

Why children need regular encounters with reading aloud

Socrates told us that all thinking begins with wonder. Nobody would dispute the need for developing thoughtful citizens, but just how do we develop a sense of wonder in children? Through stories, of course! The 6th of March is World Read Aloud Day – this is a day to celebrate the wonder and delight of reading aloud to children (or the child that lurks within us!). But there is much work to be done in South Africa before all children can expect the delight of a regular encounter with a skilled reader who breathes the kind of life and love into a story so that all concerned are transported to another world.

I say this because it cannot be any old story, read in any old language and in any old way. Reading (and learning to read), is really not just a skill to be learned and then stored for use on the odd occasion. Reading is language, and we use or lose language... Now we even know its to do with the way the brain has it's own pruning device to clear the dead or unused neural pathways. So like oral language, reading is a social and cultural practice in every sense of the word and when we talk about having or not having 'a reading culture', this implies everything that any other cultural practice takes to develop and own – the same depth of drip –fed experiences, habitual behavior and a growing sense of personal and group identity and cultural belonging.

If you are not someone who has experienced over time the joys of getting lost or found in great stories (and defining what we mean by 'great' is a story in itself that needs exploring!), you are not necessarily able to choose stories to read to others. Assuming you get help choosing what to read, to your eager young listeners (and accepting a prior assumption that the 'appropriate' book exists, in the languages it needs to be in), this doesn't mean you can just launch into the easy performance mode a seasoned reader has imbibed, to be able to conjour the desirable story magic.

Research tells us that reading enjoyment, reading behaviour and reading attitudes are closely intertwined and each of these has a positive relationship with reading achievement. The opposite applies as well; people who don't experience enjoyment and success, read less, and benefit less.

This is why Nal'ibali exists as a reading-for-enjoyment campaign. Reading for joy and satisfaction is a critical factor in transforming the South African literacy and literary landscape. The benefits of reading aloud to children need spelling out, loudly and in capital letters. It's never too early to start, and never too late either. Listening to a well read story offers us all opportunities to learn how to use new and exciting words, invites us to predict, problem solve, empathise and wonder. Great stories to read aloud have universal themes – things like hope, loss, friendship, enmity, kindness, fear, love, greed, envy, conflict. They offer us heroes to identify with and villains to judge. They help us heal and move on as we identify and deal with our own issues in a safe and nurturing space.

For all these reasons, Nal'ibali is offering a small but special story written and illustrated by Niki Daly (and available in 6 SA languages) to share with the young children in your life on March 6th, World Read Aloud Day – and long thereafter. Whether you are someone who reads regularly to the children in your life, or a novice, please join us. There is a lot of reading to be done! For guidance and ideas on how to do it and to sign-up to our World Read Aloud Day drive, go to www.nalibali.org or www.nalibali.mobi

By Carole Bloch, director of PRAESA.

