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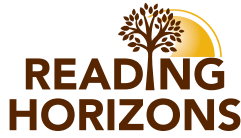


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A Comparison Between Preschool Teachers' Read-Aloud Techniques With Fictional and Informational Picture Books in Small Groups

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Abstract

Relatively little is known about preschool teachers' read-aloud techniques with informational picture books. The purpose of this investigation was to identify similarities and differences between preschool teachers' read-aloud techniques with fictional stories, which are commonly read in preschool, and informational texts. Instrumental case study and purposive sampling were employed to investigate the reading techniques of two White female teachers in one preschool classroom as they read in small groups with children two-and-a-half to five years old. In terms of similarities across genres, teachers made personal connections, prompted children to interpret pictures, used multimodal instruction, and differentiated instruction. In terms of key differences, when reading fictional stories, teachers scaffolded children's inferences and predictions, whereas for informational texts, teachers described academic vocabulary and content and focused on informational text features. Preschool teachers might expect to use a core set of reading techniques across texts and also differentiate according to the type of picture book.

Keywords: *informational text, read-aloud, picture books, sociocultural theory, preschool, small groups*

Most studies of read-aloud in preschool have focused exclusively on fictional stories as opposed to informational books. Researchers have documented that fictional stories are much more prevalent in early childhood classrooms and that many teachers prefer to read these books with their young students (Duke, 2000; Hindman et al., 2008; Yopp & Yopp, 2006, 2012). Some early childhood teachers are reluctant to choose informational books for read-aloud because they are less familiar with the topics and are concerned children will become disengaged (Pentimonti et al., 2010), whereas some teachers lack confidence and do not enjoy reading informational books aloud (Price et al., 2012).

Over 20 years ago, Duke (2000) found that informational books were scarce in first-grade classrooms; teachers and children spent little time using these texts. Duke also reported

informational texts were even more uncommon in classes with predominantly lower income children. Unfortunately, subsequent studies in preschool classrooms are consistent with Duke's findings (Pentimonti et al., 2010; Pentimonti et al., 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Yopp and Yopp (2012) documented this same troubling pattern for read-aloud in preschool through third grade, and Wright (2014) reported similar findings in kindergarten classrooms.

These discoveries provide evidence that young children might have more exposure to fictional stories than informational texts. This is problematic, given that lower achievement in content area reading could be due to lack of informational reading (Duke, 2000). Daniels (1990) speculated that less experience could lead to the "expository gap" (p. 107) as children progress through school. Kraemer et al. (2012) found that children who engaged with informational texts demonstrated better comprehension of these types of text than children who heard only fictional stories and concluded that informational reading is central to future learning and achievement. Duke and Block (2012) reported that children's content knowledge is associated with improved reading comprehension. Some researchers conclude that increased experience with informational texts in early childhood education could support future school success (Hirsch, 2003; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009; Venezky, 2000). Moreover, read-aloud can be an appropriate context for exposing children to these important texts (Heisey & Kucan, 2010). Therefore, it is vital to gain a better understanding of how preschool teachers read these texts aloud.

The purpose of this study was to identify similarities and differences as preschool teachers read informational and fictional texts aloud to young children in small groups. The following research question guided this inquiry: What were the similarities and differences in preschool teachers' read-aloud techniques for fictional and informational picture books during small-group time?

Review of Research on Read-Alouds in Preschool

In this section, I provide information from studies on interactive read-alouds in general and then on interactive read-alouds in preschool settings. I then provide a review of research on the genres to be discussed in this study and conclude with a brief review of small-group reading practices.

Interactive Read-Aloud

Reading aloud to young children is a widely embraced and enduring practice. It has been viewed among early childhood scholars and educators for decades as vital to facilitating young children's language and literacy development and has strong support from the literature (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Morrow, 2007). Teachers can take several actions to enhance young children's literacy development during this event. Experts indicate that read-aloud should be interactive, because reading to young children without response to the text offers few opportunities for developing language, literacy, and content knowledge (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Interactive read-aloud is a complex activity in which the reader uses voice and other modes of communication (e.g., facial expressions, gesture) to interpret the text and guide children's responses (May, 2011). When adults adopt an interactive reading style, they invite children to become active participants (Blewitt & Langan, 2016). Sipe (2008) portrayed teachers' roles during interactive reading as fellow wonderer, speculator, and interpreter—and encouraged teachers and children to explore all parts of the book (e.g., peritextual elements, visuals) as a way of discovering the unique affordances of individual texts. Wiseman (2011) described how interactive read-aloud provides opportunities for co-construction of meaning among teachers and children through open-ended dialogue.

Interactive reading enables teachers to think aloud to model various responses and comprehension strategies as they share ideas, make connections, ask questions, and make inferences and predictions (Dorl, 2007; McGee & Richgels, 2012). The frequent verbal exchanges also allow teachers to scaffold and assess children's uses of meaning-making strategies (Hall, 2013; Wiseman, 2011). Moreover, interactive reading supports children's oral language skills as they gain experience in articulating their thoughts and their vocabulary development as they are exposed to novel words in context (Zucker et al., 2013). Similarly, it can support children's comprehension as they learn to actively use meaning-making strategies (Mulyani, 2011; Tompkins et al., 2012; Zucker et al., 2010).

