



RESEARCH
REPORT

Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books





Introduction

Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books are designed to support below-level readers in grades 2–6. Teacher Guides for the 64 leveled titles provide step-by-step guidance to accelerate reading development with instruction that focuses on building essential vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and comprehension skills. Teachers explicitly teach and model research-based strategies, gradually releasing responsibility to students, moving them closer toward independent reading and thinking.

Choosing the appropriate program to support struggling readers is a significant undertaking. This document provides educators with the foundational

research associated with the program’s design to assist them in making an informed decision. To create the *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*, the authors relied on seminal, historical studies, as well as current findings from literacy leaders and recognized researchers. This document details how best practices in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency are interwoven to motivate, engage, and teach today’s below-level readers.



Look for this icon for specific program features that address the research.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Engaging and Motivating Struggling Readers	2
The Role of Motivation and Engagement.	2
Ensuring Success	4
How Volume and Access Impact Comprehension	4
Accelerating Literacy Development for Struggling Readers.	6
The Importance of Teaching Comprehension Strategies	6
The Role of Vocabulary	7
Scaffolding	8
Higher Order Thinking Skills and Effective Questioning Strategies.	8
The Role of Assessment	10
Written Responses	10
Performance-Based Measures	10
Summary of Foundational Research Basis	11
References	12

Foundational Research Basis for Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books

Engaging and Motivating Struggling Readers

The Role of Motivation and Engagement

When considering the dilemma of struggling readers in today's classrooms, very few educators would dispute the importance of motivation. The National Research Council in its landmark report (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998) noted there are three stumbling blocks to reading: (1) difficulty using and understanding the alphabetic code; (2) failure to transfer oral language comprehension skills to reading; and (3) the absence or loss of motivation to read. The latter, as noted in the report, greatly amplifies the issues associated with the first two. Without a doubt, becoming an excellent, active reader involves aligning motivational processes with cognitive and language processes in reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Two questions always at the forefront of researchers and classroom practitioners are: *What specific factors motivate readers?* and *What can teachers do in their classrooms to create contexts for engagement?*

For decades researchers have conducted studies attempting to capture classroom characteristics that motivate learners and foster reading comprehension. As is often noted in these studies, all students are rarely motivated by the same factors. However, there are general characteristics that appear to motivate a significant portion of learners. In an investigation of reading classrooms, Gambrell (1996) identified multiple research-based factors applicable to most school settings:

- a book-rich classroom environment
- opportunities for choice
- formal and informal opportunities to interact with their peers
- exposure to many kinds of reading experiences
- appropriate reading-related incentives, and
- an inspiring teacher who explicitly demonstrates her own love of reading.

The RAND Study Group confirms that teachers who offer choices, challenging tasks, and collaborative opportunities to interact with peers increase learners' motivation to read and comprehend text (Snow, 2002). In another study of reading motivation, researchers interviewed and analyzed elementary-age student responses using the constant comparative method (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Specific patterns emerged from the analysis, allowing researchers to group their responses into six categories:

1. why readers selected narrative text
2. why students selected reading in general
3. sources of motivation
4. actions of others
5. sources of book referrals, and
6. why readers selected expository text.

The first three items are particularly applicable to this research report. In the first category, the researchers described factors that **motivated children to select narrative text**. The findings revealed young readers selected narrative text based on three factors: personal interests, characteristics of the books, and choice. Regarding personal interests, students frequently mentioned they found books interesting because they could relate to the topic. When considering book characteristics, students were motivated to select and read books with exciting book covers, action-packed plots, and humor. Choice was also deemed important as the study revealed 84% of the children discussed books they had self-selected, while 16% discussed books that were assigned to them.

In the second category, researchers identified factors that **excited children about reading in general**. Two factors clearly rose to the top. First, the characteristics of books had a positive effect on their motivation to read. Specifically, children reported they enjoyed books that were funny or scary, and they chose books with great illustrations. Second, the findings demonstrated that children placed a great deal of importance on the information they gained from reading. They were motivated to read because of what they learned from the books they chose.

In the third category, researchers looked at **children's sources of motivation**. When asked the question, "Who gets you excited about reading?" the interviews revealed three distinct groups of individuals: family members, teachers, and themselves. Implications for the classroom reinforce the importance of home-school connections, as family members clearly influence reading behaviors. It is significant that students also credit teachers for sparking their desire to read, a reminder that enthusiastic adult role models of reading are needed in the classroom.

