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An Investigation of Prekindergarten Teachers' Read Aloud Choices

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Introduction

The benefits of reading aloud to children are well-documented (Acosta-Tello, 2019; Lane & Wright, 2007; Trelease, 2013). Since the seminal publication *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985) identified reading aloud as “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (p. 23), reading aloud has been regarded as an effective instructional practice and powerful force in creating lifelong readers (International Literacy Association (ILA), 2018; McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017; National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008). Read alouds are a valuable teaching tool for strengthening reading skills as teachers model behaviors and strategies that create and inspire good readers (Braid & Finch, 2015; Dollins, 2014; Hilden & Jones, 2013; Wright, 2018). Further, the books shared with children during the school day influence those children's reading selections outside of school (Anderson et al., as cited in Hoewisch, 2000).

In 2019, the International Literacy Association (2020) conducted an online survey of 1,443 teachers, higher education professionals, literacy consultants, and PK-12 administrators from 65 countries and territories which allowed respondents to prioritize topics and rate the amount of attention these topics are receiving. Chosen by 36% of respondents, providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content appeared in the top five critical topics for improving literacy outcomes in the next decade. Similarly, 42% of respondents identified building and sustaining a love of reading as one of the five greatest challenges in literacy education. The

books being read aloud in classrooms directly impact these two “hot” topics making the systematic consideration of teachers’ read aloud choices worthy of investigation. The purpose of this descriptive study is to document the read-aloud book choices of prekindergarten teachers in a state-wide program and to analyze the ways in which these choices align with research-based recommendations for best practices. We focused on prekindergarten for several reasons. First, the books read aloud to four-year-olds are not available to them to read independently because children at this age comprehend texts at a higher level than they can formally decode on their own. Thus, the books that prekindergartners encounter are largely limited to those read aloud in classrooms. Secondly, read alouds can support many aspects of the prekindergarten curriculum (i.e, language and literacy, social-emotional development, mathematical thinking, scientific exploration, and social studies) in a developmentally appropriate manner when the books read are strategically selected. To best reflect authentic classroom practices, the focus of both the literature review and survey questions is on teachers reading to a whole class rather than reading to an individual or small group.

Reading Aloud in Early Childhood Classrooms

Recognized as an indispensable first step in reaching and teaching students (Routman, 2018), reading aloud is an important classroom activity for developing fundamental literacy skills and knowledge (ILA, 2018; NELP, 2008). Hearing stories read aloud helps children learn the difference between conversational language and book language (Ross et al., 2005) while increasing their ability to recognize words (Stahl, 2003). Children’s literature is characterized by rich vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and varied literary styles (Beck & McKeown, 2001), and children benefit from hearing this advanced language. The findings indicated that classroom read alouds resulted in increases in decoding, reading comprehension, and picture

storytelling for Israeli first graders (Rosenhouse, et al., 1997). Likewise, a study by Beverly, Giles, and Buck (2009) found that first-graders attending a public school in the American South showed measurable reading gains in rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension after an 8-week treatment of hearing authentic literature read aloud. Research validates the positive short-term effects of reading aloud to children on the language abilities of young children through the primary grades (Klein & Kogan, 2013). An effective read aloud can increase children's vocabulary, listening comprehension, story schema, background knowledge, familiarity with text structures, visual literacy, word recognition skills, and cognitive development as well as promote a love of literature, foster social interactions, and establish lifelong reading habits (ILA, 2018; Serafini & Moses, 2014). Further, adults can systematically evoke children's attention toward print by asking questions about and/or pointing to print while reading aloud (Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2002; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007).

For these reasons, reading aloud is a standard part of the daily schedule in most early childhood classrooms. Read-alouds are a routine with which many children are familiar and seem to enjoy (Reyes & Azuara, 2008; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). In addition to their contribution to children's language and literacy development, routine classroom read-aloud experiences create a cultural norm producing expectations that children will hear texts each day at certain times and establishing a sense of community (Laminack, 2017; Wiseman, 2012).