Read-Aloud in Preschool

Interactive reading is a critical component of the preschool curriculum. Sipe (2008) indicated it is a time for teachers and children to make meaning together so teachers can model thinking strategies. Researchers have also found that preschool teachers' interactive reading supports children's development of early literacy skills. For example, print referencing, which refers to the "deliberate integration of verbal and nonverbal behaviors into their reading interactions to elicit children's increased attention to print" (Justice et al., 2009, p. 76), can increase children's print knowledge (e.g., concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, name-writing ability). Additionally, Sin Goh et al. (2012) explored the efficacy of "instructional conversations" (p. 306) (i.e., teaching through dialogue) and discovered these to be dialogic in nature with abundant verbal and nonverbal exchanges. They reported that it was an excellent technique for scaffolding and assessment, supporting children's academic and social development, and building close personal relationships with children. Similarly, Collins (2010) discovered that teachers' "rich explanation" (p. 85) that provided explicit descriptions supported children's understandings of novel words in stories. Moreover, researchers have found that interactive read-aloud with preschoolers increases receptive and expressive vocabularies when using informational texts (social studies and science; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2016) and English language learning among Spanish-speaking preschoolers (Magruder et al., 2013).

Fictional and Informational Picture Books

Fictional stories and informational texts serve different purposes. Fiction, which is "not intended to be a literally true depiction of reality" (Hopkins & Skolnick Weisberg, 2016, p. 50), helps children learn about their social worlds (e.g., human nature, relationships, life experiences). Loizou and colleagues (2011) specified that "stories are essential for the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children as well as their literacy development" (p. 73). Children have opportunities to infer characters' feelings, relate to their thoughts and emotions, empathize with character's situations, and learn how characters undergo changes (Wiseman, 2011). Informational texts, which are "intended to depict only the truth about something that actually happened" (Hopkins & Skolnick Weisberg, 2016, p. 50), can expand children's world knowledge. They are important sources of facts that children might not learn from fictional stories (Duke, 2000).

Picture books tell stories and display information through a combination of visual features, design, and (usually) written language (Martinez & Harmon, 2012; Serafini, 2014). Arizpe and Styles (2016) explained that, in picture books, images and words work in conjunction to tell stories and present information, providing children with experience integrating these elements. They found that children were deeply engaged in reading events and adept at analyzing and interpreting visual elements. Children as young as four years old could discuss ideas and information conveyed through words and images.

The type of text, either fictional or informational, influences the kind of talk during large-group read-aloud. Moschovaki and Meadows (2005) observed a “book effect” (p. 60) in which informational texts elicited more prediction, analysis, and reasoning than fictional stories. In their study, preschoolers used a variety of meaning-making strategies as they confirmed or disconfirmed their predictions and analyzed text structures (e.g., compare/contrast, cause/effect). Similarly, Price et al. (2012) discovered that teachers read fictional stories and informational texts differently during large-group read-aloud. Teachers typically read all of the words in the stories but far less text in the informational books. These researchers also noted that teachers put forth more effort with informational texts and these read-aloud sessions lasted longer than reading stories due to more frequent interactions and extended talk turns.

In Moschovaki and Meadows’s (2005) study of teachers reading to large groups, teachers drew children’s attention to illustrations, photographs, and labels and provided more descriptions, comments, questions, and additional real-world connections to support comprehension of informational texts. Likewise, Zucker et al. (2010) reported that teachers and children made more inferences when reading informational texts aloud than with fictional stories. Additionally, Torr and Clugston (1999) found that adults’ questions differed according to the type of text. They asked children to name aspects of the story relating to characters, setting, and plot (i.e., who, what, when, where questions) when reading fictional stories and asked children to explain (i.e., why, how) with informational texts. These authors concluded that dissimilar questioning techniques relate to the different forms of knowledge between these types of text that place distinctive cognitive demands on readers. All of these aforementioned studies took place with either large groups or adult–child dyads.

Small-Group Instruction

Small groups are an ideal context for teaching and learning in preschool (Blewitt & Langan, 2016; Tompkins et al., 2013). Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) specified that small-group instruction is “actually a different kind of pedagogical practice, which brings new ways of thinking about time, space, and interactions” (p. 69). In small groups, a teacher and two to six children engage in teaching and learning for a specific purpose (Morrow, 2007; Wasik, 2008). Several scholars recommend that teachers incorporate this grouping structure into their practice (Wasik, 2008; Yamauchi et al., 2013). In this setting, children enjoy close proximity and frequent interactions with their teacher (Morrow, 2007). Participants can exchange ideas, collectively problem solve, and share materials (Morrow, 2007; Schreiber & Valle, 2013; Wasik, 2008). This is important because the quality of teacher–child interactions impacts children’s academic and social development (Curby et al., 2009). The teachers in Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa’s (2017) study described small-group instruction as “teaching as interaction” (p. 66) in which they served as facilitators and collaborators. Small groups provide an ideal context for shared book reading (Wasik, 2008), enabling children to hear the teacher and see the book.

Additionally, researchers have found small-group instruction to support preschoolers’ linguistic development and English language listening comprehension (Roberts & Neal, 2004), invented spelling skills (based on phonemic awareness; Martins et al., 2016), and letter and word recognition (Connor et al., 2006). Although small groups are ideal settings for instruction in preschool, little is known about the similarities and differences in teachers’ read-aloud techniques for fictional and informational picture books in this grouping structure.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This inquiry was informed by Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory of child development, which underscores the importance of social and cultural influences on children's learning and cognitive development. One central tenet is that learning and development are mediated by the use of psychological tools during social interaction, with language being the primary tool (Vygotsky, 1981, 1986). In early childhood, children develop capacities to use language to make sense of their worlds (Vygotsky, 1986). During the preschool years, young children benefit from activities involving joint attention that enable them to develop mutual understandings as they share ideas and collaborate (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Vygotsky, 1986). These events often take place in dyads or small groups. From a sociocultural perspective, literacy is a shared communicative practice embedded in social interactions; it entails the use of cultural tools (such as texts) and meaningful symbols in various modalities (Gee, 2012). Young children develop literacy through interactions with more experienced others during guided participation in joint activities involving texts (McGee & Richgels, 2012; Morrow, 2007).

Scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1986) described the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the discrepancy between current development and the level of development the learner is capable of achieving through guidance from a more experienced other. Learning in the ZPD is optimal as new skills are introduced that are just beyond a child's ability to demonstrate independently. Vygotsky believed that this guidance is the mechanism that drives learning and development over time (Belland, 2014). This support, also called scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), is embedded in social interactions and occurs primarily through language. This interactional scaffolding is the responsive guidance a more experienced other, such as a teacher, provides to a learner (Reynolds, 2017). Interactional scaffolding takes place in the moment (Athanasios & de Oliveira, 2014). Pentimonti et al. (2017) pointed out that scaffolding can look different in a preschool setting than with older students due to the prevalence of naturalistic approaches to teaching and learning in preschool (i.e., teaching and assessment are more conversational because preschool teachers generally use fewer scripted lessons and standardized tests). Zurek et al. (2014) discovered that interactional scaffolding is an effective teaching strategy as preschool teachers support children's learning during collaborative activities. Interactive reading is one context in which this might occur.

Research Design

Participants

Instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995) and purposive sampling (Lavrakas, 2008) were used given that the goals were to seek a general understanding of phenomena through the investigation into a particular case and to offer "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 311). The study took place in one preschool classroom with two full-time teachers. Both teachers were White females who had been teaching for over 20 years each. The class consisted of 20 children ranging from two-and-a-half to five years old; 19 participated in the study. Children were almost exclusively from middle-income families.

Twice each day, the class had "choice time," which lasted at least an hour. During this time, children chose their activities and areas of the classroom. They could play independently, join their peers, or listen to their teacher read aloud and lead a response activity, which lasted about 30 minutes. There were no fixed groups of children because they chose whether to participate. The sizes of the small groups were fluid, ranging from two to

six children. At times, children would enter or leave the groups during the reading sessions. Some children frequently joined small-group read-aloud sessions, and others rarely chose to participate. This frequency was based on children's preferences and interest in read-aloud as opposed to other classroom activities. Girls tended to choose read-aloud more often than boys; older preschoolers (four and five-year-olds) participated more frequently and for longer durations than their younger classmates (two-and-a-half and three-year-olds).

The two teachers alternated roles as one read to children in a small group while the other facilitated learning opportunities in various parts of the classroom. There was no significant difference in findings between the two teachers because their reading and interactional styles were similar. Cross-case analysis would not have yielded meaningful findings, so the teachers were not treated as separate cases. Instead, the teachers and children who participated in small-group read-aloud events of fictional and informational picture books were the bounded system. Because different children chose to participate, the case varied by reading session.

After reading, the teacher typically led children in response activities that related to the content of the text. They conducted simple science experiments, engaged in art projects, cooked, and played musical instruments. For example, after reading *Music Everywhere!* (Ajmera et al., 2014), children painted to the pitch (high or low) and tempo of various styles of music. In response to *The Magic School Bus: On the Ocean Floor* (Cole & Degen, 1992), they measured the temperature of water (refrigerated, room temperature, warm). After reading *Bears* (Berger & Berger, 2002), they co-constructed "bear caves" with wooden blocks and placed stuffed animals inside. These response activities provided additional opportunities for the teacher and children to interact so children might extend their understanding of the content of the books.

Data Collection and Analysis

Teachers' language and other modes of communication were analyzed to identify their techniques during small-group read-aloud. Data were collected four to five days per week for 6 weeks; data were simultaneously collected and analyzed (Leavy, 2017; Merriam, 2009). Inductive analysis and constant-comparative techniques were employed to analyze data (Saldaña, 2016) and to arrive at themes (Leavy, 2017). I conducted open coding, categorization, and then abstracted themes (Leavy, 2017). The unit of analysis was the utterance: specific expressions of meaning that are categorically distinct and whole, varying in length, content, and complexity (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). After each observation (which was audio and video recorded then transcribed verbatim), detailed analytic memos and reflections were composed in the form of a double entry log (Saldaña, 2016). Utterances, memos, and reflections were coded for meaningful words, phrases, and nonverbal modes of communication that signified teachers' instructional scaffolding moves. Examples of initial labels included "teacher elicits response about [children's] background experiences," "teacher asks [children] for prediction," and "teacher interprets and simplifies content." These were then organized into larger categories: "scaffolding comprehension of vocabulary and content" and "nonverbal gestures to make content accessible." Open coding and categorization were conducted on a daily basis, and clear patterns emerged and categories were refined as more examples from the data provided evidence. For example, I noticed that teachers often paused to provide child-friendly definitions of vocabulary words and academic vocabulary with informational texts but rarely with fictional stories. I documented how the narrative structure of fiction compelled teachers to ask for predictions, but these were infrequent with informational texts. Finally, broader themes emerged with strong evidence of similar teaching techniques for reading fictional stories and informational texts, as well as clear differences between both types of text.

The picture books were read for different reasons. At times, teachers chose the texts to correspond with their units of study or simply chose them based on their preferences. Other times, children selected them off the bookshelves in the moment. The order of the type of text read was inconsistent, likely due to these different reasons. Some of the books in the data set were from the Magic School Bus series. These hybrid texts contain elements of both fictional stories and informational texts. During the readings, both teachers concentrated on the fictional aspects of the stories and disregarded the informational parts of the texts. Therefore, these books were classified as fiction in the data set. The final data set consisted of 20 read-aloud events: 10 fictional and 10 informational picture books. The balance between the type of text was needed to draw from sufficient examples of each. Moreover, the levels of difficulty between the types of text were comparable so that meaningful comparison could be conducted. A teacher read a few texts twice, to different small groups. Each reading was analyzed separately because the conversations that occurred between teachers and children differed and teachers differentiated instruction to accommodate for individual children within those groups.

