

10-1-1994

Reading Aloud to Low Achieving Secondary Students

Deborah Phelps Zientarski

Cedar Springs High School, in Cedar Springs Michigan.

Donald D. Pottorff

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Zientarski, D. P., & Pottorff, D. D. (1994). Reading Aloud to Low Achieving Secondary Students. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 35 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol35/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Reading Aloud to Low Achieving Secondary Students

Deborah Phelps Zientarski
Donald D. Pottorff

Information abounds about the benefits of reading aloud to elementary children (Kimmel and Segel, 1988; Trelease, 1985), but very little has been written on the merits of reading to older students. Undertaking a read aloud project with secondary students, then, is likely to raise questions such as the following: 1) will students be annoyed and feel that listening to a story is not age appropriate?; 2) will reading to students waste valuable time that could be used more wisely in reading and improving comprehension in content materials?; 3) will reading to students really motivate them to want to become independent readers?

All of these questions were concerns early in the school year when the decision was made to incorporate reading aloud as a regular component of three classes totaling thirty-one secondary students with low reading performance scores as measured by the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA). The results were extremely encouraging and the practice has now become a permanent part of this high school remedial program.

The decision to undertake the project was based both on personal experiences with reading to younger children and two recent articles which brought new awareness of the idea. In an interview, Bill Martin, Jr., a well-known children's author (Collins and Lubuda, 1990), revealed that he was a non-reader until he was twenty years old. He credits a high school English teacher for nurturing his desire to read and for his love of the written language by her reading aloud to classes on a regular basis. In a second article, Jennings (1990), a seventh grade language arts teacher from Houston, Texas, described how she managed to "hook her seventh grade students on books" by reading aloud to them and has committed herself to reading regularly to her classes. She expressed the belief that these efforts helped students to increase awareness and appreciation of good literature.

Research also validates the importance of proficiency in listening comprehension (Bagford, 1968; Lohnes and Gray, 1972). In a study reported by Atkin, Bray, Davison, Herzberger, Humphreys and Selzer (1977), involving a nationwide sample of thousands of students, listening comprehension in the fifth grade was the best predictor of performance on a range of aptitude and achievement tests in high school. When the present project was undertaken it was hypothesized that focusing on listening comprehension would be a first step toward improving academic success for the students in the project.

Developing appreciation

The first priority was to interest students in books and to help them develop an appreciation for the written language. Reading aloud was selected as the primary strategy to meet this goal. Additional decisions had to be made about what to read. "Drama In Real Life" stories printed in issues of *Reader's Digest* were selected initially because they were

generally short, simple in language and presentation, and most often included elements of the sensational, bizarre, gruesome, heroic, or inspirational. They also tended to include intense action.

Although the announcement that reading aloud was going to take place for a portion of each class period on a regular basis was met with no spirit of celebration, students did listen once reading aloud was begun. During the initial weeks of the project, little was done to expand the activity to anything more than a listening experience. It was hoped that students would listen because they wanted to, rather than because they were going to be tested or expected to perform a related task. Within two or three weeks, some of the students were leafing through the rather large supply of classroom *Reader's Digests* to "find another good one for the teacher."

When the supply of "Drama in Real Life" stories was exhausted, the decision was made to experiment with different genres. The novel *Killing Mr. Griffin* by Lois Duncan was selected because reading specialist Jim Trelease (1985) had recommended it and described its use in a similar situation. The reading of this novel did not immediately invoke enthusiasm, but as the story progressed toward more intense action, student attitudes improved. For the first time, students began to become interested in discussions about characterization, plot, theme, vocabulary and resolution. They also suddenly became Lois Duncan addicts, and eventually three more of her novels were read aloud.

It was apparent by this time that students were becoming proficient critical listeners. This was evidenced by their evaluative comments, higher level questioning, and improved competence in predicting. These poor readers had also shown that they would appreciate a good novel when given the

opportunity to do so, and began to engage in discussions of increasing sophistication. They compared author styles and talked about purpose and point of view with a certain quality that did not typify previous discussions. In short, they began to interact personally with the characters and action of the story. Perhaps the greatest reward was in finding that some of the "least likely" students began making a concerted effort to cooperate with the regular classroom agenda in order to negotiate more listening time.

Developing a sense of cultural literacy

Reading aloud to older students permits them to build background knowledge in areas which may have been inaccessible to them either because of difficulty with reading level or lack of topic exposure. Strong readers have well-stocked storehouses of background knowledge and are able to draw on that knowledge to infer information (Rumelhart, 1984). Unfortunately, many poor readers expend so much effort in decoding and focusing on the act of reading that comprehension is lost. This in turn further limits the amount of new knowledge which they are able to incorporate.

A recent national study assessing cultural literacy in American history and Western literature involving nearly 8000 high school juniors revealed students were woefully lacking in knowledge in these subjects (Ravitch and Finn, 1987). This is probably not atypical. Students with reading problems often have significant gaps in general knowledge. These students are unable to integrate new information because their existing information in certain content areas is so limited.

If students are to become culturally literate, they need to be able to integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge with greater ease and with a greater degree of sophistication.

The *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, 1988) can be a valuable tool for teachers who want to determine which areas merit attention. After an informal survey confirmed that essentially none of the students in the project had adequate background knowledge in mythology, a unit was begun on Greek and Roman Mythology. The value of this endeavor was explained in terms of history, geography, astronomy, word origins, and in what Russell (1989) describes as "the thread that ties the human struggle to ancient times." Later when students heard references to "Achilles heel," "Pandora's Box," and an "Adonis," they had the background needed to understand information that had previously been impossible for them to comprehend in context.

