

# READ-ALOUDS IN THE CLASSROOM: A PILOT STUDY OF TEACHERS' SELF-REPORTING PRACTICES

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As instructors of preservice teachers both researchers have spent time in classrooms observing the reading block. Teacher read alouds were observed and a disconcerting occurrence became apparent to both researchers independently. Teachers took two seemingly dissimilar approaches to the practice of read alouds. Teachers observed, either implemented a read aloud skillfully, obvious that thought and planning went into the activity; or completely underutilized the activity as a part of reading instruction. These observations led researchers to become committed to best practices for read alouds; and query, what practices teachers self-report employing in preparation of the activity.

According to, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (BNR) (1985, Anderson et.al.) read alouds are “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading.” Notwithstanding this affirmation some teachers do not read aloud to their students’ routinely or do not fully utilize the instructional opportunities offered by this practice. Read alouds were noted as “the single most important activity” because they offer numerous literacy benefits through an engaging activity. The researchers for this study sought to conduct a self-reporting pilot survey to gain data regarding teachers read aloud practices.

*Keywords:* read-alouds, teachers, education, reading, literature

In 1985, BNR stated that read-alouds are “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, et al., pg. 23). Notwithstanding this statement, all teachers do not read aloud to students routinely or do not fully utilize the instructional opportunities offered by the routine use of this practice. Read-alouds are “the single most important activity” because the practice offers opportunities for oral language development, literacy benefits, and broadens topic and conceptual knowledge in an engaging activity. Due to the often underutilized, but advantageous nature

of the read aloud, these authors sought to conduct a self-reporting pilot survey regarding teachers read aloud practices.

Our survey came about as a way for us to gather information regarding teachers read aloud practices in the areas of: general questions regarding read-alouds, preparation for read-alouds, conducting read-alouds, books used for read-alouds, access to read-aloud books; and lastly, training and professional development for conducting read-alouds. We also included survey questions about teachers’ demographics, educational, and work information. Based on data from the survey

we have two intentions. First we hope to determine if this survey could be a viable means to collect read aloud data on a larger scale in order to gain a more representative understanding of teachers' practices. Secondly, based on teacher responses determine areas that could benefit from professional development webinars.

### Literature Review

This literature review looks at research surrounding read alouds as a general practice in the classroom. While there is much research on read alouds, this review does not look at research pertaining to read aloud practices regarding middle or high school, or read alouds used as an accommodation. Our study looks at the practice of read alouds used in the early childhood and elementary classrooms; and therefore, did not use research outside of the age and grade level we sought to collect data. Instead, this literature review focuses on research pertaining to read alouds in the early childhood and elementary classrooms.

Research of read alouds to children in the 80's & 90's focused largely on the benefits of reading aloud in an attempt to persuade teachers to incorporate this best practice into their reading instruction time. Research from the 80's and 90's universally affirms that read alouds are beneficial for children. According to Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini (1995), Snow & Ninio (1986), Teale & Sulzby (1984) and Vivas (1996) children learn to recognize letters, and concepts of print. According to Snow (1994) read alouds promotes oral language. According to Cochran – Smith (1994) read alouds help the understanding of story structures, syntax, and grammar. According to Wells (1986) read alouds directly affect an increase in reading comprehension. According to Galda and Cullinan (1991) read alouds are capable of increasing interest in books. Due to the efforts of researchers in the 80's and 90's research in the 21st century has become

less focused on verifying that read alouds are a beneficial practice to expanding ways the practice can be used and improved.

Current research still favors examining the benefits read alouds have on oral language and vocabulary development through routine use. Several studies site read alouds as a useful tool to increase English Language Learners (ELL) vocabulary. According to Luft Baker, Rodriguez, Farmer, and Yovanoff (2016) preschool students showed significant gains in read aloud engagement and an increase in both receptive and expressive vocabulary. The home visits were to enrich the communication between children and adults at home in Spanish, the dominant language, and in English or Spanish in preschool. In other research, Giroir, Grimaldo, Vaughn, and Roberts (2015) describe the application of a read aloud routine focused on the development of vocabulary for ELL in grades K-3. The routine was used in several locales and data was collected and used to further adjust the read aloud model.

