

In Defence  
*of*  
Read-Aloud  
Sustaining Best Practice

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Foreword by Regie Routman

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**W**hat is all the fuss about reading aloud? Some of you are already confused, aren’t you? Perhaps you didn’t know there was a fuss. Well, there is – and there has been one for a very long time. Oh, it has ebbed and flowed as most things in education do, dependent upon the vagaries of the educational reform of the day; politics; new policies; the lather fictitious parent Mrs Stump has worked up; or the position on reading aloud taken by the one-and-only Gunilla Everspout, the literacy consultant who’s been hired to “straighten out the teachers in this school”.

Gunilla appeared recently in the school of some very good friends of mine. A seismic blast that may have eclipsed the shot heard round the world was evidenced when she told some of my former students that reading aloud could be likened to recess. (She would do well to steer clear of my automobile on rainy days when wet pavement is tolerated by the authorities as an excuse for out-of-control vehicles.) Needless to say, she did not view reading aloud to the students as any manner of instruction. As I listened to the stories of the conversation that ensued with her, I smiled knowingly, because I hear similar stories from all parts of the world on a regular basis.

There’s the reading coordinator with multiple degrees in literacy (including a postdoctorate) who told a year-eight teacher, “I’ll come back one day when you’re actually teaching” after discovering a read-aloud in process. Then, there’s the foundation-year teacher who had a letter of reprimand put in her file by her principal for “wasting valuable instructional time reading aloud to the students”. Or how about the year-three teacher who asked for my help last year because his year-level counterparts at the international school were preparing a “note of concern” for the administration because he was reading aloud to his students despite their request that he conform to their preference for no read-alouds above year two? (Their classes were also three workbook pages ahead of his class, so you can see what a serious matter of educational import this was.) Did I mention the librarian who was told that reading to kids was not what she was paid to do – that she should be putting her master’s degree in library science to work by *scanning books for checkout*? And, of course, we must not leave out my favourite parent, Mrs Stump, who arrived unannounced for an appointment she never booked with me to share the news that she and several other parents were concerned about my reading aloud to children who were gifted, gifted, gifted, or the principal who told me that reading aloud is what lazy teachers do when they don’t want to teach, or the colleague who told me I should “get on back to primary school” when I mentioned a great read-aloud for middle-years kids. I could go on, but I don’t need to, because many of you have your own stories.

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My point is – this book is aptly titled. The practice of reading aloud should not need a defence, but it does need one.

It's a bit discouraging to find that Gunilla Everspout and various members of the League of the Ill-Informed are everywhere – you can't escape running into them – yet it's rather heartening to discover that equally ubiquitous are teachers who care deeply about their instructional practice: teachers who desire to be well informed, knowledgeable and articulate. Teachers like you. How do I know you care deeply about such things? It's easy. Teachers who don't are allergic to professional reading, and here you are with a professional book in your hands or on your electronic reader. Yay, you!

### **The Research Then**

When I began work on my doctoral dissertation in the mid-1990s, it was clearly stressed by those who would determine my fate that my study needed to make a contribution to the profession. I knew, right from the start, that I would focus my research on the benefits of reading aloud to kids, and I was amazed to find a plethora of empirical research about the benefits. The studies I reviewed at that time noted gains in comprehension (Combs 1987; Elley and Mangubhai 1983; Labbo and Teale 1990; Morrow and Smith 1990; Richardson 1998; Yaden 1988; Yaden, Smolkin and Conlon 1989); listening skills (Elley and Mangubhai 1983); enhancement of early reading skills (Durkin 1974; Huck 1979; Warren, Prater and Griswold 1990); speaking skills (Chomsky 1972; Elley and Mangubhai 1983); vocabulary acquisition (Durkin 1981; Elley 1988, 1989; Hicks and Wadlington 1994; Maher 1991; Stahl, Richek and Vandevier 1990); parental involvement (Cornell, Senechal and Broda 1988; Robson and Whitley 1989; Warren, Prater and Griswold 1990); and student motivation (Castle 1994; Herrold, Stanchfield and Serabian 1989; Layne 1994; Trelease 1989; Wiesendanger and Bader 1989). I was, of course, also expected to note those studies that did *not* offer support for reading aloud as a form of “best practice”.

I found none.

My research on incidental vocabulary acquisition by students from listening to teacher read-alouds (Layne 1996, 1998) was recognised with two awards; I mention that only to underscore the point that if I had purposely overlooked or even accidentally missed key studies that did not support the practice of reading aloud, it would have and should have been viewed as a major misstep in my review of the literature. Wouldn't

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easily kids can really understand that when you explain it to them. I always made a pact with my classes that they could read ahead all they wanted, as long as they didn't allow their new knowledge to interfere with my instruction. Over the years I can think of only once when it wasn't honoured by a student. Sadly, he was never seen or heard from again.

