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Teachers need to reflect on whether they are exposing children to the best of recent literature

What Kansas teachers read aloud to elementary classes

by Mary McDonnell Harris

Reading aloud to children has a demonstrable effect on their reading comprehension, vocabulary, reading interests and language development.¹ Experts recommend it to teachers at all elementary levels.²

This study was undertaken to determine 1) the extent to which Kansas elementary teachers read aloud to their classes, 2) factors they consider in selecting books to read aloud and 3) the books read to children during the 1976-77 school year. From examination of titles actually read, the influence of book awards, the entertainment media and publication date were assessed.

A questionnaire was sent in May, 1977, to 418 Kansas teachers. Equal numbers of teachers were selected at random from each grade level, K-6. Of the questionnaires administered, 330 (80.1 percent) were analyzed.³

Extent of Reading Aloud

Of the teachers examined, 98 percent read aloud to their classes. They indicated a variety of reasons for doing so. Fostering good listening habits was the reason most frequently selected, followed by desire to introduce children to literature.

Teachers who read to their classes were asked to indicate the frequency with which they selected types of

literature. Fiction was most frequently read aloud. At all grade levels, a majority of teachers read fiction aloud several times a week. Most primary and fourth grade teachers read it daily. At the kindergarten and first grade levels, fiction is often in the picture book format. Primary teachers reported that they read tales and short stories as often as several times a week, but such literature is rarely read by intermediate teachers. Primary teachers were more likely than intermediate to read poetry aloud. Even so, a majority of primary teachers read poetry only several times a month. While nonfiction was read aloud by primary teachers several times a month, practices in reading nonfiction varied among intermediate teachers. Most read it less than once a month, but a sizable minority read it as often as several times a week.

Teachers were asked to list titles of books they had read aloud during the 1976-77 school year and to estimate the number of books they had read but were unable to name. A steady decrease in the number of books named and in the number of estimated unnamed books was observed from level to level. Table I lists the mean numbers of named and estimated books read by teachers at each grade level along with their sum (mean total books) and the number of questionnaire responses on which that mean is based.

Table I

Mean Numbers of Books Read Aloud Reported by Grade Levels

Grade	Mean books named	Mean books estimated	Mean total books	Teachers reporting
K	17.9	120.6	138.5	45
1	11.0	82.6	82.6	46
2	12.1	21.9	34.0	42
3	9.2	8.7	17.8	47
4	8.2	1.1	9.3	55
5	6.2	2.1	8.6	44
6	4.6	0.2	4.8	51

Factors in Book Selection

A variety of factors influence the books selected to read aloud by Kansas elementary teachers. Enjoyment by previous classes, topics being studied by the class, and student recommendations were the most frequently mentioned. The influence of the William Allen White Award is strong at the intermediate levels. Seasonal books and books that meet developmental needs of children are often selected by primary teachers. The influence of children's literature courses on teacher selection undergoes a steady decrease with grade level, with fewer than half of the teachers above first grade selecting it as an influence on their choice of books. Neither the Kansas State Reading Circle nor reviews in professional journals appears to have much influence on book selections of teachers. At all levels, however, recommendations of the school librarian influence enough teachers that these resources may have an indirect effect on selections.

Table II
Books Most Frequently Read Aloud by Teachers by Levels

	Frequency
Kindergarten	
The Gingerbread Boy, several versions	9
The Cat in the Hat, Dr. Seuss, Beginner, 1957.	7
Curious George, H.A. Rey, Houghton Mifflin, 1941.	7
C The Snowy Day, Ezra Jack Keats, Viking, 1962.	7
The Three Little Pigs, William Pene DuBois, Viking, 1962.	7
The Three Bears, Margaret Hillert, Follett, 1963.	7
C Where the Wild Things Are, Maurice Sendak, Harper Row, 1963.	7
The Three Billy Goats Gruff, Susan Blair, Holt, 1963.	6
Blueberries for Sal, Robert McCloskey, Viking, 1948.	5
Green Eggs and Ham, Dr. Seuss, Beginner, 1960.	5
Little Hatchy Hen, Flora James, Harcourt, 1969.	5
The Little Engine that Could, Watty Piper, Platt and Monk, 1930.	5
Millions of Cats, Wanda Gag, Coward, 1928.	5
Too Many Mittens, Florence Slobodkin, Vanguard, 1958.	5
Wobble the Witch Cat, Mary Calhoun, Morrow, 1958.	5
First Grade	
The Cat in the Hat, Dr. Seuss, Beginner, 1957.	6
C Make Way for Ducklings, Robert McCloskey, Viking, 1941.	6
Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne, Dutton, 1926.	6
Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper Row, 1952.	5
C Cinderella, Charles Perrault, Harper Row, 1955.	5
Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	5
Are You My Mother?, P.D. Eastman, Beginner, 1960.	4
Bambi, Felix Salten, Grosset and Dunlap, 1969.	4
Curious George, H.A. Rey, Houghton Mifflin, 1941.	4
Georgie and the Magician, Robert Bright, Doubleday, 1966.	4
Harry, the Dirty Dog, Gene Zion, Harper Row, 1956.	4
Nobody Listens to Andrew, Elizabeth Guilfoile, Follett, 1957.	4
Robert the Rose Horse, Joan Heilbronner, Beginner, 1962.	4
Second Grade	
Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper Row, 1952.	19
Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	12
Little House in the Big Woods, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	10
W The Mouse and the Motorcycle, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1965.	8
By the Shores of Silver Lake, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	4
The Boxcar Children, Gertrude Chandler Warner, Scott Foresman, 1950.	4
Curious George, H.A. Rey, Houghton Mifflin, 1941.	4
Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charley?, Rebecca Caudill, Holt, 1971.	4
Farmer Boy, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	4
On the Banks of Plum Creek, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	4
Ribsy, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1964.	4
Third Grade	
Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper Row, 1952.	11
Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	11
Ribsy, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1964.	6
The Boxcar Children, Gertrude Chandler Warner, Scott Foresman, 1950.	5
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Ronald Dahl, Knopf, 1964.	5
Farmer Boy, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	5
Henry Huggins, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1950.	5
Little House in the Big Woods, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	5
On the Banks of Plum Creek, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	5
Pippi Longstocking, Astrid Lindgren, Viking, 1950.	5
Ramona the Brave, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1975.	5
W Socks, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1973.	5

