



# Planning and interaction: Teachers' views on pre-primary read-alouds

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**ABSTRACT:** Read-alouds are recurrent in early childhood education and care settings and there is an abundance of scholarly advice regarding the planning and implementation of these sessions. However, most studies concern read-alouds with younger children and there is little knowledge regarding read-alouds during the pre-primary year for Finnish six-year-olds. The present study therefore investigated teachers' self-reported ways of organising and arguing for their ways of implementing read-alouds in Finnish pre-primary settings. The study focused on what teachers reported paying attention to when planning read-alouds and how they viewed interaction during the read-alouds. Data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 47 teachers and through group interviews with nine teachers. A qualitative content analysis showed that teachers mentioned paying attention to children's needs, interests, prerequisites and the characteristics of the books in connection to planning. They also described practices that indicated that it is common for them not to be acquainted with the books beforehand or not to have a prior plan. According to the teachers, interaction during read-alouds is common and important. At the same time, some of them expressed that they felt expected to use read-alouds as tools for supporting children's school readiness by calling for silence during the read-alouds.

**Keywords:** *early literacy, children's literature, shared bookreading, storytime*

## Introduction

Reading books aloud to children is a recurrent social activity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Nasiopoulo et al., 2022; Reunamo, 2022). Consequently, there are a great number of scientific articles presenting best practices for reading aloud. Two key aspects of read-alouds in educational settings are planning the sessions beforehand (Loyd, 2011; McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017; Santoro et al., 2008) and surrounding them with extratextual talk (Wasik & Hindman, 2014; Wright, 2018–2019).

In the present study, we investigated teachers' descriptions of planning and interaction in connection to read-alouds in the Finnish pre-primary context, as research on this specific context is scarce. The compulsory pre-primary year is the last year of ECEC before children enter basic education the year they turn seven. Pre-primary read-alouds typically include reading, showing pictures and interacting before, during or after the reading of the book.

Despite a wealth of research results concerning reading aloud with younger children on how to arrange successful read-alouds, several studies (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damber, 2015; Håland et al., 2021) indicate that this advice has not necessarily been embraced across ECEC. Because of this, many studies have recommended more pre-service and in-service training in connection with read-alouds (Håland et al., 2021; Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021; Kindle, 2011), implying that teachers might not be aware of or have mastered recommended practices. Researchers connect read-alouds with aspects central to ECEC such as language and literacy development (Lennox, 2013), learning about the world (Boyd, 2013; Wiseman, 2011) and critical thinking (Evans, 2016; Kim & Hachey, 2021). Consequently, investigating how teachers view their read-aloud practices is important and can contribute to a better understanding of possible discrepancies between recommended practices and teachers' implementations. We therefore discuss teachers' views of planning and interaction during read-alouds in relation to previous scholarly recommendations.

## Research on planning and interaction in read-alouds

The multifaceted nature of read-alouds has resulted in many different research studies presenting what teachers should pay attention to in connection with read-alouds, especially since teachers' implementation can play a significant role in children's learning (Kindle, 2011; Teale, 2003; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Some of the recurrent perspectives in read-aloud research are frequency (Dickinson et al., 2003; Zucker et al., 2009), the physical environment for books and reading (Dickinson et al., 2003; Hofslundsengen et

al., 2020), integration with other content (Dickinson et al., 2003; Teale, 2003), and book choices (Loyd, 2011; Teale, 2003; Shedd & Duke, 2008). Read-alouds are often connected to language development (Noble et al., 2019), and there is a plenitude of studies on how reading aloud to children can support vocabulary (Santoro et al., 2008; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik & Hindman, 2014) and literacy (Justice et al., 2009; Lennox, 2013; Zucker et al., 2009). Read-alouds have also been studied as arenas for providing knowledge about the world (Boyd, 2013) and opportunities for value education (Oberman, 2023). In addition, many scholars emphasise the importance of promoting literature and reading as enjoyable (Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021).

### **Scholars' recommendations for planning and implementing read-alouds**

Several scholars have made recommendations and even checklists for how to prepare read-alouds (Loyd, 2011; McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017; Santoro et al., 2008; Shedd & Duke, 2008; Teale, 2003; Wright, 2018–2019). They agree that teachers need to plan their read-alouds and read the books beforehand. Generally, the advice concerns choosing books, outlining the practicalities of the session and planning the extratextual talk.

