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## **Reading Aloud: Children's Attitude toward being Read to at Home and at School.**

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*Abstract: Whilst there exists a plethora of research about the benefits of reading aloud on children's literacy development and a range of government reports highlighting the positive investment return on early intervention strategies such as reading aloud, most literature is presented from an adult perspective. Limited research exists on children's attitudes toward being read to at home or school or the frequency of reading aloud practices that occur within these contexts. This mixed method study examines reading aloud practices in schools (N=21) and homes (N=220). It captures the attitude toward reading aloud practices from the viewpoint of 220 children aged between 6-12 years of age (Grade 1-6) across a representative range of diverse school contexts in Western Australian. The findings identify specific reading aloud practices, patterns of frequency and perceived barriers to reading aloud in the classroom and at home. The study provides support for the practice of reading aloud to be continued past the period of acquisition and independent reading. It raises concern about the low frequency of reading aloud practices at home and school and the early signs of a literacy. It also highlights the limited attention to affective domains of reading that occur in schools.*

**Keywords:** Reading aloud, literacy, Parents and young readers, reading attitudes.

### **Introduction**

At a time when literacy levels of teachers are under scrutiny and education reform is driven by evidence based data or large scale assessment (Ainley & Gebhardt, 2013), affective domains of education are often overlooked and undervalued. This is further perpetuated by the demands of crowded curriculum in schools and competing time allocation demands at home. With this context in mind, the following study highlights the importance of the well-recognized strategy of 'reading aloud', and draws from the perspective of young children to explore and capture empirical data on the frequency and attitudes towards reading aloud both at home and in schools. It includes indication of whether the practice of reading aloud is curtailed at home and at school as students' progress through the primary school years. Reading aloud is the focus of the study as it has been found to be the most significant factor in the development of literacy levels of young children (Kalb & van Ours, 2014). As a reading intervention strategy, it has many benefits, including motivating children to read, and improving basic literacy comprehension and development (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1999; Fox, 2013; Swanson, Vaughn, Wanzek, Petscher, Heckert, Cavanaugh, Kraft, &

Tackett, 2011). In the context of our research, we characterize reading aloud in its simplest form ‘as the shared reading experience between a child and a parent/guardian or teacher’.

A wide body of research including ministerial reports support the benefits of reading aloud for young children (Lane & Wright, 2007; Roberts & Burchinal, 2002). A US Department of Education commissioned report by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson (1985) entitled *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, found that, the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading, is reading aloud to children. More recently, an Australian longitudinal study found that children who had been read to fared much better in national literacy tests than those that did not (Mullan & Daraganova, 2012). In Australia, children that have been read to more frequently at age 4-5 achieve higher test scores on the *National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy* see Kalb & van Ours, (2014). It is not surprising therefore to see attitudes toward reading and being read to as key components in international survey tools such as the *Progress for International Reading Literacy Study* (Mellis & Martin, 2016).

Reading aloud is associated with a range of literacy skills and cognitive benefits. Reading to children in the early years has been linked to related language growth, emergent literacy and reading achievement (Bus et al., 1995). A recent analysis of 29 studies found “significant, positive effects for read-aloud interventions on children’s language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes” suggesting that read-aloud interventions “provide children at-risk of reading difficulties with higher literacy outcomes than children who do not participate in these interventions” (Swanson et al. 2012, p. 13). Research suggests that that being read to leads to children’s increased vocabulary (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002), reading comprehension, and cognitive skills (Kalb and van Ours (2014). Chomsky (1972) drew a connection between reading aloud and syntactic development; Beck & McKeown (2001) highlight reading aloud as an aid to help children decontextualize language. Furthermore, being read to aloud at home enhances the development of the receptive language skills involved in listening and speaking (Senechal & LeFevre, 2001). It has also been reported that children who are read to more frequently at an early age enter school with larger vocabularies and more advanced comprehension skills (see Mol & Bus, 2011). Canoy et al (2016) found that the practice of reading aloud to children encourages children to read books themselves, and entice less able children to read. Clark & Andreasen (2014) highlight its instructional benefits. Bredekamp et al., (2000) found that reading aloud helps children to understand the structure and conventions of texts. Maxim (1998) found it supports the development of language demands in other curriculum areas including Mathematics. Moreover, when parents read-aloud to their children, it provides a valuable opportunity for focused interaction, with reading subsequently situated as a valued social practice (Merga, 2014). Questioning skills, dialogic engagement and inquiry-based learning are embedded social practices instilled in children during read-aloud sessions (Trelease, 2013).

Reading aloud can lead to attitudinal and motivational outcomes for young people. The attitudinal and affective desire to read, rather than the skill or literacy ability determines whether one chooses to read or not (McKenna et al. 1995; Olufowobi & Makinde, 2011). It has been contended that the experience of being read to in childhood has a protective effect against aliteracy in later life (Beers, 2013), potentially impacting on later attitudes toward reading (Herrold, Stanchfield & Serabian, 1989). This positive attitude toward reading affects the level of engagement and practice of academic or recreational reading (see McKenna et al, 1995). McKenna’s large scale national survey found that the relationship between ability and attitude grows stronger over time, implying that a cumulative impact of undesirable reading experiences in school influences children’s literacy levels. Similarly, the Australian *Kids & Family Reading Report* (2016) found the most powerful predictor of reading frequency for

children is “how often a child is read books aloud” (p. 20). Alexander and Filler (1976, p. 1) state, “reading attitude is a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation”. Recent debate and research about literacy, illiteracy and aliteracy highlight the significance of children’s attitude toward reading engagement (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009).

There is ample evidence related to the benefits of reading aloud, including acknowledgement that the frequency of reading to children at a young age has a direct causal effect on their schooling outcomes regardless of their family background and home environment (Kalb & van Ours, 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011). However, debate about the benefits of reading aloud also exists (Meyer, Wardrop, Linn & Hastings, 1994; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst, 1994). The main points of contestation focus on: discrepancies between classroom practices in reading aloud and those practices found effective for laying the foundation for children’s future literacy capabilities (Beck & McKeown, 2001); concern that a crowded curriculum provides limited time for read-alouds; and a lack of statistical significance or outcome variance related to its efficacy as well as limited evidence of long term outcomes of reading aloud as an intervention strategy (Swanson et al., 2011). Other reasons and causes for not including reading aloud in classrooms remain a matter of conjecture rather than evidence (Fox, 2013). While the benefits of reading aloud are relatively well established, far less is known about children’s regularity of engagement in the practice and children’s attitudes toward being read to, particularly in Australian schools and home contexts.

This paper reports on the findings from the 2016 Western Australian Study in Reading Aloud (WASRA), exploring children’s reading aloud experiences, as well as their attitudes toward being read to, both at home and at school. This study treats ‘reading aloud’ in its simplest form, namely reading text orally and audibly for self and others. Whilst we acknowledge that ‘reading aloud’ practices are diverse and include a variety of approaches including the development of listening, vocabulary, comprehension and questioning skills, and that educational and socioeconomic contexts differ in reading aloud practices at home (Williams, 1998), we intentionally opted for a more simplistic unproblematized definition for this study to ensure the young children understood the meaning. In addition, the study will determine how frequency of exposure to reading aloud varies across primary school years. It draws on children’s current attitudes toward reading aloud and their self-reporting of frequency of exposure to the practice from parents/carers and teachers to provide empirical data about the frequency of exposure to reading aloud practices with specific focus on identifying points of significant curtailment and barriers to reading. There is a paucity of current research that identifies barriers to the practice of reading aloud at school and at home, and thus this research can potentially provide a crucial foundation for future intervention in this area.

## **Method**

Although some research purists assert paradigms and methods should not be mixed (Cresswell, 1994; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), and pragmatists argue against a false dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods (Cameron, 2009), proponents of mixed-method approaches, including the authors, recognize that, “the struggle for primacy of one paradigm over others is irrelevant as each paradigm is an alternate offering with its own merits” (Guba, 1990, p. 27). What has been considered a ‘quiet’ revolution to resolve tensions between the qualitative and quantitative movements (Tashakkor & Teddlie, 2003),

has emerged as a growing preferred methodology, particularly in the field of applied social research (Cameron, 2009).

A range of mixed method typologies exist that use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather, analyse and interpret data. In this instance, the researchers have employed a complementary interpretivist design described by Mertens (2005), whereby the qualitative approach is the dominant method of the two paradigms employed. The complementary design incorporates a parallel data collection model within its structure where concurrent mixed-method instruments are used for data collection and analysis. The research design addresses issues concerning the employment of mixed methods as a label rather than a process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The combined quantitative and qualitative study allowed the exploration of the interconnected and distinct aspects of reading aloud practices from the perspective of young children. The integrative mixed method design was considered the best approach to capture the attitude toward and frequency of reading aloud practices both at home and in schools.

