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Bolstering and Bridging – Pre-Primary Teachers’ Purposes and Views of Reading Aloud

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Abstract

This study investigates what purposes teachers attach to reading books aloud in pre-primary education. Data were collected through a digital questionnaire filled out by 44 teachers working with 6-year-olds in Finnish pre-primary education. Qualitative and inductive content analysis showed that the teachers saw read-alouds as versatile opportunities with several different purposes. Teachers stated that they read aloud to support language development, enhance pedagogical content or current interests, promote transversal competencies and create a certain atmosphere. The teachers’ responses suggested that they believe that read-alouds can further children’s social skills in several ways, bridge and bolster other pre-primary content and prepare children for future educational contexts. Few teachers seemed to regard read-alouds as opportunities to promote aesthetic responses to literature or children’s learning about literature as such, despite books being central to read-alouds. Further study and discussion may indicate whether it would be beneficial to strengthen purposes in closer connection to literature and aesthetic responses, as read-alouds can bring their own learning potential in addition to being versatile tools for other content and activities.

Keywords: *early childhood education; literacy practices; shared book reading*

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Introduction

Extant research has found that children benefit from adults reading aloud to them. Scholars have highlighted a wide range of skills and knowledge that read-alouds can promote. Exposing children to books and read-alouds can, for example, increase their vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Santoro et al., 2008; Swanson et al., 2011), familiarise them with written language (Justice et al., 2009), make them interested in books and reading (Pegg & Bartelheim, 2011; Sloan, 2003), deepen their knowledge

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about the world (Wiseman, 2011), and give them food for thought and opportunities for critical thinking (Evans, 2016; Kim & Hachey, 2021).

This article uses read-alouds as an umbrella term that covers both planned and spontaneous sessions where adults read aloud to children. Since teachers can have different reading styles (Kindle, 2011), the term includes the reading and showing of pictures as well as all interaction associated with a book. Complementing a book with interactions that support children's language development and conceptual growth is an important part of creating learning opportunities (Dickinson et al., 2002; Lennox, 2013). However, several studies and reports have found that teachers do not necessarily use read-alouds frequently to serve learning purposes (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damber, 2015; Repo et al., 2019) despite read-alouds being a common activity in educational settings for younger children (Boyd, 2013; Hagen, 2018; Nurmilaakso, 2006; Reunamo, 2022). Against the backdrop of read-alouds possibly not being organised as pedagogical events despite holding great learning potential, it is of interest to further explore what roles teachers think reading aloud plays in pre-primary education.

The pre-primary core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016) describes broad principles that allow teachers to tailor practices that fit their individual contexts and rely on their professionalism (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012). Pre-primary education has a pronounced role in strengthening children's linguistic awareness and interest in reading and writing, but without providing formal literacy instruction. The core curriculum shares many similarities with the core curriculum for 0–5-year olds (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 2022) and underlines pre-primary's position as part of early childhood education by emphasising a holistic approach to learning and learning through play (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016). In most countries, six-year-olds attend primary school and receive formal literacy instruction, which means that there is little research on reading aloud to six-year-olds in institutions that, on the one hand, offer opportunities that support children's interests and conceptions of literacy but, on the other hand, do not provide formal instruction in reading and writing.

The use of previous research in the present study reflects the lack of research on six-year-olds that have not yet started school. In my endeavour to refer to previous studies that correspond to the culture of teaching in Finnish pre-primary rather than school, I have used studies that focus on children younger than six in early childhood education. Where relevant, some studies in the school context have been used.

Investigating what purposes teachers associate with reading aloud can provide a snapshot of the role of read-aloud in pre-primary education from teachers' points of view. By extension, it can also contribute to insights regarding the dilemma of read-alouds: on the one hand, being thought of as beneficial learning opportunities and, on the other hand, being observed to be mostly organisational. The data were collected in Swedish-medium pre-primaries and as the national core curricula are identical

in Finland regardless of the language of instruction, results can have implications for both Swedish and Finnish-medium teacher education and practitioners. In addition, the research also endeavours to contribute to the general understanding of how teachers working in educational settings that emphasise play, holistic approaches to learning and informal literacy instruction view read-alouds.

