

The Power of Planning: Developing Effective Read-Alouds

Author(s): Meagan K. Shedd and Nell K. Duke

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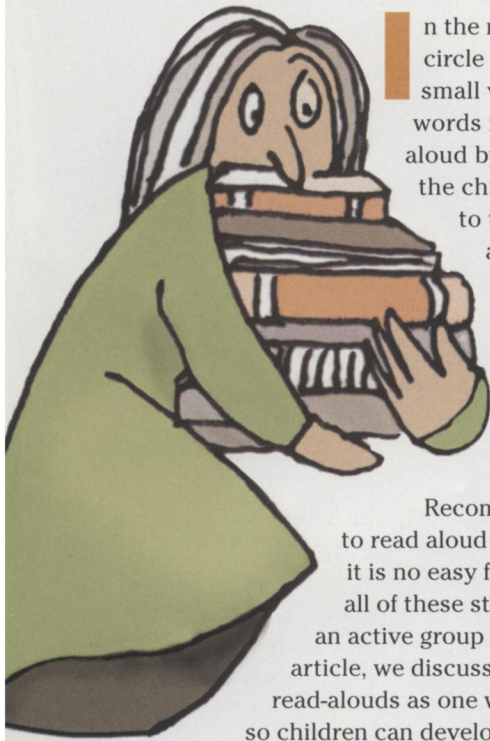


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THE POWER OF PLANNING

Developing Effective Read-Alouds



In the midst of nearly every circle time, one can overhear small voices adding to the words from the book being read aloud by the teacher. Sometimes the children's words relate to the text, sometimes to anything but the text. But, as early childhood educators, we all know the importance of reading aloud every day to develop children's language and early literacy skills.

Recommendations about how to read aloud to children abound, but it is no easy feat to regularly include all of these strategies while managing an active group of young children! In this article, we discuss the value of planning read-alouds as one way to improve practice so children can develop emergent literacy skills.

Meagan K. Shedd
and Nell K. Duke



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Meagan K. Shedd, MS, is a research assistant for the Literacy Achievement Research Center (msularc.org) and a doctoral student at Michigan State University in East Lansing. Her research interest is in the literacy development of young children and how to support it in early childhood education environments. mshedd@msu.edu

Nell K. Duke, EdD, is associate professor of teacher education and educational psychology and codirector of the Literacy Achievement Research Center at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on describing and improving literacy education for young children. nkduke@msu.edu

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The importance of reading aloud in the early childhood setting

Early experiences are essential for children's development of a variety of important literacy skills, such as concepts of print and phonological awareness (IRA & NAEYC 1998; Green, Peterson, & Lewis 2007). Opportunities for helping children develop literacy skills are abundant in early childhood education settings (Bus 2002). In addition to creating and maintaining a print-rich environment filled with many books and other print materials, early childhood educators can engage children in literacy activities, including conversations, observing and taking part in writing experiences, and joint reading experiences (Smith et al. 2002).

One such joint reading opportunity is the read-aloud. Effective read-alouds in early childhood settings have been shown to support young children's language development

(Beck & McKeown 2001), comprehension (Dickinson & Smith 1994), vocabulary (Wasik & Bond 2001), and overall literacy development (Aram 2006). A few researchers have also designed interventions to see if there are ways to increase children's literacy skills by helping teachers provide effective read-alouds (Whitehurst et al. 1994; Beck & McKeown 2001; Wasik & Bond 2001).

What these and other studies have found is that the effectiveness of a read-aloud depends on a number of factors. Successful read-alouds rely on active engagement in the reading by both adults and children. They also involve

- careful selection of high-quality texts;
- open-ended questions asked by adults and children;
- discussions about the book, building from what children already know;
- predictions by children of what they think might happen or come next in the book; and
- talk that ties the book to life beyond the classroom or the here and now. This is called using *decontextualized language*. It can mean, for example, relating the book to something that might happen in the future or something that happened in the past.



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Children whose teachers attended the professional development sessions made more spontaneous comments, and their comments were more likely to include multiple words.

In a recent study, we investigated whether teachers' read-aloud practices would change as a result of participation in a professional development session on effective read-alouds. The content of the session addressed

- the importance of reading aloud with young children,
- how reading aloud can promote emergent literacy skills,
- strategies for choosing texts to read aloud,
- strategies to use in planning for read-alouds (for example, using sticky notes for questions and comments in the text to be read), and
- modeling effective read-alouds.

The brief session (less than two hours) was part of a larger professional development opportunity examining the impact of a modest amount of education designed to increase early childhood educators' knowledge about and strategies for promoting emergent literacy (Duke, Moses, & Shedd forthcoming).

Teachers of children ages 2 to 5, who agreed to participate in the study, were randomly assigned to either a control group or a professional development group. Before and after the professional development, both groups audio-taped themselves reading aloud to children to document their practice and children's responses. The two books the teachers read aloud were *How Do Dinosaurs Get Well Soon?* and *How Do Dinosaurs Eat Their Food?* both by Jane Yolen.

