

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

The Power and Promise of Read-Alouds and Independent Reading

Recent research shows that reading is on the decline in the United States; in a 2014 survey, only 17% of students ages 6 to 17 reported daily in-school independent reading. Research also shows the reading habits of young adults have sharply decreased in the past two decades; students read less outside of school hours as they spend more time with technology.

With these discouraging findings, the National Endowment for the Arts warns that literacy—as a leisure activity—will virtually disappear in a half a century. As less of our population engages in pleasurable literacy activities in adulthood, our schools hold an increasingly important responsibility: carving out instructional time, space, and resources for literacy practices that build engagement, motivation, and joy in reading.

Two powerful instructional practices—teacher-led read alouds and in-school independent reading—have the power and promise to set students on a path of lifelong reading. When instructional time is devoted to these practices, we rouse students into embracing literacy as a perennial skill and practice. Yet as instructional time today becomes increasingly scarce because of content coverage and standardized test preparation, these cornerstones of effective literacy instruction are too often pushed aside. Schools today must treat these tried-and-true practices as the essential, nonnegotiable components that bring us closer to the International Literacy Association’s (ILA) goal of giving every child the right to read.

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Teacher-Led Read Alouds

Reading aloud is undoubtedly one of the most important instructional activities to help children develop the fundamental skills and knowledge needed to become readers.

Decades of research highlight the instructional benefits of read-alouds. There is a direct causal relationship between reading to children at a young age and their future schooling outcomes. Effective read-alouds increase children’s vocabulary, listening comprehension, story schema, background knowledge, word recognition skills, and cognitive development. In addition to these important academic benefits, read-alouds promote a love of literature, foster social interactions, and ignite a passion for lifelong reading habits.

Reading aloud to children is so important that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents read aloud

to their infants from birth. Recognizing that reading to children enhances vocabulary and exposure to oral language, the pediatrics group embraces reading aloud as a way to reduce academic disparities between wealthier and low-income children. These recommendations remind us of the critical role that reading aloud plays in promoting the rapid development of young children's neural and auditory systems as well as language and attention.

Most frequently occurring in preschool and early elementary classrooms, read-alouds help emergent and beginning readers gain understanding of book handling, print conventions, story structure, literacy syntax, expressive language, and text organizational structures. Reading to very young children stimulates their emergent literacy skills as well as their interest and motivation in becoming independent readers.

As readers age, the frequency of read-alouds declines. Secondary literacy teachers must embrace the read-aloud as nonnegotiable instructional practice. Upper elementary and secondary students reap multiple benefits from teacher-led read-alouds, including building background knowledge and vocabulary and modeling of effective comprehension strategies. As teens embrace the social nature of literacy activities, effective teachers provide opportunities for students to personally connect literature to their lives. When we relegate read-alouds to the purview of elementary teachers, we overlook the power and joy of read-alouds across grade levels.

Additionally, content area teachers must embrace read-alouds as opportunities to build content knowledge, to stimulate higher order thinking, and to engage in meaningful discussion. Even mathematics teachers can incorporate read-alouds to maximize student discourse, content acquisition, and understanding of informational text. In science classrooms, read-alouds can transform passive reception of content into instruction involving more discourse-centered meaning making. When postsecondary instructors incorporated read-alouds into college-level courses, students reported enhanced learning and significant positive responses.

A broader application of read-alouds occurs not only across grade levels and content areas, but also across a wider variety of text genres and forms. Though significant strides have been made to include non-narrative text, teachers must intentionally read aloud from expository text. Exposure to teacher-led

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read-alouds of expository text in the early grades better prepares students for reading informational and expository text that frequently occurs in later grades. Texts of varying length and format are equally ripe for read-alouds; short stories, poetry, and newspaper/magazine articles provide teachers with opportunities to model their thinking, reading, and writing skills.

Effective read-alouds are complex instructional interactions that require thoughtful preparation and deep understanding of a text. Not all read-alouds are created equal. What matters more than merely reading aloud is the quality of the teacher–student book interaction. Read-alouds must be interactive, during which teachers briefly stop, model their thinking, ask and answer questions, and invite participation from students. In reading aloud, an effective teacher serves as an orchestra conductor, coordinating conversation among students, fostering aesthetic and efferent text responses, pushing students’ text reaction past surface-level responses, and weaving an intricate network of meaning.

Another key ingredient of effective read-alouds is purposeful selection of text. Literacy teachers must conduct read-alouds from books that serve as what researcher Rudine Sims Bishop referred to as mirrors, windows, and doors so that students not only see themselves reflected in stories, but also are able to consider perspectives of those who are different from themselves.

When teachers read aloud, their actions demonstrate that they value reading; a key component in motivating students to read is a teacher who uses the read-aloud to demonstrate enthusiasm for reading and to model reading practices. When teachers purposefully read aloud from texts that capitalize on students’ interests and academic needs, students are more likely to embrace the authentic role of literacy.

