

**Double The Power Of Story:  
Create A Story Hour That  
Contributes To Reading  
Comprehension While Exploring  
Internal And External Worlds**

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*School and public librarians and teachers who read aloud to elementary (primary) children can use techniques that empower children with increased academic skills, social skills, and cultural awareness. This paper presents research-based, recommended strategies for reading aloud that both improve listening and reading comprehension and develop literary appreciation. Themes and topics of stories selected can supplement or reinforce curricular learning and explore thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Children practice social skills and respect for others while listening to and discussing stories. Included are tips for making story hour an enjoyable experience that develops a reading culture.*

Reading aloud to children is usually a very pleasurable experience for both the reader and the listener. It can also contribute to children’s academic, personal, social, and cultural awareness and growth. As an academic enrichment activity, it can increase the listeners’ exposure to language and literature through a variety of vicarious experiences. Story hour can also improve children’s listening and reading comprehension skills when the reader uses recommended read-aloud techniques. The stories selected can facilitate children’s awareness of their internal and external worlds by exploring their own and others’ thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and cultures. In order to achieve the desired goals of academic, personal, and social growth in listeners, it is important for readers to plan age-appropriate topics for story hour and to select well-written stories for themes and character development rather than simple entertainment.

After a brief review of the relevant research, this paper will focus on practical recommendations for improving children’s academic and social skills during story hour in the public library, school library, or classroom. I have drawn these recommendations from the conclusions of research and the professional literature as well as my own experience reading aloud to elementary (primary) school children in kindergarten, grade one, and grade four.

**Research on reading aloud and the development of language arts skills**

Over the years researchers have repeatedly concluded that reading aloud correlates with children's success in school (Smolkin, Conlon, & Yaden, 1988; Strickland, Morrow, Feitelson, & Iraqi, 1990) and that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson,

Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p.33). Reading aloud has the additional benefit of creating "a pleasure connection between the child and print" (Trelease, 1995, p.46).

The professional literature and texts in the field of reading and reading instruction also support the interrelation of listening and reading skills. Several studies have concluded that reading aloud and instruction in listening skills can enhance both listening comprehension and the enjoyment of literature (Boodt, 1984; Brownell, 1986; Choate & Rakes, 1987; Friedman, 1986; Hanks, 1988; Howe, 2000; Lundsteen, 1971; Pearson & Fielding, 1982; Ringler & Weber, 1984; Simpson, 1986; Smith, 1963; Walcutt, Lampert & McCracken, 1974; Warren & Fitzgerald, 1997). Literacy research documents the benefits of reading aloud on

- vocabulary,
- general linguistic ability,
- concepts of print and books,
- sense of story structure and genre,
- world knowledge,
- reading comprehension, and
- positive attitudes towards books and reading

(Burns & Roe, 1976; Cooter, 1991; Dennis & Walter, 1995; Elley, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1989; Howe, 2000; LeLoup & Stone, 1991; Meyer, Stahl, Linn, & Wardrop, 1994; Morrow, 1989; Rosenhouse, Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1997; Strickland, Morrow, Feitelson & Iraqi, 1990; Trelease, 1995; Warren & Fitzgerald, 1997).

The general conclusion is that reading aloud develops listening comprehension and language skills that children then utilise when reading by themselves.

This research and the practice of reading aloud are consistent with Vygotsky's theory of literacy as developing in social contexts with modelling and guidance by adults (Morrow, 1989; Rosenhouse et al., 1997). Story hour reading aloud is definitely a social activity in which adults can model appropriate language and social behaviour, present a variety of literary experiences, and guide comprehension. The research and Vygotsky's theory are also consistent with the testimony of many authors, from around the world and of all social backgrounds, that their parents read aloud to them frequently when they were children and that they thereby gained a love of story and an ability with language.

Practice has followed research and theory. Schools have encouraged parents and teachers to read aloud to their children every day, and articles in journals for librarians promote reading aloud in the library (Burns & Flowers, 1997; Cart, 1996; Freeman, 1992; Guardia, 1995; Hilchey-Chandler, 1997; Kids & reading, 1996; LeLoup & Stone, 1991; Mazzoco, 1993; Trelease, 1995; Wells, 1993; Wiley, 1996; and Wilson & Brown, 1999).

