“Making Read Alouds Meaningful”

A closer look at what makes read alouds meaningful in my Kindergarten classroom

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**Description of the Teaching Context**

As a Professional Development School Intern (PDS), I am interning in a self-contained Kindergarten classroom at Park Forest Elementary during the 2008 to 2009 school year. Park Forest Elementary is part of the State College Area School District, a rural school district located in a college town. My kindergarten classroom is made up of twenty-two children. Out of these twenty-two learners, twelve are boys and ten are girls. Most of our students are Caucasian, one of the boys is an Asian American, and one girl speaks both Spanish and English.

Our class is very socially cohesive and academically diverse. All of our eager learners entered kindergarten recognizing a range of letters and the sounds they make measured through a series of reading test scores. This range of knowledge is one of the criteria used to divide our class into four academic reading groups. All four groups are working very hard to become successful and fluent readers.

My mentor teacher, our classroom paraprofessional, and I work daily on the curriculum and structure of our day for the benefit of all learners in our room. The special education paraprofessional works specifically with two young boys that have been diagnosed within the Autism spectrum. A therapeutic support staff worker supports one of these two boys. This same learner leaves the classroom twice a day to work on reading and math with our school’s autism support teacher and twice a week to work with the district’s occupational therapist. Also at this time, two students leave the room for early reading intervention, and our classroom has a student who works twice a week with the school’s speech therapist.

**Wonderings and Questions**

**Main Wondering**

Through this inquiry, I want to make read alouds more meaningful for my students. I want to discover what creates the most student interest during the read aloud. I intend to figure out what
will make these fifteen minutes more engaging and meaningful by finding ways to select the right books, add variety through dramatics and songs, and planning author studies. I hope this inquiry will foster learning experiences for my students, my mentor, and myself.

In what ways can I effectively use read alouds to engage my kindergartners?

Sub-Wonderings

- How does a teacher select the right book for a read aloud?
- What books make the best read aloud for my students?
- How will adding language arts focused mini-lessons to the read alouds affect my students’ academics?
- How will adding language arts focused mini-lessons to the read alouds affect my students’ engagement?
- How will adding poetry, dramatics, and author studies to the read alouds affect my students’ engagement?
- How will adding poetry, dramatics, and author studies affect my student’s recall of read aloud stories?

Data Collection

Clear Description of Data Collection

My data collection was aimed at supporting my main wondering and sub-wonderings. I used a variety of data collection techniques to ensure the validity and accuracy of my final claims. I collected baseline data, conducted interviews, and administered a series of teacher surveys before the inquiry to guide the implemented changes. During the inquiry, I used several data collection methods focused on my students and determining what is engaging and meaningful for them. After the inquiry, I conducted exit interviews to compare with my initial baseline data.
BEFORE

The starting point of my inquiry was to find out what other teachers and our school librarian already knew about reading aloud to students. I provided each teacher in my school with a confidential survey that included questions about grade level, frequency of read alouds, favorite read aloud books, and selection and preparation for read alouds (See Appendix A for Teacher Survey #1). I also observed and interviewed our school librarian, whom I consider an expert on story telling. The questions of this interview were aimed at selecting books for my students, engaging my students during the read aloud, and ways I can enhance my read alouds. (See Appendix B for Teacher Interview #1)

Also before my inquiry began, I randomly selected eight students to interview. I looked at the four academic reading groups, and I blindly picked two students from each group. Then I pulled these students aside one at a time and tried to get baseline data about how they felt about read alouds, ability to recall any of the books we have read so far this year, books they like and do not like and how they know, and about if someone reads to them at home (See Appendix C for Students Interview #1). I used GarageBand to record the students’ responses, so I could go back and review their answers for data collection.

DURING

As I started to take a critical look at what books I was going to read to my students and just how I was going to present these books, I realized I needed ways to collect data on engagement, ability to recall the story, and likeability of the books I selected. I tried to use a variety of data collection tools and strategies during my inquiry. The first data collection method I implemented was keeping an observational checklist of off task behaviors during read alouds (See Appendix D for Checklist #1). The checklist was designed to monitor eyes off the speaker, verbal cues and
nonverbal by the teacher, and off-task behavior of all of the students in my classroom. My mentor would make note of what off task behavior was observed and also what student was off-task. These observations were made twice a week during the reading of a variety of different read aloud material to ensure a thorough analysis of behaviors during read alouds.

