

Reading that Generates Both Information *and* Inspiration:

The Importance of Using Informational Texts in the K-5 Classroom

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Do you remember when you were a young student in the early primary grades? You may recall listening to your teacher read wonderful tales in which the characters were animals who could perform humanistic feats, the stories were set in far-away imaginary lands, and, of course, everyone lived happily ever after. Your classroom library was probably brimming with whimsical stories, and while you may have *heard*, and even *recognized*, the term “nonfiction,” you probably weren’t exposed to the reading of such books in large quantities. More than likely, you learned how to read through fictional text; for most of us, fictional stories were the quintessential norm of the primary-age classroom, and it wasn’t until upper elementary that we started understanding the importance of reading for information.

Now think about the literacy environment of today’s P-5 classroom. The reading culture of our educational system has been completely revamped, and it is now customary to see teachers reading informational texts to and with their young students on a daily basis. “Reading for information” has become a particularly pivotal phrase that educators hear constantly. In 2004, Yopp and Yopp discussed an increased emphasis on the reading of informational texts. While this was indeed stressed then, just think of how the emphasis on reading to inform has greatly expanded during the past decade.

According to the Common Core, informational texts for grades K-5 are defined as “biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts;

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technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 31).

Since the implementation of the Common Core Standards, students are expected to develop research skills and there is a much greater predominance on the importance of text complexity.

While there are some who may scoff at this new way of thinking, there is evidence to show that a change was indeed necessary in our education system.

Why the Need, and Why Now?

Through the years, educators have been inundated with research indicating, and confirming, that many students hit the proverbial “wall” as they enter into middle and secondary grades. In the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s, and the decades which preceded them, there was an inadequate focus on the utilization of informational texts in the elementary grades. A study by Duke in 2000 found that teachers in first-grade classrooms used informational texts as little as 3.6 minutes per day. Although varieties of informational texts were generally available for students’ use in the upper elementary grades, these texts were often seen as simply resource tools. Teachers often spent limited time extolling the benefits of informational texts, and students were frequently uneducated on *how* to effectively read such texts (Frey & Fisher, 2007).

This created a huge and vicious cycle in our education system. Students who had not been adequately trained on proper usage of informational text fell behind once they reached the middle school years, as most of what is read in middle school (and beyond) is strictly for informational purposes (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011). In addition, many students who had not been exposed to the attributes and benefits of informational texts lost interest in reading altogether and found it to be more of a chore than an enjoyable hobby. Decade upon

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decade yielded similarly dismal results. Therefore, there was a tremendous need to change the way that students learned to read for informational purposes.

Students who have limited exposures to informational texts prior to the middle and secondary grades, and those who are not adequately taught how to utilize informational texts appropriately, often fall behind in the middle and secondary content areas. Teaching children to read for information must begin in the early grades; kindergarten and first grade children *can* (and do!) enjoy, and therefore benefit from, informational texts (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Duke (2004) believes that waiting until upper elementary grades to teach children about informational texts does a tremendous disservice to students and sets them up for failure later in their academic careers.

In today's fast-paced digital world, keeping up-to-date and informed is paramount. Smith (2000) believes that for adults, the majority of everyday reading consists of nonfiction texts, with as much as 95% of daily reading designated for informational purposes. This is why we must teach children how to understand the value and importance of informational texts. Children who grow up on informational text as part of their daily "reading diet" will have much less trouble reading for information as they move into older grades and adulthood. Common Core State Standards were developed "to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school" (p. 3). Reading nonfiction texts allows students to have a larger array of background knowledge and permits students to develop critical thinking skills. Such skills are crucial for success in older grade levels, in postsecondary education, and in the workforce environment (Goodwin & Miller, 2012/2013).

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Nonfiction texts can also motivate students to find topics which appeal to their interests. A child's great curiosity about a subject just might lead to a rewarding and successful career in the future. Nonfiction texts allow students to explore and pursue topics that are of the most interest to them (Goodwin & Miller, 2012/2013). When a child demonstrates great curiosity about a particular subject area, that passion can potentially lead to a rewarding and successful career which focuses on that topic. We call informational texts "real-world reading" (Oczkus, 2011, p.2). As the ultimate role (and goal) of the teacher is to prepare students to be functioning members of society, informational texts allow students to receive real-world perspectives.

