

# Tapping the potential of teacher read-alouds in middle schools

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**Many educators recommend reading aloud to students, but little is known about the nature of teacher read-aloud practices beyond elementary school.**

**A teacher reading** aloud to a class of students is a common sight in primary- and intermediate-grade classrooms, but is this the case in middle school classrooms? Many educators and scholars promote reading aloud to older students (e.g., Richardson, 2000; Sanacore, 2000), and middle school students, in particular, have told us that they enjoy and value teacher read-alouds (Albright, 2002; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). However, we have very little data that describe the extent and nature of read-aloud practices in middle schools.

For decades, researchers (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2001; Chomsky, 1972; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Teale & Martinez, 1996) have documented many benefits of reading aloud to younger children in the areas of language growth and reading achievement. The practice is valued so highly by the members of the National Commission on Reading that they called it “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). The Commission urged teachers to continue reading to students through all grades.

Furthermore, teachers may find that using alternate and multiple texts in the classroom can circumvent some of the problems associated with relying solely on textbooks (Guthrie & Davis,

2003). Teachers may also be delighted to discover that reading aloud a variety of materials can increase not only their students’ understanding of the content but also their engagement and inquiry into the ideas they encounter (Albright, 2002; Roser & Keehn,

2002), which, in turn, can help students make more meaningful connections between learning and their lives. Short read-alouds can also be “used to introduce a new topic, to illustrate practical applications of content area concepts, and to inject a measure of humor into the classroom” (Alvermann & Phelps, 1998, p. 384).

Research indicates that motivation, interest, and engagement are often enhanced when teachers read aloud to middle school students. In Beers’s (1990) study of aliterate seventh graders (students who could read but chose not to), students selected having a teacher read aloud in an exciting voice as one of the few activities they found to be motivating. More recently, Albright (2002) showed how read-alouds in a seventh-grade social studies class fostered engagement and learning. In Ivey & Broaddus’s (2001) survey of 1,700 sixth graders, teacher read-alouds were named as one of the two most preferred reading activities in school. Students saw the read-alouds as “scaffolds to understanding because the teacher

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helped to make the text more comprehensible or more interesting to them” (p. 367). In addition, educators claim that reading aloud to middle school students can introduce them to books they might not locate on their own (Lesesne, 2001). This research suggests that teacher read-alouds in middle grades can have positive outcomes for both motivation and learning.

It is unfortunate that we know very little about teacher read-aloud practices beyond the elementary grades. We do know that students are exposed to read-alouds less frequently as they move from primary through intermediate grades (Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000), but data from middle schools and high schools are almost nonexistent. This paucity of evidence is particularly troubling because of the need for effective instructional practices at the middle level (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Young adolescents have clearly expressed their desire to make connections between their schooling and their lives (Alvermann, 2002; Moje, 2000). However, students of this age often perceive a mismatch between their school experiences and their personal worlds (Alvermann, 2001; Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999; Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003). Because studies suggest that teacher read-alouds in middle schools can be catalysts for motivation and learning, more research is needed to explore how teachers are using the practice in their classrooms. We have attempted to address this need with an exploratory survey of middle school teachers, and in this article we share the results of the survey and discuss its implications for classroom practice.

## Our survey

We administered the survey to middle school teachers in one independent school district in the United States. The school district is in a small university city located within a large metropolitan area in the state of Texas. We visited one faculty meeting at each of the district’s three middle schools (grades 6–8) and asked the teachers in

attendance to complete the survey. Of the 238 middle school teachers employed in the three middle schools, 141 returned complete and useable surveys.

Through the survey, we sought answers to the following questions: To what extent do middle school teachers in this district read aloud to their students? What reasons do teachers give for reading aloud or not reading aloud? What types of texts do teachers read aloud, and how often do they engage in the practice? We piloted an initial version of the survey in a graduate literacy course and made revisions based on feedback from participants.

The first section of the survey contained questions about the subjects and grades the teachers taught. The second section asked the question, “Do you read aloud to your students?” Those who answered “No” were asked to select the one item from the following options that best described why they did not read aloud:

- Reading aloud is not appropriate for the subject I teach.
- I do not think that reading aloud is an important instructional practice.
- I never think about including read-alouds as a part of my curriculum.
- There is not enough time in the day.
- Other reason: \_\_\_\_\_

Teachers who answered “Yes” to the question “Do you read aloud?” were asked to answer additional questions about (a) why they read aloud, (b) how often they read aloud, and (c) the types of texts they read aloud. Respondents were given spaces to write in examples of materials they read aloud.