I also collected student artifacts during my inquiry. These artifacts included student work, student comments, a video recording of a read aloud, and photographs of the students before read alouds and also after read alouds. The student’s work samples were recorded after we completed our first author study. I had the students write and draw a letter to the author about their favorite story in the study and why they liked the story (See Appendix E for Student Document #1). The video recordings and still photographs served as a way to collect information about my students and myself. I wanted to critically watch myself reading aloud to my students and to see just what my students were doing during a read aloud. Other photographs and students’ comments were spontaneous and unexpected pieces of data that I collected during the inquiry process. These pieces of information were collected blindly as I was unsure if they would pertain to my inquiry.

My student teaching supervisor (PDA) was also able to take an anecdotal record during one of my read alouds (See Appendix F for Anecdotal Notes #1). The content of this record was simply guided by her knowledge of my inquiry presented through my inquiry brief. The observation notes included one-minute consecutive sweeps of the students attention through eye contact with the presented read aloud book or the storyteller and also observations of my presentation of the read aloud.

**AFTER**

At the conclusion of my inquiry, I once again individually interviewed the eight students I spoke with before my inquiry changes were implemented. One at a time I pulled each of these
students aside, and I asked them how they were feeling about my read alouds and if they could recall any of the books I have read to them. Then I presented them with five books I have used in different ways throughout my inquiry (See Appendix G for Student Interview #2). Two books of these five books, *The Mixed Up Chameleon* and *The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza*, I used felt pieces and a felt board to present the story. Another, *There Once Was a Man Named Michael Finnegan*, I told through song and the last two, *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!* and *No, David!*, were presented as regular read alouds. Upon the presentation of the books, I first asked the student if they did not recognize any of the books. If a student claimed to be unfamiliar with a book, I removed the book from the table. Then I asked the student pick a favorite. For their selected favorite book, I asked them to recall the story and explain why the book was their favorite.

**Data Analysis**

**Steps Taken to Analyze the Data**

The initial step for my inquiry was to critically review the teacher surveys (See Appendix A for Teacher Survey #1) and my notes from my interview with our school librarian (See Appendix B for Teach Interview #1). I was searching these documents for guidance on how to select books to share with my Kindergarten students. I knew that I no longer wanted to haphazardly select a book from our classroom library and simply read it to the students. Eight of the nine returned teacher surveys cited that some component of their curriculum drives some of the book selection for read alouds, six of the nine claim that they were looking for “engaging” or “interesting” books to present, four out of nine noted “humor” or “fun” to describe some of their favorite read aloud choices, and three out of nine said that they select books the students can relate to. I took these results and compared them to my interview notes with our school librarian. She agreed that read alouds need to be engaging for the students either through humor, ability to relate, or both.
This information gave my inquiry focus, but it was not until I completed the initial individual student survey (See Appendix C for Student Interview #1) that I had any cause for concern. At this point, I had been reading aloud to my students every day as a transition into the classroom from lunch. I was excited to hear that six of my students really enjoyed our read alouds and two students felt so-so about our read alouds. Three students were able to recall one or two of the books read during the week of the interview, and only one student was able to recall a book read longer than seven days prior to the interview. All of the eight students interviewed are read to at home by a family member and all struggled to select a favorite book from memory. The students’ responses to what makes a favorite book ranged from things they like to how the books made them feel. These responses were very student-specific, and I found no common trend among the eight students interviewed.

I wanted to find out if I could use books to make an impression on my students, so I began to carefully select and prepare books that I thought my students would be engaged with. Our school librarian suggested that you read “books that you like,” so I decided that I would introduce an author study of Eric Carle to my students. The week-long study was completely dedicated to Carle’s books, which I enjoyed as a child. On the third day I presented *The Mixed Up Chameleon* through felt dramatics. Each student had a part to contribute to the story, and by the looks on their faces and squeals of excitement, the students seemed to really enjoy it. For the rest of the week, students would ask during free play to play with the story’s pieces and the felt board. They took turns retelling the story and creating their own variations.

