Read Aloud Effectiveness on Comprehension and Attitude in Junior High Social Studies Classroom

Randy L. Hilbelink

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Abstract
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The results indicated that reading aloud to eighth-grade students does not significantly result in greater comprehension or positive changes in attitudes toward reading.

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Rick Eigenbrood

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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in the Junior High Social Studies Classroom

by
Randy L. Hilbelink
B.A. Dordt College, 1982

Action Research Report
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Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
April, 1998
Read Aloud Effectiveness on Comprehension and Attitude

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by

Randy L. Hilbelink

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Faculty Committee Member
Date: 5/11/98

Approved:

[Signature]
Director of Graduate Education
Date: 5/11/98
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I would like to thank the parents, staff, students, and board of Orange City Christian School for its financial and moral support through these past four years of my master’s program at Dordt College.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife and family who gave me the time and energy to bring this project to completion. The encouragement and support I received were vital to the project.
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if reading aloud to eighth-grade students would have a more beneficial effect on students in the areas of comprehension and attitudes toward reading in comparison to students reading to themselves. Forty-one eighth-grade students in two separate classrooms were involved in a literature-based social studies unit. During a three-week time period one class had the historical novel *Johnny Tremain* read aloud to them while the other group read the same novel to themselves. Three comprehension quizzes were given as well as a pre-test and post-test using Estes Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Reading.

The results indicated that reading aloud to eighth-grade students does not significantly result in greater comprehension or positive changes in attitudes toward reading.
Introduction

This study has been undertaken as a result of a transition that I made from a 6th-7th combination classroom in Ireton Christian to a more departmentalized junior high at Orange City Christian School. In my class at Ireton I was free to structure my schedule to include various read-aloud books. I was always impressed by the students’ attitude and understanding of the books we read. My students (and I as their teacher) looked forward to this as an enjoyable but also educational time. When I made the move to Orange City Christian, the more structured environment prevented the use of the previous read-aloud format. This study is an attempt to solve that dilemma.

Social studies in the junior high classroom is an integral part of the education of school children. Comprehending what students study in the social studies area can often be an obstacle to students obtaining a working knowledge of concepts and ideas. Often linked with comprehension is the students’ level of interest in what they are studying. Students at a very young age seem to have a natural curiosity to read and learn more about the world God has created around them. As youngsters they receive a mixture of reading to themselves and being read to by parents, teachers, or other role models. Children discover their world through stories as they interact and vicariously experience the feelings of the characters. This attention may encourage their interest and stimulate their memory to remember more of what they read.

Literature, specifically novels, has often been an effective tool in making history come alive to junior high students (Van Middendorp, 1990). Students are able to vicariously live through periods of history that are often watered down or are bland in textbooks. Using the additional tool of reading literature aloud to students may enhance not only students’ ability to remember what was read but also to promote their interest in
reading in general.

Research is needed to examine the effectiveness of reading aloud to junior high students on their ability to comprehend new material and to promote interest in history.

Statement of the Problem

The social studies classroom is an integral part of the student’s academic world. Motivating students to a positive attitude towards reading and having them perform well in comprehension should be important keys in unlocking that world.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect reading aloud has on both students’ comprehension and reading attitudes as compared to students who read to themselves. Students participated in this study within the framework of a literature-based social studies unit.

The independent variable in this study was reading aloud to students. The dependent variables that were tested to determine effect are comprehension and attitudes toward reading.

Specific Research Questions

1. Does reading aloud to students result in a greater increase in their comprehension of history compared to students who read the same materials to themselves (read-to-self)?
2. Does reading aloud to students promote a more positive attitude towards reading compared to those who read to themselves?

Statement of the Hypothesis

Junior high students being read-aloud-to will have a higher comprehension of the historical material to which they were exposed and a more positive attitude towards reading than those who read to themselves.
Definition of terms

The following definition of terms is given to promote clarity and consistency in this study:

Literature-based unit: an educational method that seeks to use fictional novels as its primary focus to teach important concepts and relate meaningful experiences to the students.

