THE IMPORTANCE OF USING NONFICTION IN THE CLASSROOM:
A TEACHING GUIDE FOR ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

by

Name of Student

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Project</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Is Nonfiction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Nonfiction Text Features</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Text Structure of Nonfiction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Is Nonfiction Important?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for the Classroom</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Case for Informational Text</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Text for Young Children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scarcity of Informational Text in Primary Classrooms</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for the Paucity of Nonfiction in Primary Grades</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupported Belief 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupported Belief 2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupported Belief 3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices for Including Nonfiction in the Classroom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Access</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Time</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension Strategies</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Opportunities</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHOD</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Audience</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals and Procedures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assessment</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The use of nonfiction in the elementary classroom is the subject of much recent study and discussion. Most explicit reading instruction in early literacy programs is delivered through the use of narrative texts. However, interestingly, research is being conducted in order to determine whether students in the primary grades would benefit from formal reading instruction through the use of nonfiction texts. While there is an abundance of research in regard to early reading achievement, few researchers have examined the role that nonfiction does or should play in the development of literacy in young students. Moreover, it was suggested by Moss and Hendershot (2002) that students in the intermediate grades lack exposure to and experience with a variety of text, especially nonfiction, which results in insufficient access skills and comprehension of the nonfiction genre.

Statement of the Problem

There are numerous studies in which the authors have examined best practices in regard to early literacy development. In their review of the research, Kamil and Lane (1997) found that the use of narrative text is viewed as the most logical avenue to early reading achievement. Also, the use of nonfiction text has attracted the attention of researchers such as Pappas (1993) and Kamil (1994; both cited in Kamil & Lane), and it has become clear that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of text to achieve proficient literacy levels. Teachers need to provide students with explicit reading
instruction with the use of nonfiction, as well as multiple experiences with rich nonfiction texts in various settings and situations.

Purpose of the Project

Although, increasingly, students are required to read and respond to nonfiction material, they are not provided with the skills necessary to read and comprehend this genre. The purpose of this project will be to develop a guide book for teachers to use as a tool to teach the features and text structure of nonfiction text.

Chapter Summary

It is this researcher’s position that nonfiction must be taught in balance with narrative text. Also, educators must teach the specific strategies, text features, and text structure that are necessary for students to access and understand nonfiction text. In Chapter 2, the Review of Literature, this researcher presents the background material to support the position that nonfiction is a crucial piece in literacy development. In addition, this researcher demonstrates the necessity for students to learn how to read nonfiction text and the need for exposure to a variety of nonfiction material in the early stages of literacy development. In Chapter 3, Methods, the procedures for the development of this project are detailed.
The purpose of this project will be to develop a guide book for teachers to use as a tool for the teaching of nonfiction. Nonfictional text represents the majority of reading and writing done by adults and comprises the bulk of passages that students must read and respond to in standardized tests (Hoyt, Mooney, & Parks, 2003). This fact alone should be a catalyst for the incorporation of explicit instruction for nonfiction material in literacy programs. Duke (2000) found that current practice indicates that an average of only 3.6 minutes per day is spent on nonfiction in classrooms. That number is even lower, 1.4 minutes per day, in low socioeconomic status (SES) classrooms. Duke (2003a) indicated that there are many benefits to teaching nonfiction in the classroom, and she suggested that early literacy instruction should include nonfiction materials.

What Is Nonfiction?

The term, nonfiction, can evoke different definitions from different people. In *Merriam-Webster Online* (Mish, 2005), nonfiction is defined as: literature that is not fictional. Exposition is defined as: establishing meaning or purpose, or, an example used to explain something that is difficult (Mish). Can one assert then, that informational or expository text, and nonfiction text are one and the same?

There are various opinions on this matter. In a recent study, Duke (2000) defined informational text as texts and contexts that have the following features:
According to Duke’s (2000) definition, informational text does not equate to nonfiction. However, for the purpose of this review of literature, this researcher uses the terms nonfiction, expository and informational interchangeably, with the understanding that they vary only slightly in structure and genre.

Understanding Nonfiction Text Features

Informational texts have many features designed to help readers navigate this reading material (McCall, 2003). When students expect and understand these features, they can access information with clarity and comprehension. Teaching students about nonfiction features, the functions they serve, and how to recognize them will help students to be successful readers of nonfiction (Bamford & Kristo, 2000). McCall identified three categories of text features: (a) print features, (b) graphic aids, and (c) organizational aids.

