In contemporary society, if things don’t happen quickly, we see a need to change them, to hurry them along. Fast-food restaurants, drive-up dry cleaners, and convenience stores have thrived on the basis of providing fast, if not necessarily quality, service. In public education, if current school reform efforts don’t show measurable gains on standardized tests in a matter of minutes, they are often discarded in the fervor to locate the next “silver bullet” reading program that will solve the literacy crisis, engage all students, calm the nerves of concerned parents, raise standardized test scores, and win someone the next school board election.

In the opening quote, Pennac refers to the need for teaching methods to show a profit quickly or else face elimination. In today’s political climate, profit equates with increased test scores. Although we believe—and scientifically based research supports our belief—that reading aloud with children increases tests scores, it is not the sole reason we read aloud with children.

A variety of research studies indicate that the predominance of reading aloud occurs in the primary grades, rather than in intermediate, middle, or high school classrooms. These same studies also suggest that picture books are rarely used beyond the third grade. Unfortunately, in many traditionally oriented classrooms reading aloud,
when it is used, is often seen as a way of controlling children or calming them down after recess, rather than as an important reading instructional strategy.

Many classroom teachers have long viewed reading aloud as a luxury, an added expense that can be cut from the classroom “budget” in order to make room for more important instructional activities in the already overcrowded reading curriculum. As students progress through the elementary grades, they encounter fewer and fewer opportunities to hear stories, to see demonstrations of reading aloud, to talk about what has been read aloud, and to enjoy literature with their fellow classmates.

Activities designed to mimic standardized test experiences are being forced upon students with greater and greater tenacity. Because of the pressure from federal and state legislatures to raise test scores, public school classrooms may become places where children learn to read well enough to score higher on standardized tests, but may not be places where you learn to love to read, discover great authors and pieces of literature, or learn how to read in order to succeed in the “real” world. If we make reading in schools so boring, so sanitized, that children refuse to engage in reading have we, in fact, educated them at all? Reading instruction in schools should develop students’ passion to read, support their engagements with texts of all sorts, and encourage them to become lifelong readers capable of fully participating in a democratic society.

In order to ensure that teacher candidates (preservice, education students) come to see the value in reading aloud and learn strategies for incorporating reading aloud into their curriculum once they have a class of their own, we need to expose them to reading aloud and literature discussions in their university coursework. If college professors do not demonstrate the importance of reading aloud, if they do not support teacher candidates as they practice this important instructional strategy and explain how to use read alouds as the foundation for reading instruction, chances are that teacher candidates will not value these learning experiences once they become certified teachers themselves.

Unfortunately—or fortunately if you are so inclined—one way to defend the practice of reading aloud with children is to cite research to suggest that reading aloud increases achievement on standardized tests, such as *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al. 1985). This may be the only way to prove to some legislators, parents, and school administrators that reading aloud should be part of every reading instructional framework. We, however, have come up with a list of thirteen good, scientifically based reasons for reading aloud that goes well beyond increased achievement on standardized tests as a rationale for this particular classroom experience. Increased test scores may be a fortunate, though indirect, consequence of reading aloud, but it should not drive every instructional and curricular decision we
make. Our list includes thirteen reasons for reading aloud with children, in particular older readers; there are probably many other reasons you can think of, too.

**Reason Number 1: Reading aloud increases test scores.** Since administrators, school board members, legislators, and the United States Department of Education often rely on increased standardized test scores to defend particular classroom learning experiences and instructional practices, we begin by reiterating that scientifically based reading research shows that reading aloud with older readers increases achievement on standardized test scores and helps develop students' reading abilities. The Commission on Reading concluded, "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success is reading aloud to children" (Anderson et al. 1985, 23). Reading aloud increases students' background knowledge, introduces them to various story structures, and demonstrates competent reading strategies—all of which contribute to increased reading ability and achievement on standardized tests.

**Reason Number 2: Reading aloud introduces readers to new titles, authors, illustrators, genres, and text structures.** Young readers often do not know what is available in the world of literature, and so it is up to us as classroom teachers, teacher educators, and school librarians to help them discover new literary treasures. With the plethora of new titles available today, and the vast array of classic children's literature in most school libraries, we are able to expose students to a variety of genres, structures, authors, and illustrators. The easiest way to do this is by reading aloud to them several times each day. We want to help students make connections with authors and story characters, become invested in the books they read, gain an appetite for literature, and develop into lifelong readers.

Children often choose to reread the books we read aloud to them. It is for this reason we need to be careful when selecting literature to share with students. There are so many wonderful titles available to choose from, however, in a range of genres and structures, that classroom teachers should have more problems narrowing their choices than finding books to read.

**Reason Number 3: Reading aloud builds a sense of community.** The community of readers built through reading aloud supports the kinds of interactions and responses we want students to construct in transaction with the literature we share with them. We share our favorite books, chapter books, informational texts, authors, and illustrators with our students and invite them to discover favorites on their own. As teachers, we demonstrate what competent and lifelong readers do, encouraging students to share their responses and ideas with us and each other. In essence, reading aloud and the community of readers we
develop creates a “space” for discussions to occur, for relationships to become 
established, for diverse interpretations to be shared, and for students to learn to 
respond emotionally to the literature we share.

Stanley Fish (1980) talks about building “interpretive communities” of 
readers, and about how these communities support the types of readers and the 
interpretations made by readers in our classrooms. Through the shared experi-
ence of reading aloud, students learn to listen to each other’s ideas and opinions 
about particular pieces of literature. They learn to respect the diverse interpre-
tations made possible by quality pieces of literature. Not only does reading aloud 
support individual readers, it also develops relationships between teachers and 
students, and among students themselves. These relationships in turn support 
individual readers and help them learn to read and interpret pieces of literature.

**Reason Number 4: Reading aloud provides opportunities for extended 
discussions.** By sharing their ideas, students learn that there is more than 
one interpretation for works in literature and that through discussion, we 
learn more about a book than we are able to on our own. Vygotsky (1962) 
suggested that what individuals can do with the help of others is greater than 
what they can do alone. This is the foundation for the learning in a commu-
nity of readers.

**Reason Number 5: Reading aloud with older readers is pleasurable.** Learn-
ing does not have to be boring and confusing. Reading aloud is a pleasurable 
experience where students can laugh at stories, share the challenges of their 
favorite characters, and become involved in the twists and turns of a good plot. 
Teachers can demonstrate their own joys and love of reading and particular 
pieces of literature and can create a pleasant experience for the readers in their 
classrooms.

**Reason Number 6: Reading aloud connects readers with content area subjects.** 
Reading aloud with older readers provides the knowledge base needed to under-
stand content area subject matter. It is also an easy way to introduce new 
concepts to students. Picture books have been published that cover a vast array 
of topics from aardvarks to zebras. Books about geology, family relationships, the 
American Revolution, Paraguay, dolphins, and many other topics are available in 
informational and fictional structures. Reading aloud provides students with easy 
access to new topics and gives them an opportunity to discuss their ideas and 
questions as they discover new information and concepts. Picture books are well 
suited to content area discussions. These books increase students’ interest in new 
concepts and encourage them to delve into topics on their own.
Reason Number 7: Reading aloud demonstrates response strategies. Reading aloud with older readers allows teachers to demonstrate the types of responses to literature we want them to construct and share. Students need to learn how to respond to literature in new ways and from new perspectives. Simply finding the main idea may help them on a standardized test, but won't help them become part of a community of readers. As classroom teachers, we want readers to be able to examine a piece of literature from multiple perspectives and discuss their ideas with other classmates. We want students to become literature explorers, reading to understand the story as well as how it was constructed.