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In-School Independent Reading

A central component of the development of lifelong readers is consistent, adequate in-school time for independent reading. Essential components of effective independent reading include the following:

- Classroom time to self-select and read a large number of books and variety of text
- Explicit instruction about what, why, and how readers read

- Teacher monitoring and support during the in-class independent reading time
- Authentic conversation about what students are reading

When accompanied by intentional instruction and teacher conferring, independent reading is not only a valuable but also an essential use of classroom time.

Independent reading is the critical time when students both consolidate and take ownership of reading skills and strategies. Richard Allington, noted literacy researcher and a past president of the International Reading Association (now ILA), often pointed out that without extensive independent reading practice, reading proficiency lags. The benefits of independent reading are inarguable; the best readers are those who read the most and the poorest readers are those who read the least. The more students read, the better their background knowledge, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, self-efficacy as readers, and attitudes toward reading for pleasure.

In-school independent reading fosters more frequent out-of-school reading. By allowing students to independently read during school hours from well-stocked classroom libraries, we increase the likelihood that students become lifelong readers. As students select their own titles and read for extended periods, they develop a sense of agency and identify themselves as readers. In assuming agency for selecting books of personal relevance and interest, we increase students' motivation for reading as a practice.

The key components of independent reading time are frequency, duration, choice, and authentic response to text being read. Whether incorporated as a schoolwide program or encompassed into individual classrooms, independent reading must occur each day for at least 15 minutes. Without this frequency and duration, students may not develop appropriate stamina. As little as 15 minutes of in-school reading has a profound impact; students who read independently for that amount of time significantly increased their reading performance, with more profound gains for below-average readers.

Another critical ingredient is diverse classroom libraries that offer print, digital, and multimodal text of both quantity and quality. The most effective teachers are those with extensive classroom libraries. These classroom libraries enable students to spend a larger percentage of their instructional time

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independently reading from books that are both appropriate and appealing. Students who have access to a collection of quality books in their classrooms read 50%–60% more than students who do not have access.

An effective classroom library entails a minimum of 10 books per student, or an average of 300 books. Perhaps more important is the need for high-quality, diverse, and appealing books that reflect students’ personal interests, backgrounds, and curiosities and that have a wide cultural representation. Classroom libraries must contain digital and multimodal texts and be diverse in text category (nonfiction and fiction), genre (e.g., fantasy, historical fiction, realistic fiction, myths, autobiographies and biographies, memoir, narrative nonfiction, expository nonfiction), and text level. As students encounter variety in genre, they increase their ability to understand each genre’s specific features and characteristics.

Independent reading equates to self-selected reading. As we allow student choice, we empower students to select books of personal relevance. Ninety-one percent of children ages 6–17 report that “my favorite books are the ones that I have picked out myself.”

This choice and ownership is especially important for struggling readers or reluctant readers. When the disengaged reader discovers a text in a classroom library that is personally relevant to his or her background and interests, the student receives the message that his or her interests matter and that books further his or her knowledge of that topic. This same student is then more likely to read attentively and work through the challenges the text might present.

Furthermore, teachers must provide meaningful opportunities for students to discuss, evaluate, and reflect upon their independent reading. When students talk around text and confer with the teacher and each other, independent reading becomes accountable and authentic.

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Delivering on Our Promise

For too many U.S. students, in-school time is their only encounter with books. We cannot afford to shortchange our students of the myriad of benefits afforded by read-alouds and independent reading. If students are not immersed in language-rich read-alouds and flooded with opportunities for independent

reading in school, then when? When schools allocate adequate in-school instructional time and resources to fund well-stocked classroom libraries and help prepare teachers to engage in effective, interactive read-alouds, these practices become a fundamental cornerstone of literacy.

MOVING FORWARD

- Recognize the benefits of read-alouds beyond elementary grades as increased background and content knowledge, expanded vocabulary, and development of higher order thinking and critical discussion.
- Create time for reading aloud as integral activity of literacy instruction across all grades and content areas.
- Build in time for independent reading in all classrooms where students self-select reading materials that are appealing and related to their personal interests.
- Review and grow your classroom library to include not only a variety of high-quality, high-interest print and digital texts across text types and genres, but also topics and themes that reflect wide cultural representation.

ILA RESOURCES

[*The Case for Children's Rights to Read*](#)

The goal of ILA's Children's Rights to Read campaign is ensuring every child has access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read. This companion resource identifies why the 10 fundamental rights were selected.

[*Characteristics of Culturally Sustaining and Academically Rigorous Classrooms*](#)

This literacy leadership brief highlights the principles of culturally sustaining, academically rigorous classrooms through the metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors, as originated by researcher Rudine Sims Bishop.

[*Choices Reading Lists*](#)

Download the Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and Young Adults' Choices reading lists for high-quality, popular titles selected by students and educators alike.

[*Expanding the Canon: How Diverse Literature Can Transform Literacy Learning*](#)

This literacy leadership brief shares how diverse literature can boost student engagement and communication skills and reshape the literature classroom.

[*Exploring the 2017 NAEP Reading Results: Systemic Reforms Beat Simplistic Solutions*](#)

This literacy leadership brief shares the most promising pathway to improving reading comprehension performance—through systemic reform.

[*Literacy Glossary*](#)

Curated by a team of literacy experts, this interactive resource defines the shared language of literacy research and instruction.

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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