

WHAT NEXT IN THE READ- ALoud BATTLE?

Win or Lose?

Mem Fox

I am reliably informed that there are educators in positions of influence who believe that reading aloud to children is a waste of time in a literacy program. Such a belief is not only asinine, but also frightening and dangerous. Research around the world has proven that children who are read to regularly are better able to learn to read easily, happily, and quickly. Listening to beloved stories again and again is a step on the road to literacy that cannot be ignored, no matter how gifted a child might be, or how disadvantaged; no matter what grade that child is in, or how young or old; no matter which language he or she speaks; no matter when he or she starts school; no matter which country he or she lives in.

Listening to an adult read aloud cultivates the essential enchanting engagement with books, stories, rhymes, and songs that every child has to experience before the formal teaching of reading can begin. And unlike basal readers, which are appallingly written and a great source of illiteracy because of their peculiar, stilted, and often incorrect use of English, the books that children *listen* to provide the best possible words in the best possible places.

When a great story is read aloud, listeners discover that vocabulary is easier to understand. The flow and grammar of language becomes more familiar. In addition, solid foundations of expectation are laid

down regarding what might come next in a sentence, what might come next in the book, and how the story might end, all of which help children to confirm their guesses by then looking at the print. In other words, it helps them in a profound way to learn to read. Here's a message from a mother, Anna Starrett, to prove my point:

My family loves your books and [we] own most of them... I find it interesting that even at an early age children recognise the pattern of a problem with resolution at the end. I brought home "Where is the green sheep?" one day and announced to my boys that I had purchased a new book called "Where is the green sheep?" My four year old said "Probably on the last page, but I want you to read it to us anyway."

As I wrote this article, I could hear a rising murmur of protest from the vociferous members of the anti-read-aloud brigade who were saying that in a crowded curriculum, time set aside for reading stories was a luxury that could not be afforded, especially with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—or from what they laughingly call students with "no background"—or those who were

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second-language learners, or mentally disabled or disturbed, or way behind, through no fault of their own. I knew I had to still the noisy voices of the anti-read-aloud brigade with evidence. And I had evidence a-plenty.

I have chosen in this column to allow teachers and parents to speak for themselves rather than to quote from the reams of research available for all to read on the Internet. Personal stories have a power and authenticity that cannot be denied.

However, to calm the doubting Thomases, let me provide this assurance: The Australian Institute of Family Studies discovered (Mullan & Daraganova, 2012) in a longitudinal study that children who had been read to before coming to school fared much better in the national literacy tests than children who had not been read to. This research confirmed the findings of many such studies over the years.

The fact that reading to children of *any age* improves their literacy caused one particular school in Australia to raise the literacy rates and test scores of its students by educating the parents long before their children started school. The results were outstanding. The principal, Neale Newcombe, described it to me with pride:

At Our Lady Of The Rosary we have over the past three years focused on making a learning community through educating parents as well as staff. We are very proactive K-6, but specifically in infants.

We focus on early intervention in the infants area of the school—making sure staff understand how children learn how to read and write, but also how to teach *them* to read and write, via in-service, peer mentoring, peer modeling, and peer evaluation. Also I go in myself, every day possible, from 9 till 11am to team-teach, model, give feedback or just be an extra pair of hands. We have trained parents in best practice and we have a team of 25 parents who rotate through the week and have children read aloud to them

and do other language-related tasks for 25 minutes with a single child. We use best practice and some other effective strategies from Reading Recovery and from your book, too.

We assess and analyse the children's reading records and get tough with parents who don't read with their child every night aloud! We give new families your book *Reading Magic* for K, 1, 2 and 3; and Jennings' book: *The Reading Bug* for Years 4, 5 and 6. We usually have an in-service for parents every term on something of educational interest. Additionally we have teacher aides going into classrooms from 9am-noon every day in Kindergarten and Year 1.

