

Making Sense with Informational Texts: The Interactive Read-Aloud as Responsive Teaching

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Few instructional activities exist that everyone, regardless of educational philosophy, can agree on, but a teacher reading a picture book aloud to young children is one of them. Though sidelined as a practice during the days of Reading First, read-alouds have regained importance in recent years (Worthy, Consalvo, Bogard, & Russell, 2012). But over time classrooms, like all social contexts, have changed. Though fictional narratives have predominated historically in teacher read-alouds, much attention in recent years has been given to increasing both the classroom use of informational texts and the text complexity of those works. Today, with considerable attention given to close reading, read-alouds are often promoted as an instructional strategy to scaffold readers through complex texts. Further, in response to calls for greater percentages of informational texts in elementary classrooms, some of those read-alouds are of informational texts (although, as Maloch & Bomer, 2013, note, not everyone is using the term in the same way).

While the decision to incorporate more informational texts into elementary classrooms appears to be settled, and teacher read-alouds offer potential for scaffolding complex texts, it is easy to lose sight of the original goal for read-alouds, that of making sense with text. Also, because different genres and text types evoke different ways of comprehending (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001), transposing a set of practices developed around fictional picture books onto informational texts is not necessarily seamless. In this article, we advocate for interactive read-alouds of informational texts as an avenue for supporting literacy development while building on the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse children. Specifically, we consider issues related to selecting informational texts and interacting with them.

In an interactive read-aloud, the teacher reads textual print but also engages in thinking aloud (Oyler, 1996). Students also play an important role in the literacy event as their spontaneous comments and questions asked in response to the text are essential. One note of caution: although interactive read-alouds offer embedded opportunities for teachers to make more complex texts accessible, they are not at all compatible with efforts that demand convergent sense-making, which close reading is often interpreted to mean (see Aukerman & Schuldt, 2016, for more on this issue).

Considering Cultural Relevancy

Following Ladson-Billings (1995, 2001), educators who prioritize culturally relevant teaching:

- hold high academic expectations,
- demonstrate cultural competence, the understanding that their own worldview and understandings may or may not align with those of their students, and
- are sociopolitically aware, that is, they have a willingness to acknowledge and critique inequity.

Fundamental to all three strands is the understanding that “knowledge is continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students. It is not static and unchanging” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 81). By viewing information as socially constructed, classroom participants can treat that information with greater scrutiny, examining it through multiple perspectives and challenging it as needed. Recently, in an effort to update the theory and reinforce pedagogical components, Ladson-Billings and others have also noted the importance of pedagogy that sustains cultural practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).

Considering Interactive Read-Alouds

Student learning occurs, in large part, through classroom talk (Mercer, 1995). In elementary classrooms, these interactions often surround printed texts (Wells, 1990). Although teachers have been reading aloud to their students for a long time, the read-aloud can take many forms. In an interactive read-

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aloud, rather than waiting for the teacher to sanction student talk by calling on a student with a raised hand or acknowledging a turn-and-talk time, students are allowed to make comments and ask questions as they have them.

As a part of our long-term study of interactive read-alouds and culturally relevant teaching, we have, at times, followed students graduating from our teacher preparation program into their first year of teaching.

An example of what spontaneous student commenting looks like can be seen in first-year teacher Megan Lankford’s read-aloud of Krull’s (2011) biography about Franklin D. Roosevelt with her third graders. Maria commented immediately when she heard

something that didn’t make sense to her. Another student then voiced her thinking in response.

Maria: I wonder why he does not call him father because mostly fancy persons call them father instead of popsy.

Lauren: Well, I disagree with you because he might have been little. (Transcript, March 4, 2014).

Teachers voice their own comments and questions as they have them throughout the reading, thus modeling their own comprehending as could be seen in the same unit of study when Megan read then commented on the text (the bold text is from the book):

He visited her home in New York City. Eleanor showed him the homeless shelters where she volunteered. I’m gonna read that again because that kind of reminds me a little bit of what Franklin did as a kid. **Eleanor showed him the homeless shelters**

where she volunteered. Hmm, so I guess she must care about the homeless and the poor too. (Transcript, March 5, 2014).

As can be seen in these examples, the kinds of thinking aloud done by teachers and students during interactive read-alouds of informational texts are often like those expressed during read-alouds of fictional texts. Evidence exists, however, which demonstrates that dialogue and teacher scaffolding are particularly important when the text is informational (Heisey & Kucan, 2010; Mantzicopoulos, 2011; Pappas, Varelas, Barry, & Rife, 2003). In addition, Oyler (1996) found that students were much more likely to position themselves as experts on a topic during interactive read-alouds of informational texts.

Student initiations in which they directly shared their knowledge from outside the text, without referencing personal experience or another text, were coded as claiming expertise. This category was quite rare during the reading of other genres, but was common during read-alouds of information books. (p. 156)

Informational texts can offer a path into literacy development not found with fictional narratives (Caswell & Duke, 1998). And because informational texts convey knowledge about the social and natural world they lend themselves to culturally relevant read-aloud experiences.