The research was conducted in two parallel phases undertaken across 21 representative primary schools in Western Australia. Surveys provided the researcher opportunity to collect a larger data set across the twenty-one representative schools [n=220].

- Group A: Parents and Teachers from 14 primary schools completed an online survey.
- Group B: Children from 7 primary schools in grades 1-3 (younger cohort) completed a dyadic researcher-delivered survey whilst grades 4- 6 (older cohort) completed an online survey.

Before research was undertaken, the research tools were rigorously piloted with age appropriate children at an additional school and the instruments were adjusted accordingly to elicit a combination of specific and open ended questions.

## Participants

The schools and student participants in this study were chosen to provide a representative sample of age, reading ability, geographic and socio-economic status (SES). Participants in the WASRA study included children between ages 6-12 years (Grade 1-6) from 21 Western Australian schools. Schools were chosen based on geographic and socio-economic status, with students' recruitment based on age and provision of consent.

Schools selected in the study were first identified by their socio-economic status (SES). In Australia, all schools are classified according to the index of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA), and thus our convenience sampling approach was responsive to ICSEA scores as ranked on the *My school* website (ACARA, 2016). ICSEA measures key factors that correlate with educational outcomes of children, allowing for fair comparisons of educational performance of schools across the nation. It considers student factors including parents' occupation and education as well as school factors such as geographical location and proportion of indigenous students.

Schools with a range of ICSEA (811 – 1159) scores spanning rural and metro schools were identified and approached as WASRA study schools. As aforementioned, the schools (n=21) were divided into two parallel groups for data collection purposes. Group A (n=14) schools collected data on other research questions from teachers and parents. This paper reports on the findings from Group B schools (n=7) where data were collected from children (n=220) who participated in surveys. Group B schools (n=7) were selected based on a range of ICSEA levels (811 – 1159), geographical contexts (2 rural and 5 metro) and school size (small <250; medium < 500 and large <1000).

The student participants in the WASRA study ranged from 6-12 years of age and are referred to as the young cohort (grades 1-3 or 6-8 years old) and older cohort (grades 4-6 or 9-12 year olds). Data collection methods as outlined above were undertaken concurrently. Mixed-methods surveys were conducted within the Group B schools across seven primary schools, with older cohort children independently filling the survey, and younger cohort children completing the survey in a dyadic exchange with a principal researcher. Resourcing also influenced participation; while all older cohort students could take part as they were able to independently complete the survey, younger cohort students were limited to a maximum of three from each grade (1-3) as the survey was conducted in dyadic exchanges with one of the primary researchers. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure a representative sample across the younger cohort. After parent consent was gained, teachers identified a good, average and poor reader from within their group based on aligned chronological age with reading ages.

Answer Choices	Responses (%)	Responses (N)
Year group		
Year 1	14.5	32
Year 2	10	22
Year 3	16.8	37
Year 4	26.8	59
Year 5	18.6	41
Year 6	13.2	29
Age		
6	13.8	30
7	8.7	19
8	12.4	27
9	29.8	65
10	18.8	41
11	14.7	32
12	1.8	4
<i>Mean = 8.55</i>		
Gender		
Girl	62.1	136
Boy	37.9	83

**Table 1. Characteristics of N= survey participants by percentage**

## Procedure

Online and dyadic surveys were chosen to capture the voices of young children and their attitudes toward reading aloud practices at home and at school. The primary researchers undertook all data collection. After sample schools were chosen based on ICSEA levels, school size and geographical location and Departmental consent requested. Once approved, consent was sought from individual government school principals and subsequently parents of children in grades 1-6. Individual dyadic surveys were conducted for the younger cohort, generally in a quiet corner of the library familiar to the student, with the questions read-aloud by the researcher and responses noted. While this approach was far more time consuming, it was essential to ensure that the data collected from this younger cohort with emergent literacy was valid. Online surveys were conducted with the older cohort and administered in familiar onsite computer rooms. Both locations made the children feel safe and comfortable throughout the process. The data collection tools were chosen specifically to cater for the age development of the young cohort and their projected attention span. Surveys were designed

to be responsive to student comprehension and literacy abilities. The definition of ‘reading aloud’ was unproblematic and simplistic to help cater to this young self-reporting cohort.

