TES talks to...

education guru Doug Lemov

Understanding complex vocabulary and syntax is the key to boosting literacy, so teachers should persuade parents to read challenging texts aloud with their children, says Teach Like a Champion author Doug Lemov

Last year, a group of teachers in the US asked Doug Lemov to write a letter to parents about the benefits of reading aloud to children. It got him thinking: what role do teachers want parents to have when it comes to literacy? What are the key factors that ensure children become advanced in their reading? He wrote the letter, but the questions stuck with him. A year on, he's written a second letter for parents, which includes plenty for teachers to ponder, too.

On a Saturday morning a few weeks ago, my youngest daughter and I sat together on the couch reading. The sun was streaming in through the windows as we made our way through the final chapter of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. The novel imagines the real-life story of a woman found living alone on a Pacific island in the 19th century. She is the last of her people and is later brought to California.

The novel was winding down. In the final scenes, Karana, the protagonist, boards a ship, willingly agreeing to leave behind everything she's ever known and setting sail for a place she's never seen with people she can't understand. My little Goose was transfixed – tucked in very close and thinking deeply. She wanted to know: how much of the story was true? What happened to Karana after she left? What did the Island of the Blue Dolphins look like now and what was there?

Together, we found out. We went online and read articles that answered her questions. We looked at pictures of the island today.

After reading a description of its desolate and arid bird sanctuary, Goose said quietly, "She ran to the boat", replaying those last scenes in which Karana chooses the danger and unknown of "civilisation" over her own harsh but familiar home.