Dear Steven,

We have the most amazing book room in my school! I actually designed it myself - not that it matters - but I did. I'm sure you're very busy with your own family and career, but I have attached twenty-seven photos of my book room in case you have time to view them. When you were at our conference, I went to your session but did not have time to ask this question before rushing off to Mem Fox's luncheon (she was fabulous, by the way!). When I am reading aloud *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo 2003) with my teammate Harold (we combine our year-two classes for this), I keep thinking we should take fifty-two copies of the book from our book room and give them to the kids to make sure they are following along as we read aloud. Harold rarely argues, but he really gets worked up about this issue and says we should leave the books in the book room. I will admit they look really good on the shelves, which are all colour coded, by the way, to match my levelling system. Check out photos 5, 12, 23 and 24 to see how it looks! What are your thoughts on the matter?

All the best,

*Addled in Anchorage*

Dear Addled,

*So glad to hear that Mem was fabulous at the conference luncheon. How did I do in my session? If I'm going to have to play long-distance referee between you and Harold, then you must both agree to compromise, because you're both right. We always want to get books into the hands of kids; however, I have come up with an idea that in situations like this, we should let it be their choice whether they follow along or not. So ... make the books available, but don't force them. Lovin' those photos, yes sirree.*

*Less than perplexed,*

*Steven*

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There is a scene in Jerry Spinelli's fabulous *Stargirl* (2000) that I capitalise upon for both visualisation and writing. It is an emotionally powerful and riveting moment – and I have evidence that it stays with my students long after the book has ended. I say with confidence that there is no way on my initial reading of the book that I could have been ready to make use of that text in the way I do now. In fact, the difference in what I can do with that book when reading it aloud now, and what I would have been capable of doing with it on an initial read is embarrassing. Yes, I would have been “experiencing it” with my students – very authentic – but at what cost?

I will acknowledge the exceptions such as reading aloud a newspaper article on the spot to model thinking aloud for your students or reading aloud from a medical dictionary without preparation so they can witness you struggle. There are always exceptions. Let's not put our energy into creating the arguments; rather, let's acknowledge that the delivery of high-quality instruction *typically* demands preparation on our part. If reading aloud to kids is instruction, then having intimate knowledge of the text (which requires a minimum of one full and thorough reading on your own before reading the text aloud to the students) is non-negotiable.

### FAQs

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Dear Steven,

I am writing to tell you about Tanner, an amazing year eleven who is smart as a whip, very polite and always does his homework. It is such a pleasure to have this young man in class in high school English! Of course I don't have favourites, but if I did ... Anyway the reason for this note is to ask for your advice. I am a strong advocate of read-alouds as I know you are. I read to the kids every day. A few days ago Tanner asked me to read a specific book to the class. His enthusiasm for the book was contagious, and I couldn't let him down, so I said yes. I had not realised that Nicole, who sits near my desk, overheard the conversation with Tanner – and now she has suggested a book she would like me to read to the class. I am not wild about the book she mentioned. What should I do?

A faithful fan,  
*Bothered in Bemidji*

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Some people aren't wild about dealing with death – especially in books written for kids. I remember Mrs Stump coming to one of my colleagues years ago to complain about her reading *Bridge to Terabithia* to the students because “a girl dies in that book, and my child might believe he could die!” News flash, Mrs Stump! By year five I think most of them have already stumbled onto that troublesome piece of reality.

I love the way Barbara Park handles the topic in *Mick Harte Was Here*. First, it's easier on the kids because Mick has already passed away when the book opens. Phoebe, his older and angry sibling, is left to pick up the pieces left by her brother's sudden and entirely unexpected departure. Second, it's raw and realistic. In Phoebe's own words, she hates “my new family of three”, and she takes out her hostility over the hand she's been dealt on just about everyone.

What is particularly brilliant of Park and informative to kids is the discovery that Mick lost his life simply by riding his bike with no helmet. The understated accident – his bike tyre just hit a rock in the street and down he came – underscores how easy it is to lose it all. Park's letter to the kids at the end of the book is very convincing – I imagine a lot more of them wearing their bike helmets after hearing this story read aloud. I've always said, “Read-alouds can save lives.” Here's a very tangible example.

**My mother and her eight siblings had rural roots, and farming was a way of life for a fair amount of their childhood.** My cousins and I have always revelled in their stories of life on the farm, and I believe that may be why Gary Paulsen's *Harris and Me* has been a favourite read-aloud for me for many years. As a matter of fact, I just concluded reading it aloud to my doctoral students a few weeks ago.

This is the book I reach for when I want to generate a discussion about giving voice to characters. I believe I am fairly effective at bringing nine-year-old Harris to life by giving him a voice that I have been told lingers with my students for the rest of their lives. The boy is outrageous to say the least, and his penchant for drawing his visiting cousin, a city boy, into all manner of mayhem provides the perfect backdrop for those who want to introduce students to a character that “stays with you”.

Harris does have loose lips in terms of his language; mild profanity marches out on a semi-regular basis. This would be unrealistic in some circles, but in a rural area where a nine-year-old boy is unschooled (it appears that way), we wholeheartedly believe it. Humour is one of the two top genres for reaching reluctant readers (mystery is the other), and this book provides it in spades. Moreover, Paulsen masterfully provides two