Data analysis consisted mainly of calculation of percentages and descriptions of major variables. For the open-ended question “Why do you read aloud to your students?” we used a constant comparison method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to independently and then collaboratively code and categorize responses. Because this was an exploratory

study with a limited sample of teachers in middle schools, we concentrated our analysis on subject areas rather than grade levels or combinations of variables. Teachers were grouped into the four main content areas (English/language arts/reading, social studies, math, and science), special education, and other subjects. The results reported refer to teachers of all subject areas.

## What we found

Overall, a large percentage (85.8%) of the teachers reported reading aloud to their students. All reading teachers and special education teachers reported that they read aloud. Of the teachers who taught the major content areas (English/language arts/reading, social studies, math, and science), the percentages ranged from 88.9% (science) to 96.15% (English/language arts/reading). Sixty-three percent of the teachers who taught other subjects (e.g., band, computers, art, and

theater) said that they read aloud. With the exception of reading teachers, most teachers indicated that they read aloud one to two times per week. The majority of reading teachers noted that they read aloud either once a day or three to four times a week.

The most common reason teachers gave for reading aloud was to model aspects of fluent reading, such as pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and style. (See Table 1 for the complete list of reasons.) Another frequently cited reason for reading aloud was to make texts more accessible to students. Teachers also specified ensuring all students were exposed to the information in the text. We speculated that these teachers may have been attempting to provide access for students who were unable or unwilling to read the text.

Teachers also noted goals of reinforcing content and increasing students' understanding or comprehension of the text. Teachers read to "point out important information in their

**Table 1**  
**Coding categories for responses to the question**  
**"Why do you read aloud to your students?"**

Concept	Category	Frequency
Modeling	Model good reading practices	18
Accessibility	Make texts more accessible to readers who cannot read	15
Understanding	Ensure or increase understanding/comprehension of the text	12
Content	Reinforce content knowledge	12
Management	Manage behavior	11
Enjoyment	Student's enjoyment	11
Vocabulary	Improve vocabulary	7
Interest	Increase interest in or introduce the topic	6
Listening skills	Increase listening skills	6
Promotion of reading	Promote positive attitudes toward reading	6
Enrichment	Enrich students' lives	3
General knowledge	Increase general knowledge	3
Enjoyment	Teacher's enjoyment	3
Community	Create community	2
Exposure	Expose students to texts they might not choose	2
Thinking	Critical thinking indeterminate or confusing	1

textbook” and “provide real-world examples.” One teacher wrote, “I read aloud to my students so students can concentrate on comprehension rather than focus on pronunciation.”

Some teachers read aloud to manage student behavior (e.g., to save time, calm students, and keep all students “on the same page”). However, reading aloud to students because they enjoy it was cited as often as reading aloud to manage behavior.

The types of texts most commonly read aloud were chapter books and textbooks. The next most frequent category was “other,” and respondents wrote in such items as poems, short stories, work pages, overheads, handouts, poems, and directions. Less than one fourth of the teachers noted picture books, magazines, or newspapers (listed in descending order of frequency). See Table 2 for examples of read-aloud materials other than textbooks given by teachers. More than half of the teachers in each subject area, with the exception of English/language arts/reading (43.5%), reported reading aloud textbooks. The textbook was the most frequent type read aloud by teachers of all areas except English/language arts/reading and special education. These teachers most often read aloud chapter books. Few of these chapter books were nonfiction, but many were historical fiction.

Why do teachers *not* read aloud to their students? Of the 141 teachers who completed our survey, only 20 (14%) reported that they did not read aloud. Of these, 75% taught a subject other than the main content areas. From the choices given for not reading aloud, 14 teachers selected “Reading aloud is not appropriate for the subject I teach.” Two of these teachers taught science and one taught math. The remaining teachers taught wellness, choral music/choir, band, physical education, technology/keyboarding/computers, visual arts, and an elective. Although the survey did not allow an explanation with this choice, it seems reasonable to assume that teachers in these subject areas viewed reading aloud as a practice

more suitable for literacy-related courses such as language arts or reading.

Three teachers (one band teacher and two art teachers) selected “I never think about including read-alouds as a part of my curriculum” and a social studies teacher chose “There is not enough time in the day.” Two teachers selected “Other reason.” An English teacher stated, “My voice will not hold up through all of the classes I teach. I have in the past, and I think it is a wonderful teaching tool.” A computer instructor noted, “My class is geared entirely towards computer instruction.” No one selected the response “I do not think that reading aloud is an important instructional practice.”

