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# BEYOND STORYTELLING

Unlocking the Potential of Interactive  
Read-Alouds in Education



ADHYAYAN QUALITY  
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# **Beyond Storytelling: Unlocking the Potential of Interactive Read-Alouds in Education**

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## Abstract

Despite a surge in enrollment of children in school in our country, studies show that there is a huge gap in foundational literacy levels. Many states have taken this up as a challenge to be solved. The Interactive Read-Aloud is a simple, low-cost intervention that can be adopted by all schools to address this.

Interactive Read-Alouds (IRAs) are distinctly different from traditional storytelling or simply reading along a story from a book. It is a pedagogical practice which, when integrated into the curriculum, deepens the development of literacy. Research shows that IRA boosts the cognitive and affective aspects of students and has several educational advantages.

IRA fosters rich thinking and goes beyond passive content consumption to active analytical and critical thinking through dialogic approaches. Integrating interactive read-aloud pedagogy across school subjects enhances comprehension and builds knowledge, providing opportunities to build 21st-century skills through curriculum connections and inspiring them to become global citizens.

Through this paper, research indicates that the IRA has a positive impact on social-emotional well-being and fosters authentic communication. It cultivates the skill of active listening while engaging learners in rich content across varied genres. It can provide the impetus to students make meaningful changes in their community to become open-minded and responsible citizens. Aside from all these valuable benefits, the IRA has been proven to infuse children with a love for reading and take joy in learning.

## Keywords:

– Interactive read-aloud – Literacy skills – Social-emotional skills – 21st-century skills – Curriculum connections

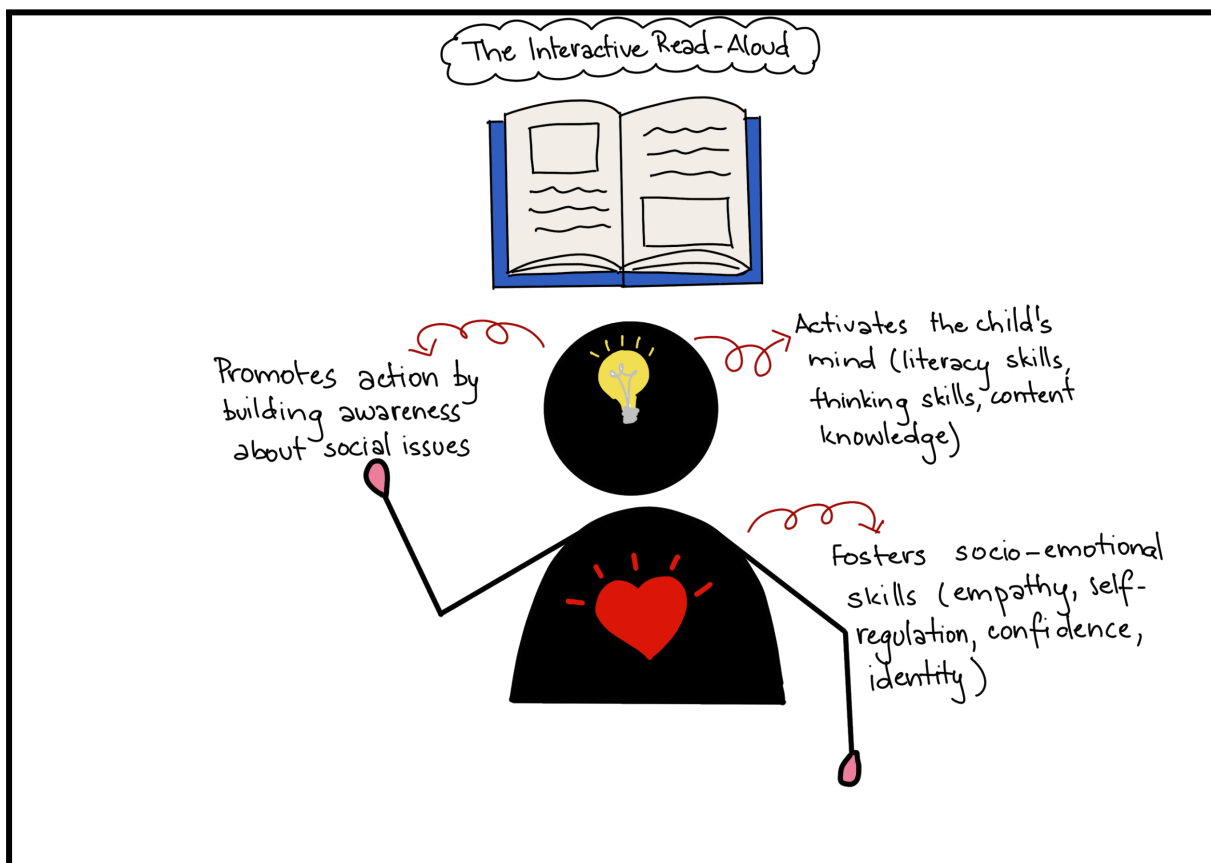
## Introduction

Recently, there has been a great deal of discourse around the inability of school-going children to be able to read and, much less comprehend, even the most basic of texts. There is ample evidence of this glaring deficiency in literacy levels that has been gathered both by large-scale assessments like ASER, NAS and the recent [Foundational Learning Study](#) conducted in 2022 as well as through longitudinal studies conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation and Tata Trusts.

