

Reading Aloud

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Chapter 3. Reading Aloud

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Abstract

Reading aloud to children has been investigated in numerous ways. The socio-cultural perspective focuses on the importance of the social and cultural context of children's literacy experiences. Drawing on research data from a study that draws on focus group interviews with children and observations of literacy lessons in the classroom this chapter will explore children's experiences of listening to stories. The chapter, which also includes the experiences of a practicing teacher on reading aloud to children, provides teachers with an insight into a 'reading for pleasure' pedagogy. The authors invite the reader to consider the selection and preparation of books and stories for use in the classroom.

Introduction

This chapter provides an insight into the role of reading aloud to Key Stage 2 children and links this to reading for pleasure. Reading aloud to children has been investigated in numerous ways with benefits often being described in terms of increased skills and increases in reading attainment: a cognitive-psychological perspective. An alternative view, the socio-cultural perspective, focuses on the importance of the social and cultural context where learning occurs rather than purely focusing on personal skills. Using research from Cara's thesis - focus group interviews with children and observations from the classroom - coupled with Ginny's experiences as a classroom practitioner, this chapter will explore the experience of reading aloud to children. Cara's doctoral study involved children in Class 5 (9- to 10-year-olds) and was conducted in England. The children were asked to take photographs to represent 'reading' in their school. These images were discussed in small groups. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). In what follows, we will discuss the findings from the study and implications for class teachers hoping to develop reading aloud pedagogy.

Socio-cultural Perspective on Reading

A socio-cultural perspective on literacy focuses on the importance of the social and cultural context where learning occurs rather than on personal skills. Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning and development as a social phenomenon whereby children become encultured into ways of thinking, feeling and acting by significant others; "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p.88). The adults use language in context and 'scaffold' the reading activity, helping the child to understand their role within it (Bruner & Watson, 1983).

This socio-cultural perspective challenges the view of literacy as a "private mental possession" which can be "quantified and measured in terms of discrete decontextualized skills" (Gee, 1991, p.31). Instead, literacy is viewed as a social practice with practice being defined by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000) as "cultural ways of utilising literacy" (p.8).

The authors go on to describe 'literacy events' as activities where talk occurs around a central text or texts, pointing to the fact that this always exists within a social context. This view highlights the necessary involvement of attitudes, beliefs and practices in literacy events, recognising that those who have "been taught empowering ways with the words they read, are far more likely to be empowered than those who have not" (Smith, 2004, p.414).

Reading for Pleasure and Reading Aloud

'Reading for pleasure' is a term that has been used to describe an act of reading that involves "the reader's volition, their agency and desire to read" (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Safford, 2009, p.5). Research suggests that engagement in reading can support academic outcomes (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Smith, Jeffrey K., Smith, Gilmore, & Jameson, 2012) illustrated by increases in vocabulary and better comprehension (Andreassen & Bråten, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012). The Reading Framework (DfE, 2023) outlines that reading aloud can be a "powerful driver for improving pupils' reading and all-round education, as well as having a positive impact on their social and emotional wellbeing" (p.101). Drawing on an extensive review of available research, The Reading Agency concluded that reading for pleasure leads to "enjoyment, relaxation and escapism, increasing understanding of self and social identities, empathy, knowledge of other cultures, relatedness, community cohesion and increasing social capital" (The Reading Agency, 2015, p.4).

Developing a reading for pleasure culture involves consideration of factors such as environment, social reading, independent reading and reading aloud. Reading aloud is an activity whereby the teacher shares a text with the children and has been identified as an important activity in relation to developing reading for pleasure (Cremin, 2014). Listening to someone read aloud can encourage the view of reading as a pleasurable activity and for those who have not yet developed adequate decoding skills, it provides access to texts that match children's comprehension levels (Goodwin, 1995).

The significance of reading aloud to children was reported by Wells (1986). He found that of the three frequently occurring activities that had been considered as possibly helpful preparation for the acquisition of literacy, only one was significantly associated with later test scores: listening to stories. Listening to stories, and perhaps the context in which these activities occur, appears to present children with an experience of literacy that develops not only their knowledge of words but also their understanding of how and why language is used.

