



The Artful Read-Aloud



The 10
Principles to
Inspire,
Engage, and
Transform
Learning

Artful
Read-Aloud

REBECCA BELLINGHAM



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TO ANNABELLE AND EZRA

*Raising and reading to you are the joys
of my life. I hope you discover the world, and
yourselves, in the books that will light your way.*

*I love you to the moon, the stars, and the
galaxies beyond and back.*

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Introduction

You need intelligence, and you need to look. You need a gaze, a wide gaze, penetrating and roving—that's what's useful for art.

—TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison's description of what's useful for art—intelligence, a penetrating and wide gaze, and a desire and capacity for looking and noticing—is a beautiful summation of what I find useful for reading aloud to children. Without fail, every time I've shined a spotlight on the importance of reading aloud and the artful, instructional moves inside an effective interactive read-aloud, teachers and graduate students have told me how much it affected them, how they changed their practice, or how they made room for reading aloud in their classrooms. They often tell me it completely shifts the dynamics of their classrooms: that children's passion for books and stories skyrockets, their conversations about characters and stories lead to more inclusive, thoughtful communities, and kids read their own independent books with more vigor and commitment.

Several years ago, one of my graduate students in the Literacy Specialist Program at Teachers College said to me, "You should just become the queen of read-aloud!" Of course I laughed at this idea (and also sort of enjoyed the idea of being the queen of something!), but it planted a seed: I should write a book about everything I had learned about reading aloud

from the stance of both an educator and an artist. I should write a book that would make it possible for teachers to give children one of the most important gifts an educator can give: access to the power and wonder of story.

I started my career as a teaching artist in New York City, working with the Dreamyard Project, a community arts organization that places artists in long-term residencies in public schools. At the time I was also a working actress. In between auditions, rehearsals, and sometimes eight shows a week, I integrated theatre and music into multiple curricular areas in several schools across the South Bronx. I directed plays, musicals, choirs, and Shakespearean performances. I helped develop original plays and performances using the stories, poems, and ideas of children in kindergarten through eighth grade. For most of these children, my fellow teaching artists and I were the art departments in their schools. Most of the time, they didn't have school-based music or drama classes, and they certainly didn't have budgets for annual shows where kids could perform onstage and experience the singular magic of putting on a show together.

My cadre of teaching artists, classroom teachers, and I produced many works of art on a shoestring budget. We didn't have spotlights or fancy costumes. We had the simplest of tools: our voices, our bodies, our understanding of color and space, our imaginations, and our ability to make something beautiful simply by singing, speaking, and moving as an ensemble. And we had words—from books, plays, and the students themselves. We had words that felt thrilling or hilarious. We had words that told stories of great courage or great treachery and that taught us how to help one another in times of need. Most importantly, we had the glorious imaginations and open hearts of the children with whom we worked. The combination of those words and the children's joyful capacity for expressing them made it possible to make magic.

What we had were things every teacher has access to. We had great stories to tell and groups of children eager to hear those stories and bring them to life. After many years of working as a teaching artist and eventually a classroom teacher, literacy coach, and instructor, I started thinking more and more about how to help teachers use the tools artists have long used to spark engagement, connect deeply, provoke inquiry, and inspire deep thinking. And I began with the time of day that has always been my favorite as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, graduate-level instructor, and mom: the read-aloud.

While most teachers do daily read-alouds and believe in their importance, there are moves we can make to significantly elevate the instructional power of reading aloud.

For instance, making small shifts with our bodies and voices can help kids envision different characters and their actions more completely. Slowing down, creating silences, and being aware of pacing can help kids begin to understand that certain passages hold key information and are worth rereading and lingering over. Making intentional eye contact with students during pivotal scenes between characters helps students infer the emotions, consider the significance of moments across the book, or simply feel utterly drawn into the story. Each of these moves is also artistic in nature: embodiment, breath, and connection are at the center of almost every artistic endeavor, and they can make a read-aloud instructional *and* beautiful and compelling at the same time.