Remember that "Nonfiction" isn't a Bad--or Boring-- Word!

If the term "nonfiction texts" reminds you of dusty periodicals filled with drab content, there is good news! Teachers now have access to wonderfully written informational texts, and children can learn to read for information in a multitude of ways, including newly-enhanced textbooks, bright and colorful picture books, a plethora of internet sources, magazines designed strictly with children in mind (such as TIME for Kids®), graphic novels, fact books (such as the "Discoveries" book series), chapter books, and digital resources (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011). No longer does informational text need to be seen as unexciting; publishers recognize the need for such texts and offer many high-quality nonfiction options for all grade levels, reading levels, and reading interests.

Teachers must always remember that boys and girls learn differently (Sax, 2007), and boys tend to enjoy reading about topics that are much different than girls. Many boys especially love to read nonfiction texts (Oczkus, 2011). Because boys, in general, tend to enjoy reading less than their female classmates, it is important that we give all students text that appeals to their

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likes and interests. Knowing this, award-winning children's author Jon Scieszka created a website called "Guys Read," which lists the titles of books that boys, in particular, would find interesting (www.guysread.com). Many of the books cited on this website are nonfiction texts.

Sharks, dinosaurs, insects, war battles, planets, and famous Americans, as well as other fascinating topics too numerous to list, can be of great interest to children. For boys *and* girls, Cunningham (2005) suggests that teachers frequently visit (and revisit) their classroom libraries to ensure that there is indeed something for everyone. When students enjoy the types of books that they are reading, they become more engaged in the reading process and reading skills improve. Reading interest inventories, conducted at the beginning of the school year, also yield invaluable information as to the topics and types of books that students enjoy reading. "Student attitudes toward reading are a central factor affecting reading performance" (Seitz, 2010, p. 30). Asking students about their preference in reading can be extremely helpful.

Educators have long understood that the more students read, their proficiency of the English language, reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary develops. What we are just beginning to understand, however, is that it is not just how *much* children read, but *what* they read that matters (Goodwin & Miller, 2012/2013). Children must be exposed to high-quality informational texts early in order to effectively develop those critical reading skills. Therefore, teachers must consistently ask themselves: Are informational texts readily accessible for my students? Do I use nonfiction texts in read alouds and shared readings? Am I utilizing quality nonfiction in my teaching of the content areas? Remember, in this day and age of reading instruction, we must supplement our teaching in order to grab our students' attention and make powerful, real-world connections.

Effective Teaching Practices for Informational Text

Although the nonfiction texts of today have been updated and improved and are indeed more appealing to children than ever before, we cannot assume that the role of the teacher has been minimized. On the contrary, there is a critical need for educators to understand the nuances of informational texts so that students can learn best practices when using such texts. Teachers must recognize that there are unique differences in fiction and nonfiction texts and must inform students of such differences. One example of this is the *text structure* (organization) of books. Unlike a fictional piece, a reader can often navigate through an informational passage without having to start at the very beginning (Oczkus, 2011). While fictional books are organized around stories with a problem and solution, nonfiction texts help to inform the reader and report factual evidence and statistical data. Nonfiction texts are typically organized around basic structures, such as *compare and contrast* or *cause and effect*. Cue words and phrases are often used with text structures (Oczkus, 2011), so it is critical that children begin to recognize these early on and build on their prior knowledge from year to year.

Another essential element of nonfiction reading is the use of *informational text features*. For example, the use of **bold print** or *italics* alerts the reader that the author of the text is highlighting a specific term or phrase, thus signaling the reader to remember key ideas. “Headings” signify that new content is forthcoming. One way that elementary teachers can educate students on the importance of this text feature is by having the reader take headings and turn them into questions. After a question is formed, the students can read the section to answer the question. “Bullets” highlight important information in an easy-to-read format, thus allowing the reader to quickly identify a list of important information that is being presented (Cohen & Cowen, 2008).

