

SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Read-Aloud: A Middle Years Approach to Connecting and Learning From Literature

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Abstract

Read-aloud is a reading activity that occurs most often in the early years classroom. Research suggests that read-aloud continues to be of value in the upper grades. Read-aloud provides opportunity for middle grade students to engage and connect to a range of literature. It increases motivation and improves accessibility for the range of readers within the classroom. It is also an effective instructional strategy that can be used in all content areas to make gains in comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills.

Teacher read-aloud has been described by the field as an imperative classroom activity to develop reading skills and knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018). However, the vast majority of studies of read-aloud and supports of this practice pertain to early years classrooms (Ariail & Albright, 2005). Further, researchers have noted a decline in the use of read-aloud as students progress in grade levels (Albright & Ariail, 2005; International Literacy Association, 2018). While the reading needs of early years and middle years students may differ significantly, read-aloud can continue to be an essential activity to include in the middle years classroom. This paper seeks to justify read-aloud as a beneficial approach to develop or deepen a middle years student's connection to literature and an effective instructional strategy to teach and reinforce reading skills.

What Is Read-Aloud?

Research in the field does not always provide a clear definition of what read-aloud is. Studies demonstrate that it is understood and implemented by teachers in various ways (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005). Read-aloud in the context of this paper will be defined as a "teaching structure that introduces students to the joy of constructing meaning from text" (Burkins & Yaris, 2016), whereby teachers simply read aloud from a text to their students. The focus area of middle years will refer to students in grades 5 to 8. Research has found that read-aloud is conducted for a variety of reasons (Ariail & Albright, 2005) and has the potential to provide many benefits when used strategically (Fisher et al., 2004). As an instructional activity, read-aloud may differ in its appearance and implementation, depending on the teacher, age, or grade level of the students, and its intended purpose.

Read-aloud generally consists of the teacher reading aloud from a text to the class. Research suggests various techniques that teachers could use to make read-aloud most effective. Some of these strategies include the use of expression, modelling fluent reading, asking questions, and actively interacting and engaging with students (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Fisher et al., 2004; Lane & Wright, 2007). Read-aloud may look different, depending on the subject area in which it is conducted. It could look like the teacher reading aloud to students from a variety of texts, teaching or reinforcing comprehension skills, teaching new vocabulary, or building context or background knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018) on a topic that students will be learning more about.

During a successful read-aloud, students should demonstrate active listening skills, understand their expectations, participate in discussion, engage, and interact with the text and teacher (Fisher et al., 2004), or they might be following along in the text (Clark & Andreasen,

2014). Depending on the read-aloud's purpose, students might complete an activity to reflect or connect to what has been read (Fisher et al., 2004).

Literature Review

Researchers have identified a need for more information on read-aloud practices in the middle years (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Over the last twenty years, research has begun to emerge in support of read-aloud in the middle year's classroom. However, this field of research continues to need exploration.

In a survey of grades 5-8 teachers in Texas, Ariail and Albright (2005) sought to find whether middle years teachers were using read-aloud, what they were reading aloud, why they read aloud, and how they extended read-aloud activities. The results revealed that over 70% of teachers read aloud to their students. Most teachers read aloud to promote the love of reading and for comprehension purposes. Teachers most often read aloud from novels and extended read-aloud activities through whole-class discussion. This study brought forward that many teachers continued to use read-aloud in the middle years, but it was not always used purposefully as an instructional activity to improve students' reading skills.

Marchessault and Larwin's (2014) research focused on read-aloud as an instructional tool. Their study uncovered that middle years students who received read-aloud instruction had an increased score on their Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA). They also found that students, particularly males, who received read-aloud as a reading intervention demonstrated advances in their reading comprehension and vocabulary. Marchessault and Larwin's work supports the use of read-aloud as an effective instructional strategy.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) were some of the first researchers to examine middle years read-aloud. They also contributed middle years students' perspectives of reading in school. In their survey of 1,765 grade 6 students, they found that read-aloud was one of the two favoured reading practices at school. Clark and Andreasen (2014) and Ledger and Merga (2018) incorporated children's perspectives into their research. While there were differences in how their studies were conducted, their findings concurred with Ivey and Broaddus' work: students enjoy being read to. Incorporating children's perspectives into the field of read-aloud enables researchers and teachers alike to identify common themes in how students describe and perceive read-aloud from participating in this classroom activity.