Other oral language and vocabulary research available in recent years is varied. Kindle (2009) explores the extent to which research-based practices of four primary grade teachers has to do with word selection and found that teachers tend to rely on instinct and personal experience more so than expert recommendations. Ambrose, Goforth, & Collins (2015) discuss a model for enhancing vocabulary knowledge during read alouds using specific strategies such as the Instructional Read Aloud (McKeown and Beck, 2003), an evidence based strategy that can improve children's vocabulary. Mascareno, Snow, Deunk, and Bosker (2016) examined teacher – child verbal interactions during read alouds to determine what kinds of verbal interaction had the most impact on increased student vocabulary. Nueman and Wright (2014) dispel myths regarding vocabulary development and encourage principles of effective oral vocabulary instruction to include explicit instruction during

read alouds. Read aloud research also covers areas such as ways to properly select beneficial books for read alouds (Schwarz et al., 2014; Dollins, 2014), effects on comprehension (Baker, Santoro, Biancarrosa, Baker, & Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2015; Santoro, Baker, Fien, Smith, & Chard, 2016; Witte, P. G., 2016), and teaching preservice teachers the best way and importance of using read alouds in their practice (Pendegast, May, Bingham & Kurumada, 2015)

### Methodology

Our goal was to obtain information from teachers regarding their ideas and instructional practices associated with the read aloud. In order to accomplish this task, we created a pilot survey of 35 questions. The survey questions were generated based on both our own personal experiences in the classroom, and teaching preservice teachers; as well as current research in the field. The first 13 questions focused on ethnographic data, educational background, teaching experience, and work data. The following two questions came from our own experiences in the classroom and as instructors in both an early childhood education and an elementary teachers' preservice program. The remaining 22 questions were divided into the following categories about teachers' beliefs and practices: *Read-Alouds* (3), *Preparation for Read-Alouds* (3), *Conducting Read-Alouds* (5), *Books for Read-Alouds* (5), *Access to Read-Aloud Books* (4), and *Training and Professional Development* (2). We designed questions that measured a variety of factors that are significant to effective and quality read-alouds, such as the frequency, techniques used, and aspects attended to during read-alouds.

Our sample included preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers across the country, most of them located in Illinois. For several months, data collection gathered came by sending an online survey to teachers via email and posting it on social media. Approximately

63 teachers participated, with only a few not answering all survey questions. Out of participants, 95% were female. The race/ethnicity of the participants were as follows: 77% Caucasian, 15% African-American, 5% Hispanic American, 4% Multiple Ethnicity/Other. In terms of education, 40% earned a graduate degree, 41% earned a Bachelor's degree, and the remaining 19% either had an Associate's degree or were still in college working towards a degree.

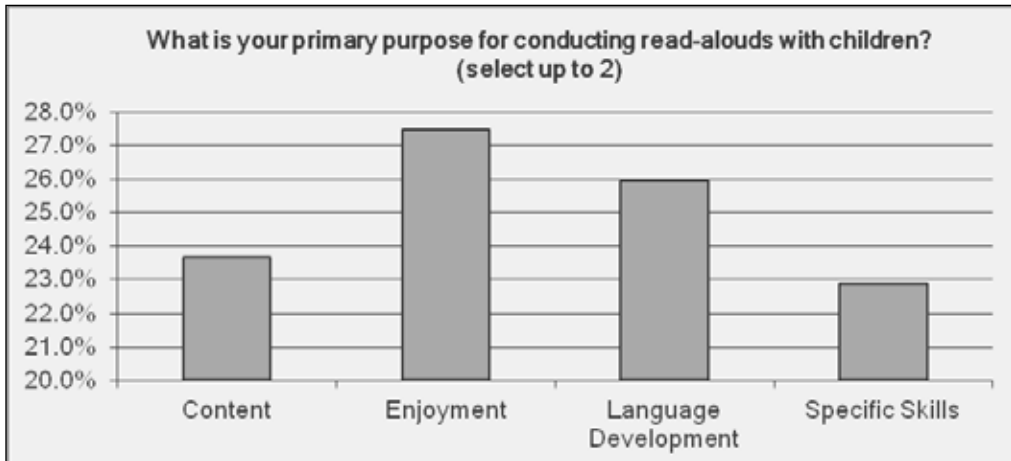
The years of teaching experience our participants had varied; 28% of the participants had zero–two years of experience in the classroom, 19% had three–five years, 16% had six–10 years, and 37% had 11 or more years of experience. When asked, *What grade level(s) do you currently teach?* participants could check items that applied. Fifty-percent taught preschool or kindergarten, 20% taught first grade, 10% taught infant/toddlers, and 20% were in other types of classrooms or grades. The majority of the teachers (79%) worked in K-12 schools and 21% were in childcare centers. The setting of these centers and schools included: 52% suburban, 22% rural, and 26% urban.