Reading-aloud: a teacher reads aloud from a book to students in a classroom setting.

Read-to-self: students reading a book on their own in a classroom setting.

Attitude: a feeling, either positive, negative, or neutral, towards reading, regardless of the purpose of reading aloud.

Comprehension: the act of exploring and interpreting meaning from print (Cosgrove, 1987).

Literature Review

The social studies classroom today is still dominated by textbooks that do an efficient job at laying out material but fail in drawing student interest in the personal stories of history (Tindall, 1996). Various methods used by teachers may lead to stifling the natural curiosity of students to explore and venture into new worlds. One of the main culprits in this methodology may be giving too high a priority to the social studies textbook.

Students have pointed to many problems they encounter with the average text. Despite the color pictures, organization, and charts or graphs, students aren’t much interested in their beautifully packaged textbook (Tyson-Berstein, 1988). In most cases students are not involved in choosing textbooks, so they lack any personal involvement or attachment to the book. Most students say that their books are neither meaningful nor necessary
(Hansen & Schmidt, 1989). The size of the textbook itself may also be an overwhelming, overbearing, and intimidating factor in how students feel about history (Sewall, 1988). Another problem with textbooks is the number of critiques that each textbook needs to undergo before being approved for print. Tyson and Bernstein (1988) state that legislators, educational policy makers, and administrative regulators have drained the life out of textbooks, turning out editions that are “overstuffed, homogenized, and expensive” (p.88).

Literature-based units may provide a refreshing supplement to the social studies curriculum. Students are able to develop their own personal involvement in the book and so develop a sense that this is not just a set of trivial facts but something which will have relevance for them (Ravitch, 1991).

Instead of relying heavily on the textbook, students are exposed to the lives of characters with stories that stimulate their interest. Reading an historical book is enjoyable and gives more meaningful understanding which the student can attach to the historical time period (Jordan, 1992). Literature also gives life to events and people that are locked in monotonous paragraphs of textbooks. It deals with human experiences, feelings, and emotions (Tindall, 1996).

Literature, then, can be a powerful tool in unlocking the interests and expanding the minds of social studies students. Reading literature aloud to students in the social studies classroom may provide even a more powerful combination to enhance students’ rate of comprehension and stimulate interest in the subject.

In a recent study by Mary Ellen Cosgrove, a firm link was established between reading aloud to students on a regular basis and creating a more literate society (Cosgrove, 1987). The same study also pointed out that reading aloud can improve attitudes and
comprehension overall with a relatively small financial outlay. Students themselves have recognized the positive feeling that being read to can give in the classroom (Ayers, 1991).

Many studies have shown that there is much that can be gained by reading aloud to students. Teachers reading aloud to their students played a positive role in helping the students develop mature written composition skills (Michener, 1989). Reading aloud to fifth-grade students helped them acquire more vocabulary than if they read to themselves (Maher, 1991). Teachers reading aloud to third-grade students has been shown to increase comprehension (Digby, 1982).

Many of the studies on reading aloud have examined its effectiveness on the primary and intermediate levels. In a recent study done by Loretta Carbone Tindall in 1996, fourth-graders that used a read-aloud literature-based unit noted significant retention of the material as well as improved attitudes towards social studies in general.

Reading aloud has been seen as an effective teaching tool (Piotrowski, 1996) in the primary and intermediate grades. Studies for junior high students so far have shown that read-alouds have had inconclusive effects on improving attitudes toward reading (Robertson, 1989). Reading aloud novels in a content area through a literature-based unit has been given little attention.

Many junior high social studies teachers have felt chained to the organization of their textbook and the methodology it perpetrates. Parents have been reluctant to cash in on this positive teaching tool, because they have felt that reading aloud to students was not necessary when they could read the book for themselves (Cosgrove, 1987). Reading aloud to students was assumed to be an ineffective teaching tool for students who could already read for themselves.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that reading aloud in a
literature-based unit within the junior high social studies classroom has on students' attitude towards reading and comprehension.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 41 eighth-grade students in two separate classes of social studies at Orange City Christian School. Students were from a largely homogeneous background: rural setting, middle class, and Caucasian. The students were assigned to one of two sections by three staff personnel at the end of their seventh-grade year. Assignments were made based on three criteria:

1) Parent request form if there is a considerable obstacle to placement.
2) Teacher input from the previous year in regards to behavioral or social patterns.
3) Heterogeneous grouping according to learning styles, academic ability and gender.