The purpose of the read-aloud is the starting point when teachers select books (Santoro et al., 2008; Shedd & Duke, 2008). Teachers are also encouraged to make sure the books are age appropriate, will interest the children and reflect the diverse backgrounds and lives of the children in the group (Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021; Santoro et al., 2008; Shedd & Duke, 2008). Santoro et al. (2008) highlighted the importance of clear and coherent text, whereas Teale (2003) emphasised that good-quality picture books combine pictures and text in ways that offer more than the text or the pictures do on their own. Teachers should also plan how to connect the topics of the book to other situations, books or themes, or to the curriculum at large, Hisrich and McCaffrey (2021) and Santoro et al. (2008) write. Additionally, the book supply should on one hand expose children to a wide range of genres (Shedd & Duke, 2008), but on the other hand also make it possible to make connections between texts by reading books by the same author or the same illustrator (Santoro et al., 2008).

The practical side of planning involves deciding when (Wright, 2018–2019) to have the read-aloud session and for how many children (Shedd & Duke, 2008). Scholars have instructed teachers to read the book beforehand to plan what tone of voice to use (Shedd & Duke, 2008; Wright, 2018–2019) and to avoid unexpected content or language (Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021). Teale (2003) advised teachers to consider how the session would fit into the larger curriculum. Similarly, Shedd and Duke (2008) wrote that teachers can plan related activities.

Beck and McKeown (2001) and Wasik and Hindman (2014) underlined that high-quality interaction is crucial when it comes to bolstering learning in connection with read-alouds.

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Recommended interaction typically involves questions and comments (Santoro et al., 2008; Wright, 2018–2019), explanations (Santoro et al., 2008; Shedd & Duke, 2008; Wright, 2018–2019) and predictions about how the story will unfold (Santoro et al., 2008; Shedd & Duke, 2008). According to scholars' recommendations, planning interaction also involves deciding where in the book to initiate what kind of interaction (Hisrich & McCaffrey, 2021). Ultimately, scholars' more detailed advice regarding what read-aloud interactions should highlight depends on what learning they imagine should take place (Sipe, 2008). For example, Zucker et al. (2009) suggested questions and domains that enhance children's print knowledge, whereas Kindle (2010), in her conclusion of a study on supporting children's vocabulary growth, stated that interactive postreading events in connection to read-alouds would provide second and third chances for children to hear and use new words from the book. In his research on promoting children's literary understanding, Sipe (2008) underlined the importance of allowing and initiating a wide variety of ways of talking about the story to broaden children's repertoire in understanding stories. For example, he writes that teachers can model personalised responses if the conversation is text-centred or encourage analytical talk if it seems to be missing.

### **Scholars' reports on insufficient read-aloud practices**

Most scholars who investigate read-alouds have reported at least some approaches that divert from researchers' recommended practices. For example, scholars have pointed out that teachers who do not organise daily read-alouds do not read often enough (McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017; Nasiopoulo et al., 2022). Other scholars have considered the institutions' book supply too narrow, as teachers favoured storybooks and seldom read non-fiction books (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Håland et al., 2021).

Kindle's (2011) study found conflicting views on what children should learn in preschool and thus what role read-alouds should have. One teacher used read-alouds for planned literacy instruction to make children "ready for next year" (Kindle, 2011, p. 28), whereas another teacher refused to plan books in advance and let the children select the books each day. Teachers letting children select the books and thus not preparing in advance was also something that Damber (2015) saw in her research. In studies by Alatalo et al. (2023) and McCaffrey and Hisrich (2017, p. 96), it was more common for teachers not to prepare for read-alouds than to do so.

In general, much of what scholars have pointed out as adverse practices boils down to a lack of planning and preparation. A common assumption seems to be that teachers who do not plan their read-alouds beforehand predominantly connect them to keeping children settled for peace and quiet (Damber, 2015; Håland et al., 2021) and to having a fun, socially comfortable time (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Basse et al., 2008; Håland et al.,

2021). According to scholars, signs of teachers ranking read-alouds low as learning activities are, for example, the fact that they mainly take place during lunch breaks (Håland et al., 2021) or rests (Damber, 2015), that they are cancelled when other activities need more time (Damber, 2015) and that teachers seldom combine them with other activities or content (Damber, 2015; Håland et al., 2021; Kindle, 2010).

Alatalo and Westlund (2021), Damber (2015), Håland et al. (2021), Kindle (2010), Reunamo (2022) and Tjäru (2020) all highlighted that teachers' interaction during read-alouds does not necessarily promote early learning. Håland et al. (2021) would like more planned pauses with instruction that lead to deeper interpretations, whereas Damber noted that few teachers initiate dialogues after reading. In studies by Beck and McKeown (2001), Kindle (2010) and Weadman et al. (2023), questions with one-word responses were common and the scholars state that open-ended questions would generate more language use. Weadman et al. (2023) concluded that higher-demand questions and frequent expansions of children's input would be more cognitively challenging and advance language development.