There have been multiple studies carried out exploring the benefits of reading aloud across all subjects. Boyd (2009) believes that reading aloud is a powerful educational tool that has the potential to encourage empathy, creativity and focus. Cron (2012) expanded on this highlighting that humans are hard-wired to listen to stories and make meaning; reading aloud from fictional texts can encourage children to explore ideas further.

Reading aloud can involve literature from a range of genres (Franzese, 2002) including fiction and nonfiction. It is recommended that every class should listen to a story as part of their daily routine using books, poems, articles or book chapters (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp (2000) declared that reading aloud is the single most important activity for reading success.

In the United States of America, the Department of Education Commission explored over 10,000 studies and discovered that the most crucial and important activity for "building skills and background for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985, p.86). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that reading aloud to children allows them to process and understand "challenging context, text

features and vocabulary” (Heisey & Kucan, 2010, p.65). This is applicable to subjects such as science and technology, not just subjects normally linked with reading aloud. In addition to this, reading to children aged 4-5 years old leads to higher reading, maths and cognitive skills at ages 8-9 years (Kalb & van Ours, 2014). Reading aloud provides children with the opportunity to develop “concepts about print, story structure and other elements of text” and “provides the child with a wealth of information about the processes and functions of written language” (Rog, 2001, p.7). Reading aloud has also been found to develop children’s listening ability and attention span (Dragan, 2001).

Research into reading aloud to children has often focused on the benefits of this activity in terms of improving skills. Reading to young children is viewed as beneficial in terms of ‘acquiring literacy’ and providing children with a ‘head start’ in life (Kalb & van Ours, 2014; Massaro, 2017). Studies with primary-aged children point to increases in vocabulary (Read, Rogojina & Hauer-Richard, 2022; Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker & Schneider, 2013) and improved inference skills (Dempsey, 2020). Additionally, reading aloud appears to have a positive impact on the amount of time children spend reading silently (Pegg & Bartelheim, 2011). Research has also focused on attitude and motivation, suggesting that reading aloud has a positive effect on lifelong reading habits and reading identity (Merga, 2017); children consider adults who read with expression and emotion as role models (Merga, 2016).

Reading aloud also develops the relationship between children and reading which leads to an increase in the number of children who identify as readers (Cremin, 2009). The act of a teacher reading to children is an important task that can motivate and inspire children to read independently (Batini, Batolucci & Timpone, 2018). Mooney (1990) also highlighted that benefits included an increase in their desire to listen and learn about books and their aspiration to become a reader.

The Role of ‘Flow’

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that the experience of ‘flow’ can impact children’s attitudes, describing it as ‘intrinsically rewarding’. Engeser (2012, p.1) links this to reading suggesting that it occurs when an individual is “completely immersed in an activity without reflective self-consciousness” or, referring specifically to reading, as Kuijpers puts it, a reader becomes “lost in a book” (2021, p.2). Csikszentmihalyi considers ‘flow’ as the process whereby an actor and action ‘become one’, pointing to this as a motivating factor for children in relation to reading. Reading aloud to children has the potential to support ‘flow’. The findings from Ryan and Schatt’s (2014) study are perhaps relevant here in relation to developing children into lifelong readers. They considered the role of ‘flow’ as part of a storytelling event.

Spotlight on Research

Ryan, P., & Schatt, D. (2014). Can you describe the experience? Storytelling, Self, Society.

Ryan and Schatt (2014) investigated the impact of the longest running storytelling program in the US by interviewing the program’s current and former students. Although storytelling is different from reading aloud (storytelling is an oral practice whereas reading aloud involves sharing a written text), Barton (1986) suggests that there are similarities in that the teacher’s performance can draw the children together in a community event. The insights from Ryan and Schatt’s study suggested that the impact on individuals was ‘enduring’ and ‘lifelong’. Participants spoke of their emotional responses to listening to stories describing the experience as ‘emotionally relaxing’ and declaring that it was “the best” and “paradise” (p.143). All the interviewees stated that the program had encouraged a love of stories in adulthood. Interestingly, most of the participants could not remember the stories that were

told but many had strong recollections of the rituals of “walking to the library” and “being triggered into a calmer state when sitting on the rug” (p.16). Ryan and Schatt identified these as experiences of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), highlighting its importance in relation to promoting reading for pleasure long term.