There are several wonderful books already in the field about the importance of reading aloud by literacy greats such as Jim Trelease (2013), Lester Laminack (2016), and Mem Fox (2001). Those books leave no doubt about the importance of reading aloud and demonstrate the instructional moves teachers can make in order to teach real reading inside one. This book is a deeper dive into the *artistry* of reading aloud. It is a user-friendly guide that builds a bridge between the artistic world and the teacher's classroom. It's a rich exploration of the way in which teaching in general, and specifically the interactive read-aloud, is as full of artistic and creative potential as any other great work of art.

How to Read This Book



When I set about writing this book, I thought about the guiding principles that have informed my approach to reading aloud to children in classrooms as well as the instructional, listening, and engaging moves I make. Ultimately, I chose ten. These principles guide my work as a teacher and an artist in general and have been inspired by many years of working in all kinds of classrooms, theatres, arts-based spaces, and learning environments. Each chapter focuses on a specific guiding principle that can deepen the impact of our interactive read-alouds. And within each chapter there are also several specific tips for incorporating the principle into your daily work with children. These concrete tips are a way of breaking down a more abstract principle so that you can try things on immediately and successfully.

While the order of these principles is intentional, you may decide not to read this book in a linear fashion. There is no exact order to thinking about these principles, so feel free to read out of order should certain ideas catch your attention first! Rather than reading the whole book at once, you may end up dipping into one or two chapters at a time and focusing specifically on only a few principles, threading those new understandings and tips into your work. There will no doubt be some ideas that *may* feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but I am sending you courage in advance for trying on a new stance and embracing a willingness to slow down and make space for words to come alive.

While these ten principles are certainly specific to the read-aloud, they extend beyond that part of the day. I hope that you learn actionable strategies and ideas for creating real moments of artistry during your interactive read-alouds but also that you consider applying these principles to other times of your day or other components of your curriculum. As you read, I hope you continue to tap into your own innate artistic impulses; approach your daily read-alouds with even more imagination, curiosity, and vision; and begin to listen or look a little differently than before. Sometimes when I read professional books, I finish reading and begin overhauling and deconstructing everything about my choices and teaching life. Rest assured—this book will not send you down that rabbit hole! This is a guide to creating greater engagement, joy, connection, and beauty in your teaching life overall.

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Principle Ten

Choose Wisely

Being intentional about your choices

**Each decision we make, each action we take,
is born out of an intention.**

—SHARON SALZBERG

For most of my life, I have been on both sides of theatrical experiences. Sometimes I've been one of the creators or performers, and other times I've been an audience member watching the work unfold. Something that always intrigues me is the journey that any piece undergoes: from a tiny idea to a fully realized performance or piece of art. I love hearing artists talk about what started them off on their creative journey or process. Did you know that E. B. White noticed a spider web in his barn in Maine, cut down the egg sac, put it in a candy box, brought it back to New York City, and watched with delight as hundreds of spiderlings escaped through the air holes of the candy box and spun webs all around his apartment (Corrigan 2011)? Or that Lin-Manuel Miranda picked up Ron Chernow's biography of Hamilton at an airport bookstore, read it on vacation, and got the idea for a hip-hop musical about the founding fathers as a result (Mead 2015)?

Works of art don't appear out of thin air, and it's fascinating to hear about how ideas come to be. We can imagine the hours of writing at the desk or rehearsing at the piano. We can imagine, too, the hours any painter or sculptor spends working and reworking his colors

or clay. What we often never know is what got cut along the way, what hard choices an artist had to make on her creative journey. Any piece of art is made up of a million tiny choices and sometimes difficult, even painful ones. I've worked on a lot of new musicals and I've seen how agonizing it was for the writers to let go of songs that were gorgeous and beloved but just didn't move the story along or serve the piece as a whole. In a *New York Times* profile about Jerome Robbins, one of the greatest American choreographers, directors, and dancers, the author quotes Frederick Ashton, a fellow dance legend from Britain, as saying, "It's not what you put into a ballet; it's what you leave out" (Macaulay 2018). The author continues by pointing out

few choreographers were more audacious than Robbins in these good deeds of omission. You can pull off such master strokes effectively only if what you're doing has imagination and vision. (Macaulay 2018)

