

# Getting Started

This section provides you with the background necessary in order to begin using Readers Theatre in your middle school classroom. Chapter 1 of this section, “An Introduction to Readers Theatre,” familiarizes you with the concept of Readers Theatre and its theoretical base, placing it within the specific context of a middle school classroom. Chapter 2, “Launching Readers Theatre in the Middle School Classroom,” and chapter 3, “Developing the Performance,” offer a general overview of the key elements of Readers Theatre and provide guidelines and suggestions for their implementation. This broad look at Readers Theatre serves as a preview to the next section, which provides a microscopic look at the processes involved in Readers Theatre as it is enacted through the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



# An Introduction to Readers Theatre

In 1999, the International Reading Association (IRA) Commission on Adolescent Literacy declared there was an “ever-deepening crisis in adolescent literacy” (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 3). The 1998 Reading Report Card by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that only 60% of adolescents in the United States could comprehend factual statements and that less than 5% could elaborate on the meaning of material they had read (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). The NAEP’s study of the long-term trend in reading indicates that since 1971 there has been improvement in 9-year-olds, but little improvement seen in 13-year-olds and no improvement seen in 17-year-olds (Donahue et al.).

A bill introduced in the U.S. Congress in 2003 to reduce high school dropout rates cited illiteracy as the major cause for high dropout rates, noting that most students who drop out read below the ninth-grade level and that one quarter of those who graduate are barely able to read training manuals (Davis, 2003). Further, as students move through school, they are expected to read more and to comprehend more challenging text. The stagnant NAEP scores and the growing concern among educators regarding adolescent literacy make a strong case for a focus on effective literacy strategies for adolescents. Readers Theatre has proven to be one such strategy.

## What Is Readers Theatre?

Readers Theatre is a strategy that showcases the power of language. It is an interpretive reading activity in which readers bring characters, story, and even content area or textbook material to life through their voices, actions, and words. Allowing for interpretation through multiple modes, Readers Theatre is often described as “a stylized form of dramatization” (Trousdale & Harris, 1993, p. 201). Regardless of formatting and purpose, it is based on script reading and the suggestive power of language (Shepard, 1994). Readers Theatre has been called “radio drama” and a “play for voices,” and its ability to adapt to specific texts, ages, performance styles, and language is one of its strengths. The form of Readers Theatre most familiar to educators today was originally developed by Chamber Readers, a nonprofit Readers Theatre company in California that has promoted reading and literature since 1975.

“You get to act out and create a picture for your audience.”

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Readers Theatre provides an oral interpretation of literature, becoming an integrated language event in the classroom. Students may adapt and present self-selected material. A story, poem, scene from a play, song, or even material from a textbook, newspaper, historical document, or biography can provide ingredients for a script. Readers Theatre makes a unique contribution to the language arts through its integration of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing experiences.

Readers Theatre emphasizes the oral performance of a text. Its conventions require that the performers read from a text. The physical presence of the text or script visually reinforces that the performance is centered in the text, and the performance is a reading of the text. Through their expressive reading, posture, limited actions, and carefully selected production elements, the performers are suggesting and enhancing meaning and creating pictures. The audience is also a partner in making and visualizing meaning from the same text as the performers. It takes the text, the performer, and the audience to make complete meaning from the performance text, and it is this combination that brings the text alive.

This form of reading aloud goes beyond the traditional forum of round robin. It is an interpretive presentation of a text by a group of readers in a nonthreatening, controlled, and prepared setting. Readers Theatre creates an opportunity for students to explore a text and to become involved with the process of rehearsal and repeated readings (Herrell & Jordan, 2002).

### *Roles of the Teacher and Students*

In Readers Theatre, the students are always the readers and performers of the scripts and, once acquainted with Readers Theatre, can become the directors and producers. The teacher is first and foremost the director of the performance and initially serves as the producer and writer of the scripts. The goal is to scaffold student independence with Readers Theatre scripts and performances. The roles of both teacher and students are somewhat fluid and should be tailored toward the needs and abilities of individual classrooms. (For further discussion on the roles of teachers and students, see chapter 2, page 19.)

