THE SHARED LITERACY COMMUNITY TEACHER READ-ALOUD PROJECT

By

Donna C. Clemenson

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Introduction

I created the Shared Literacy Community Teacher Read-Aloud Project in answer to my research question: *How can I create a culture of independent reading among African American students, especially black males?* According to research, teacher read-alouds are an important part of literacy education and should be performed in all classrooms in all subjects and grade levels. Students are able to hear syntax and vocabulary that are above their own reading levels being read by experts, who are the teachers and other adults from the community. With wise book choices, students will be excited by the texts, which will encourage their love of reading and literature and will help remove reading achievement obstacles. The goals are to raise reading levels, close the achievement gap, and establish a community of independent readers who become lifelong readers and learners.

Teacher Read-Alouds

According to Lemov et al. (2016), teacher read-alouds let students experience reading at Lexile levels above what they can read on their own. They are able to hear new vocabulary and complex syntax read by a fluent, adult reader. Students can also be a part of the love and excitement of literature. Teacher read-alouds help blast through achievement barriers.

Layne 2009, p. 52, quotes Anderson et al. 1985, p. 23, p. 51 as follows: “… in 1985, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* identified reading aloud as ‘the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading’ and ‘a practice that should continue throughout the grades’”. Layne further maintains “A good book read well will do more for the woes of our disenfranchised readers than all the leveled books the publishers can crank out” (p. 53).
Writing for the journal *Leadership Compass*, Wadsworth states “Read alouds are powerful because they serve so many instructional purposes—to motivate, encourage, excite, build background, develop comprehension, assist children in making connections, and serve as a model of what fluent reading sounds like” (2008). She shows how this allows students to enjoy and learn from literature that is written beyond students’ abilities to read independently. Pennac (1994) echoes this idea when he says of a certain teacher that “He read out loud – that’s what made the difference…A teacher who reads out loud lifts you to the level of books. He gives you the gift of reading!” (p. 111).

In an article written for an educational magazine, Lemov (2016) explains that it is important to read challenging texts to children in order to prepare them to navigate such texts on their own. Long after students can decode words, they will continue to struggle with complex ideas, and persistence with complex ideas is necessary for success in college. Unfortunately, many students reach college and do not yet have this skill, which makes reading college level texts difficult. Reading books aloud also gives children the opportunity to hear vocabulary words that are not generally heard in speech. If these words are not learned through reading, they are often not learned at all and can become obstacles to students. The listeners of books read aloud also have the benefit of having an introduction to complex syntax. Unusual and convoluted sentence structures can be barriers to understanding, but hearing them before independently reading them can help readers engage them with confidence. Lemov believes that rich, enthralling, beautiful literature read aloud to children before they can read it on their own helps students immensely with their future reading. Lemov has been a considerable influence on me in the development of the community teacher shared read-aloud project. Without read-alouds, Lemov contends,
students can suffer from underexposure to texts. Tatum (2009) and Milner (2007) both maintain that failure to expose African American students to challenging texts is a very real disservice to them. This means that they need to experience more texts rather than fewer and this includes books that they cannot yet read on their own. Adequate exposure to a wide variety of texts at elevated levels will help them with their future reading. In contrast, leveled, guided reading holds students back.

Trelease (1993) posits a formula for lifetime readers. He says that people, regardless of age, will repeatedly do only what they enjoy. Reading, like athletic prowess, is an accrued skill that improves only with practice. He reports research that shows that “it is not until eighth grade that a student’s reading level catches up to his or her listening level. Until that time, most students are capable of hearing, understanding, and enjoying material that is more complicated than what they can read” (p. xii). The experience of listening directly affects vocabulary, reading, and writing skills. The person reading aloud is a role model and the material being read is an advertisement for the pleasures of reading. Trelease continues with an example of a middle school in a poverty-stricken urban area in Boston, Massachusetts. Four years after beginning teacher read-alouds and student sustained silent reading (SSR), the standardized test reading scores of the school went from last to first in the district. Trelease has retired, but his books are tremendous read-aloud resources, as is his website on which he even has a variety of brochures that can be downloaded and printed to give to parents.

There is no time to waste, and reading aloud to students is an opportunity that cannot be missed. The Shared Literacy Community Teacher Read-Aloud Project description and implementation follow.
The Shared Literacy Community Teacher Read-Aloud Project

This project was approved by school administration and implemented by 5th grade teachers during the 2017-2018 school year at a Minneapolis, MN public school.

Rather than taking place within the literacy block, the Shared Literacy Community Teacher Read-Aloud occurs for thirty minutes every school day, after homeroom at 9:05 until 9:35. During that time, every 5th grade teacher and content lead simultaneously reads the same book to groups containing all of the school’s 5th grade students. The pace is one book per month, so nine complete high quality and high interest books are read over the course of the nine-month school year. Student pull-outs are discouraged during the reading time.

Other adults in the school, parents, and community members are invited to be guest readers. They are offered a book ahead of time, and shown the suggested pacing and vocabulary to highlight.

