Motivating the Lifelong Reading Habit Through a Balanced Use of Children's Information Books

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As literacy educators, we have a tendency to use mostly fiction books as our chief source of materials for motivating the reading habits of our students. When we examine children's reading interests and the books they choose for their independent reading, we discover that many children enjoy, and even prefer, to read information books. Coupled with students' strong interests in information books is the growing selection of quality children's information books available in today's school's libraries. This article explores the rationale for balancing the use of information books in literacy programs with a focus on how we can use information books to encourage and motivate girls and boys to do more independent reading. Ideas for practical applications of this rationale for both classroom teachers and school librarians are provided in the hope that all elementary literacy teachers will start using more information books to motivate their young readers.

Introduction

This book strengthened my dream to become an astronaut when I grow up. (grade 5 boy)

This book is great. It tells all about how our planet Earth was formed and the ups and downs about this world. I never knew that people have to start worrying about Earth. (grade 4 girl)

I liked when this book showed the inside of the Statue of Liberty. I would really like to see up there. (grade 2 boy)

Literacy educators know that children like to read information books (Reese & Harris, 1997). These few quotes above give a glimpse of the reaction children have when they are given opportunities to read information books for their pleasurable reading, as well as adequate instruction in how to explore the wealth of ideas and information found in contemporary information books. Literacy in these classrooms is nurtured through the concept of "whole literature" (Crook & Lehman, 1991) in which information books are included across literacy programs both for instruction and for motivating young readers. Supporting this growing understanding are several studies (Monson & Sebesta, 1991; Morrow & Gambrell, 2001; Sanacore, 1992) that show that for many children information books are a strong reading interest and even a reading preference.

Unfortunately, as literacy educators, we have tended to rely primarily on the wealth of picture storybooks and novels to motivate young learners to become lifelong readers (Duke, 1998). We seem to accept the narrative text as the main tool we use for literacy instruction and for the independent reading activities we give to our students. We traditionally leave information texts for later in literacy development and for when we want students to "do a project" or find specific information. This tendency ignores the interest and excitement shown in the responses of children like those quoted above who learn from these books, who enjoy reading them, and who seek them out when they visit their school library media center (Doiron, 1995). Although I would never argue against the inclusion of quality picture storybooks and novels for teaching literacy and encouraging children to take up the reading habit, I suspect we may be missing a great opportunity for catching some children by neglecting to include information books in a more central role in our literacy programs. This article explores the rationale for balancing the use of information books in literacy programs with a focus on how we can use information books to encourage and motivate girls and boys to do more independent reading. Implications of this rationale for balancing the use of information books in literacy programs are then explored in the hope of sparking elementary literacy teachers to start using more information books to motivate their young readers.

A Balanced Perspective on Fiction and Information Books

Literacy educators today are encouraged to balance their teaching pedagogy (Cooper, 2001) to include direct teaching, learner-centered methodologies, formal and informal assessment approaches, word work and work play, decoding and comprehension, reading and writing, listening and speaking, viewing and representing, as well as finding the time to make uses for new information technologies and a wealth of children's literature. This is a complicated and dynamic process to establish a literacy classroom and create a teaching and learning environment that will meet all children's needs. The tools for teaching literacy continue to center on the heavy use of children's trade books both for instruction and for children's independent practice of the literacy skills and strategies they are acquiring. This means that teachers must develop their own expertise in children's literature, plus find a large number of quality children's books for their daily work. Their knowledge of quality children's books is crucial to the success of their literacy programs (Morrow & Gambrell, 2001). Teachers purchase books at book fairs, con-ferences, and book stores; they borrow books from the school library media center, the local public library, and from their colleagues. Research has shown that the texts predominantly chosen for classrooms are narrative texts usually found in picture storybooks and novels (Doiron, 1995; Doiron & Davies, 1996; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999) and that children are taught to read mostly with narrative texts (Duke, 1998).

A growing body of theoretical and academic support for balancing the roles of fiction and information books is beginning to influence how teachers and researchers think about the use of children's literature (Duke, 1998; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997; Pappas, 1991; Sanacore, 1992; Stead, 2002). Principal among these is Louise Rosenblatt (1989, 1991), who continues to play a major role in helping educators understand the transactive nature of reading. Rosenblatt (1991) outlines two ways of reading in which we adopt either a predominantly efferent stance, where our main interest is in acquiring information, or an aesthetic stance, where we attend "mainly to what we are experiencing, thinking and feeling *during* the reading" (p. 444). Significant in Rosenblatt's newer work is her reminder that the reader may adopt an efferent or aesthetic stance about the *same* piece of writing and that "we switch stances while reading" (p. 445). What has been causing us trouble, says Rosenblatt, is the "either-or habit of thinking" where we consider a text as written for either an efferent or an aesthetic reading to take place. She explains, "We can read aesthetically something written mainly to inform or read efferently something written mainly to communicate experience. Our present purpose and past experiences, as well as the text, are factors in our choice of stance" (p. 445). Rosenblatt advises teachers to be aware of these "theoretical distinctions" and develop students' ability to read either text from either stance. This stresses the importance of using quality examples of fiction and information books to ensure a balance of opportunities for students to experience texts that can be read efferently and/or aesthetically. Balancing the books does not preclude the powerful and aesthetic role that fiction will continue to play in literacy programs, it merely establishes information books with an equal opportunity to act as a model for students, to help them learn how these texts work and to motivate them to read (Doiron, 1994; Dreher, 1998/1999; Gambrell, Palmer, & Coding, 1993).

The Growth of Quality Information Books

Beginning in the 1960s and propelled by the information age, children's information books have come into their own as a legitimate literary form led by acknowledged authors who employ rich writing styles and a variety of forms not just to convey knowledge or facts, but also to infuse their subject with the same sense of wonder and awe that drew them to the topic in the first place. This sense of excitement and commitment to their subject is easily caught by young readers. When this quality writing and enthusiasm for a subject are combined with the amazing new techniques in book design and book production, we see some truly wonderful information books on the market today.

Information books will always be valuable sources of ideas and information for readers who have a specific question to answer or a problem to solve. However, facts alone are useless to the reader unless they are developed against a background of larger concepts and generalizations that become the

ultimate purpose of the book. These concepts are developed in certain attitudes of those writers who share their expertise first and foremost as enthusiasts or people with strong convictions. Such writers treat their readers with respect and they do not write in condescending or patronizing ways. The combination of respect for the reader and respect for the subject separates the exceptional writer of information books from the mundane. Fisher (1972) said it well when she referred to quality information books as those that "combine warm individuality and clear exposition, a mingling of words that color the subject and words that clarify it, a recognition of past as well as present" (p. 46).

Just like their fiction counterparts, writers of information books have become advocates for what they do, and they frequently articulate with passion and principle their goals as writers (Blumberg, 2000; Fritz, 1993; Macaulay, 1993; Pringle, 2000.). Literacy educators are beginning to take writers of information books more seriously, and many of these writers have gained the respect and notoriety previously attributed only to fiction writers. Patricia Lauber (1992) has written dozens of science books that have won many prestigious awards. She sums up her aspirations as a writer by saying, "I hope I show that it is possible to read science for pleasure. I hope to show that a well-written science book can stand up in literary evaluation, that it is part of our literature, that it is deserving of a place on reading lists and in our classroom libraries" (p. 15).

Another respected and award-winning author, Russell Freedman (1992) claims that his "first responsibility as a writer of information books is not just to be accurate as I muster my facts, but to pursue that elusive quality called the 'truth.' That risky and uncertain pursuit is what adds a sense of exploration and discovery to an information book" (p. 3). Lauber (1992) and Freedman (1992) both demonstrate that writing an information book is "real" writing; it comes from those same inner drives to share feelings and ideas that inspire and motivate fiction writers to create stories.

The literary world is also acknowledging the works of writers of information books with prestigious awards. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) launched the *Orbis Pictus* Award in 1990 in response to the growing need for "a new award for promoting and recognizing excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children" (Vardell, 1991, p. 474). The title of the award is taken from the title of the first book actually planned for children, *Orbis Pictus—The World in Pictures*, which was published in 1657 and was chosen to symbolize "the power of outstanding nonfiction to provide a new 'picture of the world' for the child reader" (Vardell, 1991, p. 474). Book reviewers as well are writing more intelligent and informative reviews that respect information books as creative and as having literary merit, rather than limiting their reviews to a hasty examination of the book contents.

On a more tangible level, the characteristics of quality information books have been listed by several writers (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1992; Mc-

Kenzie & Warlow, 1977; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2002) in order to help school librarians and classroom teachers make informed choices. Most lists contain these similar expectations.

1. Appearance and format have an effect and should entice the reader to pick up the book.
2. The information should be authoritative, accurate and as up-to-date as possible.
3. People and things should be presented as they are, not as stereotypes.
4. Fact and opinion should be clearly delineated.
5. Diagrams and illustrations and other book design elements should act as effective guides to and supports for a clear understanding of the topic.
6. Information should be accessible through the efficacious use of table of contents, index, glossary, charts, and bibliographies.
7. Styles should be clear and direct, appropriate for the intended audience, involve the reader, and employ vivid and interesting language.

