Read Alouds: Working Wonders to Enhance Classroom Community

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Inquiry Brief

Annotated Bibliography
**Teaching Context**

I am a student teacher intern in a classroom of 20 students at Easterly Parkway Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania. The class is comprised of 11 boys and 9 girls representing several different races, religions, ethnicities, and cultures. Many of the students’ parents are attending the graduate program at Penn State University, and they come from different parts of the world. For example, we have students from Korea, Israel, and Switzerland, as well as students who were born in the United States.

The dynamic of the class is interesting because several of the students leave at different parts of the day for extra support. We have nine children who attend Title 1, three children who attend ESL, and six of our students see a counselor throughout the day. There is also one child who receives autistic support, and four students see a specialist for math enrichment.

The children have different family dynamics. We have students who have dealt with divorce in the past, are experiencing divorce or separation currently, and students living in single-parent households. Some of our students are the only children in their families, while others have up to four siblings.

Since this class is diverse, a sense of shared community is necessary for a successful learning classroom environment. Children need to have a feeling of welcoming and belonging when they walk into their classroom. School should be a safe, comfortable place for each student to come to because they may or may not have this environment at home. Students flourish best in this type of surrounding, where they look forward to coming to school each day and feeling like they are a part of something special. I chose, therefore to focus my inquiry on maintaining and continuing to build a
strong community within my classroom. Also, I plan to focus my graduate studies on literacy education.

Children’s literature is truly my passion because I feel that it can improve several aspects of the classroom and give children hope, inspiration, and entertainment. I believe any lesson can be taught, and every classroom issue can be resolved through read alouds. Students relate to characters, plots, and themes in all different kinds of children’s books. Reading aloud is an excellent way for the students to realize they are not in a particular situation alone. It reserves part of the day for children to get lost in a world where they do not have to worry about what is going on in their own lives. Endless life lessons and morals can be taught through read alouds that might be difficult to express using other medians. I also believe a great way to reinforce a sense of community is through children’s literature. From what I have observed in my class, the students love read alouds. Observing the students during read-aloud time gave me information on how enjoyable an inquiry based on read alouds and community would be for both my students and me.

**Wonderings and Questions**

**Main Wondering:**

How can children’s literature be used to help build and/or reinforce a sense of community in a first grade classroom?

**Sub-Wonderings:**

- Can read alouds help create the climate and foster understandings to reinforce a sense of community and help the students accept and celebrate each other’s differences?
- Which books or types of books leave the largest impact on a first grade class?

- Which books are the most enjoyable for first graders to listen to?

- What types of follow-up activities to read aloud time would help enhance the message the read aloud is trying to send?

- Will follow-up activities help the students appreciate the message of each read aloud?

- What is the most developmentally appropriate type of survey for first graders that will give clear answers to my wonderings?

_data collection and analysis process_

In order to research my inquiry, I knew there were certain actions I needed to take. Before I could start applying my inquiry in the classroom, I researched books, guides, magazines, videos, and instructional tools that discussed community building and read alouds. I also interviewed several people to discuss which books would be the most beneficial for read alouds, which themes would be most beneficial to incorporate into my classroom, which activities would be most enjoyable and resourceful for my students, and which surveys would be easiest for a primary class to understand.

After I compiled the data from these resources, I chose the six books that I would use for read aloud time. I chose the books based on their incredible themes that could be related to community, respect, and shared ideas and interests; they also have fun plots, incredibly engaging illustrations, and they all allowed for creative follow-up activities. Another reason I chose these six books is because they are all favorites of mine. I felt that if I was fascinated by a children’s book, the students I was reading aloud to would most likely feel the same way.
I decided the best way to enhance community in the classroom would be to read these books aloud to the whole class during a designated story-time of about 20 minutes, and then have the students complete a follow-up activity the next day during literacy stations. I believed that literacy stations was the best time for the students to complete the activity because it gave me the opportunity to work with smaller groups and pay close attention to how each child handled the lesson. Working my inquiry into literacy stations also helped me to see how students at varying academic achievement levels understood the messages of the books and activities.