Choosing Books to Read Aloud

While reliable and frequent opportunities to hear books read aloud are significant, the books selected for reading are equally important. The value of read alouds varies greatly among classrooms (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010), and one factor that influences read-aloud quality is the book being read. Books that are well written, with engaging characters and plots, offer increased

opportunities for the teacher to model fluent and expressive reading (Lane & Wright, 2007). Skillfully illustrated pages and bold photographs capture children's attention and are particularly beneficial for engaging nonreaders (Bennet-Armistead et. al, 2005). Appealing books with educational potential and powerful illustrations will increase children's delight in hearing and discussing them on multiple occasions (Horst et al. 2019; Shedd & Duke, 2008) while books related to diverse content areas strengthens the potential for the read aloud to contribute to young children's learning (Laminack, 2017).

A teacher's choice of book to read aloud is largely influenced by read alouds' perceived purpose. Some teachers view the primary purpose of read alouds as entertainment rather than teaching (McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017), thus, eliminating consideration of how a book could support curriculum goals or learning standards. Another possibility is the view of read alouds as a tool for engaging children and managing behavior rather than as a formal instructional practice (Håland et al., 2020). Intentionally matching read-aloud selections to learning objectives activates and builds upon children's existing understanding (Laminack, 2017). For example, alphabet and word play books are excellent for teaching about letters and useful for developing metalinguistic abilities such as phonological awareness (Lane & Wright, 2007). Mitchell (2003) suggests that teachers consider the reason (pleasure or instruction) and audience (needs, interests, and skill levels) with the goal to provide a balance in diversity, gender, genre, theme, and tone of books read aloud over the course of a school year.

Experienced teachers, relying on previously positive experiences, tend to read aloud what is familiar while newer teachers typically read books from their own childhoods, teacher preparation coursework, or suggestions from more experienced teacher mentors and/or librarians (Feret, 2006). Thus, it is common for early childhood teachers' read alouds to frequently feature

canonized authors (i.e., Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, and Bill Martin, Jr.) along with notable Caldecott winners (Hall 2008). Håland et al. (2020) suggest that teachers make a conscious effort to move away from a narrow repertoire of read aloud favorites. Including an assortment of text genres exposes young children to more literary variety (Lane & Wright, 2007). While more preparation may be needed for reading unfamiliar texts aloud, effective teachers are skilled at selecting appropriate books, establishing a clear purpose, pre-reading for practice, and planning for places to meaningfully engage children during the read aloud (Bingham et al., 2017; Shedd & Duke, 2008).

Nonfiction Texts

Nonfiction texts are a collection or account of verifiable information, real life events, and/or real people divided into two main categories: biographies and informational books (Young et al., 2020). Children show a natural interest in informational books (Donovan et al., 2003; Duke, 2000; Maloch & Horsey, 2013) while narrative informational books have great appeal to fiction readers (Stewart & Young, 2018). Providing a classroom with diverse topics of nonfiction texts across disciplines is noted as best practice (Coleman et al., 2012; Zemelman et al., 2005), since exposing students to high quality nonfiction supports learning across disciplines and encourages reading success (Smolkin & Donovan, 2005). Early childhood teachers, however, traditionally rely on fictional books for read alouds (Duke 2000; Håland et al., 2020; Smolkin & Donovan, 2003) resulting in extremely low percentages of nonfiction texts used with young children (Duke, 2003; Yopp & Yopp, 2006).

Including informational books as read aloud selections increases opportunities to connect with subject-specific content and vocabulary while the non-narrative structure of these texts provides greater opportunity for responses (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). Language and

vocabulary used by young learners pretending to read were key features found within informational books that had been read aloud to the students (Duke & Kays, 1998). By innately fostering student inquiry and wondering while reading, interactive read alouds create an ideal context for teaching students how to effectively read nonfiction texts with an emphasis on graphical literacy (Banerjee et al., 2017). Through purposeful planning, teachers can expand student learning beyond the text and demonstrate problem-solving skills while increasing students' awareness of different graphical components, discuss their various purposes, and correctly model how they are read.

