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## READING ALOUD AS A STIMULUS AND FACILITATION FOR CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES

### ABSTRACT

Any intentional initiative aimed at the possibility of giving space and paying attention to the children's narratives must necessarily consider the theme of possibility. In the absence of sufficient materials to "think" and "tell", children, by definition, have other perspectives, run the risk of not being able to take the advantage of the space and opportunities provided to them to share their narratives and self-narratives. About this aspect, the approach based on reading aloud presented here has shown to have a twofold beneficial effect: it not only offers and implements a space to socialize narratives, but also contributes to providing all children with learning material. to construct these narratives.

**Keywords:** Fostering stories; Reading aloud; Educational empowerment through reading; Listening practices; Stories.

## LEITURA EM VOZ ALTA COMO ESTÍMULO E FACILITAÇÃO PARA AS NARRAÇÕES DAS CRIANÇAS

### RESUMO

Qualquer iniciativa intencional que visa a possibilidade de dar espaço e prestar atenção às narrativas das crianças deve necessariamente ter em conta o tema da possibilidade. Na ausência de materiais suficientes para "pensar" e "contar", as crianças, portadoras por definição doutros olhares, correm o risco de não poder aproveitar os espaços e as oportunidades que lhes são proporcionados para compartilhar as suas narrativas e autonarrativas. No que toca a esta problemática, a abordagem baseada na leitura em voz alta que aqui se apresenta, demonstrou ter um efeito benéfico duplice: não só oferece e implementa um espaço para socializar narrativas, como também contribui para proporcionar a todas as crianças o material de construção dessas narrativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Facilitar histórias. Leitura em voz alta. Empoderamento educacional por meio da leitura. Práticas de escuta. Histórias.

## LA LECTURA EN VOZ ALTA COMO ESTÍMULO Y FACILITACIÓN PARA LA NARRACIÓN INFANTIL

### RESUMEN

Cualquier iniciativa intencionada dirigida a la posibilidad de dar espacio y poner atención a las narrativas de los niños debe necesariamente tener en cuenta el tema de la posibilidad. Ante la falta de materiales suficientes para "pensar" y "contar", los niños, que son por definición perspectivas diferentes, corren el riesgo de no poder aprovechar los espacios y oportunidades que se les brindan para compartir sus narrativas y su auto narrativas. Con respecto a este tema, el enfoque basado en la lectura en voz alta que aquí se presenta ha demostrado tener un doble efecto beneficioso: no solo ofrece e implementa un espacio para socializar narrativas, sino que también contribuye a brindar a todos los niños material de construcción de estas narrativas.

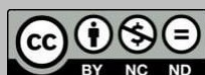
**Palabras clave:** Facilitar historias. Leer en voz alta. Empoderamiento educativo a través de la lectura. Prácticas de escucha. Cuentos.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Embracing children's perspectives and narratives

The worldwide debate on education has been enriched in recent decades by a series of stimuli, research and reflections that have called for attention to the need to embrace the perspective and voice of students in any educational process. Learning objectives, teaching and evaluation practices, relational modalities, as well as the very meaning of education and instruction, require, in order to be rethought and designed, to take into account the point of view of those for whom they are intended (BARTOLUCCI; BATINI, 2016; GRION; COOK-SATHER, 2013).

Learning theories have been telling us for decades about the need to include practices in education and training that foster involvement and motivation (BASHAM; BLACKORBY; MARINO, 2020; FEDELI; FRISON, 2018; MARGOTTINI; ROSSI, 2017). At the same time, the need to express oneself and one's point of view is a problematic condition: although not directly proportional to the instrumental resources possessed to do so, it is closely related to them (KLEINDIENST, 2017; RAKHMANKULOVA, 2021).

In short, it is necessary to include, within the educational system, moments and contexts in which narrative expression of oneself, one's experience and one's point of view is possible. However, at the same time, it is necessary to introduce in advance didactic actions that can really allow everyone to benefit from these moments and contexts by providing an adequate instrumentation and following an equitable approach (BATINI, ed., 2021a).

