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Improving student engagement in preschool classrooms with developmentally appropriate read aloud opportunities

Kimberly Russomanno

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**IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS
WITH
DEVELOPMENTALLY
APPROPRIATE READ ALOUD OPPORTUNITIES**

by
Kimberly E. Russomanno

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Education
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Master of Arts in Reading Education
At
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Thesis Chair: Valarie Lee, Ph.D.

Dedications

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband Mark Russomanno and my two daughters Madee and Alyssa Russomanno.

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With the hard work and dedication that has gone into the past two years of obtaining my Master's Degree in Reading Education, it is with great pleasure I can give gratitude and thanks to those who helped make this possible. I first want to thank Dr. Valarie Lee, for her guidance and support during this process.

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Abstract

Kimberly E. Russomanno

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DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE READ ALOUD OPPORTUNITIES
2014**

Valarie Lee, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of various presentations of read aloud and engagement in a preschool classroom in order to improve emergent literacy and listening comprehension. Engagement was looked at as well in respect to teacher expectations and what the research unveiled.

The research took place over four weeks in a half day preschool inclusion program. The research looked at traditional story book reading, interactive shared reading, e-books, repeated readings and story props for retelling of familiar stories.

Read aloud sessions were recorded over the four week period to look for patterns in student and teacher behavior that would encourage or hinder engagement during the various presentations of a story. Although reasons for engagement or disengagement were inconsistent and more individualized based on each child and their own needs, the need to use multiple forms of read aloud to engage all students was a consistent trend within the data analysis.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Open the door of my preschool classroom and you can see shelves filled with toys for learning, tools for writing and drawing as well as books for reading. Children have the opportunity to roam freely throughout their day exploring the world around. Teachers guide students to use these tools in a developmentally appropriate manner. Children play games that encourage the growth of math and literacy skills as well as motor skills. Experience is the root of learning in this environment. Another experience that the students have each day is the chance to hear an adult read good literature to them. For some students it may be the only time a book is read to them during their day.

In a perfect world my classroom would have 16 children all sitting quietly with open eyes and minds welcoming the journey that each book is going to take them on during the read aloud portion of their day. We all know that a perfect world simply does not exist. Each child comes to school with their own story and often that story impacts portions of their day. For these students much of their story is beyond their control. In this very real classroom there often comes times when their less than perfect teacher may have parts of her own story that impact the day as well.

This classroom has two sessions a day each containing 16 students. The children in my class are four or five years old and preparing for kindergarten. Each class contains about 6 students who have I.E.P.'s for various reasons such as language, motor issues, and even behavior. Within the class there are also at least 3-4 students who do not speak

English in their homes. Some students come from what would be considered “traditional” backgrounds while others live with various relatives that may have parents who come in and out of their child’s lives. Whatever the situation may be, sometimes these various components of my students’ lives impact our learning environment. It would be ignorant of me to think that I could plan my lessons without considering my students and their backgrounds and needs when preparing for my read alouds.

Purpose Statement

When the individual needs of all of the students in a classroom are not taken into consideration, read aloud can become a time of confusion and frustration for the students. When this time of day is not provided in a developmentally appropriate manner, students are not likely to be engaged and actively involved in the learning process. This in turn inhibits growth amongst preschool students in areas of listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall emergent reading skills. According to Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, (2003), state that read aloud time should be a time that is one of enjoyment and builds a positive experience for the students and that this should be of the utmost importance in order to foster an appreciation of literature as the student grows into an independent reader.

When considering the diverse make up of students within a classroom and the importance of providing positive, enjoyable experiences that engages all students, the question that is researched is as follows: What types of developmentally appropriate read aloud experiences promote engagement for preschool students?

When considering the term “engagement” for the purpose of this research, it can be interpreted as on task behavior that involves intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that a student uses in order to connect and comprehend text that is being presented by correctly answering a variety of questions.

Preschool sets the stage for education and understanding how to engage students with text, greatly impacts the future success of students as they become independent readers. Read aloud in a preschool classroom is an opportunity for teachers to expose students to a variety of texts to promote a positive attitude toward literacy.

According to De-Bruin- Parecki and Squibb (2011), many students from poor and urban districts come with a disadvantage that may lead them to be at risk for reading difficulties because within their classrooms there is not the priority of promoting strategies for listening comprehension and vocabulary skills. This suggests that even if a classroom has daily read aloud, the students are not being provided with the emergent strategies that they will need to become independent readers. Often in classrooms of diverse and disadvantaged populations, teachers are working with behaviors and outside influences such as hunger and lack of support at home that may be impacting what is happening in the classroom. Teachers who don’t understand various ways to utilize read aloud that promotes engagement within the classroom will continue to maintain the status quo of these disadvantaged populations.

Research suggests that there are ways to engage all students from all backgrounds but educators must truly understand the population that they are servicing. Most preschool teachers understand the importance of sharing books and reading stories to their students daily, but without properly engaging students and utilizing read aloud as an

experience to enhance listening comprehension, vocabulary instruction and all areas of literacy development, there are lost opportunities.

Conversations during shared book reading as discussed by Milburn et.al. (2014) allows children to construct their own meaning of text. When a student can connect to text they are able to take their already acquired knowledge and build new meanings through this interaction. Unfortunately what the research discovered is that many early childhood educators use shared reading for instructional purposes rather than an interactive experience. When students are not interacting when they are listening to a story, it can be interpreted that engagement may not be present for the majority of students.

Meier (2003), looks at the importance of multicultural literature in the preschool classroom in order to promote engagement during read aloud for children of all cultural background. The research finds that all students bring important linguistic abilities to the preschool classroom no matter what their cultural background. Meier suggests that when culturally diverse students are presented with text that represents their own background and not the mainstream that their engagement with text is more likely to increase.

The research on the topic of engagement suggests it holds great importance when building literacy strategies. The research also suggests that while many educators are aware of best practices they may not be utilizing them for a variety of reasons. The research of this paper looks deeper by incorporating many of the strategies supported by previous research and how it looks in a diverse inclusion preschool classroom. The implications of engaging students in what is considered “traditional” read aloud as well as incorporating interactive read aloud, props, e-books as well as multicultural/bilingual

literature and how students respond to each type will be investigated as well in order to help other early childhood educators find ways to improve literacy for all students during read aloud.