Reunamo (2022) and Tjäru (2020) expressed concern about how teachers underpin children's participation and engagement during read-alouds. Tjäru (2020) saw that teachers seldom elaborated on children's expressions and input. In a similar fashion, Reunamo (2022) noticed that the children were not strongly involved in the sessions and that their emotional engagement was surprisingly low. Contrary to what many other scholars recommend, he suggested that teachers should be less goal-oriented during read-alouds and explained that a strong goal orientation can block children's initiatives. Instead, he would like teachers to view read-alouds as a shared journey with many possibilities where the goals are unknown beforehand. Similarly, Sipe (2008) emphasised that teachers need to be sensitive to children's responses during read-alouds. However, to be able to follow children's lead and identify the teachable moments that occur, teachers need to be well-acquainted with the books beforehand and be knowledgeable about literature and how to take advantage of its potentialities.

## **Theoretical framework**

The current study assumed read-aloud sessions in pre-primary to be social situations in which various kinds of learning can take place. The sociocultural approach builds on Vygotsky's (1978) view that children can advance their skills and knowledge through social interaction and in communities with adults and peers. With the help of adults or more advanced peers, children can surpass their capacities and reach new levels of learning, a process that Wood et al. (1976) call scaffolding. Scaffolding is not the only learning strategy that is found in a sociocultural approach, but we have chosen to discuss

it in relation to read-alouds. In read-aloud sessions scaffolding can be understood as for instance discussions and interactive events where the content of a book is a topic and children with different experiences or ideas meet and scaffold each other together with the teacher into new learning, or where for instance words used in a book or in relation to a book is discussed in ways that expand children's understanding of words. Scaffolding is then seen as a dynamic and interactive process where both children and teachers are scaffolding. Teachers' roles in planning and interacting for such discussions to take place are crucial. By using teaching goals as a starting point, teachers can decide what scaffolding is needed in individual sessions (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010).

As reported in the chapter "Research regarding read-alouds", the read-aloud sessions are open to many kinds of interaction, which is here understood as a possible variety of learning to take place. However, for the read-aloud session to truly be social situations that scaffold children's learning, teachers need to perform several balancing acts. Kansanen and Hansén (2017) point out that teachers working towards a teaching goal that aligns with the core curriculum is seen as an ideal situation. At the same time, however, teachers need a critical stance to ward off the power of the core curriculum and its goals since these can also be a threat to a teacher's autonomy and individual approaches to teaching.

In addition, teachers need to find a balance between steering and following children. Sipe (2008) highlighted the power relations that come with teachers implementing certain norms for interaction during read-alouds. He cautions against teachers taking rigid control over the interaction to scaffold children according to how the teachers think the discussion should progress, since in a sociocultural approach it is not possible to totally steer a certain kind of learning to take place. Learning is dynamic and cannot be fully captured (Kress et al., 2021). Instead, Sipe (2008) promotes scaffolding children by following their lead, as children are more likely to make use of scaffolds that are introduced in a context in which they have contributed to themselves. This is also in line with the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), in which children's active participation and taking children's initiatives and ideas into account are underlined as important parts of operational culture.

## **Aims**

The research presented above shows that teachers' ways of organising read-alouds, especially in terms of planning and interaction, are of importance for what the sessions can offer the children. In order to emphasise the centrality of read-alouds in early childhood education, one central aspect to be considered is how read-aloud sessions can promote early learning. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate

teachers' self-reported ways of organising and arguing for their ways of implementing read-alouds in Finnish pre-primary settings. It employed two research questions central to read-alouds:

- What do teachers pay attention to when planning read-alouds?
- How do teachers view interactions during read-alouds?

The results will be discussed in relation to previous recommendations on how to implement read-alouds in ECEC settings.

## Methods

The study employed a qualitative and predominantly inductive approach, as it set out to capture and understand respondents' experiences (Merriam, 2009) regarding the planning of and interaction during read-alouds. Because of the scarcity of research on Finnish pre-primary teachers' perspectives on reading aloud, we wanted both a general view and an in-depth understanding of how teachers organise and argue for their ways of implementing read-alouds. Therefore, we used a between-methods triangulation (Flick, 2018) and collected data through both a digital questionnaire and group interviews. Questionnaires are suitable for collecting short and uncontroversial data, whereas interviews are suitable for gaining a deeper understanding of, for example, respondents' views and experiences (Denscombe, 2018).

The current interviews shared many traits with the focus group sessions. Their aim was to generate more in-depth data that could deepen our understanding during what Carey and Asbury (2012) call semistructured sessions in an informal setting. In accordance with Hennink (2014), we wanted the teachers to hear each other's views and be inspired into, for example, refining their own statements and asking the others for additional information. However, Gibbs (2017) explained that focus group sessions are ideally rather independent from the facilitator or interviewer, as the participants interact mostly with each other. As the sessions were held over video calls, the participants were limited in reading each other's body language. Short delays in sound transfer also made it difficult to have a natural interaction with quick questions or short feedback between the participants. Participants who were in the same room managed to have more independent discussions, whereas participants in different physical rooms tended to rely on the interviewer to manage the conversations, making the sessions more of an interview than a focus group discussion.