Based on these criteria, students were assigned to one of the two eighth-grade sections. This procedure does give some level of equivalency, but the classroom assignment procedure did not have anything to do with this particular study. The average Iowa Test of Basic Skills for school year 1997 were compared for the two groups using a t-test for independent means and found to be equivalent (Table 1).

One of the groups was assigned to be the read-aloud group where students would be read a passage of the novel aloud. The other group was assigned to be the read-to-self group where students would silently read the novel to themselves. Both sections of social studies were taught by the same instructor.

Procedure

The research design was a quasi-experimental design using two in-tact groups of participants. A parental notification letter was sent to the homes of all students involved
prior to the intervention (Appendix C).

The Estes Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Reading was administered before the unit began (Appendix A). The measure consists of 15 questions giving a score of five points for “strongly agree”, four points for “agree” and so on, concluding with one point for “strongly disagree”. This system was used on the items that were positively stated((3, 6, 10, 13, and 14). The other items were scored on a reverse scale so that one point was given for “strongly agree” and five points for “strongly disagree”. There would be a possible high score of 75 points for each student. The higher the score the more indicative it was of a more positive attitude towards reading (Pettengill, 1992). The same measure was administered at the conclusion of the unit (Appendix A). T-tests on the mean scores of the read-aloud and read-to-self groups were not found to be significant (Table 2).

The intervention was implemented to run for a three-week period. Both groups of students were involved in a literature-based unit centered on the time period of the Revolutionary War. Over a three-week period each group used the novel Johnny Tremain as the basis of information. Each class period began with a brief review of some of the previous day’s crucial happenings. Both the read-aloud and read-to-self groups participated in similar reviews of the passage read as much as possible. Both classes covered 10-20 pages of reading a day. Students in the read-to-self group were directed to bring along additional work in case they finished early. Close supervision was used so students did not read beyond this limit.

All participants were given one quiz each week to test comprehension. Scoring of each quiz was done by a seventh-grade parent with previous teaching experience, using a prescribed answer key for both objective and subjective questions. Each student was
assigned a number randomly to limit corrector and experimenter bias. The scores for all students were recorded for each of the six quizzes. The Estes Scale to Measure Attitude Toward Reading was again administered at the conclusion of the unit.

**Materials**

In selecting the novel for this unit, the junior high English teacher, librarian, and enrichment teacher were consulted to determine appropriate interest and reading levels. The book *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes was chosen because of the appropriate reading level and high interest level for eighth-grade students. Before the unit was begun, sufficient copies of the novel *Johnny Tremain* were obtained to provide one book each for the read-to-self group. All copies of the book were kept in a teacher cabinet in the classroom.

A set of three 20-point teacher-generated quizzes were designed to determine a reliable level of comprehension. Again, the language arts teacher was consulted to advise on level and type of questions that were used. Questions were largely objective in nature. The instrument to measure comprehension was teacher-generated using a variety of literature-based unit programs for question types and content measure (Appendix B).

**Results**

Scores from the three comprehension quizzes given to each group were totaled. Independent t-tests were used to compare the mean of the read-to-self group and the read-aloud group. There were no significant differences between the mean scores of the two group (Table 3).

The Estes Scale to Measure Attitude Toward Reading was administered at the end of the three-week period. Independent t-tests were used to compare both read-aloud and read-to-self group mean scores. T-test results for the Estes post-test were
not found to be significant (Table 4).

Discussion

This study set out to discover whether students who had a novel read aloud to them would demonstrate greater comprehension of history and exhibit a more positive attitude toward reading than did students who read to themselves. The results of the study show that there was not a significant difference in either area. Despite the equivalency of the two groups, reading aloud to students in this literature-based social studies unit did not seem to make a significant difference.