Statement of the Problem and Research Question

The problem and research question of this paper is, how various types of read aloud can engage preschool students from all backgrounds. Within a preschool classroom there is a broad range of what is considered developmentally appropriate, taking this into consideration there are many students on either end of this span. Engaging students who are considered within average range of development as well as students who are developmentally delayed or non-English speaking can be a challenge. This research takes an in depth look at how students from all backgrounds engage with the various forms of read aloud.

Story of the Question

Read aloud is one of my favorite parts of my day. I love getting my students interested in books using various props or voices. I have my favorite stories that I look forward to reading each year. Kevin Henkes', Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse is one of my absolute favorites and I anticipated sharing it with each of my classes. Then one day I looked around the carpet and I found that while reading another of my favorite stories, I had students who may not have found it as interesting as I did. I had students talking and looking around the room, sure there were a few students who appeared to be listening but not with the excitement and gusto that I had hoped for. This was the first a-ha moment that I had that began my interest in preschool students' engagement during read aloud.

Last year our school adopted a new curriculum that came with its own library of books. This particular curriculum is state approved and considered developmentally appropriate. The curriculum had an array of books that contained classic stories, curriculum developed stories, bilingual books and e-books that accompanied each study that the preschool students would work on throughout the year.

With these new resources I was excited to expand my library and examine new stories with my students. What I found was somewhat disappointing. Many of the stories contained a lot of words, too many words. My students did not have the attention span to focus on the entire length of the book, and as I read some of these books I realized that I was just as bored and disengaged as my preschool students. This was my second a-ha moment.

I began to analyze the purpose of read aloud in my preschool classroom. I had my stories that I loved, but perhaps my love of a book is not enough to get my students engaged. I had hoped that books provided by a curriculum that is developmentally designed for preschool students would be the answer I looked for to engage my students but again I found myself frustrated. I began to think about what engaged means to me and how it is defined by theorists. I questioned what I wanted my students to walk away with after these experiences.

One day I remember during story time in late September reading a book and just pushing through the story lacking any real excitement, seeing my students not interested and thinking that I just need to get to the end of the story so we can move on to our next activity. It was a moment that made me sad and wanting to make a change. I thought about how I began to treat read aloud and how it was becoming just another check mark

on my list of “to do’s” for the day. I realized this is not what I wanted or what my students deserved. I needed to investigate how I can make this time more developmentally appropriate and engaging for my students which would in essence encourage improved listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and overall emergent literacy skills.

Organization of the Research

Chapter two of the research provides a review of literature that surrounds the various forms of read aloud that intend to promote engagement for preschool students. This research provides insight into the possibilities of greater success with the presentation of various read alouds. Chapter three provides the design of my research and study. This chapter provides insight into the culture and make-up of the community that I service as well as how the research was conducted. Chapter four provides a review and analysis of the research and what was found within this process. Chapter five provides the conclusion of the study and how the findings of this particular research can be used to help others improve their practice as well as the implications for further research.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

“Many activities within preschool classrooms support early literacy development, but perhaps one of the most powerful is book reading”

(Dennis, Lynch and Stackall, 2012).

Introduction

If you look into any preschool classroom on any given day, you will find at one point the teacher gathering the children on a colorful rug and sitting at the front of the class reading a book. This time is known to most as “read aloud” or “story time”. Look a little closer and you may see children sitting and appearing to be listening intently to the story, other children may be looking around the room or talking to other peers, and some children may even try and turn their backs to the teacher. The teacher often trudges on using redirection or silent pauses to try and get the attention of those not currently engaged.

The landscape of the preschool classroom is much like many classrooms in America today, filled with diverse populations of students coming from various backgrounds and skill levels. The unique setting of preschool is that often this school experience is the first experience children may have with formal education. Students come into preschool classrooms with different backgrounds, limited language and experiences as well as various disabilities.

Read aloud can leave many students lost, frustrated, and even noncompliant. This can also impact on task students as they see their peers disengaged which causes a domino effect. Understanding the importance of read aloud in the promotion of language

acquisition, listening comprehension, and print awareness in spite of its challenges is investigated in the review of literature in chapter two. In addition this chapter will investigate the research that supports planning for diverse populations when planning literacy experiences during read aloud. This chapter will also provide a comprehensive review of the literature in respect to interactive reading experiences, multicultural literature and the use of e-books in order to promote engagement amongst all children in the preschool classroom regardless of background or experiences.

Defining Engagement

Throughout this chapter, the term engagement will be used to discuss a desirable outcome during periods of shared reading or read aloud in a preschool classroom. One can interpret engagement as an appearance or behavior of students in a classroom such as sitting quietly, looking at the teacher, and appearing to be listening to a given story another may interpret engagement as what a student must possess in order to fully comprehend what is being read, but may not have a physical presentation of good behavior. Guthrie & Wigfield, (1997) compiled research articles that look at motivation and engagement within the classroom. “Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational states are included in the definition of engagement, and engagement refers to a set of activity-related processes rather than a psychological state (p.69). While the interpretation of engagement may vary from person to person, for the purpose of this research, engagement will be defined as the ability to interact with text through discussion and answering questions that support one’s comprehension of said text successfully.

Benefits of Read Aloud in Preschool

According to Roskos, Christie, Richgels (2003), “Effective early literacy instruction provides preschool children with developmentally appropriate settings, materials, experiences and social support that encourage early forms of reading and writing to flourish and develop into conversational literacy,” (p.2). During read aloud teachers engage students in conversation and provide vocabulary instruction to build comprehension skills and concepts of print.

The benefits of read aloud activities within a preschool setting outweigh any negatives, but there is some disconnect in the presentation of stories in class. Research across the board agrees that this is a very valuable component of a child’s literacy development.

According to De-Bruin-Parecki & Squibb (2011) while many early childhood educators focus on letter recognition and phonemic awareness, comprehension is not always a focus in classroom instruction. What DeBruin-Parecki & Squibb (2011) found was that during shared interactive reading alouds comprehension instruction was most likely to take place. This knowledge could help improve instruction to students especially those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds who statistically often lack exposure to books and rich vocabulary which in turn directly impacts comprehension.