## Study context

The data of the present study consist of responses from staff mainly working in pre-primary education in Finland. Children generally enter a compulsory year of pre-primary education the year they turn six and continue to basic education the following year. Pre-primary education is part of ECEC but has its own core curriculum, the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), that emphasises children's participation and initiatives as well as learning through different forms of play.

Out of 47 questionnaire respondents, 41 were formally qualified teachers. In the following, all questionnaire respondents will be referred to as teachers and labelled T1–T47. The average work experience was 19.3 years. For the interviews, all nine participants were formally qualified teachers. All teachers had several years of work experience with children and their experience with different age groups varied, as some had mainly worked in pre-primary, while others had worked mainly with ages 0–5, or mainly with basic education.

The present study used aliases for the interviewed teachers as follows: Andrea and Anna worked in the same group, as did Vera and Sonja. Olivia and Nora worked in the same institution but had their own groups. Ina had her own group in a separate institution. Pernilla and Ester worked closely together and knew each other's children and routines, but currently, Ester's main responsibility was five-year-olds.

## Data collection

The present study used pre-primary teachers' questionnaire responses to a total of 12 questions. As the Appendix 1 shows, there were four closed-ended and four open-ended questions regarding teacher's practices. Some teachers wrote full sentences, whereas others provided only a few words. The English translations of the responses followed the style of the original responses.

A total of 22 municipalities granted authorisation and distributed information about the questionnaire to their teachers. The questionnaire was open during the December 2019–February 2020 period, and reminders were sent out in January 2020. Altogether, there were 47 responses. All identities of respondents remained concealed throughout the research process, as the questionnaire did not ask respondents to state their names, institutions or municipalities.

For the group interviews, the research questions as well as an initial data analysis of the questionnaire responses guided the researchers in what questions and topics to raise. The interviewer also remained open to the teachers' initiatives and followed up on topics raised by them. Research permission was granted by the teachers and each municipality's



head of education. All parties were informed that none of the teachers, municipalities or children would be identified in the project findings and that research data was going to be used and stored in ways that complied with guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2023).

The interviewed teachers were not selected among the questionnaire respondents. Instead, they had volunteered to be part of an intervention project. The interviews mainly took place during two meetings and were also the start of the intervention project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were performed through recorded Zoom video calls, with several teachers participating in a group interview but in exceptional cases with only one teacher present. This variation was due to teachers participating from their workplaces in the afternoons and, therefore, sometimes needing to shortly pause or completely reschedule their participation to attend to more pressing issues.

## Data analysis

An analysis of the responses to the questionnaire and transcribed group interviews followed the steps of qualitative content analysis recommended by Lindgren et al. (2020). Our decontextualisation process shortened the responses into meaning units and involved repeated read-throughs and reflection. The condensed meaning units were given descriptive codes, as exemplified in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Examples of meaning units that were condensed and coded.

<i>TEACHER RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON CHOOSING BOOKS</i>	<i>CONDENSATIONS</i>	<i>CODES</i>
Sometimes <u>according to a certain theme</u> , sometimes it depends on <u>which words we want the children to learn</u> , and sometimes <u>the children get to choose</u> . (T28)	According to theme Which words to learn Children can choose	Theme Learning goal Children's choice
I often choose stories <u>based on the pictures</u> and the <u>story of the book</u> , and especially in the autumn semester, I have <u>very little text on each page</u> . (Nora)	Based on pictures Based on story Very little text	Pictures Story Amount of text

After coding the data, Lindgren et al. (2020) recommend re-contextualisation by sorting the codes into new patterns based on interrelations and differences between codes. This phase involved grouping codes together into lower-order subcategories and higher-order main categories, as seen in Table 2. All categories can be tracked back to the first stage of the study, as the interview responses cover the same and similar topics as the questionnaire responses, often with more variety and refinement.

TABLE 2 Examples of grouping codes together to generate subcategories and main categories.

<i>CODE</i>	<i>SUBCATEGORIES</i>	<i>HIGHER-ORDER CATEGORIES</i>
Theme	Theme	Considering learning needs or interests
Learning goal	Learning goal	
Children's choice	Pictures Story Amount of text	Considering the characteristics of the books
Pictures		
Story		
Amount of text	Children's choice	Reading without a prior plan

## Findings

Data from both the questionnaire and the interviews indicated that read-alouds were of high priority. Most teachers reported daily read-alouds carried out by either themselves or other staff members. They typically reported reading fiction books and two-thirds of these were picture books, whereas one-third were chapter books. In the following, findings that correspond to the research question *What do teachers pay attention to when planning read-alouds?* are headlined Planning read-alouds. Findings in connection to the research question *How do teachers view interactions during read-alouds?* are reported under Interaction during read-alouds. Each section presents the results in categories that were generated during the analysis.