### **Analysis**

The exploratory nature of the mixed-method research model underpinning the WASRA study aimed to reveal the attitudes of children toward being read to and reading aloud both at home and at school, and the frequency of reading aloud strategies in both contexts. The data collection instruments provided a rich source of empirical data for concurrent analysis and interpretation about current and past participation in reading aloud practices. Even though the sample size was small  $n=220$ , it was reflective of practice in seven schools and is of value for statistical purposes.

Quantitative data were non-parametric and analysed to identify trends in the data in relation to reading attitudes and frequency (Siegel, 1957), with findings subsequently fleshed out in the qualitative data that were collected in the surveys. Constant comparative analysis (Kolb, 2012) of the qualitative data sets was used to highlight trends, patterns and conceptual similarities and differences. Lichtman’s (2006) data analysis process was employed to identify codes, categories and concepts. Initial coding occurred when reading the raw data from mixed-methods surveys resulting in identification of central ideas from the responses. An initial list of categories or central ideas was identified. Comparisons across the age cohorts and between home and school were employed whilst also maintaining an inductive position throughout the coding process. Rereading provided time to modify and find convergence and divergence from both quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers were careful to adopt an emic focus so that the attitudes and viewpoints of the children toward past reading aloud experiences and behaviours were foregrounded in the coding process. A text analysis of children’s responses highlighted key words and phrases. Final categories and quantitative datasets were formed into concepts (themes) from the etic perspective of the researchers (Olive, 2014). A final cross-case analysis of findings was undertaken between the WASRA data-set from the *Kids and Family Reading Report* (2016).

The combined quantitative and qualitative study explored the interconnected and distinct aspects of reading aloud practices from the perspective of young school aged children. The analysis was conducted across the age groups (6-12) and across contexts (home and school). Where cross-comparison was applicable and possible identified individual and combined groups are described as aforementioned as younger cohort (grades 1-3) and older cohort (grades 4-7). Exploration of reading aloud frequency and factors that curtailed reading aloud practices were also analysed. The mixed methods data analysis recognizes that exploring convergence and divergence of quantitative and qualitative data “leads researchers to more complex understandings toward further research studies” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 294). The findings were analysed so as to inform recommendations for future practice and research.

### **Findings**

The findings from the WA Study Reading Aloud (WASRA) reflect children’s attitude toward: being read to; frequency of being read to; independent reading frequency; reading supports at home and reading supports in the past. The findings below show indication of whether the practice of reading aloud is curtailed at school and at home as students’ progress through the primary school years.

## **Attitudes toward being Read to**

The majority of children showed a positive attitude toward reading aloud at both home and school. Just over three quarters of respondents enjoyed being read to, with 23.8% not enjoying it. The majority of younger respondents who did not enjoy being read to were either children who self-reported being very good readers and predominately wanted to 'read by myself' or those that didn't like the 'noise or interruptions' of being read to. Younger children (78.9%) enjoyed being read to, slightly more than older children (74.4%), though older children still reported enjoying the activity at school. When asked why they liked or disliked being read to, recurrent ideas were shared and common themes revealed in the coding process as outlined below.

### **Perceived Affective Benefits**

The majority of the children in both age group cohorts enjoyed being read to (74-79%). The perceived affective benefits were collectively grouped based on their comments about emotions, memories and visualization. The majority of students felt 'happy', 'relaxed', and 'good inside' when being read to. A text analysis of the words in the responses revealed 'happy' as the most frequently used word followed by 'nice'. Children in general, liked 'funny' books that made them laugh and considered being read to as an opportunity to 'escape school work'. Some respondents commented that it made them 'sleepy at night-time' but 'happy at school'. Others talked about reading 'bringing back childhood memories' and 'remembering things I did that was the same as in books'. The final category of perceived benefits related to comments about visualization, 'all I have to do is listen and imagine the story in my head', 'I get to sit back, relax and picture the story in my head' and 'when I listen I feel as if I am in the story'. Children in general associated reading aloud with enjoyment both at home and in school (74-78%).

### **Perceived Cognitive Benefits**

When analyzing the responses from children that liked being read to, numerous comments related to the cognitive benefits of being read to. A text analysis of the children's responses revealed 'listen', 'learn' and 'words' as the most frequently used words in relation to this theme. In particular, the children's comments focused primarily on word-level recognition benefits of reading aloud, such as 'if there are hard words they can pronounce it and tell me what it is', 'it makes me learn new words' and 'when I listen, I get the words in my head to spell them out and read them in other books'.