Aim

To better understand the role of read-alouds in pre-primary education, this study aims to examine what purposes teachers perceive that read-alouds can serve. The present study uses *purpose* to encompass all motives that teachers give, from goal-oriented statements of what learning teachers want to scaffold to more practical-oriented explanations of teachers’ reasoning when implementing read-alouds.

Theoretical framework

A key question for teachers orchestrating any activity in an educational setting is what purposes they want the activity to serve (Kansanen & Hansén, 2017). The purposes that teachers formulate are highly important in the teaching and learning process (Kansanen et al., 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, children acquire cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and concepts, as well as physical objects, through social interaction with others (Säljö, 2017). Social interaction also provides children with a community in which they can acquire more advanced skills and knowledge through the help of adults or “more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Wood et al. (1976) highlighted adults’ support in helping children surpass their own capacities, terming it a “scaffolding process.” By defining purposes, teachers can decide what kinds of scaffolding are beneficial (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010; Pichert & Anderson, 1977).

As the pre-primary core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016) does not instruct teachers on how to use literature and read-alouds in detail, the purposes teachers establish for their read-alouds can stem from how they view read-alouds and their potential. In their study on preschool teachers’ views and practice of early literacy, Scull et al. (2012) found indications of teachers’ practices reflecting their individual conceptualisation of early literacy. In his teachers’ beliefs research, Borg (2018) emphasises reciprocity in influence between beliefs and practices. For the present study, this means that teachers’ read-aloud practices are probably influenced by how they view read-alouds, but their hands-on experiences of read-alouds can also shape the views that they hold. The present study will focus on what purposes teachers attach to read-alouds, without exploring the origins of teachers’ views. Nonetheless, being aware of what purposes pre-primary teachers currently intend that read-alouds should serve is an important starting point when policy makers and teacher educators discuss, for example, future policy documents and teacher education content.

The purposes and functions of read-alouds

According to Wan (2000), read-alouds have been of interest to scholars for a long time, with the first studies dating as far back as the 19th century. She says that despite this early recognition by scholars that reading aloud is beneficial, their message did not receive much attention (2000). In the late 1970s and 1980s, the social interactionist view of language development became prominent, and the new perspectives on language development involved a strong interest in children's early literacy (Teale et al., 2009). As a result, read-aloud research was brought to the fore as an area of study within the field of early literacy (2009).

The position of read-alouds as an important part of early literacy practices remains unchallenged (e.g. Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010), and there are an abundance of studies on reading aloud to children. As the scope of the present study is what purposes teachers attach to read-alouds, this literature review will mainly focus on what purposes read-alouds have previously been found to serve in studies focusing on early childhood education and early school years.

In her review on interactive read-aloud research, Lennox (2013) points out that research on the positive effects of read-alouds on language development has largely focused on code-related skills, such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness and phonics. These skills are undoubtedly essential, but read-alouds should also support children's thinking and understanding through interaction that promotes vocabulary and higher-order thinking, Lennox argues. A systematic review by Wasik et al. (2016) and a research review by Snchal (2017) show that book reading has a positive effect on children's vocabulary, with the adult-child interaction during reading seen as crucial to vocabulary development. Empirical studies based on inquiries and observations of in-service teachers confirm that teachers associate reading aloud with promoting language development in general (Alatalo et al., 2023; Basse et al., 2008; Simonsson, 2004), with scaffolding vocabulary in particular (Barnes et al., 2017) and with improving print literacy (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021).

Other learning purposes have also been highlighted, painting a multi-faceted picture of read-alouds. Literacy scholars recommend implementing goal-oriented read-alouds and involving children in conversations that are challenging enough to promote their learning (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Dickinson et al., 2002; Fisher et al., 2004). Correspondingly, teachers surround their reading with interaction and a sense of community and participation, according to Boyd's (2013) research on teachers reading in kindergarten and school contexts, as well as to research by Basse et al. (2008) on reading to three and four-year-olds. For example, in a study by Worthy et al. (2012) on read-alouds in an American second grade classroom, interaction and community were portrayed as purposes of their own. Alatalo and Westlund (2021) found similar results in their study on read-alouds with three and four-year-olds. In comparison, conversation and participation were prerequisite tools rather than purposes in Vasquez's (2014) use of read-alouds to promote critical literacy in her group of three-to-five-year-olds.

