

Structured Read-Aloud In Middle School: The Potential Impact On Reading Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Read-aloud is a technique predominantly utilized at the elementary level. This study was designed to research the effectiveness of this technique at the middle school level, specifically students who were not receiving special education or additional reading intervention services. For the current investigation, students in two middle schools within the same Virginia school district were assigned to receive the treatment of Structured Read-Aloud or received traditional middle-school reading instruction. These students were tested using the Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA), both in the fall before the intervention was implemented and again in the spring of the same year, to assess gains. Results indicate that the use of Read-Aloud instruction had an impact on student DORA scores, and implications of the research are discussed.

Keywords: Read-Alouds; Middle School Reading; Reading Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Although reading aloud with children is widely agreed to be beneficial, it is often assumed, both by teachers and young people themselves, that it is something you grow out of as you become an increasingly proficient reader” (Hodges, 2011, p. 19). Mention the term “read-aloud”, where the teacher reads the text to the students, to an educator and many times the association made will be the word “elementary.” While used predominantly in the elementary grades, it is also becoming a technique that secondary teachers are beginning to employ as well. As more research literature becomes available, this technique may become part of the repertoire of many teachers outside of elementary; namely, middle school.

Why Read-Aloud?

Teacher read-aloud is not a new concept. In the 1985 *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report, it was maintained that reading aloud to young children was the “single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p.23). The commission also stressed that reading to children should continue throughout their schooling, no matter the child’s age. This recommendation is supported by research demonstrating that as the amount of time adults read aloud to children declines, the amount of time students spend on recreational reading similarly declines (Lesesne, 2006; Trelease, 2006).

In a study conducted for the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, Elly (1992) found that the United States placed *second* in the ability of nine-year-old readers internationally but dropped to *eighth* when fourteen-year-olds were evaluated (Trelease, 2006). The drop in reading success could be credited to a variety of reasons - from the type of material used, the difficulty of the text, or the curriculum as a whole. Another possibility is that this decline could be partially attributed to the changes in instructional strategies as students move through their primary education.

Middle School Students

Albright and Ariail (2005) found that teachers in the middle grades are beginning to utilize read-aloud for reasons such as modeling fluent reading, making texts more accessible, and ensuring all students were receiving the information from the texts. The use of read-alouds provides students with exposure to literature that students may not have received with a traditional textbook. Reading aloud can contribute to increased student engagement, understanding, and motivation (Albright, 2002).

“The bottom line is that when teachers read to students, they enhance students’ understanding and their inclination to read independently.” (Ivey, 2003, p. 812) In elementary school, the motivation for students to read is there - students are there to learn to read. However, when they enter middle school, sometimes their reading ability does not match what they are expected to read. The disparity between reading ability and text often becomes clearer in these grades. Teacher Linda Rief understands how important read-aloud is in bridging students’ reading difficulties with the text - “[It is] because of the struggling readers, who don’t really read on their own when given the choice, that I must find the time to read the stories aloud” (Ariail & Albright, 2006, p. 69). In fact, a number of studies of middle school age children have found that students preferred teacher read-aloud as a method of delivery and that read-aloud brought about positive student attitudes toward reading (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Ariail & Albright, 2006; Ivey, 2003).

Rycik and Irvin (2005) convey support of the read-aloud in middle school, but note that they understand why some may be apprehensive to try this strategy. “Some middle grades teachers might be concerned that read-alouds will make their students passive or dependent, but reading aloud to students actually whets their appetite for reading on their own” (p. 105). Teachers must employ questioning techniques within the read-aloud to ensure that students are paying attention and comprehension questions are correctly answered. Read-aloud should not be seen as a passive activity for students; students should be active participants in the text and the learning-to-read process.

Current Investigation

Read-aloud is a technique that has been shown to be successful in elementary school, so much so that it has become a best-practice tool throughout the primary grades (Wolsey, Lapp & Dow, 2010). Steadily, research is beginning to support the continued implementation into middle school. Middle school students have differing needs and attitudes than their younger counterparts, but a successful technique crosses all age lines. No one will disagree with wanting all students to be successful, so teachers in primary and secondary schools can implement this technique to support vocabulary and comprehension acquisition.

The current investigation looks at the impact of read-alouds on students’ comprehension skills and vocabulary skills, as measured by the Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA), in two randomly selected sixth grade classrooms. The goal of this quasi-experimental investigation is to examine whether any measureable impact is found for sixth grade students who receive a year-long intervention of read-alouds, relative to students using the same reading curriculum, absent of the read-aloud instructional practice.

METHODS

Population and Sample

The groups studied were students in “Middle School X” - grade six, the control group - and “Middle School Y” - grade six, the experimental group. The populations of the schools range between 300 and 500 students per year and are both within the same school division that has an overall demographic breakdown of 63:31 African American to White, with 40% being economically disadvantaged. The resulting sample included $n = 70$ students in the control group and $n = 90$ students in the treatment group.

Instrumentation

The use of literature and short passages aligned well with the baseline and final assessment - DORA. The DORA assesses comprehension with the usage of short passages; therefore, the skills taught during read-aloud included strategies the students could call upon during various comprehension assessments. More information on the DORA assessment tool is available at www.letsgolearn.com.