Table 1

Picture Books, Authors, and Illustrators

Fictional stories	Informational texts
<i>The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree</i> , by Stan and Jan Berenstain	** <i>A Listen to World Music</i> , by Jennifer Reed
<i>Dewey: There's a Cat in the Library</i> , by Vicki Myron and Bret Witter, illustrated by Steve James	** <i>Bears</i> , by Melvin and Gilda Berger
<i>The Listening Walk</i> , by Paul Showers, illustrated by Aliki	<i>Frogs</i> , by Golden Books
<i>Lucy's Picture</i> , by Nicola Moon, illustrated by Alex Ayliffe	<i>Music Everywhere!</i> , by Maya Ajmera, Elise Hofer Derstine, and Cynthia Pon
<i>The Magic School Bus: Hops Home (H)</i> , by Patricia Relf, illustrated by Nancy Stevenson	<i>Patterns at the Museum</i> , by Tracey Steffora
<i>The Magic School Bus: Inside a Beehive (H)</i> , by Joanna Cole, illustrated by Bruce Degen	<i>One Tiny Turtle</i> , by Nicola Davies, illustrated by Jane Chapman
** <i>The Magic School Bus: On the Ocean Floor (H)</i> , by Joanna Cole, illustrated by Bruce Degen	<i>Spiders!</i> , by Christopher Nicholas, illustrated by Mike Maydak
<i>Mouse Loves School</i> , by Lauren Thompson, illustrated by Buket Erdogan	<i>What We Wear: Dressing Up Around the World</i> , by Maya Ajmera, Elise Hofer Derstine, and Cynthia Pon
<i>Whoever You Are</i> , by Mem Fox, illustrated by Leslie Staub	

** Denotes the story was read twice.

(H) Denotes hybrid text read and classified as a fictional story.

Results

Both preschool teachers used similar techniques when reading fictional stories and informational texts, and there were distinct differences in their techniques used with the two types of text. They made personal connections and prompted children to interpret pictures with both types of text. Additionally, they used multimodal instruction (i.e., language, sound, gesture) and differentiation (i.e., paraphrasing, sign language). They employed particular techniques with fictional stories as they scaffolded children's inferences about characters' thoughts and feelings as well as children's predictions about story events. As they read informational texts, they described academic vocabulary and content and scaffolded children's interpretations of informational text features (i.e., photographs, maps, organizational features). The sections below delineate those similarities and differences. The small-group setting provided children with close access to pictures in the books and opportunities for frequent interactions between the teacher and children.

Similar Techniques When Reading Fictional Stories and Informational Texts

Making personal connections. The teachers employed a variety of interactional scaffolding strategies to support children's comprehension of fictional and informational picture books. First, they made personal connections to ideas and events in the text and elicited children's connections. When one teacher read about the intertidal zone in *The Magic School Bus: On the Ocean Floor* (Cole & Degen, 1992) in which Ms. Frizzle and the class explored the deep ocean, she recounted how she had collected sand while vacationing at the beach. She asked children if they had ever been to the beach, which prompted some to recall those experiences. While reading *Frogs* (Golden Books, 1999), an expository informational text with information about many frog species, a teacher shared her memory of catching bullfrogs with her grandfather. Later, she prompted children to make connections to the content as she read a passage describing how the male Darwin frog protects his tadpoles by holding them in his throat. She inquired if they would want a baby growing in their throat, which elicited giggles and strong disapproval. Strategic readers make connections to the text as they relate content to their experiences and prior knowledge. As the teachers offered their own connections and prompted children's connections, they modeled this key strategy and provided children with opportunities to consider how the content was personally relevant.

Scaffolding interpretations of pictures. Both teachers prompted children to interpret pictures while reading fictional and informational picture books. As a teacher read *Whoever You Are* (Fox & Staub, 2006), a brightly illustrated story that takes readers on a magical trip to view people around the world, she continually pointed to details in the illustrations, noting people's appearance, clothing, homes, and objects in their environments. She drew children's attention to similarities and differences in people and cultures through the illustrations. She also discussed characters' facial expressions to show children that people everywhere experience the same feelings. When reading *Lucy's Picture* (Moon & Ayliffe, 1994), a fictional story about a girl who makes a collage for her blind grandfather, the teacher wanted the children to notice that Lucy's grandfather had a service dog. After prompting children to attend to the illustration, the teacher then asked why he might have a working dog. A child concluded that the grandfather might be blind; the other children agreed. Then they read on to confirm their tentative responses. These findings are consistent with Tompkins et al.'s (2012) finding that four and five-year-olds can infer from pictures.

When reading *Music Everywhere!* (Ajmera et al., 2014) and *A Listen to World Music* (Reed, 2014), informational texts featuring photographs of musicians, dancers,

and musical instruments from around the world, the teacher labeled objects and described people's actions in the photographs. As she drew children's attention to photographs, they closely inspected the details. As a group read *Bears* (Berger & Berger, 2002), a simple informational text with photographs and short descriptions of bears in the wild, the teacher asked children to describe what the bears were doing in several photographs. In one example, a bear was eating honey in a tree. The teacher asked how the children knew, and they replied that it was a bee's home (there were honeybees buzzing around the bear's head). Children were able to make inferences from the photograph with teacher support. When reading fictional and informational picture books, interpreting pictures was central.