### *Setting*

Though many Readers Theatre performances take place in the classroom, the performance aspect can also move student readers and performers beyond the classroom. Readers Theatre performances may be developed for a wide variety of settings (see Figure 1). These can include other classes within the school or district, local libraries, historical societies, museums, art galleries, theaters; nursing homes; and community centers in connection with specific community events. Travel beyond classroom walls is also possible through the use of technology (audio/radio broadcast format, videotapes, public access broadcast

Figure 1. Readers Theatre Performance in an Alternative Setting—School Library



networks, website development, and the publication of scripts) and publication of Readers Theatre scripts in school newspapers or journals for students and educators.

### *The Audience*

In addition to the teacher and the performers, the audience plays a vital role in Readers Theatre. Within the classroom, the students themselves may comprise the audience. This flexibility, which allows students to move between the roles of performer and audience, allows for the participation of all students.

The audience may shift from within the class to the classroom down the hall, generating interactions among a variety of ages, grades, and abilities. Readers Theatre may also include other school personnel as well as parents, either as active participants in Readers Theatre or as observers of the performance or both.

Readers Theatre enables reading aloud with intent and purpose, where individuals are reading to and for an audience. Individuals read aloud with understanding because the material is familiar to them through repeated readings of the script. This process may also reinforce familiar content material that has been written or adapted by the readers themselves.

“All the rereading students do and their use of other people’s words really builds their confidence. A supportive group and a friendly audience also help.”

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The readers are interpreting character, action, motivation, mood, and tone by doing and experiencing them, and not simply talking about them (Trousdale & Harris, 1993). The reading becomes theater because of the many voices of both group and individual readers reading aloud, a way to make books come alive. The audience becomes part of the theater by listening to and imagining the details of scene and action communicated through those voices, sentences, and words. In fact, one of the performer’s goals in Readers Theatre is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action. This “shared happening between performers and audience” (Coger & White, 1982, p. 5) gives each individual a vital part to play. The readers perform through dramatic speech while the audience members create mental images of what they hear. For some, watching and listening to such performance enables them to understand literature or written text beyond the medium of print. This dramatic interpretation of text through Readers Theatre provides avenues for many ways of knowing.

Reading aloud may be enacted through Readers Theatre in a variety of ways. At one extreme, Readers Theatre is simply the reader and the script, without props, costumes, memorization of lines, or required movement. At the other extreme is the full-blown Readers Theatre performance with script and reader as well as mime, movement, props, costumes, and whatever else is needed or wanted. It is this versatility that makes Readers Theatre difficult to define, yet also ensures that reading aloud remains at its core where the script is constantly visible and used.

The setting itself may determine the method of presentation. “Students are free to sit or stand, in formal or informal arrangements, communicating primarily through the use of vocal inflection, gestures, and facial expressions” (Herrell & Jordan, 2002, p. 166). Scripts may be written for as many students as possible, involving them in the production solo, with a partner, or in a small group or groups. Those not participating as readers become the audience so that listening skills may be emphasized and reinforced to facilitate their future roles as readers.

Regardless of *how* it is implemented, Readers Theatre relies on a reader’s prior knowledge and experience to read the script and focuses on repeated readings for fluency and comprehension. In addition, the audience role is that of a reader of “living text,” and their prior knowledge combined with this living text will create personal meaning and understanding. Through performance, actors in Readers Theatre suggest a complete vision of the text with voice, body, posture and limited movement, music or sound effects, and limited props and stage settings.

## Research Base and Theoretical Background

To fully grasp the potential of using Readers Theatre in the classroom, it is important to know how it affects students. The concept of Readers Theatre is

grounded in a strong theoretical foundation. Combining research from both reading and creative dramatics, Readers Theatre helps defeat stereotyping, allows for variety in roles as well as learning modalities and levels of communication, and makes connections to learning standards (see chapter 9). Readers Theatre offers a forum for a process and a product, and places teachers in a range of roles, from model to facilitator. Readers Theatre not only supplies an unusual and creative approach to drama, but also provides an intense focus on fiction and nonfiction texts, making available the poems, narratives, and expository writings of the finest authors. The very performance of Readers Theatre allows these writings to come to life.

The following section explores studies and applications of Readers Theatre, lending a foundation of support to its many benefits. Discussion revolves around six major areas: oral communication skills, reading fluency and comprehension, reading motivation, vocabulary development, story schema, language structure, and collaboration.

