

Fiction vs. Informational Texts

Which Will Kindergartners Choose?

During a professional development workshop, the facilitator asks participants to reflect on all the texts we've read in the past two weeks. That's easy; I've read a few chapters in a mystery novel and part of a young adult fiction book that is required reading for my teenage daughter. Oh, and of course, I've read the newspaper, e-mails, a recipe, and text messages. I've read information on the Internet, articles in professional journals, and a chapter in a new teacher resource book. And then I consider the types of texts I read to the kindergartners in my classroom. Interestingly, most of the books are fiction. This sudden enlightenment leads to a question: Why don't I expose the children to more nonfiction and informational texts?

Nonfiction is “the literature of fact—or the product of an author's inquiry, research, and writing” (Kristo & Bamford 2004, 12). Informational texts include books as well as text in other formats such as magazines, newspapers, and online articles. The primary purpose of informational text is to provide information about the natural and social world (Duke et al. 2006).

Literacy research cites many reasons why nonfiction/informational texts should be included in primary classrooms. The availability of nonfiction

texts can motivate some children to read (Kletzien & Dreher 2004). Also, incorporating nonfiction texts in the early grades helps children develop the literacy skills they need to read and write informational texts in later grades (Duke 2007; Kristo & Bamford

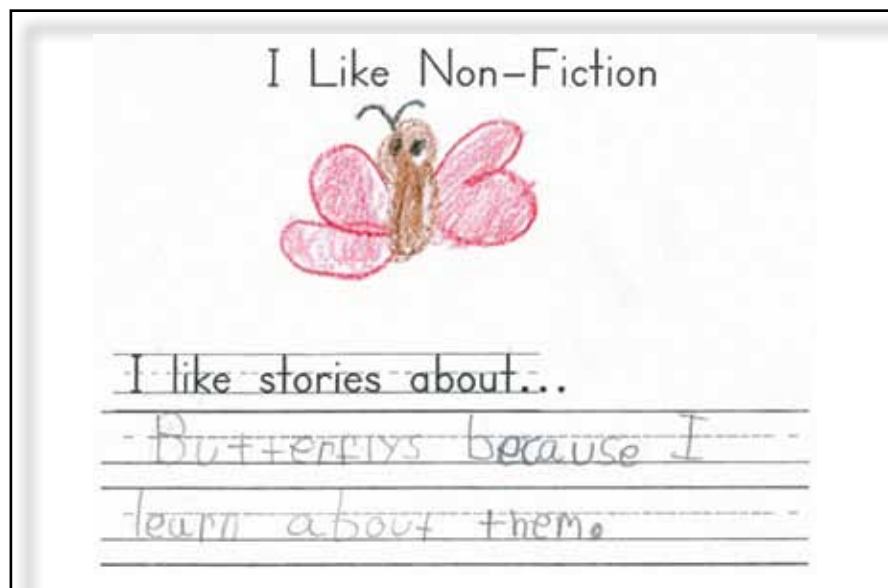
2004; Gill 2009). The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Framework calls for 50 percent of the assessment's reading passages to be informational text by fourth grade (National Assessment Governing Board 2008). The inclusion of more informational passages in the NAEP Reading Assessment helps make the case that “informational reading ability is arguably more important now than it ever has been” (Duke 2010, 68).

Informational text supports children's overall literacy development by expanding vocabulary and background knowledge, while also exposing them to the language and