A read-aloud programme is of greatest benefit to all children if it begins before they enter school and continues at least through to the ages ten or eleven because listening comprehension is greater than reading comprehension until children are in grades five or six (Pearson & Fielding, 1982). Reading aloud therefore offers pre-teen children an important venue for content learning as well as social, linguistic, cultural, and literary learning. These

benefits may even extend to secondary school students (Great Books Foundation, 1999), especially those who are reluctant or poor readers.

There are, however, three important considerations with regard to the correlation between reading aloud and language arts skills. One is how the story is read aloud: is it just read aloud or is it read effectively? The second is the selection of stories to be read: are they quality literature or are they excerpts from basal readers? And third, does the story content contribute to curricular, personal, and social growth? Each of these factors has an important impact on the listeners development of academic and social skills.

With regard to reading aloud effectively, one study (Hoffman, Roser & Farest, 1988) found that many teachers tended merely to read aloud and employed few techniques to improve student involvement and comprehension. After training in seven read-aloud strategies, these teachers incorporated many of these strategies into their story hour with the result that the average time for story hour increased from 10 to 23 minutes. The researchers noted evidence of a greater level of student engagement and participation when these techniques were used, but unfortunately they did not explore whether there was also enhanced learning. It is generally accepted, however, that greater student involvement and participation does lead to greater learning.

With regard to story selection, readers should choose stories that offer both something familiar and something new for students to learn in curricular content, literary and cultural experiences, and in personal and social skills. Stories with character development and differentiation, interesting settings, enjoyable language, and an engaging plot offer the opportunity for listeners to become familiar with story structure. Discussion can stimulate and reinforce the comprehension of these literary elements as well as vocabulary, content, and meaning. The stories in the Junior Great Books programme also offer opportunities for interpretation (Great Books Foundation, 1999). The content and themes of stories can contribute to curricular learning and personal and social awareness.

### **Strategies for reading aloud effectively**

There are several read-aloud strategies that librarians and teachers can use to increase not only the enjoyment of all listeners but also their listening and reading comprehension, appreciation of literature, and social growth. The following recommendations flow from my own research, from the professional literature and practising librarians, and from my experience reading aloud in the school library.

#### ***1. Ensure that the Story Hour is an enjoyable and literary experience***

Revisit and always keep in mind that the goals of story hour in the classroom and library are to develop a love of reading and literature, an appreciation for language, and a positive feeling for the library or learning environment (Hilchey-Chandler, 1997).

Select age-appropriate, quality literature that both the reader and children will enjoy. Exposure to quality literature helps develop general linguistic abilities as well as literary appreciation. Elements of enjoyment can come from the topic, theme, writing style, repetitive language, onomatopoeia, rhyme, characters, plot, setting, illustrations, and humour. Readers should develop lists of titles that illustrate each of these literary elements as well as the

variety of cultural genres such as fables, folktales, and legends. Children also love familiarity. Reading several stories from a series they like or rereading a favourite story brings the enjoyment of revisiting a pleasurable experience and may also improve comprehension (Rosenhouse et al., 1997).

## *2. Create an environment that promotes active listening*

Research has documented the importance of the reader's personality and the ambience of the room in helping children feel comfortable and engaged. The reader should convey personal warmth with eye contact, a positive expression on the face, a relaxed and open body posture, attractive attire, and positive words (Brownell, 1986). A stimulating but warm and comfortable physical environment enhances both listening comprehension and participation (Brownell, 1986; Burns & Flowers, 1997; Freeman, 1992). Removing visual and aural distractions will help demonstrate that the activity is important and keep listeners focused on the story (Brownell, 1986).

A structure and rules for story hour help children listen, learn, and practice appropriate social behaviour. The reader should model desirable social behaviour and set clear expectations for the children's behaviour before, during, and after the story. It is important for the reader to treat each listener with dignity and to model polite language and consideration for all listeners (Callison, 1999). Basic courtesy expected of the children includes listening to others (no speaking while another speaks), raising a hand before speaking, and making only positive comments about others' opinions. The Junior Great Books shared inquiry discussion method builds on this approach with its own more specific guidelines (Great Books Foundation, 1999).