For those children who did not like to be read to, their attitudinal responses were either physical or emotional. The majority of the concerns were about the physical act of being read-aloud to. Concern was expressed about readers being too soft that 'they couldn't be heard', too loud 'that it hurt their heads', too distracting 'that kids kept interrupting' and too boring 'lacking expression'. A text analysis of the responses revealed 'concentrate' and 'hard to understand' as the most frequently used words related to reasons for disliking being read to. The choice of books being read was also considered a real motivator or distraction to being read to aloud 'the books are boring' or 'they read books I don't like or understand'. The emotive responses of those that disliked being read to commented about feeling 'bored', 'angry' and 'frustrated' particularly if the reading was too 'slow, soft, or interrupted by other children', or if they couldn't 'connect with the experiences' in the text. Of the twenty-two



younger cohort participants that did not like to be read to, seven referred to not being able to concentrate on what was being read. The following comments were representative of the collective group that disliked being read to aloud: 'sometimes it is too slow and like they stop and start it's distracting'; 'because I can read by myself and I don't like the teacher being interrupted by other kids'; 'it is really frustrating and annoying to just sit and listen when people aren't listening' and 'I don't like it I feel wonky and dizzy and it's a waste of my time'. As such, pace, interruption, reader autonomy, behaviour management issues and emotional/physiological resistance were identified as reasons for disliking the experience, providing insight into the complexity of the issue. The emotions felt by children that disliked being read to, particularly the younger cohort was extremely palpable.

### Frequency of being Read to

Although the practice of reading aloud is known to be of benefit to children, particularly young children, most respondents would prefer a greater frequency of being read to at home (62.7%). Over a quarter of respondents claimed that no one read to them in the home (27%). A subgroup of respondents who *were* read to was created in order to investigate frequency for these children. Within this sub-group, only 17.7% reported being read to every day, with 25.8% read to, often and 56.5% only sometimes. Responses from the participants were skewed toward infrequency.

**Frequency?** A small number of younger cohort respondents reported being read books by their teacher every day (3.4%), and only 23.7% felt this occurred often. Most children reported being read to only sometimes (68.1%), with 4.8% of respondents claiming to never be read to by their teachers. A similar pattern occurred with the older cohort; a slightly smaller number reported being read to everyday (2.4%), and most respondents in this age group reported being read to sometimes (67.2%), with relatively few reporting being read to, often (26.2%). Interestingly, the older cohort reported a slightly lower rate of *never being read to* at school (4.1%) than the younger cohort (4.8%); it was anticipated that the older children would be far less likely to be read to at school, but the data did not reflect this assumption.

**When?** The reported times that students were read to at school, in order of greatest reference, included: 'after lunch', 'at the end of the day', 'as a reward', 'when we finish our work', 'on special days', 'when we have to fill in time' and 'only when we have library'. Time, in particular 'a lack of time', was noted as the most significant reasons for the lack of frequency of in class reading aloud practices. Many children cited *time* as the main reason for not being read to, as 'we only read when we finish work', or 'it depends if we have spare time or not'. However, others commented that at school they 'watched movies rather than read'. Children's perceived attitude toward curriculum demands influenced their responses, with comments such as, 'we have to do more proper work such as math and writing'.

**Why?** The children's responses highlighted perceived reasons why teachers read to them at school and the types of books that were read to them. Children generally thought teachers read to them to: 'calm us down', 'teach us new words and worlds', 'to predict things' or 'fill in time'. Some children noted that they didn't think their teachers liked reading, often based on comparison to others 'she isn't a big lover of books but Miss [M] is'.

**What?** An analysis of responses about the texts that were read to children revealed 'story books', 'funny books' and 'picture books' as the most frequently used words. In many cases the children commented about book titles including 'Faraway tree', 'Pepper pig', 'Grumpy bear', 'Star Wars', 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid', 'Geronimo Stilton', 'Rainbow Fairies' and 'Ando Weirdo'. Memorable genre and/or book content included 'how to books',

‘zombie’, ‘history’ and ‘adventure’ books. Of all the responses, only a few gave reference to authors. Although much was reported about the types of texts that were read to children, there were areas of literacy silences within the WASRA study; for example, poetry was never mentioned and reference to libraries was limited.