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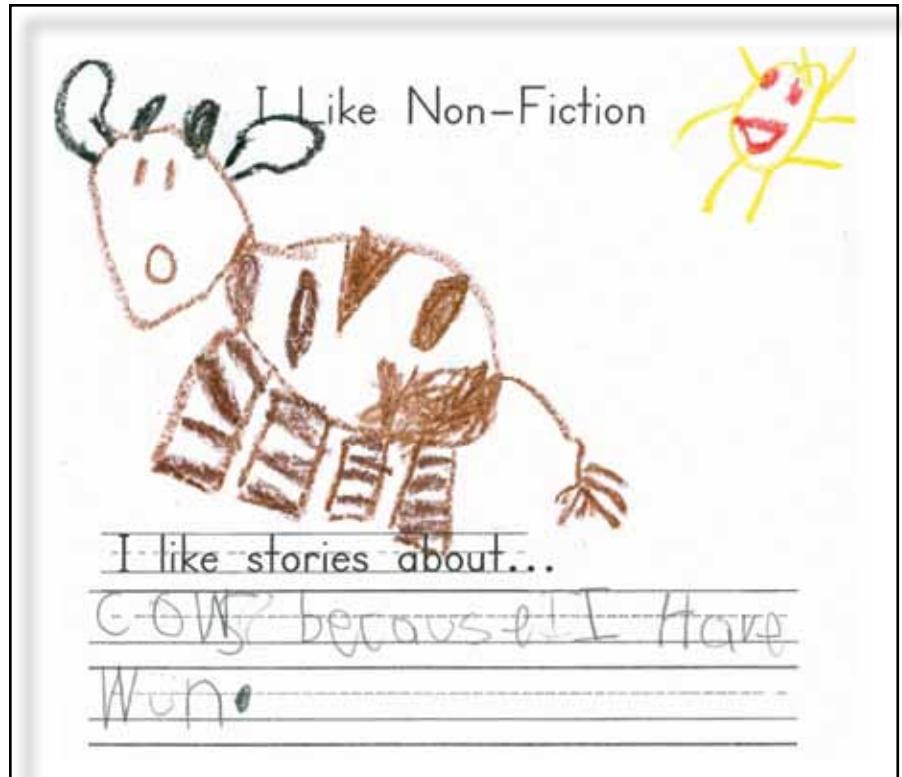
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structure of expository texts (Kristo & Bamford 2004; Webster 2009). Finally, state and widely adopted national standards, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSSO & NGA Center 2010), are calling for children to read and write informational text: “The evidence is compelling: We should involve students in informational text early in school—not only through such commonly mentioned practices as teaching text structure and vocabulary, but also by enacting the triad of reading real-world informational texts for real-world reasons in motivating contexts” (Duke 2010, 70). This means that students should be reading for the same reasons most adults read informational texts: because they need to answer a question or they simply want to know about something. The key is that the reading is real—authentic and purposeful.

Some primary teachers have specific reservations about using informational texts in the classroom (Duke & Bennett-Armistead 2003). Teachers may think young children can’t handle informational text because of the various text features, such as charts and figures, and the topic-specific vocabulary. They may think there isn’t enough informational text available that’s appropriate for young children because it has only been in the past several years that publishers have prioritized releasing informational texts for the primary grades. Finally, teachers may feel that most young learners prefer narrative texts such as storybooks.

I have high expectations for my students and believe they can read (or listen to me read aloud) informational text and understand the content. But



I was convinced that kindergartners preferred fiction, even though much of the research cited children’s preferences for the content of informational books over narrative text, given that they are provided with quality options in both genres (Duke 2003; Kletzien & Dreher 2004; Stead 2006; Pilonieta 2011). “Studies show that even young children can learn content from informational text, can understand and retell informational texts, can learn about the language and features of informational text, can respond to and discuss informational text, and can even write informational text!” (Duke 2003, 3). There has also been an increase in the number of quality

informational books available (Read, Reutzel, & Fawson 2008; Gill 2009). I decided to investigate the children’s book preferences to determine if my perception that they preferred fiction was accurate.

Initial questions

My kindergarten class includes 15 children, 10 boys and 5 girls. Six of the children are identified as having special needs, including developmental delays and difficulties with language processing. Two of the six students are on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. I designed an investigation to answer three questions:

1. Do these kindergartners enjoy reading nonfiction and informational text?
2. Do they choose to read options from that genre on their own?
3. Do both girls and boys make the same types of book choices?