Duke (2003) explained, student participation during the reading of a nonfiction text is especially important. The back and forth talk between teacher and student, which is the art of an interactive read aloud, allowed misconceptions to be uncovered and the level of background knowledge of the topic to be revealed to the teacher through discussion

Multicultural Books

Multicultural literature serves as “mirrors” and windows” allowing children of all cultures to build cross-cultural connections and understandings while also recognizing their own worth (Bishop, 1990). “Mirror” books provide an opportunity for children to see themselves in the text while simultaneously building their confidence (Smith, 1995). Books that affirm children's identities and allow them to feel affirmed in their own skin are extremely important in the development of self-awareness along with a healthy racial, cultural, and ethnic identity (Aerila et al., 2016; Francis, 2019). “Window” books help readers come to understand that their world is not the only one, but a valid world connected to many other valid worlds. Read alouds that reflect the diversity, values, and interests of children in the classroom helps affirm personal identities and build empathy (Shepherd et al., 2021).

Including a variety of high-quality multicultural books creates classrooms that are inclusive and affirming (Francis, 2019; Shedd & Duke, 2008). Multicultural literature, particularly books that depict interactions between people from multiple cultures and ethnicities, can encourage students to embrace change that may circumvent prejudice by increase students' understanding of how discriminatory practices affect children of diverse backgrounds (Nilsson, 2005; Steiner et al., 2008; Vasquez, 2003). Steiner (2001) identifies the specific benefits of multicultural literature in the classroom as creating opportunities for all children to see themselves in literature, foster the development of positive self-esteem, affirm their identities, prevent feelings of isolation, and cultivate respect, empathy, and acceptance of others.

Purpose and Significance

The value of children's literature as a tool for promoting literacy, improving content knowledge, and increasing print motivation is evident. Empirical evidence relating to the types of books early childhood teachers read aloud and the reasons for their choices, however, does not exist. The purpose of this study was to gain a current, in-depth look at prekindergarten teachers' read aloud choices. In particular, the study investigated the selection of children's literature read aloud in a state-wide prekindergarten program regarding the variables of genre, publication date, and diversity along with the teachers' rationale for selecting the books.

Methods

This explorative study used a qualitative research design to analyze empirical data (survey responses) for read alouds occurring within the natural context of routine classroom practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Researchers interpreted descriptive statistics and the results of thematic analysis to provide a better understanding of prekindergarten teachers' read aloud selections.

Participants

Participants were 151 lead teachers in a nationally recognized, state-wide prekindergarten program in the southeastern United States. Participating teachers ranged in age from 18 years old to over 45 years old. The 148 participants who responded to the gender question identified as female. The 150 participants who responded to the ethnic origin question self-reported their ethnicity as follows: White 104, Black or African American 40, Hispanic or Latino 1, Native American or American Indian 1, and Other 3. Teaching experience ranged from one to more than 20 years with 31% of respondents reporting over 20 years of experience.

Instrument

Participants completed The Read Write Survey, which is a 35-item self-report instrument created by the researchers to obtain information about the amount of time spent on various instructional practices related to reading and writing. The reading section contained 15 items. There were 13 Likert-like response items adapted by Håland, Home, and McTigue (2020) from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) survey on reading practices (Hooper et al., 2015) and two open-ended questions. Research by Yopp and Yopp (2006) inspired the open-ended questions - (a) What was the last book that you read aloud? and (b) Why did you choose this book? Responses to these questions served as data for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining permission and email addresses from the administering government agency, 1,205 lead teachers in prekindergarten classrooms across the state received the online survey. While web surveys tend to yield a lower response rate when compared with other modes of survey delivery (mail and telephone) ranging from 11% (Manfreda et al., 2008) to 13% (Daikeler et al., 2016) on average, researchers deemed email distribution to be the most effective

and efficient means for obtaining participants from a large geographic area. Over a two-week period at the end of the first semester of the academic year, 151 teachers completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 12.53 %.