### 1.2 The reading aloud proposal: Why does reading aloud foster story-telling?

The method of reading aloud that is proposed here has such characteristics that it can be conceived as a particular "space" and context, which, with Simone Giusti, we have called the "reading aloud zone" (BATINI; GIUSTI, 2021). In this "zone", everyone's narratives are encouraged, welcomed, and can find space. At the same time, our method of reading aloud is also conceived as a training to develop the necessary skills to socialize one's narratives. This method has been extensively tested and permanently introduced in different contexts: in over ten years of work, with the research group that I coordinate, we have carried out a considerable amount of transformative action research, of various sizes, involving every order and level of school (BATINI, ed., 2021a; 2021b). Research action

was aimed at the introduction of the teaching of reading aloud within the school curriculum, accompanying the project with training and monitoring and verifying the effects with a mixed method approach and quasi-experimental research designs. The plurality of projects and the multiplicity of data collected, both quantitative and qualitative, the comparison with educators and teachers and their practices, the careful collection of children and teenagers' points of view and the analysis of other experiences, together with the comparison with a series of associative experiences, have allowed the progressive structuring of a method that is fully inserted in this debate.

### *1.2.1 Specific characteristics of the method*

Therefore, before testing the proposed hypothesis, we will try to describe the reference method.

The approach to reading aloud that we propose to introduce in a stable way throughout educational and training system, from nursery to high school, involves the integral reading of stories by the teacher for their students. In particular, the stories to be read involve picture books, novels and short stories. Teachers are the ones who read, even after children have learned the rudiments of reading and are at the end of their education path. Although the method is extremely flexible, it has a few fixed points to which attention must be paid.

**1 Daily routine:** reading aloud by the teacher must occur every day, there is no reason not to read. Daily reading is one of the characteristics of the method that can be explained by the metaphor of physical activity. Every day we need physical activity to feel good; in the same way reading, in order to exert its effects, finds its ideal condition in the daily routine.

**2. Systematization:** the didactic-educational purpose requires that the reading occur in an organized, non-random framework, with a defined structure and with the awareness of all the stakeholders in the field.

**3. Intensity:** the individual reading sessions, while starting from the attention span of the children and teenagers with whom one works, rapidly increase in duration. Sessions lasting less than half an hour are not considered significant (except in the first few days of training). While not constituting a constraint, the standard indicated as optimal is one hour per day of reading by the teacher (one hour per day, every day).

**4. Graduality:** the reading aloud path must be progressive. It starts with picture stories that are short, simple, with language that is accessible and close to that of the

target audience, with content close to students and children's experience and themes related to their developmental milestones (and those immediately following). It then continues with more articulated stories, with the gradual decrease of images, and longer stories, with more complex language and interesting content, but not necessarily related to immediate experience.

**5. "Biblio-variety":** it is essential to provide in the stories an absolute variety of events, themes, types, genres, languages, protagonists and characters, editors. The variety of choices, starting with themes and languages close to the target audience with whom you are working, is fundamental to determining all the benefits that reading aloud can offer.

**6. Socialization:** there should be time for discussion during or at the end of the reading session. If there is a stop before the conclusion, in the moment of socialization it is possible to make predictions about what will happen next in the story. Moreover, during socialization we can examine the choices of the characters and imagine replacing them, trying to understand how we would have acted in their place. We can establish links between story and experience, we can express, motivating it, our appreciation or not, we can identify links with other novels or stories, with songs or movies. Some of the main gains in comprehension and interpretation skills are achieved through the variety of students' comments. Social moments are a space in which self-narration is possible, even in a mediated and progressive mode.

**7. Prompting questions and non-evaluative attitude:** the questions proposed in the socialization phase are intended to stimulate, must be open-ended (there is no "one right answer") and allow for many possibilities of response. Each contribution to the discussion is welcomed and gratefully received; there are no "authentic interpretations." Building a non-evaluative and welcoming setting is central to allowing all students, whatever their age, the opportunity and courage to express themselves.

**8. Focus on the students:** students are the main focus of reading aloud interventions. As the proposals and the experience of reading exposure progress, it is highly appropriate to give them the right to choose among multiple proposals, to directly make their own proposals, and to ask not to complete a reading. Children and students have the right to express themselves and provide their own interpretation of the story and make comments. They have the right to find, in each story, what it says to them and to share it with others.

**9. Autonomous teaching:** the teaching of reading aloud does not need additions and insertions that change its meaning. Together, reading and socialization complete the

teaching action. Book cards, comprehension tests, questionnaires, summaries, logical and grammatical analyses are to be avoided at all costs in association with the reading moment.

