

## Nonfiction in the Early Grades: Making Reading and Writing Relevant for All Students

Tiffany A. Flowers  
University of Iowa

Lamont A. Flowers  
Clemson University

### Abstract

*The purpose of this literature-based article is to outline the benefits of integrating nonfiction literacy experiences in the early grades. This article also discusses recommendations and resources for teaching nonfiction reading and writing in the early grades.*

Expanding educational opportunities for young students by improving their ability to read and comprehend informational texts is an important goal for teachers, parents, and reading scholars (Allington, 2001; Block & Mangieri, 2003; Harvey, 1998, 2002; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Kurkjian & Livingston, 2005; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Stien & Beed, 2004; Taboada & Guthrie, 2006). To accomplish this aim, many reading researchers have acknowledged the importance of fostering a child's interest in reading nonfiction in the early grades (Duke, 2000, 2004; Routman, 2000, 2003; Stead, 2002; Young & Moss, 2006). Research also suggests that teaching students how to appropriately read and write nonfiction should be a primary goal of early educational learning experiences because of the cognitive benefits received by students who are exposed to these types of literacy experiences (Boynton & Blevins, 2004; Duke, 2000, 2004; Routman, 2000; Young & Moss, 2006). Researchers have also indicated that educators should consider teaching children how to read informational texts to ensure that

by the time they reach the intermediate grades they will have the requisite skills to excel academically (Chall, 1983; Duke, Bennett-Armistead, Roberts, 2003; Fisher, 1996; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002).

Trussell-Cullen (1999) defines nonfiction as a way to "document and celebrate the real world—and that means everything about the real world that is actual, observable, recordable, demonstrable, and experienceable" (p. 2). Trussell-Cullen's definition of nonfiction is important for teachers who want to create a classroom environment where the real world is meaningful to children. Further, this focus on nonfiction may enable teachers, especially teachers in the early grades, to make learning more relevant for students. Nonfiction materials include an array of resources such as periodicals, technology, and hands-on experiences, such as trips to airports, zoos, farms, museums, and factories (Danko-McGhee, 2004; Davis & Shade, 1999). Nonfiction reading materials also include recently published informational texts and trade books (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman & Murphy, 1988; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002).

### Rationale for Emphasizing Nonfiction in the Early Grades

Focusing on nonfiction reading and writing is important for several reasons. The first reason for including nonfiction reading and writing in the primary grades curriculum is that nonfiction materials incorporate information from an array of subject areas, including math, science, social studies, technology, art, music, and writing (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Pike & Mumper, 2004); thus nonfiction promotes learning across the curriculum. Given the benefits of nonfiction, it is reasonable to conjecture that teachers in the primary grades would devote a significant amount of instructional time to teaching nonfiction. However, educational researchers have shown that primary grade children spend little time reading or learning to read and write nonfiction (Duke, 2000, 2004; Moss, 2004). The second reason for including nonfiction reading and writing in the early childhood curriculum is that it has been hypothesized that a significant percentage of the content of standardized tests' passages includes nonfiction material (Daniels, 2002; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Kristo &

Bamford, 2004). Therefore, students in the early grades should spend more time with nonfiction and expository texts to be able to understand the complexity of these texts and receive adequate preparation for standardized tests of reading achievement. In addition, students need to have exposure to these texts before entering the upper grades. Early exposure to nonfiction and informational texts may be the best preparation for the increase in academic rigor that students will encounter at the intermediate grades (Stead, 2002).

The third reason for including nonfiction reading and writing in the curriculum is that nonfiction reading materials include text structures which differ greatly from narrative texts. This means that children must learn to read expository texts (e.g., texts that emphasize cause and effect) because these texts differ structurally and organizationally from narrative texts (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). The fourth reason for including nonfiction reading and writing in the primary grades is that nonfiction allows children to have access to various literacy experiences (Padgett, 2006), such as engaging in inquiry-based instruction (Fang, Lamme, Fu, Patrick, 2006; Mardell, 1999; Schmidt, Gillen, Zollo, & Stone, 2002). Inquiry-based instruction involves conducting research to answer questions and extend previous knowledge. Therefore, nonfiction reading and writing is an important part of inquiry-based learning and should be a critical part of the early childhood curriculum.

### **Integrating Nonfiction Literacy Experiences**

One example of an integrated literacy teaching method is student-centered inquiry. Inquiry is the idea that students actively pursue a research topic of interest (Harste, 1993; Palincsar, Magnusson, Cutter, & Vincent, 2001; Pardales & Girod, 2006). Through inquiry, students learn to read, write, analyze, critique, and build on their existing knowledge of a topic (Harvey, 2002; Mardell, 1999; Jablon, 2006). The topic that is chosen by the student reflects a topic that is both important and relevant to the student. Teachers support students through the process of inquiry to provide extra support and scaffold information. Throughout this process, students learn to read critically for information in order to answer questions by reviewing information from multiple sources. Inquiry-based

instruction is a critical component of instruction for teachers who wish to teach students how to make learning more meaningful.