If we are to pull off master strokes in our read-alouds, we have to have imagination and vision. We have to make choices about what works best and remember that sometimes our omissions are as important as the things we decide to include. As is true with all our teaching moves, we must remember to choose wisely.

Tip 28: Remember It's an Orchestra

If you have noticed that I have contradicted myself throughout this book, you are right.

- Model your powerful thinking aloud, but don't take up too much airtime!
- Don't let turn-and-talks go on too long, but make sure you give thinking enough time!
- Move around, but also create moments of spellbinding silence!
- Be passionate but also intellectual and of course emotionally vulnerable and available too.

As with most things, it's about balance. As much as I believe in the importance of expressing our true love with literature and reading, our read-alouds can't be all passion and love with no substance or rigor. We could love read-aloud up all day and do very little

in the way of teaching students about deep noticing or effective analysis. Kids need both. Kids need time to listen and time to talk. It's not either-or. It's both-and. We need to model comprehension strategies by thinking aloud *and* just reading with expression and our whole bodies. We need to pause to clarify *and* sometimes just let the words do their magic.

The read-aloud is like an orchestra: a whole host of comprehension strategies and emotional responses in action. Minilessons and small-group strategy work usually call out one specific instrument. Kids need both. As adult readers, we don't pick up a book and decide that just for today we will focus only on inferring about characters and skip envisioning for the time being. The whole orchestra plays! Whenever we read, we are drawing upon many intellectual, emotional, physical, even spiritual capacities in order to make meaning from the text. The truth is, you could do any number of things at any given time as you read aloud because reading aloud is an integration of *all* the skill work you are teaching at the same time, but you have to make intentional choices about what and when to demonstrate, what comprehension skills to highlight, where to invite kids to talk, and how long both of those things should take. Keep in mind that you can always return to a part of the book on another day if you feel you have missed an opportunity to teach an important skill, or if you feel some children (if not all!) might benefit from a targeted lesson in either reading or writing.

How to Mine One Passage for Multiple Teaching Points

As I read aloud the following scene from *Amal Unbound* (Saeed 2018), I am not going to interrupt the flow. Of course I am hoping, and trusting, that kids are envisioning as I read and that they are experiencing a wide range of emotions. Powerful moments like these can, however, serve as touchstones to be returned to later in other teaching contexts. Once kids have experienced and been moved by the orchestra, *then* you can unpack any number of individual teaching points from a moment that is already familiar. Read the following excerpt, and then see some examples of how I might use it as a touchstone in other teaching lessons or conferences.

As I stepped inside, it felt like the past few months had been a terrible nightmare.

And now it was over.

I was home. . . .

Seena peeled a cucumber by the stove. She turned to hush them. That's when she saw me. She gasped. Her knife clattered to the ground.

“Amal!” she shouted. She rushed toward me and wrapped me in a hug. I had forgotten what it was like to feel someone’s embrace.

“Baji’s here!” Rabia and Safa shrieked in unison. Their eyes lit up like a string of lights on Eid. They dashed toward me. I picked them both up and hugged them. I didn’t know how I would ever let go.

“Amal?”

