Introduction

Literacy development is complex and begins before formal instruction and continues throughout life. Reading aloud quality literature has become the foundation of literacy development and classroom practice for over a century (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Doiron, 1994). Trelease (2006) explained that adults read to children in order to: reassure, entertain, bond, inform or explain, arouse curiosity, and inspire. Notably, Routman (1991) explained that classroom read-alouds, may be the easiest, most inexpensive way to help children make substantial growth in literacy. Research and current practice continue to support the use of teacher read-alouds as a significant component of instruction across grade-levels (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Sipe, 2000; Trelease, 2006). However, Trelease (2006) emphasized, that what children are taught to love will outweigh what they are made to learn. For this reason, educators must teach a child ‘how’ to read while also teaching the child to ‘want’ to read.

Today, the Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what American students are expected to learn to be college and career ready. According to the Common Core State Standard Initiative (2010), the standards are meant to help teachers set clear goals for student learning. The standards demand better analysis and argumentation skills, a greater emphasis on academic language, and greater attention to students building content knowledge and reading skills from informational text (Neuman & Roskos, 2012). The Common Core State Standards recognize that reading text contributes to the development of content knowledge and promotes a shift in elementary curriculum materials to reflect a more equitable mix of literary and informational texts. Earlier studies indicate children’s exposure to narrative text in both the home and classroom contexts is considerably greater than their exposure to other genres of text (Duke, 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2006, Yopp & Yopp, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

Reading aloud to children is a practice that has been recommended for years (Elley, 1989; Duke & Kays, 1998; Beck & McKeown, 2001; Heisey & Kucan, 2010). Read-alouds can be one component of reading instruction and occurs daily in most classroom settings. Given this regular occurrence, and new emphasis on diverse and complex text directed by the Common Core State Standards, it is important to understand read-aloud processes, specifically the breadth of read-alouds, types of text used, and beliefs that comprise good read-aloud practices.

This study is framed within the social constructivists paradigm. This descriptive qualitative study will examine first grade teachers’ current beliefs and teaching practices in order to better understand the text types and reading styles teachers’ implement during classroom read-alouds. A variety of text genres such as informational, mixed-genre, narrative, and other texts will be analyzed in the First Grade read-aloud curriculum. This research has the potential to validate how classroom teachers currently conduct read-aloud lessons, bring awareness to the text types teachers’ use during read-alouds, expose a potential need for professional development regarding read-alouds, and inform administrators and teachers of how beliefs drive classroom practice. Additionally, the results of this research could possibly assist administrators in making changes to current reading programs.
Research Questions

1. What current beliefs do First Grade teachers hold regarding classroom read-alouds?
2. What types of texts, specifically: narrative, informational, mixed-genre, or others do classroom teacher’s use during classroom read-alouds?
3. What opportunities for response are teachers providing students?

The researcher’s hypothesis is that despite the plethora of research documenting the benefits of read-alouds, recent developments with new standards may inadvertently lead teachers to conduct rushed read-alouds due to time constraints. Teachers may read to students with little or no student engagement. Although studies document the scarcity of informational text in elementary classrooms, teachers may spend too much time reading fictional, narrative text without a clear purpose for the book and lesson.

Review of Literature

Reading-aloud to children improves their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and overall attitudes about reading (Trelease, 2006), while providing a pliable context for supporting a range of emergent literacy skills (Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009). Trelease (2006) in his highly publicized The Read-Aloud Handbook, specified that reading-aloud to children can (a) condition the child’s brain to associate reading with pleasure, (b) create background knowledge, (c) build vocabulary, and (d) provide a reading role model. In addition, Teale (2006) discussed reading-aloud as a type of social interaction that exposes children to a wide variety of genres, characters, and writing styles, as well as providing opportunities for discussion and writing. Dickinson and Smith (1994) explained that interactive read-alouds support children’s capacity to reason for themselves, and reason with others through analytic discussions of the book. Interactive read-alouds provide vital learning opportunities for emergent readers where teachers and peers can actively scaffold and model comprehension strategies; engage readers, and cultivate a community of learners (Wiseman, 2011). Research has established effective read-alouds contribute to students’ background knowledge and language (Beck & McKeown, 2001), comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Heisey & Kucan, 2010), conventions of print (Clay, 1991), as well as vocabulary development (Elley, 1989; Duke & Kays, 1998; Kindle, 2010).