We have enjoyed a massive improvement in basic skills test results over the past three years. The data over the past ten years shows that over the past three years, since these initiatives have happened, we have improved from below the state average, and local Diocesan Catholic schools average, to above both, on a line that is on a 45% angle. We have a 'value added' component from year 3 to year 5: test results that show the average for schools improvements is about 5 or 6 points and we are now averaging 13 points in value-added which places us at the top of the diocese in both Maths and English.

To add power to Neale Newcombe's elbow, as it were, here's a message from a special education teacher (Karen Coy) in Australia who happened to have a disabled child herself:

You may remember last year at Ourimbah Uni, Central Coast NSW, one Friday you spoke to a small group and I mentioned my disabled son who is a great reader despite his disabilities. And I suspected it was because I've read to him every day of his life—he's 18 now. Well, recently we've found out that he has a "micro-deletion of the 17th

chromosome"—only 6 identified in the world so far—it's a new diagnosis, just discovered. None of the other 6 in the world can read!!!! Surely that's proof!!!

How amazing is that! You can happily tell people my story. All we did was every night I would let him pick the story, sometimes reading the same book for lots of nights in a row. Many library visits and books for birthday and Christmas presents, visiting Vinnies, etc., and buying old books AND modelling. My kids always see me reading for pleasure on weekends and hols. Thanks for your belief in reading to kids—some teachers leave too much to struggling kids to read for themselves.

And another from Maree Callow, also from Australia:

I have just read an article on your website about three children who could read before they hit school. Both my boys could too and like these other mums and dads I read to them both from 3-4 months. (I was an Early Childhood teacher).

The difference in my story was that unbeknownst to me my eldest Tom was born with bilateral, profound hearing loss and because of poor testing at the local hospital, he did not get diagnosed until just before his 3rd birthday. Even though my story telling may have been only heard as a whisper (if at all) he still had all the pre-reading concepts and I believe his love of books and pictures helped him to learn to speak in the following years and read and write, because by 5 he could do all these things. So even with such a major disability, reading aloud from an early age is MAGIC! I tell everyone with babies that the best thing they can do for their child is to read to them two or three times a day.

I asked if I could quote her story, and she replied:

"We have improved from below the state average, and local Diocesan Catholic schools average, to above both, on a line that is on a 45% angle."

“Within about 3 weeks, both Eric and Ala had jumped up 5 to 7 levels respectively.”

I am quite happy for you to tell our story. Tom is currently doing his Higher School Certificate and along with physics and chemistry, he is studying Advanced English and doing very well. He plans on going to university. He now uses a hearing aid and a cochlear implant—a wonderful invention!

I might add, I always get annoyed when I hear from parents that boys take longer to learn to read than girls (or are expected to take longer) because I know it all comes down to how much reading they are exposed to, and the incidental “talking and listening” that goes along with it.

I currently teach children who are deaf or hearing impaired and often use your books. Thank you so much for your email.

And here’s another powerful piece of proof, this time from a teacher of disadvantaged children in New Zealand, Pamela deWyntre:

I just finished reading your book, *Reading Magic*. Let me just say: Thank you! I am an Australian but I now live in New Zealand, teaching Year 2. A friend of mine mentioned your book as she thought that being a teacher I may be interested, and to tell her what I thought of it as she has 2 young children under 5. About 10 pages in, I rang her and said, “Do everything this book tells you to do!”

I spoke about your book in my syndicate meeting and we were all feeling inspired and fresh once more. (I guess week 9 of Term 2 does that to you!) As a lower decile school, we work with Dr. Gwenneth Phillips in First Chance Literacy. I’m not sure if you know of Dr. Phillips, but her work and findings are very similar to yours.

I had 2 children in my class who were struggling with reading. The other kids were passing them and they knew this—seeing their peers pass. I was feeling

anxious and upset and trying to not let it show. I stepped back for a moment and thought, “Well, I’ll just have to read to them some more.” So I did, and within about 3 weeks, both Eric and Ala had jumped up 5 to 7 levels respectively. They’re both brimming with confidence and Ala gets excited when its time for her group to read to me. She buddy reads for her lower/younger peers also.