The print features are: (a) bold print, (b) colored print, (c) italics, (d) titles, (e) headings, (f) labels, (g) captions, and (h) bullets. The graphic aids are: (a) fact boxes, (b) diagrams, (c) flow diagrams, (d) size comparisons, (e) magnifications, (f) photographs, (g) cross-section/cutaway, (h) tables, (i) graphs, (j) charts, (k) timelines, and (l) maps. The organizational aids are: (a) table of contents, (b) introductions, (c) supplemental information, (d) index, (e) glossary, and (f) pronunciation guide.
The Text Structure of Nonfiction

Narrative text is framed around a beginning, middle, and end, as well as the literary elements of setting, plot, character, problem, and resolution (Hartman, 2002). However, nonfiction has a different framework. When students understand the structure of nonfiction writing, they are better able to determine importance. Hoyt and Therriault (2003) identified five core text structures: (a) descriptive; (b) problem/solution; (c) time/order (e.g., sequence); (d) comparison/contrast; and (e) cause/effect. Harvey (1998) added a sixth structure, question/answer.

Harvey (1998), who cited a nonfiction reading workshop conducted by Dole (1995), demonstrated the expository text structures by the construction of sentences based on the term, *goose bumps*.

1. Cause and effect. *Goose bumps make me shiver. When the temperature drops below 45 degrees, my skin crinkles into goose bumps.*
2. Problem and solution. *Goose bumps make me shiver. But they disappear as soon as I cover up with a jacket or sweater.*
3. Question and answer. *What happens to people when the shiver? They get goose bumps.*
4. Comparison and contrast. *Some people get goose bumps from fear. Others get goose bumps when they are touched emotionally.*
5. Description. *Goose bumps make me shiver. I get little bumps on my skin. They look like sesame seeds.*
6. Sequence. *Goose bumps make me shiver. First I get cold. Then I shake all over.* (p. 78)

According to Harvey, these examples are characteristic of the way informational writing is structured and how it appears in standardized tests and textbooks. Boynton and Blevins (2003) emphasized the fact that reading and understanding nonfiction text demands abstract thinking. Students must access, comprehend, and integrate new
concepts and ideas. Therefore, it is crucial that students be able to recognize the structure of nonfiction text.

Why Is Nonfiction Important?

As reported by Venezky (1982, as cited in Duke, 2005), the majority of the reading and writing that adults do is nonfiction. Also, approximately 96% of the World Wide Web sites contain nonfiction information (Kamil & Lane, 1998). Unfortunately, many Americans are not prepared to read effectively for information. Levy (1993, as cited in Duke, 2005) reported that approximately 44 million American adults cannot elicit a single piece of information when they read a nonfiction text that requires any background knowledge.

The strongest argument for greater attention to informational text is that it will help students to become better readers and writers of nonfiction text (Christie, 1984, 1987; both cited in Duke, 2003b). In addition, earlier and repeated exposure to nonfiction will result in greater reading competence (Duke).

Based on the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2000, as cited in Moss & Newton, 2002), Campbell, Reese, and Phillips (1996, as cited in Moss & Newton) asserted that greater attention to nonfiction may result in greater overall literacy development. Results from the NAEP showed that fourth grade students, who reported that they read storybooks, magazines, and nonfiction had, on average, higher reading achievement than children who reported reading only two of these types. Also, this latter group had higher achievement than those who reported reading only one. Supporters of this claim, such as Purcell-Gates (2001; Schiefele,
Krapp, and Winteler, 1992; both cited in Duke, 2003b) surmised that reading a variety of
texts may make students better overall readers.

Duke (2003b) suggested that reading informational text builds background
knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, which may help to support reading of
all kinds. Furthermore, the use of nonfiction in the primary grades may help students
make better connections between school and home literacies and deepen their
understanding of what counts as literacy.

Implications for the Classroom

Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts (2003) reported that narrative texts are the
most common type of text found in early childhood classrooms. However, contrary to
what many believe, there are numerous indications that informational text is appropriate
and beneficial for literacy acquisition in young children (Duke, 2003b).

Many educators maintain that, prior to the fourth grade, children learn to read;
after that, they read to learn (Chall, 1983, as cited in Duke, 2003a). However, Duke
suggested that children are capable of reading to learn at a much earlier age and,
therefore, nonfiction should be a part of their daily lives early.

