

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF READ ALOUD TO CHILDREN: A POSITION PAPER

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## ABSTRACT

*Read aloud as a strategy has been utilized by many classroom teachers with the goal of effectively and successfully teaching reading to children. However, teachers should remember that teaching reading is not a “one size fits all” since students have individual differences and needs. This paper offers perspectives about read aloud as a strategy to cultivate teachers’ knowledge on how it can be utilized in a way that it can develop the reading skills and reading habits of every learner. Both opportunities and challenges of read aloud to children were explicated to provide teachers a leeway whether the strategy is appropriate on their pedagogical milieus. Finally, the concluding part of the paper offers the pedagogical implications of read aloud to give teachers a better grasp of the considerations they need to undertake before adopting the strategy in their classrooms.*

**Keywords:** reading education, literacy, read aloud, reading strategy, reading teacher

## INTRODUCTION

“Children whose families take them to museums and zoos, who visit historic sites, who travel abroad, or who camp in remote areas accumulate huge chunks of background knowledge without even studying. For the impoverished child lacking the travel portfolio of affluence, the best way to accumulate background knowledge is by either reading or being read to.”

- Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2013)

Reading is considered one of the most difficult skills to develop among children (Fiertsch, 1992; Steinberg, 1998; Trelease, 2013). However, it appears that there reading teachers who grapple with the right strategy of teaching their students to read (Gray 1996; Campbell, Hombo & Mazzeo, 1999).

For a very long time, various experts in the field of reading and literacy argued and tried to figure out the most effective way to teach reading to children so that they will become productive and successful citizens in the future. This poses serious attention since reading is: A determinant of a person’s academic and professional success (Bandura, 1986), a good way to expand the individuals’ horizons and

knowledge (Steven, 2011), enriches a person’s imagination (Steven, 2001), stimulates the mind to reduce stress (Hebert, 2015), improves memory and boosts concentration (Beiz, Duncan, Shemek, Oteo & Henry, 2016), and increases one’s empathy (Wise, 2016). In this light, teachers are expected to become familiar with different strategies in teaching their students to read. Knowing does not only mean that the teacher knows the nature and the purpose of the strategy, but it also entails that he has a keen grasp of its intricacies. As Gray (1996) punctuated, becoming familiar with a certain teaching strategy may help every student acquire the necessary reading skills they need to have to become productive citizens.

Read aloud has been found to be effective in molding children’s reading skills (Stevens, 2012; Gold & Gibson, 2012; Trelease 2013). According to Stevens (2012), “read aloud is an instructional practice where teachers, parents, and caregivers read texts aloud to children. The reader incorporates variations in pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery” (p. 2). This strategy builds the foundational knowledge needed for successful reading (McCormick, 1977 as cited in Morrison & Włodarczyk, 2009). The exposure of a child to reading primarily begins at home and extends up to school. According to Clifford (2008), children are good imitators. Hence, read aloud can give parents and teachers the opportunity to provide guidance,

support, and a good reading model for the child to mimic. Since read aloud is regarded as a touchstone for literacy development (Bredekamp, Copple & Nueman, 2000), it can be used to make students become acquainted with the process of reading as they witness the activity itself through the modeling of an authority or a more experienced adult.

This paper discusses the opportunities and challenges of read aloud as a strategy in developing the reading skills and habits of a child. To ensure a balanced discussion, both opportunities and challenges in the utilization of the strategy will be dissected to provide parents and teachers avenues to realize if read aloud can lead to the cultivation of their children's reading skills. Lastly, the writer will give his take on whether as how read aloud can impact the pedagogical practices of a teacher. Overall, it is hoped that this endeavor will pave to a genesis of future and timely studies in this field, as well as the propagation and the evolution of information regarding read aloud as a strategy in teaching reading.

## **Opportunities of Read Aloud**

According to Trelease (2013): "Every time we read to a child; we are sending a pleasure message to the child's brain. You could even call it a commercial, conditioning the child to associate books and print with pleasure" (p. 43). The strategy of read aloud to a child to foster the needed skills to become a good reader has been practiced for a long time. A report in 1985 entitled *Becoming a Nation of Readers* claims that read aloud is a potential catalyst that will eventually lead to successful reading. Since the child is beginning to read and cannot independently do it, the parents or the teachers should guide the child by providing him or her with the necessary nurture that he or she needs. In addition to this, Matthiessen (2014) believes that children need to learn how to read with the help of authority and asserts that children cannot learn how to read by themselves. Hence, children can learn best if good modeling is provided to them. To confirm the veracity of these claims, the following section discusses the opportunities that children may get from reading aloud.