(Table II cont.)

Fourth Grade		
*	Harry Cat's Pet Puppy, George Selden, Farrar, 1974.	10
	Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper Row, 1952.	8
	The Ghost on Saturday Night, Albert Sidney Fleishman, Atlantic-Little, 1974.	8
*	Maybe, A Mole, Julia Cunningham, Pantheon, 1974.	8
*	Toad for Tuesday, Russell E. Erickson, Lothrop, 1974.	8
C	Where the Wild Things Are, Maurice Sendak, Harper Row, 1963.	8
W	Henry Reed's Babysitting Service, Keith Robertson, Viking, 1966.	7
*	After the Goat Man, Betsy Byars, Avon, 1975.	6
	Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing, Judy Blume, Dutton, 1972.	5
	Taste of Blackberries, Doris Buchanan Smith, Crowell, 1973.	5
*	Why Don't You Get a Horse, Sam Adams, Jean Fritz, Coward, 1974.	5
Fifth Grade		
*	Devil's Storybook, Natalie Babbitt, Farrar, 1974.	6
	Taste of Blackberries, Doris Buchanan Smith, Crowell, 1973.	5
NW	Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nihm, Robert C. O'Brien, Atheneum, 1971.	5
	Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harper Row, 1953.	5
*	Toad for Tuesday, Russell E. Erickson, Lothrop, 1974.	4
*	Ghost on Saturday Night, Albert Sidney Fleishman, Atlantic-Little, 1974.	3
*	After the Goat Man, Betsy Byars, Avon, 1974.	3
	Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Ronald Dahl, Knopf, 1964.	3
	Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper Row, 1952.	3
*	Harry Cat's Pet Puppy, George Selden, Farrar, 1974.	3
	Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jamison, Lois Lenski, Lippincott, 1941.	3
W	The Mouse and the Motorcycle, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1965.	3
	My Side of the Mountain, Jean George, Dutton, 1975.	3
W	Old Yeller, Fred Gipson, Harper Row, 1964.	3
	Philip Hall Likes Me, I Reckon Maybe, Bette Greene, Dial, 1974.	3
	Runaway Ralph, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1970.	3
N	Slave Dancer, Paula Fox, Bradbury, 1973.	3
N	A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L'Engle, Farrar, 1963.	3
Sixth Grade		
*	Ghost on Saturday Night, Albert Sidney Fleishman, Atlantic-Little, 1974.	4
*	A Toad for Tuesday, Russell E. Erickson, Lothrop, 1974.	4
	Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain, Collins, 1946.	3
*	Devil's Storybook, Natalie Babbitt, Farrar, 1974.	3
	How to Eat Fried Worms, Thomas Rockwell, Watts, 1973.	3
NW	Island of the Blue Dolphins, Scott O'Dell, Houghton Mifflin, 1961.	3
N	Johnny Tremain, Esther Forbes, Houghton Mifflin, 1944.	3
	Johnny and the Monarch, Margaret Friskey, Children's, 1946.	3
*	Where the Sidewalk Ends, Shel Silverstein, Harper Row, 1974.	3
*	Why Don't You Get a Horse, Sam Adams, Jean Fritz, Coward, 1974.	3

