

ON THE SAME PAGE

Shared Reading Beyond the Primary
Grades

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Contents

Acknowledgments

	v
1. On the Same Page: Shared Reading Beyond the Primary Grades	1
2. “Pleeze, Just One More Chapter”: Expanding Reading Fluency with Connected Shared Reading	24
3. Learning to Read and Reading to Learn: Understanding Strategic Shared Reading	55
4. “When Do I Teach Vocabulary?” Shared Reading and Word Study	77
5. Building on Common Ground: Shared Paths to Content Literacy	96
6. Writing Roads: Shared Reading as the Foundation for Integrated Language Arts	117
7. Shared Reading as a Bridge to Independence	145
8. “But What About Grades?” Assessing the “Value” of Shared Reading	167
<i>Appendix A</i> Shared Reading to Support Word Study	199
<i>Appendix B</i> Resources for Content Area Shared Reading	202
<i>Appendix C</i> Shared Reading to Support Content Literacy	207
<i>Appendix D</i> Writers on Writing: Shared Reading to Support Independent Writing	230
<i>Appendix E</i> Picture Books to Support the Teaching of Literary Devices	233

<i>Appendix F</i>	Books for Shared Reading	238
<i>Appendix G</i>	High-Interest Leveled Books for Paired Shared Reading	242
<i>Appendix H</i>	Complete Texts	245
<i>Appendix I</i>	Forms	255
<i>Appendix J</i>	Guiding Readers Through the Text	289
<i>Literature References</i>		297
<i>Professional References</i>		303
<i>Credits</i>		307

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On the Same Page: Shared Reading Beyond the Primary Grades

Because words are essential in building the thought connections in the brain, the more language a child experiences—through books and through conversation with others, not passively from television—the more advantaged socially, educationally, and in every way that child will be for the rest of his or her life.

Mem Fox, *Reading Magic*

Recently I sat in a tenth-grade San Diego classroom listening to the teacher's animated reading of Lynne Ewing's novel *Party Girl*, and I was struck with the intensity of the students' concentration on the book. No one was sleeping, no one was whispering or writing notes, no one was applying makeup, and no one interrupted the reading for a bathroom pass. The principal leaned toward me and whispered, "They're not always like this, you know." I did know.

When I began teaching and reading young adult literature with my students thirty years ago, reading an engaging novel to my students quickly became the first survival tool in my arsenal. My students were angry and fighting and bored and tired of school. So was I, and I had been there only for a few days! As I marked time until I could resign from teaching, I found two sets of young adult novels and decided to read one of them to my students. I gave them a choice

by telling them one book was about sex (Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*) and the other was about teenage rebellion (Swarthout's *Bless the Beasts and the Children*). They chose the novel about sex, and I began reading to them as some followed along with individual copies of the book.

At the time, I had no idea I was in the process of discovering an approach to reading that would meet the needs of the students in such a powerful way. I had never heard of shared reading, and I knew no way to teach English other than the ways I had been taught as a student. I was a product of the same system that the main character in Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak* describes:

Code Breaking

Hairwoman has been buying new earrings. One pair hangs all the way down to her shoulders. Another has bells in them like the pair Heather gave me at Christmas. I guess I can't wear mine anymore. There should be a law.

It's Nathaniel Hawthorne Month in English. Poor Nathaniel. Does he know what they've done to him? We are reading *The Scarlet Letter* one sentence at a time, tearing it up and chewing on its bones.

It's all about SYMBOLISM, says Hairwoman. Every word chosen by Nathaniel, every comma, every paragraph break—these were all done on purpose. To get a decent grade in class, we have to figure out what he was really trying to say. Why couldn't he just say what he meant? Would they pin scarlet letters on his chest? B for blunt, S for straightforward? (100)

As far as I was concerned at that time, Hairwoman's teaching was for important literature—required literature. *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* was not Hawthorne, so I felt justified in not spending our days analyzing the text. I saw reading this book as a way for us to spend our time together until I could resign, so I did very little in terms of actually “teaching” the novel. We didn't look up vocabulary words, and we didn't do study guides. I didn't give them quizzes, and I wasn't concerned about test grades. We simply read the book. We laughed and cried, and we closed our door so people in the hallways couldn't hear the potentially objectionable scenes.

But a strange thing happened on the way to that important literature I wanted to teach. My students started coming to class more often, and they brought their friends who were skipping other classes. They fought less and had little patience with students who were disruptive. I spent less time managing the class and more time reading as students magically created their own forms of discipline. As they became more involved with the characters and the events of our book, I talked less and they generated our topics.