Although informational texts provide important opportunities for children to make meaning of their world, considerable variability exists in texts’ content and format (Pappas, 2006), which can impact the ways in which teachers share texts with children. In the next section we offer some recommendations about choosing and reading aloud informational texts.

How does my text selection affect the cultural relevancy of my read-aloud?

The text is an important component as it sets the context for the read-aloud (Pelligrini & Galda, 2003/2009). A teacher’s understandings of student capability, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness can be seen, in part, through the texts selected for use. Yet choosing a text can be difficult, particularly when the goal is diversity of perspectives and text types.

Little has changed with regard to the systematic exclusion of groups of people from children’s books since Larrick (1965) published her essay on the matter. Repre-

sensation matters—a lot. Much of the research on representation in children’s books has focused in on fictional narratives. Serious representation issues also exist, however, in informational texts published for children (Crisp, 2015).

All children should be able to see themselves and their communities reflected in the books their teachers read to them. Furthermore, as children’s book maker Christopher Myers (2013) reminds us, children’s texts have to serve as more than a mirror for their readers; they must also shape readers’ views of the possible, pushing us past the narrow stereotypes of our own small contexts into more generous perceptions of others. Thus, community representations cannot be token or limited to the brief historical moments with which they are often associated.

In order to truly make representation a priority, we must consider whole sets of texts in addition to single titles, ensuring that multiple perspectives from within a particular group of people are included and remaining aware that many cultural practices cross groups (Campano & Ghiso, 2011; Medina, 2010). These text sets must include various genres, many that are informational in nature.

An important part of apprenticing students into various disciplines (e.g., science, history) is to provide an opportunity for them to imagine themselves in those fields of study. Yet, in spite of stated ambitions for their students, elementary teachers overwhelmingly select texts that describe the *what* over the *how*. For example, a teacher is much more likely to select a book about frogs than one that describes how scientists learned what they know about frogs (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001). Incongruously, teachers also have a strong preference for texts written in narrative or in a hybrid writing style over expository writing, especially when choosing read-alouds (Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Though we acknowledge that children’s books do not always fit into simple narrative/expository or fiction/nonfiction binaries, we also see missed opportunities to cultivate discipline-specific literacies (Fang, 2004), and equally important, to examine how these literacies can be used to obscure how scientists actually work (May, Holbrook, & Meyers, 2008).

When selecting informational texts for your students, consider the following:

- Is this text one that allows children’s everyday sense-making to be treated as complementary to scientific reasoning? (Warren et al., 2001)
- Does the text reflect how the information was constructed, or does it present knowledge as fixed and timeless?

- How does the text fit into larger socio-historical narratives?

Though we encourage critical thinking during the text selection process, a read-aloud of any text can be culturally and linguistically relevant due to the importance of the interactions that take place during the read-aloud. Relevancy can only take place within a responsive context due to its dependence upon the students in the room.

How do I know if a read aloud is culturally relevant?

If, after a teacher read-aloud, you find yourself saying, “Oh, my gosh! Those kids know so much,” you can be certain you have just experienced a culturally relevant read-aloud. Too often, counterproductive assumptions about culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families have negatively affected our ability as teachers to build on all that our students know, using their areas of strength as avenues into new information. In addition to providing a way for teachers to think aloud, thus pulling back the curtain to let students see how they make sense of text, the interactive read-aloud sends clear messages to students that what they have to say is important. When a teacher pauses, providing appropriate wait time between pages or after a child makes a comment, she is sending a clear message that the other students are capable and also have informed things to say—they only need a moment. Rather than dismissing comments they do not understand, teachers should respond questioningly, allowing students to make their thinking clear, describe how they arrived at it, and explain how it adds to the collective understanding of the text. Thus teachers’ responses to children’s questions and comments should serve to clarify, verify, and correct rather than simply to evaluate. When asking questions, rather than asking those that fit into the category of guess-what-I’m-thinking, they should ask with genuine interest those questions that have children engaging deeply with big-idea concepts, seeking

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Selecting Informational Texts

Though we could have picked many topics, for this list we highlight books about science. Note that many of the books listed here in one category would also fit under another category as well.

Consider Representation

Who gets to be a scientist? When children are asked to draw a scientist, their pictures tend to look the same—a white, older man wearing a white lab coat and glasses (Finson, 2002). As you consider the texts you select for read-alouds, understand that the scientists you make visible in your classroom also communicate important information about who has access to scientific careers. Here are a few books that highlight scientists from marginalized groups:

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. Penguin/Dial.

Temple Grandin by Sy Montgomery. Houghton Mifflin.

The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps by Jeanette Winter. Schwartz & Wade.

What Color Is My World? by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Raymond Obstfeld. Candlewick Press.