Several factors have contributed to this malaise – an absence of exposure to a print-rich environment, poor pedagogical practices, and an excessive emphasis on rote learning. The only books most children are exposed to are their textbooks which are by and large, text-heavy, unattractive and uninteresting. Reading for pleasure is not seen as a worthwhile pursuit.

With this context in mind, this paper proposes the adoption of the Interactive Read-Aloud (IRA) as a pedagogical practice in schools to benefit learners at every stage. The IRA has conclusively proven to influence overall academic achievement and, enhance literacy skills in particular. (Lennox, 2013). Despite all the evidence that points to the read-aloud as an effective practice for building a wide range of global competencies, it is only used occasionally in classrooms. Even if used, it is usually restricted to the early years and is hardly practised beyond Std 1 or 2.

Donalyn Miller, in her latest book, *The Joy of Reading*, states, “Our literary experiences, whether joyful and engaging, or boring or painful, influence our orientation toward reading and define the value we place on reading ...” The Interactive Read-Aloud, when practised regularly and in the right spirit, can be the catalyst needed for children to develop an interest not only in reading but in lifelong learning.



*The Interactive Read-Aloud engages the mind, the heart, and the hands of the learner  
(Illustration by Nita Luthria Row)*

## Difference Between Interactive Read-Alouds and Storytelling

Storytelling and Interactive read-alouds are two independent pedagogical practices. Storytelling is an art form that involves the oral expression of stories using voice, gestures, and props, and the purpose is to engage the audience. The main aim of storytelling is to entertain and/or inform. Storytellers usually rely on the creativity of expression. Storytelling fosters oral language development, cultural awareness, and emotional connection among listeners (Mello, 2001). The process aims and objectives of storytelling and interactive read-alouds are quite distinct.

Interactive Read-Aloud is an instructional strategy to build vocabulary and comprehension. A methodological and intentional protocol involves the use of dialogue, questioning and scaffolding of the written text.

IRA uses high-quality written text. Most IRAs use picture books but one can use a variety of texts like newspapers, online articles, magazines and text with no illustrations. The Interactive Read-Aloud offers benefits ranging from improving language and literacy outcomes, aiding in the development of higher-order cognitive skills, nurturing affective skills, active global citizens and at the same time, fostering a love for reading in the child because it involves a dynamic exchange of discussions and a dialogic approach.

## Strengthening Literacy Outcomes with Interactive Read-Alouds

The Interactive Read-Aloud is integral to literacy development starting from infancy to the teenage years. At every stage, the growing child makes important gains in knowledge, vocabulary and comprehension.

It is never too early to start reading to a child. The early years (between the ages of 0 to 8) are critical for the development of a child — physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. A child’s reading journey should ideally begin in the lap of their parents which helps them form a warm lasting bond with their parents as well as with books. **Print motivation**, or a desire to read text, is one of the most important early literacy skills to be cultivated. In a meta-analysis conducted by Swanson et al, they concluded that interactive read-alouds can have “significant, positive effects on children’s language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes” on children between the ages of three and eight.

As children grow older, they learn to connect the shape of letters on a page to sounds and words. Reading regularly to children and regular exposure to printed text is thus of great benefit as it strengthens **phonemic awareness**. Side by side, they develop **print awareness**.

**Phonological awareness** (or the ability to break up words into their constituent sounds) is another critical foundational literacy skill that helps children learn to become fluent readers. (Milankov et al). Picture books often contain rhyming words and alliteration thus presenting opportunities for caregivers and teachers to enhance literacy.

All books, including picture books, use more complex words than those that are not often used in spoken language. Most spoken language by adults utilizes a basic lexicon of around 5000 words (Motag et al, 2015) whereas the language used in picture books contains 3 times as many sophisticated words. “

A very large literature shows that frequently shared book reading in the home is associated with **increased vocabulary** for children (Farrant & Zubrick, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2008; Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2005; Payne et al., 1994; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sharif et al., 2002), and with greater success in learning to read and later literacy (Bus et al., 1995; Deckner et al., 2006; Scarborough et al., 1991).” (Montag et al, 2015)

IRAs build **knowledge of the world** thus improving their **comprehension** abilities. Several studies show that an increase in background knowledge a child has about a subject impacts comprehension significantly.

