

Nonfiction Reading in the Primary Grades

How and Why It's Good for Young Learners

By Nell K. Duke and V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

READING the newspaper is among the most common, and perhaps most important, literacy events in which adults engage. One study of a diverse group of adults found that they spent more time reading periodicals than any other category of text, with periodical reading comprising 27 percent of daily time spent reading on average (Smith, 2000). In another study, newspaper reading was found to be among the most common uses of literacy observed by young children in low-socioeconomic status families (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Unfortunately, in schools, newspaper reading is not so common. In fact, nonfiction reading in general is rare in primary-grade classrooms (see Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2002 for a review). Why would a kind of reading so important to life outside of schools, to learning about the world around us, and to active citizenship, be so neglected in school?

Why Not Nonfiction?

One reason for the scarcity of nonfiction text in primary-grade classrooms may be that theorists and researchers used to think that young children cannot handle nonfiction text. However, research now clearly shows that, if given the opportunity, young children can be successful with nonfiction text (see Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2002, for a review). Nonfiction text is developmentally appropriate for young learners.

Another reason for the scarcity of nonfiction text in primary-grade classrooms may be that until fairly recently, there has been a relative lack of well-written, appealing, and engaging nonfiction texts for young children. This has certainly changed, however, as there has been an explosion in publishing nonfiction texts for young children.

It Takes All Kinds of Texts

Today, teachers can find many kinds of wonderful nonfiction materials. Here are just some of the nonfiction sources that benefit children:

- trade books
- newspapers
- magazines
- Web sites

Using different kinds of nonfiction text is especially important because outside of schools, books do not dominate reading material as they often do within school walls. Children should be exposed to many different formats of reading material, of which books are only one.

We also recommend that teachers aim to balance use of fiction and nonfiction texts. Certainly, children should have a great deal of exposure to fictional stories, but they should also be exposed to nonfiction stories and to texts that are not in story form, such as a book about

whales or an article about global warming. We need to reflect the rich diversity of texts read outside of classrooms within our classroom walls.

How Nonfiction Benefits Children

Besides linking better to home literacy practices (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2001), research suggests that there are other benefits of including nonfiction text in primary-grade classrooms. Nonfiction text can:

- build background knowledge
- increase vocabulary
- build on children's interests
- enrich use of text across the curriculum

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- **better prepare children for later schooling, where they will encounter more nonfiction texts (see Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, for a review).**

In a recent study, we found that including more informational (a type of nonfiction) text in first-grade classrooms did not harm, and did indeed have some benefits, such as fostering better attitudes toward reading and better informational writing skills (Duke, Martineau, Frank, & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

Ways to Use Nonfiction

There are many instructional techniques that can be used effectively with nonfiction texts and young children (see Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, for a book-length discussion of such techniques). Here are some of our suggestions:

- **Ask high-level questions.** One point of emphasis in many nonfiction teaching techniques is the importance of asking high-level questions and having high-order discussions around nonfiction texts. Simply asking children factual questions with answers “right there” (Raphael & McKinney, 1983) in the text will not benefit children as much as also asking children questions that require drawing inferences, applying background knowledge, pondering, even debating. Questions that start with phrases like, “Why do you think . . .” “What do you think . . .” “Have you ever . . .” can be very productive. And such questions do not always have to come from the teacher. Research suggests that children asking one another questions about what they read can also be very powerful (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

- **Combine reading with hands-on experiences.** This is another way to promote richer discussion of text, and build knowledge and motivation. One study found the combination of hands-on experiences and reading interesting texts promoted greater learning in science than only one or the other of these things (Anderson & Guthrie, 1999). If children are reading an article about butterfly migration, they might spend some time observing butterflies. If they are reading about May Day celebrations, they might telephone local groups to find out what they have planned. If they are reading about tracing family

trees, they might work on creating their own family trees. We want children to see many ways to connect reading to “real life.”

- **Make reading-writing connections.** These connections can also be powerful tools in working with nonfiction texts and young readers. In the case of newspapers, children can write “press releases” about particular articles to pass on to other classes in the school. They can write letters to the editor about article content. They can write expanded versions of articles to share with their class, or even produce their own newspaper using adult-authored newspapers as models. When children write about and in response to what they read, it leads them to think more deeply about the text. Writing texts of their own also helps children to think more about features of text and the reading process—to read like a writer (and write like a reader).

Again, we must think of the world outside of schools: So often in our daily lives, we integrate reading and writing in some way. We want children to have the same opportunity. ■



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