Interactive Read-Alouds—An Avenue for Enhancing Children's Language for Thinking and Understanding: A Review of Recent Research

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Abstract Enhancing young children's early literacy achievement is a top priority in many countries. There is a considerable body of research demonstrating young children's language development as a critical factor in reading and later academic success. Implementation of high quality literacy instruction has the potential to improve literacy outcomes for all children, especially those "at risk". However, a significant challenge has been to implement instruction that will support children's language for thinking and understanding, rather than narrowly focused instruction on easily quantified code-related skills. This article reviews some of the recent research on the value of interactive read-alouds as an avenue for enhancing early literacy learning for preschoolers. Although there is abundant evidence supporting the practice, there are a number of aspects that interact in dynamic ways to affect the efficacy of read-alouds. They include pedagogical knowledge, book selection, the quality of interactions around books, and developing vocabulary and inferential language skills. The way books are shared may open or close learning opportunities and possibilities to use language for an increasingly wider range of purposes. Skillful teachers can play a significant role in building, refining and extending literacy knowledge, skills and dispositions.

Keywords Emergent literacy · Early literacy development · Comprehension and young children · Early reading · Reading to children · Shared reading

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Introduction

Language enables children to express their thoughts, ideas and emotions. It helps them to establish their identity, to communicate with and understand others and their world, and to take control of their lives. Young children's language development is a critical factor in reading and later school success. There is a growing body of literature that documents the benefits of preschool education and the ways quality programs can support early language and literacy learning. Research has consistently indicated that children who have optimal literacy foundational skills tend to thrive and grow academically, while those with significant limitations in language skills are more likely to be left behind. Achievement gaps, especially in terms of vocabulary, are well established before children enter formal schooling and research indicates those gaps are likely to grow more discrepant with time. Implementation of high quality instruction is of particular importance to children at risk, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and English language learners. A review of recent research reveals that interactive read-alouds are a significant way to provide opportunities for rich, meaningful, and intentional instruction in ways that improve outcomes. However, this research also highlights particular aspects of read-alouds which deserve closer attention if we are to enhance children's language for thinking and understanding. These aspects include: improving pedagogical knowledge, book selection, quality of interactions, and developing vocabulary and inferential language skills.

The Current State of Affairs: Increasing Pressure

Seeking ways to address achievement gaps and improve young children's literacy outcomes are a concern for

researchers, policy makers, educators, and parents. A common set of essential components have been identified as precursors of later literacy achievement in a number of national reports from the UK, New Zealand, Australia (Australian Government 2005) and most recently, in the US: *Developing Early Literacy* (National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Components include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print concepts, reading fluency, and oral language. However, increasing pressure has frequently led to a narrow focus on easily quantifiable skills in the code-related domains like phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and phonics. Paris and Paris (2003, p. 41) maintain that because decoding enables comprehension, it is often taught first and thought to be a precursor to reading success. These skills not only dominate teaching and assessment but also potentially reduce attention given to other aspects of literacy learning that have a more pervasive and long-lasting effect (Dougherty Stahl 2011; Paciga et al. 2011). In addition, a narrow approach may not adequately serve those most in need of robust literacy practices. These essential skills should be taught thoroughly and early, but they are not sufficient for enduring literacy success. Performance on isolated skills does not necessarily result in the ability or disposition to use reading, writing, and oral language in meaningful ways in the real world. Some studies show that when students spend more time on isolated skills and extensive repetition, a likely outcome is disengagement and frustration (Wiseman 2012).

Researchers draw attention to the difference between constrained and unconstrained skills (Dickinson et al. 2010; Paratore et al. 2011; Paris 2005, 2011). Constrained skills such as alphabetic awareness, concepts of print, and phonological awareness are learned and mastered almost universally within a limited time frame, while unconstrained skills—comprehension-related abilities such as vocabulary, background knowledge and inferential language skills—continue to develop throughout life and are not identical for all learners. The benefits of early attention to unconstrained skills may not be readily observable in the first years of school, but increase in value in later years when lower-level reading processes are mastered (Dickinson and Porche 2011).