My mother. She carried my little sister Lubna in her arms. Her hair was loose and damp, grayer than it had been three months earlier. She walked toward me and stroked my hair as if checking to make sure I was real. Then, her expression crumbled. She folded me into her arms. (156–57)

- *Reading minilesson or small group:*

- *Envisioning.* I want students to pay attention to characters’ actions, so I could say, “As I read this, practice making a movie in your mind. Pay careful attention to the specific actions each character takes. Those action words help us create images in our brains that are alive and vivid as we read or listen to the story.”
- *Character development and inference.* If I want to pay attention to characters’ reactions, I might say, “As I read, pay attention to the ways the different characters react to Amal’s return. What do their reactions show us about how they have changed or how Amal’s absence has affected them? Paying attention to these little clues about how characters are described and how they react gives us important information about them.”
- *Fluency.* If I want students to read the lines with expression, trying to make their voices match the emotions of the scene, I could say, “Let’s continue reading this scene between Amal and her mother with [student 1] reading the words Amal says out loud, [student 2] reading the words Amal says as the narrator but not out loud, [student 3] reading the role of Amal’s mother, and [student 4] reading the role of Rabia. Let’s try to make our voices reflect the emotions of each character.”
- *Writing workshop.* If I want my writers to think about how to use action words to slow down a moment and help their readers really see it, I might say, “Let’s

look again at the way Aisha Saeed slows down this moment. Let's look at all the precise action words that describe exactly what's happening. Look how she describes the moment of Seena seeing her. She doesn't write, 'Seena saw me first.' Instead, she describes all of the tiny actions to help us imagine exactly what happened: 'peeled a cucumber,' 'turned to hush,' 'saw me,' 'gasped,' 'knife clattered,' 'rushed,' 'wrapped.' When you are describing a moment, try to slow down and describe each action, so that your readers can really see it."

It can be tricky to know how much to stop and when and where to call out teaching points versus when to just live inside the moment of the story. Here's the thing: If you actually read aloud every day for at least one solid chunk of precious and protected minutes, you'll develop a rich repertoire of tools and will create opportunities for all different kinds of responses and meaning making because you'll be *doing it every day*. You couldn't possibly invite kids to reenact a moment from a book; add thinking to a Literary Backpack; model your thinking; invite them to turn and talk about their predictions and big ideas; let the words wash over the room by reading without stopping; and also reread a passage of breathtaking beauty all in one day! But, across many days, across an entire year, and across many years in school? Absolutely! When we all commit to reading aloud every day in our classrooms, kids will have opportunities to engage with text in multiple modalities, with deep meaning, and with deep purpose.

Starting a novel always goes a little bit slower than it does once we're inside of it, because then kids have their pictures up and running, and we have spent some time mapping out who is who and how people are related to one another. If I read a novel like *Amal Unbound* every day for fifteen to thirty minutes (which accounts for those days with longer whole-group conversations), I would likely get through it in four to six weeks. When I taught fourth grade, I would usually get through at least two novels before Thanksgiving. I'd choose a shorter novel to read in December and during the weeks leading up to the winter break. Between January and June, I usually read three to four more novels with picture books and other short texts alongside and in between. By the second or third read-aloud, the characters and novels became reference points for the subsequent read-alouds, and the classroom began to fill with new characters and people that felt like members of our community. Students also became more familiar with the routines, structures, and ways of gathering together to think, engage, and interact.

Tips for Middle School Teachers

Middle school teachers are often managing schedules that aren't as flexible as those in younger grades. Middle school teachers who are beginning to incorporate more reading aloud can simply plan to read aloud for about one hour a week, even if that means one day is just five minutes, to continue the momentum and keep the story alive in kids' hearts and imaginations. Shifting the way you spend your time in middle school classrooms can be difficult, but thinking creatively is helpful. The time you spend reading aloud can be flexible and tailored to the demands of your schedule. Here's one way a week's read-aloud time might go:

Monday: Ten minutes to open class, get connected, settle and focus the room, and spark interest and engagement.

Tuesday: Same as Monday.

Wednesday: Five minutes because this is a crazy day. You have a big project or assignment or something that is pressing.

Thursday: Twenty minutes. At the beginning of your read-aloud practice, you might not feel comfortable doing an interactive read-aloud for a full twenty minutes, but you might consider finding one or two days a week where you can have a meatier read-aloud, get through more text, and gain some traction with your thinking, engagement, and conversations.