### ***Oral Communication Skills***

Oral communication skills are enhanced through the use of Readers Theatre (Ediger, 2002). The need to speak clearly and enunciate so that listeners understand what is said and the emphasis on proper grammar and its usage are vital to Readers Theatre and serve as strong indicators of successful speaking skills. Although rereading is essential for fluency and comprehension, oral rereading has even greater potential: “A student having difficulties with a selection when he reads it silently may find it much easier to grasp when he reads it out loud or when it is read to him by a student who understands it” (Post, 1971, p. 170).

Oral reading “more than silent reading can make clear to readers such literary elements as the role of narrator and characters” (Post, 1971, p. 169). Readers focus on their voices to portray a character. Therefore, they pay attention to articulation, pronunciation, fluency, and projection.

Both fiction- and nonfiction-based scripts make frequent use of dialogue, including narration and conversation. Narration creates setting or movement and imparts other essential contextual information. Conversations are based on what the characters say; therefore, the language they use is especially important for understanding motivation and perspective. For example, a character with high social stature may use complex, formal language while a character without this high social stature may use humble, informal, or even incorrect language. Just as in real life, language changes according to the status, role, or mood of the character, and the language used in conversation allows the listener to “get inside” the story as well as the characters. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) found that students initiated discussion regarding

“You can use your voice to stand out.”

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oral interpretation of how characters should sound. They recorded two second-grade students talking about the characters Hansel and Gretel from the folktale:

Vicky: Your voice is too sweet. I don't think Gretel would talk nice to her stepmother.

Jessica: That's what I'm doing. Gretel is being too sweet because she can't stand her. I want it to sound like phoney, not like I'm really trying to be nice. (p. 332)

The components of language in speaking and listening give life to stories and ideas. "The sound of the language adds a new dimension of meaning" (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988, p. 138). Through Readers Theatre, students also develop listening skills: both the basic skills as performers required for listening for cues and the listening skills of an audience. As audience members, students develop both aesthetic and efferent listening skills. They listen for pleasure, and they listen to learn and understand. Knowing that they will also be performers, they listen critically to evaluate the reading and performance, the script and language used, and the story or content.

### *Reading Fluency and Comprehension*

Regardless of content or format, the key component of Readers Theatre is reading, specifically repeated reading that has been shown to foster fluency and to deepen students' understanding of text. Because the focus of Readers Theatre is reading, the list of Readers Theatre vocabulary in Table 1 presents key reading

**Table 1. Readers Theatre Vocabulary**

Aesthetic Listening:	Listening for pleasure.
Automaticity:	A decoding of text automatically so that attention focuses on comprehension.
Decoding:	Identifying words by attaching appropriate sounds to specific letters or letter sequences. A child decoding the word <i>cat</i> would read the letters with the appropriate sounds for /c/, /a/, and /t/.
Efferent Listening:	Listening for information.
Fluency:	The ability to read accurately with expression, pacing, and phrasing.
Guided Reading:	Teacher, as facilitator, listens to students read and guides them with questions to enhance their comprehension of text.
Intertextuality:	Making connections between texts.
Semantic Clues:	Clues to the meaning of words that focus on vocabulary and context. A child using semantic clues would read "The cat ran up the tree" and not "The cow ran up the tree" because of the context and the child's understanding of <i>cow</i> and <i>cat</i> .
Shared Reading:	Students observing the teacher reading from a shared text; then, when familiar with the text, reading it themselves.
Syntactic Clues:	Clues to the meaning of words that focus on sentence structure, grammar, and word order. A child using syntactic clues would read "She likes her new hat" rather than "She her hat new likes" because the structure of the latter sentence does not sound correct.

terms and definitions of the reading skills often utilized throughout the implementation of Readers Theatre. Opportunities for oral performance and interventions focused on reading fluency have been previously limited to the elementary grades. However, Readers Theatre is a viable strategy to be used with all grades, but especially middle school and high school where specific oral reading skills have been neglected (Goodson & Goodson, 2005).