Procedures

Prior to the beginning of the formal research study period, the researcher provided professional development for the teachers in the treatment group, first as an introduction to the study - in August - and at two other times coinciding with the beginning of the nine-week periods - October and February.

Time spent on read-aloud was to average at least three days per week for 15- to 20-minute time periods. Although treatment differed in delivery by teacher, the strategy remained the same - read aloud. During the read-aloud, teachers stop, ask guiding and higher-order thinking questions of the students to gauge and assist comprehension. During these “stops”, teachers give students an example of how to use the text to search for comprehension answers. This also gives the teacher a chance to address unfamiliar vocabulary and show how a good reader finds the meaning during reading. As the students become familiar with the patterns, it usually becomes a strategy they can employ during silent reading, content reading and testing situations.

The DORA test was administered to the control and experimental groups in September and October and April. The baseline data were collected during the first nine-week period and the final data were collected at the end of the third nine-week period.

RESULTS

Demographics

For purposes of this study, the only demographical data analyzed was gender. Within the constructs of instruction, gender was the one area in which analysis was performed to note any trends. Table 1 provides a summary of gender throughout the study. The control group included $n = 41$ males and $n = 29$ females and the treatment group included $n = 52$ males and $n = 38$ females.

Reliability analyses for both subtests were analyzed through Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha indicated acceptable reliability of the results of each subtest - $\alpha = .976$ for comprehension and $\alpha = .971$ for vocabulary data.

Repeated Measured Factorial ANOVA

Based on the results of the tenability of assumption tests, it was determined that a Repeated Measures Factorial ANOVA was the most appropriate analysis for addressing research questions. Multivariate analysis indicates that, overall, significant differences were found across the two groups - $F = 10.054$, $p < .001$ (Hotelling's Trace). This indicates that the intervention did have a significant impact overall on both the vocabulary and comprehension assessment scores for the students in the treatment group relative to the control group.

Gender was assessed in the multivariate analysis and was found not to be significant. Noteworthy, however, is that although not significantly different, the average mean change in comprehension and vocabulary scores across the two groups reveals the impact of the treatment that was demonstratively different for males relative to females. Specifically, gains were greater for the males on comprehension in the treatment group and for the females on vocabulary in the treatment group, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Average Mean Change on DORA Comprehension and Vocabulary Scores

	Gender	Control	Treatment
Comprehension	Males	1.15	1.68
	Females	1.45	1.28
Vocabulary	Males	1.15	1.60
	Females	1.25	1.90

The test of between-subjects effects measures the impact of the intervention for each assessment independently. Vocabulary and comprehension analysis reveal no significant main effect for vocabulary; however, there is significant main effect with comprehension ($F = 7.496, p = .007$).

DISCUSSION

The current investigation indicates that read-alouds, as a reading intervention, may have an impact on student gains in vocabulary and, most significantly, in comprehension, as measured by the Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment. Additionally, these gains were found to be greatest for treatment group male students on comprehension and treatment group females on vocabulary.

Is Read-Aloud the Best Solution?

Read-aloud has both strengths and weaknesses. As a technique that has proven success in elementary and intervention settings, investigating the strengths of this technique could deepen the pool of appropriate strategies for use in the middle school classroom. In essence, teachers should not limit their teaching techniques, but instead, have a variety that can be utilized as the situation arises.

When using read-alouds, the teacher becomes the model for positive reading behaviors and the bridge for scaffolding the connection between text and read life (Burgess & Tracey, 2006). The teacher can also support student responses and guide higher-level thinking. Another strength of read-aloud is the exposure to language and literature. The students may become frustrated when reading alone, but can open themselves up to enjoying the text when they are relieved of the stresses. Engagement can be difficult with middle school students; however, when read-aloud is utilized, they can engage with the text, the teacher, and the discussion in a proactive manner (Burgess & Tracey, 2006; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

The potential weakness of read-aloud can be seen as being too teacher-directed or lacking the release of responsibility to the students to take ownership of the learning. Although students must be actively engaged in read-aloud, some may view it as a passive activity, with students simply being onlookers. When correctly used, the teacher and the students are both actively involved - the teacher actively reading and guiding questions and the students actively listening, processing the information, and taking part in discussion. While one cannot say that read-aloud is the best technique for daily instruction, simply dismissing read-aloud as an elementary technique is being short-sighted.

CONCLUSION

The current investigation is one study that examines how the addition of read-alouds to the traditional middle school curriculum can impact student success, specifically in the areas of vocabulary and comprehension development. As the results suggest, read-alouds are a valuable tool which provides reading teachers with a relatively cost-free approach that can impact their students' reading ability today, as well as their success as readers for a lifetime.

For many students, reading in the middle school is centered on a textbook passage and follow-up questions. Read-aloud can expand students' exposure to reading materials, even materials above their instructional level, by utilizing their listening skills. When the students' only task is to listen to the material being read, not worrying about pronunciation, taking turns reading, etc., comprehension becomes the end result. Teachers can take advantage of the fact that many students have a higher *listening capacity* level than *reading level* by utilizing read-aloud. According

to Walther and Fuhler (2008), “All in all, read-aloud time is relaxing, enjoyable, educational, and thought-provoking – a time when an author’s words can fill the classroom and the minds of the listeners. Who knows the long-term impact of those words?” (p. 8).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES