

nonfiction texts and achievement

Nonfiction. Informational texts (the “true” books), real-life texts, and expository texts are about the real world, as opposed to the world of narrative and the world of story and fiction. Historically, fiction and narrative text have been used to teach children and English-as-a-second-language students to read, assuming that the relative simplicity of the text and the power of story help students who are struggling with decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, and other skills, therefore helping them become fluent readers. However, researchers have noted for some time that children who are fluent narrative readers do not automatically transfer their fluency to nonnarrative and expository text. Thus, an avid reader of fiction may not always score at the top of a reading test in which understanding from expository text is being tested. This is not surprising, because the test is measuring something other than what narrative provides.

It would be instructive to examine the various reading tests given to children and teens of all ages. What percentage of a typical test given to the children in your school is assessing narrative or expository text understanding? Teacher-librarians, who understand that entire schools are being judged on these tests, should respond to support the educational goal even when the love of reading is a central program element of the library media program. The two objectives need not be antithetical, competitive, or even enemies. Teacher-librarians realize that the informational texts are central to research and information literacy and that narrative is the foundation of enjoyment.

THE RESEARCH

Consider the following findings:

The calls to use nonfiction in the classroom are much more plentiful than the actual research supporting the idea, although it makes sense that learners who read expository

text would score high on tests that assess understanding derived from that type of text.

Caswell and Duke (1998), in a case study of an English-as-a-second-language reader and a poor reader, note that major improvement in reading happens when expository text is used, rather than narrative text, particularly when the reader's interest is piqued by the topics in the expository reading (e.g., motorcycles, insects, animals, history).

Taylor and Beach (1984) note that middle school readers do much better in understanding expository text when they are taught how to recognize text structure (main headings, subheadings, summaries, charts, sidebars, etc.); in other words, teaching skimming and scanning techniques helps readers' understanding.

Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth (1980) note that ninth-grade students who use text structure clues score significantly higher on reading tests when compared to those who do not.

McGee (1982) found that it was not until fifth grade that good readers begin responding to text structure as a way to recall content. She recommended that awareness of text structure be introduced earlier.

Duke (2004) cites several studies when he says, “Increased access to informational text can also better motivate the many who prefer this kind of text or who have strong interests in the topics addressed in such text.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER LIBRARIANS

From the moment you encounter children and teens, market informational books through display, booktalks, and, in particular, as a part of every topical unit that comes through the library.

From early on, teach, point out, discuss, show, question, and demonstrate to all ages how to use text structure to find and locate

the important information in an expository text—that is, by using internal textual clues. Help learners quickly locate the information that they need in an informational text; sort big ideas from subordinate ones; and use sidebars, charts, graphs, and any other textual features—and do this in a fun and interesting way.

At every opportunity, push nonfiction materials; however, this should not be done to the exclusion of fiction. Children and teens need to be fluent in each type of text.

Immerse children and teens in nonfiction as you would in fiction—that is, push it into their hands. This means that you will need to have a large collection of fascinating nonfiction, and you will need large sections matching student interests.

Have children and teens write nonfiction. Use traditional and Web 2.0 technologies to write, illustrate, publish, and distribute original works. If children and teens know how to write narrative and expository for fun and for projects, they will score higher on tests, whether those tests emphasize one type of text or the other or both.

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