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Students must be taught to recognize text features (such as captions, photographs, graphs, tables, timelines, glossary, index, and table of contents) and understand the benefits and purposes of each (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; Oczkus, 2011). Children in the primary grades can (and should!) be exposed to text features; introducing a few at a time can help students become increasingly familiar with how such features can assist in the reading of nonfiction texts. Oczkus (2011, p.4) believes that as you introduce the text features, you should ask, “How does this text feature help you understand the reading?” This can be helpful in assessing the depth and breadth of knowledge that students have concerning the functionality of text features.

For young children, visuals are very important, so students can do “vocabulary visuals” while reading informational texts. Having students draw pictures with written words can be very beneficial for students’ understanding. Elementary students can also be taught how to take notes as they read for informational purposes. Even very young children can be taught to underline important names or dates, or highlight the main ideas of passages, or circle new and unfamiliar vocabulary. Depending on the grade level, children can work individually, in small groups, or even as a whole class. Students do not need to write in textbooks, as this concept can be done with age-appropriate magazines, newspapers, a “smart board,” or as a passage from the internet that has been copied for students. In addition, sticky notes can be used to help students make predictions, summarize, connect prior knowledge, jot down unfamiliar words they encounter, and write about “aha!” learning moments that occur while reading.

There are so many strategies to help students learn about and from informational texts. Not all strategies will work for all learners, as children have different abilities, interests, and developmental needs, so teachers should always have a large array of practical activities ready. Most importantly, teachers should model the importance of informational texts. When teachers

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encourage students to make inquiries about factual topics, they are showing students that nonfiction texts have a prevalent place in the classroom. We need to be enthusiastic in our utilization of informational text and we must teach with vigor. If students see a lack of excitement in us, they will, in turn, become disengaged and unexcited.

Don't Throw Out the Fiction with the Framework

Just as the old adage states that we must not “throw out the baby with the bathwater,” we must be very careful that we never underestimate the power and necessity of utilizing fictional texts in the classrooms—even in the upper elementary grades. We hear so much today about how reading for information is an intricate part of the reading framework of today’s classroom. Yes, informational texts are critically important and are immensely helpful in guiding students’ learning. But can fictional stories also inform while igniting creativity and curiosity? Absolutely! Some literature even lends itself to giving both real and fictional information; for example, historical fiction offers students the opportunity to learn about particular events and time periods through precise authenticity in settings, historical facts, dialect, and traditions. While the information presented in the story accurately depicts the historical time period, the characters are fictitious (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011).

It is so important to remember that narrative texts can be a source of great information for children. Just as teachers from decades before may have possibly relied *too* heavily on narratives, we must be careful to find a critical balance of fiction and nonfiction texts. The guidelines of the Common Core State Standards (2010) do stress more exposure to informational texts and more emphasis on reading and writing in the content areas, but the Standards also

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accentuate a need for true equality between the expository and the narrative. You simply cannot have one without the other in today's classroom environment.

As a society, we need children, teenagers, and adults who want to read. A recent study, released by Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization, found that the percentage of Americans teens who read for pleasure has plummeted over the past several decades. For example, in 1984, 70% of 13-year-olds read for pleasure weekly; in 2014, the percentage is down to 54%.; for 17-year-olds, the percentage went from 64% in 1984 to 40% in 2014. Sadly, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure went from a mere 9% in 1984 to 27% in 2014 (www.commonsensemedia.org). If this is the trend, what will the next 30 years hold? Children must be exposed to a great variety of literature so that they develop a desire to read. Many children (and adults) prefer reading fictional texts, while others do, in fact, enjoy reading about real persons, places, and events. No matter what, we must teach children how to learn from and appreciate all that fiction and nonfiction texts have to offer.

The Bottom Line: Children Benefit from Informational Reading

No matter the beliefs concerning Common Core Standards, one thing is true: Children do benefit from learning how to read informational texts in the primary grades. The sooner students are exposed to such texts, the better prepared they will be for future learning. In this age of exciting, new nonfiction texts, it is imperative that we incorporate this genre into all content areas throughout the day. It is also vital that students are taught a variety of strategies for how best to understand and appreciate all that informational texts have to offer.

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