

# Nonfiction Reading in the Intermediate Grades

**It's not just textbooks anymore!**

By V. Susan Bennett-Armistead and Nell K. Duke

**T**HE INTERMEDIATE GRADES have long been known as the time when children start "reading to learn." Topics such as the "Core Democratic Values" and magnetism are part of many school curricula. In the past, children learned about these topics largely through textbooks. As we prepare students to be adult readers, however, this practice has come under scrutiny.

Adults get information in a variety of ways. One study of a diverse group of adults found that they spent more time reading periodicals than any other category of text, with periodical reading comprising 27% of daily time spent reading on average (Smith, 2000). Another study found newspaper reading to be among the most frequent ways that adults use literacy (Purcell-Gates, 1996). If we want students to be prepared for gathering information in the real world, we need to think outside the book.

**Using different kinds of nonfiction text is especially important.**

## Why the Mismatch?

There are a few reasons why children in the intermediate grades have had limited exposure to a variety of nonfiction texts. One is that for some time, few nonfiction materials for this age group were compelling. Many nonfiction trade books were dry and unappealing. Magazines and newspapers for children were scarce and, of course, no one had thought of the Internet yet.

In addition, teachers, having been reared and trained on textbook use, felt uncomfortable with alternative media. Not that we're old dogs, but sometimes it's hard to learn a new trick. As new teachers arrive in schools, they may bring a comfort with new media with them.

## It Takes All Kinds of Texts

Today, teachers can find many kinds of wonderful nonfiction materials. Here are just some of the nonfiction sources that benefit children:

- trade books
- newspapers
- magazines
- Web sites

Using different kinds of nonfiction text is especially important because outside of schools, books do not dominate reading material. Children should be exposed to different formats of reading material, of which books are only one.

We also recommend that teachers aim to balance use of fiction and nonfiction texts.

Certainly children should have a great deal of exposure to fictional stories. But they should also be exposed to nonfiction stories and texts that are not in story form, such as a book about space or an article on wetland preservation. We need to reflect the rich diversity of texts read outside of classrooms within our classroom walls.

## Why Kids Need a Variety of Nonfiction

We believe that students benefit from a wide variety of nonfiction, including magazines, newspapers, narratives, and informational texts.

• **A variety of nonfiction texts may help students become better writers.** Not surprisingly, relationships exist between what students read and what they write (Kamberelis, 1998). Exposing students to a variety of texts offers them a buffet of choices for expressing their own ideas. If they only read textbooks, they miss out on models for many writing styles and formats.

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• **A variety of texts, fiction and nonfiction, may help prepare students for tests.** Students who report reading a greater variety of texts perform better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a standardized test (Dreher, 1998/1999). Many standardized tests include a great deal of nonfiction as well as fictional text. Sometimes, time spent on real reading and writing feels like it takes away from test preparation. In the case of reading a variety of materials, we provide a form of test preparation—for example, we offer students important exposure to text features such as graphs, charts, and captions that show up on standardized tests with some regularity.

• **Reading a wide range of materials seems to affect students' interest in reading overall** (Duke, Martineau, Frank, & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). This may in turn result in students reading more productively (Caswell & Duke, 1998).

All of these together result in a richer literacy experience for students. Helping them make sense of what they read is important, however.

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## Strategies for Using Nonfiction

There are many instructional techniques that can be used effectively with nonfiction texts (see Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, for a book-length discussion of such techniques with younger students). Here are some suggestions:

• **Ask high-level questions.** One point of emphasis in many of these techniques is the importance of asking high-level questions and having high-order discussions around nonfiction texts. Simply asking children factual questions with answers “right there” in the text (Raphael & McKinney, 1983) will not benefit children as much as also asking questions that require drawing inferences, pondering, and even debating. Questions that start with, “Why do you think”; “What do you think”; and “Have you ever” can be powerful. And such questions do not always have to come from the teacher. Research suggests that children asking one another questions about what they read can also be very powerful (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

• **Combine reading with hands-on experiences.** This is another way to promote richer discussion of text and build knowledge and motivation. One study found the combination of hands-on experiences and

reading interesting texts promoted greater learning in science than only one or the other of these things (Anderson & Guthrie, 1999). If students are reading an article about spiderwebs, they might benefit from observing a spider spin a web or monitoring a web over time. If they are reading about the Mars landing, they might access the NASA Web site, [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov), for information on how to create their own rovers. If they are reading about Russia, they might ask members of a local Russian heritage group to visit. We want children to see many ways to connect reading to “real life.”

• **Make reading-writing connections.** These connections can also be powerful tools in working with nonfiction texts. In the case of newspapers, children can write “press releases” about particular articles to pass on to other classes. They can write letters to the editor about article content. They can write expanded versions of articles to share with their class, or even produce their own newspaper using adult-authored newspapers as models. When children write about and in response to what they read, they think more deeply about the text. This also helps children think more about features of text and the reading process. They begin to read like a writer (and write like a reader).

Reading textbooks provides information, but if we want students to be able to produce their own texts as well as use a variety of texts, we need to think about providing a variety of examples for them. Again, we must think of the world outside of schools: So often in our daily lives we integrate reading and writing in some way; we want children to have the same opportunity. ■



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