Although prescriptive lists may be helpful for a literary analysis or for making a book selection, it is often the intangible combination of the writer's enthusiasm, a unique perspective, and an engaging writing style that coalesces around a provocative subject that produces a rare and enduring book that captures everyone's interest. Some would say such titles are rare, but they are becoming more common as writers of information books understand their audience better and recognize that most readers have a great deal of prior knowledge that they bring to the reading event. Consequently, they are creating their books with a deep and enduring respect for their readers.

Children's Reading Interests

Adding to the growing influence that information books are having in promoting literacy is the attention researchers and literacy educators are giving to children's reading interests. As classroom teachers and school librarians, we know that children enjoy similar types of stories. Whether it is a great picture book like *Jumanji* (Van Allsburg, 1981), *Animalia* (Base, 1987) and *Who is the World For?* (Pow, 2000), or a popular fiction novel like *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) and *Zack* (Bell, 1998), children as a class enjoy sharing the stories and novels that teachers select for literacy instruction. Teachers build a repertoire of favorite stories that they use each year in the context of curriculum themes and for developing a wide range of literacy activities. It seems that once we have found a fiction title that connects with our students, we quickly integrate it into our pedagogy and make it part of children's shared literacy experience.

The same consistency, however, is harder to achieve with information books, and because children's interests are so diverse, it should not necessarily be the goal. When it comes to information books, diversity in student interests means that teachers need to look for a wider range of book selections rather than searching for that one special book that will provide a

43

consistent experience. In fact, if we really examined how children react to reading the same novel or picture book, we would often see that they do not consistently like a particular book. Their enthusiasm for the book comes because the teacher is keen to share it, and he or she goes out of the way to make it a rich experience for the class. The choices we make as teachers are often based on what we like, what we think the children would like, and what we are excited about sharing with our students. Our students respect that enthusiasm we bring to the classroom, and they usually respond in kind. We need to start more often to find out what their interests really are, finding great information books that will support and nurture those interests, and give them chances to explore information books in their interest area. We need to find information books that excite us, that reflect our reading interests, and then share that enthusiasm for a certain topic with certain information books. We know our students will quickly follow our example (Hickman, 1983) and learn to seek out chances to read information books.

It is easy to find out what children's reading interests are: ask them. Make a simple interest inventory and give it to the class at the start of the school year. Pay attention to what sport is in season and highlight books in that area. Months before the science fair starts, get out lots of science books and have students explore topics of interests to them. It builds background knowledge and enthusiasm for reading science. Magazines are one of the favorite types of reading materials. Go to the school library and borrow a set of past issues of magazines and set them out for silent reading or for a literacy lesson. Have students visit the school library and specifically find information books in an interest area. After they read them in the classroom, have them share what excited them about the books. It is all a matter of accepting that the individuals in the class will have individual subjects that excite them; your job as the teacher is to give them access to as many types of information books as you can and then allow them to read these books as part of their independent reading. You are showing respect for their reading interests, and at the same time you are giving them the chance to practice their reading proficiency.

Information Books in Literacy Programs

Cooper (2002) outlines many basic teaching methods for beginning and experienced teachers that focus on providing balanced literacy instruction. In developing their literacy programs, teachers are encouraged to read aloud to children daily, to engage them in shared reading and writing activities, and to set aside plenty of time for children to read books on their own. The literacy environment is a series of direct instruction and independent activities that gives students the chance to "construct meaning"; practice skills; and build their listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing. We read aloud; we read along; and we read alone (Cooper, 2002). Many teachers add a fourth parameter: read a lot. Sheer quantity of reading is a factor in developing reading, and we cannot underestimate the value of

having students read many, many books independently (Allington, 2001). The example of learning to play the piano or to ride a bicycle or to learn word processing can useful here. Someone can teach you the basics of these tasks; they can show you how it is done; but until you actually get in there and practice, you will never become proficient. The same is true of literacy. Learners need direct instruction; they need someone to model and show how it is done. Then they need plenty of practice, sometimes on their own and sometimes with an expert close by to support and encourage them as they learn. It is possible to apply these same concepts to using information books in the literacy classroom.

Read aloud. Doiron (1994) outlines the many benefits of reading information books aloud to children. Children need to see reading modeled by an expert; they need to watch as you explore an information book and learn what is inside it. You will show them that we do not have to start on the first page and go through to the last page when we read information books. Readers can browse through the whole book first to get an idea of what it is about and how the author has organized it. They can see that it has a table of contents, a glossary, and an index to help find specific information. Readers can go through the book a second time and look at the pictures, the maps, the charts, and other visual materials. You could read through just reading the captions under the parts that attract our attention; you could focus on the book design and what tools are used to help readers understand the information presented. In other words, the reading of information books is a different process; it is still reading; it is just reading applied to a different context. Reading aloud the information book will help you engage young readers and to show them how to pick out the key items, to make pictures in their minds for the descriptive parts, and to identify what it is about the subject that attracted the author to it, the intriguing parts of the book. Reading information books aloud can also help build classroom conversations about shared texts and help as you build a community of readers (Oyler & Barry, 1996).