Decoding, comprehension, fluency, and automaticity combine to create a successful reader, and each component is enhanced through the use of repeated readings in Readers Theatre. When readers first attempt to read, they must decode or translate print into sound. This process includes the use of phonics, context clues, sight words, and structural analysis. Next, the combinations of sounds or printed letters become words and then word groups and then sentences. For most readers, these first steps of decoding are automatic, as is the next step: focusing on the meaning within and between words, sentences, and paragraphs. Reading also requires decoding and making meaning from graphic elements of the text as well as connecting these visuals with the printed letters and words. These actions are the basics of the comprehension process. For an individual to be a successful reader, however, these actions must be combined with fluency (Ambruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

Fluency—the ability to read accurately and with expression, pacing, and ease—allows students to read aloud effortlessly and animatedly. As a fluent reader, they read with automaticity: They decode text automatically so their attention may be focused on comprehending what they read (Samuels, 1979). However, students who struggle with reading are usually unable to quickly identify most of the words in a text often because of a lack of automaticity. These students read in stilted, word-by-word delivery that sounds unnatural, and they are unable to pay attention to text meaning. They are also often unable to comprehend what they have read. These students have not had the experience or the practice of processing words and meaning automatically and fluently and may not have heard or paid attention to fluent and expressive reading.

The reading component of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), Reading First, declares that building fluency is one of its five major dictates. *Put Reading First* (Armbruster et al., 2001) states that “readers theatre provides readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency” (p. 29). Other studies also have found Readers Theatre to be a viable means of fostering fluency (Bidwell, 1990; Hoyt, 1992; Martinez et al., 1999; Rasinski, 2001; Rinehart, 1999; Tyler & Charad, 2000). Because research has shown that “many adolescents would benefit from additional time with the same text” (Goodson & Goodson, 2005, p. 24), repeated readings or rereading, a strategy inherent in Readers Theatre, will facilitate reading fluency and text comprehension. When students are reading fluently, their attention is no longer

“Thanks to Readers Theatre, their speaking aloud is clearer and their rate and pacing are good.”

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focusing on decoding but on comprehension (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1987, 1994; Homan, 1993; Samuels, 1979).

Readers Theatre offers a way for teachers to incorporate repeated readings in a motivating and meaningful context within their classrooms. Readers remember and understand more as they reread a story; their word recognition and pronunciation skills increase. Reading practice within the context of Readers Theatre becomes rehearsal with “the lure of performance” (Busching, 1981, p. 334), providing an incentive for students to return again and again to a specific passage with the goal of reading it fluently. The repeated reading involved in Readers Theatre affords practice needed for reading to become automatic and concurrent while creating a motivating forum to do so.

### ***Reading Motivation***

Students are given a meaningful context to read, write, speak, listen, and view through Readers Theatre. It serves as a motivational tool for them, developing their schema of specific texts, concepts, and language. In addition, Readers Theatre requires collaboration among students, establishing a valid and purposeful reason for students to work together for its creation and implementation. Rehearsals foster a confidence in and comfort level for all students and lead to a performance that provides a space where anything may happen.

Through repeated readings as well as performance with others, students make close contact with the text. They experience the text firsthand, no longer observers or even merely readers. This experience of performing a text serves as a major motivating factor for students to read (Bidwell, 1990; Martinez et al., 1999; Millin & Rinehart, 1999; Rinehart, 1999). “Repeated readings become rehearsals, and those rehearsals before their peers, and an eventual performance provide the incentive to practice reading the same passage repeatedly” (Goodson & Goodson, 2005, p. 25).

To enter on cue during rehearsals and performance, readers must carefully read and listen to the text. This challenge, or “the lure of performance” (Busching, 1981, p. 334), serves as an incentive for revisiting the text constantly, as students strive to bring the written words to life. Not only does Readers Theatre provide a meaningful context in which students read, write, speak, listen, and view, it also includes the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence as a physical aspect of learning (Larkin, 2001), supporting teachers’ observations that many students have a desire to perform and express themselves orally (Prescott, 2003).

Readers Theatre also allows students to have a voice in decision-making and collaboration. Students should be allowed to select the role in which they are most comfortable, and this means allowing students to be readers, performers, and organizers. Each of these roles requires reading, speaking, listening, and preparing. Decision making regarding

“Readers Theatre is a very fun way of learning things by acting them out. I like how you have to use body movements and your imagination instead of props. That helps you get into the reading more.”

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roles, choice of text, choice of language, pacing and expression, experimentation, and performance empowers students and sparks enthusiasm because they are in control of the process and it becomes their own.