Despite several decades of studies, reports and interventions, there is little enduring change in levels of literacy achievement (Paratore et al. 2011). Limited language limits children's academic potential, their ability to navigate the social world and their ability to participate actively in society (Dickinson et al. 2009). If we are aiming for long-term impact on language learning and academic success, more broad-based approaches focused on developing vocabulary, language knowledge, and comprehension are necessary at the time when young children are developing code knowledge (Morrow et al. 2011). It is easier to effect change in the preschool years when children's skills are "relatively malleable" than in later years when these skills are more stable and require considerably more effort to change (Justice et al. 2008, p. 52). Researchers have begun to recognise the significance of developing linguistic processing skills, especially vocabulary and comprehension, prior to entering school (Dickinson et al. 2010; Gunn et al. 2011; McKeown and Beck 2007; Powell and Diamond 2012; van Kleek 2008). If we are to put every child on a positive trajectory, we need to support learning in all areas of development that relate to both early and later literacy success. The benefits of interactive read-alouds have long been recognised as one avenue to achieve this (Cunningham and Zibulsky 2011; Ezell and Justice 2005; McKeown and Beck 2007; National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Wells 2009).

Why Interactive Read-alouds?

The term interactive read-aloud is used in a broad sense to "describe the context in which a teacher genuinely shares, not abandons, authority with the children" (Smolkin and Donovan 2002, p. 28). Before, during, and after reading, adults may use opportunities to incorporate dialogic strategies. These are strategies that actively engage children in reciprocal, conversational exchanges with participants sharing ideas with each other and listening to alternative perspectives. Teachers intentionally build on their own and the children's ideas to keep the focus on the text and to expand on the content in ways that support and enhance language and thinking skills. Read-alouds, especially when dialogic strategies are incorporated, are positively linked to children's overall academic achievement, reading skills and interest in reading and writing. Not only is it an enjoyable and engaging experience, but it also enhances oral language through exposure to new and interesting words and grammatical structures that are quite different from everyday conversation. It provides opportunities for participation in sustained conversations, expansion of language use for a wider range of functions, and growth of conceptual knowledge. The basic skills of beginning reading such as print awareness, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge are also supported within a meaningful context.

Although there is abundant evidence of the efficacy of read-alouds, they are not always a regular feature of preschool and kindergarten classrooms (Pentimonti et al. 2011). Even when read-alouds *are* included, researchers (Justice et al. 2008; Kindle 2011; Massey et al. 2008) suggest that the quality varies significantly across classrooms on key dimensions. Volume and frequency of reading are important; however, we can't assume children

will take on literacy behaviours simply because they hear stories. Learning involves more than exposure to information; there are other factors that impact on the effectiveness of read-alouds in classrooms. What teachers know and understand about teaching and learning (their pedagogical knowledge), can enhance or limit learning opportunities.

Developing Pedagogical Knowledge: Optimizing Opportunities for Learning

Developing and maintaining relevant pedagogical knowledge and attention to instructional quality have a direct impact on children's learning and achievement (Bradley and Reinking 2011; Dickinson et al. 2009; Justice et al. 2008; Wasik 2010; Young 2009). Results from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE), an extensive longitudinal study undertaken in the UK to examine the impact of early education and care on children's cognitive and social behavioural outcomes, provided much-needed insight into specific pedagogical practices that were associated with achieving 'excellent' outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford 2010). There was wide variability in quality across settings. The most effective educators in settings deemed high-quality, demonstrated a sound grasp of pedagogical content knowledge; they not only knew their curriculum content, but also understood "what part of that content was most significant and relevant to the needs of the children they were teaching" (p. 159). They also had a repertoire of appropriate strategies from which to select, to suit particular content.

Data from the E4Kids study (Melbourne Graduate School of Education 2012) currently being undertaken in Australia reveal the instructional support domain, especially in relation to extending children's conceptual knowledge and thinking skills, is the area where improvements are desirable. An earlier New Zealand study (Mitchell and Cubey 2003) reported similar themes. First, although preschool classrooms were welcoming and staff-child interactions were warm, support for literacy was not strong. Second, there was often a gap between teachers' stated beliefs about literacy and their observed practices. Third, teachers in classrooms ranked highly for quality literacy resources, activities, and interactions took a broad view of literacy and believed it to be a life skill. In contrast, those in low ranking classrooms had a narrow view and tended to see the value of literacy development in terms of school readiness.

