Expanding the Power of Read-Alouds

My heart is like a zoo—  
eager as a beaver,  
steady as a yak,  
hopeful as a hungry heron  
fishing for a snack . . .

O begins the picture book  
My Heart Is Like a Zoo (2009), by  
Michael Hall. For the third time  
this week, kindergarten teacher Ms.  
Speed reads aloud this charming and  
rhythmic text. The children have already dis-  
cussed how the author uses similes to describe  
the numerous feelings of a young boy’s heart.  
During this reading, several children join in with  
a few of the phrases and rhymes: “Angry as a  
bear,” “Brave as a lion.”

Ms. Speed and the children talked earlier  
about Hall’s use of heart shapes to depict the  
features of the animals in the book. Before opening  
the book this time, she traces the hearts that  
form the mane, the face, and the nose of the lion  
on the cover. After reading the book aloud, Ms.  
Speed leafs back through it, selecting random  
pages, rereading the similes, and guiding discus-  
sions about the meaning of each. She tells the  
children that today they will use the luscious  
language ideas from the book to create their own  
similes, with an accompanying animal picture  
made from shapes—in this case, hearts.

Throughout the day, Ms. Speed works  
with small groups to jointly draft similes that  
compare each child to an animal of his choice.  
The groups talk about comparisons, and some  
children offer simile suggestions: “You’re fast  
at recess. I think you’re fast like a cheetah” and  
“My dad is always telling my brother that he is as  
slow as a snail.” The kindergartners create ani-
mal images using shapes and then write their similes at the bottom of the paper. Ms. Speed posts the final projects—some with creative spelling—on the bulletin board, and the class reads each one chorally: “I am as jumpy as a frog,” “I am as tuff as a walrus,” “I am as sweet as a rabbit.”

By reading aloud My Heart Is Like a Zoo, Ms. Speed has harvested the power of a picture book to teach the concept of similes. She was inspired by the book’s words and art, and she brought these stimulating elements to the children. She used the text as a springboard for expanding their vocabulary and then offered a related activity so children could apply their new knowledge. Ms. Speed embedded literacy development in the context of authentic reading and writing—all from reading aloud a quality book.

**Quality literature and purposeful activities**

Ms. Speed chose this particular book for the characteristics that make it an exceptional read-aloud. The illustrations are bold, vivid, playful, and attention grabbing. Because the book is about a young child’s feelings, it is easy for the target audience to relate to it. The rhyming text makes for an engaging read, enticing listeners to join in and practice their own reading skills. Additionally, My Heart Is Like a Zoo is filled with unique and sophisticated vocabulary, providing opportunities for children to expand their receptive and expressive language. These important elements combine to create a wonderful book.

This article provides the rationale for using quality children’s literature and purposeful activities to lay a strong foundation for literacy development. Teachers can use read-aloud experiences to help children build background knowledge in components essential for future reading and writing success—vocabulary, print concepts, phonemic awareness, and fluency (Barclay 2009). When teachers strategically combine key preliteracy activities, such as chanting poems that rhyme, singing silly songs with alliterative elements (Willaby Wallaby Wastin—an elephant sat on Justin), and using alphabet blocks to spell out new found vocabulary, they help young children transfer this learning to their own independent reading and writing.

Reading aloud invites children into the world of books, takes them on journeys to faraway lands, and motivates them to learn and explore. Each time teachers read with expression and excitement, they model the beauty of the written word. Reading aloud to young children prepares them for later proficiency in independent reading and writing. It is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for independent reading (Lawson 2012). When adults model the sounds of written language, introduce and reinforce vocabulary in context, and show the structure and punctuation of texts, children build their own listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities (Morrison & Wlodarczyk 2009). By starting with the whole text, as opposed to isolated skills out of context, children can eventually connect and apply the skills shown to their own independent reading and writing endeavors.

**Reading aloud invites children into the world of books, takes them on journeys to faraway lands, and motivates them to learn and explore.**

Teachers can help children build background knowledge in vocabulary, print concepts, phonemic awareness, and fluency. This article provides examples from exemplary texts and strategies teachers can immediately implement to help children develop skills in these four areas.