At the very end of this week, I asked the student to write to Eric Carle and tell him what their favorite book was and why (See Appendix E for Student Document #1). Five out of the eighteen students selected *The Mixed Up Chameleon* as their favorite book, four picked *Pancakes,*
Pancakes, three selected *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *My Cat, Slowly, Slow, said the Sloth*, *Head to Toe*, and *Rooster Off to See the World* were all selected once by different students. Just as varied as the selected favorite books were the responses why. Nine of the eighteen survey responders specifically recalled some component of the text to support their response, and of these eight responses four were *The Mixed Up Chameleon*. Seven of the eighteen responses said they like the book, because it contained a food or an animal that they like, and finally the last two responses were about the illustrations in the book.

As my preparation and selection of books increased, I had my mentor monitor off-task behaviors (See Appendix D for Checklist #1). I was able to calculate the engagement with the text by adding up the number of check marks on the checklist. The checklists with the most checkmarks indicate the most off task behavior, and the checklists with the least indicate more on task behavior. My analysis of this data indicates that students were most off task during *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!* and most on task during *David Gets in Trouble*. These checklists also provided me with insight to specific students that are typically off task and students that are typically on task during read alouds. This information was helpful to the management aspect of my daily read alouds.

In the same ways the checklist was helpful with my inquiry, the anecdotal notes generated by my student teaching supervisor (PDA) provided insight about behavior during a felt dramatic read aloud. These notes (See Appendix F for Anecdotal Notes #1) observed that for the time interviewed the I had the full attention of my audience one hundred percent of the time. My PDA also indicated that the students looked to the left or the right as I did in correlation with the story.

The exit interviews I conducted (See Appendix G for Student Interview #2) provided me with data about the students’ favorite read aloud books, ability to recall books read more than seven days ago, and ability to remember the sequence of events of these stories. Six of the eight students
were able to recall at least one book that was presented more than a week ago, and out of these six students five were able to recall more than one book. Five students recalled *The Mixed Up Chameleon* without any preempting, two remembered *No, David!*, and most of the remaining books that were remembered were from the Eric Carle author study or from the current unit of study. After presenting the five books, four students did not recognize *Hooray for Diffendorfer Day!* and one student did not recognize *There Once was a Man Named Michael Finnegan*. Five of the eight students selected *The Mixed Up Chameleon* as their favorite books, and all were able to recall the sequence of the story. The remaining three students selected *No, David!*, and two were able to clearly recall the sequence of events of the story. “It was silly” was the most common response to why the book was selected as a favorite read aloud. This response was provided four out of the eight interviews.

**Explanation of Findings**

After carefully analyzing all of my data, my evidence supports two claims with quality supporting evidence. These claims are aimed at answering some of my sub-wonderings and at my main wondering as it pertains to my specific Kindergarten classroom.

**Claim #1:** My Kindergarten class is most engaged in a read aloud if the read aloud is entertaining to them. This entrainment can come through humor, singing, or through felt dramatics.

My first piece of evidence to defend this claim is the data that came from the observation checklists and from my PDA’s anecdotal notes. Both of these sources of information demonstrated that students were either fully engaged or had the least amount of off task behavior when an entertaining read aloud was presented. The checklists indicate that *David Gets in Trouble, There
Once was a Man Named Michael Finnegan, and The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza had the least number of recorded off task behaviors out of all of the read alouds subject to the checklist data collection. My PDA also reported that I had one hundred percent engagement during a felt dramatic presentation about the life of a dog and the life of a squirrel. This proves that throughout my inquiry, my students were most engaged during read alouds to which I added some form of entertainment to the text.

Another piece of evidence that supports my claim that entertaining read alouds are the most engaging for my students is the result of my exit interviews. In these interviews students selected two books, one presented with felt dramatics, and the other selected because of its humor, as their favorite stories from the grouping. Six students out of eight told me that the reason that like liked these two books were because they were “silly.” The data tells me loud and clear what my students are looking for in a read aloud. They want to laugh and be entertained.

This result did not come to me as a surprise, nor do I think it will to most teachers or family members. Looking back at my teacher surveys and librarian interviews, these sources of data clearly showed me from the beginning that entertaining read alouds are the most effective to engage learners. These pieces of data showed that a clear majority looks for “engaging” or “interesting” books and some even specifically describe “fun” or “humor” filled book as their favorite read alouds to share with students.

