Why Reading Aloud is One of Our Best Instructional Tools

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Engaging the Disengaged, Teaching Tips, Implementation

“Mrs. D, Travis ain’t a good reader. Why he don’t read no better than I do. We got lots of good readers in our class, but Travis, he ain’t one of ‘em.”

This bold statement was made by Travis’ best friend during my first year working with middle school students. I had just shared some of the comments Travis had made during a reading conference to show the others what a metacognitive reader sounded like. Although Travis could only read at a second-grade level, he interacted in that reading in the following ways: “Why Mrs. D, that doesn’t make sense, maybe I’ll read it again; OOH! That was funny. Don’t you think so Mrs. D?; Why would the author say it that way? I don’t get it; Hey! Do you believe that, Mrs. D? That is so cool.”

Travis’ inability to read fluently at grade level had caused everyone, including teachers, to see him as a struggling reader, or worse yet, someone who was not smart. However, when the reading was taken from his hands and put in mine, no one in the class understood a passage like Travis, whether it was at a middle school or adult level. As my journey with these middle school students continued, I began to see more and more students shine after they had been labeled as struggling readers. Comments such as: “Mrs. D, can’t you see Salvador’s little body fluttering in the wind disappearing down the road. I think the theme is that we need to never be afraid of death,” or “Don’t you get it everybody, this story is a metaphor about life,” came from students who struggled to read at grade level on their own. Even though these students did have huge issues decoding multisyllabic words and reading fluently at grade level, many of them comprehended at much deeper levels than their seemingly more capable peers.

One of the most misunderstood facts in the instruction of literacy is that the ability to think deeply does not always coincide with the ability to decode words. In a fact sheet prepared for the International Dyslexia Association, Dianne Sawyer and Karen Jones share that, “Intelligence is not the best predictor of how easily a student will develop written language (reading and spelling) skills.” In other words, how well we decode words does not always correlate with how intelligent we may or may not be.

When the reading was put in my hands, many of these struggling readers shone. They were often the ones making connections and inferences, identifying images, asking questions, and synthesizing in profound ways. More importantly, their brilliant thoughts and comments helped the others to learn. This also led others, as well as themselves, to see how bright they actually were, raising their often damaged self-esteem. Just as importantly, I was able to instruct those reading on and above grade level in an efficient and effective manner along with those who were not on grade level.

This experience led me to understand that, in order to instruct all students in the room in deep-level comprehension, the teacher needs to do the bulk of the reading for large, group strategy lessons. When this is done, all students in the room can and will benefit from the instruction. All students can hear and understand the text at or beyond grade level without decoding and fluency issues getting in the way. All students can share their thinking, building a community of learners who learn from and with one another. Therefore, all students in the room can learn to think deeply about texts, taking that skill to their independent reading which is the
ultimate goal of reading instruction.

Reading aloud is backed up in the fourth edition of Best Practice (2012). Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde state that teachers need to read quality literature aloud to their students as well as share a “wide and rich” range of literature. They also found that teachers should model and share their “own reading process.” How can we model our own reading process if we do not read aloud?

These authors also found that students benefit from “social, collaborative, activities with much discussion and interaction.” I think one of the best ways to get students to discuss great works of literature and informative texts is to read orally, having them think-pair-share with a partner at many stopping points in the text.

Another best practice pointed out in this text is that we need to do less grouping of students according to reading level. This is very difficult; if I place Travis in a literature circle with a group reading To Kill a Mockingbird, the reading takes him hours to complete each night. An oral reading session is a perfect time to place him with someone who can think or maybe more importantly needs to think on Travis’ level.

So if you have any Travis’ in your classroom, read something of value orally to your class, pair him with a student you feel is quite capable, ask a few rich questions at stopping places in the text and sit back and watch what happens. Better yet, follow some Making Meaning lessons in which these stopping places and rich questions are already set up for you. All of your students will learn regardless of reading level and you might be surprised at who your strongest readers and thinkers truly are.