### Independent Reading Frequency

Over 92% of the younger cohort reported being independent readers, with 94.1% of the older cohort reading independently. Only 5.7% of the older cohort and 7.6% of the younger cohort reported never reading independently.

Answer Options	Responses (%)	Responses (N)
Never	6.5	13
Sometimes	27.6	55
Often	23.1	46
Every day	42.7	85

**Table 2. Independent reading frequency**

Many children in the study reported that they read because they ‘had home reading tasks’, others were encouraged by their parents to read ‘mum and dad are teaching me to read’. In some instances, children reported being forced or bribed. One student explained that ‘my dad forces me to do it [read] so that I can get better grades’. Comments such as ‘I am already a good reader but I choose not to read’ were common and supported by other aliterate students. Skill was a barrier for some students, one student explained ‘I like reading when I am bored ... but I am not a good reader and I can’t read big words’.

Children identified the following reasons for not reading independently: ‘they would rather be doing other things; they were not good at reading; they didn’t have time to read, and that they considered reading boring’. The text analysis of the responses found ‘play’ to be the most frequently used word relating to why children did not read frequently, suggesting that time allocation, or the choice to engage in other recreational pursuits, may have been a predominant cause of reading infrequency. On analyzing the responses, children reported being more interested in either technological or sporting options in relation to the apportioning of their leisure time. Many had a desire to ‘play Minecraft videos’, ‘watch cartoon network’, or ‘play cool games on my iPad’ rather than read. One respondent stated that he was ‘addicted to technology’. A small proportion reported they didn’t read frequently due to homework commitments, book availability (resourcing issues) and perceived social isolation related to reading.

### Reading Supports at Home

Students were asked who currently reads to them at home, with multiple selections permitted. Mothers were reported as providing the most support for children (62.8%), with reference to Grandmas, Nannas and Sisters far outweighing male support. Comments such as ‘Mum reads mostly because she doesn’t do the jobs that Dad needs to do’ highlighted inbuilt gender perceptions and imbalances. Many of the older cohort read by themselves stating ‘I can already read, so no one reads to me’. Quotes such as these were not indicative of preference; rather they were reflective of a common assumption that once independent

reading skill had been acquired, its support was no longer within the scope of parental responsibility.

Answer Options	Responses (%)	Responses (N)
No one	27.0	56
Mother	62.8	130
Father	45.4	94
Stepmother	1.4	3
Stepfather	0.5	1
Friend	3.4	7
Brother	11.1	23
Sister	16.9	35
Other person (please say who):	32.8	68

**Table 3. Home reading supports**

Nearly a third of respondents included “other” in their response, with grandparents most commonly stated as an additional home reader.

### Reading Supports in the Past

Most respondents (92.6%) reported being read to when they were younger. The results below suggest a decline in parental commitment to reading, when these reported past reading frequencies are compared to the present. Students who were read to when they were younger were asked “Who read to you when you were younger?” and multiple selections were permitted.

Answer Options	Responses (%)	Responses (N)
Mother	86.6	162
Father	65.2	122
Stepmother	1.1	2
Stepfather	1.1	2
Friends	4.8	9
Brother	15.5	29
Sister	27.3	51
Teacher	42.2	79
Grandparent	69.5	130
Other person (please say who):	33.7	63

**Table 4. Sources of early reading support**

Grandparents and cousins were the most frequently recurring “others” not listed with reference to Grandmas, Nannas and sisters far outweighing male support. Over half of the children noted that teachers read to them when they were younger (60%).

### Discussion

Although the practice of reading aloud is known to be of benefit to children, particularly young children, relatively few children in this study reported being read books on a regular basis by either teachers at school or parents at home. However, the majority of students in both age group cohorts reported that they enjoyed being read to, 79% of the

younger cohort and 74% of the older cohort, citing a range of affective and cognitive benefits of being read to. Both age group cohorts reported that they would like to be read to more often, at home and at school. In addition to capturing children's attitudes toward being read to, the findings highlight the frequency, timing, location and issues curtailing being read to both at home and at school. As discussed previously this study treats 'reading aloud' in its most basic form, namely reading a text orally and audibly for self and others.