Reason Number 8: Reading aloud increases readers’ interest in independent reading. Many of our students have become avid independent readers because of the invitations the classroom read alouds offer. In fact, many of the books we used in our first years as teachers had been read to us in our teacher education classes. We read what we are exposed to and what is available to us. Reading aloud is the key to the world of literature; it is our duty to open the door for our students.

Reason Number 9: Reading aloud provides access to books that readers may not be able to experience on their own. Every book is available to every student simply by altering the approach to reading it. When students can’t read a book on their own, we can read it to them. Reading aloud provides an important scaffold as young readers increase their independent reading abilities. It allows them to focus on the meanings being constructed rather than on their ability to decode text. Students eventually develop knowledge concerning how books work, the type of “book language” contained in stories, directionality, and other concepts of print and story elements and structures. These concepts and abilities play an important role as readers develop into independent, successful readers.

Reason Number 10: Reading aloud provides demonstrations of oral reading and fluency. Classroom teachers are students’ primary guides into the world of literature. Not that we all have to sound like James Earl Jones when we read, but we are demonstrating the ways that reading a book aloud sounds. As skilled readers, we read aloud with fluency and confidence, two skills we want our students to develop. We use voices to bring the stories to life. We demonstrate the way stories are constructed and the way language in books differs from that in oral speech.
**Reason Number 11: Reading aloud helps readers understand the connection between reading in school and reading in life.** Stories are an important part of our lives both in and out of school. We tell others our own stories so that they may get to know us. Authors share stories so we may get to know them. They invite students to make connections between the story worlds they create and the world in which we live. The ability to connect one's reading and one's life is an important skill readers use to make sense of their literary experiences.

**Reason Number 12: Reading aloud provides demonstrations of quality writing.** As the old saying goes, “Be careful what you read, for that is how you will write.” The books we read aloud provide powerful models for the types of writing students will do. They increase students’ vocabulary, which in turn helps them to become better writers. Using authors as mentors, students learn a variety of writing styles and elements of craft.

**Reason Number 13: Reading aloud supports readers’ development.** Besides being an enjoyable experience that builds community, helps readers respond to literature, exposes readers to new titles and authors, invites readers into the world of literature, and creates lifelong readers, reading aloud helps readers become better readers. Reading aloud with older readers provides an opportunity to hear diverse interpretations, share ideas with other students, and expand their own interpretive skills. As we read aloud, we are able to demonstrate the things that competent readers do. These demonstrations are powerful lessons for developing readers.

There is no substitute for reading aloud. No other experience or instructional strategy can capture the mood and enjoyment of a piece of literature. Reading aloud is about more than increasing standardized test scores and developing more capable decoders. It’s about teaching children why to read, not just how to read. It’s about inviting them into the world of literature and exposing them to the joys of reading and the fantastic story worlds available in books. It’s about teaching them what pleasures await them between the covers of a good book. Shirley Brice Heath (1994) explains that in order to have literate people emerge from our classrooms, we have to provide examples of “joyfully literate adults” for students to emulate. This may be one of the most important roles the teacher plays in their classroom—“joyful promoter of literature and reading.”
Finding time in an already overcrowded school day can certainly be a challenge. Those things that we value tend to stay in our schedules, and those things that don’t matter as much seem to fade into the background of the curriculum. This chapter makes the case for reading aloud to be one of those things that we value and that will continue to occur every day. With mounting pressure from political groups, standards legislation, and mandated instructional practices, aspects of the curriculum that cannot be defended may disappear. We hope that reading aloud will not suffer such a fate.

Human beings come to know the world through the stories we hear and tell. Since the time of Homer’s *Odyssey*, people have used stories to explain nature and the events in the world, to share adventures, and to help young people understand the possible challenges that await them as they grow up. Reading aloud provides the space and opportunity for storytelling to occur every day in our classrooms. For these reasons, we have chosen to read aloud with older readers for many years in our classes, from kindergarten through college.
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