### Results

#### Read-Alouds

There were several significant findings of our survey. When asked, In your opinion, what best describes a read-aloud, participants could check all that apply: *reading a book aloud*, *reading aloud with instruction*, *reading aloud for enjoyment*, *whole group*, *small group*, *individual*. For each item, only 16–20% selected it. Almost all teachers reported they were good at conducting read-alouds either all of the time or some of the time. The question about the purpose of read-alouds demonstrated that enjoyment and language development were more emphasized than content and specific skills (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



**Preparation for Read-Alouds**

The results of two questions regarding the *Preparation of Read-Alouds* indicate that many teachers (50-70%) do not often prepare for read-alouds; either time spent on planning or reading books ahead of time (see *Figure 2* and *Figure 3*).

Figure 2

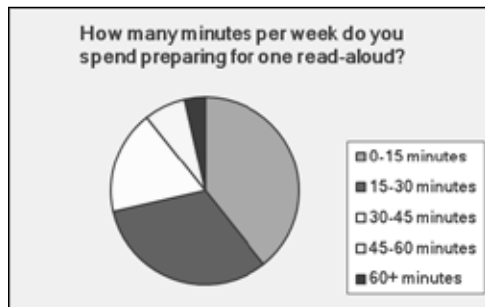
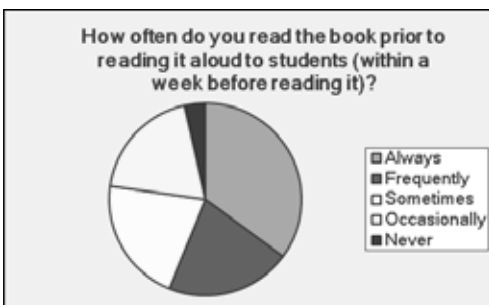


Figure 3



**Conducting Read-Alouds**

Questions regarding how teachers conduct read-alouds produced interesting findings. Teachers were asked how often and how long (time) they conduct read-alouds in their classrooms. Approximately 74% of teachers conduct read-alouds at least once a day and the same amount spend more than 11 minutes when conducting a read-aloud. On the other hand, 26% conduct read-alouds only a few times a week. While both questions have similar percentages, we cannot determine if the same teachers who read aloud more frequently are the same who spend more time for a read-aloud. Our results indicate that teachers, when reading aloud to children, tend to focus on word studies, specific literacy skills, and vocabulary more than content, background, and concepts of print (see *Figure 4*). Regarding techniques used while reading aloud, a significant number of teachers (35%) use expression and intonation when reading aloud; 16% pace and use sound effects/voices. The least chosen techniques used during read-alouds were props, gestures, and voice volume.