Using storybook reading to bolster content areas is common, as observed in studies by Boyd (2013) and Morrow and Brittain (2003), whereas Pentimonti and Justice (2010) advocate reading more informational books and paying more attention to the content areas of early childhood education. The different results can be attributed to the fact that Pentimonti and Justice (2010) mainly investigated what content areas the books themselves covered, while the school teachers in Morrow and Brittain’s (2003) study seemed to use the interaction surrounding the books to emphasise certain content areas.

Some studies show that teachers read aloud to pass on a certain cultural heritage (Simonsson, 2004), to connect children to literature and to teach them how books work (Boyd, 2013; Wiseman, 2011; Worthy et al., 2012). However, Boyd (2013) and Loyd (2011) establish that a read-aloud is often “a springboard to other learning” (Boyd, 2013, p. 118) and a way of engaging children in topics outside the books, rather than a way of providing children with experiences of interacting with and thinking about texts.

In her study of how and why elementary school teachers selected books for reading aloud, Loyd (2011) found that read-alouds served cognitive, social, pleasure, political, moral and psychological purposes. Although the teachers’ book choices in Loyd’s study derived from what learning or development the teachers wanted to promote, the teachers also considered whether the books’ artistic values would favour their learning purposes.

The composite purposes in Loyd’s (2011) study resemble Rosenblatt’s (1983, 1986) description of a continuum between more efferent and more aesthetic approaches to literature. When using an efferent approach, teachers primarily focus on what they want children to take away from the text and be able to use in other contexts afterwards. When applying an aesthetic approach, teachers encourage children to combine the text with more personal aspects, such as their individual feelings and memories, thereby evoking more immediate and personal responses during the reading event. Sipe (2008) states that aesthetic literary understanding is rarely a valued educational practice in the US. In accordance with Sipe, Reunamo (2022) found that read-alouds in Finnish preschools and pre-primary education promoted children’s elaboration, ideas and emotions to a lesser extent than many other activities. In Sweden, teachers participating in Simonsson’s (2004) study seldom mentioned the aesthetic aspects of picture books, although they considered imagination a desired outcome of using picture books, as did teachers in Alatalo and Westlund’s (2021) study. In contrast, Danish teachers mentioned imagination as often as language development when defining their purposes for reading aloud (Basse et al., 2008).

Despite many teacher-centred studies revealing a multitude of read-aloud purposes, Damber (2015) and Dickinson et al. (2002) found little evidence of coordination between book reading and ongoing learning goals or themes in early childhood classrooms. In a Norwegian study conducted in first grade classrooms, results from Likert scale questions showed that most read-alouds occurred during lunch breaks (Håland

et al., 2020). Only a third of teachers considered it very important or quite important that the selected texts related to a current class theme or topic.

Read-alouds that do not principally serve learning purposes seem to have other functions. Håland et al. (2020) found that teachers typically read aloud to manage and entertain the children in their classes. In studies by Alatalo and Westlund (2021) and Basse et al. (2008), one reason for organising read-alouds in early childhood education was to induce calm and rest. These findings are in line with Simonsson (2004), who found that using literature could be a way to practise focusing, sitting still and listening. Although these results demonstrate that read-alouds can serve what Damber (2015) terms “disciplinary purposes,” learning to focus and listen can also be viewed as part of what Loyd (2011) categorised as cognitive pragmatic purposes. In the European Commission’s (2006, p. 16) description of key competences for lifelong learning, “to concentrate for extended periods” is one of the skills mentioned.

Methods

To investigate what purposes teachers attach to read-alouds, the present study employs a qualitative and inductive approach. Central to qualitative studies is capturing and understanding research participants’ meanings, attitudes and behaviours (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015; Merriam, 2009). Inductive research proceeds from collecting “specific examples of the phenomena” (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015, p. 444) to uncovering patterns and themes during the analysis process. In the present study, this entails capturing teachers’ individual responses about read-aloud purposes and discovering interrelations and differences between the responses.