The results of several different types of data, checklists, student and teacher interviews, and a survey, clearly defend my claim. I can say with complete certainty that my Kindergarten class is most engaged in a read aloud if the read aloud is entertaining to them. This entrainment can come through humor, signing, or through felt dramatics.
Claim #2: When a teacher carefully selects the books, prepares, and adds an entertaining element to a read aloud, the student’s appeal for the story, and ability to recall the story will increase compared to a regular read aloud.

The initial student interviews indicated that only one of the eight students were able to recall the name of a book read aloud over seven days prior to the interview, but the exit interviews told a much different story. During these interviews, six students out of the eight interviewed were able to recall at least one book presented over seven days prior, and out of these students, five were able to recall more than one book. Also during the exit interviews, all of the students were able to recall the sequence of events in their selected favorite book. All of these books had been presented more than seven days before the interview. My analysis of this data clearly indicates that with careful planning on the teacher’s part, the student’s ability to recall read aloud stories by title and by the story’s sequence will increase.

Another piece of evidence that defends this claim is the student documents I collected (See Appendix E for Student Document #1). These documents show that my Kindergarten students preferred The Mixed Up Chameleon as the favorite read aloud book. This book was the only book featured as felt dramatics during our Eric Carle author study (See Appendix H for Picture #1). These documents also showed that half of the students were able to recall a specific story detail when asked why that particular book was their favorite, and out of that sample a majority of the responses were to support The Mixed Up Chameleon. This indicates to me that the students like the story presented through felt dramatics the most and were also able to defend this with hard evidence from the story.

These pieces of evidence support my claim that students’ appeal for a story and ability to recall the story and the sequence of the story will increase if the teacher prepares a carefully
selected book for the read aloud. This preparation during my inquiry included pre-reading the text, looking for books that I thought would be humorous to my students, and with some stories creating a felt dramatic presentation to accompany the text.

**Reflections and Implications for Future Practice**

My inquiry has given meaning and purposes to our daily read alouds. Read alouds have quickly evolved from a quick selection of a book off a shelf to a prepared experience for my students and me. This experience has changed who I am as a storyteller and changed my students as an audience. My students are more engaged in our daily read alouds. This engagement will hopefully benefit their language arts academic abilities, creativity, and most of all, their passion for literature. I am excited to continue to critically select and prepare books to present as read alouds for my students. I now know that they are looking for entertainment either through the humor in the text or through becoming an active participant with felt dramatics.

This inquiry has caused me to carefully reflect on the books I present, and this reflection will remain with me throughout my teaching career. I now know what to look for when selecting a book and about how to present the right books for my students. This exact match might not fit with classes to come in my teaching career, but I feel prepared to be able to critically look at the books I present, how I present them, and how my students are engaged with the read aloud. I have found that with read alouds you need to balance entertainment with books that support your curriculum, and most of all, you need to listen to what your students want to hear.

**Future Wonderings**

- How will my students enjoy poetry? Reader’s theater?
- Will my class still enjoy felt dramatics if not everyone has a part?
• By the end of the year, will my students still be able to recall the books I have read aloud?

• Will my class next year enjoy some of the same books?
Appendices

Appendix A, Teacher Survey #1, Example

Reading Aloud Survey
Distributed by Ashley Franceschelli, Kindergarten Intern in Room 127

1. What grade or grades do you teach? 5

2. Do you read aloud to your students? Yes No

3. When do you read aloud to your students? various times

4. How often during a week do you read aloud? 3-5 times

5. What are some of your favorite read aloud books?
   Flush
   Loser
   various picture books

6. How do you select and prepare the read aloud books that you will share with your class?
   based on topics of study, connection to kids' life

7. What do you think makes a good read aloud book?
   engaging, kids can all relate to it, some humor, some real life situations, thought-provoking

Please return this survey to Ashley Franceschelli's staff mailbox by 3/5/09
Thank you in advance for your time!
Appendix B, Teacher Interview #1, Questions and Notes

Interview Questions for Mrs. Collins

  - Book that you like, your enthusiasm is the selling point, they pick up on it, your attitude of presentation
  - Discussion lead in, tie it to their experiences enthusiasm, intro, draw them in,