Figure 4

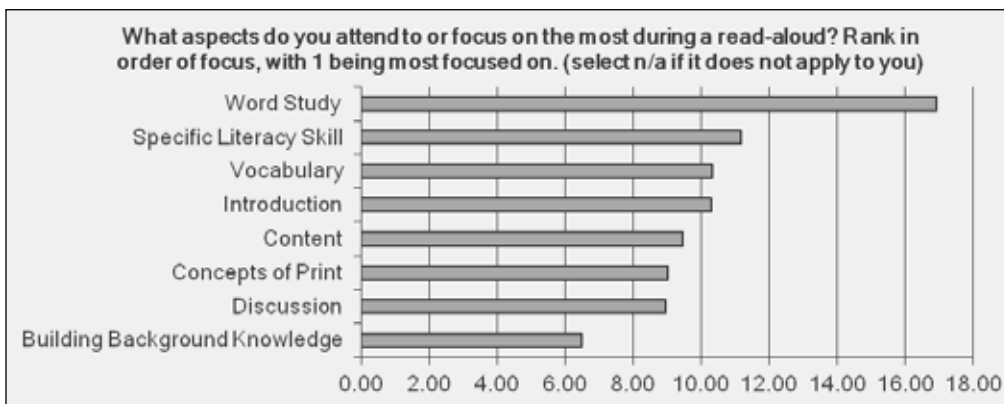
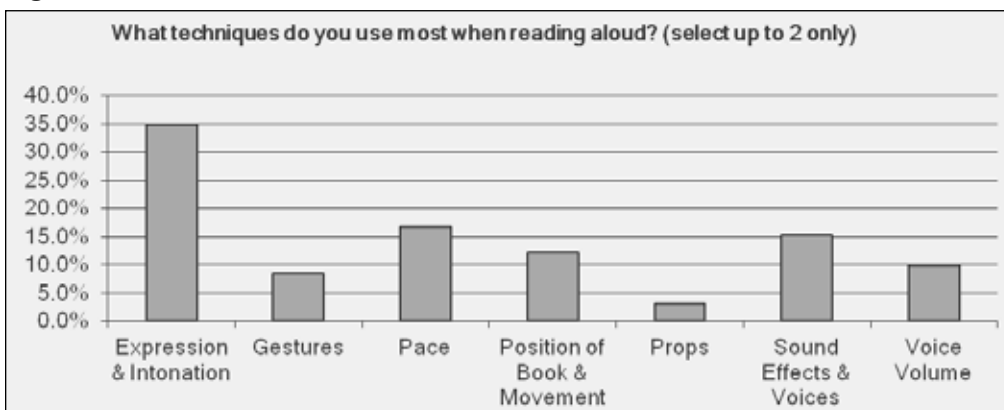


Figure 5



**Books for Read-Alouds**

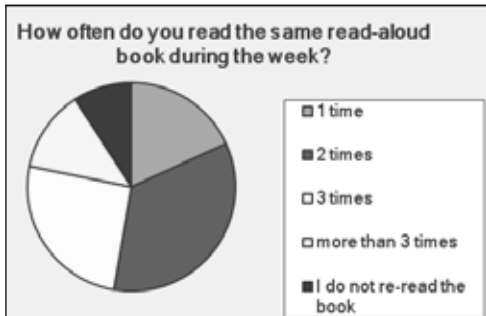
Books are critical to a quality read-aloud. Questions in our survey regarding books focused on the frequency that a book is read and types of books used for read-alouds. Most teachers only re-read a book once (19%) or twice (34%). Approximately 38% of teachers read a book three or more times. Nine percent of teachers though, do not re-read a book at all (see *Figure 6*). Read-aloud books are selected for teacher’s familiarity at a rate of frequently (38%), sometimes (37%) and occasionally (19%). This means that many teachers do not often decide on book selection prior to use

and their familiarity with a text is frequently limited. Seventy-six percent of teachers did report, however, that they use a variety of genres for read-alouds. When selecting their own books to read aloud, 60% of teachers ranked “age appropriate” as what they consider the most. The second ranked item was “specific curriculum unit.” Tied for third was “theme” and “length.”

**Access to Read-Aloud Books**

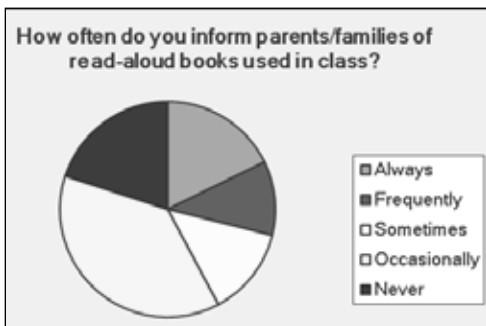
Other significant findings involved access to read-aloud books. We asked teachers if students were able to view the book after it