The study’s pre-primary context

In Finland, children start to attend compulsory pre-primary education the year they turn six, and they move on to basic education the following year. The *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016) stresses a play-based and sociocultural conception of learning and states that “pre-primary education is integrative in nature” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016, chapter 4.3), implying that teachers are free to combine learning modules, tools and goals as they see fit. Although pre-primary education does not involve formal teaching of reading and writing, the Finnish National Board of Education (2014/2016) stresses the strengthening of children’s linguistic awareness and interest in reading and writing. It also states that staff should read and discuss different texts with the children and use literature in ways that help children understand the concept of reading. In addition, literature is also described as an inspiration for verbal and bodily expression and imagination.

As Finland has two official languages, the educational system offers education in both Finnish and Swedish. The teachers in the present study worked in

Swedish-medium groups. On average, 42% of the children came from a Swedish-only background, 32% from a Finnish-Swedish bilingual background, 18% from a Finnish-only background and 8% from other backgrounds. Four teachers worked in language immersion groups where all of the children came from Finnish-only homes. The immersion groups follow the same national core curriculum as all other pre-primary groups and the children had most likely attended at least one previous year of Swedish immersion before their pre-primary year.

Procedures

The data collection was part of a larger online survey, where three researchers at Åbo Akademi University constructed a digital questionnaire targeting early childhood education and pre-primary education. The survey had three parts: one concerning background information about the teachers (education, position, teaching experience, language background) and their groups (ages of children, group size, children’s language backgrounds, language of instruction, possible language profile of the group); a second part on questions about the teachers’ use of children’s books and read-alouds; and a third part regarding the implementation of special education. It included nine open-ended questions and 18 closed-ended questions about books and read-alouds. Two of the open-ended questions corresponded to the aim of the present study: “If you have planned read-aloud sessions, why do you conduct them? You can mention as many reasons as you like,” and “To your mind, what do the children gain from read-aloud sessions? Think about recent read-aloud sessions.”

There are 33 Finnish-Swedish bilingual municipalities in mainland Finland and 16 Swedish municipalities on the Åland Islands. As some municipalities share their Swedish pre-primary education with neighbouring municipalities, we reached most municipalities where Swedish is a language of instruction in Finland by sending 31 letters of authorisation to the heads of local education. Twenty-two municipalities granted authorisation and distributed information about the questionnaire and its digital link to their teachers working with children aged 0–6.

Data were collected during the December 2019–February 2020 period, with reminders sent out in January 2020. Altogether, 216 responses were received, including 48 from teachers who worked in pre-primary education. Four of these teachers left necessary questions blank, so the data comprise responses from 44 teachers. The identities of all the respondents remained concealed throughout the research process, as the names of people, institutions and municipalities were not requested as part of the questionnaire.

The respondents and their pre-primary groups

Of the 44 respondents in the present study, 42 held positions as teachers, one was a special education teacher, and one was a child minder. Thirty-nine respondents

were formally qualified for their positions, whereas five were not. For convenience, all the respondents will be referred to as teachers and labelled T1–T44. The average amount of work experience was 19.5 years, with 39 of the teachers having more than five years of experience within early childhood education or pre-primary education. Group sizes ranged from 7 to 25 children, with the most common group size being 20.

Data analysis

The present study used data on what purposes teachers attributed to read-alouds through two open-ended questions. The data from both questions were treated as one data set. All the questions and responses were in Swedish. Some teachers wrote full sentences, while others listed key words or main ideas. English translations of the teachers’ quotations reflect their individual response styles. The total amount of textual data was 1,636 words, with an average of 36 words per teacher.

To analyse the data, qualitative content analysis was employed. Lindgren et al. (2020) highlight de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation during this process. In line with Lindgren et al. (2020), the de-contextualisation process involved recurring read-throughs of all the data and breaking the teachers’ original responses down into meaning units, shortening the meaning units into condensed versions and giving them descriptive codes that were either manifest or latent. Table 1 exemplifies this process. According to David and Sutton (2016), manifest coding entails using words that occur in the data, whereas latent coding means that the researcher also identifies themes beyond the text’s verbal surface.

Table 1. Examples of teachers’ responses broken down into meaning units for further condensation and coding.