- How do you prepare for read alouds?
  - Tie to their experience, reason why I am reading this, settle them down

- Do you do read alouds with all grades in our school?
  - Yes, older kids, more mature than they are, less frequent, people that are older than them, novels, chapter a week
  - How often?
    - K primary- every class, funny
    - Intermediate-
    - How does the selection of the book and preparation change?
      - Enjoy, nursery rhymes
      - Classics that they should know for real life
    - Some of your favs?
      - Set suspense by reading text first then picture, chair with arms, for your arms

- What are some of your favorite read alouds?
  - Helen Lester
  - Ted Arnold
  - Older
    - Chris Van Oostburg – 4th
  - Underwear – Primary
  - Stays away from holiday stories, diversity of the community,
  - Balanced ethics and backgrounds

- How do you manage engagement during read alouds?
  - Hook with Intro
  - Voices
    - Family, tv people
  - Puppet + book = hard, after dramatics, or intro
  - 5th out of 8 is the beast with the voices
  - Even if you miss up the kids don’t care
  - Teach them to sit flat and be proactive about
  - Up high in a chair
  - Consistent expectation of behavior, routine
  - Eye contact, non-verbal cues
  - Reserved seating in the front row
    - Closer they are to you the better
    - Keep there attention to you
    - Consistent
Appendix C, Student Interview #1, Questions

- How do you feel about our after lunch read alouds?

- Can you name any of the books I have read this year for our daily read alouds?
  - Do you have a favorite read aloud book?

- Did you ever hear a book you did not like? How did that book make you feel?

- Did you ever hear a book that you really enjoyed? How did that book make you feel?

- What are some of your favorite books to hear?

- What do you think makes a good book?

- Does someone read to you at home? Who? When? How often?
### Appendix D, Checklist #1, Completed Checklist Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student’s Name</th>
<th>Eyes Off</th>
<th>Verbal Cues</th>
<th>Nonverbal</th>
<th>Off Task Behavior</th>
<th>Other Comments</th>
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Dear Eric,

My favorite book is The Mixed-Up Chameleon. It has lots of different animals. He changes into Love, Carin.
Appendix F, Anecdotal Notes #1 submitted via email from Susan Lunsford

When I arrived, Ms. F gathered students on the carpet after lunch for a “silly story” using felt pieces on the felt board.

*A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A DOG!*
(Your felt board cutouts are adorable!)

You did an amazing job of not “missing a beat” by calling helpers to make the story come alive on the felt board.

**ALL EYES WITH YOU** (I did a sweep of students at interval noted to see how many students were looking at you, intent on the story):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 min</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 min</td>
<td>100% (squirrel story)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 min</td>
<td>-1 student (but right back on track when the puddle was presented)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 min</td>
<td>100% (“I climb as far as I can…”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 min</td>
<td>100%</td>
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The students were looking right and left with you while you said this—they were mimicking your actions (I’m not even sure if they were trying or knew they did this).

You demonstrate great enthusiasm in your voice when reading aloud—your confidence is showing!

You used a non-verbal to pull one back on-task (you never missed a beat here, either. Just kept on reading!)

**Questions:**
Once the students started sharing ideas, interest waned a bit. Your voice got them all back—when you said “tweet, tweet, tweet.”

You did a nice job of discussing details from the story that made it exciting to listen to. Reminded students that they could do this in their writing. I’m thinking more examples would have been nice here but you were on “borrowed time” with their attention span and probably didn’t want to push them past their limit.
Ms. F: What can we add to our stories to make them POP?
Pick an animal and write a story that tells about...This is what they do in second grade! This is a great motivator—I think I saw them sit up straighter/taller when you said this!

I'm anxious to see your student work results from their writing today! 😊
Appendix G, Student Interview, Questions

- Can you remember any of the read aloud books I have read to you after lunch?
  - If the students is able to recall a book, ask for recall of the story’s sequence
- Present the 5 books
  - Do any of these books look unfamiliar or strange to you? Which ones?
  - Can you pick one favorite out of these books?
    - Can you tell me why this book is your favorite? Can you tell me what happens in this story?

Appendix H, Picture #1, Felt Dramatics of Eric Carle’s The Mixed Up Chameleon