Overall, the study found some positive changes in participants' read-aloud practices as a result of taking part in the professional development. Participants asked more open-ended questions during the read-alouds than they had before the session. Children whose teachers attended the professional development sessions made more spontaneous comments, and their comments were more likely to include multiple words. Children's use of multiple-word comments suggests that they had an opportunity to engage in conversations about the text with the teachers, a hallmark of effective read-alouds.

Planning for the read-aloud

As noted earlier, our professional development focused on the importance of reading aloud with young children and how reading aloud can promote emergent literacy skills. In addition to information about the importance of

read-alouds, participants learned how to plan for effective read-alouds. The session covered aspects of planning, such as how to choose books and how to prepare questions and comments to use during the read-aloud. We believe planning is essential, especially for some practices, such as asking open-ended questions. Below are recommendations for planning a read-aloud.



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Choosing books

Select books that children find engaging and that have educational potential.

- Look for books with powerful illustrations that will capture children's attention and encourage them to read the book again after the read-aloud. Bold photographs and richly illustrated pages are important for engaging children who are not yet reading and for encouraging their "rereading" of texts, particularly once the read-aloud is over (Bennett-Armistead, Duke, & Moses 2005).
- Choose books that reflect the diversity, values, and interests of the children in the classroom.
- Select a variety of types of books (genres), including those with humor, those that convey information, books that help children grapple with pressing issues in their lives, and so on.
- Use books periodically that help develop specific literacy skills, whether it is an alphabet book to develop letter-sound knowledge or a rhyming book to work on phonological awareness. Books can serve multiple purposes. For example, a book about colors can offer new ideas and opportunities not only to teach colors but also to build knowledge or vocabulary related to objects in the book.
- Select books with high-quality writing. Ask yourself whether the book is a model of writing for children. For example, does the story or narrative text depict characters, setting, plot, and resolution in a way that is both rich and appropriate for the age group?

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- Select books that offer opportunities for learning. Consider whether there are new concepts or vocabulary, new knowledge or ways of thinking fostered by the book. Of course at the same time, be sure there is not so much new that the children might be overwhelmed.
- Review the book for opportunities to teach vocabulary. Consider whether there are words in the book that are likely to be unfamiliar to children and worthwhile for them to learn.
- Select books that provide something to talk about. If you struggle to think of what you and the children could discuss related to the book, it is probably best to go with another title.
- Be especially selective when choosing books based on popular media, such as television and videos. Although these books may be exactly what interest children, the writing and narrative may not meet the criteria described above.
- Draw on recommended book lists for high-quality children's books. Several children's book lists are available online, including the Association for Library Service to Children/American Library Association's Notable Children's Booklist, the National Education Association's Educators' Top 100 Children's Books, and the International Reading Association's Children's Choices Booklist.

Setting the stage

When selecting books for read-alouds, it is especially important to consider your audience. Some books are appropriate for a whole class reading; others are better suited to a smaller group of children or for use during nap time or free choice when one or two children need more individualized attention. Having children sit close to you during the read-aloud not only presents the possibility of

developing their literacy skills but also provides social and emotional benefits (Bus 2002).

When thinking about how to engage children, also consider your role in the read-aloud.

- Where you sit and how are critical considerations. Be sure to sit so that all children can see the book, and be prepared for them to inch closer as the reading progresses.
- Minimize distractions so each child can focus during the read-aloud. Children can sit cross-legged with hands in laps, or each can sit on their own pillow or carpet square.
- Plan ways to alter your tone of voice. For example, if the book has multiple characters, consider the various voices you'll use as well as intonations and inflections for each character to make it interesting and interactive for children. By changing the tone of your voice, you help children better understand the characters and thus better participate in conversations about them.

Types of Questions to Ask during Read-Alouds

No matter which types of questions you ask, be on the lookout for opportunities for questions that maximize interactions with children and increase talk about the book.

Factual questions ask for details about the text: "When does this story take place?" or "What kind of bird is this?"

Inferential questions encourage children to read between the lines of the text: "Why do hockey players wear skates?"

Opinion questions invite children to tell you what they think: "What do you think about that?" or "What did you think of the book?"

Text-to-self questions bridge the text to the child's own experience: "How did you feel when that happened to you?"

Text-to-text questions bridge the text to another text the child has read: "Is this like another book we've read?"

Prediction questions ask children to tell you what might happen next: "What do you think the bird is going to do with the twig?" or "What do you think the author will teach us about next?"

Authorship questions ask children to think like the author: "What would you have David do if you wrote the story?"

Vocabulary questions ask children what they know about a word: "What do you think the word *glare* means?"