Teacher responses with different meaning units underlined in different styles	Condensation	Code
A calm moment for the children. Expanding vocabulary. Listening comprehension – What happened? Imagination – What do you think will happen? Listening to classic fairy tales and new, modern stories. (T9)	a calm moment expanding vocabulary listening comprehension imagination covering a variety of genres	rest and relaxation vocabulary understanding imagination book skills and book interest
The children in the group have very strong Finnish language proficiency (they most often use Finnish in play), and we support children’s [Swedish] language use and increase their vocabulary through read-alouds. When new/difficult words occur in the book, we discuss what the word means, etc. with the children. (T1)	supporting Swedish increasing vocabulary	Swedish proficiency vocabulary

Once the researcher has de-contextualised and coded the data, Lindgren et al. (2020) prescribe a process of re-contextualisation, where the codes are sorted into

new patterns according to whether they are interrelated with or different from other codes. The codes are then checked against the original texts and the aim of the study is to make sure they are relevant and correspond to the original data (Bengtsson, 2016). For the present study, and in accordance with Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the codes were collected on a coding sheet and grouped together. As exemplified in Table 2, classifying the codes into groups made it possible to generate higher-order main categories comprising codes that label lower-order subcategories.

Table 2. Examples of codes being grouped together according to interrelations and differences and given higher-order headings.

Codes	Grouping of codes	Headings of higher-order main categories
rest and relaxation	rest and relaxation	Setting a certain atmosphere
vocabulary	vocabulary	Supporting language development
understanding	understanding	
imagination	Swedish proficiency	
book skills and book interest	imagination	Helping induce transversal competencies
Swedish proficiency	book skills and book	Enhancing pedagogical content or current
vocabulary	interest	interests within the group

Bengtsson (2016) and Morgan (1993) point out that in qualitative content analysis, counting categories and subcategories clarifies the magnitude of the studied phenomena. In the present study, category sizes make it possible to distinguish what purposes many teachers tend to mention, as opposed to purposes that few teachers associate with read-alouds. The next stage of the process is to check how the results correspond to previous research and whether they seem plausible (Bengtsson, 2016; Lindgren et al., 2020).

Results

The qualitative content analysis of the teachers’ responses resulted in four main categories of purposes that read-alouds serve in pre-primary education: (a) supporting language development; (b) enhancing pedagogical content or current interests within the group; (c) helping induce transversal competencies; and (d) setting a certain atmosphere. Most teachers provided responses that mentioned several qualitatively different purposes, which contributed to different categories. Altogether, 36 teachers provided responses that contributed to three or four of the main categories.

(a) Supporting language development

Supporting language development was the most common reason for performing read-alouds. Table 3 specifies what kind of language development teachers connected with reading aloud.

Table 3. Teachers' responses in category (a) supporting language development.

	Teachers (n = 44)
(a) Supporting language development	41
<i>language proficiency in general</i>	20
<i>vocabulary</i>	28
<i>Swedish proficiency</i>	14
<i>understanding</i>	8
<i>early reading and writing</i>	11
<i>telling and retelling stories</i>	6
<i>linguistic awareness</i>	4

Some responses covered language proficiency in general, whereas others named specific aspects of language development. The teachers shared the view that reading aloud expands children's vocabulary and offers a way to introduce words that are uncommon in everyday spoken language. They mentioned that children learn new words (T17) or, as pointed out by T9, difficult words that need explanation:

New words, as they ask "What's that?" (T17)
 [...] an increased vocabulary. Difficult words that need an explanation afterwards
 (T9)

Read-alouds also served as a means of strengthening the children's Swedish proficiency. Few teachers mentioned a specific aspect of Swedish, but instead referred to children needing to increase their general proficiency (T3). T2 pointed out that reading in Swedish is important, as some children are read to in Finnish at home.

I hope their Swedish gets better/stronger bit by bit. (T3)
 Reading in Swedish is important, reading in Finnish at home. (T2)

One-quarter of the teachers viewed read-alouds as a way to evoke children's interest in early reading and writing. T25 wanted children to experience written language by being read to, whereas other teachers, such as T24 and T21, more explicitly mentioned wanting children to become interested in reading:

Experience of the language being read. (T25)
 Develop an interest in stories and an interest in reading. (T24)
 A positive attitude to books and reading ... (T21)

In the subcategory understanding, the teachers provided few tangible examples, but some, such as T9 and T25, seemed to focus more on listening comprehension and understanding a book's language than on children picking up on more abstract themes or messages.