**Develops fluency.** Fluent readers can automatically recognize words which are pivotal in successful reading. However, becoming fluent in reading is not a one-day achievement nor attainable in a short span of time. If parents and teachers want their children or students to become fluent readers, they need to expose them in constant practice. When an adult reads aloud expressively with children, it strengthens

their automaticity and accuracy (Polette 2014). Furthermore, Hasbrouck (2010) asserts that when adults read aloud with children through modeling a well-paced, expressive, and guided manner, they aid children in honing their fluency. Since accuracy has been considered as an integral component of fluency, teachers who are dealing with early literacy learners should emphasize and dedicate a big amount of time to building their rudimentary word recognition or word analysis skills (Pikulski & Chard 2005). To put this in reality, teachers should create a classroom that provides abundant opportunities for students to read words with precision (Snow, Burns & Griffins 1998). This practice is believed to be a building block for producing adept and engaged readers (Hasbrouck 2010). Monitoring the progress of the students should be ensured by the teachers so that they can really help in the development of the children in becoming fluent readers. Teachers need to be ready to find time to conduct conferences with the students so that they can discuss areas of improvement and use such opportunities to remodel fluent reading through read aloud (Osborn & Lehr 2004).

**Widens Vocabulary and Knowledge.** One of the most evident fruits of read aloud is the expansion of students' vocabulary knowledge (Needlman 2004; Rippel 2006; Newton, Padak & Rasinski 2008) both for young learners (Pikulski & Templeton 2004; Logan 2012; Varon 2012) and adult learners (Wasik 2012; Oliver & Young 2016; Williams 2016). The main reason why reading aloud with children can enrich their vocabulary is due to the incidental learning that they get from it (Carey 1978; Al-Mansour 2011). Not only that read aloud provide an opportunity to increase the vocabulary of children, but it is also a way to make them gain a wealth of information (Rog 2001). When children are listening to an adult reading aloud to them, they develop and elevate their repertoire of vocabulary and knowledge of the world. Also, the teacher needs to note that when children ask questions about the words or information, they got from what was read to them, they should enthusiastically entertain their questions as this would further motivate them to expand their vocabulary and schema, leaving them wanting to discover more as they read.

**Improves Comprehension.** Strengthening the comprehension of children when they read is essential because the goal of reading is to understand the printed words found in the books. It was found out that frequent read aloud sessions of an adult with a child builds

comprehension (McCormick 1977; Primamore 1994; Terblanche 2002; Trelease 2013). When children are exposed to expressive oral reading, their understanding of what is being read to them tremendously escalates (Beck & Mckeown 1999; Polette 2014). Since fluency and comprehension are believed to be intertwined with one another (Neddenriep 2010; Cotter 2012), through continuous read aloud practices, children are familiarized with words, syntactic patterns, and genres of the texts. Hence, they become more comfortable, and they accumulate more alacrity on making explorations when they read. A very good reason for using read aloud to enhance the comprehension of children is that teachers can demonstrate comprehension strategies as they orally read through think aloud (Block & Israel 2004; Ortlieb & Norris 2012). Teachers should conscientiously model how to attack texts to comprehend them. When this model becomes a routine with children, they can eventually imbibe the comprehension strategies learned from their teachers and use these strategies for every type of text they encounter for easy comprehension.