Consider Rigidity of Knowledge and Author Visibility

Is the knowledge in the informational book treated as firmly established and as if it existed in a vacuum? In spite of what we learned in school about how knowledge is generated, a values-neutral scientific-method-based process is a gross oversimplification of how scientists work. Though scientific knowledge is empirically based, it is also socially and culturally embedded, tentative, and the result of human imagination and creativity (Lederman, Abd-El-Khalick, Bell, & Schwartz, 2002).

Authors of informational texts are increasingly pulling back the curtain and allowing readers to follow along as they explore the topic rather than translating settled knowledge for a child audience (Aronson, 2011; Zarnowski & Turkel, 2012): The following books have to do with the nature of science, and/or they allow readers to explore subjects alongside authors.

Boy, Were We Wrong about the Human Body! by Kathleen V. Kudlinski, illustrated by Debbie Tilley. Dutton Children's Books.

Boy, Were We Wrong about Dinosaurs! by Kathleen V. Kudlinski, illustrated by S. D. Schindler. Dutton Children's Books.

Boy, Were We Wrong about the Solar System! by Kathleen V. Kudlinski, illustrated by John Rocco. Dutton Children's Books.

Boy, Were We Wrong about the Weather! by Kathleen V. Kudlinski, illustrated by Sebastia Serra. Dutton Children's Books.

Butterfly Tree by Sandra Markle, illustrated by Leslie Wu. Peachtree.

Invincible Microbe by Jim Murphy and Alison Blank. Houghton Mifflin.

Scaly Spotted Feathered Frilled: How Do We Know What Dinosaurs Really Looked Like? by Catherine Thimmes. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

For upper elementary and middle school, also consider Harcourt's Scientists in the Field series:

Beetle Busters by Loree Griffin Burns, photos by Ellen Hara-simowicz.

Citizen Scientists by Loree Griffin Burns.

The Next Wave: The Quest to Harness the Power of the Ocean by Elizabeth Rusch.

The Tapir Scientist by Sy Montgomery, photos by Nic Bishop.

Wild Horse Scientists by Kay Frydenborg.

Consider Risky Topics

Too often we as teachers attempt to protect our students from topics which they are already not only aware of but experiencing firsthand. Though we know our own contexts best and must stay attuned to them, many of the topics most often left unaddressed are those that could best benefit from professional guidance (Hess, 2002).

No Monkeys, No Chocolate by Melissa Stewart and Allen Young. Charlesbridge.

What's In There? by Robie H. Harris. Candlewick Press.

When Rivers Burned by Linda Crotta Brennan. Apprentice Shop Books.

Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? by Tanya Lee Stone. Macmillan.

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Hess, D. E. (2002). Discussing controversial public issues in secondary social studies classrooms: Learning from skilled teachers. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 30(1), 10–41.

Lederman, N. G., Abd-El-Khalick, F., Bell, R. L., & Schwartz, R. S. (2002). Views of nature of science questionnaire: Toward valid and meaningful assessment of learners' conceptions of nature of science. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 39(6), 497–521.

Zarnowski, M., & Turkel, S. (2012). Creating new knowledge: Books that demystify the process. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 38(1), 28–34.

out information about how the ideas connect to the children’s lives (and thus why they might matter to them), and thinking through how the ideas fit (or clash) with what they already know. For sample questions, see Figure 1.

“But I’m not comfortable with children calling out”

Classroom management is (and should be) a priority for all teachers. Maintaining an environment in which children are safe and productively engaged is essential to the culturally relevant classroom. Yet, too often we have observed read-alouds with students who are compliant but not necessarily engaged. Facilitating interactive read-alouds can be difficult, as they require facilitating a productive discussion while maintaining a stance that acknowledges and responds to students’ in-the-moment decision making. Too often, we as teachers begin our instructional activity with such a rigid plan in place that we are not able to hear what our students have to say. Though difficult at first for many, we believe that culturally relevant teaching components that comprise the practice of reading aloud necessitate interaction. If necessary, those beginning the practice might start with reading to a pair or small group of students or spend time before reading generating lists of what sort of comments and questions will best serve the educational needs of the group. For however we achieve our interactive read-aloud goals, high expectations have to include teaching and expecting students to productively participate in academic conversation while making space to question presented information and imagine alternate possibilities.

Conclusion

Teacher read-alouds of informational texts provide opportunities to encourage children to make meaning of their lives, experiences, and the natural world. Although we have

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- Can you say more about that?*
 - So do you mean . . . ?*
 - Is there another way to say that? I don’t understand yet.*
 - I feel like I’m missing an important piece of what you’re thinking.*
 - Could you walk me through . . . ?*
 - Help me understand how that connects to [the text, what we’re talking about, etc.].*

Figure 1: Teacher Questions Designed to Clarify Student Response

outlined suggestions for choosing culturally relevant texts, the power of the read-aloud is in the moment-by-moment interactions that children have with each other and the teacher. By maintaining high expectations for students’ participation and meaning making, teachers foster children’s ability to inquire, critique, and analyze texts. ●

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