Listening comprehension – what happened? (T9)
 Listening to Swedish, learning words, learning to understand more Swedish (T25)

Teachers who stated that read-alouds promote children's own telling and retelling of stories seemed to mention this in passing, without explaining how this aspect benefits

from read-alouds. Unlike T38, T23 provides more detail but explains that children’s retelling is a way to monitor children’s understanding.

Practise telling and so on. (T38)

We read the same book for one week, and the children retell the story on Friday.

This way we can follow up on how good their comprehension is. (T23)

Of the few teachers who specifically mentioned increasing linguistic awareness through read-alouds, only one teacher provided an example of how a recent read-aloud made the children more linguistically aware. T39 chose a book with a local focus, stating that the book represents local language use.

(b) Enhancing pedagogical content or current interests within the group

The majority of the teachers stated that they used read-alouds to enhance other content or current interests within their groups (Table 4).

Table 4. Teachers’ responses in category (b) enhancing pedagogical content or current interests within the group.

	Teachers (n = 44)
<i>(b) Enhancing pedagogical content or current interests within the group</i>	31
<i>amplification of current themes</i>	13
<i>new knowledge and experiences</i>	15
<i>values education</i>	10
<i>book skills and book interests</i>	13

Reading books with specific content was a way to introduce or amplify a current theme that a group was working on over a longer period of time (T19), as well as books on topics in which the children had expressed an interest (T43).

Connection to a theme, for example, seasons, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Christmas, etc. (T19)

Children often want to choose the book, want us to read about a specific theme. (T43)

The teachers also acknowledged that read-alouds provide new knowledge and experiences. T26 used books to teach children new factual knowledge, whereas T18 and T23 emphasised how children obtain new thoughts and experiences through book content.

Searching out facts by reading from a book together. (T26)

Listening to stories about different phenomena and people. (T18)

I think they develop a bit of new imagination, new words, new thoughts and reflections. (T23)

Teachers mentioned books as part of values education. Books can be a way of bringing up difficult subjects according to T18, and T15 noted that read-alouds may promote morality, depending on a book’s topic:

Perceiving different feelings etc. [...] brings up difficult subjects. (T18)
Thinking about the book content. They learn to discuss and hopefully also to argue their cases depending on the book. Morality, right/wrong, etc. depending on the topic (T15).

The teachers also used read-alouds to support learning about the nature of books and their possibilities, labelled book skills and book interests. T9 seemed to want the children to become familiar with a wide range of books and stories, whereas T42 wanted to give the children a feeling of becoming part of the story:

Listening to classical fairy tales and new, modern stories. (T9)
I hope they get a feeling of being “inside” a story. Entering another world and forgetting one’s own for a bit. (T42)

(c) Helping induce transversal competencies

In category (c), teachers mentioned purposes that concern developing certain skills and abilities that are transferable to other situations (Table 5).

Table 5. Teachers’ responses in category (c) helping induce transversal competencies.

	Teachers (n = 44)
(c) Helping induce transversal competencies	35
<i>imagination</i>	20
<i>focusing and listening</i>	18
<i>skills in connection with discussion and conversation</i>	13
<i>thinking and memory</i>	8
<i>social competence</i>	8

T8 mentioned using read-alouds to promote imagination and memory, whereas T34, for example, mentioned enhancing attention skills.

Imagination, memory, a starting point for discussion and a cosy time. (T8)
They learn to listen and take in a story and to stay focused. (T34)

Along with many other teachers, T8 also mentioned skills connected to discussion and conversation by simply labelling them “discussion.”

Some teachers connected interaction with working on children’s social competencies (T31), and others associated empathy and feelings with read-alouds, without specifically connecting them to conversation (T41, T24).

Interaction and social competence. (T31)
To develop empathy skills. (T41)
To get to experience feelings during storytime. (T24)

As for evoking thinking and memory through read-alouds, T16 viewed such activities as a starting point for critical thinking and reflection, whereas T21 focused more on providing eye-openers and enhancing memory.