### **Attitudes toward being Read to**

Overall, children had a positive attitude toward being read to, reading aloud and reading independently. Reading aloud was generally considered a luxury or reward and a break from other curriculum areas or 'real school work'. At school and home, the children felt 'relaxed' and 'stress free' when being read to or reading by themselves. Nevertheless, evidence did support undue weight placed on skill development at the expense of enjoyment and entertainment, supporting previous findings of other researchers (Baker et al., 1996; Merga, 2016a). Reference to reading aloud as a reading strategy for skill development was found across the range of questions. Issues raised provided insight into reasons why some children did not like to be read to, including interruptions when reading aloud, over use of questioning skills and a focus on words rather than texts, with these strategies often evoking a negative emotive response.

In general, the children that enjoyed reading, or being read to, referred to liking the choice of books that they were being read. Many of the respondents articulated their enjoyment of 'funny' books that made them laugh. This affirms key findings about children's book choices in the early years (YouGov, 2016). Others talked about reading 'bringing back childhood memories' and 'remembering things I did that was (sic) the same as in books'.

### **Frequency of being Read to**

Relatively few children reported being read books by their teacher every day or often, and over a quarter of the children (27%) claimed that no-one read to them in the home. Of the children who claimed to be read to at home at least sometimes, less than a fifth of this group reported being read to at home every day (17.7%). This is concerning in light of the range of aforementioned benefits conferred in this practice in supporting early and ongoing reading development. For instance, Durkin's (1966) early study in this field highlighted the role of being read to as a vital factor in fostering early reading, Mullis et al.'s (2003) study in thirty-five countries mirror these results. The finding that nearly 25% of teachers do not read to children often in schools is particularly alarming in light of the similar numbers of parents or carers not reading to children at home. Amongst the various implications for reading skill development, this suggests that the fostering of reading enjoyment may be viewed as an orphaned responsibility by both teachers and parents, as contended by others (Bunbury, 1995; Merga, 2015).

### **Independent Reading Frequency**

It is purported that three dynamics are among the most powerful predictors of reading frequency for children aged 6-17 years: how often children are read books aloud; children's reading enjoyment; and knowledge of reading level (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Knowing

that children's reading motivation is multi-dimensional and that it relates to both the frequency of their reading and their reading performance, it was interesting to note that only 42.7% of children who participated in this study were daily independent readers, with just over a third of children reporting that they read infrequently (never or sometimes). The results highlight the importance of exposure to reading aloud experiences, particularly in view of Adams' (1990) findings that children have a variance of 25 hours to 1,500 hours of read-aloud experiences before beginning school. While the available research into aliteracy suggests that engagement in recreational reading declines as students move through the schooling years (CSM, 2014; OECD, 2011), it also highlights the beginning signs of aliteracy within the younger years (Olufowobi & Makinde, 2011). Our findings indicate the possibility of a relatively low starting point in independent reading engagement. We interpret this finding cautiously, in the knowledge of the multiple factors that could influence reading frequency in young children, and we do not suggest that this independent reading infrequency is simply a product of choice. Skill level and a range of other factors could contribute, see Merga, (2014).

### **Reading Supports at Home**

It has been contended that one of the most important things a parent can do, beyond keeping children healthy and safe is to read to them (Joyce, 2017). Whilst over a quarter of the students felt that no-one read to them at home, the mother was the most frequently associated with being a home reader (62.8%), with fathers less likely to support reading at home (45.4%). In addition to parents, siblings and grandparents were cited as playing an important role in reading aloud to respondents. In many instances, the majority of references related to predominately female support such as nanna, grandma, aunty and sister. While we are cognizant of the impact that non-traditional and divided families can exert on the opportunity for enacting a paternal responsibility in this instance, we are also aware of the volume of research which suggests that in Western culture, reading may be constructed as a feminine practice eg. (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Clark, Osbourne & Akerman, 2008; Nichols, 2002) which may lead reading supports to be more typically relegated as a role of the mother. We also wish to acknowledge the constantly evolving potentialities in parental roles and gender norms (Merga, 2017).