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**About the Author**

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**Background knowledge**

To comprehend print, readers must access their individual background knowledge (Kissner 2009). Each of us has a unique set of background knowledge based on all our experiences—family, culture, travel, people, books, movies, conversations, and so forth. It includes all that we have seen, heard, tasted, touched, and smelled. Background knowledge is also known as schema (Anderson & Hite 2010). If we use the analogy that the brain is a giant file cabinet, we could say that we have created individual file folders on multiple topics from our diverse life experiences. We have schemas for classrooms, grammar, recess, restaurants, driving, sports, and doctor visits, to name just a few. Each time we learn new information about a given topic, our brains quickly access the corresponding file folder and add the new information to it. These folders then become available to assist us with making sense of new material or situations we encounter.

**To support children’s vocabulary expansion, read aloud the best, brightest, and most colorful and creative language available.**

By reading aloud books about dinosaurs, glaciers, caves, and electricity, teachers help children build background knowledge and create essential file folders that assist them in becoming independent readers and writers. We also help them add to their existing file folders, making files thick and rich with information. When teachers carefully select wonderful literature, including informational books, children develop schemas for vocabulary, concepts about print, phonemic awareness, and fluency. These schemas are critical for proficient literacy development (Catts 2009).

**Vocabulary**

Because vocabulary development predicts later reading and academic achievement (Morrison, Bachman, & Connor 2005), it is one of the most important file folders we can help children create and fill. Knowledge of words affects comprehension, writing efficiency, and content area information (Stahl & Nagy 2006). Children need to be able to read a variety of words and understand their meanings in specific contexts. When a child encounters a new word in print and can decode it, he still needs to understand it in order to connect meaning to the text. If he has previously heard this word read aloud in context, he is more likely to connect it to its meaning.

Children learn as many words incidentally while listening to teachers read aloud as they do with independent reading. In a study conducted by Brabham and colleagues (2012), second-graders showed significant vocabulary gains from as little as two opportunities to hear a book with unknown words read aloud. To support children’s vocabulary expansion, read aloud the best, brightest, and most colorful and creative language available.

**Three vocabulary levels.** Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2008) describe three tiers of vocabulary to consider when selecting words for instruction. The first tier includes basic words that most children already know, such as baby, mom, my, toy, and blanket. These words usually do not require direct teaching. Tier three consists of low-frequency words that are often limited to specific domains or content areas. Examples of tier three words include simile, tide, volcano, and pollen. Teachers can introduce and discuss these words as they arise in a project or study. For example, during a unit on space, teachers would introduce the word meteorite. Words in the second tier are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech. They are found in all types of texts, including informational texts, poems, and narrative stories. Tier two words often represent more rare or precise ways to say simple things. For example, using words like scamper, prance, frolic, or trudge are more specific than walk or go. Other examples include splendid, mischievous, detest, and reluctant. Since tier two words appear often across many different domains, teachers can stress them during vocabulary instruction.

**Exceptional language in books.** Children’s books are excellent sources of sophisticated words that qualify as tier two words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan 2013). When a teacher reads aloud Thunder Cake (1997), by Patricia Polacco, for example, children encounter rare words and unique language that they are unlikely to hear in any other context. The words surveyed, strode, crowed, lovingly, grease-stained, penned, exclaimed, and scurried appear on a single page in the book. The best authors use words that bring to mind vivid visual images. In Come On, Rain! (1999) Karen Hesse describes a quenching rainstorm on a sweltering summer day: “The smell of hot tar and garbage bullies the air as I climb the steps to Jackie-Joyce’s porch. . . . Jackie-Joyce comes to the door. Her long legs, like two brown string beans, sprout from her shorts. ‘It’s going to rain,’ I whisper.” Words like these strike children and create images they will remember. Such exceptional language helps them as they describe their own experiences through writing.