## The status of middle school read-alouds

In our survey of the three middle schools in one district, we found that many teachers do read aloud to their students. While teachers of reading, special education, and language arts were most likely to read aloud, high percentages of teachers of other subject areas also engaged in this practice. Many of the reasons (see Table 1) teachers gave for reading aloud (e.g., modeling, making texts accessible, supporting comprehension, reinforcing content) were positive and supported by research on reading aloud to middle school students (Albright, 2002; Ivey & Broadus, 2001). The preponderance of reasons given by the teachers indicates an emphasis on efferent purposes for reading, which emphasize learning information from text (Rosenblatt, 1995). It seemed apparent to us that these middle school teachers were concerned with facilitating their students’ learning and had definitive, instrumental reasons for choosing their instructional practices. The emphasis on instrumental purposes for reading became more apparent as we examined the types of texts that the teachers read aloud.

The survey described in this article was exploratory; that is, one of our objectives was to

**Table 2**  
**Examples of teacher-reported read-aloud materials**

Subject	Title	Type
Art	Artist biographies	Other
Art	Student poems	Poetry
Band	Composers' notation or history of music	Other
Choir/music	Background information	Other
English/language arts/reading	<i>Flipped</i> (Van Draanen, 2003, Knopf)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>Search For the Shadowman</i> (Nixon, 1998, Yearling)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>The Stones of Mourning Creek</i> (Les Becquets, 2001, Winslow Press)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	"Dreams" by Langston Hughes ( <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=6691&amp;poem=31112">www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=6691&amp;poem=31112</a> )	Poetry
English/language arts/reading	<i>Because of Winn Dixie</i> (DiCamillo, 2001, Candelwick Press)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>Journey to Topaz: A Story of the Japanese-American Evacuation</i> (Uchido, 1988, Creative Arts Book Company)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>Lupita Mañana</i> (Beatty, 2000, HarperTrophy)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>Never Trust a Dead Man</i> (Vande Velde, 2001, Laurel Leaf)	Chapter book
English/language arts/reading	<i>Wilderness Peril</i> (Dygard, 1991, Puffin)	Chapter book
Math	<i>G is for Googol: A Math Alphabet Book</i> (Schwartz, 1998, Tricycle Press)	Chapter book
Math	<i>The Cay</i> (Taylor, 2002, Yearling)	Chapter book
Math	<i>Sir Cumference and the First Round Table</i> (Neuschwander, 1997, Charlesbridge)	Picture book
Science	<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> (Rawls, 1984, Random House)	Chapter book
Social studies	<i>Catherine Called Birdy</i> (Cushman, 1995, HarperTrophy)	Chapter book
Social studies	Original documents	Other
Social studies	<i>Pink &amp; Say</i> (Polacco, 1994, Philomel)	Picture book
Spanish	Dr. Seuss books in Spanish	Picture book
Special education	<i>The Original Adventures of Hank the Cow Dog</i> (Erickson, 1998, Puffin)	Chapter book
Special education	<i>The Sweetest Fig</i> (Van Allsburg, 1993, Houghton Mifflin)	Picture book
Theater	<i>Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!</i> (Prelutsky, 1998, Knopf)	Picture book
Theater	Short stories/poetry	
Wellness	<i>Teen Health</i>	Magazine
Math, English/language arts/reading	<i>Time, Newsweek</i>	Magazine
Math, science	<i>The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times</i>	Newspaper
Science, English/language arts/reading, social studies	Local newspaper	Newspaper

gain insights to guide future research. For this reason, we did not specify for the teachers what we meant by the term *reading aloud*. As a result, we learned that teachers defined the term in a variety of ways. Many teachers reported that they read aloud when they had read passages from their content area textbooks. In addition, teachers read aloud announcements, workbook pages, and instructions for classroom activities.

We noted a lack of variety of read-aloud materials, with less than 20% of the teachers mentioning that they read picture books, newspapers, or magazines. (Although, as Table 2 illustrates, many teachers indicated a creative selection of materials.) There was also a notable lack of nonfiction chapter books read aloud in any subject area. Chapter books, mostly fictional, were read aloud only slightly more than textbooks. Although a few science teachers reported reading chapter books, the language arts, reading, and special education teachers chose chapter books most often.