To get the children to think critically, to strengthen imagination, etc. We discuss and reflect during the read-alouds [...] they start reflecting and want to find different answers to questions. (T16)

Practise memory skills by letting them retell [...] Eye-openers from the content. (T21)

(d) Setting a certain atmosphere

The fourth reason for conducting a read-aloud was that it sets a certain atmosphere.

Table 6. Teachers’ responses in category (d) setting a certain atmosphere.

	Teachers (n = 44)
<i>(d) Setting a certain atmosphere</i>	28
<i>rest and relaxation</i>	17
<i>affinity and participation</i>	13
<i>joy and cosiness</i>	13

More than a third (Table 6) of the teachers connected read-alouds with rest and relaxation but, in addition, they all mentioned other purposes covered in the other main categories. T19 saw an opportunity to provide a calming moment, whereas T3 saw read-alouds as an alternative to a proper after-lunch rest:

Calming moment – looking at books. (T19)

In our pre-primary group, the children don’t have a rest, so it can be nice to calm down after lunch. (T3)

Some teachers, such as T6 and T26, viewed read-alouds as a way to create a sense of affinity and participation within the group. Both T29 and T36 also indicated that read-alouds bring joy and cosiness:

Participation when the children get to take part in discussing what we are reading, children get to bring books to the pre-primary group for us to read. (T6)

A good time together where everyone can be heard and let their imaginations flow. (T29)

The children get to laugh and have fun. (T36)

Discussion

According to the results, teachers consider read-alouds to be versatile and able to serve many purposes (cf. Loyd, 2011; Reunamo, 2022). In categories (a) supporting language development and (b) enhancing pedagogical content or current interests in the group, teachers make strong connections between learning purposes and books. Using literature to enhance language development is in line with previous research (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Justice et al., 2009; Lennox, 2013), and the teachers drew parallels between the language of the books and certain purposes within language development. Although 32% of the children came from Finnish-Swedish bilingual

homes and were likely to have two first languages, almost one-third of the teachers specifically mentioned reading aloud to strengthen children's Swedish proficiency. It is possible that they saw Swedish-medium pre-primary as a counterweight to children growing up in a Finnish-dominated society. Surprisingly, only one-quarter of the teachers mentioned purposes related to early reading and writing, but it is conceivable that they worked on these during other activities. Coordinating book choices with other activities and interests is a recommended practice (Dickinson et al., 2002), and teachers reported choosing books that reinforced certain content, thus enhancing related purposes.

Categories (c) helping induce transversal competencies and (d) setting a certain atmosphere were generally less intertwined with books. Instead, teachers focused on scaffolding learning and the development of competencies that, according to the *National Core Curriculum of Pre-Primary Education*, support all educational activities as preconditions "for personal growth, studying, working and civic activity now and in the future" (National Board of Education, 2014/2016, chapter 2.5). Teachers that expressed using read-alouds to set an atmosphere in category (d) also mentioned learning purposes in other categories, thereby demonstrating how their read-alouds served several purposes.

When looking at the results, the main categories and their subcategories invite further conclusions about findings that appear to be especially interesting in relation to the nature of pre-primary education. However, these conclusions regarding the socio-cultural approach to learning, the connection between read-alouds and other content, and efferent and aesthetic approaches are further abstractions of the findings and should be treated with caution.

In their responses, the teachers displayed a sociocultural approach to learning similar to Säljö (2017). The results highlight a threefold connection between read-alouds and children's social development: read-alouds were considered joyful, social situations that strengthen a community in general (category d), but they were also opportunities for children to practise social skills, such as interaction and self-regulation (category c). In addition, teachers stated that book choices and conversations during read-alouds can accentuate social topics, such as values, emotions and empathy (category b). Likewise, teachers in Alatalo and Westlund's study (2021) modelled positive social interaction and raised topics regarding social values during read-alouds.