**Juicy questions.** To help young children notice the exceptional language in books, it is important for teachers to initiate and guide discussions during and after read-alouds. In addition to posing questions that require one- or two-word responses, teachers can ask open-ended and higher level questions during these discussions to encourage children to develop language. Think of these as juicy questions, as opposed to the dry questions that requirerote responses where only one answer is considered correct (Dallins 2008). (See “Dry and Juicy Questions.”)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dry questions</th>
<th>Juicy questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ What color was the girl's dress?</td>
<td>■ How would the story be different if it took place in modern times?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ How was Peter Rabbit punished when he arrived home?</td>
<td>■ Why do you think the cat, dog, and mouse refuse to help the Little Red Hen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Who is the story mainly about?</td>
<td>■ What would you do if you were Goldilocks and you broke Little Bear's chair?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What does the Little Red Hen bake at the end of the story?</td>
<td>■ Do you think this could be a true story? What makes you think that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What are the life stages of a frog?</td>
<td>■ What were the circumstances when you felt sad (lonely, frustrated, exhausted, etc.) like the main character?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Where does the story take place?</td>
<td>■ Compare the life cycles of a butterfly and a ladybug.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What three items does Jack bring down the beanstalk?</td>
<td>■ Should Jack have taken the things from the giant? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What time of year does the story take place?</td>
<td>■ What would be the advantages and disadvantages of living next to Mr. McGregor's garden if you were a rabbit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What does the caterpillar turn into at the end of the tale?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What material did the third pig use to make his house?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ What was the third animal that the Old Lady swallowed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Who stole the cookie from the jar?</td>
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Both types of questions are beneficial. Dry questions are valuable because they help students listen carefully and focus on facts and details. Open-ended or juicy questions give children more opportunities to think and to experiment with language. By consciously forming questions that elicit longer and more thoughtful responses, teachers help children delve into the comprehension of text. Such questions encourage children to craft full and complete responses. Teachers can also restate children's answers back to them, being sure to add some specific vocabulary from the book.

In her article “Sagacious, Sophisticated, and Sedulous: The Importance of Discussing 50-Cent Words,” Collins (2012) emphasizes thinking outside the book by extending exemplary word usage into everyday conversations and small group discussions. As teachers highlight the unique words encountered in read-alouds, they help children learn how to apply these words in multiple settings. In this way, teachers expose the children to repeated interactions with the same complex vocabulary, and thus children build depth of understanding. The knowledge of these words then transfers to the children’s speech and writing.

**Concepts about print**

By listening to a variety of quality literature read-alouds—including stories, nonfiction, poetry, and other genres—children develop understanding of the key features of print and the concepts about how print works (Nichols et al. 2004). This knowledge supports children in becoming proficient readers. Concepts about print are the knowledge that reading and writing are performed for various reasons and have many different purposes. We read signs, invita-tions, recipes, dictionaries, stories, and magazines.

To perform these tasks, children must first understand how the English language works in print form in order to decode and comprehend the text. They learn that English is read from top to bottom and from left to right (unlike some languages). They learn to identify letters and words, understand the use of spaces between words, and recognize a variety of punctuation marks. Additionally, young readers learn to use the table of contents, glossary, and graphs in nonfiction.

The read-aloud experience is an authentic venue for exposing children to these skills. Big book versions work well for focusing on print concepts because the whole class can see examples of the concept as the teacher talks about it. For example, when a teacher shouts, “Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!” she points out the exclamation point after each word and explains to the children how the author often uses punctuation marks to signal how the reading should sound. By raising the pitch of her voice and pointing to a question mark during the read-aloud, the teacher helps the children make a connection not only with how to read with expression but also with how to transfer this knowledge to their own writing.

Teachers can expand children’s understanding of various print concepts by intentionally skipping around when reading aloud magazines, textbooks, or other nonfiction resources. When a teacher demonstrates using the table of contents or index to locate a particular section in a book, listeners notice that some books have parts that do not have to be read in order, from front to back. They are resources for learning specific information.

When beginning to read an informational book such as *I Wonder Why I Blink and Other Questions About My*
**Phonemic awareness**

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in spoken words. This skill is a “strong predictor of long-term reading and spelling success and can predict literacy performance more accurately than variables such as intelligence, vocabulary knowledge, and socioeconomic status” (Gillon 2004, 57). Children who are phonemically aware are better able to transition into phonics, where they directly associate the sounds with the letters in the words, and have the basic tools to support independent reading (Barclay 2009). Therefore, it is imperative that a child develop a schema for this valuable skill.

