

Nurturing Emergent Readers Through Readers Theater

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Readers theater is a familiar literacy strategy for children who can read independently; however, it can also be used with younger children who have not yet developed independent reading skills. The purpose of this article is to adapt the concept of readers theater for use with emergent readers. It focuses first on defining readers theater and its many benefits, particularly in the areas of literacy development. Finally, it includes suggestions for successfully implementing a readers theater program with young children.

KEY WORDS: readers theater; readers theatre; choral reading; drama; emergent literacy.

Three-year-old Joey and his classmates love pigs and consider *The Three Little Pigs* folktale to be the height of suspense, action and drama. These children naturally extend the tale into their play by building houses where giggling “pigs” hide from a big bad wolf that can never quite blow the house down. Like children’s play, imagination drives drama. The world of the theater is a world of suspending our disbelief and pretending that we are in a place and time removed from reality. Imagination is also one of the hallmarks of childhood and it is this skill that drives the fantasies of young children like Joey. Drama holds both power and potential in early childhood programs because of its ability to harness a child’s well-honed imagination and use it to enhance learning. The children’s sociodramatic play with *The Three Little Pigs* required them to use problem solving and motor skills in building block houses, develop understandings of story structure in reenacting parts of the tale and provided opportunities to enter, retell and recreate the tale’s drama. Joey’s teacher further

extended the children’s involvement with *The Three Little Pigs* through a modified version of readers theater. Readers theater is a type of drama that holds particular potential with young children because of its strong connections to literacy development and the ease with which it can be implemented. However, readers theater is underused with young children, in part because of the mistaken belief that only readers can participate. This article defines readers theater, focusing on how it can be used with emergent readers. It describes some of readers theater’s characteristics and the benefits that make it appropriate for the early childhood classroom and concludes with specific suggestions for implementation.

WHAT IS READERS THEATER?

Readers theater is a staged reading of a play or dramatic piece of work designed to entertain, inform or influence. It developed after World War II from the speech and drama fields of oral interpretation and conventional theater (Adams, 2003) and differs from traditional plays in that the readers (or actors) typically do not memorize lines but read directly from the script. Readers theater was originally developed by and for adults but was quickly adapted for use with older children. Most readers theater performances involve actors standing or sitting on a stage or other performance area. Costumes, scenery, and props are

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rarely used but may be suggested by an accessory such as a crown or sign. The performance is highly stylized, meaning that actions are implied rather than performed. For example, an actor may turn her back to the audience to indicate that her character has left the stage or use her hand to pantomime knocking on a door.

One of the ways in which readers theater differs from conventional theater is that the major focus remains on the text. There is no attempt to create the play's reality on stage because it is co-constructed between readers and audience. The reader participates in this co-construction by suggesting interpretations through fluent or expressive reading while the audience member uses his or her imagination to complete the meaning making. This shared meaning making between readers and audience is why many practitioners do not use an apostrophe in the term readers theater; the production does not belong to the readers. The entire process is a jointly interpretive act for both readers and audience. It is this combination of text, interpretation and performance that makes readers theater a valuable tool for literacy development.

What counts as readers theater varies tremendously. Readers theater is a newcomer in the ancient art of drama. Consequently, it is also a chameleon, diversely defined. Many of the ways in which I have used readers theater blend boundaries with other drama techniques such as choral reading but the technique's title matters little when student learning is the goal. Researchers and practitioners agree on some key components of readers theater, such as the on-stage use of scripts, but this does not mean that all children need to read from scripts or that all lines must be read. Teachers, caregivers, and children should give their creativity free reign in designing and performing readers theater. If some children can best participate through pantomime while others speak or read text, then use both formats. If the children are not prepared to read the entire text, then have major portions read by a teacher narrator while children join in with portions highlighted in a big book or repeating key words and phrases. Almost all children will eventually develop the skills to participate through oral and written language, but any level of participation will render benefits supporting children's development and encouraging literacy. Strict guidelines need not apply. As long as the text maintains a prominent and visual role in design, rehearsal, and performance, the most important elements of readers theater are present.

It is this flexibility that Tanner (1993) describes as plasticity and identifies as a major principle of readers theater. Plasticity means that the format and content of readers theater is limited only by the imaginations of those who create it. Performances can take place in any setting from classrooms to the outdoors and use virtually any text from letters, to poems, to tall tales, to children's self-created stories. I have used readers theater with populations from preschool to adult, with texts ranging from folktales to ethnographic research reports. In each circumstance, the readers theater product and process looked very different but the result suited the needs of each group and setting.

HOW CAN READERS THEATER BENEFIT YOUNG CHILDREN?