Exploring children’s and teachers’ experiences of reading aloud

In Cara’s research study, children in Class 5 described the experience of being read to as one of relaxation. During a reading aloud session one child commented:

It's really nice because you can relax, and you don't have to do anything. You just need to listen to him read. And it's actually really nice because sometimes I don't really want to read. Sometimes I like people reading to me.

Brock et al., (2008) suggest that for children to develop a love of reading they may benefit from certain forms of encouragement. When considering the experience of listening to a story, teachers need to consider aspects such as seating positions, comfort, classroom environment and delivery of the text. Ensuring that the classroom is a happy, comfortable environment can strengthen a child’s relationship with reading.

Research suggests that the aesthetics of a reading environment can aid children's growth and progression as readers (Guthrie et al., 2007) through the arousing of their senses including visual, feeling, smelling, hearing and imagination (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). Consideration of the environment should therefore be a priority for teachers as this may also develop the children's enjoyment and perceptions of reading overall (Blachowicz et al., 2006). An environment where children can relax and one that also looks enticing can help to promote the love of reading. Ensuring that displays are current and relevant and that reading areas are comfortable with a wide range of texts would seem important. Other factors may also be considered during the reading aloud event. For example, the children in Class 5 found ‘comfy spots’ by lying on the floor on coats and bags. Wigfield (2010) suggested that the environment can significantly impact student learning outcomes and Mashburn et al., (2008) highlighted that comfortability and happiness in a reading area can develop and reinforce a child’s motivation to read.

Another aspect that teachers need to consider is the way in which they deliver the text. Acosta-Tello (2019) suggests that using different voices for characters has a positive impact on the reader, creating enthusiasm and intrigue towards the story. This is supported by the Reading Framework (DfE, 2023) which highlights the importance of teachers using ‘voices’ and ‘pauses’ when reading aloud. An enthusiastic delivery can help to develop children’s relationships with the characters, enabling them to visualise the events and become “part of the story itself” (Acosta-Tello, 2019, p.4). This requires the teacher to become somewhat of a performer. As Barton (1986) suggests, reading aloud is similar to storytelling where the teacher’s performance can draw the children together in a community event (ChClass 5s, 2003).

The children in Class 5 commented positively on their teachers' use of voices:

It's got different characters and voices, he's very good at that. Because when we were reading a book about these Scottish elves, he did an amazing Scottish accent. It was really funny.

This appeared to engage the class in the story with one child sitting at their teacher's feet like 'he is in a trance'. This would seem to link to Csikszentmihalyi's idea of 'flow' where child and teachers 'become one' in a shared event.

The teacher, therefore, is central in terms of sparking, developing and sustaining an interest in reading and how a teacher talks about a shared text can have a huge impact on the children's views. In addition, being a reader is an important aspect of a teacher's practice. Research exploring teachers as readers (Cremin et al., 2009) highlights the role a teacher can play in developing a love of reading. If teachers have read the class book already, this can allow for specific emphasis, discussion of certain relevant aspects and creation of 'inside-text talk' (Cremin, 2019). Inside-text talk is the discussion of a book leading to the understanding of characters and context. This can create exciting engagements between children who feel passionate about the book. Cremin (2019) refers to this as 'book blether' (Cremin, 2019). If teachers are also engaged with the story, it allows them to be involved, make genuine comments and develop children's thinking further. In *Prompts for Critical Reflection* which follows, Ginny reflects on her experiences in the classroom relating to the importance of the reading aloud.

Prompts for Critical Reflection

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud, or story time, was a timetabled part of our everyday routine, 20 minutes after lunchtime. Ensuring story time was after lunchtime and not before another activity, allowed me to leave the story on a cliffhanger nearly every time and we would never cut the reading aloud session short which often happens at the end of the day due to tidying up, collecting belongings etc. Valuing and prioritising story time demonstrates to the children the importance of that session. The children would place a sign outside the door stating that 'Storytime was in progress'. We had a phrase that the children repeated regularly – 'story time is the most important part of the day'.