Bidwell (1990) found that struggling middle school students were especially motivated by Readers Theatre. Her work with eighth graders included turning a trade book with which they were struggling into a script, then rehearsing and videotaping it. She discovered that students came alive, concentrating “so much harder because they were going to be performing in front of their class or parents, or sometimes the whole school” (p. 40).

Readers Theatre motivates students to read, to read expressively, and to read for understanding. Research (Bidwell, 1990; Chomsky, 1976; Martinez et al., 1999; Ranger, 1995; Uthman, 2002) has found a significant increase in students’ motivation to read when participating in Readers Theatre. Students once viewed as poor readers were seen in a positive light by peers after participating in Readers Theatre. Students remained on task for longer periods of time and found a purpose for the repeated readings required for performance. The motivating aspects of Readers Theatre are key to its success in the classroom. In addition, the performance aspect of Readers Theatre motivates students to develop their vocabulary.

### ***Vocabulary Development***

Over a century of research on vocabulary has helped educators to understand that vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916) and that lack of vocabulary may be a crucial factor underlying school failure (Becker, 1977). Therefore, vocabulary development is essential, and, because words are best learned in context, vocabulary development may be facilitated through reading (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). By encouraging students to develop and use well-organized scripts—scripts then used to verbally enact the story or present information—Readers Theatre creates a meaningful context in which students may learn new vocabulary and word usage.

Through Readers Theatre, students are introduced to texts of good literary quality and exposed to varied, rich, and colorful vocabulary. The promotion of word play where words “feel good on the tongue, sound good to the ear, and incite a riot of laughter in the belly” (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002, pp. 147–148) gives students pleasure while it develops their vocabulary. Creating a forum within the classroom where students are “immersed in a situation in which rich, precise, interesting, and inventive use of words is valued” (Graves & Watts-Taffe, p. 150) encourages students to develop their vocabulary. Such a forum is Readers Theatre. It gives students the responsibility of reading, speaking, listening, and writing language in a performance medium. Because the goal of performance is to engage the audience, Readers Theatre serves as an excellent vehicle for word play and vocabulary development.

In their writing of a script, students may borrow vocabulary from their reading. For example, young children developing scripts for Readers Theatre were found to use vocabulary from fairy tales they had heard frequently read aloud. Older students are able to

extend their vocabularies when they have sustained interactions with a well-written text. Just as big, shared books provide a model for the language children use in their own stories, so does Readers Theatre (with its repeated readings of a text) perform a similar function. (Hill, 1990, p. 3)

Performance demands attention and so does the need for students to find the right words to gain that attention.

Beyond motivation is the manner in which vocabulary is learned. As noted earlier, vocabulary is best learned in context, but even context is not enough unless there are repetitive encounters. Especially beyond the elementary grades, “the need for repetition or redundancy is an important idea to hold on to in developing vocabulary as well as comprehension” (Early & Sawyer, 1984, p. 337). Vocabulary development occurs, not through assigned word lists, but through repeated encounters with words in natural contexts. Therefore, one of the essential elements of Readers Theatre, the concept of repeated readings, has applicability for vocabulary development. Because Readers Theatre uses repetition, activity, and reinforcement, three facets of the basic procedure for developing vocabulary (Smith & Barrett, 1975), it may be beneficial in increasing students’ sight vocabulary.

Many middle school struggling readers are word-by-word readers. They may read and understand an individual word, but they do not anticipate what is coming next or realize that the word they have read is part of a sentence that must be understood as a whole. Both semantic and syntactic clues enable the reader to read and comprehend each word as well as the complete sentence. Through script read-alouds and repeated readings, Readers Theatre gives students the opportunity to get beyond reading word by word. Becoming familiar with the script and understanding both its meaning and use of language provides readers with experience in the use of semantic and syntactic clues.

Vocabulary development, critical for students of all ages, but especially for middle and high school students, is facilitated through reading (Nagy et al., 1985), word play (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002), and instruction that includes the repetition of a word, an activity, and reinforcement (Smith & Barrett, 1975). The forum of Readers Theatre, through the use of repeated readings, word play, semantic and syntactic clues, and peer feedback, all within a performance venue, is able to provide strong support for the development of students’ vocabulary. Readers Theatre also has the potential to increase students’ sense of story schema and language structure.