“Furthermore, reading books to children (a) provides opportunities for multiple exposures to words and related concepts, (b) allows for connections between content-area knowledge and/or academic language, and (c) aids in the development of a strong oral

language foundation,” (Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011 as cited in Dennis, Lynch, & Stockall, 2012).

Planning for Diverse Preschool Populations

According to Dennis, Lynch, and Stockall (2012), book selection is an important component when preparing to read to a group of diverse students. According to this research, it is important for the teacher to know the backgrounds of their students and provide texts that represent the various students and their experiences when selecting texts. This takes into account many factors such as culture, developmental appropriateness, disabilities within the classroom, and even considering gender. Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012) suggest that when selecting texts for children with developmental disabilities the teacher must take into account the attention span of the students. This alone can impact how engaged a child is when a book is read to them. The research states that text should be consistent with the amount of time they are able to attend.

According to Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012) state that when engaging students with developmental delays or disabilities the educator must also take into account what the disability is. Some students in a classroom may have visual impairments which require the teacher to make thoughtful decisions about how text is presented. This includes offering books that have braille, finding text that is bold, clear and has high contrast as well as considering the types of pictures within the texts. Hearing impaired students may have difficulties with language that is figurative or abstract and need special attention with vocabulary. This can be done with the use of books that include sign language as well as using pictures for references (Dennis, Lynch and Stockall, 2012).

Diverse preschool classrooms also include students who come from various language backgrounds. According to Naqvi, McKeough, Throne, and Pfitscher (2012), dual language books can be used as a resource in classrooms where children are emergent with their literacy which provides a culturally and linguistically responsive classroom. When planning for diverse backgrounds, culture is something a teacher must take into account. “In addition to academic benefits, social benefits accrue for children in schools that build upon home languages” (Naqvi, McKeough, Throne, and Pfitscher, 2012). Providing ELL students with opportunities to hear and see books in their home language can have vocabulary building benefits when learning English.

Leacox and Jackson (2012) investigate the positive effects of using books within a classroom that take stories in English and use technology enhanced readings with Spanish to bridge vocabulary learned. When planning for diverse students during read aloud looking at technology and how it can be used to support students who are non-English speaking or ELL in order to promote engagement. “Although embedded instructional definitions in either Spanish or English were beneficial, vocabulary instruction in Spanish during shared reading produced greater gains in the children’s ability to define or explain targeted words” (Leacox and Jackson, 2012). These considerations when planning texts in a preschool classroom can help improve the overall engagement of students.

Improving Engagement through Various Forms of Read Aloud

Engagement in a preschool classroom requires the students to be actively involved and connected with the text that they are being read or listening to. This can be accomplished through a variety of presentations of text and the interactions they illicit. “Repeated interactive read-alouds, a systematic method of reading aloud, allow teachers to scaffold children’s understanding of the book being read” (McGee and Schickedanz, 2011, p. 1). This type of read aloud requires students to interact with the text through questioning and discussion rather than the teacher simply reading the text and the students listening to a story. Using interactive read-alouds in preschool and kindergarten have shown to improve children’s engagement, as well as understanding of literature and fostered appreciation for literature (McGee and Schickedanz, 2011). When text is read more than once, research shows that students can spend more time during subsequent readings to interpret the text in a manner that is more in-depth. This implies that not all read alouds are created equal and that the presentation of read aloud that is most effective for children are the ones that involve the student. Passive listening is not enough. McGee and Schickedanz (2011) state that the read-alouds that require students to participate by asking and answering questions as well as making predictions will produce the most successful results.

With preschool students especially, the attention span is often short. A first reading of a story may be simply the introduction of the text and future readings will have more meaning for the students as they know what to expect and are more active with the listening. McGee and Schickedanz (2011) found that while interactive read-alouds are effective in improving engagement, teacher selection of book lacked a certain

sophistication. They found that many educators continued to choose text that had predictable text or in a “big book” type format. What they also found that while these books have a purpose, they lack the sophistication needed to ask questions that would truly require students to interact with the text. “Effective teachers model what ideal readers do by explicitly talking aloud as they read, making children aware that they are predicting, making an inference, or changing their ideas about what is happening in a story” (McGee and Schickedanz, 2011, p. 4). With this age group, many students are experiencing formal education and reading instruction for the first time. Modeling these strategies help foster the skills that students need as they become independent readers. The research of McGee and Schickedanz (2011) also defined four components for what they believe will successfully implement repeated interactive read-alouds within the classroom, book introduction, vocabulary support, analytical comments and questions and finally after reading “why” questions. These components are dependent on each other and believed necessary to create an environment that builds on emergent readers’ skills. Reese and Cox (1999), further investigate the interactions between adults and children during shared reading. “Shared book reading is appropriate for examining the effects of social interactions on emergent literacy because it requires cooperation as well as the generation of conversation between reader and child” (Reese and Cox, 1999, p.21). This particular research focused on the quality versus quantity of shared reading experiences. Reese and Cox (1999) focused on a type of shared reading known as “dialogic reading” which can be defined as a style of reading that increases the use of open ended questions that create more opportunities for children to respond and interact with the text. The use of open ended questions increases opportunities for students to build on what they know

and explore ideas beyond the surface of the story. This ultimately provides the stepping stones for comprehension of text.

The research of Reese and Cox is similar to that of McGee and Schickedanz (2011), in which the research supports that students are more likely to be engaged in story book reading when they are actively involved. These techniques provide students with opportunities for higher level thinking.

Children today are born digital natives. Many students can manipulate touch screen devices such as iPods, iPads, smart phones, computers as well as many other forms of new literacies in the classroom. Roskos and Burstein (2012) observed use of e-books during shared reading in preschool classrooms. The research was conducted in eight diverse preschool classrooms located throughout the United States. “To clarify terms, an ebook is any digital learning object that represents what would generally be considered a traditional children’s literature book” (Roskos and Burstein, 2012, p.30). According to Roskos and Burstein (2012), during shared reading of e-books, teachers spent time looking and listening to the e-books with the students rather than their usual task of reading a traditional story to the children. During this time, however, many of the skills that the teachers would use in a hard copy book were imbedded into the lessons of the e-book experience. Traditional, before, during and after reading activities took place throughout the research with the e-books (Roskos and Burstein, 2012). The research ultimately found that e-book presented in various media such as touch screen (ie. Computers or smart board) vs. tablets or iPods had different results. Students benefitted more from e-books presented on a touch screen and benefitted the least from the use of iPods when presented text in this medium. Increased recognition of targeted vocabulary

was noted through the use of e-books. While it is not explicitly state within the research, the research suggests that children are more increasingly more interested and engaged in books that are presented in an electronic manner. With the proper adult training and use of the technology, the use of e-books in the classroom in conjunction with traditional hard copy books can build and improve on vocabulary in emergent literacy classrooms (Roskos and Burstein, 2012). Students' interest in technology can improve their desire to participate with a given text. This creates an environment in which students are receptive to learn and can improve these skills due to their engagement.