We were encouraged to find that most teachers valued reading aloud to their students and allocated time to do so. However, we were concerned to see so little attention given to the aesthetic purposes for reading. Reading and listening to literature can allow students to make personal, meaningful connections to their own lives and to virtually experience other ways of being (Rosenblatt, 1995). Read-aloud advocates and middle school educators (e.g., Lesesne, 2001; Trelease, 2001) claim that reading aloud, accompanied by opportunities for sharing responses to the reading, can promote a love of literature, reading, and the topic at hand. Teachers in our study did indicate a few reasons for reading aloud that addressed these purposes (see Table 1), such as student enjoyment, promoting positive attitudes toward reading, enriching students' lives, and creating community. Nevertheless, responses of this nature were cited far less often than the responses that indicated more instrumental, efferent, and managerial purposes. Furthermore, only one teacher out of the 141 indicated that read-

alouds were used to help students think critically about what they were reading. This finding is noteworthy when considering the need for adolescents to take a critical stance toward the multiple information sources they encounter in today's world (Alvermann, 2002).

In our collaborative analysis of the survey data, we speculated on several reasons why teachers would lean toward instrumental uses of read-alouds, such as reading content area textbooks, choosing a limited variety of types of texts, and focusing on efferent purposes for reading aloud. Among our speculations was the assumption that teachers often feel compelled to "cover" content, particularly in the state of Texas, where teachers are under tremendous pressure for their students to perform well on the state's standardized assessment exam. Teachers are also often constrained by short class periods and may feel that there is little time to use reading materials other than the textbook. Furthermore, the large number of teachers who read aloud textbooks, coupled with an analysis of their reasons for reading aloud, indicates that teachers are aware of problems inherent in many textbooks and of the difficulty their students have reading them (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Tomlinson, Tunnell, & Richgels, 1993); therefore, teachers read aloud the textbook passages as a way to make them more manageable for their students. These factors contribute to an environment in which teachers may understandably select instructional activities and materials primarily for instrumental purposes.

In addition, many teachers may not be fully aware of the many benefits and possibilities of reading aloud in subject areas other than those related to literacy. The most common reason the teachers in this study gave for not reading aloud was that it is not appropriate for their subject area, and several indicated that they never think about reading aloud. Furthermore, we found no evidence that teachers think reading aloud is an unimportant instructional practice. We suggest, therefore, an increased emphasis on helping teachers become aware of the multiple benefits

and purposes of teacher read-alouds, as well as practical suggestions for implementing them in their subject areas. With increased awareness, coupled with specific information on tips and resources, those who are already reading aloud can enhance their existing practices, and those who are not reading aloud can begin to explore an additional instructional strategy. We believe that realizing the potential of teacher read-alouds across the curriculum would involve reading aloud regularly, reading a variety of texts, and reading for both aesthetic and efferent purposes. These practices could help teachers address the curricular demands of their subject areas while also engaging students in the topics and concepts at hand and helping them to make connections to their own lives.

## The potential of middle school read-alouds

Hoffman, Roser, and Battle (1993) offered a model of exemplary read-aloud practices for elementary teachers. Building on that foundation, we offer the following suggestions for middle school teachers looking to begin or enhance the practice of reading aloud to their students. We suggest that middle school literacy specialists use the information as a foundation for modeling and working collaboratively with teachers of various subjects to incorporate read-alouds into classrooms. University teacher education faculty working with preservice and inservice teachers may also use this information to guide their students to include read-alouds in their teaching.

### ***Finding appropriate and engaging texts to read aloud***

Teachers can start with the following ideas to locate and select texts for reading aloud. They can also refer to Table 2 for more suggestions from the teachers in our study.

### **ONLINE RESOURCES FOR CONTENT AREA BOOK AWARDS**

- *Notable Children's Books in the English Language Arts*, National Council of Teachers of English/Children's Literature Assembly ([www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/notable2004.htm](http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/notable2004.htm))
- *Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies*, National Council for the Social Studies ([www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable](http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable))
- *Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children*, National Council of Teachers of English ([www.ncte.org/elem/orbispictus](http://www.ncte.org/elem/orbispictus))
- *Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K-12*, National Science Teachers Association ([www.nsta.org/recommends](http://www.nsta.org/recommends))

**Explore award-winning books related to content areas.** Perusing annotated lists (many are available online) can reveal a surprising number of titles on numerous topics. These books have been chosen for quality and appropriateness of content in a particular area of study, as well as their literary quality. Infusing the curriculum with literature can provide students with expanded perspectives of their own worlds and worlds outside their experience (Meltzer, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995).