When teachers adhere to the attitude that the read-aloud is a critical component of a comprehensive literacy program and not an optional activity, it becomes the heart of reading instruction (Routman, 2000). Hahn (2002) also believed that read-alouds were the heart of reading instruction when it mirrors and reflects the teaching of reading workshop. She described how teachers should be disciplined in choosing what books to read-aloud and when, and knowing how and why the read-aloud fits with reading instruction. Furthermore, Trelease (2006) discovered that students actively engaged in reading when their teacher read to the class on a regular basis. Although reading a story to a child is not a difficult task for a literate adult, taking advantage of the read-aloud experience to develop children’s literacy is complex and demanding (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

While most educators agree on the importance of read-alouds, specific details on how to conduct a read-aloud are less clear (Fisher et. al., 2004). Teale (2003) suggested that teachers consider the following: the amount of time allotted to reading-aloud, choice of text, method of reading-aloud, and how read-alouds fit into the curriculum. While specific implementation practices are not clear for read-alouds, read-alouds can potentially serve several purposes and expose students to a variety of skills. For example, read-alouds can increase accessibility to texts for students who are unable to read the text themselves (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ariail & Albright, 2006).

Common themes arise in the research on read-alouds such as: intentional teaching, ensuring students understand the purpose for the read-aloud, and when to apply comprehension strategies (Fisher et. al., 2004). Combinations of these factors make read-aloud an important aspect of literacy
development. Therefore, the teacher has a vital role in the read-aloud process. Fisher et al. (2004) described seven components of effective read-alouds: (1) book selection is appropriate to students' interest and developmental levels, (2) books are previewed and practiced by the teacher, (3) a clear purpose for the read-aloud is established, (4) fluent oral reading is modeled, (5) teachers employ animation and use expression while reading, (6) students are engaged in book discussions before, during, and after the read-aloud, and (7) connections are made to reading and writing. Each component relies on teachers' knowledge and subsequent actions.

Brabham and Brown (2002) compared surveys of elementary teachers administered in 1960-70 to surveys administered in the 1990's and found that half or less of teachers in 1960-70 reported reading-aloud to students compared with Lickteig and Russell's (1993) report that 76 percent of elementary teachers read-aloud daily and 100 percent read-aloud several times a week. Additionally, Lickteig and Russell (1993) reported that 90 percent of teachers read-aloud for enjoyment, not instructional purposes and only 11-28 percent of teachers read-aloud to stimulate discussion, build comprehension, impart knowledge, or build vocabulary. Teachers reported that they read most often to students after lunch and expected students to listen quietly during the oral reading time (Lickteig & Russell, 1993; Jacobs, Morrison & Swinyard, 2000). More recently, Zucker et. al. (2009) clarified that read-alouds are often used as a time to discuss story meaning or comprehension skills but that educators also need to take advantage of verbal and nonverbal techniques to develop children's print-related skills. They suggested small steps in making print referencing a systematic component of instruction: (a) determine which read-aloud within your classroom will regularly involve your use of print referencing techniques, (b) prioritize print referencing techniques in order to cover one or two targets in each read-aloud session, and (c) secure a collection of books to address select targets.

Brabham and Brown (2002) confirmed teacher explanations and student discussions are critical factors that benefit students' learning of words, concepts, and construction of meaning from texts read-aloud in the elementary grades.