## Story Schema

Reading from a shared text or creating or adapting scripts within the forum of Readers Theatre has the potential to increase students' knowledge of story schema and intertextuality. The sustained interactions with a well-written text during Readers Theatre provide a model of good writing and help to extend students' vocabulary (Hill, 1990).

Moving into the text, students come to recognize both its details and major themes. If reading fiction, students' story schema (expectations of the organization of story, including setting, characterization, theme, and plot) is developed. If reading dialogue, students also come to learn about point of view (Ratliff, 2000), allowing them to consider another's thoughts or perceptions. The elements of drama, such as movement, sound, and energy, as enacted through Readers Theatre, help students see things from different perspectives. Taking on the role of a character challenges students to develop empathy for that character or to better understand what motivated the character to act in a specific way.

If reading nonfiction, students begin to recognize specific organizational patterns of the text. Students reading both fiction and nonfiction focus on the content and the process of reading the text. Their schemata of prior life experiences and prior reading experiences with similar texts interact with the reading context. This interaction helps students to predict text and aids in their processing of letters and sounds. Concurrently, the development of schemata is facilitated by the recognition of letters, sounds, and words. This constant circular processing continues smoothly for successful readers and is supported and enhanced by Readers Theatre. As students continue to read, they also begin to grasp intertextuality (making connections between texts) and recognize how a narrative or expository text can be written in the form of a Readers Theatre script.

"Readers Theatre is a very expressive way to show feelings. I like this because instead of expressing my own feelings, I have the chance to express a character's feelings."

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## Language Structure

Readers Theatre may help students become more aware of language and its structure, especially syntax or the knowledge of word order, phrasing, and grammar. Students involved in dramatic activities such as Readers Theatre constantly explore ways of talking and using language. Pellegrini (1980) observed dramatic play with young children and discovered a correlation between such play and the children's understanding of syntactic structure. Using text in Readers Theatre to actively engage children allows them to examine word order, phrasing, and grammar for both literal and emotional meanings (i.e., "I do not fear..." versus "Can't scare me").

If students create or adapt a text for a Readers Theatre script, they learn to discriminate between trite or contrived language and effective language (Hill, 1990; Ratliff, 2000). They begin to consider the rhythm of the words, the length

of the sentence, and the use of rhyme and repetition. Whatever makes an effective narrative or nonfiction text becomes obvious when students read aloud in Readers Theatre. Working on a script for performance allows students to grasp the use of language to describe ideas, to organize text, to create a mood, and to make a point. Devices such as repetition of a theme, key word, or phrase are incorporated into the script, and students become aware of pacing, sequencing of ideas, and editing needed to give the audience enough information to understand the characters, story, or concepts.

This exploration and use of language often leads to a greater awareness of the variations in language and a more critical use of syntactic patterns. The creation or adaptation of scripts for Readers Theatre also reinforces syntactic knowledge (DeRita & Weaver, 1991). Constant editing, rereading, reading aloud, and group feedback provide opportunities for students to discuss and better understand language structure as well as to become accurate and fluent readers of text.

Students engaged in Readers Theatre use “literate language” (McMaster, 1998, p. 575) and play with words, selecting the language they believe best fits. Through the implementation of Readers Theatre in the classroom, the power of story and the power of language are demonstrated. Students begin to realize that the written and the spoken word have the power to entertain, to create, to think, to reflect, to change, and to communicate.

### *Collaboration*

All students in the class may be a part of Readers Theatre, and all readers rely on one another to succeed. This means that students not only have to work cooperatively, but they also have to communicate what they understand as well as what they want and be able to articulate reasons to support what they want. This cooperative process has both social and intellectual benefits, helping students to better communicate and work together and to better understand, ask, request, suggest, and test ideas.

The collaboration required of students to successfully create, practice, and implement Readers Theatre not only helps to eliminate labels of reading ability (Wolf, 1993), but it also helps students work together toward shared goals (Goodman, 1978; National Institute for Literacy, 2001; Sloyer, 1982). As students work together, their confidence grows, they begin to see themselves as part of a successful project, and they gain a sense of pride and satisfaction. Because Readers Theatre is an experience that may last only a few days or a few weeks, students are able to complete a project and see their efforts rewarded.