Reading aloud to children, helps children learn **prosody**, or the ability to read using one’s voice to express meaning and emotion which further helps comprehension and communication.

Lastly, when the child perceives reading as something that provides joy and builds on their curiosity about the world, they view books positively and are encouraged to pick up books and read independently.

## Interactive Read-Aloud & Cross-Curricular Connections

To create a balanced curriculum, teachers must expose students to different texts with alternate perspectives, genres, and stories. Introducing Interactive Read-Alouds can provide an opportunity to foster interdisciplinary connections leading to a balanced curriculum. IRA strategies feed on inquiry and curiosity. When students are engaged in the IRA, teachers probe students with open-ended questions building a rich culture of thinking and problem-solving instead of merely consuming and regurgitating information.

To have a successful IRA, selecting the right book to challenge deep critical thinking is important. Picture books can vary in complexity in topic and content, allowing students to express their opinions, think divergently, offer perspectives, and appreciate the diversity of the world. Read-aloud is not limited to teaching English or any Language but can become an integral part of various school subjects like science, mathematics, history, and art as seen in the CBSE curriculum.

Here are some examples of how teachers can use IRA in their classrooms to stimulate discussions in science

*The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth* by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen introduces readers to Geology. A journey to the centre of the earth, exploring different layers, rocks, fossils, and volcanoes.

*Gulli's Box of Things* by Anupama Ajinkya Apte, Illustrated by Anupama Ajinkya Apte, Published by Pratham introduces young readers to the concept of magnetism.

*Ada Twist, Scientist* by Andrea Beaty and David Roberts. It's the story of a curious girl who loves to ask questions and conduct experiments to find answers. The objectives of the read-aloud are to introduce students to the skills of observation, inquiry, and experimentation, and to learn to persevere.

For a successful IRA, the teachers follow the 3 instructional phases: before reading, during reading, and after reading. Teachers must explicitly lay down the objectives for each phase and what it will achieve. Teachers may analyze the text features teach comprehension strategies of visualization or inference or may ask students to identify the theme of the text. After reading, teachers can facilitate discussions, and reflections, that extend from the topic or theme. (Morgan, E 2017, Hoyt, 2007). This is a skill that takes time, practice, and intentional objectives.

Students can become authors by creating their own texts using various modes and media to communicate their ideas and messages. For example, the teacher can introduce students to different genres, formats, and styles of writing, and model the writing process and the elements of effective communication through the read-aloud texts. Students then become creators of stories, poems, songs, comics, or scripts, based on the texts they read or the themes they explore. They are vehicles to facilitate peer feedback and collaboration, and to celebrate students' achievements and creations (Calkins, 2001; Routman, 2003).

Here are other examples to use in core subjects:

**History:** A possible read-aloud text is *Marching to Freedom* by Subhadra Sen Gupta and Tapas Guha. It narrates the events and personalities that shaped India's struggle it introduces students to the historical context, key figures, and major milestones of the freedom movement, and inspires them to appreciate the sacrifices and contributions of the freedom fighters

**Environmental Science:** *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. A classic story describes the consequences of environmental degradation. The objective of the read-aloud is to introduce students to the concepts of sustainability. Inspiring students to take action for environmental protection.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly demands the importance of a holistic curriculum that is interdisciplinary and flexible. NEP emphasizes the need to cater to diverse needs. Including IRA pedagogy into the curriculum will provide students with a variety of texts, in different genres, and languages fostering experiential learning. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has endorsed read-aloud as a strong pedagogical practice. (CBSE, 2019) The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 of India emphasizes the importance of STEM and STEAM education. IRA can foster innovation, creativity, and



excellence among learners, and bring deeper neural connections deepening comprehension, and memory, and stimulating active learning.

## Building Social-Emotional Wellbeing Through the Interactive Read-Aloud

Rebecca Bellingham, author of *The Artful Read-Aloud* states, “It’s no secret that reading aloud to children ... is one of the most important things any teacher, parent, or grown-up can do to help children become better readers, thinkers, and frankly, better human beings.”

An article by Dr Linda C. Mayes in *Psychology Today* titled ‘The Mental Health Benefits of Literacy,’ clearly shows the positive influence stories can have on social-emotional well-being. When children of all ages are read to by a caring adult, it creates a strong bond between the reader and the listener — one in which they not only connect with each other but also with the characters in the book. Listening to read-alouds helps children develop **focus** and **self-regulation** as they learn to pay attention.

In the interactive read-aloud, the reader encourages the student to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections. The listener may identify with one of the characters or empathise with them.