These findings should also be considered in light of intergenerational transmission of reading attitudes. For instance, DeBaryshe (1995) found a significant causal pathway from maternal beliefs to reading practices and from maternal beliefs to reading interactions. The high number of older students who reported that no-one read to them at home is reflective of findings from *Kids & Family Report* (2016) which highlight a decline in reading frequency at home and parents continuing to read-aloud after age 5. Reading influences have been found to be bidirectional between child and parent, where there is mutual influence on the future behaviour (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). However, nearly 70% of the respondents wanted parents to read to them more often at home, suggesting that reading in the domestic space needs to become a greater priority where possible. In many instances, the children tried to justify the support or lack thereof at home, comments such as 'my housekeeper reads because Mum and Dad were at work' or 'they can't read to me because they have to cook and put away the clothes and wash the dishes'. Moreover, children commented about 'missing being read to', and showed genuine concern that parents had stopped reading to them. Where possible, parents should be encouraged to increase the frequency of these opportunities at home. Again, we acknowledge that the reasons for read-aloud infrequency or cessation may be complex, and reflective of the fact that two-fifths of adult Australians have below

functional literacy (ABS, 2013). Furthermore, low socioeconomic parents who are forced to work long hours, diverse family structures and parental health and wellbeing may, amongst other factors, influence opportunity in this area. Where parents simply cannot read-aloud at home due to these factors, opportunities for reading at school become crucial.

### **Reading Supports in the Past**

Although the study was not longitudinal in structure, the reflection on past reading supports allowed exploration of self-reported past and present social supports and opportunities. The majority of children had been read to when they were younger (92.6%). Again, mothers played the most significant role (86.6%), though the role of fathers was also greater in this retrospective reflection (65.2%). In addition, teachers were identified as playing a significant role (42.2%), along with grandparents (69.5%) and siblings. When children commented on past reading support, they associated it with 'who', 'where' and often 'why' responses; for example, 'Dad reads to me at home 'cos he was a science teacher in England' or 'they usually read to me inside sitting on the couch, because I like them reading to me when they are close'. Interestingly, the affective dimension of reading was highlighted more than the cognitive dimension within these reflective responses, unlike responses to reading aloud at school.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings revealed positive attitudes towards reading aloud strategies and being read to both at home and in schools. The findings also revealed issues that limited or curtailed the practice within these contexts. The following suggestions are presented as recommendations to educators and parents:

- Schools should encourage and support their teachers to read to their young students with greater frequency throughout primary school.
- Children should be encouraged to read for recreation with greater frequency once independent reading skill has been acquired.
- Reading aloud in the classroom and at home should be continued well past the period of acquiring independent reading skills and include a full range of text types.
- Schools should play a key role in effectively communicating the importance of continued shared reading at home to parents and students, to increase understanding of its value beyond children's independent reading skill acquisition.

### **Limitations**

This mixed method study had limitations and risks typically experienced with working with young children, many of which we strove to mitigate through our method and research design. Three main limitations identified related primarily to measurement limitations, that is, the reliability and issues surrounding children's self-reporting, the actual sample size ( $n=220$ ) and the limited longitudinal aspect of the study. Reliance on self-reporting of children is problematic, particularly when reporting on frequency related questions. Senechal et al (1996) argue that social desirability bias impacts responses and reliability. However, recent studies have concluded that children as young as 5 years of age can reliably and validly self-report when given the opportunity to do so with an age-

appropriate instrument (Varni, Limbers & Burwinkle, 2007). The survey instruments were carefully piloted prior to implementation and designed to cater for the ability and attention span of the age groups. Although not longitudinal in its design, the self-reporting aspect of the study allowing reflection on past reading aloud experiences provides valuable insights worthy of further interrogation in subsequent longitudinal investigation. Although the total number of respondents (n=220) could be considered small, it is within the range expected by the researchers and still provides adequate exploratory first level data. Future research is planned to increase sample size across the Australian states.

## Conclusion

Many voices about reading practices are presented in our literature, however this study adds children's perspectives to the quantum. Furthermore, there is a paucity of current research that quantifies the regularity of reading aloud in Australian classrooms and homes, or identifies barriers to this practice, particularly from the perspective of children. These findings contribute valuable insight and new empirical data to the field, illuminating children's perspectives, attitudes and silences toward reading aloud practices. The findings constitute a crucial foundation for future intervention and research in the area. The relatively low frequency of reading aloud practices in school and at home were concerning, highlighting the need for schools to continually provide reading aloud opportunities for young children across the primary years. The findings also encourage a focus on the affective domain of reading aloud to foster positive attitudes toward reading, potentially mitigating aliteracy. On this, the lack of reference to diverse text types and omission of poetry require further investigation. The recommendations outlined can guide intervention in this area, and support calls for future investigation into this phenomenon including a broader exploration of the different types of reading aloud that occurs in schools and at home.

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