It was of paramount importance to create a classroom that would be deemed safe by the children. I also strived for the concept of 'cosy'. We had fairy lights around the room, soft furnishings in the reading area and, during storytime, a fireplace on the board with the lights turned off. Students were allowed to remove their shoes, put their heads on their jumpers and close their eyes. Reading the book before delivering it to the class can be incredibly exciting. You can pinpoint where you are going to finish for that section. It also provides an opportunity to develop voices for the characters and actions throughout the story.

After every storytime, the children and I would discuss some exciting sections of the text: which characters we liked and what we thought was going to happen next. I tried to make sure the children only contributed voluntarily as I did not want them to think it was a reading lesson where there was a right and wrong answer. Children shared their interesting insights into the story, often continuing their conversations at playtime.

Other ways I developed 'inside-text-talk' (or book blether) were through personal reading every morning. I provided opportunities for 'quiet' reading and 'chatty' reading, allowing children to have time alone to get into the flow of their literature or to discuss their reading with friends. After each morning reading session, I would ask the children 'Where have you all been this morning?' to which they would reply as if they were the protagonists in their stories, telling me about their wild adventures or the information they had learned. This gave the children a brief insight into the literature others were reading and highlighted texts they might enjoy as well as creating links with texts they had already read. Children also connected through shared texts, identifying other children with similar reading interests.

Encouraging children to share their reading habits can create a domino effect, whereby they want to read more and share their reading adventures together.

Ginny's reflection above is a reminder of how the teacher often strives to make time for areas of literacy pedagogy that are important, and which may not be reflected or prioritised within the primary curriculum and busy school day.

After reading Ginny's reflection above, consider the following questions:

- How is Reading for Pleasure developed in your own context? How are children encouraged to feel safe and to enjoy listening to stories?
- What other strategies could you consider?
- What are your priorities for fostering a love of reading through reading aloud to children? What are the challenges faced by teachers?
- How can you seek to understand children's experiences of being read to and how they feel about this?

Choice of books to read aloud in the classroom – some considerations

The choice of text is an important factor when reading aloud. If the curriculum is to value children's interests, it may be useful to consult children and acknowledge their views (McTavish et al., 2012; Reedy & De Carvalho, 2021). Drawing from Cara's research involving classroom observations and interviews with children, the *Spotlight on Research* below, provides insights into the ways in which the children expressed a desire for the teacher to 'know' them as readers and understand their preferences in reading.

Spotlight on Research

Book choice and children's reading preferences

As part of Cara's doctoral research, the children in 'Class 5' shared their responses to three texts read aloud during the course of the academic year: 'Wee Free Men' by Terry Pratchett (2003); 'Ratburger', by David Walliams (2012); and 'Room 13', by Robert Swindells (1989). Cara explored why the books were chosen by the teacher and how children responded to them.

The teacher, Mr Dickens, began the school year reading aloud from 'Wee Free Men' (Pratchett, 2003). He was passionate about Terry Pratchett's books and personally owned many copies. This approach to selecting texts meets the criteria that teachers should be enthused and excited about the books that they read aloud to children (Acosta-Tello, 2019). However, this enthusiasm was not replicated by the children in the class. One child, who was an avid reader, commented that:

I think I don't really get the book. It's a little bit hard and a little bit olden days

This lack of enthusiasm was supported by classroom observations.

He is reading Terry Pratchett. The children keep shuffling, swapping places. I think the story is too difficult for them to understand ... There is a funny bit in the book – no one laughs. I don't think they are listening.

Research suggests that teachers often rely on their favourite texts from their own childhood (Cremin & Durning, 2020). This is somewhat understandable. When we enjoy a text, we

perhaps assume that others will too. However, to be able to make choices that are relevant for the children in a class, teachers should have a wide knowledge of texts (Cremin et al., 2008; Cremin et al., 2014).