Texts can be selected and used in elementary classrooms for various purposes during read-alouds. The most common genres in classrooms consist mainly of fictional, narrative texts. Teachers' selections of texts for read-alouds may be influenced by availability. Duke (2000) studied first-grade classrooms and found informational text accounted for a mean of 2.6 percent of displayed print and 9.8 percent of classroom library materials. Likewise, an average 3.6 minutes per day involved informational text with an average of 1.3 minutes per day in socially disadvantaged districts (Duke, 2000). Several studies utilizing surveys of teachers' practices suggest that young students receive little exposure to informational texts. Pressley, Ranking and Yokoi (1996) administered a national survey to exemplar teachers (recommended by administrators) teaching kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade and revealed that only 6 percent of the material read in their classrooms was expository. Yopp and Yopp (2006) provided evidence of consistency between school and home in terms of exposure to various texts and reported a significant difference in the proportion of informational texts and mixed genre text read-aloud to boys than girls. Boys were read twice as many informational texts and three times as many mixed genre texts than were girls. Additionally, Yopp and Yopp (2006) found that informational texts make up a very small proportion of teacher read-alouds in primary classrooms. Subsequently, in 2012, Yopp and Yopp discovered that narratives still constituted 77 percent of the books read-aloud to children with only 8 percent representing informational text. Furthermore, science read-alouds outnumbered any other content area and life science constituted 75 percent of informational read-alouds reported.

In addition, a variety of texts can be used to model strategies and demonstrate how the language of a book is different from spoken language. Brabham and Brown (2002) reviewed how teachers read to students and found that learning goals should be aimed at efferent purposes. Teacher explanations and student discussions are critical factors that benefit students' learning. Sipe (2000) discussed how picture books (narrative story with pictures) provide visual stimulation and
provide literary understanding for students. Children should be encouraged to explore the dust jacket, front and back cover, end-pages, title, and dedication page. Illustrations in picture books fill in the gaps in the text, and the text fills in the gaps in the illustrations. Read-alouds with informational texts provide students the opportunity to become familiar with its characteristics and conventions as well as building knowledge of the world (Duke & Kays, 1998). Duke (2004) explained that teachers must teach students how to read informational texts and use comprehension strategies. The interactive information book is best used during comprehension acquisition for emerging readers, nonreaders and struggling readers to provide rich contexts for engaging children in meaning-making processes (Smolkin & Donovan, 2003). Similarly, mixed-genre texts have the potential to increase students’ knowledge base with a variety of topics while students have the opportunity to apply that knowledge to a narrative tale. Chapman and Sopko (2003) called mixed-genre text (combined-text) and discussed how the number of concepts addressed in this text type can overwhelm students and teachers. Navigating this type of text can be difficult. For this reason, Chapman and Sopko (2003) suggested reading the text in layers. Addressing layers provides teachers with the opportunity to model revisiting text for various purposes. Exposing students to a variety of text genres can demonstrate the beauty of language available in picture books, poetry, and nonfiction. The exposure to numerous texts can make gains in fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, thus validating why read-alouds are an important part of the daily literacy routine.

Methodology

The research was completed in the spring term of the 2013 school year. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select from predefined participants. Two local school districts in southwest Tennessee were used to select two participating teachers. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) currently teach first grade in a classroom setting, (b) implement read-alouds, and (c) voluntarily consent to participate in the study. Data for this study included teacher interviews, teachers’ reading logs, and read-aloud lesson observations. The data was triangulated to portray a description of what occurred during the first-grade classroom read-alouds. The researcher conducted in-depth personal interviews with each participating teacher regarding: teaching experience, beliefs, planning, and typical lesson experiences concerning read-alouds. A pre-determined interview protocol was used including open-ended questions as well as follow up questions. Follow up questions were used as deemed necessary by the researcher. Interviews took place in the teacher’s classroom at a time when no students were present. Each participating teacher kept a reading log for four weeks documenting: date, title, author, genre and topics discussed during any read-aloud in the classroom. The researcher utilized, Duke and Bennett-Amistead (2003) and Yopp and Yopp (2012), as guides to code texts as (a) informational, (b) mixed, (c) narrative, and (d) other as defined. Yopp and Yopp (2012) guided the coding of informational text by science domain.