Two early childhood and literacy experts completed data analysis. For the first question (title of last book read aloud), researchers developed a data coding system based on the research variables (genre, publication date, and diversity) which they applied to categorize data by tagging each participants' response (book title) with codes in a spreadsheet. For the second question (reason for selecting book), researchers compiled participants' responses and sorted them categorically using a deductive approach to identify cohesive, overarching themes.

Results

Question 1: Books Read Aloud

In response to the question "What was the last book that you read aloud?," participants (n=151) provided 102 different book titles. Two respondents indicated that they could not remember the last book read aloud, and more than one teacher identified several of the same books (*Pete the Cat and the Missing Cupcakes*, *The Gingerbread Man*, and *Gruffalo*).

Genre

Of the 102 books identified, 93 were fiction, and nine were nonfiction. Most (57%) of the fictional books were seasonal selections that included 49 Thanksgiving (14) and Christmas (35) books. Fictional titles included folklore, fantasy, and contemporary realistic fiction. The nine nonfiction books identified included four concept books (three alphabet and one opposites) and five information books. Three of the information books had science-related content (seasons, recycling, and simple machines). One book had a mathematics focus (measurement), and one discussed following directions.

Year of Publication

For traditional folktales, such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*, researchers used the publication date of a popular contemporary version. No year of publication was available for four reported titles. The 98 available publication dates ranged from 1947 (*It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles Shaw) to 2021 (*The Silly Sounds of Christmas* by Mike Petrik). Most (67) of the books were published in the last 20 years with 13 of these (12 fiction and one nonfiction) having been published in the last five years. Only two books (one Christmas and one contemporary realistic fiction) had a publication date after 2020.

Diversity

There was one example of international literature (*The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson) and four multicultural books. Multicultural literature selections included two stories from Africa - *Abiyoyo* by Peter Seeger, which is a picture book adaptation of a South African lullaby and folk story, and *Shadow* by Marcia Brown, which is an illustrated translation of the poem by Blaise Cendrars describing the rich history of African storytellers and shamans passing into memory. Other multicultural titles included the bi-lingual (English and Spanish) picture book *Quinto's Neighborhood* by Puerto Rican author Ina Cumpiano and *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera Williams, which tells the story of a lower income family and includes both Latino and African American characters within the illustrations.

Question 2: Reasons for Selecting the Book

In response to the second question “Why did you choose this book?,” participants provided 155 different reasons for why the book they identified had been selected to be read aloud. In five instances, teachers provided reasons such as “a student brought it from home for me to read” and “our student librarian selected it from our book nook for our afternoon read

aloud,” which indicated the book read aloud was chosen by a child or children rather than the teacher. Researchers identified five overarching themes and sorted the 150 reasons cited by teachers as influencing their book choice into these thematic categories as follows: Subject Matter (81), Curriculum (42), Student Appeal (14), Pleasure (10), and Classroom Management (3).

Subject Matter

Subject matter being of current interest was the most noted reason for selecting a book to read aloud. In addition to sixteen statements that explicitly referenced “theme,” researchers placed reasons that referred to the time of year (53) and units of study (12) in this category. Subcategories for time of year included books selected because they were about Christmas (31), Thanksgiving (10), December/winter (7), and holidays (5). Similarly, participants selected books about a variety of topics because they were of general interest “We have been talking about animals/pets.” and “We are studying farms. We will visit a farm later this week.”

Curriculum

Participants cited the curriculum as their reason for selecting a book 42 times. Nine reasons referenced the book as “part of the curriculum” or being required, and 33 reasons mentioned a certain content area, lesson, or skill. Specific content area references appeared as follows: literacy (24), health (4), science (3) or mathematics (2). In the subcategory of literacy, teachers commented on the book’s contribution to the development of knowledge and/or abilities in the following areas: rhyming words (9), phonics (4), vocabulary (4), story sequence or structure (4), compare-contrast (2), and reading motivation (1).