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Children's book choices

At the end of 19 weeks, I concluded that the children had proved my theory wrong. As a group, the children chose nonfiction or informational texts over fiction 14 out of 19 weeks. One week, they checked out an equal number of fiction and nonfiction. Each week, more boys than girls chose nonfiction. In fact, 50 percent or more of the boys chose nonfiction for 15 out of the 19 weeks. It was becoming clear to me that while they enjoyed fiction, nonfiction was the preferred choice of many of the kindergartners that year. Mohr (2003) found a similar result in a study of first-graders who were asked which books they would like to have to keep. "Eighty-four percent of first grade children chose informational texts when given a choice of many different types and genres of children's picture books" (Read, Reutzler, & Fawson 2008, 213).

Classroom observations

I noticed more and more children choosing from the nonfiction bin and sharing with each other books on extreme animals (unique, dangerous, fastest, smallest, and so on), dinosaurs, weather, and other topics. This supported the data I had gathered by tracking children's library book choices. They were also giving "book talks" in conversation, highlighting the books they were reading. I noticed that the books children brought from home to share with the class were more diversified. Without any mention of the genre, children were sharing texts on fire trucks, pet care, and even ballet dancing in addition to fairy tales and storybooks. "Nonfiction resources contain so much more information than any one of us—student or teacher—can possibly hold" (Duke 2007, 12).

Before I had decided to intentionally focus on using nonfiction texts in the classroom, one active and inquisitive boy had done everything possible to avoid sitting on the rug with a book

Gathering information

For 19 weeks, I tracked the books that the children checked out of the school library. Each week I tallied the number of books that were nonfiction/informational and how many were fiction. I also noted the choices of boys versus girls. As each child brought a book to the librarian to be stamped, I read the book's title to the child and flipped through several pages. Then I asked the child, "Is this book fiction or nonfiction?" I recorded the genre of the text as well as anecdotal notes about the child's understanding of the difference between fiction and nonfiction texts. In addition, I informally observed the children's choices in the classroom library and gathered information through writing samples and discussions. This was a learning opportunity for the children and a type of informal assessment strategy for me.

In the classroom, I tried to read aloud at least two nonfiction books

each week. At first it was difficult to select nonfiction books. There were so many to choose from, including some recommended by the librarian, but I couldn't find books on topics of interest to me. A colleague reminded me that it was important to focus on the interests of the children. They wanted to read books about dangerous bugs, monster trucks, the butterfly life cycle, and famous athletes. In addition to reading more nonfiction books aloud, I added a few bins of nonfiction and informational texts to the classroom library. I also included things like cereal box covers, brochures from amusement parks and museums, magazines like *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and colorfully illustrated children's cookbooks. Researchers suggest that approximately half of classroom libraries and reading instruction for primary grades should revolve around nonfiction texts (Kletzien & Dreher 2004; Pilonieta 2011).

during independent reading time. Finally, after some pleading on my part, he would get a book and go through the motions. During this period of time, however, I noticed him pouring over the nonfiction books with an excitement and interest he had never before expressed. He especially loved any book about trains. He had visited many railroad stations and could make interesting connections to the content and photographs in the books.

Kletzien and Dreher (2004) discuss the notion of “information readers.” These children find it more compelling to read informational texts than stories. “Informational text has motivating potential because children are curious about their world. Children who are interested in a particular topic are motivated to read about it in informational text” (Kletzien & Dreher 2004, 6). I saw this curiosity flourish and motivate several of the children to read, children who otherwise would have resisted independent reading. Monitoring the topics the children chose also provided me with informa-

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tion about what their interests were, and I was able to recommend other books on the same topics to these children to keep them reading.

Gathering information through children’s writing

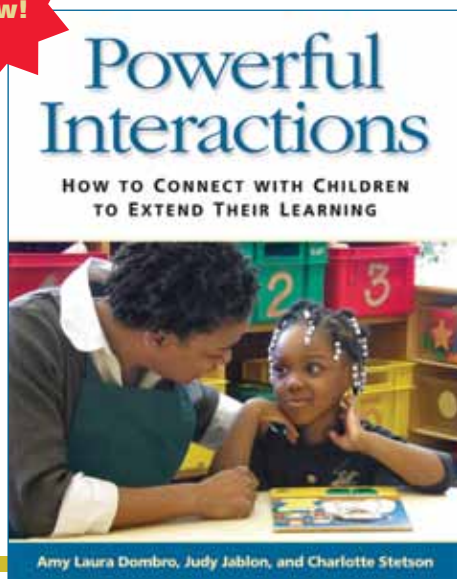
After conducting this research, I was convinced that many children enjoyed reading nonfiction as much as, or more, than fictional stories. I asked the children to write about their favorite genre to reinforce their understanding of the different genres. I created two papers, one titled “I Like Fiction” and one titled “I Like Nonfiction.” After some discussion about the differences