Integrating nonfiction literacy experiences into the primary grades curriculum also prepares students to understand complex concepts, analyze data, and think logically (Goodman, Hood, & Goodman, 1991). For example, imagine that students in the early grades are learning about frogs. They may start the lesson by watching frogs, writing observations about frogs, and then researching the different species of frogs in various informational texts. Then, students can collect data from other informational texts about frogs and utilize this information to write about their learning experiences. These types of integrated learning opportunities allow students to study nonfiction material in relevant and innovative ways.

### **Recommendations for Preservice and Inservice Teachers**

Recently, there has been an influx in the number of books published regarding how to teach nonfiction reading and writing (see Appendix A), as well as nonfiction and informational texts (see Appendix B). Many of these texts may aid teachers who are searching for conceptual and practical information concerning the use of nonfiction in the classroom. In addition to these texts, it is recommended that practicing teachers engage in professional development activities that provide them the opportunity to read research on the effects of nonfiction reading and writing on student achievement. Also, teachers may consider examining the scholarly literature concerning the usefulness and importance of developing students' interest in nonfiction reading and writing. These types of professional development experiences will enable teachers to effectively utilize literacy-based strategies involving nonfiction literature in the classroom.

Moreover, practicing teachers might consider collaborating with other teachers and university professors to engage in critical studies regarding the connection between theories of learning and classroom-based applications involving nonfiction literature. In this regard, practicing teachers and educational researchers can share ideas for teaching nonfiction and collaborate with one another on various topics, such as teaching students how to write biographies and teaching

students how to conduct research. In addition, practicing teachers might consider learning about the various strategies to teach students how to navigate complex informational texts, as well as the instructional potential of nonfiction materials during shared and guided reading sessions (Bamford, Kristo & Lyon, 2002).

During a teacher preparation program, some of the methods courses often encourage the use of trade books, such as informational texts. However, they may not include strategies for teaching students how to navigate these texts (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Therefore, it may be advisable for teacher preparation programs to teach a separate nonfiction reading and writing course that focuses heavily on nonfiction to help prepare teachers to incorporate nonfiction in their classrooms. The underlying theme of this course might be to help teachers think critically about teaching nonfiction in the primary grades. In addition, students may learn new strategies, become acquainted with using innovative teaching techniques, and reflect on their current teaching practices. By reading the current research, preservice teachers may also be able to learn how to effectively use nonfiction in the classroom; how to arouse children's natural curiosity at a young age by guiding or facilitating inquiry; and how to encourage teacher collaboration around the topic of nonfiction. In addition, preservice teachers may have the opportunity to expand their knowledge of the importance of nonfiction reading and writing in the classroom. The overarching goal of this recommendation is to prepare teachers to teach students to comprehend informational texts, conduct research projects, and engage in independent reading in the early grades. Another goal is to help preservice teachers expand their definitions of early literacy beyond narrow definitions that include skill development such as sight vocabulary, decoding, and word recognition (Indrisano, 1995; Sears, 1999) to other conceptions of literacy that include conducting research and thinking critically.

It is also important that preservice and practicing teachers study schema theory as a way to understand or comprehend new information (Stahl, 2004). According to Richgels (1982), "A schema can be thought of as a knowledge structure, or framework, which interrelates all of one's knowledge about a given topic. Prior knowledge, organized in schemata, in

turn influences the form and content of new knowledge" (p. 54). In essence, a schema is the file cabinet inside the brain that stores information. Each drawer contains a file of existing information about various topics and information. As a person receives new information, that new information integrates with existing information and is stored in the brain. Scaffolding is a teaching process that involves learning about the existing knowledge that students possess and teaching the student new information using his or her pre-established knowledge base (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, it is important that teachers have the opportunity to explore various ways to interpret or construct knowledge (Dewey, 1910; Johnston & Afflerbach, 1985) as it relates to teaching nonfiction reading and writing in the primary grades.

### References

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### Additional Resources

#### **Professional Texts about Nonfiction Reading and Writing**

- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. B. (2007). *Reading for information in elementary school: Content literacy strategies to build comprehension*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Jenkins, C., & Earle, A. (2006). *Once upon a fact: Helping children write nonfiction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
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#### **Nonfiction and Informational Children's Texts by Subject**

##### **Mathematics**

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##### **Science**

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- Pallotta, J. (1986). *The ocean alphabet book*. New York: Charlesbridge Publishing.

**Social Studies**

Adler, D. (1999). *A picture book of Thomas Alva Edison*. New York: Holiday House.

Adler, D. (1994). *A picture book of Anne Frank*. New York: Holiday House.

Crews, D. (1978). *Freight train*. New York: Harper Collins.

Gibbons, G. (1982). *The post office book: Mail and how it moves*. New York: Harper Collins.

Maass, R. (1989). *Fire fighters*. New York: Scholastic.

Munro, R. (2001). *The inside-outside book of Washington, D.C.* New York: Sea Star Books.

Scillian, D. (2001). *A is for America: An American alphabet*. Farmington Hills, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.

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