Student Appeal

Participants noted selecting a book to read aloud because they felt it would be appealing to students 14 times. In seven cases, the teacher chose the book because children were previously familiar with the author, character, or series. In other cases, the teacher selected the book because it possessed certain characteristics that they thought students would find pleasing, such as being engaging or of high interest (4), having attractive illustrations (2), and the story being relatable (1).

Pleasure

Participants identified the book being pleasurable as their reason for selecting it 10 times. Teachers used words such as fun (4), entertaining (3), enjoyable (2), and “humorous, happy” (1) for the reasons in this category.

Classroom Management

All three of the reasons categorized as “Classroom Management” related to maintaining routine and/or transitioning between activities. Specifically, teachers stated they selected these books to read because “it was our nap story . . . helps us relax and get ready for sleep;” “waiting on our lunch helpers to finish cleaning the cafeteria;” and “relates to reinforcing procedures at the close of the semester.”

Limitations

The titles in this study were restricted to a single book from a convenience sample of demographically similar prekindergarten teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further, the time of year when the teachers answered the survey questions (late November – early December) seemed to influence the results, as shown by the reported reading of many seasonal books.

Discussion

Findings revealed that the books read aloud by prekindergarten teachers were quite homogenous.

What follows are general observations:

- Books selected were mostly contemporary realistic fiction or folklore.
- There were very few recently published books selected.
- There were many holiday books that reflected dominate Christian and American views selected.
- There were almost no multicultural or award-winning books selected.
- The most often reported reason for selecting a book was because the subject matter related to a topic of study.
- There was not a single instance of a book chosen as a whole group read aloud because it was well-written or exhibited any characteristics of literary quality.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate the importance of educating teachers on children's literature and how to use it in early childhood classrooms.

In 2018, the Children's Literature Assembly (CLA) of the National Council on Teachers of English published guidelines defending the need for courses in children's literature in teacher preparation programs. Resolutions included a need for: critical study of books for children and adolescents taught by faculty with an in-depth knowledge of the subject; a sustained and continuing emphasis on how to select and use literature effectively in the classroom; and a broad knowledge of authors, illustrators, resources, and relevant literature topics. Findings in this study support the CLA's call to action and expressed by others (Hoewisch, 2000; Tunks et al., 2015) affirming the need for quality children's literature courses as part of every teacher preparation program. For young children to fully benefit from classroom read alouds, early childhood

teachers must know how to select and effectively share books that support learning across the curriculum and in all developmental domains.

Books that are international in origin or multicultural in their viewpoints may have a profound effect on children's global outlook and understanding of humanity (Young et al., 2020). International literature, books originally created and published outside of one's own country (Yokato & Teale, 2017), foster both intercultural understandings and the development of empathy (Acevedo & Short, 2018). The only example of international literature read aloud by teachers in this study was *The Gruffalo*, a British children's picture book by writer and playwright Julia Donaldson originally published in 1999. Not surprisingly, books written and published in other English-speaking countries are among the most common in the United States because they do not require any translation (Young et al., 2020). *The Gruffalo*, which recounts the exploits of a mouse who scares off a fox, owl, and snake by claiming to wait for a monstrous friend, would have limited, if any, opportunity for familiarizing children with the history, culture, and literary traditions of the United Kingdom.

Multicultural children's literature serves as an opportunity for children of color to see themselves in the text (Smith, 1995) while allowing children of all cultures to build cross-cultural connections and awareness, thus, engendering understanding and compassion (Bishop, 1990; Laminack & Kelly, 2019). Fortunately, the number of published books created by African American authors and illustrators that feature African American children has increased in recent years (Huyck & Dahlen, 2019). In this study, however, none of the contemporary realistic fiction books read aloud contained Black characters even though this study occurred in a state where 27% of the population identifies as Black or African American (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Books that focus on all children's individuality are necessary for the development of

healthy racial, cultural, and ethnic identities (Shepherd et al., 2021) and an important part of building a classroom community (Hall, 2008). As the number of books published by diverse authors and illustrators continues to increase, it is imperative that teachers share these books with the children in their classrooms as a means of diminishing the adverse effects of negative stereotypes, fostering the development of positive self-esteem, and cultivating acceptance of others (Shepherd et al., 2021).