Most of the teachers also described coordinating book choices with ongoing themes or their groups' current interests. Previous research has shown that connecting read-alouds to other educational content is a beneficial approach (Dickinson et al., 2002; Fisher et al., 2004). Much like the teachers in the studies by Boyd (2013) and Håland et al. (2020), teachers in the present study explained that they wanted books to match a certain theme, learning content or time of the year, which resembles Laminack and Wadsworth's (2006) recommendation of reading aloud to build bridges across the curriculum. It is also in line with the holistic approach of Finnish early childhood education (Kangas et al., 2022) and pre-primary education

(Finnish National Board of Education, 2014/2016). However, the present study does not reveal whether teachers actively integrate read-alouds with other activities and learning content. After all, there is a difference between scaffolding specific learning by combining read-alouds with, for example, cognitively challenging conversation (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Dickinson et al., 2002) and simply reading books that reflect current themes, leaving it up to the children to make the connection between the books and the overarching purposes.

In relation to Rosenblatt’s (1983, 1986) continuum of efferent and aesthetic approaches, the present results indicate that teachers associate predominantly efferent purposes with read-alouds. They appear to focus on promoting learning that children can benefit from in other situations, and they read aloud, for example, to introduce new vocabulary (category a) or knowledge (category b) or strengthen children’s ability to concentrate (category c).

Purposes with aesthetic traits were less prominent. In the book skills and book interests subcategory of category (b), a few teachers made statements that suggested a more aesthetic approach. The predominance of efferent purposes in the teachers’ responses is in line with Sipe’s (2008) finding that aesthetic literary understanding is rarely valued in an educational context. Both Sipe (2008) and Sloan (2003) recommend combining personal, aesthetic approaches and more analytical and efferent methods to offer children literary events that promote the ability to engage in imaginary worlds and advance cognitive abilities. The results of the present study also resemble Reunamo’s (2022) findings that reported children participating less, taking fewer initiatives and adding new ideas less often during read-alouds than during other activities. This could indicate that teachers believe read-alouds to be an arena for bolstering everyday communication skills and academic skills, rather than one for reflecting the Finnish National Board of Education’s (2014/2016) description of encouraging verbal and bodily expression and connections between language, imagination and children’s literature. The teachers’ accentuation of academic skills evokes questions of whether read-alouds are mostly what Sipe (2008, p. 7) describes as “a mechanical tool for teaching children how to ‘do school.’”

Limitations

The present study examined what purposes teachers attached to read-alouds. Data were collected through a questionnaire and since there were no field observations, the results indicate teachers’ views on read-aloud purposes without accounting for how teachers implement them in practice. Field observations could undoubtedly provide a fuller understanding of teachers’ read-aloud purposes, but they are beyond the scope of this study.

Coding teachers’ responses was challenging in cases where the responses were very brief. Treating responses to two similar questions as one data set helped in attaining a fuller understanding, but there is still a risk of misunderstanding regarding some

responses. Likewise, the further and more abstract conclusion I draw based on the results should be seen as an attempt to describe and discuss tendencies rather than confirmed facts. Ideally, these could serve as a starting point when planning future interviews and field observations regarding read-aloud purposes.

Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, the purposes that teachers mention indicate that they view read-alouds as versatile activities that can bolster a multitude of learning goals and bridge different curriculum content. Connecting various content and activities and bolstering children's social skills correspond well to pre-primary education's holistic approach to learning. Further research with observational studies and interviews could illuminate to what extent and how teachers actively integrate read-alouds with other activities.

However, teachers' inclination to think of read-alouds as bridges to other content entails a risk of them overlooking read-alouds' more intrinsic learning potential, such as discovering books and stories and their distinctive characteristics or mastering how to elaborate on personal and aesthetic responses to literature. The results of the current study indicate that teachers, at least during read-alouds, view literature as a tool rather than a purpose, but these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To strengthen read-aloud practices that also support purposes closer to literature and to children's own expressions, further research that contributes to building more theory on this matter is needed. This could help pre-service and in-service teacher education to offer teachers a clearer understanding of how to work with literature, not only as an important tool for supporting various kinds of learning and connections between curriculum content, but also as a purpose in itself.

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Bolstering and Bridging – Pre-Primary Teachers’ Purposes and Views of Reading Aloud

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Bolstering and Bridging – Pre-Primary Teachers’ Purposes and Views of Reading Aloud

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