There are several limitations within this study that may have caused this lack of significant difference. One of the limitations of this study would be its quasi-experimental design. The use of in-tact groups may not have taken into account some of the differences students may have had in learning styles or specific reading abilities. If this study were to be duplicated, it may prove beneficial to include a greater number of groups from a variety of schools to try to insure a greater degree of exportability. Since all of the students were within one school system, there would have been many opportunities for discussion outside of class that may have confounded the results of comprehension or attitude. Doing a similar study using a variety of schools and an increased number of students may lead to more significant results.

Another factor that may have confounded the results of this study were the daily oral reviews that were held each day. Though similar for each classroom, the material discussed may have drawn significance away from the study by engaging students in an alternate format of receiving information — the oral question and answer method.

Another limitation on the study was that it was conducted over a short period of time. Perhaps pre-testing in the fall and post-testing in the spring would establish more
of a difference between the groups. It might be that longer exposure to read-alouds would produce more positive and conclusive results.

It also seemed that even though the students were told to answer honestly, some may have responded to the questions in a way that they felt would be the “right” answer. If this were the case, then knowing that reading is important to their teacher may have influenced their responses to the Estes survey. Both groups may have answered similarly because they may have thought the teacher “expected” them to answer in a certain manner.

There were also several items out of the experimenter’s control. One student was absent for three days and two students were absent for two days each and so were unable to be in a controlled atmosphere. Two students in the read-aloud group received help from the resource room teacher in reading the story and answering questions. Experimenter bias might be seen as a problem. Though comprehension quizzes were corrected by another person, the teacher’s attitude toward’s reading may still have had an influence on the attitude of the students through the choosing of questions and identifying correct responses. It is also possible that the teacher, in trying to be impartial, may have inadvertently been less expressive or less enthusiastic and thus have affected the results.

The opportunity to use read-alouds could be expanded for further study in education. This particular study focused on the historical time period of the Revolutionary War. There are many other time periods of history that could be pursued. Perhaps read-alouds could be used in other content areas such as Bible or geography to give students a personal look into the life and times of other cultures. More study might need to be done with other age students; possibly expanding into the high school grades to see if read-alouds may be beneficial to older students.
Though no measurable changes in comprehension or reading attitude occurred, some general positive observations were noted. In general, students in both groups had a very positive attitude toward using a novel to develop their perspective on history. Increased attentiveness during review times and descriptive detail were noted by both groups. Oral comments by the students, especially in the read-aloud group, were noted in anticipation to what was going to be read for the day: “They’re going to look at Johnny’s hand today, aren’t they?”, “What would Johnny be doing up on Copp’s Hill?” and “Johnny’s got a crush on Cilla, doesn’t he?”. There also seemed to be a more relaxed atmosphere in the read-aloud group as students looked forward to listening to the story unfold. In contrast, oral comments were noted from the read-to-self group as being less positive. Comments were made about when they, too, would be read to aloud. Also, reading seemed to be more of a chore, which led to a more negative atmosphere as compared to the read-aloud group.

Another aspect of including read-alouds in the social studies curriculum may be in enhancing our Christian perspective on education. Students are just beginning to understand how God works in history to accomplish his will according to his timeline. Students are introduced to ideas of community, justice, prejudice, racial conflict, cultural differences and more. Through the use of literature-based units, a teacher in a Christian school may be better able to bring to life the emotions and feelings of his students through the characters they discover. The idea of approaching God’s creatures in their wholeness rather than taking objective facts and generic identities may help students to see God’s completeness in the world He has created. Then, too, God originally used the spoken word to teach His people about Himself. The use of read-alouds in the classroom may prove to be not only an obedient but effective response to God’s gift of language.
The social studies curriculum also focuses on relationships of people to their environment. Read-alouds allow the speaker to add expression, accents, and characterization which add to the deeper meaning of the story. As students are engaged in listening to historical characters wrestle with problems of injustice and prejudice in the world in a more authentic way, they may be open to identifying ways in which they can apply biblical values to the world in which God has placed them. These values may assist students vocalizing their Christian commitment and ideals into practice in their daily lives.