As the teachers read, students have their own copies of the book, so they follow along as well as listen. This is what makes it a shared teacher read-aloud. When the books are finished, students take their books home for possible re-reading and sharing. Having high quality books in home libraries can help boost literacy also. Students are made aware of any sequels, as well as other books by the same authors, in case they are interested in reading more.

Some important factors to remember: This is a teacher read-aloud, not a time for students to do the reading. Asking students to say the next word in the text when the teacher stops reading is a great way to keep them engaged in the text, but they should not do any substantial, extended reading-aloud. Teachers should follow the suggested pacing for each week as closely as possible. There may be some follow-up teaching activities or
clarifications given during the literacy block, but the read-aloud time is mainly for reading and should contain only limited discussion of text and vocabulary.

Criteria for Read-Aloud Texts

- The book should be one that our students are able to relate to culturally (CRT).
- The book should be well-written as evidenced by an earned literary recognition and/or status as a classic.
- The book should have a suitable Lexile level (complex syntax and vocabulary).
- The book should explore meaningful topics students can learn from (textual lineage).

Our First Read-Aloud Book

*Holes* by Louis Sachar.

- Our students can relate to this high interest book culturally. The main characters are adolescent boys, some of color. Race is a topic in the book.
- *Holes* was awarded the Newbery Medal in 1999.
- *Holes* has 233 pages and its Lexile level is 660, which is in the middle of the Bottom Lexile Range (450 – 765) of the MCA reading specifications for 5th grade.
- Topics in *Holes* include: Responsibility, Friendship, Luck, Destiny, Loyalty, and Family.
- Eighty copies of the book have been purchased outside of school funding, so all 5th grade teachers and students will have their own copy of the book to keep.

Logistics

There are five adult readers, so the three homerooms have been divided into five groups. Teachers received student group lists and, after the Monday morning all-pod meeting, teachers read the names of students in their groups and students follow the teachers
into the rooms for reading. The teachers have the books with students’ names on them. They are provided with a pacing guide for the week, and vocabulary words and definitions in the week’s readings. They also have some comprehension questions for discussion if they want to use them, or need to fill some time. When teacher read-aloud time is over, students go to their lockers for their binders and line up for their Block 1 class. After Friday’s shared community reading time, the literacy content lead teacher collects all the books and mixes the students into new groups. This way, students have the benefit of hearing different adults read. It also reminds everyone that it is a group of seventy reading the same book, not just the fourteen in each group. Additionally, after the Friday reading, the literacy content lead asks what page all of the groups ended on, because the adults do not all read at the same pace, even with a pacing guide. The literacy content lead makes up a new reading guide for the following week, beginning at the lowest page number completed by everyone, so that all groups begin in the same place on the following Monday. This recalibration is necessary in order to ensure that if students were in a slower reading group, they will not miss any of the book if they move to a teacher who reads at a faster pace. The result is that some students reread a few pages, but that is good reading practice anyway. This is one way to keep teachers on a similar reading schedule, because some stop and talk more, while others read the entire time. After the next Monday all-pod meeting, teachers read the students’ names in their new groups. They already have the books for their groups, a new pacing guide, new vocabulary lists with definitions, and the reading starts again for the week. The literacy content lead does all of the organization so the teachers have no extra planning or lesson preparation. A few teachers may like to read ahead and review vocabulary, but aside from that, none of their time outside of the actual reading is necessary.
We read the final few pages all in one room, take a group picture with students holding their books, then start watching the movie as a way to celebrate, if a movie is available. We watch the movie during the shared community read-aloud time for the rest of the week and begin the next book on the following class day. Students keep a copy of each book, and they receive a copy of the discussed vocabulary, with page numbers and definitions for future reference.

Next Books

*Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

- Pages – 181 with a Lexile of 1020
- Awards – Newbery Honor Book in 1988
- Themes – Survival, Identity, Coming of Age

*Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan

- Pages – 262 with a Lexile of 750
- Awards – Pura Belpre Award Winner, Publisher’s Weekly Best Book of the Year, ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults
- Themes - Perseverance, Home, Justice, Hopes/Dreams, Poverty, Prejudice

*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick

- Pages – 169 with a Lexile of 920
- Awards – California Young Reader’s Medal, Judy Lopez Memorial Award
- Themes – Friendship, Transformation, Misfits in Society

*Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis

(Students read *The Watsons Go To Birmingham – 1963* by Curtis last year.)

- Pages – 243 with a Lexile of 950
Awards – Newbery Medal in 2000 and Coretta Scott King Author Award

Themes – Importance of Family, Poverty, Race, Compassion, Perseverance

Remaining books for the year to be determined later. Text suggestions are always welcome!

Expected Results

We expect to see enthusiasm for the shared texts and for independent reading. This we are already witnessing. Research reveals that reading aloud promotes and inspires independent reading, and independent reading improves reading enjoyment and ability. This will result in increased scores on standardized reading tests and a shrinking of the achievement gap. This capstone project was completed with the words of Milner in mind, who said, “The time has come to end the excuses: we must teach, empower, and educate Black male students and take education to the next level” (2007, p. 245).
References


