

# Incorporating Informational Texts in the Primary Grades: A Research-Based Rationale, Practical Strategies, and Two Teachers' Experiences

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**Abstract** This article highlights the literacy practices of two second grade teachers—one in an affluent suburb of a major metropolitan area and the other in a large urban school district. The article describes how these teachers use informational texts to engage their students, to provide children with opportunities to learn about the world around them, and to immerse them in literacy learning. The article also shares the teachers' insights into the value of informational texts in primary classrooms.

**Keywords** Literacy · Informational text · Teacher education

*"It makes them feel involved in their world...they learn about what's going on in the world and they learn they can have a voice. What's more important than that?"*

—Cristina L., 2nd grade teacher.

Many primary grade teachers include a preponderance of fiction in their classrooms and there still seems to be a lack of attention to informational text. Researchers have found a dearth of informational text in primary classrooms (Duke 2000; Yopp and Yopp 2000). However, informational texts can ignite students' innate curiosities about the world around them. Informational texts hold a key to engaging

curiosity as well as expanding ideas and content knowledge (Brozo and Calo 2006). Unfortunately, their use has been reserved, for the most part, for older students. Some researchers argue that even the youngest students need to be exposed to informational texts to give these children the opportunity to learn about the world around them (e.g., Benson 2003; Duke 2000; Gaffney et al. 2008; Hiebert 1991; Pappas 1991, 2006). It has also been suggested that the current demands of later schooling and the realities of life beyond school increase the need for the inclusion of informational texts at even the youngest grades (Duke 2000; Kamil and Lane 1997). In fact, Caswell and Duke (1998) present evidence that some children may prefer informational texts to narrative stories, and such texts may provide an entry point for literacy learning for some children. Although the need clearly exists for the inclusion of informational texts in early grades, there seems to be little actual attention to these materials in U.S. primary classrooms. The International Reading Association 2011 survey results *What's Hot and What's Not?* (Cassidy et al. 2010–2011) shows that informational/nonfiction texts are a hot issue in literacy education today.

To help further discussion of this important topic, two teachers opened their classrooms and shared their ideas about how they effectively incorporate informational text into their second grade classrooms. The first teacher, Cristina, teaches in an affluent suburb of a major city in the southeast. Isabelle, the second teacher in this article, teaches in a high-poverty urban school in the northeast. Cristina and Isabelle were both identified by peers and supervisors as exemplary teachers who used a range of texts in their primary classrooms. Both of the teachers whose ideas are shared in this article use informational texts as vehicles to provide their students opportunities to learn about their world.

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### Making Learning Relevant and Meaningful

Through multiple interviews with Isabelle and Cristina it became evident that both were concerned about making students' learning both relevant and meaningful. Isabelle talked about the importance of "exposing kids to their world" and Cristina talked about how nonfiction "involved kids in their world." Both Isabelle and Cristina purposefully used the word *their*. The inclusion of nonfiction was not just about letting students become involved in and learn about the world, but rather *their* world. Although this is a subtle difference, it is an important distinction as it shows ownership and emphasizes students as having a place or a role in the world around them.

Isabelle and Cristina also spoke about using informational texts to draw on students' interests and mentioned giving students ample opportunities to self-select their books. Cristina noted that some of her students prefer fiction, while others gravitate toward nonfiction. She said that "for those kids who have a balance [in genre preferences], it really depends on what they are interested in at the time." In Isabelle's classroom, students read independently while she works with small groups. According to Isabelle, the children select their books from book bins based on what they find appealing. Isabelle noted that recently she had added new informational books to her library. "Many kids picked them [the new nonfiction books] up because the pictures were great and the text was really interesting to them." She also noted that informational texts were particularly beneficial for her students who struggle with reading. She observed that these children self-selected the nonfiction books more often than other books:

I don't know if it was because they couldn't access the text in many of the books or that the pictures were just more stimulating to them. I'm not sure. They had a lot of questions about the pictures. They were reading [uses air quotes]—reading the photographs and having questions about those. They were still practicing literacy, just at their level.