During the course of the study, the researcher observed one scheduled read-aloud lesson to document the type of text used, duration of lesson, and type of student engagement. Brabham and Brown’s (2002) framework and definitions were used to analyze the type of teacher reading style during the read-aloud lesson observation across three categories: just reading, interactional, or performance reading.

Findings

After conducting interviews, observing lessons, and analyzing reading logs, three major themes emerged. These themes included reading-aloud for a purpose, an emphasis on student engagement, and exposing students to a variety of text genres. The teachers considered read-alouds a vital component to classroom instruction and read-aloud daily. They viewed read-alouds as an opportunity to model fluent reading and expose students to different types of text genres. Both
teachers were knowledgeable about what topics their students were interested in and expressed a
desire for their students to enjoy reading.

The teachers in this study believed that read-alouds were valuable and utilized them as a
whole-group teaching strategy. Both teachers, Kate and Heather (pseudonyms) scheduled two read-
alouds during the day. Usually, one read-aloud was for the purpose of teaching a skill and the other
read-aloud was mainly for enjoyment. In addition, Kate used read-alouds for transition times,
sometimes as many as four to six times during the day.

Kate used read-alouds to teach comprehension skills such as mental images, schema, and
inferencing. She followed her building’s pacing guide referencing the Common Core State Standards
and gave the school librarian lists of topics, genres, and authors, in order for the librarian to pull
appropriate texts for her. Whereas, Heather used read-alouds to demonstrate concepts about print,
parts of a book, decoding strategies, and fluency. She often used big books from a retired reading
series and Internet resources to help her select appropriate texts. Both teachers felt that book
selection should be planned and books previewed to ensure compatibility with lesson objectives and
maintain student interest.

The teachers stated their students were actively engaged before, during, and after read-
alouds. This artifact was validated with classroom observations. Before reading, teachers gave
students a synopsis of the story, oriented them to text features, and allowed students an opportunity
to predict what the story could be about. During the reading, children used hand signals so they
could ask questions, ‘turned and talked’ with neighbors, and group discussions took place. After the
reading, students summarized the reading, discussed connections, author’s purpose, and often wrote
about the texts they were reading.

Teachers assessed student performance based on participation. Heather stated, “I assess by
observing how they are participating, by listening to the questions they ask, and reflecting on how
they respond to the questions that I ask.” Kate stated, “Assessing read-alouds is something I should
probably work on, my students use hand-signal to indicate when they don’t understand, but I don’t
use any formal assessments.”

Both teachers used read-alouds as a springboard for writing. Heather used read-alouds to
model writing, co-construct an alternate ending to a story, and respond to the story independently.
Kate had students write in response to stories, write reports about informational text and construct
poems. Kate and her students also co-constructed a topic list, generated from classroom read-alouds
and placed the list in the writing center as a resource.

In addition, Reading Logs were kept four weeks and analyzed by text type with informational
texts characterized by science domain. Each teacher read-aloud from four text categories: fictional or
narrative, informational, mixed-genre, and other texts. Kate read-aloud 54 titles in 63 sessions and
logs indicated that read-alouds consisted of 66 percent fictional text, 19 percent informational text, 5
percent mixed-genre, and 6 percent other text types. Of the informational text read, 88 percent were
characterized as life-science domain with 12 percent in the earth and space domain. Heather read 22
titles in 34 sessions during the four week timeframe and logs indicated she read: 79 percent fictional
texts, 6 percent informational text, and 15 percent other text types. Of the informational text read-
aloud 100 percent represented the life-science domain.