Friday: Fifteen minutes. This may also be a day where you can have a longer conversation about everything you have read in the week, which means you might read for eight to ten minutes and talk together for the rest.



Kids in middle school don't usually gather on the rug for a read-aloud, but we can still create a feeling of community and connection around the text by positioning ourselves alongside different table groups as we read.



To those who say there is no time for reading aloud because there are other important curricular goals to hit, we must articulate the ways in which those goals are authentically integrated into the interactive read-aloud. If we see reading aloud as central not only to the curriculum but also to the needs of students both as individual readers and as members of a literary community, then we are not finding time for something extra; we are simply choosing to value something that we know has a powerful impact on their reading lives and development. We are choosing to include something in our daily schedule that we know is highly engaging and meaningful for our students. We are letting kids experience the whole orchestra because we know it is one of the most effective and beautiful ways to wrap our hearts, our brains, and our whole communities around text. We are choosing an experience that gives our kids access to thinking, conversation, and meaning making, all of which fuels their independent reading lives. I hope this language helps if you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to defend your choice to read aloud to students every day!

Tip 29: Be Intentional



There are many ways to be intentional about choices we make as we prepare and implement our daily read-alouds. The first, and perhaps most important, is book choice. We must think carefully about what the best text is for this unit, this group, this moment in the school year, or this moment in time.

We must also choose books that reflect a wide variety of voices, genres, authors, and points of view. We must remember the beautiful principle of creating windows and mirrors for our students by filling our classrooms with books that reflect back the experiences, cultures, family structures, losses, dreams, injustices, and joys of our kids, as well as books that help kids imagine and understand the lives, voices, and perspectives of people who are unlike them, who have grown up or live in unfamiliar places or historical times. These windows and mirrors make it possible for kids to see value in themselves and also see beyond themselves. They make it possible for kids to experience and understand that we are connected through story and through our common humanity.

As you are deciding on your read-alouds for the year, you might ask yourself:

- What skills or strategies do I want children to practice in particular? What books would be a good fit for that work?
- What experience do I want to create in the room: One that makes us laugh and bond? One that helps us think about what kind of community we are and want to be? What books would be a good fit for that?
- What other content across the day do I want to support? What book might give kids an entry point into some of the conceptual knowledge or information that will help them along that path?
- How can I include my students' needs, interests, or opinions about what to read aloud next before I get started in a new book?

In a discussion about inclusion, equity, and social justice in school, Cornelius Minor, author of *We Got This*, talks about how essential it is that we bring books into our classrooms that reflect the world of our students, and the world at large, no matter who is in your room. “Even if those kids aren’t in the classroom, those books *have* to be in the classroom. Lots of people look around their classrooms and they’ll say, ‘There are no gay kids here so I don’t need books with gay protagonists.’ Yes you do. ‘There are no black kids here so I don’t need books with black protagonists.’ Yes you do. ‘There are no immigrants here so I don’t need books with immigrant protagonists.’ Yes you do. Even if you’ve got a classroom full of white folks—how are we going to have antiracist white people or white people who understand the immigrant experience if we don’t expose them to books?” (Minor and Richard 2018).

While I was writing this book, I often read quotes or little passages of text to my mom, a forty-year veteran teacher, and those words rang out for her so profoundly. “Wow,” she said after a long pause. “When I think back over my years in the classroom, I’m not sure I was as mindful about this as I should have been.” My mom’s clarity and honesty was so touching to me, and it’s a reminder to all of us that sometimes we need to reflect on the unexamined choices we are making about the books that fill our libraries and that are used as read-alouds. The choices we make about the texts that we bring into our classroom are

some of the most powerful ones we can make. With every book you consider for read-aloud, ask yourself:

1. Who or what is the story or book about?
2. Who wrote the book?
3. From whose point of view is this book written?
4. Whom might this book be a mirror for; whom might this book be a window for? How might it be both for lots of different kids?