"The value of the teacher as the expert who delivers and mediates the curriculum content cannot be overstated. A well-developed curriculum is important … However, it is the quality and skill of the teacher who is implementing the curriculum that will have the most significant impact on

children" (Darling-Hammond and Bransford cited Wasik 2010, p. 623). The adult, as mediator, plays a key role in helping children to negotiate new understandings—there are many concepts that children cannot discover by themselves. Wiseman (2011, 2012) advocates a proactive role for teachers; they model and scaffold comprehension strategies, textual features and extend children's abilities as language users. Children should be active participants; they learn most effectively when adults are tuned-in and responsive to their current level of understanding. Skillful teachers are able to use flexibly a continuum of support for individual children (Blewitt et al. 2009; Pentimonti and Justice 2010). When adults have insight into a child's current needs, they can adjust their support and provide the right degree of challenge, just beyond their current level. Put simply, it is the "Goldilocks principle": not too easy, not too difficult, but just right. Initially skilled teachers model meaning-making, reasoning, and comprehension processes. Gradually the child assumes greater control. If this is to work, the level of teachers' pedagogical knowledge is a critical issue. Teachers will also draw on this knowledge to make worthwhile selections of books that will appeal to emerging readers. Thoughtful selection and culturally responsive teaching, coupled with literature that reflects the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups in the class, and enable children to make links with their lived experiences, as well as promote connection and engagement (Conrad et al. 2004; Wiseman 2012).

Book Selection: Reading a Range of Quality Literature

Teachers have an influential role in choosing books. Selecting the right book contributes towards successful read-alouds; the repertoire should include a variety of well-illustrated, quality literature: fiction, poetry and information books. Type of text and book genre influence children's responses (Moschovaki and Meadows 2005). Exposure to different genres helps children understand how various texts are organised and offers different learning opportunities. For example, young children can learn both specialized vocabulary and content from information books. Although the primary purpose is to convey information or explain phenomena in the natural and social world, information books also expose children to reading for different purposes and different ways to approach texts using language features such as a table of contents, glossary, and labeled diagrams. Also information books lend themselves to more cognitively challenging talk than narrative texts (Anderson et al. 2012; Price et al. 2012). When used for authentic purposes, these books can stimulate curiosity and build conceptual knowledge as children explore accurate and authoritative information. They also

can be used as a springboard to seek further information about topics that capture children's interest.

Despite this, research reveals that teachers are most likely to limit their choices to narrative storybooks (Duke 2004, 2007; Pentimonti et al. 2010, 2011; Price et al. 2012; Yopp and Yopp 2006). Narratives are "standard fare" and teachers neither use information texts on a regular basis, nor supplement narrative choices with informational books (Yopp and Yopp 2006, p. 47). Across the early years, it appears that children are missing valuable opportunities to hear and learn about the language of exposition, which will help them comprehend texts they will frequently encounter at school (Yopp and Yopp 2006, 2012). These authors also suggest that the impact of teachers' choices extends beyond the read-aloud experience; children are more likely to select books that they have heard teachers read when they come to make their own selections for independent reading. Although knowledgeable and appropriate book choices are essential, the way books are used will also impact learning outcomes.

Quality of Interactions and Book Reading Style: What Makes the Difference?

Many experts, including Bradley and Reinking (2011), Dickinson et al. (2009), Dickinson et al. (2011) and Paratore et al. (2011) argue that the way teachers use language matters. "Teachers' comments, the information they communicate verbally, their responses to children's comments and questions, and the questions they ask are all of central importance. The ability of teachers to draw children into sustained conversations that stretch children's linguistic and conceptual abilities, and to teach vocabulary that fosters conceptual growth become equally, if not more, important than the activities they provide" (Dickinson et al. 2009, p. 329). Researchers (Cabell et al. 2008; Kindle 2011; Justice et al. 2008; McKeown and Beck 2007; Massey et al. 2008; Paratore et al. 2011) note that the kind of interactions that take place during read-alouds can differ significantly. They reveal that the talk around books (extra-textual talk), rather than behaviour-focused talk, is the crucial element for enhancing language development. Justice et al. (2008) explain that read-aloud experiences are virtually impossible to script; they involve responsive, dynamic, and purposeful exchanges that use open-ended questions and extend children's language and thinking.