## *3. Develop an age-appropriate topic for each Story Hour*

A topic for each story hour provides coherence to the whole story hour programme and unity to the individual session that may include a variety of genres. Topics can focus on

- the school curriculum,
- personal awareness,
- social skills,
- multicultural experiences, and
- literary elements.

It is important to plan a schedule of topics so that stories and content are age-appropriate and include information and ideas that reinforce or complement other academic and social learning. Selecting stories related to or supplementing the classroom curriculum can also offer the reader an opportunity for collaboration with teachers. Such topics may include the alphabet, the seasons, holidays, family and community members, habitats, and animals.

Stories that develop personal and social awareness may explore both negative and positive thoughts and feelings such as anger, fear, shyness, love, and confidence. Stories about social topics may focus on desirable behaviours such as respect, responsibility, courtesy, honesty, kindness, and tolerance. Multicultural stories also increase social

awareness and include a variety of local and international cultural celebrations, legends, and folktales. The following titles are examples:

Armenia	<i>A Weave of Words</i>
Ashanti	<i>Cow-tail Switch</i>
China	<i>Lon Po Po; Tiki Tiki Tembo</i>
Denmark	<i>The Ugly Duckling</i>
France	<i>Cinderella; Stone Soup</i>
Germany	<i>Little Red Riding Hood; Hansel and Gretel; Rapunzel</i>
Ghana	<i>Anansi the Spider; Anansi and the Moss-covered Rock</i>
India	<i>Seven Blind Mice</i>
Japan	<i>Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes</i>
Jewish	<i>It Could Always Be Worse; Something from Nothing</i>
North America	<i>Arrow to the Sun, Girl Who Loved Wild Horses</i>
Saudi Arabia	<i>The Rose's Smile</i>
South Africa	<i>Abiyoyo</i>
Turkey	<i>Kassim's Shoes</i>
West Africa	<i>The Hatseller and the Monkeys</i>
West Indies	<i>The Faithful Friend</i>

To build literary appreciation, readers can select stories that depict a character, create a special setting, emphasise plot and conflict, or develop a main idea. Fables and fairy tales usually have an obvious theme. Many stories include literary devices such as personification, flashback, metaphor, simile, or onomatopoeia. The following traditional titles of children's literature illustrate the various aspects of literary appreciation:

*Titles that emphasise character:*

Ackerman, Karen.	<i>The Song and Dance Man</i>
DePaola, Tomie.	<i>Strega Nona</i>
Goble, Paul.	<i>The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses</i>
Lionni, Leo.	<i>Frederick</i>
Lobel, Arnold.	<i>Frog and Toad (series)</i>
Marshall, James.	<i>George and Martha (series)</i>
Minark, Elsie.	<i>Little Bear (series)</i>
Potter, Beatrix.	<i>Peter Rabbit</i>

*Titles that illustrate personification:*

Burton, Virginia.	<i>The Little House; Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel</i>
Lionni, Leo.	<i>Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse</i>
Lobel, Arnold.	<i>Fables</i>
Silverstein, Shel.	<i>The Giving Tree</i>
Steig, William.	<i>Sylvester and the Magic Pebble</i>
Williams, Margery.	<i>The Velveteen Rabbit</i>

*Titles that emphasise setting:*

Cannon, Janell.	<i>Stellaluna</i>
McCloskey, Robert.	<i>Make Way for Ducklings</i>
Yolen, Jane.	<i>Owl Moon</i>

*Titles that emphasise plot:*

Aardema, Verna.	<i>Borreguita and the Coyote</i>
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Lionni, Leo.	<i>Swimmy</i>
Lobel, Arnold.	<i>Frog and Toad</i> (series)
McCloskey, Robert.	<i>Blueberries for Sal</i>
Seeger, Pete.	<i>Ahiyoyo</i>
Sendak, Maurice.	<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>
Soto, Gary.	<i>Too Many Tamales</i>

*Titles that emphasise theme:*

Lionni, Leo.	<i>Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse; Frederick; Swimmy</i>
Yorinks, Arthur.	<i>Hey, Al</i>

Even young listeners can discuss thoughts and feelings, social values and behaviour, character, plot, setting, theme, and literary devices during or after listening to a story when the reader poses reflective age-appropriate questions.