Making sure to read aloud a balance of books that are written from the point of view of children of color and white children is nonnegotiable. Also nonnegotiable is noticing if a book you've chosen is told from the *point of view* of a child of color but *written* by a white author. Are you also making sure to choose books written by *authors* of color? If you notice you have read three books in a row that only reflected traditional family structures, what books might make a good choice next? Are you making sure to include books about children of color that reflect the “everyday beauty of being a little human being of color” as well as books that center on civil rights, social justice, and important first achievements? In her op-ed piece “Black Kids Don’t Want to Read About Harriet Tubman All the Time,” Denene Miller reminds us that children of color “want to read books that engage with their everyday experiences, featuring characters who look like them. Just like any other child” (2018, 10). Furthermore, she writes, “white children, too, deserve—and need—to see black characters that revel in the same human experiences that they do. Real diversity would celebrate the mundane—like a little kid going out after a snowstorm—rather than the exceptional” (10).

You might need to forego a book you love to read one that is less familiar in order to represent a fuller spectrum of human voices, experiences, and points of view. Let me be clear: this is not about checking off boxes of voices you have represented, but about developing a mindfulness, about paying attention to how your choices reflect the spectrum of our shared humanity.

You may have guessed that I absolutely adore anything that Kate DiCamillo writes, but I also love Katharine Applegate, Lauren Wolk, Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, Cynthia Lord, and Lois Lowry. Each one of those authors is phenomenal, and so many of their books would make perfect read-alouds for upper-grade classrooms. But, these authors are all white

women. And obviously, I absolutely cannot nor would I ever just read the work of white women aloud. The canon of children’s literature is incredibly diverse. If you don’t know the organizations We Need Diverse Books and #1000BlackGirlBooks (started by an amazing eleven-year-old named Marley Dias, who was sick of “reading about white boys and dogs”), look them up (Roy 2016).

Once we decide what we might read aloud and begin planning, we face a whole host of other decisions: where to think aloud and what to model, where to invite children into conversation, what moments we might reread, what words or passages we might embody. And *as* we read aloud, we also make choices about how long to let a conversation continue, whose thinking or partnership talk to highlight, and when to linger and when to move on. As I do this work, I think of the words of Frederick Ashton: “It’s not what you put into a ballet; it’s what you leave out” (Macaulay 2018). Sometimes our best intentions end up cluttering our read-alouds, so we must be as mindful about the moments when we choose to *do* something as we are about the moments when we decide to leave well enough alone. In her book *Teaching Talk*, Kara Pranicoff (2017) offers wise advice about places that often make meaningful stopping points for conversation (a character has a strong emotion; something unexpected is revealed) versus places that don’t necessarily merit stopping (new vocabulary is introduced or something confusing comes up).

It can also be helpful to clarify for yourself when you might choose to simply think aloud instead of stopping for conversation. These are times I’m more likely to just think aloud:

- In the beginning of the year, when I am revving up expectations for the thinking work I’ll be asking students to try on and learn. I want them to have concrete examples of what to aim for in their jots, turn-and-talks, conference conversations, and silent conversations with themselves.
- When I’m modeling a new strategy or skill that kids need explicit demonstration with, at all levels of text.
- If the text complexity takes a jump from what prior read-alouds demanded, I will demonstrate how my thinking becomes more sophisticated and nuanced.
- When I am modeling strategies and skills students might have practiced in grades or years prior but which I have never modeled, so that it can serve as a

mentor text for what I'm hoping they can begin to apply in their independent reading lives across a unit or across the year.

- In the beginning of more complicated books, especially if kids are new to books at levels N and above. I want them to see how my mind makes sense of more complicated texts and opening chapters.

The more you read aloud, the more you begin to develop a felt sense for when to stop, when to come up for air, when to move on, when to rely on your voice and body, when to pause to unpack or think aloud, when to invite kids to talk, and when to let a whole-group conversation emerge. Like anything, your intuition gets stronger with practice. And your choices become more astute.