In his book *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (2012), Richard Allington examines Guthrie and Humenick's 2004 meta-analysis of 22 experimental or quasi-experimental studies of reading motivation and achievement. Their findings identify four classroom factors strongly related to reading growth:

1. easy access to interesting texts
2. student choice
3. student collaboration during reading and writing activities; and
4. emphasis on student effort over student outcome.



Engagement and Motivation in *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*

Research confirms that children who have not experienced success with books and literacy are apt to be unenthusiastic about learning to read and write (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). For students who struggle with reading and writing, teachers should remember the powerful effects of motivation. *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books* **provide countless opportunities to remind struggling readers about the delights of a good book and why learning to read is worthwhile.** Humorous stories with imaginative plots will grab their attention. Manageable chapters and “just right” text levels will keep them reading from the first page to the last. Throughout the reading experience, teachers model comprehension strategies and provide vocabulary support using ideas from the “Smart Word” cards to ensure student success. After reading, students have opportunities to revisit the text to increase fluency rates, or to practice expression in a Readers Theater activity. To extend written expression, students might be asked to work in small groups to write a sequel to the story or to complete a graphic organizer about story elements. Other student writing activities include creating journal entries, writing and illustrating help-wanted ads, and penning personal narratives using the story as a model.

Ensuring Success

Unfortunately, many children do not choose to read often, nor do they choose to read in significant amounts (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). A large number of children come to school with inadequate literacy experiences and are unprepared for the rigors of formal schooling (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Many young children have had limited exposure to robust, extended conversations with adults where they are apt to hear rich language. Others come to school without sufficient oral language development, or the highly-valued “lap hours” of read-aloud experiences. The challenges for addressing these varied needs in the classroom can be staggering.

How Volume and Access Impact Comprehension

The volume or amount of reading done by children makes a significant difference in developing their skills as readers (Allington, 2012; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). A classic study by Richard Anderson and colleagues showed that time spent reading books *out of school* was the best predictor of a child’s growth as a reader from the second to the fifth grade (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988).

Cunningham and Stanovich reported that early success at reading unlocks a lifetime of reading habits. They found the amount of print children were exposed to had profound cognitive consequences, and the act of reading itself increased children’s ability to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003).

When Allington (2012) reviewed studies comparing reading done *in school* by higher-versus lower-achieving students, he noted the evidence was substantial. Overall, lower-achieving readers simply read less during the school day than their higher-achieving counterparts.

But the news is not all bad for poor readers in today's classrooms. This is a wake-up call for schools to adjust their expectations and schedules to right this wrong. Cunningham and Stanovich noted a second positive dimension while investigating reading volume as a contributor to word growth. Their findings were clear: reading books yielded significant dividends for everyone. The more able students benefited, as did those children with limited reading and comprehension skills (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001).

Not only is the volume of reading crucial, but **access to reading material is also important.** In 2010, Reading Is Fundamental commissioned a study to better understand the educational benefits of children's access to print materials (Lindsay, 2010). Conducted by Learning Point Associates, the meta-analysis research synthesis found access to print:

- causes children to read more frequently and for longer periods of time
- improves reading performance
- helps children develop basic reading skills, and
- improves children's attitude toward reading and learning in general.

Fountas and Pinnell (2006) add that teachers need a large and varied collection of books to ensure students have access to both variety and quality. In addition, studies confirm that classrooms with a larger supply of books had: (1) students who read more frequently; and (2) more students reading books they could read successfully (Allington, 2012).

Findings such as these are important because proficient readers are exposed to more words. They read more while continually building their vocabularies. And because they read more, they are exposed to thousands of new words, various genres, and subject matter knowledge. As might be expected, poor or struggling readers read little. Their vocabularies remain unsophisticated due to minimal exposure to rich words and interaction with challenging text. Poor readers often have large deficits in vocabulary and, if and when they do read, their knowledge of useful strategies for unlocking word meanings is very limited (Allington, 2012).

The evidence is clear: motivation matters; choice and access to engaging books matter; and the amount of reading matters. Students need inspirational teachers as role models who will make reading the most important task each day. Classrooms must be literacy-rich environments, chock-full of engaging texts at varying levels of complexity. And students need sufficient time daily to read and write. Research is clear: readers get better at reading by reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Accelerating Literacy Development for Struggling Readers

The Importance of Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Regardless of slight nuances in the definition of comprehension, most everyone would agree that comprehension is the ultimate goal in reading instruction. Whether it is viewed as the construction of meaning or the interaction between reader and text, comprehension is a complex process. The RAND Study Group offers evidence that improvement in reading occurs when students are actively interacting with the text (Snow, 2002). In addition, the Study Group members suggest low-achieving students benefit from the explicitness with which teachers teach comprehension strategies.