The Case for Informational Text

The importance of informational text has been well established. In her
presentation at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA),
Duke (2002) detailed the many benefits of informational text: (a) it can be entertaining,
and some students actually prefer reading and writing informational text; (b) it can be
used to help solve problems and answer questions; (c) it can be used to raise questions and pose problems; and (d) it can be used to build background knowledge.

Also, Hartman (2002) supported the use of more nonfiction. He suggested that informational books can be used to: “(a) satisfy and broaden curiosity, (b) provide breadth and depth of information, (c) offer accurate information, (d) provide models for informational writing, (e) challenge readers to read critically, (f) help present familiar things in new ways, (g) promote exploration and simulate direct experience, and (h) connect readers and reading to the real world” (p. 2). In addition, Caswell and Duke (1998, as cited in Hartman) reported that the use of nonfiction may help reluctant and emerging readers find a path into literature. Once a child has found an interest, he or she is likely to read more (Alexander, 1997, as cited in Hartman).

**Informational Text for Young Children**

According to Duke (2003a), informational text is developmentally appropriate for young children, and there is little research to support the argument made by some researchers and theorists (Moffett, 1968; Bruner, 1986; both cited in Duke) that only narrative should be used with young children. On the contrary, Pappas (1993, as cited in Duke) demonstrated that young children can access and learn from the key linguistic features found in nonfiction. Furthermore, Oyler and Barry (1996) found that first grade students made intertextual connections during interactive teacher read-alouds of informational texts. As she observed and collected data on her 24 first grade students over the course of a school year, Barry found that the more exposure and opportunities
students had to interact with informational books, the better they were at initiating
intertextual links.

Duke (2003a) asserted that the use of nonfiction text fosters and builds upon a
young child’s inherent curiosity and interest in the natural and social world. She cited a
study conducted by Klutzier and Szabo (1998) who found that primary grade students
were more likely to show a penchant for informational text. In this study, first, second,
and third grade students preferred information books at least as often as narrative text
when asked to choose between them.

Duke (2003a) reported on a case study that she conducted with a colleague
(Caswell & Duke, 1998, as cited in Duke). These researchers examined the progress of
two boys who struggled notably with reading development. When the boys were
provided with rich informational texts, a genre they enjoyed immensely, their reading
development greatly improved.

The Scarcity of Informational Texts in Primary Classrooms

According to Duke (2003c), informational text is scarce in primary grade
classrooms. In a study conducted by Hoffman (1994, as cited in Duke), it was reported
that only 12% of reading selections from five basal reading programs for first grade were
nonfiction. Similarly, an analysis of eight basal reading programs for second grade
revealed that only 33.8% of the reading passages were informational (Schmidt, Caul,
Byers, & Buchaman, 1984, as cited in Duke).

In another study conducted by Duke (2000), she examined the amount of textual
experiences offered to first grade students. This observational study consisted of 20 first
grade classrooms in 10 school districts. Duke found that only 6% of the books in low
SES classroom libraries were informational. In high SES classrooms, 11% of books in
the classroom library were informational.

The results from surveys (Yopp & Yopp, 2000; Pressley, Tankin, & Yokoi, 1996;
both cited in Duke, 2003b) about the presence or absence of informational text in the
classroom supported Duke’s findings that there is a scarcity of informational text in
primary grades. In a recent survey of 126 primary grade teachers, Yopp and Yopp (as
cited in Duke, 2003c) found that only 14% of materials that were read aloud on a given
day were informational. Also, in a survey of 83 primary grade teachers, it was found that
only 6% of read aloud material was expository (Pressley et al.).

In spite of the paucity of informational text in the classroom, 38% of the
selections in standardized reading tests are expository (Flood & Lapp, 1986, as cited in
Duke, 2003c). Clearly, there is a discontinuity between the genres to which students are
exposed and the genres included in the tests that they take.

*Reasons for the Paucity of Nonfiction in Primary Grades*

Often, the reasons cited for the lack of nonfiction in the primary grades are: (a)
young students cannot manage informational text, and (b) they do not enjoy
informational text. However, Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997) found that children can
reproduce or reenact the language of informational text and comprehend such text with
considerable skill. Moss et al. found that, as students became immersed in nonfiction,
writing was a natural way for them to extend their experience. The use of writing
allowed students to ask questions and reflect upon their thinking in response to the
reading. Even first grade students were able to articulate their thinking in response to
their reading of the text. While first grade students drew pictures and supported them with drawings, older students maintained reading response journals.