Tip 30: Respond to Who's in Front of You



I recently modeled a read-aloud in a middle school classroom that was pretty much an epic fail. I went in with all my best intentions, but I didn't know the kids, and as a result, the book and lesson I chose were a total mismatch. I was at the beginning of a coaching cycle with a middle school faculty on student-centered teaching, ways to ignite their students' interest in reading without relying on tightly controlled worksheets, annotations, and teacher-led experiences. This was a school where classroom libraries were scarce, students read virtually no books of their own choosing as part of their ELA curriculum, and engagement with actual novels and books was nearly nonexistent. I was convinced I could waltz into their classrooms and show them the power of read-aloud. I chose *Refugee* (Gratz 2017), a book that I was certain would light them on fire. It was about children their age and about compelling current issues. Perfect!

Not so much. While *Refugee* is riveting, the beginning chapters are chock-full of facts, dates, and information about the brewing crisis that led to each child's current situation. While the story of each child gets started right away, you have to wade through some complex and technical information first. It didn't grab them; it didn't ignite them; it didn't give them joy. For a first read-aloud with a classroom full of sixth graders whom the teachers

described as reluctant readers, I should have chosen a book that would speak to them right away, that didn't have the same text qualities that pushed them away in the first place—unfamiliar facts and information that felt confusing and overwhelming and interrupted their enjoyment of a great story. Or I should have set the stage better by reading aloud and exploring stories about refugees through picture books or the United Nations magazine for kids about the current crisis, all of which would have given them background knowledge and a familiarity with some of the context surrounding each child's story in *Refugee*.

Inspired by my own epic fail, I decided a better choice would have been *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora* (Cartaya 2018), a funny, contemporary, bighearted book that sounds like the kids we teach—a book that would have reflected their humor, their struggles, and their friendships. I might have also chosen a book with interesting visuals. In *The First Rule of Punk* (Pérez 2018), the author includes pictures of the main character Malu's zines, which are both artistic and a bit sardonic—perfect for middle school kids. Any one of Kwame Alexander's books, where the story and the language resonate and sparkle immediately, would have also worked beautifully. If I had started my coaching cycle with one of those books, I believe I would have made an entirely different impression. I think I would have shown them books can be world-changing and completely engaging. Alternatively, I could have shown them that books can bring us together in community, can make us happy and laugh, can make us eager to find out what will happen. I think I would have garnered a little bit more buy-in because all of those books are totally compelling rides and not taxing the way that *Refugee* might have felt initially for this particular class of kids. I think I might have set the stage for a book like *Refugee* down the line, because I would have convinced them that books can be worth the effort.

Good teaching is always responsive. It always asks us to pay close attention to what is in front of us and adjust our expectations. I think the best teachers are the ones that share the gift of “animal cunning”—a description that has been given to Mark Rylance, one of the greatest Shakespearean, stage, and screen actors of our generation. Tim Carroll, who has collaborated with Rylance for years and directed him in ten Shakespearean productions, describes Rylance's animal cunning as that which gives him the ability to “smell the room and shape his performance accordingly” (Isherwood 2013, 6). This is precisely what we do when we teach and when we read aloud in particular. If I had planned to read through to the end of the chapter without stopping but then read the room and realized the kids needed a chance to shift their bodies and talk for a minute, I'd give them that break. Or if I had

planned a think-aloud or a turn-and-talk but could see the kids were completely enthralled as I was reading, I might continue reading a bit more, maybe to the end of the chapter, before inviting them to discuss or thinking aloud.

Being responsive is actually about putting into practice what we are teaching children to do as readers: to notice, to think and wonder, to reflect and possibly revise or change course along the way. The better we are at noticing and responding, the more aligned our teaching will be with the needs and lives of our kids—and the wiser our decisions will be.