Information Books in Early Childhood

The Mitten, Little Bear, Caps for Sale—What do these and so many other books in early childhood classrooms have in common? They are stories or narrative texts.

Research indicates that storybooks are indeed the most common type of text found in early childhood classrooms (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts 2002). Literacy research and theory both provide lots of good reasons for including so many storybooks in young children’s lives (e.g., Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). However, research and theory suggest that other kinds of books, in particular information books, also belong in early childhood classrooms.

Contrary to what many believe, there are numerous indications that informational text is appropriate for young children and can have significant benefits for them. Informational literacy can be developed from the very beginning.

What is informational text?

I define informational text as text written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world (typically from someone presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to someone presumed to be less so) and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose. Features commonly found in informational texts include graphic elements, such as diagrams and photographs; text structures, such as compare/contrast and cause and effect; access formats, such as headings and an index; language forms, such as use of timeless verbs and generic nouns (e.g., “Birds eat insects” versus “That bird is eating an insect”); and others.

Traditionally, informational text is the text that we read to learn, as distinguished from the text that we learn to read. Many educators believe that children begin to read to learn around fourth grade and that before this, children are only learning to read (Chall 1983). However, as I discuss in this article, research suggests that children are indeed able to read to learn (and be read to, to learn) from a much earlier age. Just as nonfiction is common in the everyday lives of adults, so too can it be part of the daily lives of children.

Informational text is developmentally appropriate for young children

Perhaps the most important point to establish is that informational text is developmentally appropriate for young children. Although a number of influential theorists have argued that narrative is primary for young children (e.g., Moffett 1968; Bruner 1986), that it must “do for all” (Moffett 1968, x) in early childhood, there is little research to support this contention. A variety of studies suggest young children can interact successfully with informational text when given the opportunity to do so. Several examples follow.

An often cited study by Christine Pappas (1993) notes that kindergarten children repeatedly read to from a set of information books were able to pretend to read those same books using many of the key linguistic features of...
“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”

— Francis Bacon

The dominance of narrative text in early childhood may be inconsistent with children’s own preferences. Although the research in this area is riddled with problems (Kletzien 1999), taken as a whole it suggests that children do not show overwhelming preferences for narrative to the exclusion of other text forms. Rather, children often select nonfiction, informational texts when given a choice.

Notably, one study indicates that younger primary children are particularly likely to show preference for informational text (Kletzien & Szabo 1998). In this study children in first, second, and third grades preferred information books at least as often as narratives when asked to choose between them (with book topic held constant). Fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders, however, more often selected narratives. Boys in general were more likely to select informational texts, but as with nearly any study in this area, there were substantial individual differences. Some children, both boys and girls, exhibited a strong preference for narrative texts, some for informational texts, others for neither.

When children’s preference is for narrative, they fit well with the typical text offerings of early childhood classrooms. When their text choice is informational, children fit considerably less well. For children at risk for or struggling with learning to read, there is a particular reason to pay attention to research on reading interests and preferences. Interest has an important influence on children’s enthusiasm for reading and can even support children’s reading development (Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler 1992). As teachers we also know that struggling readers typically show less interest in and motivation to read than do their more successful peers (Guthrie & Wigfield 1997). One might suspect then that making high-interest reading material available to students at risk or struggling to learn to read may be particularly important.

In case studies conducted with my colleague Linda Caswell (Caswell & Duke 1998), we examined the progress of two boys struggling substantially with their

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reading development. We found that
the boys’ reading development
finally took off when their
teachers provided them with
a reading and writing diet
rich in informational
text—a type of text
these boys strongly
preferred. Although
providing these
children with
informational
reading material
was by no
means the only
factor contribut-
ing to their progress,
we argue that it was one important factor.

Research involving highly successful adults with
dyslexia shows that one factor the adults had in com-
mon was a childhood history of high-volume reading in
topic areas of passionate interest to them—areas quite
often addressed in informational texts (Fink 1995/1996).
While not definitive on the point of interest, these
studies do suggest that young readers at risk or strug-
gling will benefit from high-interest materials, including
informational texts. For many young learners the high-
interest nature of informational texts is one argument
for their inclusion in early childhood education.

Supporting vocabulary and world
knowledge development

There are substantial individual differences in chil-
dren’s development and learning, but there is no ques-
tion that early childhood is a time of notable growth of
vocabulary and world knowledge (Shonkoff & Phillips
2000). By definition, informational text is written to con-
vey information about the world around us and contains
specialized vocabulary toward that end (e.g., Purcell-
Gates & Duke 2001). Thus informational texts may be
particularly well-suited to contributing to young chil-
dren’s development of vocabulary and world knowledge.

Even before children can read independently, there is
evidence that they learn vocabulary from texts read
aloud to them (e.g., Elley 1989). Although studies on
this point have been conducted primarily with
storybooks, it is reasonable to think the same would
hold true with information books (Dreher 2000). In one
study kindergarten teachers included more discussion
of vocabulary and text concepts when reading aloud
informational texts than when reading aloud narrative
texts. A first grade teacher in another study devoted
more attention to comprehension in general when
reading informational text aloud (Smolkin & Donovan
2000; see also Mason et al. 1989).

Parents may interact more around
vocabulary and concepts when reading
aloud informational text. A study of
mothers of Head Start children did find
just that; the mothers asked more
questions and introduced more
vocabulary when reading aloud
informational rather than narrative
texts (Pellegrini et al. 1990; see
also Lennox 1995). If anything, we
might expect reading aloud
informational text to have a
greater effect on the develop-
ment of vocabulary and concept
knowledge.

With respect to development of
world knowledge in general, research is also suggestive.
One study shows evidence that kindergarten children
develop content knowledge from information books
read to them (Duke & Kays 1998). Children’s journal
entries regularly contained content linked to informa-
tional books that were read aloud. For example, after
hearing the book Potato, by Barrie Watts, about how
potatoes grow, one child drew a cross-section of a
sprouting potato plant. After hearing books about
spiders, a child drew a spider and spider web complete
with entangled prey (an idea discussed in one of the
books). Research involving third grade children whose
science unit contained both firsthand observation and
informational texts shows they learned more than those
children whose science unit contained only firsthand
observation (Anderson & Guthrie 1999).

With regard to intervention on behalf of children who
might have difficulty learning to read or who were
already struggling to build literacy skills, using informa-
tional text as a means of developing early vocabulary
and world knowledge may be significant. Researchers
find that on average these children’s vocabulary
knowledge is weaker than that of their peers (Snow,
Burns, & Griffin 1998), and they are more likely to
struggle with
reading later in
school when
substantial infor-
mational reading is
a demand (Chall,
Jacobs, & Baldwin
1990).

Encouragingly,
one study of poor
readers notes they
are particularly
likely to improve vocabulary development from repeated read-alouds (Elley 1989). Thus, while more direct research is needed, the evidence suggests that incorporation of information books in early childhood settings may lead to improved development of vocabulary and world knowledge.

**Developing children’s concepts of reading and writing**

In the United States and other relatively literate societies, early childhood is a time to build children’s conceptions of the purposes and nature of reading and writing (e.g., Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1984; Clay 1993). These conceptions may differ depending on the nature and uses of literacy to which children are exposed (e.g., Heath 1983; Purcell-Gates 1995, 1996). Thus if early childhood settings do not offer informational texts, children may not learn that literacy is a means of obtaining or communicating information.

In research I conducted in first grade classrooms, teachers offered children very little experience with informational text: an average of 3.6 minutes per day, even less for children in low socioeconomic-status settings (Duke 2000). As a result, the idea that one important purpose of reading and writing is to obtain or communicate information about the natural or social world did not get attention within these classrooms.

In addition, no one conveyed the notion that text can be read nonlinearly. Children had not learned that we can read just parts of a text, not necessarily in order, often using tools such as the index, headings, and table of contents to guide us. The literacy to which children in my study were exposed was almost exclusively linear, proceeding from the beginning to the end of the text, in order, and in its entirety. This experience stands in sharp contrast to much of the reading that adults do in their daily lives, which in fact is nonlinear in nature (Venezky 1982). Nonlinear reading will become more dominant with increased use of technology (Kamil & Lane 1998).

Hynes (2000) illustrates the possible impact of this restricted representation of literacy in early childhood by describing a struggling student who did not consider himself a reader because he did not read narrative literature for pleasure. This student and others were described by Hynes as “living outside the dominant genre of school.” Their views of what constitutes reading and literacy were shaped accordingly.

Research demonstrates that kindergartners and first and second grade students who have had little experience with informational text at home or at school show limited knowledge of such text; their literacy knowledge is directly tied to the types of literacy they have experienced (Kamberelis 1998). Limited knowledge of the multiple purposes and types of literacy is particularly likely to be a problem among children who get most of their literacy knowledge and experience at school.

**Steps toward bringing informational text to young children**

The joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and NAEYC (1998) clearly calls for young children to experience a variety of texts, including informational texts, in child care and preschool settings. Early childhood educators have an important role to play in increasing the availability of informational texts for young children. Here are some of the things we can do:

1. **Be aware of the types of text to which we are (and are not) exposing our children.**

   Look at your classroom libraries, at the books you send home with children, at what you read aloud every day. How much is informational? Do children experience a wide array of texts in your classroom? Do you have colleagues who would benefit from increased awareness about this issue?

2. **Devote some funds for books and other materials to the purchase of informational texts.**

   For a while we may need to overcompensate, spending a larger portion of funds on nonfiction to help balance our collections. Information books, children’s nature magazines, and many other nonstorybook texts can increase the diversity of our libraries and their appeal to a greater number of children with varied needs and interests. Find out from children the kinds of texts and topics they would like to see in their classroom library.
3. Raise parents’ awareness of the appropriateness and value of informational texts.

*Parents* magazine recently listed “The 50 Best Children’s Books” (Seid 2002). All 50 books are stories, and all but one are fictional. We need to supplement these resources with suggestions for informational and other types of books for young children. When lending children’s books for home reading, include information books as well as storybooks.