Each activity had a direct connection to the story I had previously read and incorporated community building in some way. *Dog Eared* by Amanda Harvey, was the first book I read, and it was about a dog that was self-conscious because another dog made fun of him for having large ears. The reason for reading this book was so that we could discuss what bullying is and how we can prevent it and/or resolve it. I figured if we could eliminate bullying in the classroom, it would be one step closer to creating a comfortable classroom community. After I read *Dog Eared* to the class, the next day at literacy stations I had the students create a dog puppet using paper, crayons, a craft stick, and glue. Although they drew a dog, I told them that that dog represented them. I lead the students into a discussion about bullying, and told them that we would be acting out our own version of *Dog Eared*. I explained that they would be using their dogs to bully the other dogs about anything they chose. The other dogs had the job of figuring out what they could say or do in that sort of situation if/when it arises in school.

The second book I read aloud was *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. In this book, the Once-ler was a greedy man who decided that cutting down Truffula Trees was the best
way to increase his business and make him rich; he did this without worrying about what or who he was hurting in the process. I read this book with the objective of teaching my first graders the importance of respect for others and respect for the environment. At literacy stations the following day, I brought in wildflower seeds, soil, and clear plastic cups. The students and I discussed one particular part of the book where the Once-ler provided a little boy with the very last Truffula seed and said, “UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, it’s not going to get better, it’s not.” I asked the students what they thought this meant, and how can we apply this to our own classroom and lives. After the students suggested different ways they could take care of the environment, classroom, and friends, we planted our very own “Truffula seeds” and watched them grow over time.

I read *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein to my class so they would understand what it means to be selfless, grateful, and a good friend. *The Giving Tree* was about a tree who would do anything for a little boy that she loved. As the boy grew older, he took more and more from the tree, and the tree gave away all that she had (apples, leaves, branches, trunk, and stump) so that the boy would need and love her in return. For the follow-up activity, I thought a good idea would be to have the students come up with their own “free gifts” so that we could be giving trees as well. I created a bulletin board with a large tree with the words “Our Giving Tree” written across it. Each student came up with a different “free gift” that they could give in school to their classmates. Once they came up with their gift, I supplied them with shiny, red apples made of paper and they wrote their idea on it. I displayed the apples on our tree so that they could refer back to it throughout the upcoming weeks (see Appendix A). I saw that the children enjoyed
this book and activity, and realized I could use this to my advantage. I created “shout outs”, which was an activity that I applied to our daily morning meetings to enhance the community of our classroom. Each day, I gave the students an opportunity to give three people “shout outs”, which meant they could tell me about a specific incident where one of their classmates was doing something from our giving tree. When they let me know about that person, I let that person put a marble in our class marble jar. Once the marble jar was filled, the students got a special treat in class. Most of the students’ “shout outs” were for classmates that gave them compliments.

Since the children in my class could sometimes be disrespectful to the teachers in the room, I decided this could be addressed in a read-aloud and activity. A strong classroom community can be created when students are respectful to each other, their teachers, and vice versa. For this reason, I chose to read the book *Miss Nelson is Missing!* by Harry Allard and James Marshall. In this story, the students are extremely disrespectful to their teacher, Miss Nelson. She dressed up as a strict witch to show the students that they should have been more respectful and appreciative of their sweet and timid teacher. At literacy stations, the students and I discussed the reason why I chose this book and what they could do in class to make it apparent. I provided the students with writing paper that were addressed as letters to my mentor, our paraprofessional, and myself. The students wrote us letters about what they can do in class to show us respect and positivity. Some promises students made were: to sit quietly, not talk while the teacher is talking, will not move around when the teacher is talking, will not play with things, will not call out or yell, raise a hand when they have a question, listen to and
follow directions, give hugs to teachers, show respect, will not run in the hallway, give teachers compliments, use manners, will be honest, and will be nice (see Appendix B).