Along with focusing on student interests, Cristina also spoke about the value of helping students see that they, too, have important ideas to share: "they [students] can have a voice and express their opinions." She described a social action letter writing campaign that her students initiated after reading an informational article about nutrition in schools. Cristina and her students wrote a letter to their own school district's food service division about the food in their school. As she reflected on the value of this activity, she said, "That's an example of why it's important for them to read and write informational things, because it helps them to know that they can have an opinion and be taken seriously."

Both Isabelle and Cristina used texts that connected to the students and their learning. Isabelle chose a nonfiction big book, *The Big Red Tomatoes*, because she could draw on what they were learning in science. She also made connections for the students about how the students and their families get vegetables from the grocery store to tie the learning to their own community: "I was able to help them make that connection from their background knowledge to this book." Isabelle also spoke about a project where the students wrote nonfiction narratives about their own lives as well as a social studies project in which they learned about cities.

Isabelle also emphasized the importance of reading nonfiction as a lifelong skill that is important to develop early:

Before I was in teaching, in the business world it [nonfiction] was all we ever read every single day. Most of what I read now and have read as an adult is of an informational nature. If those are the real experiences you're going to have as an adult, then kids need to be taught how to do it well.

Cristina also focused on making learning meaningful and relevant by participating in a community volunteer program in which therapy dogs come to the classroom regularly (Paws for People 2011). The students learned how these dogs help people of all ages. On a weekly basis, Cristina incorporated both informational reading and writing using the dogs. Sometimes the students read *to* the dogs, sometimes they read *about* the dogs, sometimes they read about other animals and made connections to the dogs. In writing, students wrote letters to or stories about the dogs. They learned about literacy elements such as cause-effect by discussing and experiencing how cause-effect could pertain to the dogs, and then the students completed graphic organizers and wrote stories that incorporated the cause-effect text structure. This practice is beneficial to the students as readers because teaching students about informational text structures helps scaffold their comprehension (Read et al. 2008). Cristina chose this real-world volunteer program and the accompanying nonfiction reading and writing activities to make learning come alive for her students. Students were able to read about, witness, and write about the value of volunteer work and civic-mindedness.

### Incorporating Explicit Strategy Instruction

A common thread woven through both Cristina and Isabelle's classrooms was their use of comprehension strategy instruction. The two teachers used different, yet complementary, techniques to develop their students as strategic,

independent readers of informational text. In Isabelle's classroom, she shared the example of using the *Big Red Tomatoes* big book as a shared reading text for a think aloud. Think-alouds are commonly used in literacy classrooms as a way for teachers to make their thinking explicit to students (Duke and Pearson 2002). In this case, Isabelle wanted her students to see how she used the comprehension strategy of determining importance: "we actually determined importance on each page because we were working on taking notes and paraphrasing...we talked about what was the main information that the author was trying to tell us." Isabelle scaffolded the instruction by first modeling the strategy and then describing it in student-friendly language:

I asked the students what the author really wanted us to know—what did he really want us to learn on each page. And so then as we started to do it, that's when I named the strategy. I said, 'what we're doing is finding the main idea on this page.' So, in this lesson, I was building on what we had done before. I do that a lot where I put into kid terms what the strategy is and then I say 'what you're doing is something that good readers do all the time.'

Isabelle also explicitly taught her students how to use the comprehension strategies of asking questions, making connections, making comparisons, and setting purposes for reading. When working with a small guided reading group, Isabelle set the purpose for reading and helped students make connections using the strategy of coding text (Harvey and Goudvis 2007):

We're going to read this book and compare how peanuts are grown with how tomatoes are grown. And, you're going to do something as you read to help you as you're comparing. You're going to be marking spots where things are similar with an S and where things are different with a D to show where you're making comparisons.

Isabelle also spoke about the importance of making inferences. She noted that while using nonfiction they looked at "how the author might tell us some things, but we fill in the holes to get the rest of the message." She taught students how to use the text, their own knowledge, and pictures to help make inferences about the author's intent.