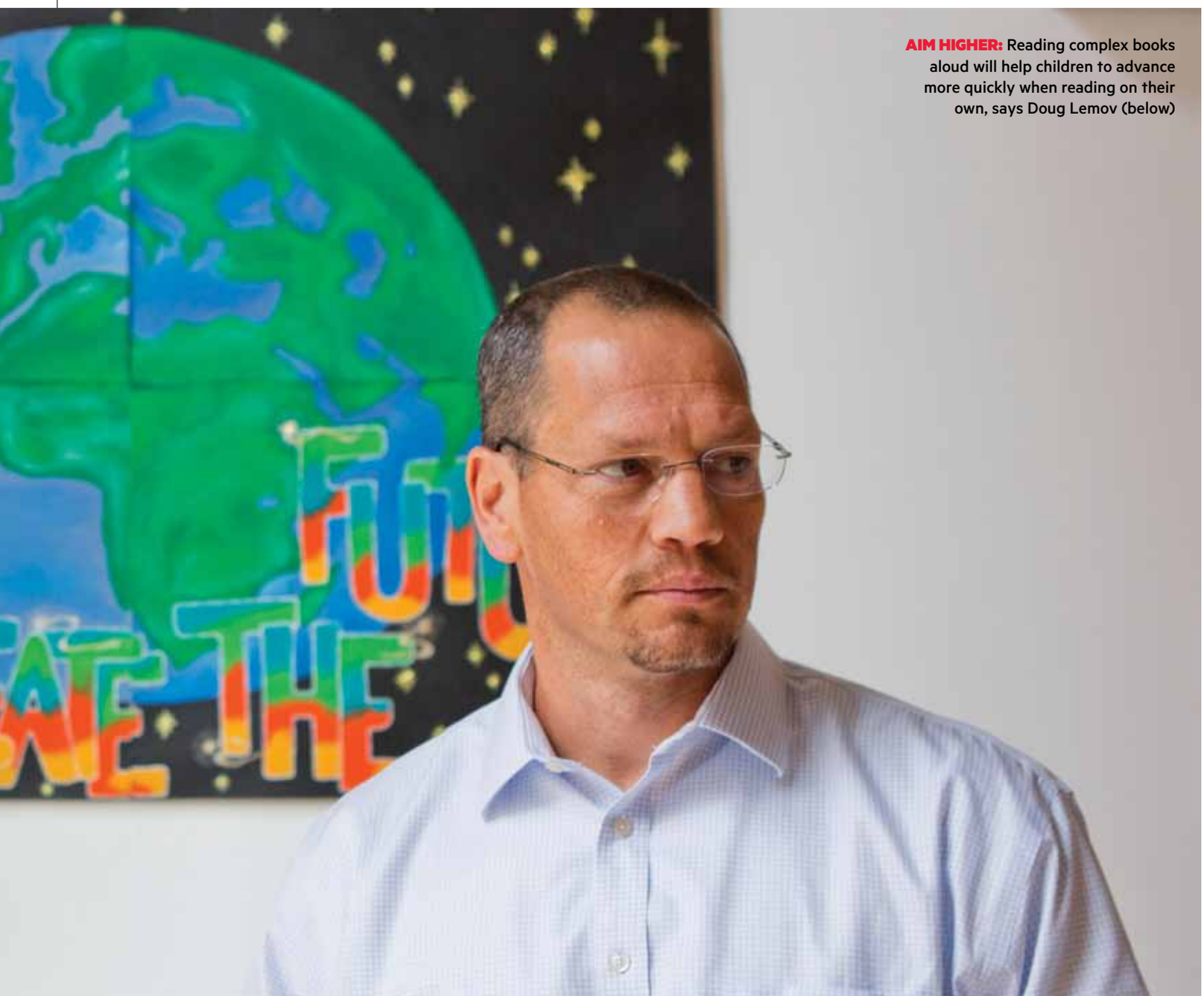
The gatekeeper task

Listen, I am biased. If there's anything that makes me happier than reading with my kids, I haven't yet found it. And as an educator, I won't be the first to make the case for reading aloud to your kids.

But I want to go beyond the basic advice ("read to your kids") and share some thoughts about the importance of reading challenging texts to your kids – books more advanced than they can read on their own.

This is very important because it prepares them to engage with difficult texts and complex ideas. In time, most kids learn to effectively decode (applying their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to correctly pronounce written words). Far fewer learn to follow difficult ideas in complex texts.

So, yes, encourage your kids to practise decoding and fluency on accessible texts. But also realise that being read to from books that are more complex than they can read on their own prepares them for the gatekeeper task: understanding difficult ideas and complex texts.



AIM HIGHER: Reading complex books aloud will help children to advance more quickly when reading on their own, says Doug Lemov (below)

GRAHAM TURNER /THE GUARDIAN

Goose, tucked in next to me on the couch, is a 2nd grader here in the US (the equivalent of Year 3 in England). *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is measured at 1,000 on the Lexile scale – which measures a text's complexity and a reader's skill level.

Lexile 1,000 is actually closer to the 6th grade level (Year 7) in vocabulary and syntax – that's when the 75th percentile student reads at Lexile 1,000. This is important. Even by their last years in high school, the weakest 25 per cent of readers never read at Lexile 1,000, a point the top 25 per cent of readers reach in 6th grade.

Again, just about everyone learns to decode. But not being able to understand the sorts of complex texts that make college viable is an epidemic.

One important benefit of reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, then, is that Goose will learn challenging vocabulary before she is able to read it on her own. And at a faster rate. When she encounters words in her independent reading, she will have the benefit of knowing more of the words she's trying to read. This will help her to succeed at decoding them.

> Knowing advanced vocabulary will push the margins of what my daughter can read

And, as she gets older, knowing vocabulary that is more advanced will push the margins of what she can read on her own.

I skimmed *Island of the Blue Dolphins* to look for rich vocabulary. In a few seconds, I found "befall", "glisten", "pelt", and "decree". Ask yourself: when did you last use one of those words in conversation with your child? You probably haven't for several years, if at all. Even in conversations with adults. Words like that almost never occur in spoken conversation. They only show up in written texts – specifically, in the kind of advanced complex texts that you must read to prepare for and succeed in college.

Put another way: reading complex texts is the only way to learn words such as those.

So kids who have been read to are likely to be familiar with the words at the next levels of their reading, words that will be barriers to many students.

But it's not just with vocabulary that reading aloud helps. Consider this sentence describing the arrival of a trader ship at the beginning of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*: "As I crouched there in the toyon bushes, trying not to fall over the cliff, trying to keep myself hidden and yet to see and hear what went on below me, a boat left the ship."

That sentence is incredibly complex. There are five different actions taking place: a boat

There are myriad sources of blithe and anodyne amusement; only reading offers to-your-soul depth

is arriving; a girl is crouching in some bushes; she is trying not to fall; she is trying to both listen and to stay hidden; and at the same time trying to see the boat.