Furthermore, Oyler and Barry (1996) indicated that young students can respond to informational text in sophisticated ways. These researchers found that first grade students linked the presented text with other remembered text and attempted to legitimate the notation of the text through connections with personal experience. Additionally, these researchers noted that the more time students spend in the classroom, the more the opportunity for intertextual connections grow. According to Duke (2003c), there are three beliefs that seem to be the cause for the indifference to nonfiction in the primary grades: (a) young students cannot make sense of informational text, (b) young children do not enjoy informational text, and (c) young children should first learn to read and then read to learn.

**Unsupported Belief 1: Young Children Cannot Handle Informational Text**

Some researchers and theorists (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Egan, 1986, 1993; Moffett, 1968; Sawyer & Watson, 1987; all cited in Duke 2003c) have maintained that narrative genres are the primary, if not the only, avenue by which young students can comprehend and communicate in the world around them. However, there is little, if any, research to indicate that young children cannot make sense of non-narrative text. Furthermore, there is little or no evidence to suggest that young children must learn to read narrative text before non-narrative text. Conversely, research conducted by Duke and Kays (1998), Moss (1997), and Hicks (1995; all cited in Duke), demonstrated that young children can learn from informational text if provided the opportunities to interact with this genre.
In a study conducted by Pappas (1991a, 1991b, 1993; all cited in Duke, 2000), kindergarten children were asked, on three occasions, to immediately pretend to read informational books and story books that had just been read to them. The children’s pretend readings of both genres were very similar to the text that they had just heard, which was an indication that they were able to learn about the language features of information books.

Hicks (1995, as cited in Duke, 2000) demonstrated that first grade students were able to participate and contribute to complex discussions about informational text in a classroom setting. A review of these studies indicated that young children were able to interact with and comprehend informational text.

Unsupported Belief 2: Young Children Do Not Like Informational Text

The second unsupported belief is that children do not like informational text, regardless of whether or not they can comprehend the text (Duke 2003c). In a study conducted by Kletzien and Szabo (1998, as cited in Duke), the researchers asked six teachers in Grades 1-3 to predict which text their students would prefer among forced choices that were obviously indicative of nonfiction and narrative. The teachers predicted that the students would prefer narrative text. However, the students preferred nonfiction at least 50% of the time. Moss and Hendershot (2002) found that, at the end of the school year, during which students were provided the choice of what to read, 16 (33%) of the 48 sixth grade students reported a preference for nonfiction.
Unsupported Belief 3: Young Students Should Learn to Read First, and then Read to Learn

Duke (2003c) maintained that the previous two beliefs stemmed from work conducted by Chall (1983, as cited in Duke). However, Chall described the stages of reading development that children experience, not the stages of development they should experience. At the time of Chall’s study, nonfiction reading material was scarce, but there are no empirical data to suggest that children should learn to read through the use of narrative text rather than nonfiction material.

Duke (2003c) found that children in classrooms with more informational text, who entered first grade with low letter sound knowledge, had higher reading comprehension rates and writing achievement than children in comparison classrooms. Therefore, Duke maintained that the inclusion of informational texts in the primary classrooms had a positive effect on overall achievement. Also, Duke found that reading informational text helped students to use, apply, and increase word knowledge and build background knowledge on a particular topic. Thus, students gained crucial knowledge and skills needed to grow in their literacy development.

Best Practices For Inclusion of Nonfiction in the Classroom

According to Duke (2004), the scarcity of nonfiction in the classroom, and the difficulty students have in the comprehension of such text, cannot be ignored. To address the problem, teachers need to: “(a) increase students’ access to informational text, (b) increase the time students spend working with informational text in instructional activities, (c) explicitly teach comprehension strategies, and (d) create opportunities for students to use informational text for authentic purposes” (p. 40).
Increased Access

According to Duke (2004), increased access to informational text motivated students who preferred this type of text. In a case study, Duke worked with a student who showed minimal interest in storybooks, but enjoyed informational books that were provided for him on such topics as animals, outer space, and machines. When he read informational text, he was better able to decode difficult words and used background knowledge without much difficulty. As he enjoyed more success with informational books, his overall reading ability and self-confidence grew which, in turn, had a positive effect on his narrative reading. Furthermore, in an earlier study, Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003, as cited in Duke, 2003a) found that the use of informational text in the classroom can increase the opportunities for home school connections that promoted literacy. They found that parents, who seldom read fiction for pleasure, engaged in nonfiction texts such as newspapers, magazines, and reference books.