The effectiveness of read-aloud as an instructional reading strategy could be evaluated through students' progress in their reading skills and attitudes. While Clark and Andreasen (2014) used their study to see whether student reading attitude affected grade 6 students' perception and learning during read-aloud, this method could be approached in reverse to find whether the use of read-aloud affects students' reading attitudes and learning. Research has determined several benefits of read-aloud as an instructional approach, such as improvement in students' comprehension (Ledger & Merga, 2018; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014), increase in understanding and use of vocabulary (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014), background knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2018), student attitude, motivation, and connection to literature (Albright & Ariail, 2005), and interactions and participation during read-aloud activities (Lane & Wright, 2007). Teacher implementation of read-aloud also plays an important role in students' success (Layne, 2015). If teachers apply research-supported instructional strategies, it could increase the likelihood that their students will demonstrate growth.

There is a small amount of literature asserting that read-aloud may not be a useful tool in the classroom. Findings from Ariail and Albright's (2005) aforementioned teacher survey identified that not all teachers found read-aloud suitable to their area of instruction, some teachers did not acknowledge read-aloud as part of the curriculum, and others felt that they did not have time for it. This may indicate the lack of consistency in how read-aloud is defined and implemented or the limited research available that supports read-aloud as an instructional approach in the middle years. Swanson et al. (2011) argued that there was little evidence of the

long-term effects of read-aloud as a reading intervention. In their meta-analysis of intervention strategies, they found that read-aloud was responsible for only a slight degree of variance, demonstrating that there were other factors of greater importance.

While the literature on read-aloud in middle years is still limited, I argue that our current understanding presents a plethora of benefits. Therefore, read-aloud is not just an approach to use in early years, but a strategy that should also be considered in middle years classrooms.

Connecting Middle Years Students to Literature Through Read-Aloud

As students progress into middle years grades, there are specific reading skills and attitudes required for proficient reading. These could be enhanced through the use of read-aloud. Developing a positive connection to literature in middle years students can promote future reading (Sanacore, 2000). Three strategies demonstrate potential to improve a connection with literature: access, motivation and enjoyment, and relating to readers' lives.

Access

Read-aloud is a strategy that can enable access to all levels of readers in the classroom. Research indicates that one of the main reasons teachers continue to read aloud in middle years is to increase access for students (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005). Students come into middle years possessing a variety of reading skills and attitudes. We could assume that this is dependent on their previous experiences with reading. Teachers need to continue to be sensitive and responsive to all of their students' reading needs as students progress in the middle years. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) acknowledged that the expectation of student reading in middle years may be above the reader's ability and that eliminating read-aloud from instruction could cause student stress. Further research demonstrates that students who have challenges reading independently have greater comprehension when being read to (Ariail & Albright, 2005). Marchessault and Larwin (2014) suggested that instructional strategies (like read-aloud) that can reach all levels of readers in the classroom are approaches that should be used across grade levels. Thus, the use of read-aloud can continue to open the door for the range of readers within the middle years classroom.

Motivation and Enjoyment

One of the key components to developing a strong foundation in literacy is students finding joy in reading, which could affect their motivation to read. Sanacore (2000) professed, "Promoting the lifetime love of reading should be one of our most important goals in middle schools" (p. 157). Several researchers determined that the purpose of read-aloud in the classroom includes student enjoyment and to increase student motivation to read (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2005; Clark & Andreassen, 2014; Fisher et al., 2004; International Literacy Association, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007; Ledger & Merga, 2018; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014; Sanacore, 2000). Ariail and Albright (2005) found that teachers most often reported including read-aloud to encourage a love for reading. There is a connection between students' enjoyment of listening to reading and motivation to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Read-aloud can also motivate illiterate students to learn to read (Ariail & Albright, 2005; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014).

It is clear that for students to establish a love for reading, read-aloud needs to be a pleasurable experience. Layne (2015) stated, "Read-aloud time needs to be enjoyable" (p. 39). Researchers have recommend a variety of strategies to promote student engagement and enjoyment during the read-aloud experience. Sanacore (2000) suggested that reading aloud should occur daily, a variety of texts should be read, and teachers should incorporate students' interests. Layne (2015) concurred that students like having a consistent read-aloud time. Lane

and Wright (2007) advised teachers to engage students in read-aloud through expression, voice, and gestures. They also encouraged student engagement by interacting with students or through “text talk” (p. 670), discussion, and learning vocabulary.

Research demonstrates that while often the teacher uses read-aloud to promote a love for literature, students also report enjoying read-aloud as a classroom activity (Clark & Andreasen, 2014; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ledger & Merga, 2018). Activities that students enjoy and can learn from should be incorporated into all classrooms.