Teachers in a study by Gjems (2011) seldom built on children's responses to elaborate the subject; they were generally satisfied with whatever answer a child presented. McKeown and Beck (2007) also report teachers often accepted children's responses that were "on the road, but not in the lane" (p. 286). They maintain that teachers need to follow up children's responses with prompts for

elaboration. They observed that language interactions relating to routine matters that involved low-level cognitive skills tended to prevail; these were frequently directive, and failed to encourage complex language use or extended talk. The interaction in many early childhood classrooms follows a common pattern of initiation, response, and then evaluation (IRE) (i.e., the focus is on producing the correct answer). Justice et al. (2008) observed the quality of language instruction to be characteristically low, despite the use of scientifically based preschool language and literacy curricula.

Rather than limiting speculative and exploratory talk, teachers and children need time to engage in sustained shared thinking. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) describes this concept as "an episode in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc." (p. 157). Talk is promoted as a means of learning to develop and extend thinking. When conversations are limited and/or teachers maintain strict control (initiating the topic, seeking pre-determined answers, neglecting to build on children's attempts at topic initiation), children don't hear or practice the kinds of extended structures required to fuel language learning (Dickinson et al. 2012).

Kindle (2011) illustrates the way particular interactional styles make a difference; she noted how teacher dialogue and quantity and quality of interactions affect children's language participation outcomes. Four kindergarten teachers in the same school used the same text for an interactive read-aloud. She captured the difference in four vignettes, with titles reflecting the tenor of the experience. For example the vignette of Bree's class (p. 19), titled "Do you know what I know?" was a highly teacher-directed experience. The few opportunities for interaction only required basic recall of factual information and verbal display of knowledge. Kindle characterized it as having the feeling of an assessment. In contrast, the vignette of Lisa's class was titled "In the book and beyond the book" (pp. 20–21). Lisa integrated concepts about print as a natural part of the discussion; her intention was to co-construct meaning with the children. Although they had a degree of agency and control, she drew their attention to key concepts and words she wanted them to learn and they were encouraged to think and wonder beyond the page. Lisa adopted a much more analytical orientation towards language; children were required to reflect on words and their meanings.

Vocabulary is a critical factor in school success; having a rich store of language to draw upon supports early reading and writing and in later years, composing and comprehending complex texts. Learning experiences that build conceptual knowledge and vocabulary as Lisa demonstrated can have an enduring effect on language and

comprehension abilities. Those that take a narrow focus on code-related abilities may well result in many children who are decoders, but "cannot later map the words they uncover into the rich linguistic fabric that is text" (Dickinson et al. 2010, p. 308).

Building Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary

Initially oral conversations are the way young children learn words; however, everyday talk is inadequate to sustain effective vocabulary development. Interactive read-alouds offer opportunities to enhance both vocabulary breadth (volume of words known) *and* depth (how well words are known). To really 'know' a word entails knowing "what a word represents and to begin to understand the network of concepts that goes with it" (Neuman and Dwyer 2009, p. 384) as well as how a word's meaning can vary. When teachers read aloud, they can select literature that is beyond children's own independent reading level. Such books contain rich language that supports literacy. Nevertheless, McGee and Schickedanz (2007) report relatively few teachers are reading the more sophisticated stories or information books that have far greater potential for expanding vocabulary, enhancing comprehension, and allowing space for discussion and analysis.

Children need more than incidental exposure to rich language. Kucan (2012) describes classroom environments that support vocabulary development as places "in which words are not only noticed and appreciated, but also savored and celebrated" (p. 361). Active engagement is required if children are to make worthwhile vocabulary gains and begin to understand that words may have multiple meanings. Teachers need to provide explicit focus on selected appropriate words and the way they work. This includes elaborating on word meanings, providing repeated exposure to those words, reinforcing pronunciation, building knowledge of words' semantic relationships, and engaging children in conversations which will consolidate their understanding as they use the words and receive feedback on their efforts. There are many ways to do this. For example, in an Australian study Torr and Scott (2006) identified six pedagogical strategies that differed in the level of support for vocabulary development. They ranged from those rooted in the "here and now" and connected to the child's world, e.g. "Relate the word to the child's personal situation and use it in context" (p. 161), to much more complex requests/comments: "Ask for or provide a synonym that is more technical than the initial term" (p. 163).