Allington (2012) also confirms reading comprehension involves “active thinking,” and provides significant evidence that active thinking can be improved when teachers explicitly model comprehension strategies. His findings mirror data presented in *The National Reading Panel Report* (2000). Most students typically do not acquire helpful strategies on their own. As also noted by the RAND Study Group, readers do benefit when strategies are specifically taught and modeled. This is particularly true for lower-achieving students (Allington, 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Authors-practitioners Harvey and Goudvis (2007) concluded that when students read and respond to text that provokes thinking, they more likely become active, engaged readers.



Guiding principles of comprehension research related to the development of *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*:

- Direct or explicit instruction about comprehension strategies (such as self-monitoring, summarizing, and predicting) can be beneficial to reading comprehension (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, 2002; Pearson & Duke, 2002).
- Instruction on story grammar and text structure analysis positively affects comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Dickson, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998; Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002).
- Good comprehenders use specific strategies to help them retain, organize, and evaluate information they are reading (Snow, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000; Allington, 2012; Pearson & Duke, 2002).
- Reading fluency is a critical component of success in reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin; McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008; Rasinski, 2004).

When students read *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books* they **develop critical comprehension strategies empowering them to take charge of their own learning**. Teachers explicitly teach and model research-based strategies, gradually releasing responsibility to the students, always moving them toward independent reading and thinking. Handy step-by-step lesson plans provide guidance to support students before, during, and after the reading experience. Students analyze text structure in an instructive “Looking at a Narrative” section in each chapter book. In addition, readers are provided opportunities to expand their proficiency in fluency and writing in response to what they have read.

The Role of Vocabulary

The National Reading Panel Report states the importance of vocabulary in reading achievement has been recognized for more than half a century. (National Reading Panel, 2000). Two years later, in a follow-up report commissioned by the U. S. Department of Education, the authors of the RAND Study Group reaffirmed **vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to reading comprehension** (Snow, 2002).



Guiding principles of vocabulary research related to the development of *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*:

- Direct instruction of specific vocabulary is an important component in students’ vocabulary development (McKeown & Beck, 2004; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000).
- Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000).
- Vocabulary learning is effective when students are actively engaged in learning tasks (National Reading Panel, 2000; Allington, 2012; McKeown & Beck, 2004; Pressley & Fingeret, 2007).
- Learning in rich contexts leads to improved knowledge of word meaning (McKeown & Beck, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Students reading *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books* acquire vocabulary through active engagement, including: direct instruction of vocabulary; intentional and incidental learning; rich contexts; and repetition and multiple exposures. “Smart Word” cards, which accompany each title in the series, put best vocabulary practices into action. By integrating the Smart Word cards into instructional routines, teachers are able to differentiate instruction for learners of all abilities. One section of each card addresses the special needs of Spanish-speaking English language learners. All activities provide guidance for active participation as students work with partners or in small groups.

Scaffolding

When students are not experiencing success, it is critical for teachers to adjust the delivery, pacing, and/or content of the lesson. A key strategy for making learning more accessible is called scaffolding. Simply defined, scaffolding is a technique in which teachers provide extra modeling, examples, and support, especially as a new skill or concept is introduced. As students become more accomplished in performing the task or understanding the concept, the guided support is gradually withdrawn, allowing students to become more independent.

Scaffolded instruction may be the single most important approach to teaching that makes a difference in how well learners succeed (Strickland, Ganske & Monroe, 2002). When teachers scaffold instruction, readers can be successful, regardless of where they fall on the developmental continuum. Effective teachers carefully observe students, provide a variety of scaffolds, and thus make learning meaningful and purposeful. The RAND Study Group indicates that specific scaffolded instruction—such as pre-reading, building background knowledge through extended discussions, activities incorporating story structures or graphic organizers, and pre- and post-writing activities—has been effective to promote comprehension for low-achieving readers (Snow, 2002).



Teachers will find helpful scaffolding in *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*. Each book-specific teacher guide provides the following: ideas on pre-teaching key vocabulary words, suggested dialogue (including think-alouds) to support students during the reading process, and special guidance for English-language learners. For students, each chapter book has built-in support, including a main character page to identify who's who, an illustrated glossary to make vocabulary more accessible, and a table of contents page to provide a quick overview of what happens in the story.

Higher Order Thinking Skills and Effective Questioning Strategies

No one would argue that poor readers struggle while responding to comprehension questions. They frequently are not able to answer lower level (knowledge) questions, and truly wrestle with higher level inferential ones.