Reader Relation

In addition to providing access and enjoyment, the texts used for read-aloud have the potential to establish connections with students. This is what Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) referred to as books being mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (as cited by Johnson et al., 2017). Students need to see themselves, see the world, and gain perspectives from the books they read. Tatum (2014) determined, “Teachers need to foster students’ partnership with texts” (p. 4). In a survey about texts read, Tatum found that adolescents connected to texts in multiple ways, including their age range, ethnicity, gender, or personally. Sanacore (2000) expressed that texts can become “especially powerful” (p. 160) when they relate to students’ lives, inviting students to reflect and take action, just like sliding glass doors. Albright and Ariail (2005) ascertained that reading various forms of texts to students can strengthen the connection between learning and students’ lives. Therefore, an assumption could be made that regardless of the text read, students develop a relationship or connection with that text and that it is a teacher’s responsibility to select read-aloud texts that promote positive connections.

Another way for teachers to be responsive to students’ needs is through book choice. Classrooms can be filled with students of diverse backgrounds (Johnson et al., 2017). Teachers need to reflect, select, and share appropriate texts that are representative of various students’ backgrounds and life experiences. According to Sanacore (2000), students who are exposed to a variety of texts can become more knowledgeable citizens. Implementing read-aloud in the classroom provides an opportunity for teachers to be culturally responsive to students’ needs and enhance the connections that students can make with a variety of texts.

Research demonstrates that access, motivation, and enjoyment, and relating to students’ lives are a necessary trifecta in the development of the connection between students and texts.

Read-Aloud as an Instructional Strategy

Literature supports read-aloud as an effective instructional approach across grade levels. The International Literacy Association (2018) regards read-aloud in middle years as a “nonnegotiable instructional practice” (p. 3). Research demonstrates that when read-aloud is used as an instructional approach, considerations should be made about what it will be used to teach, and how the teacher will deliver their instruction.

What Should Be Taught?

Research indicates that the use of read-aloud in the classroom can be used to teach a variety of skills. Read-aloud can increase comprehension, thinking skills, reading fluency, background knowledge, enhance vocabulary development (International Literacy Association, 2018; Lane & Wright, 2007; Sanacore, 2000), and writing skills (Fisher et al., 2004). Clark and Andreasen (2014) recommended that teachers be direct and deliberate about the purpose of instruction during read-aloud, so that students are aware of what they are learning and increase their engagement.

Read-aloud can be used to teach or reinforce reading comprehension skills. As students progress in their grade levels the development of comprehension matures and requires higher

level thinking. Layne (2015) claims that any text read aloud can be used to reinforce a reading skill, and every pause made is a teaching opportunity. Skills like visualization, inferencing, sequencing, and determining the main idea can be taught or reinforced through read-aloud. Layne further suggested engaging students in their learning by acting out what they are visualizing and asking questions tied to specific reading skills. Read-aloud can be used to model thought processes that occur during reading. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) referred to this strategy as “think-aloud” (p. 189). Teachers can use think-aloud practices to show how they make connections to the text and ask questions (Albright & Ariail, 2005). Marchessault and Larwin (2014) articulated that the use of think-aloud during read-aloud can further deepen students’ comprehension skills.

Research has shown that read-aloud can also be an effective instructional approach in various content areas (International Literacy Association, 2018). Teachers can select and use texts that fit into units of study and curriculum content (Lane & Wright, 2007). The International Literacy Association (2018) suggested that teachers should also include expository texts in content areas to prepare students for future grades. Read-aloud in content areas can be used to develop and build student knowledge, acquire vocabulary, and establish thought processes related to selected topics. Lane and Wright (2007) indicated that instructional time can be saved when read-aloud is strategically used to cover multiple goals.

Researchers have found that vocabulary development and enrichment is another reason to include read-aloud across grade levels. In Layne’s (2015) discussion of read-aloud, Linda Gambrell contributed, “Our richest and most descriptive language is found in books” (p. 44). Gambrell explained that read-aloud is necessary to develop book language, because it differs vastly from how people speak. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) also demonstrated the importance of teachers modelling the use of context clues to understand new vocabulary. Fox (2013) described the natural way that students acquire language from read-aloud: first by listening and engaging in the story, then learning, and finally using the language.

In addition to advancements in reading and thinking skills, content area knowledge, and vocabulary, read-aloud has also proved to be a resourceful tool to teach writing. Teachers can expose students to a variety of writing genres, elements of the writer’s craft, and conventions, by reading aloud mentor texts. Mentor texts can also be referred to throughout the writing process. Mentor texts can be described as texts that writers can learn from (Laminack, 2017). Marchetti and O’Dell (2015) declared mentor texts as “the single most important element of your writing instruction” (p. 3). The use of mentor texts holds such importance because they demonstrate the *how* of writing (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2017). When students learn to write, it is often through imitation of modelled writing. Why is read-aloud a necessary step in the use of mentor texts for writing instruction? Dorfman and Cappelli explained that students need first to enjoy the text as readers. “We introduce them as read-alouds, appreciating and responding to them as readers. Then, we revisit them through the eyes of a writer” (p. 9). Laminack (2017) concurred with Dorfman and Cappelli, explaining that a text becomes a mentor text once it is familiar to the student. The author’s choices can be learned from only when a read/writer relationship has been created with the text. So why not have students independently read and choose their own mentor texts? Marchetti and O’Dell (2015) demonstrated this as a possibility in high school. However, reading aloud from a text creates access to the range of readers within the classroom. We also know the importance of text selection for an effective read-aloud, because they are selected to connect to the readers in the classroom and for specific teaching purposes. Like the cycle Fox (2013) described in language acquisition, providing access through read-aloud also begins a learning cycle. Access facilitates a connection between the student and text, which leads to learning and understanding the text, learning from the author’s choices in the text, and lastly applying those skills in students’ writing, which also strengthens the reading and writing connection.