Periodic review of vocabulary and ongoing monitoring of development are also essential elements of effective instruction (Beck et al. 2008; Blewitt et al. 2009; Kindle 2010, 2012; Marulis and Neuman 2010; Neuman 2011;

Neuman and Dwyer 2009). Hindman et al. (2012), Jalongo and Sobolak (2011), Massey (2013) and Silverman and Crandell (2010) recognise that words are learned incrementally. They suggest going beyond storytime and taking opportunities to review and reinforce word meanings and facilitate deeper understandings in other contexts throughout the day. However, studies show that embedded, explicit, and extended focused teaching is not the norm in preschools. For example, an analysis of ten commercially produced early literacy preschool curricula programs by Neuman and Dwyer (2009) revealed that there were few attempts to teach vocabulary intentionally. Developmentally appropriate and meaningful strategies to introduce new words and inspire children to use them were virtually non-existent. In the light of what we know about the vocabulary gap for students from differing backgrounds, it is crucial to focus systematically on vocabulary expansion at a younger age (Beck and McKeown 2007; Harris et al. 2011; Jalongo and Sobolak 2011; Neuman and Dwyer 2009; Torr and Scott 2006).

Neuman (2011) calls for the placing of vocabulary instruction at the "forefront of early literacy instruction" (p. 358). She identifies three significant aspects of quality vocabulary teaching. First is making decisions about the words children will need for making meaning and developing more sophisticated language. This language includes words to talk about unfamiliar objects, events and ideas, as well as categorical terms to organise knowledge. Second, a combination of implicit *and* explicit instruction leads to enhanced vocabulary learning. Finally, depth of processing is more likely when the daily curriculum includes meaningful play-based learning experiences and problem solving tasks that provide practice for children to use target words and build interconnected knowledge of concepts.

Kindle (2012) identifies three different levels of instruction. Although her research was with teachers in the early years of primary school, these levels could be incorporated during read-alouds with preschoolers. In implicit instruction, children hear more complex language as books are read and teachers weave this language into discussion; there is no attempt to teach word meanings. In embedded instruction attention is provided to target words. Child-friendly definitions are inserted within the supportive context of the read-aloud, but with minimal disruption to reading. Explicit focused instruction usually occurs before or after reading, when teachers identify and work with target words that are critical for comprehension. This allows for multiple opportunities to interact with target words outside the context of the book.

Research offers clear guidance about the kinds of activities to increase vocabulary and advice about words upon which to focus. Many educators find Beck et al.'s (2002, 2008) 3-Tier framework helpful. Tier 1 words are

basic words from our everyday vocabulary. Children either know these words or they can be readily understood through context and/or illustrations. Tier 2 words are those employed by mature language users and are typically not part of young children's oral vocabulary. They occur across a variety of contexts, may have multiple meanings, and they represent the more sophisticated vocabulary or abstract ideas that are likely to appear in written texts. They allow greater detail and precision of language. Tier 3 words are low-frequency words or technical words often connected with a specific content area. Beck et al. maintain that Tier 2 words will have the greatest impact on reading comprehension. They provide a menu of instructional activities to support teachers' use of more sophisticated language; many are appropriate for preschoolers.

In addition to developing vocabulary, the ability to use inferential language skills should be a focus, as there is a close relationship between these two aspects of reading. "Participating in decontextualised language, forming ideas about what was in the book, and expressing them in ways that make sense to others are the ingredients of building competence" (McKeown and Beck 2007, p. 284).

Developing Inferential Language Skills

In the early years of school many young readers face difficulties with text level comprehension. A number of experts are now advocating a proactive approach in the preschool years rather than providing intervention in the middle years. There is substantial evidence that preschoolers are capable of doing more than labeling or describing concrete elements that can be easily perceived (e.g. Blewitt et al. 2009; Massey et al. 2008; Sittner Bridges et al. 2012; van Kleek 2008; Zucker et al. 2010). However, van Kleek observes that inferencing is rarely considered in interventions with preschoolers. If children are to be empowered to use language for thinking and understanding, they need to develop abilities to operate at an inferential level. This requires readers or listeners to go beyond information directly presented in the text and illustrations. Authors and speakers frequently leave some ideas or messages implied or unvoiced. Background knowledge and reasoning skills are needed to predict, hypothesize, explain, imagine, infer, problem solve, and evaluate. Using these processes helps to fill in gaps, elaborate on information and better understand authors' intentions.