between the two genres, I asked individual children to tell me which sheet they needed and what topic they were going to write about. I verified that they understood the terms—*fiction* versus *nonfiction*—and were choosing the appropriate category. Each child then completed the sentence starter, “I like stories about . . .”

The kindergartners got right to work. Immediately I could see their responses indicated understanding of the purposes of reading nonfiction and informational text. One child wrote, “I like stories about butterflies, because I learn about them.” She understood that one of the purposes of reading nonfiction is to learn new information. Other children made

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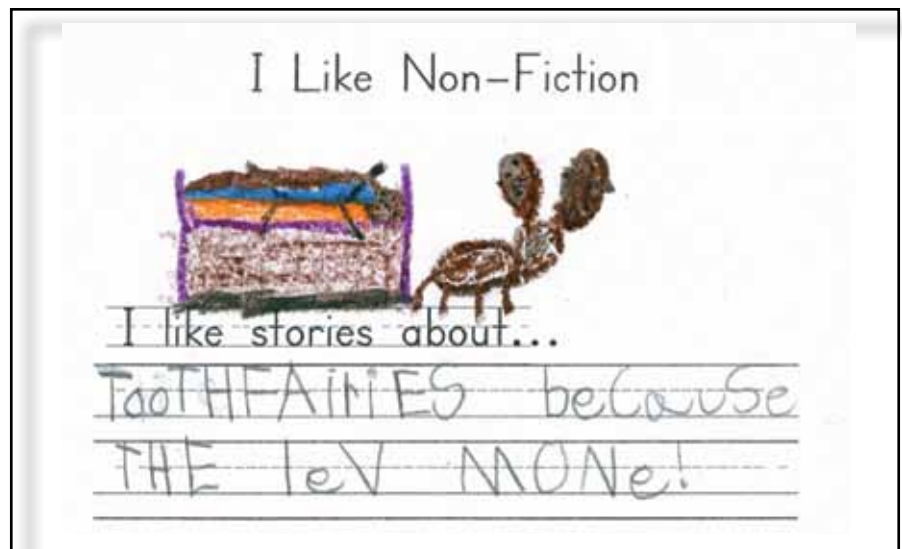
connections to their personal interests, writing, “I like stories about cows because I have one.” This child’s family had a new cow on their farm, and he was wrapped up in books about this topic. Finally, one boy showed that he understood that his own life made an interesting nonfiction story as he wrote about himself, “I like stories about Liam when he was a baby.” These examples highlight the children’s natural curiosity about the world, which “remains solid as they progress through their elementary school years and is not limited to the world of animals” (Stead 2006, 2). Ten of the 15 children in the class chose to write about nonfiction as a preference.

The five children who chose fiction wrote about enjoying favorite story characters like Peter Pan and Clifford because they are “funny.” One very young kindergartner enthusiastically asked me for the sheet that started, “I like nonfiction . . .” and I asked her what she was going to write about as her favorite nonfiction topic. She replied with all sincerity, “I like stories about the tooth fairy because she leaves me money.” I hesitated, looked to my teacher’s assistant, and then proceeded to hand her the nonfiction sheet. That lesson is for another day, another grade level, in fact!

Conclusion

At the conclusion of my investigation, I was convinced that the kindergartners enjoyed reading nonfiction texts, often chose that genre on their own, and both boys and girls made choices that included nonfiction. I did note that in this group, more boys than girls chose nonfiction. A review of the research helped shape

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my understanding of the need to use more nonfiction and informational literature with the children. However, the process of observing kindergartners’ book choices, discussions, and writing is what really compelled me to change my thinking and practices. It is evident that “incorporating informational text 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” (Duke 2004, 43).

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