### Planning read-alouds

When preparing read-alouds, teachers described paying attention to aspects regarding learning needs or interests, to children's prerequisites for participating in read-alouds, to the characteristics of the books as well as to what scope they would like a specific read-aloud to have. In addition, they described reading without a prior plan.

#### *Considering learning needs or interests*

According to the teachers, topics originating from children's learning needs and interests influenced the choice of books. Of the respondents who filled out the questionnaire, T28 mentioned choosing books according to "what words we want the children to learn", and T1 explained that events in children's personal lives can influence book choices. T16 provided an example of how children's interest in electricity guided her choice of book.

T1: *Books are also chosen according to situations in life, e.g. divorces, death and so on.*

T16: *The children were wondering about power cuts and storms, so I chose a book on electricity.*

Of the interviewed teachers, Ester thought it was important that children “develop social and empathetic skills” and often chose books that she thought could support this development. A few teachers, like T31, wanted to ensure that children became acquainted with a wide range of genres and made sure to vary their book choices.

T31: *[It is] important to include many different types of books. New, old, stories with little text or a lot of text, rhymed stories, etc.*

A current topic could also be a chosen theme that the group was working on in several activities. A majority of teachers mentioned highlighting certain themes and times of year in the group and choosing books accordingly. As most teachers filled out the questionnaire in December, many explanations for book choices were similar to T18’s “Because Christmas is near”.

### ***Considering children’s prerequisites***

Teachers also reported paying attention to children’s prerequisites for engaging in read-alouds and trying to coordinate the characteristics of the books with children’s capacities. T4 and T30 thought of prerequisites of an immediate nature and mentioned children’s current energy level and attention span:

T4: *... by figuring out which book is a match that day... children’s energy... theme, etc.*

T30: *... the ones they are expected to manage to stay focused on.*

Children’s language proficiency had an important influence on many teachers’ book choices. For example, T31 wanted books to “fit children’s language level”. In addition, T43 stated that books should be “suitable for pre-primary children”. A few other teachers gave similar responses, indicating that age-appropriate books are books of suitable complexity or books that tend to interest the age group. Some teachers also described adjusting their read-alouds as children become more advanced over time.

### ***Considering the characteristics of the books***

Besides paying attention to the themes, language and general complexity of the books, a few teachers pointed out that books should be of suitable length and have interesting pictures. Teachers did not elaborate on what a suitable length was, but in their questionnaire responses, some possibly associated length with complexity, as one referred to the amount of text and another to the fact that she wanted a suitable length for reading with second language learners. In an interview, Pernilla offered another

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perspective, as she pointed out that books should ideally be short enough to finish before the taxi picks up some of the children.

The importance of pictures became especially clear in the interviews, with Nora and Olivia explaining that they based many of their choices on the pictures. Both Olivia and Pernilla wanted books to have the potential to spark discussion and they considered appealing pictures to play an important part in this, especially during the autumn semester when the children are new to pre-primary.

*Olivia: ...the pictures start discussions and are appealing. ...in the beginning of autumn, it is a lot about pictures being appealing.*

*Nora: I do choose stories a lot based on the pictures...and especially in the autumn semester, I do have very little text on each page.*

*Pernilla: I like these Pettson books that have a lot of details that can spark discussion...*

T8 shared this opinion, and stated “after Christmas I start chapter books”, indicating which characteristics were considered important changes as children become more advanced when it comes to comprehending books.

When choosing books, some teachers also take their personal tastes into account. T36 explained that the reading is better and has “more dramatic quality if one appreciates the book oneself”. Ina, on the other hand, thought that she should stop letting her personal preferences limit her choices:

*Ina: I know I need to get better at not being so fixed on the cover ... I can dismiss a book straight away. [ ] But it is pretty awful if I, the teacher, dismiss [books] because I don't like [them].*

### ***Considering the scope of the read-aloud***

A slight majority of the questionnaire respondents reported combining read-alouds with other activities. Most commonly, read-alouds were paired with organisational activities, such as resting and waiting. Approximately one-fifth of teachers mentioned connections to other pedagogical content, such as circle time, physical activity, art and so-called pre-primary assignments.

Some of the interviewed teachers described expanding the read-alouds into something more than just reading a book and talking about it. Pernilla explained how she expanded her reading of the book *Gropen* (The Pit) by Emma Adbåge with book talks, gamification of the book and looking for new play sites.