Among the titles identified by prekindergarten teachers in this study, award-winning literature was almost nonexistent. The Caldecott Medal, given annually since 1938 to the most distinguished picture book, is among the most prestigious and well-known American children's book awards. Of the 84 winners or numerous runners up, however, only three were among the books read aloud by prekindergarten teachers in this study. The 1983 and 1986 recipients of the Caldecott medal (*Shadow* by Marcia Brown and *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg, respectively) and a Caldecott Honor book from 1983 (*A Chair for my Mother*) were the only award winning books identified by participants.

Book awards provide a rich resource for identifying high-quality books for read alouds and can be particularly useful in identifying multicultural children's literature that appropriately celebrates diversity and social justice (Shepherd et al., 2021). The Coretta Scott King Award, John Steptoe Award for New Talent, Jane Addams Children's Book Award, Pura Belpré Award, and the Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature all recognize books and authors for their contribution to the affirmation and appreciation of diversity. Similarly, the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award recognizes the most distinguished beginning reader book while the Sibert Award honors the most distinguished informational book. These award-winning books, and many more, can be found on the American Library Association's website along with the

Association for Library Service to Children's Notable Children's Books list, which identifies the best children's books each year. The books on these lists can assist early childhood teachers in identifying a wide variety of excellent books for reading aloud.

Conclusion

The pattern of findings (e.g., limited appearance of nonfiction, recently published titles, award winners, and multicultural literature) suggest that the read-aloud choices of prekindergarten teachers in this study has much unused potential for promoting children's growth and learning. Because reading aloud is already an integrated part of the daily classroom routine, it would not require extensive effort to develop this ongoing practice to maximize its capacity for teaching and learning more fully by beginning with the informed selection of books for reading aloud. The findings in this study also have implications for teacher educators, school administrators, instructional coaches, and district-level curriculum specialists who should be involved in supporting teachers in selecting and utilizing the best possible books to read aloud to young children. Children's literature is of interest as a subject in its own right and has an essential role to play in the development of children as readers.

Further Research

Increased awareness of picture books and their authors as well as children's literature resources likely to result in more diverse read aloud selections. Recognition that teachers' knowledge and familiarity with children's literature impacts read aloud selections makes investigating the presence of children's literature courses in teacher preparation programs as well as professional develop opportunities for in-service teachers of value.

While further wide-spread study of early childhood teachers' read aloud choices is essential, an examination of how teachers are sharing books (i.e., traditional versus interactive

read aloud) would also provide beneficial insight. The effectiveness of reading aloud can be increased through situations created to engage listeners in the read aloud experience (Acosta-Tello, 2019). Duke (2003) explained the importance of student participation during the reading of a text, especially nonfiction where back and forth talk between teacher and student allows misconceptions to be uncovered and the level of background knowledge of the topic to be revealed. Hilden and Jones (2013) explained that interactive read alouds allow teachers to model how to read fluently, introduce vocabulary and emphasize graphics within the text while providing an opportunity for students to engage, ask questions and share connections with the text, thus, becoming more engaged (Shedd & Duke, 2008). Furthermore, intentionally facilitating children's direct contact with text (e.g., letters, words, sentence, punctuation devices) using verbal and/or nonverbal references results in children's increased attention toward print and, as a result, print knowledge (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005; Evans et al., 2008; Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2002; Justice et al, 2008; Lovelace & Stewart, 2007). Consequently, future studies exploring prekindergarten teachers' use of various read aloud strategies and their impact on students' knowledge of print, vocabulary acquisition, and intrinsic motivation to read would yield important implications for instruction.

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