Reading Aloud to Teens Gains Favor Among Teachers

Ragina Shearer walks around the classroom as she reads to her 6th grade Spanish class at Calhoun Middle School in Denton, Texas.
—Richard W. Rodriguez for Education Week

By Mary Ann Zehr

Mention teachers’ practice of reading aloud to their students and a typical image comes to mind: In a cozy corner of an elementary classroom, youngsters are gathered on a rug, listening intently to *Charlotte’s Web*.

But, in fact, many teachers across the country are reading to students in middle and high schools, too, and some education researchers say more teachers of adolescents ought to be using the same strategy.

English teachers are reading aloud to teenagers classics ranging from the *Odyssey* to *Of Mice and Men*. History and social studies teachers are voicing the words of the Declaration of Independence and letters home from U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War. Even some math and
science teachers are reading to adolescents in class.

The technique is getting attention amid a bigger push for improvement in adolescent literacy, as educators emphasize that literacy is not just a concern for the elementary grades.

Many teachers made reading aloud a regular practice after attending sessions at education conferences by Jim Trelease, a journalist and the author of the Read-Aloud Handbook, published by Penguin in 1982. Now retired, Mr. Trelease has been a longtime crusader for getting parents and teachers to read to students of all ages.

“If the only thing a teacher shares is from a textbook, how are you going to get students excited about reading?” he said in a recent interview.

Other teachers found by trial and error that reading aloud worked for adding interesting content or making literature come alive for students. And some educators say they read to their classes to model good reading, such as by asking comprehension questions as they go along, or simply because students love it.

Some of those ideas might have come from Read It Aloud!, a book published in 2000 by the International Reading Association based on a column advocating reading-aloud techniques for secondary-level students.

Still, some educators and even those who are fans of reading aloud say the approach should not be overused. They say a teacher’s reading aloud shouldn’t become a crutch for students who don’t want to read anything on their own.

**Research Findings**

Most research about reading aloud has been conducted on elementary school students; findings on how the strategy affects adolescents are limited. But a few researchers have studied how teachers use read-alouds at the middle school level, and the topic is often on the agenda at education conferences.

Lettie K. Albright, an associate professor in literacy at Texas Woman’s University, for example, presented findings from a study of an 8th grade teacher’s experience with structured read-alouds at the annual meeting of the Oak Creek, Wis.-based Literacy Research Association, formerly called the National Reading Conference, last month. Ms. Albright has specialized in studying the impact of reading aloud to middle school students.

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**Why We Read Aloud**

About 300 teachers responded to a reporter’s inquiry posted on listservs run by the English Companion Ning social networking site and the National Council for the Social Studies seeking comments on why and what they read aloud to their middle and high school students. Read excerpts from the responses.
In 2006, she co-wrote an article published in the journal *Reading Research and Instruction* that reported on a survey of middle school teachers who used reading-aloud approaches. In that article, she summarized research showing that the practice builds middle school students’ knowledge in content areas, helps them have positive attitudes toward reading, and helps increase their reading fluency.

Overall, 344 of 476 survey respondents said they read aloud to their students. Female teachers were more likely than their male colleagues to read aloud; teachers of English/language arts or reading were more likely to do so than teachers of other subjects. The most common reason for reading aloud, according to survey respondents, was to promote a love of literature or reading. Other top reasons were to build interest in a topic or introduce a topic, model fluent reading, and expose students to texts they might not read otherwise.

Ms. Albright teaches a course in teaching literacy across the academic-content areas. She has an interest in helping teacher-candidates envision how they might use read-alouds of picture books effectively with adolescents. A lot of picture books, particularly biographies, she says, are sophisticated and appropriate for adolescents.

“The teacher needs to think about why he or she is using the book and connect it to the curriculum, to have purpose, to think about how you will introduce it to the students,” Ms. Albright said. “You don’t want to just pick up a book, read it, and then close it and move on.”

Debra Schneider, a history teacher at Merrill West High School in Tracy, Calif., said she uses picture books to supplement the U.S. history curriculum for her 11th graders because such books communicate a lot of basic information in a concise way.

She said she builds her lessons around themes and finds that picture books help her to bring extra content into the classroom, since the school library doesn’t have enough books to enable all of her 105 U.S. history students to check out a book on the same theme. She’s read to them, for example, a picture book about Japanese internment during World War II.

Ms. Schneider also read excerpts from the 1987 book *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* to her students, and “you could have heard a pin drop,” she said.

The students, she said, told her it was much better than having to read about the Vietnam War from a textbook.

‘Enhance the Lesson’

At West Babylon Junior High School in New York, educators have found a way to create a library of picture books for read-alouds. They applied for and received local and state grants to buy the books.
Julie A. Powers, a 6th grade math teacher at the school in the Long Island town of West Babylon, said she has always read to her students, even when she taught math to 7th and 8th graders. She appreciates that the school now has a picture-book collection that includes math books, so she doesn’t have to buy them on her own, as she did previously.

“Math tends to be abstract, so I’m looking for concrete ways to help [students],” Ms. Powers said. “If the students aren’t getting something, I’ll look for something that can enhance the lesson.”

To introduce fractions, for instance, she’s read the *Hershey’s Milk Chocolate Bar Fractions Book*, by Jerry Pallotta.

Some history teachers say they read primary sources to their students that may be written in language that is hard to grasp.

When Joe Ritzo, a social studies teacher at Stowe High School in Vermont, teaches students about the Declaration of Independence, he reads the beginning of the document to his students. “The language is well over 200 years old,” he said. “It’s very flowery and the kids just don’t take to it.”

Every few lines, he summarizes what the document is saying. “They need to know what its meaning is in 2009,” Mr. Ritzo said.

Other teachers say they read aloud for special populations of students, such as English-language learners or students with disabilities, who may have trouble understanding a text.

For example, Betsy Green, a special education teacher at James Wood High School in Winchester, Va., said she and her students read aloud a majority of text used in her classes, often pausing for interpretation or discussion.

“The text of much of the incorporated literature is just too difficult for students with comprehension or decoding issues to read to themselves,” she said in an e-mail.

‘Grave Injustice’

Some educators, however, say they are concerned that reading aloud could be overused.

“If you read to students, it can be OK to motivate them and get them started,” said Angelia C. Greiner, who sometimes reads aloud over the Internet as a distance-learning English and speech teacher for the Arkansas School of Mathematics, Sciences, and the Arts, in Hot Springs, Ark. “But they’ve got to learn to read on their own, what we call close reading,” she said. Teachers who read practically everything aloud to their students do them a “grave injustice,” she said.

Robert Pondiscio, the communications director for the Core Knowledge Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Charlottesville, Va., that promotes a curriculum based on core academic content, said he has reservations about teachers’ reading aloud to adolescents.

“The need to do this at all seems to be a way of glossing over poor reading skills and poor content knowledge that should have been addressed in elementary school,” he said.
But Paul W. Hankins, who teaches 11th grade English at Silver Creek High School in Sellersburg, Ind., sees reading aloud as an equalizer for students who will read an assigned book and those who won’t.

He recently finished reading John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* to his students; he said he’s read it aloud to classes 36 times in six years of teaching.

Mr. Hankins said he often faked having read an assigned book when he was in school, and as long as he is reading aloud to his students, they won’t have a chance to do the same. That’s one reason why he reads *Of Mice and Men* and other literature out loud.

“I’m going to put myself out there with all my voices,” he said, “and let you hear the dramatic part of this novella.”