#### 4. *Pre-read every selection before reading it aloud*

This enables the reader to decide how to introduce and read the story aloud, which literary, cultural, social, and/or curricular elements to emphasise, and which post-listening activities are most relevant (Burns & Flowers, 1997; Cooter, 1991).

#### 5. *Use a generic lesson plan that enhances listening and comprehension*

Research provides some general recommendations about which techniques readers can use before, during, and after reading aloud (Howe, 2000; Rosenhouse et al., 1997). What appears to be significant for listening comprehension during story hour are:

- expressive reading that encourages attention to and interaction with the material (Morrow, 1989; Scollon, 1988) and
- activities that encourage interest, review, and analysis (Howe, 2000; Morrow, 1989; Rosenhouse et al., 1997).

Merely reading aloud may or may not be effective in developing language skills (Morrow; Strickland et al., 1990; Warren & Fitzgerald, 1997).

The following generic lesson plan of story hour activities is based on a lesson plan developed for a research project on the contribution of listening comprehension skills to reading comprehension skills (Howe, 2000). It includes Brownell's (1986) recommendations for improving listening and thinking skills with the HURIER model (Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding). It uses indirect teaching techniques that encourage the attention, interaction, and review that are essential to both listening and reading comprehension. The lesson plan model is also consistent with the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities used by children who are expert readers (Callison, 1999). Those who read stories aloud can adopt these same activities for listeners in order to enhance their comprehension.

*Pre-listening activities.* Get the students' attention and get rid of distractions (Brownell, 1986; Burns & Flowers, 1997; Freeman, 1992). Then stimulate their interest by:

- referring to previous stories, personal experiences, or knowledge,

- generating curiosity about the current topic or title, or
- setting a purpose (Callison, 1999; Rosenhouse et al., 1997).

These activities get children's attention and activate the prior knowledge and interest necessary for comprehension.

*During listening activities.* Always present the story in ways that sustain attention and enhance listening comprehension by:

- maintaining eye contact,
- reading with expression,
- inferring and modelling prosody, and
- defining new or unusual words as you read them (Brownell, 1986; Callison, 1999; Cooter, 1991; Elley, 1989; Freeman, 1992; Rosenhouse et al., 1997).

Optional activities may include

- providing a few props that represent characters, themes, plot, or setting (Cooter, 1991; Wilson & Brown, 1999);
- encouraging students to participate in repetitive story language (Freeman, 1992; Tompkins & McGee, 1989; Wilson & Brown, 1999);
- encouraging students to visualise by giving them the time and purpose to close their eyes (Brownell, 1986); or
- making summaries or predictions at key points (Cooter, 1991; Hoffman, Roser, & Farest, 1988).

Pre-reading the story will help you select those optional activities most appropriate for each title. While these activities keep children attentive and develop their linguistic abilities, it is important not to let the number or duration of such activities break the continuity or enjoyment of the story. At least one experienced pre-school story reader prefers not to allow any interruptions to the story itself (Mazzoco, 1993), and the omission of illustrations and props may have a positive effect on children's imaginations (Strickland et al., 1990).

*Post-listening Activities.* These include a discussion of the story and an age-appropriate related creative activity. When posing a question, be sure to allow adequate wait-time so that most students have time to complete their thoughts before calling on one for an answer (McKay, 1988). Enhance listener comprehension by asking the children to do one of the following:

- consider literary elements and structure such as character, plot, setting, style, and mood (Gordon, 1989; Nelson-Herber & Johnson, 1989; Schmitt, 1988);
- identify the topic and main idea (Brownell, 1986; Callison, 1999; Duffelmeyer & Duffelmeyer, 1987; Paris, Wasik, & Van der Westhuizen, 1988; Rosenhouse et al., 1997; Warren & Fitzgerald, 1997);
- interpret a character's actions, feelings, or motivations (Great Books Foundation, 1999); or

- summarise or retell the story (Brownell; Dennis & Walter, 1995; Morrow, 1989; Paris, Wasik, & Van der Westhuizen; Rosenhouse et al.; Schmitt);

The Junior Great Books programme and its recommended discussion methods distinguish between questions that are:

- factual (those with a definitive answer in the text),
- interpretative (those with answers that are text-based but with more than one possible answer), and
- speculative (those with answers that are not text-based).