Research demonstrates ample opportunities for read-aloud to be used as an instructional approach across subject areas to build a range of skills beneficial to middle years students and beyond.

A Teacher's Role in Read-Aloud

A teacher's role in read-aloud is imperative to its success. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) expressed, "The teacher is such an integral part of the learning process when using read-aloud" (p. 189). While the concept of read-aloud is simple, the teacher's role is complex.

There is more than one successful implementation method for read-aloud. The choice of implementation can affect its use as an instructional approach. A survey conducted by Fisher et al. (2004) examined 25 teachers who exemplified excellent read-aloud instruction. The researchers found seven components that were common among these teachers: selection of text, previewing and practising texts, establishing a purpose for read-aloud, modelled fluent reading, expression, text discussion, and the connection to reading and writing.

Layne (2015) demonstrated commonalities with Fisher et al.'s findings on components that make read-aloud successful. Layne indicated several planning considerations that are necessary to establish a successful read-aloud. These include the environment, previewing texts, planning teaching points, the book launch and closing, and text selection. Layne suggested that teachers make environmental considerations such as a seating plan to ensure that students are demonstrating their best learning during read-aloud time. Burkins and Yaris (2016) also emphasized text selection for a successful read-aloud. Text selection could determine the level of student engagement, development of connection, and learning that is accomplished. Layne (2015) described the beginning of a read-aloud or "book launch" (p. 28) as necessary not only to hook the readers but to prepare them for the genre or type of book they will be encountering. Layne demonstrated that teachers need to set a purpose for students' listening. This might happen before the read-aloud starts or change depending on the stopping points or what has happened in the book. Layne's recommendations urge teachers to be well planned for read-aloud to improve instruction, increase student engagement, and ensure the overall success of read-aloud time.

Teacher modelling can also play an important part in the success of a read-aloud. Marchessault and Larwin (2014) endorsed teacher modelling as an imperative part of effective read-aloud instruction. Read-aloud was previously acknowledged as a way to teach reading and thinking skills. Teachers can model their thought processes to reinforce reading comprehension, learning vocabulary, how to read various genres of text fluently, and the connections they are making to the texts (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014).

Another important part of a teacher's role during read-aloud is the teacher's interactions with students. Interactions and engagement of students can help students learn or reinforce their learning. Teachers can pause throughout their reading to instruct, share their thinking, and engage students in a discussion about the text (Layne, 2015). Discussion can be carried out in various ways and can demonstrate the comprehension that students have built from the reading (Albright & Ariail, 2005).

Research supports that planning, modelling, and interacting with students increases the effectiveness of read-aloud as an instructional approach.

Limitations and Further Recommendations

While the literature reflects many opportunities for the use of read-aloud in the middle years classroom, some limitations remain. The argument of building a connection between students and literature could be further strengthened by investigating the effect that read-aloud has on the development of the whole learner. An exploration of the effect of reading aloud on

establishing classroom community, student identity, and connecting to students socially and emotionally could deepen students' connections to literature.

Studies that directly correlate read-aloud with its long-term effect on students' connection to literature and skills, such as writing, would also aid in proving the necessity for read-aloud in the middle years and strengthen this position. Further investigations are recommended and would contribute to the rationale for including this activity into everyday practice in the middle years and beyond.

Research demonstrates that read-aloud is an effective approach to develop student connection to literature and instruction. Read-aloud can be used to establish or strengthen a student's connection to literature through accessibility, enjoyment, motivation, and relating reading to their lives. Read-aloud is an effective classroom approach when teachers utilize research-supported implementation practices. Read-aloud in the middle years can be used to instruct or reinforce reading and thinking skills such as comprehension, writing, vocabulary enrichment, model fluency, and content knowledge, and is most successful when there are planned teaching points, pauses during reading, and active interactions, discussions, and student engagement. While research in the field continues to be small when compared with research in the early years, the benefits of incorporating read-aloud into the middle years classroom outweigh its lack in study. Using read-aloud in the middle years classroom assists teachers to be responsive to students' needs and prepare them for future reading experiences.

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