Even with all of these supports in place there are other factors beyond the classroom that can impact engagement for a preschool student. Looking further we can investigate the impact of a students' native language and engagement through the following research.

Student engagement can be lacking when a student does not have the language to support the learning taking place during shared reading activities. According to DeBruin-Parecki & Squibb (2011), students who may lack language or are considered "at risk" for success in literacy would benefit greatly from intentional teaching of comprehension strategies. Their research found that often comprehension skills are taught in the upper grades, but it is essential for teachers of preschool age students to begin the process during read aloud long before the students can read themselves. When looking at the at risk population of students this was found to be even more important. One part of the comprehension instruction according to DeBruin-Parecki & Squibb (2011), is to ensure that children can connect text to self. This implies that students can see themselves and their own life experiences within the text and can make connections that would improve their ability to

comprehend. This may not be the case when a classroom only provides texts that represent the mainstream population. “Despite their diverse backgrounds, all children bring to school rich linguistic abilities acquired through social interactions in their home and community” (Meier, 2003, p,242). In the research conducted by Meier (2003), the topic of how other cultures tell stories is addressed. Many students coming from various cultural backgrounds may have little to no experience with traditional story books but rather a rich spoken home language that tells stories orally without the use of actual books. What Meier (2003), observed was that while many of these children had a great deal of knowledge and could answer questions within the classroom, when it came time to read a story the children often had difficulty staying on task and engaged. Choosing books that relate to the students’ lives is first and foremost the most important step to engage students from various backgrounds. Meier (2003), also found that skills that explicitly teach book behavior skills through more interesting open ended questions. Meier (2003), finally stresses the importance of making books come alive. Students who lack language will be more likely to be interested and engaged in storybook reading. Using multicultural literature during read aloud can provide many benefits for young students as well. “A child may see his or her own life reflected in a book or may have an opportunity to see into someone else’s life” (Mendoza and Reese, 2001, p.6). Multicultural literature can help engage students when they can connect with the characters in a book while for other students they can see how others live. Au (1998) looks at literacy instruction through a social constructivist approach. This research looked at the achievement gap that is present between the mainstream and diverse populations and how individuals are represented through text and literature in the classroom. Students

who did not see themselves in what they were reading about had difficulty connecting to text which in turn impacted the overall ability to comprehend text. This suggests that when literature is not present that represents the diverse population of a school community, the education gap continues to grow bigger. Mendoza and Reese (2001), caution that ensuring the text is an accurate representation of a culture as authentic and also that teacher utilize a vast array of text that represent various cultures as not to use one book to represent an entire culture. When looking at multicultural literature the research suggests that not only should there be diversity in the types of texts that students have available but also that within a given culture there must be multiple examples of that culture as well.

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, it is clear that there are many components to take into consideration when improving student engagement during read aloud. Teachers of preschool students can improve instruction by recognizing the choices made when creating a literacy environment for diverse preschoolers. Understanding the importance and benefits of read aloud in preschool for development of print awareness, vocabulary acquisition, as well as comprehension skills can only stress the importance of further research that investigates best practices that will address the needs of all students in a classroom.

Dennis, Lynch and Stackall (2012) stress the importance of reading books to students to support early literacy. The landscape of what is considered a “typical” classroom has drastically changed throughout history. Students come from very diverse backgrounds with very different views of literacy and storybooks even as young as preschool.

Understanding the diversity must be considered and that instruction must be differentiated with multiple methods for read aloud, are the framework for the research. This study aims to look at the strategies suggested throughout the literature and research how engagement is positively or negatively impacted by these shifts in thinking and presentation.

Chapter III

Research Design/Methodology

The research design for this study is qualitative research. With this paradigm data is collected through observations, work samples, interview, etc. For the “teacher researcher” this type of research lends to observing and analyzing everyday occurrences in one’s own classroom to investigate a question within their own practice. “One feature that every form of practitioner inquiry has in common is that the practitioner himself or herself simultaneously takes on the role of researcher” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.41). According to Shagoury & Power (2012). Teacher research provides the educators the ability to look at the various issues within the classroom and reflect with colleagues on ways to improve these issues to create schools that can work through the issues to best serve their students. ”Versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent for educational and social change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.37). This type of research is subjective as the researchers is immersed within the classroom setting as not only the teacher but the researcher as well, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). What is most unique about this form of research according to Cochran-Smith & Lytle, (2009) is that anyone in the school community can take the role of the researcher. This differs from a more quantitative research design which is a more objective research that take a more outsider approach, where researchers are not necessarily part of the school community but rather other educational institutions or even companies. These types of researchers more often utilize tools to measure variables as well as the relationships within the variables, (Creswell, 2013).

Quantitative research according to Cochran-Smith & Lytle, (2009) is look for an answer to a specific question. The practitioner qualitative research looks at a question based on a personal experience in the educational field. This question may lead to many sub-questions that may lead to deeper understanding without necessarily finding one answer. This qualitative research is intended to look at my own classroom setting and reflect on my own teaching as well as student responses to the various texts they are presented during read aloud time. I have chosen qualitative research because I am subjective within this study. This is research based on a question that is specific to my teaching placement and my students. The research will take place within my classroom and analyze my own practice as well as my students' responses to my practice. Teacher research is important because as stated in Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009).

The strategies that will be implemented for this qualitative study are video/audio recordings of read aloud sessions, teacher reflection journal, and anecdotal notes of children's responses to comprehension questions during these whole group structured activities.