In conclusion, to be an effective teacher in the social studies area teachers need to continue to develop ways to motivate students to have positive attitudes towards the areas they are teaching. Literature-based units have been shown as an effective teaching tool to increase student interest and also extend student understanding of history (Tindall, 1996). Read-alouds may be seen to help students find another way to attach meaning to learning by seeing history in the full realm in which God created it — with emotion, struggles, triumphs, and tragedies. By affirming spoken language through read-alouds, teachers model and may promote positive attitudes towards history specifically and reading in general.
References


Piotrowski, J.B. (1996). The Effect of Reading Aloud on a Student's Attitude Toward Reading in the Fourth Grade. Research report. (ERIC Document Reproductive


Appendixes
Appendix A

Estes Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Reading

The next fifteen questions come from the Estes Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Reading. Read each statement and decide how you feel about it.

Circle SA if you strongly agree.
Circle A if you agree.
Circle N if you are neutral or cannot decide.
Circle D if you disagree.
Circle SD if you strongly disagree.

1. Reading is for learning but not for enjoyment.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

2. Spending allowance on books is a waste of good money.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

3. Reading is a good way to spend spare time.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

4. Books are a bore.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

5. Watching T.V. is better than reading.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

6. Reading is rewarding to me.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

7. Books aren’t usually good enough to finish.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

8. Reading becomes boring after about an hour.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

9. Most books are too long and dull.
   SA  S  N  D  SD

10. There are many books which I hope to read.
    SA  S  N  D  SD

11. Books should only be read when they are assigned.
    SA  S  N  D  SD

12. Reading is something I can do without.
    SA  S  N  D  SD
13. Some part of summer vacation should be set aside for reading.


15. Reading is dull.
Appendix B

Johnny Tremain Reading Quiz--Chapters 1 and 2

Date: 10/16/97

Points: __________ / 20 total points

Number __________

Grade: __________

1. The author's name is ________________.
2. Johnny is apprenticed to a silversmith in Boston. What does it mean to be apprenticed? ________________

3. Draw on the back the Lyte family crest and motto.
4. Why does Mr. Lapham sleep with a basket on his head? ________________
5. What does Johnny have locked away in his trunk up in the attic? ________________
6. Who is Johnny originally supposed to marry in the story? ________________
7. What is the most precious thing in the Lapham house? ________________
8. Who is the finest silversmith in all of Boston? ________________
9. What was the item Mr. Hancock asked the Lapham's to make? ________________
10. Who stopped Johnny from finishing his work for Mr. Hancock on Saturday? ________________
11. What was wrong with the coal Dove brought back on Saturday? ________________
12. Why was the Lapham house so nervous about the smoke coming out of their chimney on Sunday? ________________
13. At the outset why doesn't Dove like Johnny? ________________
14. What had been Johnny's most obvious character fault? ________________
15. Whose original idea was it to work on Sunday? ________________
16. How does Merchant Lyte lose a front tooth, according to Johnny's story? ________________

17. Who got the cracked crucible for Johnny? ________________
18. Choose three of these words to define: crucible, beaux, Jehu, Ol Gran Hopper
   a. ________________
   b. ________________
   c. ________________
19. Make two predictions about where the story will turn next.
Johnny Tremain Reading Quiz--Chapters 3 and 4

Date: 10/23/97

Number

Points: ________ / 20 total points

Grade: ________

1. What was the only case in which Johnny's mother told him to show the cup to anyone?

2. For what reason did Johnny think Mr. Tweedie always came in the morning?

3. What was the one flaw in Lavinia Lyte's beauty?

4. Though he could read splendidly, why did Johnny not get the job at Mr. Hancock's counting house?

5. Where did Johnny get the money to stuff himself at Afric Queen?

6. Who were the limes for that Johnny bought?

7. Johnny slept the night on Copp's Hill. What was Copp's Hill?

8. Though at first Merchant Lyte was going to throw Johnny out of his office, what did Johnny mention that sparked Merchant Lyte's interest?