Pernilla: *...then I used open questions about this book ... to discover what the children were thinking. And then they get a reward with a simple game, so you press the iPad, and something happens on the screen. Then we went on to find our own favourite places for playing.*

Sonja and Vera described a project in which they read several books from the same book series. They used props, including additional posters with pictures from the books, and noted that the children started making connections to previous read-alouds. According to the teachers, the children enjoyed the project and were inspired by the books in their play.

Sonja: *...we made a more extensive theme with The Jerry Maya Detective Agency books, and we had prepared quite a lot beforehand with props and different pictures on big posters ... Everyone was a lot more into it and it was possible to read to slightly bigger groups and they [the children] went back to think about what happened last time and why and that was really fun.*

Vera: *Yes, they elaborated on it when playing...*

### ***Reading without a prior plan***

In addition to explaining what they paid attention to when planning read-alouds, many teachers also indicated that at least some of their read-aloud sessions had little prior planning or, like T1, that their only plan was to read whatever the children wanted to listen to.

T1: *We are happy to read what the children want and there are not actually any criteria, so we work with what we have...*

Most teachers stated that both adults and children can influence book choices for read-alouds, and several teachers described a two-stage process with staff and children influencing the choice. In T23's group, teachers made a first selection and children then voted for the book to be read aloud.

T23: *The staff choose books according to our themes, but the children then vote for what book gets read.*

With several books at hand, teachers have not necessarily closely acquainted themselves with all the books before beginning to read. Anna and Vera talked about read-aloud sessions that in their minds were unsuccessful, as the books had content that they were not prepared for.

Anna: *...this one was actually about a mother who was going to have a baby and the baby died and...you could not see that on the cover or so, so that was pretty much a shock to me too...*

Vera: *I ...noticed that this is about an alcoholic father...and I was just going to read some fun book, and that was not very successful.*

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Ester remembered sometimes having chosen books that are too long and having had to come up with her own ending to finish quicker. Pernilla shared this experience and agreed that it was frustrating to be “just sheepishly close” but not quite make it to the end of the book.

Despite sometimes organising read-alouds without prior planning, several teachers underlined that they still have pedagogical ambitions during the read-alouds. Andrea and Anna said that they automatically answer questions and connect the story to the children’s own experiences. Anna recalled intending to just read a book straight through but instead catching herself initiating conversation and reflection. Andrea agreed that, even when teachers think they don’t have a plan, they still seem to work with certain things.

*Anna: ...but you still encourage reflection and...well, to talk about your thoughts and what you think will happen...despite having no other intention than to simply read.*

*Andrea: ...although you still subconsciously work with the same things, it is easier if you have planned your agenda.*

### **Interaction during read-alouds**

Almost all teachers responding to the questionnaire claimed that they at least sometimes discussed the book during read-alouds. Likewise, most teachers stated that they initiate questions and comment on the book in connection to reading. According to the teachers, it was also common for the children to initiate questions and comments. The interviewed teachers were especially keen on talking about interaction, and their input can be divided into five categories: Talking promotes engagement; Silence signals engagement; Talking promotes general conversation skills; Talking promotes school readiness and Silence promotes school readiness.

#### ***Talking promotes engagement***

In the interviews, the teachers highlighted the importance of talking about the books. They explained that they emphasised interaction to promote children’s engagement in and comprehension of the story.

*Anna: You read and show the pictures, but you also encourage reflection and, well, to talk about one’s thoughts and what do you think will happen...*

*Nora: To explain if they are wondering about something, like “Why are they doing that?” or questions about pictures and then you explain and...*

Ester and Pernilla both remembered “a long time ago” when interactions used to be discouraged during read-alouds. Ester even recalled being assessed by whether she had the children sit quietly when reading aloud during her teacher training. They agreed that

their current practice with more interaction is better. In Pernilla's experience, children having to save what they wanted to say until after the book was finished was not a good solution.

*Pernilla: You told them, "You have to wait until later". Of course, they didn't remember what they wanted to say afterwards.*

### ***Silence signals engagement***

The interviewed teachers agreed that engaging in a story can also entail being quiet. Nora and Ina noted that children being quiet can be a sign of their being successfully captivated by the read-aloud.

*Nora: If the story is so exciting that all children sit in absolute silence, then you know that they are engaged.*

*Ina: ...gradually, it has gotten quieter and quieter and eventually they sit in absolute silence and just stare at the pictures. You have captivated them.*

### ***Talking promotes general conversation skills***

Talking and discussing during read-alouds is not only about promoting engagement in and comprehension of the book. The teachers also saw read-alouds as opportunities to help children practise their general conversation skills. Anna and Andrea, who worked in the same group, expressed putting a lot of effort into working with conversation, as they had noticed that children need to practise their conversation skills.