Procedure of Study

Prior to conducting the research, I informally took notice of the engagement of the students in my classroom setting during out story time. I began to reflect on what actually happens during this time of day, how the story is selected, and the engagement of each student, as well as my own reactions to the story as well as the benefits of this time of day for preschool students. I reflected on how many times paraprofessionals or myself needed to redirect the students as well as the ability to answer questions. Children's excitement

level and expressions were also noted during these times in order to determine what was actually happening during read aloud.

Both AM and PM sessions of my preschool classroom contain diverse populations of various cultural backgrounds as well as 6 students in each session having IEP's for various developmental delays. Taking all of this information into account I realize the presentation of read aloud can greatly impact the way in which the text is received by each and every student.

For this study I have decided to look at several forms of read aloud and monitor for student interest, engagement and ability to answer comprehension questions correctly. I decided to look at the effectiveness of including interactive shared reading, e-books, as well as multicultural/bilingual texts to research during this study. Using the reflection journal and videos I was able to see how the students are truly interacting or not during read aloud. While I looked at the data collected, I also tried to find common themes that were found during the various presentations.

The data was collected over a period of four weeks. Book selection and rationale was noted in the teacher reflection journal. Student engagement was analyzed through videotaping of read aloud sessions. When the video was viewed I was looking for several things. I observed and took notes on student behavior. Those who "appeared" on task by sitting quietly on the carpet, looking at the teacher and not participating in disruptive behavior. I also looked for off task behaviors. I focused what the behavior was, what appeared to trigger the behavior as well as how many times a student or students needed to be redirected to focus on the book. I used the video to look at my own behaviors. I asked myself questions of how my behavior during read aloud either contributed to

engagement or even possibly disengaged students. I observed those children who appeared engaged on the video and the accuracy of their answers to text based questions. I analyzed how I view what engaged looks like and what I discovered about my own perceptions. Through these questions and observations I began to see commonalities between the presentation, the students in my class and my own expectations and how each component relied on the other.

The data was also analyzed to see how the students respond to the various presentation of texts. During read aloud over the course of the study I presented text in a manner that the students may not normally have access to. During my research I noted what the students respond to best. I analyzed how the various forms of text and presentation improve engagement with certain populations in the classroom such as students who are English language learners, communication impaired, hearing impaired, and have behavior issues.

The students were focusing on a “buildings study” for the duration of the research. The first two weeks the students worked on “The Three Little Pigs” fairy tale which worked was presented through traditional story reading, stories that were extensions of the text, bilingual multicultural versions of the story and retelling using story pieces.

The second half of the research used various adaptations of “The Gingerbread Man.” During these two weeks, students utilized traditional story reading, repeated readings, listening center reading of the story with headphones and a CD player, interactive computer versions of the story, and story pieces for the students to independently retell the story.

Context of Study

George L. Hess Educational Complex is one of two elementary schools located in Mays Landing, NJ in Atlantic County. The school serves all of the children in the district who are in grades Pre-k, 2-5. Due to space issues grades K and 1 are housed in a different building across town. The Hess School serves approximately 1,700 students. The population of this district is diverse with 50.8% of the students being white, 0.1% are two or more races, 5.6% Asian, 18.8% Hispanic and 24.7% African American. Of that population 252 students or 17% are classified as having a disability, 732 or 49% come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and 30 or 2% of students have been identified as having limited English proficiency. This information was obtained by the NJ Department of Education website under the “NJ School Performance Report” heading. The district provided preschool program is a four year old half day program in which members of the community may sign their child up for preschool if they will turn 4 on or before October 1st of that particular school year. Registration is first come first served due to limited space and parents must provide transportation for their child to and from the program. Students who have been identified as “preschool disabled” may attend school at the age of three after a child study team evaluation and are placed in a preschool disabled self-contained classroom if they are considered eligible. Busing is provided for this population of students. Four year old students with IEPs who either transition from the three year old program or are tested prior or during their four year old year are also eligible for busing.

My current preschool classroom is a four year old preschool inclusion class. There is one teacher and two paraprofessionals to support the students within the

classroom. The morning class has 16 students. Of the 16 students, 9 are boys and 7 are girls. The class has 6 students who are white, 3 students who are Hispanic, 3 students who are African American, 1 student who is Macedonian, 2 students who are Asian and 1 student is two or more races. Four students in this class entered school not yet four years old as their birthdays were in September after school had already started. The students who have IEP's mostly have speech delays in either expressive or receptive language or both. One child in the class is classified with behavioral issues and two are being monitored for possible autism spectrum disorder and will be seen by the school neurologist prior to entering kindergarten. The PM class consists of 16 students as well. There are 5 boys and 11 girls in this setting. Of those 16 students, 8 students are white, 1 student is Hispanic, 3 students are African American, and 4 students are two or more races. There are 6 students in this session that have IEPs as well. The disabilities vary from speech, health impairments, and behavioral issues as well. Two students had not yet turned four prior to starting the school year and had birthdays in September as well.

It has been noted that the morning class has more difficulty with rote like tasks such as letter and number recognition, but can offer more expanded and insightful answers to questions they are given. Solving problems is a strength for many of the students and the group is fairly independent with following the daily routine. In contrast the afternoon students have quite a few students who can recognize most letters and numbers on sight but struggle to answer simple "wh" type questions. This particular group often needs choices when answering open ended questions and can be found off topic during whole group instruction. It is also noted that the overall age of students in the PM session is considered very young as the majority of the class turned four in July,

August, or September. This is often most evident when students are asked to attend to a task not of their own choosing for more than 10 minutes.

Students in both classes are generally well behaved and get along with their peers. The class is two and a half hours long and broken into morning meeting, playground, small group/center time, read aloud, and snack. During small group/center time, students pick learning centers to play and explore in while adults within the classroom engage the students in conversation and extensions of learning. For small group, children are called to a table for an activity that focuses on specific skills. These groups are flexible groups that are at times heterogeneous and homogenous depending on the skill and needs of each student. Working with peers and independently making decisions is a main focus of the classroom. Students use their names to travel from center to center. Each learning center had spots for four names and children are encouraged to use their executive function with adult support when a preferred center is full and they need to choose another area to go to. During this time of the day most play and groups are no more than four children at a given time. Read aloud is generally a whole group activity where the students convene on the carpet and listen to a story often related to the theme or study that is taking place within the classroom. This time of day can be more difficult for the younger students and the students that have language or behavior issues. There is a lot of language during read aloud and this can be particularly stressful for myself and the students if they are not engaged. It is the hope through the research of various forms of read aloud activities, that preschool student engagement can improve which will improve the students' overall emergent literacy skills.