The most well researched and widely accepted reasons for using readers theater in educational contexts deal with the development of literacy skills. In fact, readers theater may be better suited for literacy development than many other forms of drama because it is both text and performance based. The relationship between readers theater and literacy is explored in greater detail elsewhere (e.g. Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Chard, 2000) but one particularly powerful connection is fluency.

Fluency

The National Reading Panel describes fluency as the ability to "read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 11). Readers theater's combination of text and performance maximizes its potential for developing fluency, or appropriately using intonation, stress, and pauses to group words into phrases that reflect the author's syntax and are expressive of the feeling, tone, or characterization of the text (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Fluency is assessed through reading aloud and requires the combination of sight word recognition, comprehension, and verbal expression, all prerequisites for effective readers theater presentations.

Fluency gains may be associated with readers theater participation (Millin & Rinehart, 1999). One explanation for these improvements is that readers theater demands practice and practice requires repeated readings. Rereading increases rate, accuracy and comprehension and readers theater motivates

even struggling and reluctant readers to reread texts (Larkin, 2001; McMaster, 1998; Rinehart, 1999; Tyler, & Chard, 2000; Uthman, 2002; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Children know that they will be performing readers theater and the desire to put on a great performance is more intrinsically motivating than simply requiring that a story be reread a prescribed number of times. I recently observed a student teacher staging a readers theater performance in her elementary school classroom. Children who typically participated infrequently and without willingness clamored for the opportunity to be part of the performance. The readers theater activity clearly motivated even the reluctant readers and helped engage all the children in the literature.

Readers theater can be structured to accommodate children's diverse skills and abilities while providing an authentic reason for repeatedly reading the same material (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Perhaps most importantly, research indicates that these increases in rate, accuracy, and comprehension do not end with texts that have been practiced but carry over to new and unpracticed texts (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Children who have participated in readers theater may be more likely to associate practice with good reading and be motivated to practice consistently (Millin & Rinehart, 1999).

Even children who cannot read for themselves can experience literacy benefits through readers theater. Readers theater performances model the

prosody and expressiveness of fluent reading. When young children participate in readers theater by repeating narrator spoken words or phrases, they practice the expressive reading that is modeled by the narrator. Like dramatic play, story retelling and many similar literacy activities, readers theater can provide nonreaders with literacy models and access to literature.

Diverse Skill Levels

An additional benefit of readers theater is that the same text can be used with diverse skill levels. Because children read different parts within a script, roles can be assigned based on both reading skill level and interest. Consequently, emergent, struggling and more advanced readers can participate in the same performance with equal opportunities for success. Teachers can accomplish this through many approaches including adapting a complete story so that some parts are at a higher difficulty level than others or composing composite scripts that are based on a common theme such as animals but draw from many different texts. Table I lists several text resources and suggested adaptations that may be used with emergent readers. Teachers will experience the greatest success by creatively approaching each readers theater project and utilizing multiple strategies in creating scripts appropriate for various levels of emergent literacy.

Table I. Suggested Resources and Strategies for Using Readers Theater with Emergent Readers

Picture Books	Sample Strategies
<i>Goodnight Moon</i> by Margaret Wise Brown (1947/1991)	<i>Big Books and Prompt Cards:</i> Using a big book, read the story with the children and explore the illustrations until the story is familiar. Create prompt cards for each of the objects that are wished "goodnight." Give each child a prompt card and organize the children so that they are either standing or sitting in the appropriate order. Using the big book, read the first half of the story and have the children use prompt cards to help read the second half of the story.
<i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> by Eric Carle (1969/1994)	<i>Props and Puppets:</i> Assign children props or pictures of food that correspond with the story (you may want to have children make these). Using a caterpillar puppet, have the children "feed" the caterpillar as they read.
<i>King Bidgood's in the Bathtub</i> by Audrey Wood (1985)	<i>Echoing or Repetition and Visual or Aural Cues:</i> Have the majority of the story read by a teacher narrator or divide the narration among a group of stronger readers. Emergent readers participate by echoing the repeating text. Use visual and aural cues such as a short trumpet fanfare before the king speaks, a drum roll for the queen, a flag waving for the duke and a kazoo toot for the Paige.
<i>The Little Red Hen</i> By Paul Galdone (1973/1985)	<i>Writing Parts for Different Reading Levels:</i> Divide the story into narrator and character parts based on reading difficulty. Assign the most difficult parts to the most advanced readers and so on until you have parts for every desired level. Non readers can be given additional support through memorization, pictures and environmental print, etc.
<i>Owl Babies</i> by Martin Waddell (1992/1996)	<i>Rebus Stories:</i> Create a rebus story using clip-art, divide it into parts and photocopy for performance.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION: HOW CAN READERS THEATER BE EFFECTIVELY USED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS?