Since the students were hearing a lot about respect to improve the community of our classroom, I wondered if the students would be closer if they realized they shared the same feelings. To show similarities in their feelings, I chose the book Today I Feel Silly & Other Moods That Make My Day by Jamie Lee Curtis and Laura Cornell. The book is about a little girl who expresses a different way she feels on each page, and why she feels that way. Throughout the book I told students to put a finger on their nose if they have ever felt that way or had a similar situation happen to them. At the end of the book, they realized they had their fingers on their noses for most of the same things. Once they realized this, I decided the activity should be based on shared feelings. I made a guessing game where the students had to predict the different feelings of a particular cartoon. After they figured out all of the moods, I prompted an informal discussion where the students could talk about times they have felt that mood.

Last, I read The Peace Book by Todd Parr to show my students that there are several different kinds of peace, and we can experience peace in our own classroom. In this book, Todd Parr has a different idea of peace on each page. I wanted the students to understand that peace is important and that everyone can have a different idea of peace, but it is something that we all want. For the follow-up activity, I had the students fill out a half sheet of paper that had a peace sign and two lines for writing on it. Inside the peace sign, it said “Peace is…” and the lines were there for the students to write their own ideas of peace. Once they finished writing their idea of peace, they were to color their peace signs however they wanted. I hung them up all around the room so that the
students can see what peace means to others in the class, and be proud of their own ideas as well (see Appendix C).

After each activity, I had a survey that the students completed, so I could analyze their feelings about the book and activity, and how much they understood the lesson and its significance. The surveys were comprised of 4 - 8 questions. Most of the questions were “yes or no” questions, and they were in the form of happy and sad faces so that it would be easy for first graders to understand. Each survey was geared towards the specific book and activity, but they all included the questions such as: “Did you like the book ________?,” “Did you like the activity?,” and “What can we do in class to show this?” (see Appendix D). This helped me figure out which activities and books were understood and appreciated by which students (see Appendix E). From these surveys I tallied students’ responses to pinpoint any trends among the students (see Appendix F).

Another form of data collection I used was observations and notes that I would take throughout the day. Whether it was at literacy centers, during read-aloud time, or any other time of day, if I heard one of the students refer to my inquiry, I recorded what was said in a notebook where each student had a designated page. I used this notebook for “shout outs” as well. I recorded who gave a “shout out”, who they gave it to, and what it was for. This helped me decide whether I had seen a change in just a few students, or if most of the class had been involved in creating a warmer, welcoming classroom community.

I also video-recorded all of the activities the students participated in at literacy centers so that I could go back and see their reactions as they were working. This also gave me specific quotes from students expressing their ideas and feelings throughout my
inquiry. I also video-recorded a wrap-up session to see exactly what my students learned and retained throughout this entire process. During this session, I had the students create a list of what they thought made up a good community and they came up with several different ideas (see Appendix G). This recording pulled together all of the loose ends and final thoughts to my inquiry project.

**Explanation of Findings**

*Claim #1: First graders enjoy and look forward to read aloud opportunities.*

Before I began my research for my inquiry, I observed my previous first grade class during read aloud time and saw how engaged they were. I wondered if a different first grade class would enjoy read aloud time as well and provide a broader idea of how first graders perceived read aloud time. After reading these books aloud to my class, I could clearly see how much the students enjoyed the read alouds. When I reviewed the surveys for all books, 85 out of 87 responses declared that the students liked the books. That means 98% of the time the children enjoyed the read aloud I had prepared. I believe that young children relate to picture books that combine both visuals and text, which is why they enjoy the read alouds so much. Another interesting thing I found from observations was that after I had read these books, the children checked them out at their next library special. The fact that the students went independently checked out these books indicates that they were enjoyable to hear.

I also received feedback directly from the students. On one occasion, I had a student tell me that read aloud time was her favorite time of day. After two separate read alouds, I had two children come up to me and thank me for reading those books because
they enjoyed them so much. I also had another student, who is often off-task, disrespectful, and unmotivated, tell me during literacy centers, “Please read us this book aloud. I promise I will be good and listen.” This child not only said “please”, but he also followed through with his promise after I read the book. This example showed how much a read aloud could impact a child. Last, I asked the children during a morning meeting if they preferred books read aloud to them or reading to themselves. Eleven out of seventeen students declared they preferred read alouds.

Claim #2: Children can demonstrate a sense of community after listening to books that focus on values such as respect and caring for others.