Increased Time

Duke (2000) emphasized that teachers must increase the time that students engage in instructional activities that are focused on nonfiction. In her 2000 study, Duke found that students spent an average of only 3.6 minutes daily in interaction with nonfiction. She suggested that teachers include nonfiction read-alouds so that students can become familiar with the structure and features of nonfiction text. Dreher and Dromsky (2002, as cited in Duke, 2004) found that students were more likely to self-select nonfiction if the teacher had read it aloud to them. Guided and independent reading, writing, and content area instruction are activities in which the teacher should use informational text.
Comprehension Strategies

Students must receive explicit instruction on how to read nonfiction (Duke, 2004). Duke and Pearson (2002, as cited in Duke, 2004) found that students’ comprehension development was fostered through the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Duke reported that the strategies to be used to improve comprehension are: (a) monitor, (b) activate prior knowledge, (c) make predictions, (d) question, (e) think aloud, (f) visualize, (g) make inferences, (h) notice and utilize text structure, and (i) summarize. Duke emphasized that students must be taught to recognize the differences between nonfiction text and other types of text.

Authentic Opportunities

According to Duke (2004), it is imperative that students read informational text for authentic purposes. Duke found that, frequently, students read nonfiction only in order to answer questions at the end of a chapter. Duke cited Purcell-Gates and Duke (2003) who found that second and third grade students, who were encouraged to do more authentic reading and writing of informational and how-to writing in Science, showed more growth in reading comprehension and writing. Teachers must provide authentic situations in which students can read and write to obtain information.

Chapter Summary

As demonstrated in this review of literature, there are many reasons to include nonfiction in the classroom. Moss et al. (1997) found that nonfiction contains well written exposition and is ideal for exposing students to expository features. Informational texts are attractive and interesting and can pique the interest of young readers.
Also, Duke (2002) detailed the many benefits of informational text: (a) it can be entertaining, and some students actually prefer reading and writing informational text; (b) it can be used to help solve problems and answer questions; (c) it can be used to raise questions and pose problems; and (d) it can be used to build background knowledge. In the words of Duke (2003a):

Young children are inherently curious about the world around them. One need only witness children’s fascination with cars and trucks passing a puppy playing in the park or worms that wash up after the rain to recognize the young child’s great interest in the natural and social world. (p. 2)

It is this researcher’s opinion that there is a great need to give students numerous opportunities to interact with nonfiction in a variety of settings. Also, students should be given explicit instruction on how to read and comprehend nonfiction text. In Chapter 3, this researcher describes the method, target audience, goals, and procedures for the development of this project.
Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project will be to develop a resource guide for teachers to use as a tool to teach nonfiction. The scarcity of nonfiction in classrooms today came to the attention of this researcher when she began a study of nonfiction with her sixth grade students during the last 3 months of the school year. As the study began, several problems became apparent. While there were a few students who lacked interest in nonfiction text, the biggest obstacle was that the students did not know how to read it. Additionally, students, while eager to read about their chosen topic, did not know how to synthesize the information into an original work. It was through this teaching experience that this researcher saw the need to provide students with the instruction they need to read and write nonfiction text.

Target Audience

This project will be designed for application with students in Grades 4-6, but should be easily adaptable for use in primary, as well as secondary grades. Teachers who need a guide to teach nonfiction, teachers who seek to improve their students’ reading achievement, and teachers who desire to strengthen their students’ ability to read and enjoy nonfiction text, will be interested in this project.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project will be to provide teachers with a resource to facilitate the explicit instruction in the reading of nonfiction text. The guide book will provide a brief
review of literature that demonstrates the need for more informational text in the classroom. Subsequent chapters will be organized to include the elements of nonfiction text, such as text features and text structure. Each element will be briefly detailed and an example of each provided. Additionally, current trends and best practices will be presented.

Peer Assessment

Assessment of the resource guide will be obtained from four colleagues through informal feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. Each colleague will be given a copy of the document and asked to review it for timeliness, ease of use, and relevancy. Each reviewer will provide comments, editing marks, and suggestions on the hard copy.

Chapter Summary

The paucity of nonfiction in the classroom is the subject of much research. Through this project, this researcher will use knowledge gained from an extensive review of literature and personal teaching experience to provide other teachers with the timely and meaningful tools needed to address this issue. In Chapter 4, she provides user-friendly information and applications for teachers who are unfamiliar with best practices for teaching nonfiction, and/or for those who desire to strengthen their teaching of nonfiction as a reading genre. Discussion and colleague reviews are presented in Chapter 5.
REFERENCES