C = Caldecott Medal

N = Newbery Medal

W = William Allen White Award

* = William Allen White nominee, 1976-77

Books Read Aloud in 1976-77

The elementary teachers reported 1514 titles of books they had read aloud in their entirety to classes during the 1976-77 academic year. Of these books, 1051 (69 percent) were selected for reading aloud by only one teacher. Only 128 of the books (8 percent) were read aloud by more than five teachers. The most popular book was **Charlotte's Web**, read aloud by 46 of the teachers in the survey. Teachers of first, second, third, fourth and fifth graders read **Charlotte's Web** although a majority of them were

second grade teachers. Thirty-seven teachers at all levels except kindergarten read the second most frequent title, **Little House on the Prairie**. The third title, **Little House in the Big Woods**, was read by 22 teachers. It was followed in popularity by three of the 1976-77 William Allen White nominees (**A Toad for Tuesday**, **Harry Cat's Pet Puppy**, and **The Ghost on Saturday Night**), a William Allen White book (**The Mouse and the Motorcycle**), and **Curious George**.

Table II presents the ten books most frequently read aloud by teachers at each grade level. Actual numbers of books listed per grade vary because of many ties.

Characteristics of Books Read Aloud

The influence of the William Allen White Award on the list presented in Table II is striking. Seven of the 22 1976-77 nominated titles appear there. Comparison of numbers of teachers who read aloud nominees with the books' rankings by Kansas children who voted to determine the 1977 William Allen White Book, indicates a definite relationship, but not a one-to-one correspondence, between teachers' and children's selections.

Ten winners of the William Allen White Award appear on Table II. Of the 24 books so honored since 1963, 18 were read aloud by at least one teacher in the sample. The 1970 winner, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, was most popular, heard by 18 classes. Ninety-eight classes (not necessarily different classes) heard William Allen White Books during the 1976-77 school year.

The reading of Newbery Medal Books is less frequent, but Caldecott Books are often selected. The most frequently read Newbery books were *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nihm*, both William Allen White winners, also. Twenty-three of the 54 Newbery books announced since 1922 were read aloud to 70 classes. *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Snowy Day* were the most frequently read Caldecott winners. Twenty-three of the 30 books chosen to receive the Caldecott Medal were read aloud to 113 classes.

The influence of the media on books selected, especially on books selected by primary teachers, seems quite strong. Books from Table II to which children had media exposure in 1976-77 include *Little House on the Prairie*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Cat in the Hat*, and *Winnie the Pooh*. Books from this group were read to 123 classes.

In evaluating the recency of books selected for reading aloud, all titles published since 1970 were considered recent. Numbers of recent books were compared to numbers of books published before 1960. Of the titles appearing on Table II, 21 were published after 1970, and 30 were published before 1960. Thus, older books seem to be more likely to have gained the "classic" status to be frequently selected by teachers. Of the books from Table II read aloud by intermediate teachers, 18 were recent, and seven were older. Primary teachers, by contrast, read 23 older books and only three recent ones.

Examination of the publication dates of approximately 1300 of the 1514 titles reported revealed that more were recent than older. In fact, about 40 percent of the books read aloud were recent. Thus, it would seem that although the William Allen White award is the most persistent influence toward currency in book selection, individual teachers were finding other recent selections for reading aloud.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Most Kansas teachers act on their knowledge of language skill development by reading aloud to their classes several times a week, but daily reading aloud is ad-

vocated by most authorities in reading. Some teachers should consider becoming more intentional about making daily time for reading good books to children. Others might find ways to involve parents, high school and college aides, and adopted grandparents in reading to youngsters.

Books selected for reading aloud by Kansas teachers are usually prose fiction. Because poetry is brief, intense, readily available and intended for reading aloud, children's experiences with literature would be enriched if more teachers were intentional about reading it to them. Although not all nonfiction is suitable for reading aloud, children need to be introduced to it on at least a weekly basis. Teachers might consider reading portions of non-fiction books to illustrate their uses to children.

The entertainment media have a strong influence on primary teachers' selections. Discussion of the influence of media on the literature program might help teachers to make wise decisions about appropriate levels for reading featured books. Teachers and librarians might work together to identify literature for study in conjunction with media offerings.

Enjoyment by previous classes, topics being studied by the class and student recommendations are strong influences on Kansas teachers' book selections. These factors tend to encourage the reading of familiar books. Teachers report that recent reviews of children's books have little or no influence on their selections. While the reading of children's classics is certainly important, teachers need to reflect on whether they are exposing children, also, to the best of recent literature.

The institution of an award similar to the William Allen White Award for the primary grades might stimulate exposure to the best of the many recent publications for younger children. In the meantime, teachers may become familiar with the review media available in their school libraries. The K-NEA Reading Circle, *The Hornbook Magazine*, and *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* are especially helpful in choosing current read-aloud selections that will appeal to the teacher as well as to the children.

Footnotes

1. Sandra McCormick, "Should You Read Aloud To Your Children?" *Language Arts*, February, 1977, p. 139.

2. Charlotte S. Huck, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 712.

3. 80.9 percent of the questionnaires mailed were returned. Those returned but not analyzed were completed by teachers who taught above the sixth grade level or were incomplete.