They learn to develop **empathy** for characters who may be very different from them and understand their perspective. The IRA helps children learn to respect differences and understand what causes people to behave in certain ways.

Children learn the values of **kindness** (*Have You Filled A Bucket Today* by Carol McCloud); **resilience** (*Rosy Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty); **building community** (*All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold) and **embracing diversity** (*Neel on Wheels* by Lavanya Karthik) through stories that deal sensitively with these topics.

Read-Alouds can help children take pride in their **identity**. Gone are the days when most children’s authors hailed from the West and the characters in books were predominantly Caucasian. Today, the number of Indian authors writing books that are contextually appropriate and that celebrate the diversity of peoples in our country has proliferated giving children to see characters similar to themselves as main characters in books and take pride in their skin colour and heritage (*Brown like Dosas, Samosas and Sticky Chikki* by Hetal Dattani Joshi).

Despite the availability of interesting and diverse books on all these subjects, children may not have access to them or pick them up on their own. Books that are thoughtfully chosen can be used with students of all ages to develop the above-mentioned skills. Apart from narrating the story, interactive reading aloud supports students with dialogic interventions that spark discussions and reflection.

## Building 21st-Century Learners and Global Citizens

Interactive Read-Aloud pedagogy is not only a means of transmitting information, but a way of transforming learners into active learners. Using read-aloud can create a conducive class environment for listening and thinking, where students are attentive, respectful, and responsive to the texts and open to fair discussions.

Teachers must model and scaffold listening and thinking skills, such as paraphrasing, clarifying, elaborating, and evaluating, and encourage students to use them in their interactions. When teachers use open-ended questions and prompts, it stimulates students' higher-order thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, and application, and fosters their metacognition, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Exposing students to diverse texts, perspectives, and issues, and inviting them to critically examine texts from multiple angles and sources becomes an impetus for deep thinking (Clasen, Tia, 2021).

Using the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, to create their narratives and solutions can empower learners to take action to make a positive difference in their lives and communities. By implementing IRA, teachers can inspire students to develop a sense of agency, identity, and purpose, and connect their learning to their personal and social contexts.

For example: *The Green Revolution: A Boy's Journey from Rio to the World* by Adrian Caleb discusses ways to solve the ecological change in a collaborative manner (Pratham - StoryWeaver)

Teachers can provide students with opportunities by acting as active mentors cultivating confident students to express their opinions, and perspectives, that foster civic and social actions driven by outcomes (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Wilhelm, 2008).

For example, *The Girl Who Thinks in Numbers: Data Warrior Prukalpa Sankar* by Shreyasi Singh, Illustrated by Rai, Pratham Books can be used in multiple capacities.

The NEP 2020 aims to foster a culture of inquiry, innovation, and excellence among learners, who can contribute to national and global development (NEP 2020, 2020).

Media and information literacy is an essential 21st-century skill. Students must be able to evaluate information, think critically, and identify biases so that they can successfully

participate in a democratic and intercultural dialogue, and learn to address global challenges and opportunities (UNESCO, 2013).

Interactive Read-aloud (IRAs) are an effective way to teach information and media literacy skills to young learners. Reading aloud relevant articles from the news, teachers can expose students to different sources of information and perspectives. Teachers may use the CARP test to check the **Currency, Authority, Relevance and Reliability, and Purpose/Point of View** of the article. *How teachers' model plays a critical part in driving critical thinking, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing information.* Through interactive read-aloud strategies, teachers can invite students to demonstrate their learning by giving opportunities to students to share opinions and make connections.

Teachers can use online news articles, advertisements, and other social media texts; topics related to global and national issues, such as human rights, peace, environment, health, or culture, can be explored at all ages. From primary school, students must be encouraged to share different perspectives, values, and solutions with reason and rationale.

*The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth* by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen can be used to teach students how to compare and contrast information from different sources. Information from the book, a website, and a video can differ, and discussing the differences can help students create their texts and media. Students then learn to use words, images, sounds, or animations, to communicate their ideas and messages effectively and ethically to different audiences and contexts (Hobbs, 2010; Serafini, 2014).

Stories of Malala and Satyarthi can be used to propel stories of change.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Interactive read-aloud is a pedagogical practice that deepens literacy skills. Students develop critical and analytical thinking. Embracing IRA into the curriculum will strengthen the holistic curriculum fostering a love for reading, learning, thinking critically and becoming ethical global citizens. IRA is extensively implemented in the early years, but implementing it across grade levels and age groups will have a significant influence on the well-being and intellectual abilities of children.

In the report commissioned by the National Academy of Education prepared by Anderson et al, titled *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, one of the recommendations is: **“There is no substitute for a teacher who reads children good stories. It whets the appetite of children for reading and provides a model of skilful oral reading. It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades.”**

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