While all types of questions can be asked, the programme's shared inquiry discussion focuses on interpretative questions and a structure in which the leader can only ask, not answer, questions (Great Books Foundation, 1999). Such discussions encourage participation and develop higher order thinking skills in listeners and readers. They may also increase personal and social knowledge and skills, since many interpretative questions involve an explanation of a character's behaviour, feelings, or motivation. The shared inquiry method can be used with age-appropriate readings and questions for children from kindergarten to grade 12 (Great Books Foundation, 1999).

The goal of these post-listening discussions is to develop a sense of story structure, character, main idea, and interpretation through a brief review. One discussion topic may be enough for each story, especially with primary students, and sometimes they may be omitted to avoid over-analysing (Guardia, 1995; Nelson-Herber & Johnston, 1989). Although analytical discussion facilitates comprehension as well as personal and social awareness, story hour should remain enjoyable and not become an obvious lesson (Freeman, 1992).

A post-listening creative activity related to the story encourages personal expression and improves the retention of what is heard (Brownell, 1986). The educational benefits of artistic activities include the development of eye-hand co-ordination and small motor skills, following directions, and using geometric shapes. Written activities enhance the understanding of literary elements and reinforce skills in vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Including a variety of creative activities will appeal to and stimulate different types of talents — manipulative, musical, linguistic, and artistic.

As part of story hour, children can create on a personalised long-term project that they work on at various times throughout the year. In kindergarten, for example, children can develop their own alphabet book from a template provided by the reader. Each page of the template focuses on one letter, which is the topic of story hour, and provides space where children can write the letter and draw objects beginning with that letter.

In first grade they can create a book of the months or seasons from a template the reader provides. After listening to a story related to the current season or month, they may complete a picture for that month, including seasonal weather and vegetation, what a character did during that time of year, or their own favourite seasonal activities. Including annual holidays and celebrations in the book will increase multicultural awareness.

The challenge for the reader is to select an age-appropriate number and type of these pre-, during-, and post-listening activities that are most relevant

- for each title,



- for the particular students,
- for contributing to academic learning,
- for developing personal, social, and cultural awareness, and
- for improving listening and reading comprehension by increasing vocabulary, identifying the main idea, interpreting characters, and understanding other literary aspects of the story.

These activities offer an opportunity for readers to be creative and to collaborate with teachers. The use of different pre-, during-, and post-listening activities provides variety within a consistent structure that enhances listening comprehension. The goal for story hour is the introduction or reinforcement of listening skills with a few questions rather than direct instruction (Gordon, 1989; Nelson-Herber & Johnston, 1989).

## 6. *Enjoy the stories, the experience of reading aloud, and being with children*

The reader's enthusiasm for literature, creative activities, and children is contagious!

## Conclusions

Teachers and librarians can create a story hour programme that helps all students to develop personal and cultural awareness, listening and reading comprehension, and proficiency in language and social skills. Story hour provides an opportunity to offer children curricular content and many literary, cultural, and social experiences. Children can learn social skills and respect for others while listening to and discussing stories, if there are clear expectations for their behaviour and a good role model. The three critical elements are:

- what the reader selects to read,
- how the reader reads it aloud, and
- which activities the reader uses to reinforce and extend comprehension and learning.

In order to contribute to all children's comprehension and enjoyment during story hour, readers should employ effective indirect teaching strategies in a comfortable but stimulating environment. Both theory and research support the correlation between listening and reading comprehension skills, and the preceding read-aloud recommendations are based on teaching and learning strategies that improve listening and reading comprehension. The stories selected for reading can contribute to curricular learning, personal awareness, social growth, and multicultural experiences if they include those titles with academic and/or social content and ideas. Story hour can contribute to literary appreciation when readers select quality literature and discuss the use of language and the development of character, plot, and theme.

Although readers who follow these recommendations may not necessarily see the resulting long term personal and academic growth, they may nonetheless feel assured that they have contributed to the increased language arts skills, literary and cultural appreciation, and cognitive and social development of their students—all while the children think they are just listening to a story!

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