Students who struggle have rarely been *taught* how to respond to questions after reading text. Lessons typically focus more on assessing what is read, rather than helping students become more proficient in how they read (Allington, 2012; Keene, 2010). By providing appropriate strategies, teachers can help students better understand what they have read. Effective teachers model useful strategies they want readers to adopt when responding to questions, such as: returning to the text to find an answer; using information from the text and knowledge in their head; evaluating text using a rubric; or using graphic organizers to categorize information (McCardle, Chhabra & Kapinus, 2008).

As research and informal classroom observations confirm, most of the questions teachers typically ask are lower level in nature and lessons tend to focus on immediate recall of information (Allington, 2012). High-quality questions engage readers and produce deeper learning than lower level questions (Keene, 2010; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; Strickland, Ganske & Monroe, 2002).

Strickland and colleagues (2002) point out that, when thinking about the right kind of questions to ask, teachers should consider the following:

- quality of the questions
- feedback offered to students; and
- explicit modeling they provide in answering questions.

The recall of basic facts is important, but is only a minor component of overall reading comprehension. Quality instruction calls for a healthy balance of questions. Teachers should move beyond asking literal questions, and pose inferential and application questions to stimulate higher order thinking. Giving students immediate feedback that confirms why the response is correct can be helpful, as can additional prompts and discussion guiding students to appropriate responses. Explicit teacher modeling is also beneficial in providing students with examples of how to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections.



With *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books*, students have opportunities to respond to all three levels of questioning: literal, inferential, and application. Every book-specific teacher guide includes questions in the familiar before, during, and after reading instructional format. For each chapter, there are a variety of questions provided for teachers to prompt discussion while leading small groups. The higher-level questions encourage students to: (1) think more deeply; (2) become problem solvers; (3) integrate prior knowledge with newly learned information; (4) become active participants in group discussions; and (5) seek out new information on their own. The RAND Study Group confirms that for students in the intermediate grades, engaging students in elaborative questioning improves their comprehension of text read with the teacher as well as text read independently (Snow, 2002).

In addition, the teacher guides include blackline masters that provide engaging questions that require students to infer, analyze, evaluate, and apply as they respond to text. Also, in the back of each chapter book is a feature called “Think About It.” These questions are designed to guide students as they explore text and monitor their own understanding.

The Role of Assessment



Informal assessment opportunities in the *Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books* program are designed to help teachers (1) monitor progress toward literacy goals; and (2) adjust instruction and text levels according to student progress.

Written Responses

Blackline masters accompany each teacher guide to assess comprehension and language arts skills. Students are asked to perform a variety of written tasks to demonstrate their understanding of what is read. For example, while reading the book, students respond to questions as a self-monitoring tool. After finishing the book, students complete activities to review grammar or vocabulary skills, check fluency rates, or write for a specific purpose or audience.

Performance-Based Measures

Each teacher guide also provides suggestions for performance-based assessment. These activities may be used to informally observe and assess student progress in oral reading and comprehension. Activities include creating storyboards to retell a story, presenting an oral critique of a story to a partner, working in groups to present a Readers Theater version of a favorite chapter, and retelling the story in a first-person narrative.

Summary of Foundational Research Basis

- ✓ Motivation to read is a critical element in students' literacy development.
- ✓ Many factors affect motivation, but some of the most important are: access to interesting texts; choice over reading materials; meaningful, collaborative literacy activities; and adult models for positive reading attitudes.
- ✓ The volume or amount of reading done by children makes a significant difference in developing their skills as readers. Access to reading material is also an important factor.
- ✓ Most students do not acquire comprehension strategies on their own. Therefore, it is especially imperative for educators to explicitly teach these strategies to struggling readers.
- ✓ Vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to reading comprehension. Vocabulary skills can be developed through: direct instruction of vocabulary; intentional and incidental learning; rich contexts; and repetition and multiple exposures.
- ✓ Scaffolding instruction is an effective way to ensure readers can be successful, regardless of where they fall on the developmental continuum.
- ✓ Teachers should move beyond asking literal questions, and pose inferential and application questions to stimulate higher order thinking.
- ✓ Teachers can use a mix of informal assessment opportunities to monitor progress toward learning goals and adjust instruction according to student progress.



Laugh-Out-Loud Chapter Books allows teachers to boost achievement for their struggling and reluctant readers. The program offers engaging, high-interest narrative texts supported by lesson plans designed to build key literacy skills. The student books feature built-in reading support to provide scaffolding for low-achieving students, while the teacher guides make it easy to deliver targeted, explicit skills instruction.

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