Read along. Shared reading and writing have become established classroom methods that involve students in writing their own charts to be reread chorally as a class. Teachers write poems on charts, and the class reads them together for reading practice and often to add to the current theme activities. Teachers put a Morning Message on the chalkboard, and the class starts the day with a series of shared language activities. Big Books are used to bring the class together for the shared reading of a story and the shared discussion of what the story was about.

All these experiences can be used with information books as the core content. Big Book versions of information books are becoming much more common, and they involve students in actually *seeing* how information texts are organized. The class can share reading the book chorally, in small groups, or individually. The class could collect information on a current topic and do

45

a shared writing activity on the class chart. This could be turned into a fact sheet on the topic, and all children could have a copy to read for themselves. It is really simply a matter of taking information books and integrating them into your existing instructional strategies.

Read alone. The point is made above about the importance of students having sustained time each day to read independently. Krashen's (1993) meta-analysis of the research on the value of independent reading has removed any doubt about the role independent reading plays in literacy achievement. So whether you use DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), or SQUIRT (Sit Quietly for Uninterrupted Reading Time), we must make this time every day in our classrooms.

It is important to remember that students have diverse reading interests, and so you must rotate the collection of information texts set out in the classroom collection. Use your school library media center, and plan with the school library media specialist how to display and highlight information books, how to introduce new books with booktalks and activities for examining the various genres of information books like visual dictionaries, fact books, photo-essays, and series books. This will encourage the students to read, and it will add energy to your silent reading program.

Read a lot. Quantity matters. It stands to reason that the more books students have read, the better their reading will be. So we have an obligation to provide them with as many books as we can, as well as other information texts such as newspapers, magazines, and other print resources (Allington, 2001). Why not have students track their reading of information books, just as they track the novels and picture books they read? Students could have reading records that are clustered by their areas of interest, so, for example, make a list of hockey books, craft books, and books about other personal areas of interest.

Special literacy activities to consider. In addition to the focus on in-class and in-library reading initiatives, there are plenty of other opportunities to integrate information books into many of the common teaching methods literacy educators use. For example, *Book Buddies* is a common program where students from higher grades work with students in lower grades (Doiron & Davies, 1996). They get together to share books and read together. This is a perfect opportunity to have book buddies explore each other's reading interests and come back with good information books to share at the next Book Buddy session.

Most teachers and teacher-librarians work together to develop Author Studies where students learn about the people behind the books they love to read. There are many excellent information book authors who could be examined and celebrated in the same way. Authors such as Gail Gibbons, Linda Granfield, and Russell Freedman have much to teach students about the research and hard work that goes into writing quality information books.

Book publishing is also a common writing experience, where students take a story through the writing process and produce a book complete with their own illustrations, cover design, table of contents, and author biography. Teachers who have taken this activity into the writing of information books report that students become excited about writing when they write about the world around them, the natural world, the world that informs their personal interests (Stead, 2002). Students also enjoy adding graphics, visual representations, and unique and interesting book design techniques to their information books. It opens a whole new and exciting world for teachers who balance their writing programs with opportunities for students to produce information books.

Using information texts in literacy programs does not have to be limited to books. Newspapers and magazines are excellent tools to teach children how information texts work, and they are great to encourage reading and to build the lifelong reading habit. In addition, visiting World Wide Web sites that are predominantly about using information targeted for a specific purpose. This heightens the need for all literacy educators to be teaching children the critical skills to use these sites appropriately and with an eye to the authority and reliability of all information sources.

These few examples should be enough to drive home the point that encouraging children to be lifelong readers does not begin and end with fiction texts. In this time of overwhelming amounts of information for us all to read, we must not limit ourselves to using information texts solely for functional and perfunctory tasks. Children enjoy information books in and of themselves; they want to know about the natural world, the microscopic world, the world beyond our planet; they are excited about people and places other than their own communities; they want to know all about themselves and how their minds, bodies, and hearts work; they are eager learners who want to develop new skills and new knowledge in a whole variety of areas. As teachers and teacher-librarians, our job is to excite children about books and at the same time not limit their choices of the types of books and materials that will give rise to a passion for reading and the lifelong reading habit.

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