A lack of gender or racial discrimination in roles is possible in Readers Theatre. It is appropriate for a girl to read a boy’s part, a student to read an adult’s words, and conversations to be read by students from a variety of cultures. In fact, the very turning of these roles upside down and sideways often provides insights and humor for the reader and the audience.

“You get to work with different people.”

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One of the more appealing possibilities of Readers Theatre, in juxtaposition to the collaboration it requires, is the elimination of labels of reading ability through its adaptation to a variety of learning styles. Dewey (1944) advocates the combined use of sensory, motor, and mental processes for effective learning. Hoyt (1992) asserts that there are “many ways of knowing” (p. 580), and that students develop greater reading comprehension when they are able to integrate reading with drama and oral language. Trousdale and Harris (1993) discuss many ways Readers Theatre includes different kinds of intelligences beyond verbal intelligence in the interpretation of literature. In her yearlong study using Readers Theatre, Wolf (1993) found that interpretative behaviors such as language use, body movement, and affective interpretations allowed for a more fluent reading and for stronger comprehension as the students enacted self-created literary texts.

Drama provides a context for students to employ the language arts (Pappas & Brown, 1987). Struggling students especially are often able to be successful through Readers Theatre because there is a physical aspect of learning (bodily, kinesthetic intelligence) as well as the development of interpersonal, social, and collaborative skills. The use of these modalities allows students to weave together many possible text interpretations in addition to providing practice and purpose for the actual reading of text.

The integrated language event of Readers Theatre—with its focus on speaking and listening and opportunities for reading, writing, thinking, and viewing—promotes cooperative interaction with peers and enables students to read expressively and with confidence (Prescott, 2003). Further, the concept of repeated readings has been shown to lead to significant gains in fluency and increased student motivation to read. Readers Theatre provides a context for vocabulary development; it immerses students in story schema and the structure of language by providing examples of diverse quality literature that is both read and heard. Finally, the oral communication skills required in Readers Theatre prompt students to reread orally, engage in discussion and dialogue with attention to pronunciation and fluency, and comprehend what is read and heard more clearly. The impact that the process and performance of Readers Theatre have on students’ language development and literacy skills as noted here is enormous. The benefits are many and varied, and, perhaps most importantly, the use of Readers Theatre is easily integrated into the classroom and its curriculum.

“I like Readers Theatre because you express yourself in many ways, like when we were reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. I made a paper wig so I could read Charlotte’s part. It was awesome!”

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT  
(MALE READING A FEMALE  
CHARACTER’S LINES)

## Adaptability and Practicality of Readers Theatre

In addition to being supported by a solid research base, Readers Theatre is practical and can be implemented by classroom teachers. Because of its adaptability to age, audience, and ability, Readers Theatre is more approachable

for most classroom teachers. In addition, its emphasis on reading and the use of quality text allows for a smooth integration into content areas.

Because students may devise roles and select their own parts in Readers Theatre, there exists a noticeable lack of emphasis on reading ability. The wide spectrum of roles and the process of Readers Theatre itself allow students with special needs, struggling readers, and/or emergent readers to play a part. Teachers recognize students' varying abilities and are able to structure performance groups, select appropriate materials to be performed, and suggest or assign roles that will create successful reading and performance situations for all students. A performance may have one person reading each part or groups of students reading parts as a chorus. The latter format gives each student a role and allows the group to set a pace that helps struggling or emergent readers to successfully experience reading. With mixed-ability classrooms becoming more and more common, the adaptability of Readers Theatre for all levels of students is extremely beneficial for teachers.

Readers Theatre makes accessible a variety of texts. It also engages students with text through discussion, reading aloud, listening, visualization of text, and assessment of their work in relation to the text content, and provides the time for students to be engaged beyond simply discussion. It allows students to play with language, words, and concepts, and to share what they have learned. Through Readers Theatre, teachers are able to involve their students in "an interactive, interpretive process without the constraints of typical theatrical endeavors involving elaborate props, costumes, memorization of lines, lengthy rehearsals, and scenery" (Herrell & Jordan, 2002, p. 166). Given the time constraints of the school day, this very simplicity makes Readers Theatre more approachable and possible for the classroom teacher.

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