**Teachers help children develop fluency by selecting texts that invite them to chime in on repeated readings.**

When a child can distinguish between the three sounds in *nut, n/t, n/t;* for example, he is becoming aware of how separate sounds create words. As well as attending to sounds at the beginning, middle, and end of a word, another skill associated with phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize and create rhymes (Puppa 2009). When teachers draw attention to rhyme, alliteration, consonance (repetition of some consonants), and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) during a read-aloud session, they help children develop file folders about the manipulation of sounds to form words. This helps lay the foundation for sounding out words in future readings and for figuring out how to spell words in writing (Ryder, Tunmer, & Greaney 2008).

During a read-aloud of Cathy MacHern’s *Chicky Chicky Chook Chook* (2011), children hear language play that includes rhyme, alliteration, and consonance. Because of the book’s upbeat format and silly sounds, children can build phonemic awareness in a natural and supportive setting. Drawing special attention to certain phonemic elements of the text in repeated readings helps solidify children’s use of this important skill. Both real and made-up words, like *fizzy, crazy, lazy, dozy, busy, snoozy,* and *wooooozy,* hum rhythmically inside a child’s ear. They are ideal opportunities to stress these sounds and their manipulation in a variety of words. Teachers can highlight rhyming pairs like *sticky and icky, cat and cat, sleep and peep,* and even expand on them with additional examples. The audience can contribute *flick, stick, lick,* and *tick* to the rhyming words *chick and pick.* Such activities reinforce the attention to sounds and help children become better readers and spellers.

**Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to read smoothly, accurately, and with the appropriate expression and meaning (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston 2009). The term fluency includes attention to proper expression, stress, pitch, and phrasing. For listeners or readers themselves to comprehend a text, it must be read with fluency. When the reading is slow and labored, it is difficult to attend to what is being read and relate it to the information or story (Smith et al. 2014).

As teachers slow down their reading at suspenseful parts, quicken the pace during action sequences, and quiet their voices during sad or tender moments in the texts, children gain a sense of how pacing, inflection, and rhythm help listeners grasp the meaning. By attending to punctuation and using expression and intonation during read-
alouds, teachers help children hear the way texts need to be read for optimum comprehension. When children begin to read independently, they will have the background awareness of fluency to help with comprehension.

Teachers help children develop fluency by selecting texts that invite them to chime in on repeated readings. When children hear predictable books that have frequent repetitive sentences or phrases, rhyming, sequential patterns (such as the numbers 1 through 10), or cumulative patterns (the story line builds on previous text), they are invited to share in the reading. Invariably, children replicate the pacing and tone of the teacher as they say, “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!” In this type of choral reading, children hear exemplary models of language, and they practice expressing these same texts with fluency.

Consider reading books developed from songs. Use them to present the features of language such as stress, rhythm, and intonation (Paukette & Rieg 2008). Since the words and tunes to songs like “Row Row Row Your Boat,” “The Wheels on the Bus,” and “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” are easy to learn, children can almost immediately read along, joining in with the clear and pleasant fluency of written language. Some authors have created their own versions of familiar songs, adding additional silliness for children to enjoy while reading and singing along. In Seals on the Bus (2003), by Lenny Hort, animals of all sorts quickly fill the bus, and a raucous chorus ensues. The seals go “Errp, errp, errp,” the tiger roars, the geese honk, and finally the people on the bus yell, “Help! Help! Help!”

Conclusion

When teachers of young children carefully select books to read aloud, and when they plan purposeful activities related to the books, they foster key concepts for children’s future literacy development. Teachers lead children toward a lifetime of reading and writing success and enjoyment by starting with the whole text, the whole story. In this way, children more readily build background knowledge that they can directly connect to authentic reading and writing efforts.

When teachers share the best literature (including informational texts), children increase their oral vocabulary and transfer it to reading print and writing their own work. They develop a better understanding of how print works in the English language. They begin to play with language and build phonemic awareness that helps make reading, spelling, and writing readily accessible. Teachers can help children develop schemas for each of these four key literacy skills—vocabulary, print concepts, phonemic awareness, and fluency—and can reinforce the schemas in an inviting and comprehensive manner using read-alouds. Teachers foster young children’s love of books and literacy—and access to all the doors they open—each time they use books as springboards for focused preliteracy activities.

References


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