4. Include more informational texts in classroom activities.

Although there is limited research identifying an accepted set of best practices for using informational texts with young children, I have seen a number of activities work effectively. Some have a basis in research.

There is much early childhood educators can do to incorporate informational text into our classrooms. And as more early childhood educators develop ways of using information books in their classrooms, early childhood researchers will need to study their impact on children’s learning. Researchers need to look especially at what happens when children are exposed to a significant amount of informational text from very early on and throughout several years of schooling. Currently we know little about the outcomes. Early childhood researchers and educators have important contributions to make in developing informational literacy.

References


Some Information Books for Children


Interactive read-alouds.

Reading aloud informational texts, especially with a great deal of teacher-child and child-child interaction, is likely to have many benefits. Some, such as building vocabulary and developing knowledge of the linguistic features of information book language, are discussed in this article. It is especially important to ask higher-order questions—questions that require going beyond information given directly in the text to reading between the lines, thinking ahead, making connections between the text and prior knowledge or experiences, and so on. Questions that ask “Why do you think . . . ?” “How does . . . ?” “Have you ever . . . ?” “Does this remind you of . . . ?” “What does the author mean by . . . ?” “What if . . . ?” can easily lead to higher-order discussions.

Interest groups.

Children who share an interest in particular topics—such as ocean animals, cars and trucks, or farming—can gather for a group activity involving both information books and hands-on experience. Groups might look through informational texts on their topics and listen to a text read aloud or played on tape. Children might watch a relevant video (many free or low-cost videotapes related to science and social studies are available through PBS and other sources), explore materials firsthand, or go on a field trip. As groups become experts on topics, they can share what they learn with their classmates or with families and the community at school-family nights.

Purposeful writing.

Because one purpose of informational text is to convey information about the natural or social world, children should whenever possible write informational text to convey information to others who want or need it. Children could write brochures about exhibits for use at the local science center. They can create posters about the school garden to display in school hallways or write books on underrepresented topics to donate to the school library. For very young children, parents or other family members, adults in the child care setting, and familiar groups in the community (police officers, grocers, librarians) can all become meaningful audiences for information children are learning about the world around them.

Innovations.

Children can use an existing text plus their innovations to create a new text. For example, I've seen innovations on the storybook Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin, that start with a title like “Ms. Smith’s Class, Ms. Smith’s Class, What Do You See?” Similarly we can create innovations on information books with young children. The information board book Do Monkeys Tweet? by Melanie Walsh, could be rewritten to feature other animals. A book about the development of an apple from seed to fruit (there are several books on this topic) could be a model for children's writing about the development of a pumpkin from seed to vegetable. A book about one cultural celebration could be a model for new text about another type of celebration.

Teaching about text.

Children may need help understanding differences in the purposes and features of different kinds of text. Some children may not have used a book as a reference or may be unfamiliar with the wide range of text features—index, table of contents, page numbers, headings, captions—that help us find information we are looking for. Children may notice that some books use photographs as illustrations without realizing that those photographs depict real animals, people, objects, or events. Teaching children about text through hands-on use, demonstration, and explanation can promote literacy development.
Some Information and Other Nonfiction “Little Books” Series

Many publishers now have series of nonfiction little books intended for young children. These are usually for grades K–2, but in some cases they are appropriate for preschoolers. Not all books in these series are information books as defined in this article. Readers can review these and similar series of nonfiction little books to determine which are most appropriate for the children they teach.

National Geographic—Windows on Literacy

Newbridge—Discovery Links Science and Discovery

Links Social Studies

Sadlier-Oxford—Content Area Readers

Scholastic—Science Emergent Readers and Social Studies Emergent Readers

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Early childhood education is a term that describes the care taken and the teaching of young children from their birth to the age of eight, or until they start school. The term refers to activities carried out by people outside the family and is often focused on learning through play. The facilities that provide early childhood education services include kindergartens, nurseries, pre-school classes, child-care centers and other institutions. Depending on the age that a child goes to school in each separate country, early childhood education covers a different period. In New Zealand and the Unit The best source of information on the subject of early childhood is a lady by the name of Bev Bos. For over 40 years she has been running a living laboratory called Roseville Community Preschool. The Alumni of that preschool are sending their kids there. Also, early childhood are precious years for a child's development. I am not giving out any books suggestions but practicals rather activities you can do with your kids. I love to do different activities with kids. See more ideas about Early childhood, Books and Childhood. Planning in the Moment with Young Children: A Practical Guide for Early Years Practitioners and Parents: Amazon.co.uk: Anna Ephgrave: Books. Nicky. EARLY CHILDHOOD - books. Theories and Approaches to Learning in the Early Years Critical Issues in the Early Years: Amazon.co.uk: Linda Miller, Linda Pound, Linda Miller, Linda Pound: Books. Linda Miller Early Childhood Case Study Research Education Key Learning Books This Or That Questions. Theories and Approaches to Learning in the Early Years Critical Issues in the Early Years: Amazon.co.uk: Linda Miller, Linda Pound: Books. Nicky. EARLY CHILDHO...