Discussion & Recommendations for Additional Study

For the past decade, research has revealed an overall scarcity and limited exposure of
have implied that difficulties reading informational text may explain the fourth-grade reading slump.
Since students in fourth-grade are expected to read vast amounts of informational text, it makes sense
that reading informational text be integrated into the lower grades. Many scholars have suggested
that providing more experience with informational text in the early grades may help mitigate the difficulty students experience in later schooling (Duke, 2000).

This study examines two first grade teachers’, in two separate districts, beliefs about read-alouds and how their practice corresponds to their beliefs. Although both teachers incorporate read-alouds more than once a day and believe in the importance of using a variety of text types, both teachers primarily conducted read-alouds with fictional, narrative text. This study supports the findings of Yopp and Yopp (2006) and indicates that even when teachers read-aloud more than one text a day, the proportion of mixed and informational text were small, and narrative or fictional text dominates what teachers read-aloud to their students. Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) suggest that at least one-third of all materials in classroom libraries and read-alouds to children should be informational.

Both teachers acknowledge the Common Core State Standards and how the standards can be integrated into the read-aloud curriculum. Because Kate acknowledged the standards, she began to incorporate more informational text than in the past. She stated, “With the Common Core, we have been doing a lot of research projects, so I start with that…. because we have standards that are directly geared for non-fiction…. It really forces you to do more non-fiction.” Kate’s students wrote reports on sharks and dogs. This led her to integrate several informational texts on these topics in her read-alouds.

Furthermore, the reading logs affirm Yopp and Yopp’s (2012) findings that informational texts are largely comprised of science, whereas the majority of informational read-alouds related to topics of life science. With Kate’s informational text usage at 88 percent and Heather’s at 100 percent life science, both teachers read mainly about animals. Similarly, Yopp and Yopp (2012) found that 75 percent of read-alouds were on topics of life science with 16 percent of selections on earth and space, 9 percent were categorized as engineering and technology and no books had a focus on physical science. State and national documents provide a rationale for broadening the science informational books that are shared with children in the early years (Yopp & Yopp, 2012).

Both teachers in the present study indicated that student interest and curriculum objectives were motivation for selection of their read-alouds. Kate discussed that only two or three read-alouds were suggested with the adopted curriculum and that a small section on read-alouds was included on the pacing guide. Heather explained how she views read-alouds as a strategy for teaching. She stated, “Because of my background, whatever skill or subject area that we are using, I build it into that. I don’t feel like it is still being emphasized in my school as much as it was ten years ago. New teachers don’t understand the components of reading-aloud and therefore don’t understand the importance of reading aloud and place an emphasis on it. This is sadly what I see happening.” Kate mentioned, “You don’t hear people talking a lot about the books they read aloud,” even though her principal communicates how read-alouds are seen as valuable teaching strategy.

Yopp and Yopp (2012) claim that raising current teacher awareness of genre’s importance, scarcity of informational text in early childhood, and narrow content focus that students are exposed to during read-alouds is an important step in increasing the breadth of informational text in the primary grades. In addition, close examination of materials and practice within elementary schools should be encouraged. Teacher education faculty should ensure that research on informational text be included in curricular content of their programs. If teachers understand text types, authors, and current standards, reading-aloud will become a time of enjoyment for teachers and students while powerful rigorous learning is taking place.

Understanding that children come to school with a variety of skills and background knowledge, the likelihood that differences will exist in children’s literacy experiences is inevitable. Teachers share the responsibility of acknowledging students’ differences and should seek to provide opportunities to foster the construction of literacy knowledge required for reading and writing. When teachers carefully select, preview, and read-aloud a variety of texts with a clear purpose, they have an
opportunity to actively engage students in discussions, model fluent reading, and promote an enjoyable experience with books. Read-alouds can benefit students of all ages in literacy aspects when teachers understand both the power of a book and utilize read-alouds as a valuable teaching opportunity. The read-aloud may look like an ordinary occurrence in the classroom but it can have extraordinary benefits for students.

References


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