I do not yet have kids, but I tell you—I can’t wait to have children, to read to them and do fun things with them and provide a supporting and loving and enchanting childhood. Thanks again!

As if as the huge improvement in literacy were not enough, a sense of community is created in any class that experiences the same shared, secret joy of listening to the same great pieces of literature, be they brief or much longer. The class bonds in such a way that it becomes more like a family than class. Characters in books provide inside jokes, common phrases, and points of reference that become a code belonging to that “family” alone.

If all this evidence is not sufficient to recommend the read-aloud session, teachers who read aloud regularly will tell you that their children are never better behaved, or quieter, or more still than when they are listening, rapt, to great stories written by great writers.

A friend of mine, Sandy, works as nurse in a children’s ward in which a read-aloud program has been instituted, mainly for the children’s sake but also to alert parents to the delight and importance of reading to their children. She sent me this e-mail:

We have just had a little 3 year-old with a broken leg who needed to be in traction for a while. She loved having books read to her by the staff, as her parents couldn’t stay in with her. Her behaviour was terrible when she arrived and she didn’t know how to look at a book but it didn’t take her long for her to learn with lots of patience from the staff and volunteers. She now gets very excited over stories and her behaviour has improved. I hope it continues when she gets home. I did see *Possum Magic* was a favourite! Sandy.

And here’s a whole class of 3-year-olds as described by Linda Niro in Brecksville, Ohio:

I just felt that I had to pass this on. After reading two short stories to my 3-year-old class, none of who are very good at sitting still, and one of whom tends to practice long-jumping behind the others, they begged me to read *Where Is the Green Sheep?* I was completely amazed at the end, when they all clapped. A group of hungry, tired 3 year-olds applauded the book. I can’t wait to read them more of your work! Thank you!

Another class in Hong Kong had its own little miracle, as recounted by Rosheen Rodwell:

You have inspired me! I wanted to write to tell you what happened in our library at school today. On Saturday I watched a room full of adults transfixed by your reading of your wonderful books. So, I decided to give it a go at school with the Year 1s (I run the library but am not a teacher). I deliberately chose “Where is the Green Sheep” so I could copy the way

“After reading two short stories... a group of hungry, tired 3 year-olds applauded.”

you did it. As soon as they saw the book, the complaints started:

"It's too babyish," they said. "My mum reads this to my little sister," and so on. I just started reading very quietly and within 2 pages you could have heard a pin drop. 2 more pages and they were all joining in. Some of them looked so rapt you would think I had never read to them before, or even that no one had ever read to them before.

When I had finished there was a general buzz about green sheep in the room and at the very end of the lesson, the quietest boy in the class, who has never expressed an interest in books and can never find one he wants to take home, came up to me and very quietly asked if he could borrow "the book about the green sheep." A triumph! Thank you, thank you.

A mother who read *Reading Magic* took its advice to heart, especially in regard to reading differently to her 9-year-old reading-disabled son. She decided to read to him with vitality, and for pleasure, not to teach, and this was her reaction, which came via my American editor:

It's too early to tell if Jamison will make 'reading gains' as we continue to follow Mem's wonderful advice, but the truth is that I don't really care, because Jamison is smiling when he's reading.

As a parent myself, and as a grandparent and a writer who often reads her own work to children, I know from a lifetime of experience that no matter what I do or say before or after a book, nothing holds children's attention more than the story itself. Once I start—once we teachers start—once we stop droning on in an irritating, foolhardy attempt to teach or "orientate" children to a book and *finally get going*, the children are transfixed. And the sooner they're transfixed, the sooner they want the book read again. And the more they hear the story, the more they hear its fabulous language, and *understand* its fabulous language, and *learn* its fabulous

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language, and *use* its fabulous language. Without wasting a single minute on inane questions and activities, a wide and exquisite vocabulary is absorbed, as well as difficult grammatical constructions that turn out not to be difficult at all in context.

I ask myself why we feel it's necessary to ask tedious, obvious questions before, during, and after we read a book. My hunch is that we grossly underestimate the intellect of young children and assume they are all underachievers and dimwits. Most children are much smarter than that. We have to trust ourselves to trust them to learn what books can teach.

