite minutes,

Twenty minutes brand-new,

Read to your bunny often,

And...

Your bunny will read to you.

Current Investigation

Given the importance of read alouds, this study investigated the frequency with which teachers used this practice in different grade levels. The research hypothesis was that there would be a significant difference between the use of read alouds at different grade levels, with read alouds becoming less frequent as grade level increased.

Method

Participants: Forty-eight teachers from four elementary schools in an affluent school district in a suburban town in New Jersey were the participants in this study. Of the forty-eight teachers, fifteen were first grade teachers, seventeen were third grade teachers, and sixteen were fifth grade teachers. All of the fifteen first grade teachers were female. Of the seventeen third grade teachers, sixteen were female and one was male. Of the sixteen fifth grade teachers, fourteen were female and two were male. Of the forty-eight participants, forty-five were female and three were male.

Materials: A survey instrument was developed in order to address the research question cited above. The instrument (see Appendix A) consisted of two parts. Part one focused on general information about each participant

including gender, age, years of teaching experience, and highest degree attained. Part two contained nine questions, seven closed form questions, one ranked question, and one open-ended question.

Procedure: The researcher administered the survey, once permission had been granted by building principals, to all first, third, and fifth grade teachers in the school district. The survey was administered at the end of a faculty meeting to all applicable teachers. The researcher explained the instructions to the teachers orally at this time. The teachers were given fifteen minutes to complete the survey. The teachers were asked to reflect on their daily teaching practices in order to provide their most accurate responses. The researcher asked all teachers to complete the surveys independently. The surveys were collected immediately after the participants were finished.

Data Analysis: The researcher sorted the data collected from the participants by grade level. The researcher reported the findings for each grade level. The researcher then compared/contrasted the findings within each grade level as well as all three grade levels combined in order to test the hypothesis. The researcher carefully examined the data for qualitative and quantitative purposes. Responses from the open-ended question on the instrument were summarized to highlight major trends. Quantitative data was analyzed using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine the statistical difference in time spent reading aloud among first, third and fifth grade teachers in the district.

Time Line: The researcher obtained permission from the building principals in December and scheduled appointments in January to attend a faculty meeting in each building in order to administer the survey. Once the data was collected, the researcher worked with a statistician in February to analyze the data. The researcher reported the results in March.

Results

Quantitative Data: The results from the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test did not find a statistical difference in time spent reading aloud between first, third and fifth grade teachers. The averages were as follows: 23.95 minutes per day for first grade teachers, 17.14 minutes per day for third grade, and 19.77 minutes for fifth grade. The F-value was 3.00. The *p*-value was 0.06 and non-significant.

A second Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was run on only the first grade and third grade data. The ANOVA tested the hypothesis that first and third grade means were equal. The hypothesis was rejected. The F-value was 6.17 and the *p*-value was 0.02 and significant.

Qualitative Data: The open-ended question on the survey, (Do you think **students** benefit from teachers reading aloud? Why?), was the final question teachers encountered. It required a written response. The researcher found many common trends among the first, third and fifth grade teachers' responses. The most common response was that children find pleasure and enjoyment from being read to and that books foster the love of reading. Reading aloud was

reported as beneficial because children hear good, fluent, expressive reading being modeled. The elementary teachers viewed read alouds as a way to enhance children's listening skills and improve comprehension and vocabulary. Furthermore, the teachers believed that time spent reading aloud is a worthwhile practice because children are exposed to a variety of genres and use high-level thinking skills in both understanding what is being presented and in relating the information to prior experiences.

Discussion

Reading aloud is valuable for students of any age. Oral reading transmits the pleasure of reading and invites listeners to be readers. There are numerous benefits and according to the research, teachers are aware of its importance in the classroom. Teachers at the elementary level are reading aloud to their students. Oral reading is a part of their daily teaching practice. The present research suggests that there are more read aloud experiences in the first grade than in the third and fifth grades. Children of all ages need to hear a teacher modeling expressive, enthusiastic reading. Reading aloud is necessary and important not only at the primary level, but also at the intermediate level. Although this research does not extend into secondary schools, oral reading is equally important in this classroom setting too.

In examining the qualitative data reported in this study, the teachers' personal views of the benefits of oral reading are consistent with the current research in the field. As Trelease (1989) stated, "...we need to advertise reading.

We need to read to our children to entice them and instill in them the desire to read. Reading aloud is simple. It is fun and inexpensive, but the benefits are monumental" (as reported in Wan, 2000, p. 151). The teachers in the study uniformly agreed that children find pleasure and enjoyment from being read to and more importantly, that books foster the love of reading.

There is an abundance of literature in the field concerning the importance of read alouds in both the home and school settings. What has been written and what is being written about this area has positively affected the classroom teacher and his/her teaching practices. It is refreshing to report that the teachers from this study value the current research and use it in the classroom.

In retrospect, the study included forty-eight teachers from four different elementary schools in an affluent school district. Of the six elementary schools, only four were interested in participating in this study. Did the loss of twenty teachers have an impact on the results of the study? I do not believe so. Furthermore, the study would have been further strengthened by including middle school teachers and high school teachers to cover a broader range, primary through secondary, of teachers' daily practices and beliefs. How often are middle school and high school teachers reading aloud to their students? This is an area that needs to be explored in the future.

Does the affluent, suburban school district have an impact on the results of this study? I do believe so. A strong school system with high expectations and a solid curriculum makes a difference. It would be interesting to study

teachers' daily practices and beliefs of oral reading in various suburban and urban, whole language and basal series districts.

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Table 1 Survey Administered to First, Third and Fifth Grade Teachers

I.

1. Grade that you teach _____

2. Sex: Male or Female

3. Age: 22-29 years

   30-39 years

   40-49 years

   50 and over

4. Years of teaching experience _____

5. Highest degree attained _____

II.

1. At ***home***, do **you** read for pleasure? Yes or No

2. In the ***classroom***, do **you** read aloud to your students? Yes or No

3. If you answered yes to the question above, do **you** read aloud to your students on a ***daily*** or ***weekly*** basis? _____

4. ***If daily***, how often during the day do **you** read aloud to your students? Circle one answer, please.

   1-2 times a day

   3-4 times a day

   5 or more times per day

5. ***Based on your personal reading philosophy,*** how important is it to **you** to read aloud to your students? Circle one answer, please.

1 very important

2 important

3 somewhat important

4 not important

6. Do you think **students** benefit from teachers reading aloud? Yes or No

Why? _____

_____

_____

_____

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