**Figure 6**

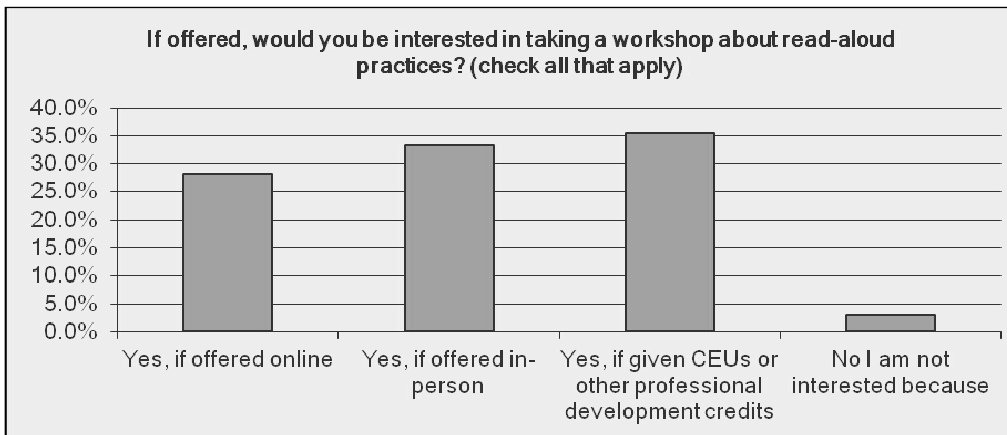


was read aloud; only 63% said students could access it independently. Additionally, teachers informed parents regarding read-aloud book titles used in class: always (14.5%), frequently (9%), sometimes (11%), occasionally (31%), and never (16.5%) (see *Figure 7*).

**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**



**Professional Development & Training**

We tried to capture how interested teachers are in training opportunities for conducting quality read-alouds. Most teachers (65%) stated their school or center places a strong importance on professional development. Teachers were interested in workshops offered online and in-person, especially if professional credits were offered (see *Figure 8*).

**Implications & Conclusion**

Several implications can be drawn from teachers' aggregated answers in the following areas: teacher preparation, attending to illustrations, repeated exposure through rereads, and access in centers. Creating powerful read-alouds do not simply happen. Planning is an essential practice for quality instruction, and read-alouds are no exception. Planning ensures time spent reading aloud is most beneficial for supporting early literacy skills. Consideration should be given to selecting quality books, preparing questions, developing literacy skills involvement (predicting, monitoring, context clues, visual cues), and extension activities. Selecting a book appropriate and beneficial for a specific class means considering a book's: Lexile level, length, authenticity. Consideration of a class': demographics, literacy skills, and attention span also need

to be considered. Selecting key places to ask questions is important and open-ended are best for developing critical thinkers. Post it notes or book markers offer a helpful strategy to indicate places for questions. Likewise, selecting a literacy skill for instruction requires preparation and familiarity with a text. Lastly, benefits of rereading are well documented. (O'Connor, Bocian, Beebe-Frankenberger, Linklater, 2010). Rereading provides young readers and pre-readers with more opportunities to develop language and comprehension on a deeper level. Rereading can occur in a number of ways: the teacher should read a book more than once, copies should be available to read during center and free time, and copies should be available for students to bring home.

Another implication concerns attention paid to illustrations. Picture books are a distinctive literary genre that combines a written story and illustrations. In a picture book, both the illustrations and the text work together to tell the story. In a quality picture book, illustrations play just as important part as the text in telling the story. Teachers need to pay attention to the illustrations, reading the pictures is part of the process for emergent readers. Illustrations in children's picture books play a part in early literacy development. Attending to the illustrations during a read aloud models for students a strategy that beginning readers employ to help make sense of text. Visual information can support reading by scaffolding text for readers. Print concepts include visual

cues gained from attending to pictures. Students need to learn to critically analyze and use the visual.

Lastly, teachers' responses lead to an implication for the frequency of reading aloud to students. In 1985, the report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* stated that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" yet it is not a daily practice in all classrooms. (Anderson et al., 1985) Given the benefits such as listening, oral language, and numerous literacy skills attributed to the practice of reading aloud, daily practice is necessary. In addition to developmental areas, read-alouds benefit affective domains such as: learning empathy for others; exposure to people they normally do not encounter, for example the elderly, or people from different ethnic backgrounds or social status; what is considered proper or appropriate behavior; broadening imagination; and to view situations from various perspectives. Research from the past forty years concludes that reading aloud is an effective classroom practice. Read Alouds should be a daily routine (Anderson et al., 1985; Allen, 2000; Beers, 2002; Lesesne, 2006). Lesesne (2006), for example, noted that teacher read-alouds, in addition to motivating alliterate students to read, can also introduce avid readers to a world of books they might not otherwise find on their own.

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