This claim was formed from several different pieces of information. After reading The Giving Tree, I had students come up with their own ideas of free gifts they could give to their classmates. Some ideas the children came up with were: playing with friends, giving compliments, helping friends when they are sick, being nice, writing notes to people, picking flowers for friends, sharing books, giving hugs, giving respect, saying thank you, saying your welcome, and making friends. The students came up with these ideas all on their own after I had read the book aloud. Since I created a bulletin board in the classroom, the students started giving each other more and more compliments as the weeks went on. Students would give an abundance of compliments because they could tell from the reactions of teachers and peers that they were performing a nice deed. I also had a student share toys at recess with another student and said, “I’m being like the Giving Tree!” I had also noticed that since I started reading these books, more students would say “please” and “thank you” when I handed out snack each day. I kept track of
how many people were not polite when I gave out snack. My data showed me that when I first started my read alouds, there were 6 children who did not say “please” or “thank you”. By the end of my inquiry, there was only 1 student who had not thanked me for snack.

Once I saw how successful this lesson had been, I decided to implement “shout outs”. This addition to our day really had the children think about what they could do to enhance our classroom community. I had students give “shout outs” for giving compliments, giving hugs, being nice, following directions, and being polite.

Another incident that I thought was interesting occurred during indoor recess one day. Two of my students, who are my two most behaviorally challenging students, were playing with blocks and looked really proud of what they were doing. When I asked what they were making, they exclaimed, “We are making toys for poor kids and kids with cancer!” This happened after I talked to the children about my involvement in Penn State’s Dance MaraTHON and described myself as a giving tree. These two boys took my situation, made it their own, and referred it back to the original story of The Giving Tree.

Claim #3: Read alouds can enhance community when students realize they share common interests, ideas, and feelings.

Two books and activities in particular made this claim evident. The books Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day and The Peace Book had a larger impact on my students than I ever could have imagined. When I presented my survey for Today I Feel Silly, the majority of students shared the same feelings about something in
school that makes them happy and something in school that makes them sad. There were 10 students that declared friends and teachers are what makes them happy in school, and 8 students said that people being mean or doing mean things in school makes them sad. 11 students explained that they felt happy after I read the book aloud, and 13 students felt good/happy after they shared stories with each other of times they felt those moods. Sharing their own personal stories with the rest of their peers created a warm sense of community in which they related to each other’s experiences.

Also, when I read the book aloud, I prompted the students to put their finger on their nose every time they felt that mood before. During my inquiry wrap-up session, I had a student say, “… every time there was a different mood, everyone had their finger on their nose on every page.” When I asked what that meant, another student said, “It means that we all share the same feelings.” I was so impressed to hear this because the students do not always articulate their feelings clearly to the rest of the class. This activity brought the group together in a new way.

Last, after I read The Peace Book, the students felt a sense of pride when I asked them to tell me their own ideas of what peace is. On the peace signs I provided, I had 9 students offer answers involving friends in some way; whether it was making them, working with them, playing with them, or making them laugh. All of their answers were genuine, as I did not prompt them in any way. In the survey for this book, I asked students if they thought it was important to talk about peace. Why or why not? All but one student said that it was important, and 11 explained that it was important to talk about peace because people should know what peace is so they could make peace. On
several different occasions after this lesson, I had students mention peace in our classroom. No one had ever discussed peace before I read the book aloud!

**Reflections and Future Practice**

After researching my inquiry and coming up with my findings, I have decided that there will be several ideas and activities implemented in my future classroom. The first and most important lesson that I learned from my inquiry is that I will make sure that I have a read aloud prepared for every day we are in class. Students really benefited in so many ways from having books read aloud to them each day. I have heard from many teachers that read alouds are not “important” enough to have each day, and they “take up too much time”. In my opinion, read alouds can be incorporated into every class. If time does not permit every day at the same time, it is worth fitting it into the schedule. In the younger grades, (K-2) snack time is the perfect opportunity to have students engaged in a read aloud. For the older grades (3-6), a chapter book works well, where the teacher can easily pick up or put down the book because they are broken up into smaller parts of a larger story. Even if there is an extra few minutes at the end of the day while the children are waiting in line for dismissal or specials, a read aloud would be greatly appreciated by the students. There is always time for read alouds when you think about all of the different lessons children can learn from just focusing on the book.