Utilizing multimodal instruction. In addition to making personal connections and scaffolding children's interpretations of pictures, the teachers used multimodal instruction when reading fictional and informational picture books. Kress (2010) indicated that "mode is a culturally shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning" (p. 79). Modes can include (but are not limited to) language (in verbal and written forms), gestures and facial expressions, visual images, digital compositions, and music used to create and communicate meaning. In this study, teachers used sound and gesture in conjunction with language.

First, teachers mimicked sounds (onomatopoeia) and encouraged children to imitate them. Sasamoto and Jackson (2016) described onomatopoeia as a communicative phenomenon that lies on the continuum between showing and saying. A communicator uses *showing* when the message is difficult to articulate (e.g., gesture, facial expressions) or is most easily conveyed through nonverbal means (e.g., pointing, shrugging), whereas *saying* involves the use of speech. Onomatopoeia falls between these poles because it is a "somewhat stylised and iconic representation of sensory experience via sound" (p. 45). Onomatopoeia is particularly expressive because it combines sound and meaning into one term. When reading *The Listening Walk* (Showers & Alike, 1961/1991), a fictional story about a family who attends to sounds while on a stroll around their neighborhood, the teacher encouraged children to imitate the sounds with her. After the story, she and the children carefully listened to sounds in their classroom and shared what they heard.

Teachers used the same technique to support children's comprehension of informational texts. As a teacher read *Music Everywhere!* (Ajmera et al., 2014), she encountered a photograph of a child blowing a conch shell. She imitated the sound by blowing loudly into her fist, providing children with background information on using conch shells for communication. Similarly, she encouraged children to imitate a man playing a pan flute in *A Listen to World Music* (Reed, 2014) by blowing over the back of her hand. Not only did teachers capture children's attention and invite their participation through the use of sound words, but onomatopoeia served as another form of sensory input and means to make sense of the sounds children hear in their environments as well as sounds that might be new to them.

Second, teachers communicated through gesture. McNeill (1992) indicated that gesture presents "thought in action" (p. 1) and is "closely synchronized with the flow of speech" (p. 11); gesture and language work concertedly to express meaning because "speech and gesture are elements of a single integrated process of utterance formation.... Utterances and thoughts realized in them are both imagery and language" (McNeill, 1992, p. 35). The teachers often gestured to augment their communication. In one part of *The Magic School Bus: On the Ocean Floor* (Cole & Degen, 1992), the group read how the story characters were traveling toward an island. The teacher drew a circle on the table with her finger to show how an island is surrounded by water to support children's interpretations

of the illustration. In another example, the teacher used gesture to describe a concept while reading *Frogs* (Golden Books, 1999). A child inquired about a picture of a frog's puffed throat. The teacher then moved her fingers and hands in front of her neck to demonstrate the alternate pushing and expanding movements of the frog's throat when it croaks. Her use of gesture enhanced her description of how the frog's throat moves. Sometimes teachers used gesture to make sounds. While reading *One Tiny Turtle* (Davies & Chapman, 2001), an exploration of the life cycle of the female loggerhead sea turtle and the only narrative informational text in the study, the teacher read a passage describing how the loggerhead's shell became hard as she grew into a large turtle. The teacher then knocked on the table and explained that it makes that sound because it is hard. This technique enabled her to convey meaning through multiple modes (e.g., language, gesture, visual elements) simultaneously to communicate ideas through these different semiotic resources to support comprehension.

Differentiating instruction. When reading fictional and informational picture books, teachers differentiated instruction to account for children's development and learning needs. Differentiated instruction is based on the knowledge that children have different capabilities, enabling each child to access the curriculum rather than standardizing expectations (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Teachers differentiated by paraphrasing to simplify and shorten the text and incorporating sign language to adapt to one child's primary mode of communication.

Paraphrasing is a meaning-making strategy in which readers put content into their own words (Kletzien, 2009). The teachers paraphrased to simplify content that was too conceptually dense and to shorten the text to maintain children's attention. For example, on several pages of *The Magic School Bus: Inside a Beehive* (Cole & Degen, 1996), in which Ms. Frizzle and her class transform into honeybees and explore a hive, the teacher described story events with the aid of pictures to cut out long passages and omit several minutes of the story for her younger listeners. At one moment, she called out a two-and-a-half-year-old participant by name and compelled her to look at the illustrations; the teacher quickly described the pictures rather than reading the lengthy paragraphs. She kept the youngest children's attention toward the end of the long book and modeled how to make sense of story events by interpreting pictures. When reading *One Tiny Turtle* (Davies & Chapman, 2001), the teacher omitted passages and entire pages of text. In this instance, a three-and-a-half-year-old put his head on the table and stopped participating in the reading toward the middle of the book while the four-and-a-half and five-year-olds (the three oldest children in the class) continued to look at the pictures, offer comments, and ask questions. Because participation was voluntary, the teacher shortened the reading event to ensure the younger child did not walk away. Similar to the fictional story, she described the illustrations to reduce the reading time in attempts to maintain children's attention to the end.

The teachers also differentiated instruction to support individual students when they read together. In one of many examples, they adapted instruction for a boy who was diagnosed with Down syndrome and communicated primarily through sign language. He also used Russian at home, so he was an emergent bilingual. When reading *The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1978), in which the bears go on a scary adventure, and *Patterns at the Museum* (Steffora, 2011), featuring visual patterns in photographs of art and architecture, the teachers used several strategies in conjunction to support his abilities to notice and label objects in pictures. They pointed to pictures, repeated words, used exaggerated expression, and incorporated sign language. He often responded with excitement by smiling, vocalizing, clapping his hands, signing, and

pointing to pictures. The teachers' individual attention to the child, as well as using his primary mode of communication (signing) in conjunction with speech, helped him focus on the content and potentially learn through observation and imitation. This finding supports Weller and Mahoney's (1983) assertion that combining speech and signs is an effective means for increasing communication with young children diagnosed with Down syndrome. Moreover, the adult does not have to be proficient in signing; this mode of communication can be useful when using a limited repertoire of common signs. Additionally, repetition of words provided more exposure as he developed English vocabulary.