If you drew a diagram of it, you'd basically get this sentence, split down the middle and with a bunch of other actions jammed, syntactically, into the middle: "As I crouched there in the toyon bushes, a boat left the ship." It's not every day you see an author try to describe so many things and their relationship to one another inserted into the middle of a single sentence.

But this is not just a clever bit of writing. Complex syntax poses a massive barrier for students. They read a sentence like that and cannot unwind its syntax. They grasp a few pieces, one or two ideas, but cannot put all of the pieces together.

The roots of misunderstanding

Many times as an educator, I have traced the roots of a misunderstanding of some major idea in a passage to a student's struggle to differentiate the meaning of one clause in a complex sentence from the meaning of the whole thing.

Consider this sentence: "She stepped forward quickly to help, only to find that her muscles, her tendons, would not obey."

The point – which must be unpacked from complex syntax – is that she did not, in fact, help. If you understand only the simple part of the sentence, you get exactly the wrong meaning.

In our book *Reading Reconsidered*, my co-authors and I describe a sentence from *Oliver Twist* that is 37 words (and seven lines!) long. Want to know why kids can't read Dickens – or Darwin or [African-American social reformer Frederick] Douglass? Their ability to master the complex syntax of those texts is one big reason.

Hearing complex syntax read aloud builds an affinity for a different kind of vocabulary. Call it the vocabulary of syntax. As with distinctive words, so too will they be more ready to decipher complex and unusual sentence structures – a string of introductory prepositional or participial or appositive phrases that are hard to follow, say – when, months or years later, they begin to read them on their own.

All of that advanced vocab and syntax will be really good for Goose. But most important, perhaps, is the complexity of the story.

Island of the Blue Dolphins is a long way from a Magic Tree House book, the kind of thing she loves to read on her own (and which I am a big fan of). It engages Goose in complex ideas and thoughts, complex plot, rich detail. That, too, will make her a better reader. But most important of all it will make her, I think, someone who loves reading. I want her to associate amazing stories – as enthralling as any movie – with reading. Nothing makes the case for that like the best, the richest, books.

There's an irony here. This is the era of the "device": the buzzing and flashing smartphone. It is designed by our society's finest minds to fight back against you in every minute you attempt to forget it and sustain focus on something else – reading, say. Most likely yours is within five feet of you right now. Most likely you are addicted to it. In such an era, reading is at risk. And, in fact, that data is clear. People are reading less and less. Young people most of all.

A common but unfortunate response may be to make reading easier, more accessible. The thinking is that kids will like reading if we give them what's easy and appealing. If it's too challenging, it will drive them away. My own children often hear the message that they should avoid any book where there are more than five words they don't know on a page.

I can't speak for you, but if that book is *Unbroken* or *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I am telling the older Lemov children to go for it anyway.

To me, it's only by experiencing what is truly great – which is often also difficult – that they will be sold on reading. It's not the accessibility of books that makes converts of their readers, it's the brilliance, the power, the greatness.

Bring books to life

So read the best books with your kids. Read them aloud, bring them to life. Because challenge is far more engaging in the long run than pandering. There are myriad sources of blithe and anodyne amusement. Only reading offers to-your-soul depth.

What's more, challenging books push us to read non-fiction – harder to read and constantly required of college students – in response. Like Goose and I seeking to know what was complex, new and fascinating about *Island of the Blue Dolphins*: we become ad hoc researchers.

It's no surprise then that Goose still talks about *Island of the Blue Dolphins* weeks after we read it. But more important is the fact that my 13- and 15-year-olds still remember sitting on the same couch at the same age reading the same book. Even years later: say the title and watch their faces react, their eyes.

The story was for them then, as it is for Goose now, unlike anything they had experienced – deep, haunting, beautiful, inspiring. It was deeply memorable because *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was far harder – but also far more interesting – than anything they could read on their own. And that made all the difference.

Doug Lemov is the author of Teach Like a Champion *and* Reading Reconsidered: a practical guide to rigorous literacy. *Find out more at www.teachlikeachampion.com @Doug_Lemov*