The children's response to a text that linked to a recent school residential trip was more positive. 'Room 13' (Swindells, 1989) tells the story of a class of 10- and 11-year-olds who visit Whitby, a seaside resort on the east coast of England. The children in the study had visited the town earlier in the academic year. Janine summarised the plot:

[It's] about a girl who goes on a school residential to near where we went in Whitby. And she goes to a hotel in Whitby, and there's a room called room 13. But it's not actually a room. It's a storage cupboard place. But at midnight, it turns into room 13.

Such was the enthusiasm about the text, several of the children purchased copies of the book so that they could read along with the teacher or even read ahead. Claire told me that Janine had got a copy of the Room 13:

She keeps it in the drawer ... She follows along with him

Claire also had a copy and field notes reported that she:

...rolls onto her back and holds the book up in the air as she follows the text.

Observational notes showed how children in the class expressed disappointment when the teacher stopped reading and those with personal copies enjoyed their privileged position:

Mr Dickens says, 'we'll leave it there'. The children groan. Claire gives Mr Dickens a knowing look, as if to say she shares the knowledge of the book and recognises something bad is going to happen in the story.

When texts endorse children's reading preferences or relate meaningfully to their lives, they seem enthusiastic, engaged and motivated to read. In the case of 'Room 13' (Swindells, 1989) this might be due to the relevance of the story, the suspenseful plot and the links with a recent experience in their lives. However, the extent to which texts for reading aloud should be based on children's preferences might not be straightforward.

Many of the children expressed a desire to hear stories by the celebrity author, David Walliams. Walliams was a popular author in the class and many children had personal copies of his books. The experience was reflected in a conversation with Tulip:

I ask Tulip if she likes the story. She says yes. She says there was a really funny bit last time called 'sizzling bottoms'. I ask what happened. She can't remember but she liked it because it was funny

As we can see above, Tulip could not really explain her ideas about the 'funniness' of the text. It would seem important therefore, for teachers to discuss how books create effects, such as humour. It may also be an opportunity to draw attention to the way in which books and stories could reinforce stereotypes through the portrayal of their characters, thereby using this as an opportunity to develop children's critical literacy. In addition, this can highlight the difficulty teachers might experience when choosing suitable class novels and the extent to which children's preferences should be considered. Teachers have a responsibility to share texts that they believe are suitable for the children in their care. They are in a position to introduce their classes to a wide variety of authors and genres and, with a knowledge of their children's reading preferences, and make personal recommendations.

For teachers to effectively support reading for pleasure and provide suitable book recommendations, they will need to read children's books (Cremin et al., 2009) as this will enable them to make judgments about their suitability for the classroom and for the children that they are teaching. It is only by reading texts themselves that teachers are in a position to make judgments about which texts are suitable for their children. Additionally, if teachers are familiar with the story, they will be better placed to support 'inside-text talk' (Cremin et al., 2019) and provide opportunities for exciting and genuine engagements, supporting deep thinking about a text.

Diversity in Children's Literature

The books introduced by teachers provide opportunities for children to learn about themselves and the wider world. It is important to ensure that children feel represented and noticed (see also Sharpe and Taplin, this volume). The Reading Framework (DfE, 2023) suggests that children should be able to consider themselves in the role of protagonist, highlighting the importance of diversity in the text we choose to share. In 2022, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) reported that although the representation of characters from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds has increased (4% in 2017 to 20% in 2021), this is still not representative of the 33.5% of pupils who are from a minority ethnic background in the UK primary school population. Teachers need to consider this when choosing and selecting books for their class. It is important to develop these understandings and social sensitivities, values and belief systems (Norton, 1990) whilst still being able to engage empathetically and emotionally, making connections to the world and developing a desire to understand (Kucirkova et al., 2017). Such an approach helps to nurture children as active participants in the community, where they feel sense of belonging and are supported. It is also important to ensure that the literature available to children relates to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) community. It is clear that over the last 15 years, the inclusion LGBT issues in the curriculum has increased with current guidance in England stating that LGBT relationships must be taught in school. However, with 45% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pupils reporting incidents of bullying (including 64% of transgender pupils) there is still a long way to go before we can truly say we have an inclusive education system (Bradlow et al., 2017). LGBT-friendly books in primary schools can help to increase awareness, acceptance and understanding by broadening the reader's experience of the world. The use of such texts in story time can provide space for discussion, allowing for further understanding of the self and others. The opportunity to discuss ideas with peers, friendships can arise and when children feel seen, heard and represented. C.S. Lewis once said, "Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one'".