*Andrea: There are children that don't say a whole lot, so we try to get them to take part in the discussion in one way or other, not forcing them, but you try to hand them the mike every now and then...*

Andrea and Anna also pointed out that part of promoting children's conversation skills is listening to what they have to say. They described read-alouds and lunches as opportunities to compensate for homes that provide children with few adult-child conversations.

*Andrea: ...in some families, that [conversation] does not exist at all...So unfortunately... even at lunch, they sit with their hand in the air to get their turn to talk to the adult at their table.*

*Anna: Yes, they don't tell their friends things like that; it's especially aimed at an adult.*

### ***Silence promotes school readiness***

Several of the interviewed teachers expressed that schoolteachers expected children in pre-primary school to learn to sit still for the length of a lesson (45 minutes) as

preparation for school. Ester stated that it could be embarrassing to her if the children did not fulfil their future schoolteachers' expectations and made too many comments instead of listening quietly. Some teachers seemed to assume that concentrating and listening in school meant being quiet.

*Ester: ...I know the [school]teachers appreciate the ability to sit quietly and listen so if they [the children] start commenting on everything, it could be embarrassing, like, what did we teach them [laughing].*

### **Talking promotes school readiness**

Anna was reluctant to have children practising sitting still. She highlighted that she encourages physical movement instead. However, she recalled a recent read-aloud with a lengthy discussion and pointed out that the fact that the children were able to sit still and be verbally engaged for almost an hour was something she would like to mention to the schoolteachers, as this seemed important to them.

*Anna: We can tell their future teachers at the transition meeting: We timed them!...the most important thing seems to be that they can sit still for 45 minutes...they [the schoolteachers] point this out to us, that when they start school, they need to be able to sit still for 45 minutes.*

## **Discussion**

Our study has focused on teachers' planning of read-aloud sessions and how they view interaction during read-alouds. As a response to the first research question, i.e., in relation to planning read-alouds, teachers described seizing the moment and catching on to children's present interests or learning needs, but also choosing books according to ongoing themes as well as having long-term plans of, for example, acquainting the children with different genres and working with their social skills through book contents. Delivering a planned curriculum while also taking children's initiatives into account is part of teachers' pedagogical decision-making (Sairanen et al., 2022). As part of this decision-making and in accordance with Hisrich and McCaffrey (2021) and Santoro et al. (2008), teachers mentioned trying to find books that correspond to children's prerequisites regarding length, illustrations and complexity.

Only a slight majority of teachers reported sometimes combining read-alouds with other activities, which was surprising, as the Finnish National Board of Education (2016) emphasises holistic and integrative instruction. In a similar fashion, Dickinson et al. (2003) and Teale (2003) have recommended integrating read-alouds with other content. The most common combination in our study was reading aloud while children were resting, which Damber (2015) advised against. However, provided that teachers also



arrange read-alouds at other times of the day, one could presume that reading during routine activities can be a sign of read-alouds being a high priority, as this combination fits more reading into the pre-primary day. Drawing on, for example, Teale's (2003) description of read-alouds as an activity that has been heavily underlined as very important and beneficial, it is also possible that teachers think of reading aloud as something that automatically adds more value to otherwise rather mundane situations.

Few teachers reported integrating read-alouds with other pedagogical activities, and an explanation could be that this requires the kind of planning that teachers seldom prioritise. Previous studies on ages 0–5 indicate that most read-alouds take place without prior pedagogical planning (Alatalo et al., 2023; Repo et al., 2019). Although letting the children choose the books can promote children's agency, impromptu choices make it difficult for the teachers to connect the books to other activities or to the curriculum at large, as recommended by Hisrich and McCaffrey (2021).

The drawbacks of not having a prior plan could also be seen in the interviews, as several teachers connected unsuccessful read-alouds to a lack of preparation on their behalf. In a similar manner, teachers connected extra successful read-alouds with careful planning and expanding the sessions into, for example, joint outdoor play. In these cases, the implementation of read-alouds aligns with Reunamo's (2022) recommendations of not using books as end products but as starting points for joint creativity. By extension, this also contributes to the holistic education prescribed by the Finnish National Board of Education (2016).

In response to the second research question on interaction during read-alouds, most teachers stated that both teachers and children initiated interactions during read-alouds. All interviewed teachers saw interaction as important and, in concordance with the sociocultural approach (Vygotsky, 1978), connected it to engagement and comprehension and to themselves providing sufficient scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976). Read-alouds were also seen as opportunities for practising general conversation skills and a chance for children to have conversations with adults, which resembles studies by Alatalo and Westlund (2021) and Basse et al. (2008), where teachers saw read-alouds as socially comfortable.