**Produces Critical Readers.** As children become more exposed to reading, they need to learn how to think deeply about what they read. Children who are always immersed in oral reading are expected to grow in their reading skills and stamina. Hence, when children are earning their reading progress, teachers should consider using more advanced books so that their students may start reading critically (Pressley 2006). Read aloud yields an opportunity for teachers to tackle challenging texts with children. By reading together orally, teachers can guide and support children whenever they will encounter difficulty in critical reading. Similar to how read aloud strengthens the comprehension of students, the strategy can also train them to critically read a book especially when their teachers are good models (Cunningham 2005). Meller, Richardson & Hatch (2009) believe that although teachers should meticulously choose the right texts for read aloud sessions that will cultivate critical reading, they need to remember that texts are not critical in real essence. It is the conversation that takes place between the teachers and the children that crafts texts to become critical. Because of this, teachers should start critical questions by framing questions that will require children to read critically. The biggest consideration of the teachers here is to ensure that the questions given to the children are in the range of their reading level. If a teacher fails on this part, children might become frustrated readers rather than critical readers as they find reading a daunting task for them.

**Gives a Positive Outlook towards Reading.** Deciding on the right strategy to teach reading to struggling readers is one of the most challenging concerns for teachers (Rohr, He, Murphy 2014). Reading aloud with children has been considered as an effective way to create a positive stance about reading (Atwell 1987; Mooney 1990; Trelease 1994; Hennings 1994; MacKinney 1996; Needlman 2004). One of the benefits of read aloud to children is that it paves the way to a strong bond between the teachers and the students (MacKinney 1996). In this sense, it is imperative that the adult who guides children as they read both orally should be nurturing and accommodating so that the children will feel comfortable towards the activity. It is also worthy to mention that teachers should be patient whenever students mumble, hesitant to read, and commit flaws because this will not detach children from the activity. Teachers who are sensitive to the readiness of the students can result in positive feelings towards reading. It is also crucial for every teacher to make reading enjoyable for children as this will determine if they become engaged or disengaged readers (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala & Cox 1999). One way to incorporate this in the read aloud sessions is to let students choose the books that will be read orally (Strauss 2014). This strategy is a very good way to captivate children's positive feelings towards reading because the freedom that was given to them in choosing the books will make them feel that reading is not an activity that is led by a "dictator" (a teacher who chooses all the reading materials for the students). And that, children too can take their own part in choosing their reading materials. Furthermore, the said approach will also allow children to discover their reading interests. Thus, leading the children to become independent readers in a long run.

### Challenges of Reading Aloud

Although some researchers are claiming the benefits that children may get from read aloud sessions, some researchers also assert that it has its own drawbacks (Gibson 2008; Mackay 2010; Wilson 2010; Huang 2010; Redpath 2011). These drawbacks justify the notion that there is no single best practice in teaching reading. This section presents certain challenges that teachers may face when reading aloud with children in their classes.

**Promotes Pseudo Reading.** Although pseudo reading is perceived to be part of the literacy development of an individual (Chall, 1983), read aloud may lead to students

pretending to read as they decode the words found in every sentence of the texts that they read. Mackay (2010) points out that reading is generally a silent activity. Given this characteristic, he believes that it is difficult to comprehend the texts when the reader is reading aloud. His reason is that it is impossible to keep on track in making meanings because the usual focus of read aloud is on the prosody of the texts. Jacobs (2011) adds that read aloud does not build comprehension because it is impossible for children to focus simultaneously on reading orally and understanding what they read. McCallum, Sharp, Bell & George (2004) think that reading silently leads to better comprehension since it promotes keen attention to what is being read. When children read aloud, they usually cannot monitor themselves unless an adult reads with them. Whereas in silent reading, children can closely observe and self-check themselves if in case they commit lapses. Another risk of clinging too much on read aloud to teach children to read is that they utilize only their limited cognitive resources to understand what they read (Hale, Skinner, Williams, Hawkins, Neddenriep & Dizer 2007). It is very laborious for children to make sense of meanings when reading aloud because they need to entirely rely on pronunciation, intonation, and other voice dynamics. Hence, the limited cognitive resources for the prosody of the text hamper comprehension.

**Heightens Anxiety.** There are children who are naturally timid and reserved. Linder (2004) restates that it is crucial for every teacher to remember Thorndike's assertion that learners need to be ready before they are exposed to instruction. In this case, if children are not yet equipped with the necessary vocal dynamics, they need to successfully read aloud a given text, they will feel worried and frustrated every time they are called to read orally in class. This scenario becomes a hindrance for the children to become engaged in reading because they may associate it with anxiety. Another reason why read aloud usually leads to anxiety is that children feel discouraged when their teachers correct them publicly (Mackay 2010). That is why there are some children who stutter or feel nervous when they read aloud specifically in front of the class. The key here is to be sensitive to what students feel because if teachers keep on imposing something that they are not comfortable with, this might push them further to become habitual readers.