Chapter four of the thesis will review the results of the video recordings that focus on student responses, behaviors, and overall engagement during read aloud. Chapter four will also review the results from the teacher's journal and anecdotal notes that reflect comprehension and participation of the students during read aloud as well as any extension activities that result from the stories.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four examines the findings of the study that researched the question, “What happens to student engagement when preschool students participate in developmentally appropriate read aloud in the classroom?” Upon reviewing my data sources, teacher/researcher journal, and video of read aloud sessions, as well as anecdotal notes taken during observations, I found key themes that I would further discuss. I was able to identify three big ideas that were interwoven into each component of the research. These include my own personal ideas and expectations of student engagement and how that impacts the students, connections made to text through hands on/interactive experiences during and after read aloud, and the correlation of using fairy/folktales when trying to engage preschool students.

Revisiting the Study

As previously stated in chapter three, data was collected over a period of four weeks where I exposed the students to various presentations of read aloud to find ways that would promote student engagement. Initially I took video of a typical read aloud where a book was chosen based on the unit of study that our class was learning about and followed a “typical” read aloud structure where students listened to a story and answered questions at the end of the text. This allowed me to have a base line of what actually happens during read aloud within my classroom while I am reading a book. I went back and viewed the video and took notes in my teacher research journal to note my behaviors

as well as student behaviors when text is read in this standard presentation. Subsequent read alouds within the research period were also recorded while I was reading and interacting with the class in order to see the process as an outsider. The video was reviewed and I was able to note trends in my behavior and students' behavior as well as changes that I noted as the research progressed. Student responses to questioning were also recorded and noted through the process to use the data to better understand how the various read alouds may contribute to comprehension.

Engagement: Personal Ideas and Expectations

I found through this process and reviewing of the data that I needed to analyze my initial view of what I felt engagement looked like in a preschool classroom and how my thinking shifted over the course of the research. I found this to be important because what I believed engagement looked like and what I came to find had great impacts on the research. During each session I noted that when the children were settled on the carpet, each day I would say, "Boys and girls, I need you sitting flat on your bottoms, criss- cross applesauce, with looking eyes and listening ears." In a preschool classroom routine and repetition is crucial and helps students become more independent. I would still say my daily mantra to the children because it sets the stage for being a "good listener," but I found that if I saw a student properly following all these directives that I believed they were engaged.

Looking over the data, I found several instances where children looked engaged yet were unable to actively participate in the discussion. The following interaction with myself and a child in class really made me think about this. This child is the model child

on the carpet, she sits, and she appears to listen but struggles with answering questions and participating during story time.

Me: A.A., why was Rosa putting the money in the jar?

A.A.: I don't know.

What I found through my data collection was that my initial idea of engagement was based on what I felt an administrator would want to see upon entering my classroom. Not all administrators who complete the observations in preschool have early childhood as a background and the expectation is not always developmentally appropriate. I found that this theme was sitting in the back of my mind as the research progressed. I was allowing fear of observations hold back on truly engaging the students. As I reviewed my journal entries and videos I found that students who appeared off task could answer text related questions at times which went against my initial ideas of engagement and vice versa.

As the research progressed I found that engagement was not a quiet process as I had thought but my ideas began to shape around the idea of a shared process. In order for my students to be engaged they needed to be involved. When working with preschool students, involved is not quiet and orderly all the time and I needed to accept that.

As the weeks progressed, I noted a child C.B. who has consistent problems with disruptive behaviors most often during whole group instruction. Through the analysis of the data I found that these behaviors often impact the ability of other students to focus and stay engaged as well during these whole group experiences.

What I analyzed that not only does my idea impact what engagement truly is but I also needed to take note on how other students can really impact the engagement of their peers, especially in four and five year old students. The peers may appear engaged, but if their attention is focused on environmental factors such as peer behavior they are not interacting with the text.

When the students participated in hands on activities, they had more excitement and interest in the text. What I noted consistently in my researcher's journal was that C.B. was involved with the text and excited to participate. C.B. often struggled during whole group, but when given hands on activities he was able to make the story meaningful to himself and would be less disruptive to others. It was also consistently noted that students who are not native English speakers also found the hands on activities that accompanied the story made concepts that they may not be familiar with more concrete.

With the use of repetitive familiar text, students were able to answer more open ended questions. This can be attributed to the fact that the students were no longer trying to figure out what the words mean, but rather what was actually happening in the story. For each child, they were beginning to comprehend the text on their own level and could expand on their answers within their own developmental level.

Me: Why do you think the man had to take a break when he was chasing the Gingerbread Man?

K.C.-I think he was really tired, the Gingerbread Man is super-fast.

C.T. - I think he needed a drink, it was hot out.

A.A. - Gingerbread Man is fast, that's why.

The presentation of story pieces allowed the students to participate in a more conversational style of read aloud. When reviewing the data collection I noted that even though students may have been moving around and not following the "proper" rules of read aloud and some were calling out, all of the children were answering questions and participating in the repeated portions of the text. What I found that when I introduced the story pieces during read aloud in a more casual manner, the students who often had the most difficulty with language and behaviors often chose using the story pieces and the books during free time.

G.D- "Do you want to do Gingerbread Man with me, S.L.?"

S.L. - "Yeah! I'll go get the book!"

Overall, what I found was that over time I became more relaxed with my ideas of engagement. Engagement initially to me was traditional story time with quiet students listening to the story, absorbing the information through osmosis. Once I stepped back and allowed conversations to take place and created opportunities for students to interact more with the text during read aloud and during choice time, students became interested in read aloud and chose reading activities during free time over more popular centers such as dramatic play and blocks.

Reviewing my researcher's journal, I began to see trends in the shift of my own thinking. Initially the research was to see how all students could sit quietly on the carpet and listen to a story and produce the results that I felt an administrator would be looking for. Overall, I found that my shift in thinking when it came to student engagement was a

theme throughout the research. This was evident as we progressed through the weeks of the research and how observations of the students evolved.