Both Isabelle and Cristina also emphasized the differences between reading fiction and nonfiction. One key difference they both discussed was the value of teaching students how text features and graphic elements can help them access information in nonfiction texts. Cristina mentioned that "they're learning this week about how captions tell another part of the story. So we talk about how they should read the captions when looking at the pictures

because the captions explain what they are seeing." Isabelle emphasized that "you don't just get information from words but also from pictures, graphs, charts, diagrams, heading, captions, and labels." Isabelle also pointed out that while fiction is read from beginning to end like a story, with nonfiction "you can pick and choose parts you want to read." Both teachers found that they need to explicitly teach students how to access information using nonfiction text features in order to aid students' comprehension.

### Finding a Balance

Isabelle and Cristina helped their second-grade students learn about their world by providing a balance in both the materials they selected for their classrooms and their instructional practices. Across the two classrooms, a variety of nonfiction reading materials were available for students, including student anthologies; big books; small leveled books; trade books; classroom magazines; brochures; and, in Cristina's suburban classroom, information from the Internet, video streaming, and CD-ROMs. Both teachers talked about the value of providing balance between their use of fiction and nonfiction. The varied materials that both teachers used with their students helped them to accomplish this goal. Isabelle discussed using mini-lessons with both fiction and nonfiction shared texts and writing reading responses for both genres. She said, "They need to be reading both [fiction and nonfiction] all the time." Cristina also discussed the value of purposefully pairing fiction with nonfiction. While Isabelle lamented that "there just isn't as much good nonfiction at their reading level" in her urban school, Cristina discussed the multitude of texts that were available to her in her high-SES suburban school.

### Making Connections

The final thread in Cristina and Isabelle's teaching was the concept of making instructional connections. The connections that the teachers discussed included reading-writing connections and content-area connections. In their classrooms, nonfiction became a bridge between reading and writing as well as between literacy and the content areas.

Isabelle highlighted writing nonfiction reading responses, writing nonfiction narratives, and writing research reports. Cristina echoed the value of research, but also introduced the idea of using technology as a tool for helping students conduct research. She described the computer lab where all students can work on computers and how "the technology specialist just gave me a website to do research on the Internet." She also discussed the

value of video streaming to build background knowledge. Isabelle, on the other hand, did not mention using technology in her classroom. When probed about this, she said she did not use technology “not because it isn’t a good idea. But we only have one working computer in our classroom...I haven’t been able to incorporate technology at all. It’s really frustrating. We avoid it. It’s really unfortunate because these kids do not have computers at home. There are computers in the library, like 16, but only six work at once because of something with the power. It’s ridiculous.” Isabelle discussed providing class books, taking field trips, working collaboratively with the other second grade classrooms, and getting brochures and information sent to them from free local sources as ways to help her students conduct research.

Throughout the interviews and observations, both teachers focused on the value of using nonfiction to make cross-curricular connections. Cristina stated:

I do a lot of reading all the time. Since I teach second grade we are always teaching reading whether we’re studying something for science or social studies or even math. They do a lot of reading in their math these days. They really have to understand how to get information and make sense of it.

Her use of reading and writing with and about the therapy dogs helped her to make connections to their study of their local community. Nonfiction, she found, could be used across the content areas:

It’s that perfect bridge. Sometimes I’ll use fiction to begin a nonfiction unit or the other way around. When we had a unit on ancient China, I used a fiction book *Ruby’s Wish* (Bridges 2002)...It was important for kids to understand what family life was like back then. Then I used a nonfiction book to talk more about family life so they could get more facts about it.

Isabelle, too, used informational books to make curricular connections. Her use of the books *Big Red Tomatoes* (Graham 2001a) in shared reading and *Peanuts* (Graham 2001b) in guided reading helped her students learn about their science unit on plants.