Adults can help children build mental representations that will enable them to engage in these higher-order thinking processes. This kind of talk is much more complex than shallow turn-taking (McKeown and Beck 2007). With skilled guidance and opportunity for practice, children are capable of linking and integrating ideas and moving well

beyond simple recall of events they have just heard. If supported, children can learn to keep to the topic and use more complex sentence structures as they elaborate and link statements. With careful preparation, read-alouds can be an ideal context for engaging children in sustained conversations with an inferential focus. van Kleek (2008) points out that generating literal and inferential questions beforehand removes the pressure of simultaneously managing behaviour, maintaining children's attention, *and* spontaneously devising appropriate questions. The role of the adult is critical; "Children adjust their discourse to match the level of the adult's conversation" (Zucker et al. 2010, p. 67). van Kleek et al. (2006) suggest that adults can model inferential thinking skills and scaffold children's language, thus providing an apprenticeship in skills which children will later use independently. These authors explain how to go beyond literal comprehension and draw on background knowledge and reasoning skills by commenting, elaborating, thinking aloud, and asking questions. Responding to questions assures active participation, and spoken output "pushes learners to process language more deeply—with more mental effort—than does input" (Swain, cited, Zucker et al. 2010, p. 67).

Researchers have provided guidance on different kinds of inferences children could make, e.g. providing

Table 1 Examples using Marion Blank's levels of talk

Level of talk	Examples
Level 1—is the most simple: comments or questions match a child's direct experience – things they can see, touch, or hear	Children might name actions or identify items, e.g., point to the crest, wings or tail that they like best for Phoebe. Or "What else can you see in the forest?"
Level Two—comments or questions that require recall or analysis of information	"First, Zelda gave Phoebe a crest; what else did she suggest to make her look beautiful?" Or, "How did Phoebe try to get noticed?"
Level Three—requires reordering of experience and going beyond what is readily observed; children can be encouraged to make text-to-life or text-to-text connections and use more abstract language	"Can you think of another bird or animal that is very colorful like Phoebe is now?" Or, there may be discussion about what Phoebe is feeling and thinking at various points in the story
Level Four—requires reasoning, problem solving skills and explanation	At the beginning of the story, Phoebe is desperate to be noticed. Children could be asked to predict some ways that Phoebe could resolve her problem. Or "Why do you think Phoebe wanted to look like Zelda?" At the conclusion, they might consider what they thought Phoebe had learned

Blank et al. 1978

information, thinking about causal links, or making judgments and evaluations (van Kleek et al. 2006). Marion Blank's Levels of Talk (Blank et al. 1978) offers a useful 4-Level framework to develop dialogue in ways that incrementally encourage children's talking, thinking and reasoning. Open-ended questions, for which there's not one right response are a key feature of the latter Levels. At Level 3 and 4 children are motivated to use more cognitively complex language. *Feathers for Phoebe* (Clements 2010) is an appropriate choice for a read-aloud with preschoolers; many connections can be made with information texts. Table 1 provides examples that could be used with this delightful tale about Phoebe, a small non-descript grey bird who wants to be noticed. She seeks help from Zelda, a talented beauty specialist to give her a new look. As the story unfolds and Phoebe's transformation progresses, there are ample opportunities for exploration of the contents and themes of identity and appearance.

The immediate challenge for teachers is to engage preschoolers in more active participation that requires them to think and reason as they listen to and discuss books. The goal is to better develop comprehension related abilities (unconstrained skills) that will support their learning now and as they move into the formal years of school.

Conclusion

The preschool years are a critical time for language and literacy learning and development. The adults who work with young children can play a significant role in building, refining, and extending the knowledge, skills, and dispositions crucial for later learning and academic success. There is little doubt about value of well-planned, engaging interactive read-alouds as one of the key avenues for supporting young children's language for thinking and understanding. This review highlights three significant messages for teachers.

First, it appears that read alouds could be used more frequently and more effectively, especially for children "at risk", to nourish vocabulary and higher-order thinking skills. Second, increasing teachers' awareness of the variety and range of quality literature, especially information books, could broaden children's conceptual knowledge and offer greater opportunities for cognitively challenging discussion. Finally, a closer focus on the nature and quality of interactions can lead to improved outcomes. The way books are shared open or close learning opportunities and possibilities to use language for an increasingly wider range of purposes. Instigating change and maintaining it presents an enormous challenge, but it is one that must be addressed if we recognise that for children, the limits of their language mean the limit of their world.

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