The next section explores key differences in the teachers' reading of fictional and informational picture books.

Techniques Used Only With Fictional Picture Books

Making inferences. When reading fiction, the teachers scaffolded children's inferences about characters' thoughts and feelings as well as predictions about future story events. For example, a teacher and small group of children read *Dewey: There's a Cat in the Library!* (Myron et al., 2009), a fictionalized account of the true story about a cat who lived in a library. In one scene, a rowdy boy is petting Dewey the wrong direction (back to front). The teacher asked the children if the cat looked happy, and they inferred that the cat did not like to be stroked that way. When the teacher asked children if they would like it if someone did that to them, they responded negatively. Not only did the teacher scaffold children's inferences about the character's feelings, but she personalized the experience, giving children chances to empathize with the character by imagining their own feelings in that situation.

In *Lucy's Picture* (Moon & Ayliffe, 1994), the group read a passage in which Lucy's class is painting pictures but Lucy wants to create a different art piece for her blind grandfather. When reading this passage, the teacher asked the children to look at the illustration of Lucy, who is contemplating creating a collage, and noted how the character does not like any of the paint colors. Then the group read how Lucy decides to make a textured collage and later gives it to her blind grandfather, guiding his hand over the art piece. At that point, the teacher inquired why the character had taken that action. The children surmised that the grandfather could feel the collage with his hands. They understood that the only way the grandfather could appreciate art is to feel the different textures. This interaction is consistent with Martucci's (2016) findings that preschoolers and teachers can engage in mental state talk when reading fictional stories and that preschoolers are able to establish causal relationships by ascribing motives to characters' actions.

Scaffolding predictions. The narrative structure of the fictional stories was a channel for scaffolding children's predictions. As they read stories together, the teachers frequently asked children what they thought would happen next and then read to confirm or disconfirm their predictions. As a group read *Mouse Loves School* (Thompson & Erdogan, 2003), a simple story about a cartoon mouse who sneaks into a backpack and is transported to school, the teacher asked children where the mouse might go in the backpack. The children were unsure, but as they read the clues on each page, they concluded that it was a school. In the end, their prediction was confirmed. One group read *The Magic School Bus: Hops Home* (Relf & Stevenson, 1995), in which the bus transforms into a frog. In one scene, the bus follows a great blue heron to a pond. The teacher asked the children where the bird might lead them. One child predicted it was going to its nest. They continued reading to find out—and disconfirm the child's prediction. When reading *The Magic School Bus: Inside a Beehive* (Cole & Degen, 1996), the teacher asked children what would happen

when the story characters attempted to enter the beehive. A child made a correct prediction (they would turn into bees), and the group read on to confirm. As the teachers asked the children to predict and then read on, they prompted children's strategic reading behaviors.

Techniques Used Only With Informational Picture Books

Exploring vocabulary and fact-based content. Making inferences and predictions were common strategies the teachers scaffolded for children when reading fictional stories but were infrequent when reading informational picture books. Instead, teachers described academic vocabulary and content as well as scaffolded children's interpretations of informational text features. Research has shown that informational texts contain more unfamiliar terms (Hiebert & Cervetti, 2012) and that discussing word meanings in context is an effective technique for teaching novel words (Wright, 2014). Nagy and Townsend (2012) defined academic language as "specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content" (p. 92). Some informational books in the data set contained words in bold letters followed by a brief definition, such as "ethnomusicology" (the study of world music) in *A Listen to World Music* (Reed, 2014, p. 5) and "cephalothorax" (p. 4) (the head and chest of a spider) and "camouflage" (p. 19) in *Spiders!* (Nicholas & Maydak, 1999), an expository text with information about many species of spiders. Teachers briefly paused to describe academic language and content in child-friendly terms when encountered in the text. At one point, the teacher read how a funnel weaver spins a cone-shaped web and strikes its victim. She struck the air with her hand and described how the spider is quick. This brief definition given in context might help children gain a better understanding of the concept.

The teachers also paused to discuss academic content. Later in *Spiders!* (Nicholas & Maydak, 1999), the teacher read about their fangs and asked children where fangs are located. After a child patted her chest, the teacher pointed to her mouth and described fangs as big sharp teeth spiders use to inject venom, a poisonous substance, into their victims. She then illustrated by tapping a child's arm. She was explicit and used multiple modes to communicate because the concepts were unfamiliar to children. She provided information, defined words, described, and gestured to support their comprehension.

Scaffolding informational text features. The informational texts contained features that were not read in the fictional stories, such as photographs with labels and captions, maps, and diagrams. The teachers frequently drew children's attention to these elements to support their meaning making. For example, while reading *What We Wear: Dressing Up Around the World* (Ajmera et al., 2012), which features photographs of children around the world wearing traditional costumes, the teacher pointed and read the titles of the countries represented by the children in the photographs. As teachers and children discussed details in the photographs, teachers sometimes urged children to study the pictures to seek information. While reading *A Listen to World Music* (Reed, 2014), the teacher asked children to look at a horn that a shepherd boy was playing and asked what animal they thought it was from. While reading *Patterns at the Museum* (Steffora, 2011), the teacher prompted children to read the visual patterns in photographs. Wright (2014) indicated that teaching content through visual features is an effective technique. These interactions gave children opportunities to understand that pictures contain information, which they can interpret.