**Try picture books!** Many of the picture books published today are quite sophisticated and appropriate for older children, and they address an astounding variety of topics. The book *Teaching with Picture Books in the Middle School* (Tiedt, 2000) offers further suggestions.

**Start with short texts.** If you are hesitant to read aloud literature or other materials to your students, start with pieces of short text such as newspaper articles or poems. These materials can be less intimidating for teachers who have less experience reading aloud.

**Look for texts in your daily life** (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). As you read newspapers and magazines, clip articles that relate to your subject area and to which students might respond favorably. For example, a math teacher might read aloud an article from the Internet about summer employment for teenagers. Then, after sharing personal responses to the content, the class might use the statistics to engage in activities related to computation, as well as critical problem solving. For other sources, check out magazines geared to young people such as *Cicada* and *National Geographic Kids*.

### **Reading aloud to students**

Teachers can use the following tips to make reading aloud more comfortable, enjoyable, and effective for their students and for themselves:

**Read the material before sharing it with students.** When you are familiar with the text, you can read it aloud more fluently, note difficult vocabulary, and determine where to pause for discussion or questions. Preliminary reading can also prevent awkward situations in which the topic or language is found to be inappropriate for the intended audience.

**Practice effective read-aloud habits** (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Trelease, 2001). Use various inflections to emphasize changes in the tone or mood of the article or story, and try different voices for different characters. Speak loudly and do not read too rapidly. When reading a picture book, show the pictures and make sure everyone can see them. For more tips on reading aloud, see Jim Trelease's website at [www.trelease-on-reading.com/rah\\_chpt4\\_p1.html](http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/rah_chpt4_p1.html).

**Stop at various points and share what you are thinking as you read** (Oster, 2001). Show the students how you make connections between the reading and your own life, other texts you have read, and what you know about the world. Model for the students how you ask questions of yourself and of the author as you read a text. Point out when you "read between the lines" to make an inference or when you notice information that is

important to your understanding of the text. When you demonstrate for students how you respond to, question, and make meaning of what you read, you provide them with a powerful model of an effective, engaged, and critical reader.

**Encourage students to respond to the reading and share what they are thinking.** Talking about the text during a read-aloud can enrich and shape the meaning that is made by the students (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Roser & Keehn, 2002), and young adolescents need opportunities to make sense of their school learning through their own experiences (Moje, 2000). Discussion can take place before, during, and after the read-aloud in a whole group, small groups, or student pairs. Allow students to share their personal responses before asking them to discuss any specific information. Often, simply asking, "What do you think about this?" will prompt sharing. For examples of discussions and a list of "starter questions" to stimulate conversation, see Albright (2002).

### **Reading aloud is important**

In this article, we shared the results of a study of the read-aloud practices of middle school teachers in one school district. Due to its exploratory nature, this study had several limitations. First, the sample was limited to those who completed useable surveys; that is, 59% of the middle school teachers in one school district. If results from the other 41% had been included, the results might have been notably different. Furthermore, the sample was limited to one school district in one geographic area. However, the results did provide snapshots of many of the practices among one group of teachers. In addition, Texas middle schools provided a rich base for this study due to the influence of its policies on the national education arena. The second limitation is that we were not able to analyze every piece of information because of the ambiguity of some of the information written by respondents. Nevertheless, analyzing the data provided us with valuable insights, as well as implications for further research. Finally, because

we did not clearly define what we meant by *reading aloud*, the interpretation of this term was left open and varied among the teachers. This omission most likely resulted in an overly generous estimate of the number of teachers who indicated that they read aloud to their students.

We believe this study is important because it is an introductory look at middle school teacher read-aloud practices; however, it is clear that additional research is needed. We are currently conducting further research on this topic. Our follow-up study involves a larger sample of teachers and examines additional variables, such as teachers' training in read-aloud practices and their use of response opportunities to the read-alouds. We expect that further research will yield additional insights on the nature of read-aloud practices and will ultimately result in enhanced learning experiences for early adolescents.

In summary, we found that the majority of the teachers in our study read aloud to their students and that they read aloud for specific pedagogical reasons. We did note, however, the predominance of emphasis on reading for instrumental purposes, and, in contrast, the lack of attention given to reading for aesthetic and critical purposes. The suggestions outlined in this article provide a starting point for expanding teachers' existing read-aloud practices. They encourage teachers not only to read aloud to middle school students but also to provide opportunities for students to make personal connections between the literature and their lives. We believe that these practices will facilitate more meaningful connections and increased motivation to learn.

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