**10. It provides for the participation of all teachers:** reading should not be completely overlapped, in the school grades, with literature; it is not the responsibility of a specific teacher. The participation of multiple teachers from a class in the training has considerable significance not only for the students, but also for the teachers themselves who experience a different way of collaborating.

## 2 READING ALOUD AND LANGUAGE

### 2.1 Enhancing language through reading aloud.

Language is a valuable tool: communication happens through language, language allows us to relate to others, to access meanings, to tell and to tell ourselves, to understand what we are told and much more. The development of language and a rich vocabulary, therefore, is a prerequisite for reflecting on and socializing self and one's own experience. We could argue that the development of language skills has an enabling function with respect to the possibility and, at the same time, the motivation for storytelling.

Reading aloud can have a very powerful effect on language skills in a very special way. Indeed, it implies an active role of the child/student who naturally formulates hypotheses about the meaning of the terms encountered based on the context. The process is quite simple: while listening to a story I will most likely encounter a number of terms that I do not know. If there are too many words (or phrasal constructions) that I do not know, I will select, without precise intentionality, those that strike me or that allow me to make a hypothesis of meaning on the basis of the context in which they are inserted. This meaning is temporarily assigned if it works for the story. Subsequent encounters of the same term will allow me to "test" the attributed meaning and confirm or, possibly, correct it.

Continuous interruptions by the educator or teacher, aimed at explaining individual terms, especially with younger children, can instead lead to an unhappy enjoyment of the story and confusion about the terms. These interruptions are often driven by anxiety reactions, which lead to misunderstanding the concept of story comprehension, confusing it with literal knowledge of each term. However, the "natural" learning that occurs through

stories works very well and produces significant benefits without tiring and allowing you to focus and place your attention on the overall meaning of the story.

The specific context in which these learnings are structured, moreover, provides a wide series of examples of narration and self-narratives, of reactions to what happens. It provides micro-views and more articulated perspectives about the world, about what happens, about experiences, changes, learnings, about the self and its many possibilities of becoming. It is therefore a matter of situated learning that allows you to build in an original way, through the different narrative frames acquired, your own narratives.

## 2.2 A systematic review on the effects of reading aloud on language

The systematic review we conducted with our research group, called "Reading Aloud and First Language Development: A Systematic Review" (BATINI et al., 2020) has overall shown that benefits can be achieved across the language area with the practice of adult-mediated shared reading of narrative books.

The review provides a general overview of studies published over the past decade and collected on the ERIC database that have explored the role of reading aloud on language development, beginning in early childhood.

The process followed, which led to the identification of 51 articles consistent with the objectives of the research, can be summarized in the following steps: choice of database; selection of inclusion/exclusion criteria; first analysis and skimming based on title and abstract; filing of selected studies; identification of the characteristics of each study; extraction of results and comparison.

The analysis of the studies confirmed, as already found in some meta-analyses (MOL; BUS, 2011; MOL et al., 2009), that exposure to reading in early childhood, but also at later ages, is associated with language acquisition and the development of many related sub-dimensions.

Among the language components most affected by exposure to reading aloud were included skills closely related to language, skills related to cognitive function (memory, attention, and intelligence) (BARTOLUCCI; BATINI, 2019a; 2019b), and emergent literacy (comprehension, print awareness, knowledge of letters, phonological and spelling awareness). Our analysis, which focused primarily on language development, found that the areas that benefit most from reading aloud are receptive vocabulary (e.g., KOTAMAN, 2013), expressive vocabulary (e.g., GONZALEZ et al., 2010), lexicon (e.g., WRIGHT; DUNSMUIR, 2019), narrative production (e.g., BAKER et al, 2013), vocabulary depth (e.g.,

DAMHUIS et al., 2015), mathematical and scientific language (e.g., NEVO; VAKNIN-NUSBAUM, 2018), and verbal and communicative interactions between adults and children (e.g., BRANNON; DAUKSAS, 2012).

Thus, the body of research showed a significant impact of exposure to reading aloud on a complex set of language-related dimensions and abilities.

