

Reading Informational Texts in the Early Grades

Increasing your students' exposure to informational texts can dramatically enhance their literacy skills.

Research indicates that school-aged students comprehend narrative (story) texts more easily than they do expository (informational) texts (Berkowitz and Taylor, 1981; Langer, Applebee, Mullis, and Foertsch, 1990; Olson, 1985). Research also points to several possible reasons for this discrepancy, including the evidence that different reading skills are required for understanding informational and narrative texts, and that there is a lack of exposure and/or instruction related to reading informational texts, especially in the early grades.

Reading Informational Text Is Different from Reading Stories

Differences in the content and structure of narrative and expository texts require different sets of knowledge and reading skills for successful comprehension. For example, knowledge of story structure and the domain of human actions underlies comprehension of many narrative texts, whereas comprehension of expository texts depends on knowledge of the content and structure of specific disciplines. There are major structural differences between narrative and informational texts. Narrative texts are described through story “grammars,” or rules devised for expressing the structure of stories (Mandler, 1984), whereas informational texts are generally described in terms of their organizational structure and/or the levels of importance of the information they contain. Text structures are shaped in large part by the thinking patterns typical of the knowledge domain being represented in a text (Anderson and Armbruster, 1984).

A generally recognized goal of story reading is to understand the actions of the main characters, because the relations among characters are central to the plot and themes of stories (cf. Omanson, 1982). Knowledge of human actions serves as a guide to comprehension because it enables readers to link together various components of a story (Trabasso and van den Broek, 1985). However, informational texts represent specific disciplines, each of which is structured in a different way. For example, comprehension of physics and history texts is facilitated by the knowledge that physicists primarily consider events to be invariant—that is, laws that explain natural phenomenon are generally predictable—whereas historians do not view events as necessarily invariant or predictable.



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Flexible grouping represents thoughtful and strategic use of a range of grouping options throughout the literacy instructional period.

Just as domain-specific knowledge aids comprehension, so does knowledge of text structure. Children as young as the preschool level use knowledge of story structure in a variety of ways: to guide their expectations about stories; to identify what is to be included in a story; and to make distinctions between some of the structural components of stories, such as setting, initiating event, conflict, and resolution (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Stein and Glenn, 1979; Whaley, 1981). Readers who have a well-developed sense of story structure produce better summaries and are better able to distinguish between important story components and relatively unimportant details.

Most expository texts are organized around a small, hierarchically arranged set of topics (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; Meyer, 1975). Awareness and use of this hierarchical structure allows the reader to decode and retrieve information in a planned manner. Common organizational patterns in informational texts include listed description, sequence, explanation, compare-contrast, definition-examples, and problem-solution (Slater and Graves, 1989). However, it is important to understand not only that expository texts have distinct organizational patterns, but also that these patterns are used differently in different subject areas and that this can impact student comprehension and learning (Hynd, 1998; Wineburg, 1991). Several studies indicate that student's knowledge of expository structures increases with age, a correlative of experience with diverse text forms (Danner, 1976; Garner et al., 1986).

Young Children Often Receive Insufficient Exposure to Informational Texts

Duke and her colleagues describe data from analyses of basal reading series, surveys, and classroom observations that converge on the point that informational text is scarce in primary grade classrooms (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts, 2003a). For example, analyses of the types of texts present in basal reading within the past two decades indicate a range of informational texts from a high of 33.8 percent in eight basal reading series for grade 2 (Schmidt, Caul, Byers, and Buchman, 1984) to a low of 12 percent in five basal reading series for grade 1 (Hoffman et al., 1994). According to Duke et al. (2003), the most recent analysis of this type found an average of 16 percent informational selections in an examination of six grade 2 basal reading series copyright 1995–1997 (Moss and Newton, 1998).

Similarly, a survey of eighty-three primary-grade teachers indicated that only 6 percent of materials read throughout the school day was informational (Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi, 1996). Furthermore, a recent survey of 126 primary-grade teachers found that only 14 percent of materials that they reported reading aloud on a given day was informational (Yopp and Yopp, 2000). These results are supported by a study in which all assigned and self-selected reading and writing was observed in three classrooms, one in each grade K–2, for a four-month period (Kamberelis, 1998). This study found that science books were read by the children far less often than stories and that science reports were also far less often the focus of assigned classroom writing.

In Duke's own research on the types of text to which children were exposed in grade 1, she visited twenty first-grade classrooms, ten in low-income districts and ten in high-income districts, four times each over a school year (Duke,

1999, 2000). On each visit she coded, among other things, the text type of print on classroom walls and other surfaces, books and other materials in the classroom library, and any activity during the school day that involved print. The results showed little informational text in the classrooms—an average of 2.6 percent of texts displayed on classroom walls and other surfaces, and of 9.8 percent of materials in the classroom library—on her initial visit. The results also indicated little time during the school day devoted to informational text—a mean of only 3.6 minutes per day. Another noteworthy finding in this study was that children in classrooms in low-income districts spent an average of just 1.4 minutes per day with informational text. Not only did low-income classroom libraries contain fewer informational texts than high-income districts, but also they contained fewer materials in general, and the low-income class sizes were larger, meaning that there were fewer books per student. Duke argued that the relative scarcity of informational texts in first-grade classrooms in general, and in low-income classrooms in particular, may help explain why many children have difficulty with informational reading and writing in later schooling—for example, during the “fourth-grade slump” (Chall et al., 1990).