In the *Ideas for Classroom Practice* that follows, Ginny and Cara provide strategies to support reading aloud in the classroom and recommendations of books to read to children.

Ideas for Classroom Practice

Strategies for reading aloud in the classroom

Ginny's reflection:

I always ensure that I read a text before sharing it with the class. This is essential not only to assess the text's suitability, but also to support your delivery. I try to find texts that link with the children's experiences and backgrounds as well as their reading preferences. An example of this was when I read Morris Gleitzman's 'Boy Overboard'. The children had been asking questions about events in Afghanistan and this provided some insight into what life

may have been like for children who lived there. I also try to ensure that the texts I read aloud are both diverse and representative of the children in the class.

Another consideration is how characters are represented in a text. For example, 'The Last Firefox' by Lee Newbury is a story that includes a family with two dads. The dads were not central to the story, but their inclusion helped develop awareness of this family structure for the children in the class.

Some suggestions:

Familiarity with a story can aid anticipation and help your confidence when reading aloud. Aim to leave on a cliffhanger!

Being comfortable:

On the floor | at desks | lying down | blankets | pillows | shoes off | options of having their eyes shut

Environment:

Lights off | fireplace with a crackle on the board | general quietness | a sign on the door saying 'do not disturb' | fairy lights

Delivery:

Voice: high – low | fast – slow | loud – quiet | exaggerate pauses | movements and gestures to support the text | read the room and respond to their feedback both verbal and non-verbal | consider pace - count 2 for a full stop and 1 for a comma | move around the room or sit still depending on the text | ask occasional questions or share your thoughts.

Book recommendations:

Here is a list of books we would recommend for reading aloud in class. You are the best person to choose which texts would suit your class. Consider children's wider background, hobbies and interests along with their experience of being a reader.

Year 3	Year 4
Saving Winslow Sharon Creech (author) Sarah Horne (illustrator) Dragonsitter Josh Lacey (author) Garry Parsons (illustrator) Pugs of the Frozen North Philip Reeve (author) Sarah McIntyre (illustrator) Puppy Academy Gill Lewis (author) Sarah Horne (illustrator) Planet Omar Zanib Mian (author) Nasaya Mafaridik (illustrator)	The Last Firefox Lee Newbury (author) Laura Catalán (illustrator) The Lion Above the Door Onjali Q. Rauf (author/illustrator) Armistice Runner Tom Palmer (author) Tom Clohosey Cole (illustrator) Malamander Thomas Taylor (author/illustrator) Varjak Paw S. F. Said (author) Dave McKean (illustrator)
Year 5	Year 6
The Boy with the Butterfly Mind Victoria Williamson (author) All to Play For Eve Ainsworth (author) Kirsti Beautyman (illustrator) Highland Falcon Thief M. G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman (author) Front Desk Kelly Yang (author)	The Eleventh Trade Alyssa Hollingsworth (author) Boy 87 Ele Fountain A Kind of Spark Elle McNicoll (author) Kay Wilson (illustrator) The Light in Everything Katya Balen (author) Sydney Smith (illustrator)

How to be More Hedgehog Anne-Marie Conway (author) Raahat Kaduji and Danielle Daye (illustrators)	Jamie L.D.Lapinski (author) Harry Woodgate (illustrator)

Chapter summary

In this chapter, we have explored the role of reading aloud in Primary school and reflected on its importance in supporting reading for pleasure. Adopting a socio-cultural perspective, we considered the findings from Cara's doctoral thesis along with Ginny's experiences in the classroom to highlight possible areas of interest for current classroom practitioners.

Recognising the value of 'flow', we examined the importance of the classroom environment, text choice and the teacher's role, acknowledging that in today's packed curriculum, reading aloud should be a timetabled activity to ensure that it is embedded into everyday classroom practice and does not just become an optional extra. As Ginny suggests, reading aloud is 'the most important part of the day!'

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