Based on information in V. Bennett-Armistead, N.K. Duke, & A.M. Moses, *Literacy and the youngest learner: Best practices for educators of children from birth to 5* (New York: Scholastic, 2005).

Preparing to read

One key aspect of the professional development opportunity was to help teachers think about planning ahead not only from a logistical standpoint but also for the text reading itself. It is important to read the book ahead of time to avoid surprises

related to content or unfamiliar words as well as to think about where you can ask questions or teach new content or skills as part of the shared book reading. For example, look at *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Eric Carle, and think about how you can use the book to teach concepts of print, or "how text works." For example, point to text while reading to show that it is the printed words that we read and that we read from left to right. Or look to the book for new vocabulary words, as in *Olivia Forms a Band*, by Ian Falconer.

To develop comprehension, plan for places in the text where you can ask children to make predictions or relate the book to what is happening in their own lives to develop comprehension. More important, through reflective planning, you can think about how you might use one book over the course of several days or throughout a theme to improve several literacy skills, such as comprehension, vocabulary, and alphabetic knowledge.

It should come as no surprise to early childhood educators that 10 children might not all be able to sit still for an entire reading of a book. Just as effective planning includes thinking about the content of the book, you also need to think about different ways to engage children in the text, whether it is encouraging them to find letters they know, read along with you, or clap or snap fingers when they hear a "special word of the day."

In our study, one significant difference between educators who received the professional development and those who didn't was the number of open-ended questions asked during a read-aloud. Open-ended questions invite children to give extended responses rather than one-word answers, such as yes or no. For example, a closed-ended question is, "What color shirt is the boy wearing?" In contrast, an open-ended question would be, "How do you think that made him feel?" Instead of asking a question, consider using prompts, such as "Tell me more about _____," and inviting children to talk to you about why a character might be doing something in a story or why something might

Some books are appropriate for a whole class reading; others are better suited to a smaller group of children or for use during nap time or free choice when one or two children need more individualized attention.

happen next in an informational text. Open-ended questions encourage multiple-word responses and the kinds of conversations between teacher and children that aid in the development of language, vocabulary, and other critical early literacy skills. Of course, it is okay to ask some questions that are closed-ended too; having a variety of questions is best (see "Types of Questions to Ask during Read-Alouds," p. 25).

In reading aloud, making comments can be as beneficial as asking questions. If you think a word will be unfamiliar to children, try giving a quick explanation of the word as you read and revisiting the word afterward. If you think the children may not understand a concept in the book, provide an explanation or demonstration. If you find something particularly funny or interesting, point it out. How you respond to a book is an important model to the children. For example, we have been in classrooms in which teachers make many "I wonder____" comments as they read. Before you know it, children are making "I wonder____" comments too!

When planning ahead for a read-aloud, it can be overwhelming to keep track of all your ideas—ask this question here, make this comment there. As you preview the book, write questions and comments on sticky notes and place them on the pages as reminders.

Of course, during the actual reading you may find that you have planned too many questions and comments or too few. Feel free to make adjustments. It's also important to follow the children's lead.

They may focus on an aspect of the book you didn't even think about! Finally, it's okay to get a little off topic, but if you do use gentle

management techniques to guide the group back to the book. Asking "What do you think will happen next?" (or, for an information book, "What do you think the book will teach next?") is one way to bring children back to the reading.

Bringing the reading to a close—and extending the learning

When you reach the end of the book, the discussion and learning need not end. Bringing the reading to a close can include a variety of activities that capitalize on the richness of the text and the discussion during the reading of the book. For example, you might ask the children what they think of the book to determine whether you should read it again. You can talk with the children about making the book available to them later and where to place it. For example, you might create a bar graph and have children cast votes to decide whether to keep the book in the book nook, on a table (as part of a center activity), or in another special location of their choosing. A discussion of the book post-reading can also help you to plan related activities, either for that day or later in the week or month. For example, if you read *Growing Vegetable Soup*, by Lois Ehlert, you may decide to actually make vegetable soup or plant a garden with the children. Or if you read a book about trees, you may go on a walk and try to identify different trees using the book as your guide.

Conclusion

The read-aloud has long been established as an important part of the development of children's literacy skills. But successful read-alouds don't just happen; they are the result of planning and careful attention to the details. By selecting books that children will find engaging and spending some time in purposeful preparation, you increase the likelihood of a successful read-aloud, which can help to develop young children's literacy skills.

Children love to capture the power of the read-aloud, and, chances are, you will see them recreating the experience, conversations, and learning to conduct their own read-aloud someday.

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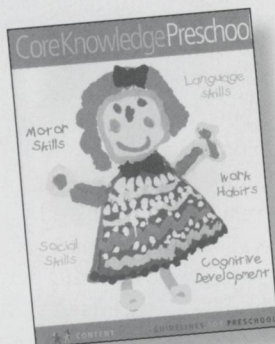
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