With regard to the duration of reading aloud activities, the analysis of the studies has validated the idea that intensive, repeated and frequent training produces significant results, confirming the importance of investing in the quality and quantity of the time dedicated to this activity. Although some studies (e.g., HIPFNER-BOUCHER et al., 2014; SALO et al., 2016) have shown positive results even after a limited number of reading sessions, continuous and repeated practice has been found to bring more significant improvements in children's language development.

### 2.3 Our research for educational policy Reading: So Cool!

As far as early childhood is concerned, it may be useful to look at the effects identified by our research group during the course of the first year of the project, which accompanies the educational policy Reading: So Cool!<sup>1</sup>. These effects are related, in particular, to educational services aimed at children aged 0-3.

The surveys carried out before and after the intervention (through an intensive narrative training based on the method already described) allowed to observe significant effects, detected through two different instruments, on receptive language and productive language.

We will not describe here all the dimensions detected by the research. Only the dimensions concerning language will be examined in depth. Language was assessed through a tool called "TPL" and through the "Bayley-III" battery, which has a scale specifically devoted to language. Both these instruments are individually and directly administered. In addition, we also took into account the results of the "PVB" test, which is an indirectly administered instrument, since it is filled by parents.

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<sup>1</sup> "Reading: So cool!" is a project promoted by the Region of Tuscany with the partnership and scientific coordination of the University of Perugia (Department of Philosophy, Social, Human and Education Sciences) and the partnership of Cepell ("Center for books and reading" of Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities), the Regional School Office for Tuscany and Indire (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research) and the collaboration of LaAV Letture ad Alta Voce (Nausika Association).

The increases in the two groups - experimental (the group that received the intensive reading aloud intervention) and control (the group that continued with the traditional activities proposed in early childhood services) - between the first and second assessment were obtained, for each subject, by subtracting the score of the first survey from the score of the second one. We then proceeded to calculate and compare the mean increases relative to both the experimental and control groups. This comparison, aimed at verifying statistically significant differences, identified the effects recorded with validated tools. Moreover, it revealed statistically significant increases, in favor of the experimental group, in the language area through the Bayley III scale of the language (which reaches statistical significance  $F = 4.767$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the positive effects in the linguistic dimension emerge both on the production side (expressive language) ( $t = 3.301$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and on the comprehension (receptive) side ( $t = 3.321$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong effect on the linguistic sphere in all its sub-components.

A confirmation of these measures comes from the TPL test: this early language test, in fact, reinforces and confirms the results that emerged from the previous test, showing a significant increase in the performance of the experimental group compared to the control group ( $F = 3.219$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) both as regards production tests (expressive language) and comprehension tests (receptive language).

The results emerging from the PVB questionnaire, administered to parents, further confirm what has been already revealed through the direct administration of tests and batteries to children, with respect to the sphere of language. Through the parents' observations, increases in several linguistic operational components are highlighted, such as total word production, noun production, total use of predicates, use of sentences with functors (articles/prepositions), and production of sentences with pronouns. The positive effect of exposure to reading aloud impacts various aspects of language production.

The result is particularly interesting in comparison with control groups: control groups obviously have a growth in their language skills and competences since their age range is strongly affected by this kind of development, yet experimental groups reveal a significantly greater growth. Moreover, through a detailed analysis - conducted through various attempts to segment our samples - an even more powerful effect of exposure to reading aloud is detected for those starting from a lower level of performance. This finding provides support for the "democratic and equitable" function (BATINI, ed., 2021a; 2021b)

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<sup>2</sup> The analyzes were carried out using MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) with repeated measures (group X time) to evaluate the group / time interaction that gives us the measure of significance of the intervention impact in the experimental classes compared to the control ones.



of reading. Reading aloud, indeed, has proved capable of decreasing interpersonal differences at the class level, promoting greater homogeneity of the groups, while fostering the growth of all experimental group members.

The daily school diaries drawn up by the educators of early childhood services has provided further support for this outcome. In fact, educators, through a semi-structured daily tool (the school diaries) and a more complete, weekly version, have provided a significant amount of quantifiable and categorizable data. An analysis was carried out for the construction of ex post categories: in the observations made by the teachers there was a multiplicity of occurrences relating to language, which was the most represented macro-category.