In addition to discovering the information in photographs, teachers and children examined other visual features, such as maps. While reading *A Listen to World Music* (Reed,

2014), they encountered a photograph of Japanese children playing traditional instruments. The teacher pointed to a map of Asia at the bottom of the page and located different Asian countries. At the end of *What We Wear: Dressing Up Around the World* (Ajmera et al., 2012), the teacher showed children the world map and indicated that the colored areas were the countries that were represented by the children in the book. The book *Spiders!* (Nicholas & Maydak, 1999) contained additional visual features, such as diagrams and cutaways. As the teacher read, she pointed them out and the children inspected them. The book *A Listen to World Music* (Reed, 2014) displayed several organizational features (i.e., table of contents, headings/subheadings, glossary). Although the teacher did not explicitly draw children's attention to all, she did read the subheadings, showing children how some informational texts are organized.

Discussion

The findings from this study cannot be generalized, but they suggest there are distinct similarities and differences between preschool teachers' read-aloud techniques with fictional stories and informational texts. The findings reiterate what other researchers have asserted: Reading both types of picture books aloud to preschoolers are complex communicative events (May, 2011; Sipe, 2008). Not only is the teacher presenting content the author and illustrator have created, they are concurrently demonstrating how to make meaning and taking several actions to ensure the content is comprehensible to children (Hall, 2013; Wiseman, 2011). This requires preschool teachers to simultaneously interpret the book's content and remain responsive to individual children to keep them engaged with the text. Navigating these complexities of reading aloud to preschoolers is needed to teach in children's ZPD.

Making Personal Connections

The multiple examples of the ways in which these teachers made personal connections to the text and prompted children to make similar connections suggest that both teachers believed that it is possible for young children to discover how the text's subject matter is relevant to their lived experiences. To these teachers, this was a key meaning-making strategy for young children, regardless of the text. This enables children to forge connections to new information with their prior knowledge and experiences rather than trying to make sense of story events and facts in isolation.

Interpreting Pictures

Like Arizpe and Styles (2016) found, interpreting pictures during read-aloud is central to young children's meaning making, no matter the content or type of picture (illustration, painting, photograph). With rare exception, pictures and words work in conjunction to tell the story or convey factual information in picture books (Serafini, 2014). Carefully integrating this verbal and visual information enables the reader to come to a deeper understanding of the text's subject matter. At the same time, interpreting pictures is an appropriate technique for sharing information while omitting portions of written text, when necessary.

Utilizing Multimodal Communication

The preschool teachers in this study also demonstrated how reading aloud to children is much more complex than simply reading the words on the page. It is an act of communication that is not limited to language. Teachers can more fully communicate the ideas and information the author and illustrator have presented by using a range of modes,

both verbal and nonverbal. Gesture and sounds (onomatopoeia, making sounds) were the most common modes these teachers employed, which enabled children to use multiple senses to interact with both types of text. This comprehensive approach might make the content more comprehensible to preschoolers, especially as they are just acquiring language.

Differentiating Instruction

Like Kletzien (2009) recommended, both teachers differentiated instruction across fictional and informational picture books by paraphrasing to support children's meaning making and to shorten reading time. They used one child's preferred mode of communication (sign language) with both types of text. These findings suggest that differentiation is possible with both, and choosing a simpler (shorter) text might not be necessary. As Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) asserted, instructional adaptations the teacher makes during read-aloud can make the text more accessible to individual children. This requires preschool teachers to know their children as individuals (language development, preferred modes of communication) and possess knowledge of child development to teach in developmentally appropriate ways (attention span, multimodal communication).

Scaffolding Inferences With Fictional Stories

These preschool teachers employed similar reading techniques between fictional stories and informational texts, but they also adjusted their reading behaviors to meet the unique demands and affordances of each type of text. When reading fictional stories, both teachers consistently scaffolded children's inferences about characters' feelings and predictions about story events. This finding supports Wiseman's (2011) and Tompkins et al.'s (2013) assertions that making inferences through dialogue can support young children's comprehension. For these teachers, children's understandings of characters' motives, perspectives, and emotions were crucial to making sense of stories. This support Martucci's (2016) findings that young children are capable of engaging in talk about mental states. Moreover, findings suggest these teachers believed it was important for children to better understand their social worlds by exploring characters' emotions, motivations behind their behavior, and consequences of their actions. Read-aloud was not just an opportunity for academic growth, but a chance to support preschoolers' social and emotional development. For these teachers, scaffolding in children's ZPD is not just for academics but for other developmental domains.

Making Predictions With Fictional Stories

Both preschool teachers elicited children's predictions when reading fictional stories, which were written in a narrative format. Prediction is a complex reading strategy that requires the reader to infer future happenings based on their understanding of story events. As Dori (2007) and McGee and Richgels (2012) suggested, forming predictions is an essential strategy for making sense of stories. Additionally, the teachers gave children chances to think in terms of past, present, and future, which could support their cognitive development. For these teachers, preschoolers were capable of such complex reading behavior and cognition with appropriate scaffolding.

Scaffolding Academic Vocabulary and Content With Informational Texts

When reading informational texts, these preschool teachers' scaffolding of academic vocabulary and content, as well as informational text features, suggests reading these texts aloud presented unique challenges and affordances. Like Pollard-Durodola et al. (2016) found, read-aloud of content-rich texts could support preschoolers'

academic vocabulary development. The teachers in this study demonstrated their belief that preschoolers are capable of comprehending academic language and content in their ZPD when communicated in child-friendly terms. This finding supports the work of Nagy and Townsend (2012). The teachers often paired their descriptions with multimodal communication (gesture), accessing a range of semiotic resources to make this potentially challenging content more comprehensible.

