

The Case for Informational Text

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Younger students need to expand their repertoire and build literacy skills with informational text.

Think about the way you come to understand the world around you. What do you read to find out about the climate of a region you plan to visit? What do you consult to identify the bird that just flew past your window? In fact, what are you reading right now? The answer to all these questions is *informational text*.

We are surrounded by text whose primary purpose is to convey information about the natural or social world. Success in schooling, the workplace, and society depends on our ability to comprehend this material. Yet many children and adults struggle to comprehend informational text.

We should not wait to address this problem until students reach late elementary, middle, and high school, when learning from text is a cornerstone of the curriculum. Four strategies can help teachers improve K–3 students' comprehension of informational text. Teachers should:

- Increase students' access to informational text.
- Increase the time students spend working with informational text in instructional activities.
- Explicitly teach comprehension strategies.

- Create opportunities for students to use informational text for authentic purposes.

Increase Access

Chances are that your personal bookshelves, magazine racks, and website bookmarks are replete with informational text. Many young students, however, have limited access to such text. One study of 20 1st grade classrooms found that on average, informational text constituted less than 10 percent of classroom libraries. And informational text represented an average of less than 3 percent of the materials displayed on these classrooms' walls and other surfaces (Duke, 2000).

Young students need to learn about the range of purposes that text can serve (Duke, 2003). By filling the classroom with books on insects, weather, firefighters, the ocean, families, trucks, reptiles, pets, and other topics that fascinate young children, teachers can demonstrate to their students that reading can help them obtain important information.

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When teachers include informational text in the classroom, they also expand opportunities for home-school connections that support literacy (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Research and experience suggest that even parents who rarely read fiction for pleasure can become inspired when teachers invite them to interact with their children around nonfiction texts, newspapers, magazines, and reference books (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2002, 2003).

Increased access to informational text can also better motivate the many students who prefer this kind of text or who have strong interests in the topics addressed in such text (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 2002). One student with whom I worked had shown little enthusiasm for the storybooks that his teachers had been providing, but genuinely enjoyed the informational books that we introduced, especially on his favorite topics: outer space, animals, and machines. When reading informational books, he was more willing to persist in decoding difficult words, and he applied background knowledge more readily. As he experienced success with informational books, both his overall reading ability and his self-confidence grew to the point where his narrative reading also seemed to benefit.

Increase Time

In addition to including informational text in the classroom environment, teachers also need to include such text in instructional activities. The

study of 1st grade classrooms showed that students spent an average of only 3.6 minutes each day interacting with informational text—even less in low-socioeconomic-status schools (Duke, 2000).

One way to incorporate informational text in the classroom is to read it aloud to students. When teachers read aloud from informational text, young students become familiar with its characteristics and conventions (Duke & Kays, 1998). Listening to informational text can be a valuable tool for knowledge building, especially when combined with other ways of learning about the world, such as hands-on investigations (Anderson & Guthrie, 1999). Research also suggests that students are more likely to select informational text for independent reading if their teacher has read it aloud to them (Dreher & Dromsky, 2000).

Teachers can also use informational text in guided and independent reading, in writing, and in content-area instruction. For example, one teacher with whom I worked taught the *sp-* blend during a guided reading of an informational book about spiders. Another teacher taught students how to summarize as they wrote reviews of favorite informational books. And a science teacher used a combination of hands-on experiences and informational text reading to build students' knowledge of simple machines.

Some educators worry that informational text may be too difficult for young students, or that spending time with informational text will distract

students from learning basic reading skills. Research evidence does not support this concern, however (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2002, 2003). In one study, 1st grade students whose teachers included more informational text in their classroom libraries, on classroom wall displays, and in classroom activities showed growth on standardized tests of decoding and word identification equal to those of students whose teachers focused less heavily on informational text. For classes whose students entered school with relatively low letter-sound knowledge, those exposed to more informational text actually had higher growth in this area. The study also documented other benefits, including better informational text writing and increased enthusiasm for recreational reading (Duke, Martineau, Frank, & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

Teach Comprehension Strategies

In addition to exposing young students to informational text, teachers must also teach them *how* to read it.

Research shows that good readers are strategic in their reading (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) and that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies can foster comprehension development (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Although most of this research has been conducted with older students, it makes sense to begin this long-term endeavor early on (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Pearson & Duke, 2002).