My intention, when I write for children, is to amaze and inspire; to delight and comfort; to excite and entertain; to thrill and enchant; to calm; to amuse; to make them want to come back, and back, and back to my books so they can learn from my words how words work. So you'll understand why, as a writer, I'm desolate when ill-advised but well-meaning teachers kill the delight and dig graves for my stories by doing things that seem so harmless at the time, such as asking this dumb question (regarding *Hattie and the Fox*): "How do you think Hattie feels when she knows it's a fox in the bushes?"

How do you think I felt when I received this e-mail via my assistant, Edna?

My name is Haylee Eades I am a year 2-3 classroom teacher at Roebourne District High School in the Pilbara district of Western Australia. This term as part of our literacy program we are doing

an author study on Mem Fox. My class consists of 15 Aboriginal students. The children are enjoying having a Mem Fox text (one text per week) read to them as part of our shared reading sessions (a component of the Aboriginal Literacy Strategy). The texts are also integrated throughout our writing sessions. I was hoping that that we would be able to write to Mem Fox later in the term as a way of the students reflecting and justifying which text is their favourite.... I would appreciate it if you could respond to this email and the suitability of my request as a way of informing my planning. Kind regards, Haylee

Sadly, yet again, a well-intentioned teacher wanted to "use" my books instead of reading them. Astonishing though it may seem, may I reiterate, I write books to be read and loved. I write to inform, to mesmerize, to soothe, and to challenge, not to be used and abused. I write books like *Two Little Monkeys* and *The Goblin and the Empty Chair* so children will say, "Read it again! Read it again!" rather than die of boredom. So I replied to this young teacher, hoping to inspire her and not deaden her obvious youthful enthusiasm:

Thank you for your lovely email. I'm answering myself as of course my assistant is in bed at this hour.

I adore you for wanting to use my books but they are books and stories, you know, not texts! I almost felt tears in my eyes when I read the word 'texts'. Please don't kill my books. To heck with the curriculum! Just love them!

As a teacher-educator of 28 years' standing let me whisper a secret (don't tell any one who taught you!!!): the best way to 'use' books is to read them over and over and over again, especially on the day they're first introduced. Read with

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vitality and wild enthusiasm and giggles and laughter and craziness and quietness and zest. Don’t waste ‘teach-ery time’ introducing the books to the gorgeous kids in your classroom: they won’t concentrate until you actually start to read and then whammo, you’ll have them in the palm of your hand, and you’ll make a HUGE difference. Lucky them!

Make me happy! Much love, and apologies for my bossiness. I am too old to change my ways now.

She replied very kindly at the end of March (2012):

Sorry about the delay in responding but I wish to thank you for your words of wisdom. We have had an amazing term reading, listening to, singing to and acting out your stories. Thank you for your contact details. The children were so excited about being able to write to you. Kind regards, Haylee

And finally, here is my response to an Australian university student who

wrote to say she would be teaching a microlesson on reading aloud as part of a college assignment and thanking me for having written *Reading Magic*, which she had found illuminating:

Dear Jess,

I’m thrilled you’re going to switch on the read-aloud light in your micro-lesson. I hope it goes brilliantly. Three cheers for you!

When I was a uni lecturer [college professor] I read aloud to my students at least three times in every class. It’s the one thing they all remind me about whenever I meet them: ‘I *loved* it when you read aloud to us,’ they say.

I’m pleased they remember because underneath all that joy they also heard wonderful words and ways to use them; stunning sentences and ways to construct them; memorable stories and how to shape them; linguistic problems and how best to solve them. They also heard bold beginnings and deeply satisfying endings. And in amongst it all, from the stories they listened to, they

learnt life’s lessons and how to be good and caring citizens.

Reading aloud is a way of life, a way of loving, and of course, the best way of teaching literacy.

All the best in your excellent endeavours!

And as my mother used to say at the end of a story, which I will purloin for the end of my sermon:

Four, six, eight, ten,

That’s all—Amen!

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