The daily quantification of children's verbal interactions - recorded by the educators using a five-point frequency scale - also shows clear progress in the frequency averages daily recorded in all 53 nurseries included in the sample as experimental group. The increase is almost one point out of 5 (going from the initial average of 3.4 to the final average of 4.3 and halving, moreover, the internal variance) and goes hand in hand with readiness to listen and pay attention. By examining the qualitative notations in the language macro-category, we can gather a considerable amount of evidence: from the sub-category of non-verbal language it is clear how children, even those who have not yet developed a verbal language, try to communicate and make their will understood. For example, they point to books to read, in an effort to continue the activity or begin it. Pointing, participating with gestures and the expression of emotions through the face are frequently reported.

Verbal production appears to be very frequent and relevant, especially for the reading request, both in general and in relation to specific books. There are many reports of children who anticipate the story with the exact words, demonstrating not only attention and understanding of the unfolding of the story, but also an improvement in cognitive abilities, especially mnemonic ones. Another interesting evidence, repeatedly underlined, is related to the reproduction, by the children, of the situation of reading aloud: the story is re-elaborated through the words of the children, but with the use of words or phrases from the book (learned by heart). Thus, children tell their own narration of the story to classmates or puppets arranged in a semicircle. This is further evidence of the increase in vocabulary and verbal production, as well as the demonstration of the child's cognitive processing of the story and its message. Reading has become a routine and an action to be imitated, taking the educators and the setting as a model.

The analysis on the diary annotations has made it possible to investigate also the indirect effects: the use of the stories that children make, as many educators tell us, is not limited to verbal or behavioral reproduction. Reading often becomes a stimulus and source: it represents a stimulus because it offers the opportunity to talk about oneself, telling personal facts connected to the action carried out by the characters or to the context of the story. On the other hand, reading encourages children to make references to characters and books in situations and contexts other than reading moments. At the same time, children take material from stories to talk about themselves and their experiences, and to describe themselves. In older children, these observed processes are complete, and the activities performed and reported become indicators of text comprehension and processing. Instead, younger children participate in the activity by showing their understanding and participation by repeating animal cries and sounds, or trying to reproduce the words they listen to.

### **3 CONCLUSIONS**

The literature related to the linguistic effects of exposure to reading aloud presents findings that would pave the way for other more complex discourses regarding the right to education and what instructional practices can create the pre-conditions for exercising it. The completeness of the linguistic effects of reading aloud has also been found in the research we have produced directly in recent years. This research indicates that reading aloud is an important practice not only because it provides the material through which the representation of meanings can take place and continue.

The concordance, in the results we have proposed, between two different surveying instruments, with the observations recorded by the parents and with the analysis of the school diaries sent by the educators, reassures us not only about the efficacy of the didactics implemented, but also about the interpretation and enhancement of these language skills in the context in which children live.

From reading children acquire words, materials to think and tell, along with a plurality of ways of thinking and telling. However, stories are much more than that. In stories, children encounter experiences and emotions similar to their own and this allows them to translate and put into words what they live. They also encounter dissimilar experiences that help them to imagine, to think about possibilities (and to increase those that are available for themselves) and to understand the experience and way of thinking of

others. The desire to express oneself and the attempt to do so are the first clues that they are on the right path.

In particular - within the model proposed here - the opportunity is manifested, concretely, in each reading aloud session, through the specific techniques (prompting questions, open-ended questions, invitations to compare with the experience...) used in the socialization phases that characterize the dialogic reading.

The importance of guaranteeing children the right and adequate space to tell about themselves and express their points of view, needs and desires, remains abstract as long as the socio-economic cultural background is the major predictor of the attention and space that a child will be able to obtain from others and from adults.

To truly recognize the right of children to tell and build their own story, it is necessary to develop in them all those skills of emergent literacy and literacy. Along with the necessary health and food assistance programs, it is necessary to think about compensatory interventions, for example through reading aloud.

Very often, in the education system, it is thought that family background represents an ineluctable destiny. However, evidence tells us that adequate, prolonged and intensive teaching focused on reading aloud can have a strong impact in different age groups and that all children and teenagers in heterogeneous groups (such as school classrooms) benefit from those interventions.

The demand for space, for meaning, for possibility is a question that strongly arises from millions of children all over the world who are exposed to educational poverty.

The systematic introduction of daily reading aloud of stories of all kinds in every educational context - from the earliest childhood and throughout schooling - could finally be an answer.

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