**Leads to Boredom.** The attention span of students varies depending on their age. Children from 2 to 5 years old can

generally listen with interest to someone for around 5-25 minutes and children from 6 to 10 years old can enthusiastically listen to someone for around 12 to 50 minutes (Hill 2015). Teachers who read aloud with students to strengthen their reading skills and habits should be aware of the problem that may be created if students listen to someone orally reading for them beyond their attention span. When students who read aloud with their teachers had reached the peak level of their attention span, there is a tendency that children fake read and will not even concentrate on comprehending the texts. If this continuously happens, students will feel bored, and this will just detach them from becoming ardent readers (Davis 2012).

**Results to Dependent Readers.** Adams (1990) mentions that if teachers want children to read more, they need to create a place that will motivate them to do so. This claim revolutionizes the beliefs of some educators since then. Thus, it resulted in the implementation of "sustained silent reading" (SSR) or "drop everything and read" (DEAR) in the classrooms with the aim of producing independent readers. When students read silently on their own, they build within them their own independence to acquire the skills they need for successful reading (Hasbrouck 2006). Contrary to this, read aloud may offer a different outcome since students rely too much on their teachers since they act as lead readers in the read aloud sessions. Although some studies claim the efficacy of read aloud with children in building their comprehension, it is pragmatic to say that teachers would not want to produce students who can only comprehend well when someone reads to them orally. And the danger here is, children will not become independent readers, but rather they will become dependent readers. As Hopkins (1997) asserts, teachers should train their students to become confident readers, capable of working through and comprehending texts autonomously.

**Encourages Word-by-Word Reading.** One problem that is brought by read aloud is that since it highlights oral reading, it strongly emphasizes decoding and word recognition (Jacobs 2011). Because of that, children who are trained in reading aloud would usually spend so much time pronouncing words accurately when they read rather than comprehending what they read. This posits a big problem in a long run specifically if the students will read in their L2 texts. The exacerbation of the problem is manifested because there are words in children's L2 that are not pronounced the

way they are spelled. Hence, if children cannot decode and recognize words successfully, they usually become upset and may see reading as a burden (understood.org).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Knowing the appropriate strategy to teach students is essential for effective learning. Becoming familiar with what strategy to utilize and when to apply it can greatly improve and affect students' comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002 as cited in Morrison & Włodarczyk, 2009).

Teaching students to read is not a size fits all concept (Hasbrouck, 2006). This entails that there are or are no single or even multiple strategies that may be regarded effective in teaching students to read. Understanding what read aloud is as a strategy through becoming acquainted with its opportunities and challenges does not suggest that teachers are either encouraged or discouraged to use it in their own classes. By doing so, provides reading educators a grasp of what it may entail having read aloud as part of their pedagogical practices. It is through this awareness that reading teachers may become more reflective of their own instructional practices – making them more familiar with to implement this strategy, plan and design their own read aloud approach, select the vocabulary to be taught, and contemplate various ways to motivate students to interact with the texts that they read.

On the other hand, since it has been found that read aloud fosters the development of the fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension of the students, teachers, and parents of young children may conduct read aloud sessions daily to establish a strong repertoire of reading skills and habits as early as possible. Teachers and parents should meticulously choose the reading materials, explicate unfamiliar words, and reinforce children to become independent readers. Teachers and parents may also ask stimulating questions to entice students to think critically.

Raising awareness about the opportunities and challenges of read aloud may also help schools that offer a teacher education program to train pre-service teachers on read aloud as a strategy in teaching reading. In this way, there could be a production of more teachers who are knowledgeable and skilled in read aloud sessions with children.

It is recommended that the discussions offered about read aloud may be used as bases for conceptualizing studies that may empirically validate the claims offered in this paper. The study may also involve an exploration of how read aloud is currently practiced in the Philippines to clarify its pedagogical underpinning in a specified geographical milieu. An investigation on how it is practiced in an online learning environment may be initiated to provide reading educators, parents, and students fresher perspectives about this strategy in the context of remote teaching.

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