Another idea that I would like to bring into my future classroom is that creating and maintaining a sense of community must be a yearlong focus. Many schools begin the school year with a unit such as “Living in Harmony”. I think that this unit is so important that ideas of it should be carried out throughout the entire year. From what I have seen, a
class is only as good as the sense of community that is established there. Students will not work to their fullest potential if they do not feel respected, encouraged, or welcomed by their teachers and peers. When I have my own classroom, no matter what grade I teach, I am going to read *The Giving Tree* on the first day of school and discuss the “shout outs” activity. I plan to continue “shout outs” throughout the entire year because I have seen such positive effects from doing so.

I would love to use my read aloud and activities in my future classroom, even if it is just a starting point. I think it would be an amazing accomplishment to have students start learning about ideas of respect, shared feelings and ideas, and community, and broaden these ideas to accepting diversity, celebrating differences, and maintaining these key components of community even outside the classroom and in every day life.

This inquiry has also taught me several other things: which surveys are best comprehended by a primary class, which kind of activities are most enjoyable and understood by a first grade class, and which types of books the students are most engaged in. For example, if I have to give an assessment about anything, I will know that students will have an easiest time filling out a survey which includes “yes or no” questions represented by smiley and sad faces rather than surveys that say “agree” or “disagree”. I also know now that anytime I would like to do a follow-up activity to my read alouds, that students will appreciate activities that are hands-on or relate to their interests. Last, I know that if I am teaching a first grade class, I will read them books that have bright, lively pictures, fun story lines, great themes or lessons, and text that I can be dramatic with.
I have learned all of these ideas from my inquiry process, and cannot wait to use them in my own classroom in the future.
Appendix A

Our Giving Tree
- Play together
- Give compliments
- Be nice
- Make cards or letters
- Respect each other
- Share books, toys, friendship
- Help each other
- Give hugs
- Be thankful
- Say “Thank you”
- Say “Your Welcome”
- Help friends when they are sick or hurt
- Pick them flowers
Appendix B

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
I will raise my hand not call out.
And not talk when you are talking.

Love,
Katrina

Dear Miss Flanz,
I will raise my hand.
I will not play with pencils. 

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
I will not raise my hand.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Miss Flanz,
You are smart.
And pretty. I will

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
I am not going to

Dear Miss Flanz,
I am not going to

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
You are my teacher.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
We are to be held

Dear Miss Flanz,
I will raise my hand.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
Best wishes,

Dear Miss Flanz,
Thank you for your help.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
You are my teacher.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
I will raise my hand.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
You are my teacher.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
You are my teacher.
I will not play with pencils.

Dear Mrs. Corkery,
You are my teacher.
I will not play with pencils.
Appendix D

Name _______________________________________________________

1. Did you like the “The Giving Tree”? 🤔😊

2. Did you like creating our own apples and giving tree? 🤔😊

3. Do you know why we made our own giving tree? 🤔😊
   Why?

4. Did you learn the theme of the book? 🤔😊
   What was it?

5. Did you learn anything from the book that you can do in class? 🤔😊
   What is it?
Appendix E

[Image of handwritten notes]

Iffrey:

1. Why is it important to be nice to the teachers?
2. What can we do if we disagree with the teacher?
3. Why is it important to be honest to the teacher?
4. How can we show the teacher that we are working hard?
5. What do we do if we see the teacher doing something that is not right?

Because we can tell the teachers what we are working on and that we have to treat the teacher nicely.

Jessica:

I can't do math with the numbers on the board.

(Note: The handwriting appears to be in a different color or style than the rest of the text.)

Taste: bad
Community
- Working Together
- Respecting our friends
- Helping each other
- Being Nice
- Making New Friends
- Peace
- Standing up for friends
- Teaching and learning
- Giving compliments
- Honesty
- Using your words
- Sharing
- Don't tease people
- Be polite
- Respect
- Behave and be responsible