Developing vocabulary

The use of high-interest, controlled vocabulary materials serves purposes in practice and in building reading skills, but does very little to enrich speaking and listening vocabularies. Those students with a good command of the language who possess larger vocabularies tend to achieve greater success in their content courses. The complexity, subtlety, and vocabulary of a literary work that older students find difficult to read can be understood and appreciated when read aloud. When read aloud, it can offer a galaxy of new words formerly not integrated into their own vocabularies (Russell, 1986).

Our John Willie, a Catherine Cookson novel, was read to the class. The setting is in the mid-1800s in an English mining town where conditions were reprehensible, child labor was common, and many hungry people were left with no alternative but the workhouse. The story enriched students from a historical perspective, included unfamiliar speech patterns and phrases, and new vocabulary. In many situations, the new and unfamiliar vocabulary was not explained to the students, but rather they were asked what they thought a

word meant after hearing it used in context. When dialect was part of characterization, students enjoyed imitating dialogue appropriate for that character and comparing how different characters might have sounded using similar ways of speaking.

Developing metacognitive strategies

While students may have difficulty with reading, the assumption cannot be made that they also have difficulty with thinking. As the project progressed, it became apparent that the quality of student discussion was very much linked to the quality of literature being used.

During read-aloud experiences, metacognitive strategies can be implemented by stopping at key points to identify important information, clarify purpose, and make predictions about the upcoming text (Savage, 1988). Students can listen to the thought processes of their classmates as they make hypotheses or explain and support their viewpoints with examples from the story. Some students lack personal strategies for unlocking text and benefit from opportunities to hear their peers model how they arrive at conclusions and interpretations. On more than one occasion students were observed rethinking their positions after listening to other students share their opinions. This modeling helped them with developing personal strategies for optimal comprehension.

Conclusions

Reading aloud has long been the domain of elementary teachers in elementary schools, but this project provided convincing results that reading aloud has merit with older students. Certainly, sustained silent reading time becomes more important with older students and provides them with opportunities for enrichment and a chance to pursue their own interests. However, reading aloud can provide students with

a common experience conducive to group activities and with material that they are unlikely to read independently.

Although it is too early to substantiate the success of this single program, the results give real reason for optimism. The reading aloud experience has created a deeper sense of appreciation of written language for the students involved. This is evidenced through student comments and interest in each succeeding personal choice for classroom reading.

Vocabulary has been enriched as students have been provided with a chance to hear new words both naturally and in context, words which were too difficult for them to read independently. These words which have then been added to their speaking vocabularies through activities and exposure serve as a foundation for acquiring additional vocabulary.

When literature is carefully chosen, schemata are broadened and students naturally integrate new words, facts, concepts, and ideas more readily than they are able to do without this valuable background information. Expanding background knowledge is likely to help students improve performance in other content courses as well.

Metacognitive strategies are active strategies possessed by successful students. Much has been written on the topic of teaching these strategies to students to assist them in the improvement of reading performance. The read-aloud experience offers a group exposure to common material, and as students share their thoughts and ideas and model how they arrived at their conclusions, others can learn through peer modeling.

The learning that results from an encounter with a good book is one of the most valuable experiences that schools can

provide (Matthews, 1987). This project has provided convincing evidence that reading aloud to secondary students works and a commitment has been made to continue this practice in the classroom.

References

- Atkin, R., Bray, R., Davison, M., Herzberger, S., Humphreys, L., & Selzer, U. (1977). Crosslagged panel analysis of sixteen cognitive measures at four grade levels. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 8, 67-81.
- Bagford, J. (1968). Reading readiness scores and success in reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 21, 324-328.
- Collins, B., & Lubuda, M. (1990). Sharing the love of reading: An interview with Bill Martin, Jr. *Reading Today*, 8, 1.
- Cookson, C. (1975). *Our John Willie*. Boston: G.K. Hall.
- Duncan, L. (1978). *Killing Mr. Griffin*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Hirsch, E.D. (1988). *The dictionary of cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Jennings, J. (1990). You can't afford not to read aloud. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71, 568-569.
- Kimmel, M., & Segel, E. (1988). *For reading out loud! A guide to sharing books with children*. NY: Delacorte.
- Lohnes, P.R., & Gray, M.M. (1972). Intelligence and the cooperative reading studies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 7, 466-476.
- Matthews, C.E. (1987). Lap reading for teenagers. *Journal of Reading*, 30, 480-485.
- Ravitch, D., & Finn, C. (1987). *What do our 17-year-olds know?* NY: Harper & Row.
- Rumelhart, D.D. (1984). Understanding understanding. In J. Flood (Ed.), *Understanding reading comprehension*. Newark DE: International Reading Association.
- Russell, W. (1986). *More classics to read to your children*. NY: Crown.
- Russell, W. (1989). *More classic myths to read to your children*. NY: Crown.
- Savage, J.F. (1988). A shift in theory in reading research. *International School Journal*, 16, 35-44.
- Trelease, J. (1985). *The read-aloud handbook*. Harrisonburg VA: Donnelley.

Deborah Phelps Zientarski is a secondary special education teacher at Cedar Springs High School, in Cedar Springs Michigan. Donald D. Pottorff is a faculty member in the Department of Reading at Grand Valley State University, in Grand Rapids Michigan.