Readers theater can be varied in such a way that it helps children develop skills they will need to become successful, independent readers. Pre-school children and emergent readers unable to read a printed script can participate through a form of readers theater similar to choral reading in which a strong narrator, usually the teacher, reads the majority of the text and the children join in by repeating phrases or reading key lines from prompt cards. A prompt card is a visual aid that includes a printed word and an accompanying illustration. For example, a teacher or other adult could read aloud *Stellahuna* (Cannon, 1993), the story of a young bat who is separated from her mother, and create a prompt card for the word “bat,” a simple word repeated throughout the story. The narrator holds up the prompt card each time the word is used and the children join in saying the word. This format of a supportive narrator reading the bulk of the text while emergent readers join in on selected parts can be easily modified for different preferences and skill levels. For example, a pre-school teacher might begin by reading or telling a story or folktale appropriate for very young children. After the children are familiar with the story, the teacher can choose from several strategies including: prompt cards; big books, echoing or repetition, memorization, props, and puppets (see Table I). As the children’s literacy skills increase, they can take a greater role and will eventually take charge of performing an entire script. What is important is that children are motivated and fully engaged in a literacy rich activity. The following suggestions will help create successful readers theater experiences with young children.

Choose Developmentally Appropriate Texts

Fluency development also requires reading material that is accessible to the child. Determine the child’s reading level and choose high quality texts that will be sufficiently challenging while remaining within reach. As caregivers and teachers of young children know, accessible materials are not only developmentally appropriate; they are also of interest to children. No reading activity that requires children to read dull, lifeless material will be successful. Texts at every level of difficulty and covering every topic can be adapted for readers theater so material can be

exciting and maximize the opportunities for each and every child’s success. Drudgery is drudgery, whether it is disguised as drama or not.

Use Visual and Aural Aids

Texts must also be presented in developmentally appropriate ways and for young children this includes the use of instructional aids. When introducing texts for readers theater dramatization, take advantage of good illustrations by examining the pictures with the children and encouraging them to talk about what they see. Pre-school children and emergent readers will be especially successful when performing readers theaters with familiar texts that include repeated characters, words, phrases or themes. Simple illustrations can also support the performance by being included on prompt cards and scripts. Younger children and emergent readers may find scripts that combine pictures and text more manageable. For example, a colleague recently adapted a children’s book for readers theater by creating a script that denotes each character by a picture rather than listing the names. Children who are more independent readers can more easily keep their place when using scripts with color-coded speaking parts. Likewise, a visual or aural signal contributes to the comedy or drama while helping young children follow along and make their cues (see Table I).

Determine the Dramatic Experience Level of the Children

Do the children have experience with creative dramatics, structured role-play, story-enactment or performance of any kind? If not, provide opportunities for children to participate in these types of learning activities. While it is true that young children are often less inhibited than adults, it is also true that young children may be shy and uncertain when developing new skills. I recall 2-year-old Thomas testing his developing dancing skills as he tentatively moved to music, first bouncing in place and making small halting movements before developing the motor skills and confidence to twist and spin throughout the room. Just as young children need time and opportunities for developing their creative movement skills, they need time and structure to develop skills and confidence in dramatic activities. Incorporate play and creative dramatics that encourage children’s imaginations and help them develop confidence in speaking in front of others. This is especially important when working with older

children who might be more self-conscious and fearful of looking silly in public.

Model Expressive Reading

Children learn more from what we do than from what we teach. A classroom teacher who puts little expression into reading aloud, teaches by example that reading need not include the inflections and other techniques of vocal emphasis that we include in our speech. Indeed, many of us who typically speak with enthusiasm and expression become verbal zombies while reading aloud. Fluency involves not only accuracy and rate but also expression. If we struggle to read aloud with expression, then we need to increase our own expressive fluency as part of our effort to become better teachers of young children.

Teachers can do this in many ways. Less formal means include making a conscious effort to read with expression. Monotone reading in otherwise fluent readers is more often the result of not *trying* to read with expression rather than being *unable* to read expressively. Simple practice such as reading aloud the same sentence but stressing different words and using different inflections to change the meaning will help, as will practicing reading aloud a story before reading it in the classroom. Additionally, involvement in oral interpretation activities such as story telling and public speaking are excellent ways to improve expressive reading.

Early childhood classrooms provide ample opportunities to model expressive reading. Obvious examples include stories, poems, and other language arts texts, but even directions for worksheets, the lunch menu, and textbooks provide expressive reading opportunities. I recall attending a workshop where the presenter read the instructions on a fragrant soap bottle with such mock seduction that we laughed throughout her entire presentation. The humor was not in the words but in the *way* she said them. While fragrant soap bottles may not be part of early childhood curricula, any text worth reading aloud is worth reading well. Children need to hear what fluent reading sounds like and when teachers model expressive reading, and are explicit and openly reflective in their modeling, children can learn how the human voice conveys meaning (Larkin, 2001; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999).