Several teachers saw read-alouds as a way to prepare children for school. Most of them connected read-alouds to listening in silence and sitting still, thus practising for school. As the Finnish National Board of Education (2016) writes that pre-primary and basic education should be a continuum that supports children's growth and learning, the idea of practising "for school" is understandable. However, we see some risks in using read-alouds for practising school-behaviour. First of all, interaction during read-alouds is thought to be crucial regarding, for example, literary understanding (Sipe, 2008),

vocabulary (Kindle, 2010) and print knowledge (Zucker et al., 2009). Second, if pre-primary teachers connect their read-alouds to future school behaviour, it is important to keep in mind that school behaviour is more complex than sitting quietly. It is also worth remembering that cooperation between pre-primary and basic education teachers is a two-way process, not an undertaking where pre-primary teachers abandon the nature of pre-primary education to accommodate the expectations of basic education teachers.

## Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, the practices described by the teachers in our study indicate that there is uncertainty regarding the roles of read-alouds. On the one hand, teachers seem to have a clear view of what is important to them when planning read-alouds and mention coordinating children's needs, interests and prerequisites with the characteristics of the books. On the other hand, the described practices also indicate that unprepared read-alouds are common. In addition, the teachers saw interaction as an important part of read-alouds, yet some of them connected read-alouds to practising school readiness by sitting still and being quiet.

Teachers' prior planning could perhaps be thought to overshadow or stunt children's contributions to the read-aloud session, but we agree with Sipe (2008), that teachers knowing the books beforehand and having an idea of how the read-aloud could play out help teachers scaffold children's engagement and accelerate rather than inhibit children's active participation. It is also likely that prior planning increases the chances of cognitively challenging conversations, which have proven to be scarce during read-alouds, according to previous research (Reunamo, 2022; Tjärü, 2020; Weadman et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a considerable risk that unplanned read-alouds will become isolated events rather than integrated parts of what the Finnish National Board of Education (2016) describes as a holistic education that combines different activities and contents into learning modules. By making the most of read-alouds and letting them influence and be influenced by other pre-primary content, the overall presence of literature increases without the number of read-alouds necessarily going up.

Drawing on these arguments, we want to underline that prior planning and acquaintance with books should be the norm for pre-primary read-alouds. We also argue that it is more important that teachers pay attention to their current pre-primary context and that they do not let the prospect of children entering school the following year overshadow the playful and participatory nature of pre-primary instruction.

## Limitations

The current study was based on teachers' responses and did not involve field observations; therefore, it does not account for how teachers work in practice. As the responses in both the questionnaire and the interviews had many resemblances, we believe that the teachers' responses still provide good insight into teachers' planning and implementation of read-alouds. Both the questionnaire and the interviews mainly concerned teachers' approaches to read-alouds in general, whereas asking about particular read-aloud sessions could have generated more detailed results. We therefore suggest that future studies combine field observations and, for example, teacher diaries for more tangible results regarding what teachers do in practice and what they involve in their planning versus what they decide in the moment.

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## APPENDIX 1 Questions used in the study

In the interviews, the same question generated responses that covered general practices, planning and interaction.

	<i>QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS</i>	<i>QUESTIONS AND TOPICS RAISED DURING INTERVIEWS</i>
Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work experience</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Position in team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work experience</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Position in team</li> </ul>
General practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often are read-alouds part of your planned curriculum?</li> <li>• Who usually reads during the sessions? Mark all persons who read equally often. (a teacher/a child minder/a group assistant/someone else)</li> <li>• Give examples of three books you have read lately.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is a typical read-aloud session like in your group?</li> </ul>
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are books chosen for read-alouds? Do the books need to fulfil criteria?</li> <li>• How were the books you have read lately chosen?</li> <li>• Do you combine read-alouds with other activities? If yes, with what activities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is a typical read-aloud session like in your group?</li> <li>• How do you decide whether a book is suitable for reading aloud?</li> <li>• What are your favourite books for reading aloud?</li> <li>• What do you do in addition to reading the text and showing the pictures?</li> <li>• Tell me about read-alouds that in your mind were extra successful.</li> <li>• Tell me about read-alouds that in your mind were unsuccessful.</li> </ul>
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens after you have finished the book? (we go on to another activity/the person reading asks questions or comments the book/the children ask questions or comment the book/something else happens, what?)</li> <li>• Do you discuss the text in connection to reading? (most often/sometimes/seldom/never)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is a typical read-aloud session like in your group?</li> <li>• How do you know that a child or a group of children like a book?</li> <li>• What do children do in addition to listening to and looking at pictures during read-alouds?</li> <li>• Have you experienced read-alouds that in your mind were extra successful? Give examples.</li> </ul>