

“Sometimes I Just Crave Information!”

Teaching and Learning with Informational Text

Linda B. Gambrell and Barbara A. Marinak

As part of a study on motivation to read, we recently interviewed several hundred elementary students.¹ When asked about what kind of books she liked to read, one fifth grade girl replied, “Well, sometimes I just crave information!” Her reply reflects the fact that many young readers are highly motivated to read nonfiction. Some children do crave information! But we also know that many young children have difficulty comprehending informational text. There are a number of reasons why students struggle with this type of text: they may lack sufficient experience with informational text and receive minimal explicit instruction about using informational text.² Social studies can play a particularly important role in helping young learners become familiar with and motivated to read informational text. This issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* is filled with insights and engaging instructional ideas designed to promote student success and achievement with informational text.

What is Informational Text?

While there are many definitions of informational text, we like a broad and inclusive definition—one that specifies three distinct types of informational text: narrative-informational, expository-informational, and mixed.³ *Narrative-informational* text conveys factual information using a story format. *Expository-informational* text also conveys factual information (including biographical information), but does not use a story structure. *Mixed text* is defined as a hybrid of styles and structures. Informational text comes in many forms, including trade books, textbooks, magazines, reference books, encyclopedias, newspapers, posters, pamphlets, and electronic sources such as websites.

Why Does Informational Text Matter?

In an often-cited study by Christine Pappas, kindergarten children were just as successful in reenacting events from informational books as from story books—and they preferred the informational books.⁴ Pappas challenged the “narrative as primary” notion, stating that an exclusive emphasis on “story” in the early grades limits children’s experiences with informational texts and may create a barrier to full access to literacy. A more recent study also found that informational books were the overwhelming choice of primary students.⁵ One hundred and ninety first-graders from ten different schools were invited to visit a book display which included a range of

genres, ethnicities, and male/female protagonists. They had unlimited time to browse and select a book that was theirs to keep. Approximately 85 percent of the children chose informational books over fiction.

What Are the Barriers?

One study found a scarcity of informational texts in first-grade classroom print environments and activities.⁶ On average, only 3.6 minutes per day were spent with informational text during classroom reading and writing activities. In low-socioeconomic status schools, almost no time was spent with informational text. As students progress to the upper elementary grades and into middle school, the problem persists or worsens. Several studies have reported that students engage in little content area reading of any kind, either in class or as homework.⁷ These research findings suggest that students may not be reading content textbooks and other informational texts because they find these texts to be inconsiderate, difficult to comprehend, or not engaging. Another reason students do not engage with these texts is that teachers do not assign the reading of textbook or primary source material.⁸ Consequently, the conclusion drawn by many students may be that the reading of these texts is not important to their learning.

Several important classroom observation studies have reported little or no teacher modeling of the use of informational text and minimal explicit instruction using informational text.⁹ Due to the perception that informational text is difficult, teachers often read informational text aloud, rather than instructing students in comprehension strategies, so that they might read it themselves.¹⁰

Teaching About the Text

There is clear evidence that teaching with and about informational text promotes elementary students’ general literacy knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge in the content areas. In one study, after a series of reading strategy lessons, upper elementary students showed gains in their ability to infer major ideas and demonstrated application of the lessons to new content texts.¹¹

Just as there are elements in a narrative story grammar, there are also text elements that comprise what might be termed an “informational grammar.”¹² The five elements of informational text are the Author’s Purpose, Major Ideas, Supporting Details, Aids, and Vocabulary. The term “text structure” refers to the



organizational logic of a text.¹³ While there are a number of identifiable text structures that are represented in informational text, five occur frequently in K-8 books and textbooks: Cause-Effect, Compare-Contrast, Time-Order, Simple Listing, and Problem-Solution.¹⁴

Researchers have found that text structure instruction was effective for promoting informational text comprehension.¹⁵ Text structure awareness has also been linked to accurate recall and retelling.¹⁶ Readers who understand text organizational structures typically find greater success in identifying important information and relationships between ideas.

Preparing for the Future

One of the most often cited reasons for increasing attention to informational text is that students are expected to read and understand a wide range of informational text as they progress through the grades and through life. An equally compelling reason is that, for many students in the elementary grades, informational text can serve as a catalyst for motivation to learn. Simply put, many students crave information. The articles in this themed issue highlight how social studies instruction using informational text can nurturing the language, strategies, and skills our students need in order to “read the world.” 🌐

Notes

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