Strategies that appear to improve comprehension include monitoring students' understanding and making adjustments as needed; activating and applying relevant prior knowledge (for example, by making predictions); generating questions; thinking aloud; attending to and uncovering text structure; drawing inferences; constructing visual representations; and summarizing. With each strategy, explicit teaching should include information about *what* the strategy is, *when* it is used, *how* it is used, and *why* it is worth using.

When talking with young students, I often discuss the strategies in terms of good readers, as in “Good readers think about what might be coming next.” I also model the uses of comprehension strategies by thinking aloud as I read. For example, to model the importance of monitoring understanding, I make comments such as, “That doesn't make sense to me because . . .” or “I didn't understand that last part—I'd better go back.” Accompanying the reading with written activities—such as constructing a Venn diagram when reading a text with compare/contrast structure or writing questions about a text for classmates to answer—can also help foster students' strategy development.

Research suggests that teaching even one comprehension strategy can lead to improved comprehension and that teaching multiple strategies can have an even larger impact (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, 2000). One approach to teaching multiple strategies simultaneously that has received considerable support in the research literature—and that has been

used with students as early as 1st grade—is *reciprocal teaching* (Palincsar, Brown, & Campione, 1993). In this approach, the teacher explicitly teaches and models the use of four strategies: asking questions, summarizing, clarifying, and making predictions. In small groups, students take turns playing teacher and applying these strategies themselves, with help from the teacher and their peers as needed. Eventually, students apply these strategies on their own as they read increasingly complex and varied texts.

Another important aspect of teaching students how to read informational text is making them aware of the differences between informational text and other kinds of text, especially fictional narratives. For example, we typically read fictional narrative texts in their entirety, from beginning to end, and at a steady pace. In contrast, we typically read informational texts selectively—just the parts that might meet our needs or interest us. We might start at the index, then check a passage on page 38, then read a whole section on page 15. We may vary the pace of reading from section to section, reading some parts carefully and just scanning others. Students need to learn the differences between various kinds of text and the consequences of these differences for their reading processes (Symons, MacLatchy-Gaudet, Stone, & Reynolds, 2001).

Use Informational Text for Authentic Purposes

When you read informational text, you do so for an authentic purpose—to obtain information that you want or need to know (Purcell-Gates, Duke, Hall, & Tower, 2002). You may read a book on financial management to help you make good investments, a magazine article that deepens your knowledge of Buddhism, or a field guide to identify birds in your yard.

In contrast, students in school usually read informational text to answer questions at the back of the chapter, to complete a test prep worksheet, or simply because the teacher said to do so. Some of these activities may be unavoidable, but we need to create classrooms in which students read informational text as often as possible for more compelling purposes. In a recent study, 2nd and 3rd grade students whose teachers encouraged more authentic reading and writing of informational and how-to texts in science showed higher growth in reading comprehension as well as in writing (Purcell-Gates & Duke, 2003).

Teachers can use many strategies to create authentic purposes for reading informational text. They can set up situations in which students need information, then encourage students to read to obtain that information. Students may want to find information about the life cycles of frogs before setting up a tadpole tank or learn about the needs of growing things before planting a window box. Teachers can pique students' curiosity: putting out some earthworms

for students to observe; demonstrating that water left out in a pan on Friday has “disappeared” on Monday; setting out some magnets with various materials that the magnets will or will not attract. Students will read informational books and other print materials on earthworms, evaporation, and magnetism with greater interest and purpose after such activities as these.

Reading-for-writing may also increase authenticity. Students can read about electricity to write their own class book on the subject for the school library. They can read about pond life to prepare a brochure for a local nature center. They can read about trash and recycling before embarking on a letter-writing campaign to decrease trash output in their community.

In my experience, young students working to comprehend informational text for such purposes look noticeably different from those reading it simply because the teacher assigned it. The first set of students reads more strategically and pays more attention to components of the text, such as

headings, vocabulary, and summary statements. Indeed, instruction that emphasizes reading to learn and sharing information with others has proven effective in increasing students' engagement, application of strategies, and comprehension (Guthrie, 2003).

Increasing Reading Achievement

The four strategies discussed in this article provide a good start for our efforts to improve young students' ability to read informational text. In the years to come, I hope that teachers and researchers will work together to develop and test techniques, observe and experiment, and gain new insights about how to help students with this important goal. Incorporating informational text in the curriculum in the early years of school has the potential to increase student motivation, build important comprehension skills, and lay the groundwork for students to grow into confident, purposeful readers.

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