Scaffolding Informational Text Features

In addition, these teachers saw the need to scaffold children's comprehension of informational text features as they were encountered. This gave children opportunities to discover different ways key information can be organized. It was especially remarkable how the teacher helped children interpret maps so that her preschoolers might realize the three-dimensional earth can be represented on a two-dimensional map on a much smaller scale. These teachers provided their preschoolers with exposure to informational text vocabulary, academic content, and features, introducing their young students to these complex texts they will encounter throughout their future schooling experiences.

Teaching in Small Groups

The findings from this study support previous research indicating the small-group context for teaching and learning can be ideal (Schreiber & Valle, 2013; Wasik, 2008; Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017; Yamauchi et al., 2013). It is an appropriate setting for interactive reading with fictional stories and informational picture books. Teachers frequently discussed images and ideas, prompting children to attend closely to the books. These findings align with Wasik's (2008) recommendation that teachers can take advantage of the affordances of small-group read-aloud, such as multiple opportunities to talk about the text and giving children close proximity to the book. This is important from a sociocultural perspective because teacher-learner interactions (Mulyani, 2011; Tompkins et al., 2013; Zucker et al., 2013) and using cultural tools (e.g., language, books, visual images) are central to teaching and learning. The small-group setting provided opportunities for rich conversations (Collins, 2010; Sin Goh et al., 2012) in a natural context, which Pentimonti et al. (2017 and Zurek et al. (2014)) suggest is appropriate for preschool. The teachers regularly utilized a core set of reading techniques for both types of text (i.e., making personal connections, prompting children to interpret pictures, using multimodal communication, and differentiating instruction). For these teachers, this set of techniques was essential to teaching in children's zone of proximal development, regardless of the text.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are common to qualitative research. Reliability, validity, and generalizability were not established due to the purposive sampling (Lavrakas, 2008) of a small number of participants limited to one site. Because no established metrics (pretest-posttest) were used, it was not possible to measure children's learning as a result of teachers' reading techniques. Small groups were the only structure for this study, so a comparison between teachers' techniques with large and small groups could not be conducted. Given that children's participation in the reading sessions was voluntary, the extent to which some children benefitted over others is not known. Because the researcher was the data collection instrument (observing in the classroom, transcribing, writing memos and reflections), all phases of the inquiry were potentially vulnerable to researcher bias. Although efforts were made to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), similar studies are needed to provide additional support for findings.

Implications

Implications for Teaching

The findings from this study suggest that reading fictional and informational picture books aloud with preschoolers in small groups offers many opportunities for teachers to demonstrate strategic reading techniques and elicit these responses from children. Although the teachers in this inquiry relied on a common set of techniques for both, they also used different strategies for each type of text. These findings suggest that preschool teachers can expect to employ a core set of crucial reading techniques for both types of text that includes making personal connections and interpreting pictures. Teachers can make the content of both types of texts more accessible to their young learners by using multimodal communication and differentiating instruction based on knowledge of children and their development regardless of the text. At the same time, teachers need to be responsive to the unique affordances and demands of each type of text, such as the narrative structure of stories and the expository organization, academic content, and textual features common to informational books. It might not be necessary to read all the words of a picture book. Instead, preschool teachers can draw children's attention to the information in images as they omit text. Finally, reading to preschoolers in small groups has several advantages, such as providing children with close access to the text and enabling frequent interactions among participants. This grouping structure should be prioritized for reading aloud in the preschool classroom.

Implications for Research

The teachers in this study were two White women with advanced degrees who each had been teaching for over 20 years. Future research should focus on reading techniques among different populations of teachers: early career educators, those who are linguistically and culturally diverse, and teachers of different genders. Future studies should examine teachers' read-aloud with different populations of children such as emergent bilinguals, those in programs that primarily serve children of lower socioeconomic status, children diagnosed with disabilities, those who are not preschool age, and children in more informal childcare settings. A closer inspection of these differences might help researchers gain a better sense of how these factors play into teachers' reading techniques.

Future studies might also investigate teachers' interactional scaffolding strategies with different types of visuals (e.g., photographs, lifelike pictures, stylized and nonrepresentative illustrations) to better understand how these visuals might be interpreted and referenced during read-aloud. Additional inquiry is also needed to examine the ways that talk and multimodal communication work in conjunction with textual elements (i.e., language, images, design) to support children's meaning making. Additional research is required to gain insight into teachers' reading techniques with different texts such as poetry, songbooks, cookbooks, fairy tales and folk tales, comics, and digital texts, as well as fictional stories and informational texts on different topics not covered in this study. Finally, more research is necessary to compare teachers' read-aloud techniques with large and small groups to further clarify the affordances and challenges of each grouping structure.

Conclusion

Few studies have compared preschool teachers' interactional scaffolding strategies during read-aloud of fictional and informational picture books in small-group settings. This study brings to light the instructional moves teachers took to support children's meaning making under these conditions. When employing multiple and varied modes

of communication, it is probable that teachers are more likely to reach children in their individual ZPD and thereby extend children's knowledge of the functions of text and their capacities to interpret information in the various forms (linguistic and visual) presented in fictional and informational picture books.

The findings from this investigation were similar to and different from those of previous studies. Like Moschovaki and Meadows (2005) discovered, there was a book effect in which fictional stories and informational texts generated different responses. Contrary to those findings, however, teachers made (and elicited) personal connections and compelled children to interpret pictures in both types of text at similar rates and prompted children to make more predictions with fictional than informational texts. Contrary to Zucker et al. (2010), fictional stories elicited more inferences than informational texts. Findings also differed from those of Price et al. (2012) because teachers did not read the entire text with fictional stories but paraphrased both types of text at similar rates. The differences and similarities in these findings illustrate the complexity of the interactions between teachers, children, and texts during read-aloud events in preschool.

About the Author

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