Hands on/ Interactive Repeated Readings

While reviewing my journal I found that student interaction and hands on experiences played a large role in all aspects of the research. I had always planned on using hands on/interactive experiences as part of the research but I did not think that the research would suggest that these experiences would support the most engagement as I soon found. Story pieces are just that, pictures or puppets that are characters from a given story that are used to tell or retell as story. In previous years, I had used story pieces in the library center to supplement the books that I provided to my students. What I realized through the research was that I really had not used these tools during read aloud as a way to engage my students. During the first week of the study, read aloud was based on the building study from the preschool curriculum. Students were exposed to several different versions of 'The Three Little Pigs,' through the course of the week. The first day, the book was introduced and read.

Me- "Today we are going to read a story about Three Little Pigs and the houses they built.

A.T. - "I know that book, my mommy reads it to me at home!"

E.K.-"There's a bad guy in the book, he's a wolf."

I found that throughout the research, when familiar text was introduced, students were more interested in hearing the story. This suggests that while we as teachers want to expose our students to many different text, perhaps in the early childhood classroom,

familiar/repetitive text is an effective way to engage students and allow for increased comprehension. When the story is predictable, the ability to focus on vocabulary is much more fluid as well.

The following day, the story pieces were introduced. Interestingly enough, I found that the concept of “straw” in respect to the story was hard for my students to understand.

A.T.-Straws like we drink our milk with Russomanno?

Me: No, straw in this story is like hay, remember the hay we had in the sand table? Just like that.

Vocabulary is key when comprehending and connecting to text. Reviewing the data, I found that I often reviewed words with my students that I felt were difficult or they may not have been exposed to. What I realized was that I often assumed many of my students understood vocabulary that I felt was more basic and that it was something I often overlooked. When reviewing this I realized that the other day no child questioned the vocabulary word of straw, it was when they had a visual prompt of a story piece, and they were trying to connect that there was some confusion. Taking time to reflect on these experiences not only help my students but help me take time and review my own assumptions.

When reviewing the data I found that modeling the use of the story pieces was key, in past experiences I have not and students were less likely to independently utilize them. My awareness of engaging my students allowed for me to serve them better. I noticed students who lacked language or the ability to sit during the reading of a story during traditional story time would choose story pieces as an independent center during

their free choice time. They had a feeling of success that I could see in their faces during observations time and time again.

After reviewing the videos and journal entries, the data suggests that interactive read alouds promote engagement in preschoolers by getting students actively involved in the story. The data also suggests that repeated readings and exposure to text can improve engagement for students who typically do not attend to more traditional read aloud sessions due to disabilities or ELL reasons.

Fairytales and Folktales to Improve Read Aloud Engagement

During the study I found a commonality between all students in my class no matter what their background when it came to fairytales. Students from all cultures and backgrounds seem to be familiar with popular fairytales. Most students were familiar with the story of “The Three Little Pigs” and “The Gingerbread Man” which we worked on various versions of for most of the study.

We read a story called, ‘The Three Little Javelinas’ in class which is an adaptation of ‘The Three Little Pigs’ set in southwest America. The children were very interested in this particular story once they connected it to their past reading experiences.

Me-Boys and Girls, the story we are going to read a story today called “The Three Little Javelinas,” I want you to listen and see if this story reminds you of another story we have read.

A.T. - I know this story, it’s like the pigs!

Me- What do you see so far that is the same as our other story?

C.T.-They are a kind of pig!

T.W. - There's a wolf that wants to eat them.

Me-What do you see that is different?

J.R. - I don't like the wolf.

I.H. - They live somewhere else in this book.

T.W. - They are called the Javes' not pigs!

The data suggests that because the students had prior knowledge of the general story they were engaged because they were actively trying to compare the two versions. The students were eager to share their findings of the same and different when it came to the two versions. This was also true when other versions were read.

One interesting observation was made the next day when the story was read in Spanish. The students who were so eager to participate the day before were less focused and inclined to answer questions. It is to be noted that I do not speak Spanish fluently and only read the text in Spanish and asked follow up questions in English.

When we read 'The Three Little Javelinas' in Spanish I found an interesting observatoion. The book is a bilingual book written for early childhood students. Previously students were excited about the book and wanted to share their ideas. I told the students they were going to hear the story in Spanish which is another language people speak and that many of the friends in our class speak Spanish in their homes. I was interested to see that initially the students were excited to see the book again, but interest and engagement was lost once I began to read it in Spanish. I found it most

surprising that the Spanish speaking children were not interested in hearing a story in school using their home language. This was not at all the outcome I had expected.

Analyzing this piece of data, I found that using a book that was previously high interest was not as interesting the second time around in a different language, even to children whose native language is Spanish. The data suggests that while reading text in different languages may be important to build students' pride in their own culture, it does disagree with what the literature review suggests when it comes to bilingual books. This suggests that bilingual books may not necessarily always improve student engagement.

Summary of Data Analysis

As quoted in chapter two, "Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational states are included in the definition of engagement, and engagement refers to a set of activity-related processes rather than a psychological state" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997, p.69). After careful review of all of my data sources, I found that the definition of engagement being an "activity-related process" was greatly supported by the research.

The students were most interested and willing to participate in reading activities that had text that they had some schema about. Students who experience difficulty sitting for teacher directed read alouds were more successful when they were able to participate in the learning through hands on experiences using story pieces or other types of interactive activities that were used in conjunction with the story.

Predictable text allowed students who lack language to participate successfully which motivated them to want to listen to the story and in turn were more engaged. The data suggests, students who participated in reading of familiar fairytales were able to

participate in answering more complex questions because they were able to focus more on the content rather than learning the story line.

Chapter five will look at the conclusions and implications of the research as well as recommendations for future research in the area of student engagement during read aloud in a preschool setting.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions, Limitations and Implications for the Field

Summary

When concluding my research, I found that student engagement is student driven and not necessarily teacher or administrator driven. In order to engage preschool students of various backgrounds with text, it is of the utmost importance to know what type of learners you are serving. After four weeks of implementing various presentations of read aloud for my preschool students, I found that there is not one way that promotes engagement for all students. Preschool students learn best through experience and providing my students with interactive hands on approaches to story book reading had an overall positive response to read aloud.