Make Practice a Priority

There is truth to the old adage that practice makes perfect. In addition to the literacy benefits

attributed to repeated readings, readers theater should provide all children with opportunities for success. Specific, structured practice time is a necessary component of successful readers theater performances. We need to provide time for these readings and re-readings that honors the importance of this activity. Some practitioners recommend designating practice time with a symbol such as lighting a candle (Adams, 2003), ringing chimes, or playing transition music. The particular symbol matters less than designating this as a special time and helping young children transition to the readers theater activity.

Children should also be given sufficient practice time to feel comfortable reading the material in front of others and should have input in determining when they are prepared to perform. The specific amount of time will vary but teachers should begin by planning at least one week with daily practice time before a readers theater performance. Very young children and emergent readers require guided group practice time while older children may be able to practice individually or in small groups. With experience, the time may be adjusted but many readers theater experiences have been sabotaged when teachers do not give children the necessary practice time to give a confident and rewarding performance.

Pre-school and kindergarten-aged children can especially benefit from practice in oral interpretation. Adams (2003) suggests preparing young children for readers theater by beginning with familiar verses or rhymes. The children chant and act out simple nursery rhymes, poems and songs, creatively moving to the words. This dramatic play provides speaking opportunities and practice working collaboratively in groups. Poems, songs, chants, finger plays, rhymes, and other types of verbal play are simple sources for preparing children for both oral presentation and reading.

Involve Families

Practice and subsequent literacy growth can be facilitated by involving families. Teachers of older children might send home marked copies of the script for children to rehearse with family members (Larkin, 2001). Parents and guardians of younger children should be made aware of the books and stories planned for readers theater activities and encouraged to incorporate these stories at home through reading aloud, story-telling, story enactment, and both child and family discussions. We know that literacy acquisition begins well before school and that

children learn best when parents are involved in their child's formal education. Including families encourages literacy rich homes and increases opportunities for parents and children to spend quality time together.

Perform for an Audience

Nearly every article and book linking readers theater with literacy development cites readers theater's ability to motivate students as one of its greatest assets. However, it is the audience, rather than the text, that is the greatest motivator. Children want readers theaters to be good because they want to perform well in front of others. Just as research indicates children write better when they are writing for their peers rather than the teacher, children will put in greater effort when they have an audience. Perform for an audience as much as possible (Larkin, 2001). Small groups of well-known people such as the non-performing portion of the class, other teachers, or the 1st grade class next door are less intimidating to young children and make enthusiastic audiences. We all want an appreciative audience. Recall how a 3-year-old anxiously calls out, "look at this" when showcasing a new accomplishment such as learning how to cross her fingers. An audience's applause validates the child's efforts and helps children maintain motivation from one readers theater to the next.

Be Persistent

Readers theater can be a wonderful addition to early childhood settings, but it requires persistence. Despite planning and good intentions, first attempts may not meet our expectations, especially when working with new developmental levels or groups. My first attempt at using readers theater with undergraduate pre-service teachers was a near failure. Reflection, student feedback, and experimentation helped me develop strategies to alleviate some of the stage fright, apathy, and confusion that hindered the success of readers theater with young adults. Subsequent performances improved until readers theater became a course highlight, but I had to adjust my way of presenting readers theater and working with my students. Teaching young children is no different in that teachers must be persistent, reflective, and flexible as they implement new instructional strategies. Both teachers and children will improve with practice but improvement will never come if readers theater is only tried once.

Finally, persistence also means knowing that the benefits of readers theater may not be immediately apparent. I recently conducted a readers theater activity with a small group of three year olds. One little boy appeared only marginally interested and did not participate in the activities. However, during the free-play time following our readers theater, he quietly walked over and picked up the prompt cards (see Table I) that had been laid aside. I heard him softly exclaim that he was going to tell the story and watched as he shuffled through the prompt cards, narrating the familiar tale to himself as he went. The readers theater had inspired and supported this small child's storytelling, but this activity could be easily missed in an active and bustling pre-school setting.

CONCLUSION

Readers theater can be a rich addition to early childhood classrooms that motivates children and helps them develop literacy skills. Parents, teachers and caregivers of young children should be open-minded, flexible and willing to experiment in their use of readers theater and related dramatic techniques. Through practice and the simple suggestions outlined above, persistence will be rewarded as both young children and adults feel the excitement and magic of dramatic learning.

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