The use of nonfiction not only helped these two second-grade teachers bridge literacy and the content areas, but it also helped them make learning significant and interesting to students. Isabelle and Cristina used a range of informational texts in their classrooms for a variety of purposes. Some of these materials were used for explicit instruction, while others were simply available for students to read, explore, and enjoy on their own. These two teachers used myriad instructional practices to provide their students with a range of ways to delve into nonfiction and learn about the world around them, including shared reading, shared

writing, guided reading, independent writing, researching, and independent reading. All of these practices are consistent with a literacy-rich classroom (Graves et al. 2007). These experiences provided their students with scaffolded opportunities to learn how to access information from a variety of texts. Cristina summed up the value of using informational text with the quote that opened this article: “I just think it [nonfiction] is really important. They learn about what’s going on in the world and they learn that they can have a voice. What’s more important than that?”

### Final Thoughts

The two teachers highlighted in this article were extremely reflective about their work, their beliefs, and the instructional choices that they make on a daily basis. Both Isabelle and Cristina believe that using informational texts provides their students with opportunities to learn about their world. Cristina and Isabelle showed how they effectively build on their students’ innate curiosities and interests by providing them with a range of materials. Cristina and Isabelle not only made learning relevant by selecting materials that children were interested in, and provided a balance of materials and instructional techniques, but they also helped their students make connections between content and literacy. Through her use of shared texts and think-alouds, Isabelle also demonstrated how comprehension strategy instruction using nonfiction texts can be incorporated into a primary classroom filled with a diverse group of young students eager to learn about the world around them. Both Cristina and Isabelle believe that helping students learn how to attend to the intricacies of nonfiction text, such as looking at text structures and attending to text features, may also help them become more active, strategic readers.

As second grade teachers in other classrooms plan their instruction, informational texts can fit into their selection of materials for literacy as well as content-area instruction. Table 1 provides teachers with information about grants that they can pursue to find funding for such resources.

Many supplemental educational publishers now include more leveled nonfiction in their offerings to help meet this ever-growing demand. Table 2 highlights some examples of quality informational texts that are available for primary students. With the Internet, classroom magazines, leveled nonfiction books, newspapers, and more, there are numerous forms of quality informational texts available for students to read, explore, and enjoy.

Clearly Cristina and Isabelle use nonfiction in many ways in their classrooms. Others can learn from Cristina and Isabelle’s experiences and try one or two ways to incorporate nonfiction in their own classrooms. When they find successes like those of Cristina and Isabelle, they will

**Table 1** Funding sources

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Local PTA  
<http://www.pta.org/>  
 The Lowe's foundation  
<http://toolboxforeducation.com>  
 NEA foundation: books across America  
<http://www.neafoundation.org/pages/educators/grant-programs/books-across-america/>  
 EdWeek grant listings  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/grants/index.html>  
 Target  
<http://sites.target.com/site/en/company/page.jsp?contentId=WCMP04-031770>  
 Title I or Title III grants  
<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>

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Check out corporations and organizations in your local area!

**Table 2** Nonfiction resources for your primary grade classroom

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Content area reading leveled texts	Benchmark education <a href="http://www.benchmarkeducation.com">www.benchmarkeducation.com</a>
Fact and fiction KEEP books	KEEP BOOKS/The Ohio state university <a href="http://www.keepbooks.org">www.keepbooks.org</a>
Guided reading nonfiction kits Safari® magazine	Mondo educational publishing <a href="http://www.mondopub.com">www.mondopub.com</a>
Windows on literacy® language, literacy and vocabulary young explorer classroom magazine	National geographic school publishing <a href="http://new.ngsp.com">http://new.ngsp.com</a>
Discovery links®	Newbridge <a href="http://www.timeforkids.com">www.timeforkids.com</a>
Guided reading books PM collection®	ReadingA–Z.com Rigby <a href="http://rigby.hmhco.com/en/rigby.htm">http://rigby.hmhco.com/en/rigby.htm</a>
Time for kids® classroom magazines	Time for kids <a href="http://www.timeforkids.com">www.timeforkids.com</a>
Weekly reader® classroom magazines	Weekly reader corporation <a href="http://www.weeklyreader.com">www.weeklyreader.com</a>
Sunshine™ science	Wright group <a href="https://www.mheonline.com">https://www.mheonline.com</a>

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see how motivated and eager their students are to learn and to read about the world around them. To quote a phrase from Inside Film magazine (2003), it's time for teachers to help their students "get off the map and into the world."

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