This four week experience allowed me to take a good look at how text was previously presented to students in my class which lead to the story of the question. The research also provided me with a shift in my thinking and presentation of text that really took my individual students into consideration rather than merely focusing on what was dictated by curriculum. When the study was concluding, I noticed a shift in my students as well. They looked forward to read aloud and began to answer questions in a more thoughtful manner as they became more actively involved in the reading.

In addition to a shift in thinking, I found that by presenting my students with multiple opportunities to experience a story through shared reading discussions, story props, technology, and repeated readings that students who fall into the category of English language learner or communication impaired were able to find success in their

participation when they could use the props to retell as story that had predictable text. These students often find it difficult to attend to a story in a more traditional setting due to language barriers, through these activities, students flourished and found story time to be more enjoyable. Negative and disruptive behaviors also diminished when students who typically had difficulty attending to a story were able to interact with the text. Shifting my own thinking when it came to expectations of what student engagement looked like allowed me to take these experiences and see the value they provided to students who often struggle with read aloud.

During this research, fairy tales were used to provide the repeated readings, multicultural stories and e-books. Fairy tales were found to be a very useful tool as it was discovered that regardless of each students' background, they had a familiarity with each of the main stories that was read. The Three Little Pigs was used for the first two weeks and The Gingerbread Man was used for the final two. Having a familiarity with the text provided an instant interest amongst the entire population of students. This allowed for the students to listen to stories that had a similar story line but may have been done from a different perspective such as "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs as Told by A. Wolf." Engaging the students with familiarity created opportunities to expand on the stories read in class.

Lastly, the research found that students began to seek out retelling stories and visiting the library center more frequently during free time when given text in various presentations. Students could use the story props during independent center time without the need of adult support. Students became more interested in visiting the listening center

as well to hear a previously read story on CD. Students who became engaged during read aloud became more independent with their emergent reading skills.

Conclusions

After reviewing the literature that focused on preschool student engagement during read aloud, I found that my study was beneficial to my students because it provided them with new outlets to experience read aloud beyond sitting and listening to a teacher directed instructional story time. This is important because the benefits of reading stories to preschool students are immeasurable but often as teachers we find ourselves in a rut of reading a story for the sake of reading a story without necessarily taking the children into account. As previously quoted in chapter two, Dennis, Lynch, and Stockall,(2012), “Many activities within preschool classrooms support early literacy development, but perhaps one of the most powerful is book reading,” (p.5). Dennis, Lynch and Stockall further discuss the implications of story book reading as a way for preschool students to be exposed to rich vocabulary as well as begin to connect to text as well as improve language skills. I found the quote and research to drive my thinking because while I was finding myself lacking the excitement for story book reading during read aloud, it fueled my belief that there is great importance in this time and it is not simply reading a story. I found that my own research supported this idea and that improving student engagement we could reclaim this time for what it was truly designed to be, a time to build on the essential emergent skills needed to become an independent reader.

Using my reflections and data collection while watching the videos of read aloud in my class I found as McGee and Schickedanz, (2007) described interactive repeated

read alouds as something that, “allow teachers to scaffold children’s understanding of the book being read,”(p.742). This research made it clear to me that this is not a one size fits all model, understanding each child and their background is what shapes the interactions. I would not necessarily find the perfect situation for all of my students to be engaged at one time and perhaps that was not realistic. This was evident as I reviewed each video. One child may have been engaged and able to answer questions when working with story pieces, but struggled during whole group story time. Some students found the e-books to be something they enjoyed while other students were quick to finish and rushed through the questioning process without putting much effort into their answers.

Ultimately my research supported the current literature that discusses read aloud in the preschool classroom and more specifically student engagement. Students had a greater interest in text when it was presented in a hands on interactive way. Students engaged in conversation during read aloud and connected to their own experiences when discussion was conducted in a less formal instructional manner. Engagement is an interactive process where the students must be invested in the text, this is most successful in a preschool setting when students can actively participate in the read aloud process through retelling the story, hands on story props as well as choral “reading” of predictable text with the teacher.

Limitations

The limitation that impacted the research the most was time constraints. The research was conducted during the month of November when students are not consistently in school due to NJ Teachers’ Convention, Veterans’ Day, and Thanksgiving. The students also attend a half day program for preschool which is only 2

½ hours which must also incorporate all other areas of development during this time. This impacted the study because while the stories read built upon previously read text, the weeks were not always full weeks of school and the students were off schedule and routine. This impacted participation and behavior of students who are dependent on consistency and routine.

The other issue of time was the study was conducted for a period of only four weeks. Due to time constraints not all types of read aloud had multiple exposures such as e-books. The iPads for the students were not working at the time of the research and students had difficulty utilizing the desktop computer from lack of exposure to that particular form of technology. If the time span was greater, a more in depth look at each form of read aloud would have been possible.

Implications for the Field

After analyzing the data collected for this particular study, conclusions could be drawn about student engagement during read aloud in a preschool classroom, however, there are also some aspects that could be further investigated. Future teacher researchers that investigate student engagement for read aloud in a preschool classroom could look at the research over a greater period of time. This would allow the teacher researcher time to look not only at the various presentations of read aloud but also various genres of text and how that may impact various students within the classroom.

Another implication for future teacher research would be to investigate the correlation of storybook reading within the home and engagement in the classroom. Providing the parents the ability to participate in a survey by requesting information

about reading within the home and their child's attitude toward reading may give insight into the value students place on reading upon entering the preschool classroom.

In conclusion, read aloud in the preschool classroom provides many opportunities to teach emergent readers print awareness, vocabulary, proper book handling and connecting spoken and written words. The research found and not surprisingly that teachers cannot simply read a book to a class and expect results from all students. By providing students with interactive/hands on experiences that are thoughtfully planned out for read aloud, student engagement is most likely to improve. Understanding the needs of the various students in the class and scaffolding the lesson and questioning to meet the students' needs improve student success and engagement. Understanding what is developmentally appropriate when presenting text to preschool students as well is key. When teachers take these things into consideration a time that may have previously been frustrating and chaotic can become a time that fosters learning and a love of reading.

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