Improving Young Children’s Knowledge and Understanding of Informational Text

A review of the literature by Duke and her colleagues revealed studies indicating that young children can learn from and about informational text if given opportunities to interact with this type of text (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts, 2002, 2003b). For example, in a study where kindergarten-aged children were read informational books and then asked to pretend to read the same books, their pretend readings showed an increased similarity to the adult reading in terms of a number of language features (Pappas, 1991a, 1991b, 1993). In a related study, kindergarten-aged children were asked to pretend to read an unfamiliar informational book before and after a three-month period of exposure to teachers reading aloud other informational books. Children’s pretend readings after this exposure reflected greater knowledge of several important features of informational text (Duke and Kays, 1998).

Research also suggests that young children who are exposed to informational texts demonstrate comprehension of the content of these texts (Moss, 1997). For example, children’s journals have been observed to reflect content knowledge derived from informational texts (Duke and Kays, 1998). In addition, children in grade 1 have demonstrated the ability to participate in sophisticated discussions of informational text in the context of a classroom that includes many texts of this type (Hicks, 1995). Finally, students in a first-grade classroom have been observed to make connections among informational books when given the opportunity to do so (Oyler and Barry, 1996).

The evidence suggests further that exposure to informational texts improves young children’s abilities to read and write these forms of text (Kamberelis, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1988; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon, 1995). As part of her work with the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading

“Effective teachers identify each child’s ‘conditions for success’ and create flexible groups to meet those conditions.”

Achievement (CIERA), Duke and her colleagues explored this effect directly by examining thirty first-grade classes from thirty elementary schools in six low-income districts randomly assigned to one of three groups (Palincsar and Duke, 2004). In the experimental group, teachers were asked to include approximately one-third each of informational, narrative, and other types of texts, such as poetry or procedural text, in classroom activities, in the classroom library, and on classroom walls and other surfaces. Teachers in the exposure control group were provided with the same amount of money and support to supplement reading materials in the classroom, but there was no emphasis on diversifying the types of texts available in the classroom. In the third, no-treatment control group, teachers were not asked to alter the materials used in their classrooms in any way.

The results of Duke's study indicated that by the end of grade 1, experimental-group children were better writers of informational text than children in the control groups, that they had progressed more quickly in reading level, and that they had shown less decline in attitudes toward recreational reading. Experimental classes that entered school with relatively low literacy knowledge showed higher overall reading and writing ability by the end of grade 1 than comparable control classes. This study provides compelling evidence of the benefits of increased exposure to informational text in the early grades.

The Benefits of Reading Informational Text in the Early Grades

Collectively, the research on exposing young children to more informational texts suggests that there are a number of benefits to be gained from this practice. These include evidence that increased exposure is likely to:

- make young children better readers and writers of informational text
- improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills
- build their background knowledge
- increase motivation for reading
- improve home-school literacy connections

As Duke and her colleagues argue, the most obvious benefit of increased exposure to informational text in the early grades is that it makes children better readers and writers of informational text. However, there is also evidence that reading informational texts enhances vocabulary and comprehension skills. Specialized vocabulary is a key feature of informational text (Duke and Kays, 1998), and there is evidence that even young children learn vocabulary from texts, including those that are read aloud (e.g., Elley, 1989). In addition, research indicating that teachers and/or parents attend more to vocabulary and comprehension when interacting with children through informational texts supports the likelihood that exposure to informational text builds vocabulary, and that general comprehension skills may be further enhanced through these texts (Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, and Brody, 1990; Smolkin and Donovan, 2001).

“Abandoning traditional static, ability-grouping frameworks allows students of all abilities to achieve higher vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency scores.”

To the extent that young children's exposure to informational texts improves their ability to read and write these types of texts as well as their vocabulary and comprehension skills, it is also likely to build background knowledge and promote overall literacy development (see Dreher, 2000). Given the importance of informational texts in conveying knowledge about the natural and social worlds, this is a significant factor in preparing young children to read and comprehend more advanced content-area texts.

A final area of benefit is the potential that increased exposure to informational texts has for improving young children's interest in and motivation for reading. At least some children have high levels of interest in informational texts or topics addressed by them, and for those children the presence of informational texts in the classroom is likely to be motivating. Such motivation, then, is likely to encourage them to read more or to read more productively (e.g., Caswell and Duke, 1998). In addition, evidence that informational texts are read widely outside of schools (Venezky, 1982) suggests that exposure to informational texts in the early grades may help children make links between home and school literacies. This may be particularly important for children from homes in which story reading is uncommon (Caswell and Duke, 1998).

Although research in this area is still in its infancy, there is already sufficient evidence to warrant increasing young children's exposure to informational texts as a means of enhancing a range of literacy skills. As research in this area expands, we are likely to learn more about which types of informational texts can and should be introduced at different levels of schooling, and the best ways of teaching young children how to read these texts. Meanwhile, let's start reading more nonfiction in the early grades.

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