At the time, I didn't have the educational terminology or the confidence to describe the approach I was using. In fact, I always felt as if I were doing something less than what I was hired to do. But I did know that the more we read, the more I felt as though I were finding a measure of success with students who had given up on school and literacy. When we finished *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* and my students asked me to read another book, I knew I had discovered a way of teaching that I would always use to help older students discover the magic of reading a great book. My students and I had quickly discovered the affective benefit of shared reading; it took many years of experience for us to discover the cognitive support the same approach could offer.

Many years after my initial experience with shared reading, I had the pleasure of spending two years in Mary Giard's first-grade classroom. I was able to see the kind of reading environment Mem Fox describes when several times a day Mary and her students gathered in front of her chair for a time of shared reading. She used Big Books and charts so students could follow the text as she offered them the voice support of her fluent reading. As I observed the daily shared readings, I began to truly understand both the complexity and the value of this experience for Mary and the learners in her care.

Mary read fairy tales and poems, picture books and chapter books, and with each text her students' worlds seemed larger than the day before. When they read *Seven Chinese Brothers*, her students had a rich discussion as they teased out the meaning of the word *baptism* (which many compared to time in a Jacuzzi). Multiple readings of Sendak's book *Chicken Soup with Rice* led students to explore words and imitate Sendak's language patterns in their own writing. Mary's choices for shared reading led students to further explore related titles, authors, characters, and themes during their independent reading. Some students always chose to reread texts Mary had read that day, and others chose to read more books by that same author. A community of learners was built, and in the course of that building, those students were able to comprehend issues and discuss universal themes far beyond their chronological ages or independent reading abilities.

Research in Support of Shared Reading

Mary's students were experiencing the benefits of what Don Holdaway calls a shared book experience. With the publication of Holdaway's *The Foundations of Literacy*, educators began to examine the value of the shared book experience as an essential approach offering a range of support for emerging readers. "Teachers have always used the special power of reading to a group of children

as an important but separate aspect of their language teaching,” says Holdaway, “but they have seldom brought that power over into the centre of the instructional programmes in reading and written expression. Reading to a group of children in school has little instructional value simply because the print cannot be seen, shared, and discussed” (64). This statement in no way diminishes the value of read-aloud. Rather, adding the approach of shared reading as *instructional* time gives read-aloud its rightful place as a time to experience the rich language, engaging stories, intriguing information, and poetic rhythms that are firmly embedded in most readers’ memories without overwhelming emerging readers with too many instructional lessons.

Holdaway highlighted three important stages of the shared book experience: discovery, exploration, and independent experience and expression. He advocated that teachers control readers’ familiarity with the text by using such approaches as unison reading, language experience, oral cloze, enlarged texts, whole-group readings, and repeated readings and listening posts while cautioning teachers to “maintain such a flow of *new* material that none can be processed repetitively to the point of perfect rote memorization” (127). Students would experience the text in each of these approaches with the voice support of other fluent readers.

As a way of deciding which students need more familiarity with a text than others, Holdaway suggested that we look at the nature of reluctant reading behavior as a way to decide how much repeated exposure to each text we might use. For example, with emergent readers, we might use five or six repetitions, and with those who are early readers he recommended one or two repetitions with longer delays between each exposure. For those at the fluency stage, or with older, remedial readers, he recommended full introduction of the text with no repetition (128). In establishing the parameters for how he was using the shared book experience as a level of support to meet the literacy needs of all the learners in a classroom, Holdaway provided each of us with a goal and a model for our own classrooms.

Margaret Mooney further reinforced the goal of the shared book experience in *Reading To, With, and By Children*: “Shared reading is an approach where the teacher replicates the bedtime story situation with the class, a group of children, or an individual child to enable them to enjoy and participate in the reading of books which they cannot yet read for themselves” (10). With the shared reading approach, we are able to support students as they move beyond the range of their independent reading. It is the implementation of this definition that gives developing readers the opportunity to see and hear what fluent reading sounds like, learn new words, and understand how a reader approaches a challenging text. The summer my great-niece, Madelyn, was seven, she reminded me of the critical value of shared reading in terms of reading, language, and writing.

During the previous year, Madelyn had enjoyed several shared readings of Lewis Carroll's *The Annotated Alice*. She particularly enjoyed the following passage:

“The time has come,” the walrus said,
“To talk of many things,
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—
Of cabbages—and kings
And why the sea is boiling hot
And whether pigs have wings.” (235)

Figure 1.1