9. From whom did Johnny get a white linen shirt and corduroy jacket to meet at night with Merchant Lyte?

10. What lie did Merchant Lyte tell to get Johnny arrested and put in jail?

11. Who came to visit Johnny while he was in jail?

12. What was Johnny's name for Mr. Percival Tweedie?

13. How was Johnny's cup identified among the four presented in court?

14. What sentence did Merchant Lyte want carried out on Johnny?

15. Who gave an enchanting (but almost totally imagined) tale of a story during Johnny's hearing in court?

16. What almost made Johnny cry at the end of chapter 4 when the group was leaving the courthouse?

17. Define these two words:
   a. Tory
   b. Whig

18. Describe the character of Merchant Lyte or Lavinia Lyte. Be specific.

19. What was Rab wearing that told Johnny he was a 'Son of Liberty'?

20. Make two reasonable predictions that you think will happen in Johnny's life.
Johnny Tremain Reading Quiz--Chapters 5 and 6

Date: 10/30/97

Points: _______/20 total points

Name ____________________________ Grade: ____________

1A. How had Rab gotten Cilla and Isannah out of the Lapham house to testify in court?

1B. To whom did Johnny try to sell his cup?

2. What system did Johnny devise so as to not let his anger get the best of him?

3. What is Johnny’s new job?

4. Describe Johnny’s horse Goblin.

5. What reward did Johnny carry in his pockets for Goblin?

6. Johnny promised Cilla he would meet her by the well two days a week: ______ and Sunday afternoon.

7. Where would the Observers meet?

8. What refreshment did Rab and Johnny bring the Observers?

9. What did it mean when Mr. Adams said, “This meeting can do nothing more to save the country.”?

10. Why did the colonists dump the tea into Boston harbor?

11. Paul Revere _______ (was/was not) one of the people who helped dump tea.

12. In what costumes did the colonists dress up?

13. Who was caught stealing tea and what was his punishment?

14. What did this secret code mean: You owe eight shillings on the Boston Observer?

15. Where did the men of the Sons of Liberty have their secret meetings?

16. What was the counter sign to the secret message “Me know you” on board the ships where tea was being dumped?

17. What are the Dartmouth, Elinor, and the Beaver?

18. How many days could the tea stay on the ships in Boston harbor?

19. What had Johnny done to make sure he could swing an axe to break open the tea chests?

20. Who had Johnny wished he had shown his crippled hand to?
Appendix C

Letter to Parents

October 7, 1997

Dear: Mr. and Mrs. Smith:

Beginning next week, our 8th grade American history class will be starting a literature-based unit on the Revolutionary War. The two sections will be reading from the same book, *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes. One of our 8th grade sections will be reading the book to themselves while in the other section I will be reading it aloud to them. This study is being carried out as part of the work I am doing in the Dordt College Masters Program. The purpose of this study is to gauge the effectiveness of this type of literature-based unit. Two attitude and several comprehension quizzes will be given to chart each student’s progress. Our unit will be completed in a 3 week session. If you have any questions either before or after the study please feel free to contact me at any time.

In Christ’s Service

Randy Hilbelink

737-4489
Tables
Table 1

Iowa Test of Basic Skills Comprehension Scores for 1997 Read-aloud and Read-to-self Groups

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Table 2

**Estes Scale to Measure Reading Attitude Pretest for Read-aloud and Read-to-self groups**

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### Table 3

#### Summary of Comprehension Quiz Scores for Read-aloud and Read-to-self groups

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<td>Read-to-self</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>49.725</td>
<td>5.381</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Estes Scale to Measure Attitude Toward Reading Posttest for Read-aloud and Read-to-self groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-score</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read-aloud</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>43.238</td>
<td>14.060</td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read-to-self</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42.000</td>
<td>15.580</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa

VITA

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Date of birth: 9/3/59

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Colleges or universities attended, the years attended, the degree earned, and the major field.

Dordt College, 1978-1982, Bachelor of Arts degree, History, Secondary Education