

Book Review

by Jonda C. McNair, Clemson University

Duke, N. K. & Bennett-Armistead, V. S. (2003). *Reading and Writing Informational Text in the Primary Grades*. New York: Scholastic. 272 pages. Paperback. ISBN: 0439531233.

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis on the importance of exposing young children to informational text (Duke & Kays, 1998; Duke, 2000; Pappas, 1991; Pappas, 1993; Reese & Harris, 1997; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). One of the foremost scholars of informational text, Nell K. Duke, and V. Susan Bennett-Armistead, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, have written an exciting new book that should be of interest to teachers as well as teacher educators. This book is engaging, well written. It will be accessible to teachers and offer them practical suggestions on incorporating informational text while at the same time providing a solid research base in reading instruction. Teachers benefit from knowledge of reading research in that they can see the connection between theory and praxis. As a teacher educator I became more knowledgeable about studies on topics related to informational literacy ranging from print-rich environments to comprehension instruction to teacher professional development.

The first chapter defines the term informational text, which is vital since not all types of nonfiction (e.g., biography) are informational text. The distinguishing features of informational text are briefly mentioned and reasons are given as to why informational text should be included in primary classrooms. These reasons range from building background knowledge to the prominence of informational text in our daily lives to addressing children's inborn curiosity about the natural and social world in which we live. All of the reasons are supported by research. In fact, a highlight of this chapter is that the terms "research" and "research based" are clearly defined for practicing teachers. Lastly, this chapter addresses a number of reservations (e.g., Is informational text developmentally appropriate for young children?) that educators may have about the use of informational text.

Chapter 2 describes how informational text can be incorporated into the classroom in a number of ways such as through read-aloud, wall displays, and lessons in science, mathematics and social studies. This chapter also includes criteria to consider when choosing informational text.

Chapter 3 examines the implications of using informational text during shared reading and read-alouds. It emphasizes the importance of discussing specific features of informational text such as topical vocabulary and highlights the notion that reading informational text exposes children to an enormous amount of content. The importance of interaction between the teacher and student during read-aloud and shared reading is highlighted as are other valuable comprehension strategies which include making connections, activating background knowledge, and summarizing. Examples of instructional practices that aid in comprehension such as think-alouds and K-W-L are also described. A notable feature of this chapter, and several others, is actual transcripts of student teacher interactions involving informational text.

Chapter 4 addresses guided reading with informational text and offers suggestions on ways to group children by interest in a particular topic, by author's craft (e.g., use of diagrams, question and answer format, etc.) by reading level, or randomly. Challenges of grouping with informational text are discussed as well since background knowledge and familiarity with content affect readability. This chapter provides more in-depth information on comprehension instruction and contains a listing of professional books on the subject. Also of note is a listing of "little books" series that can be used during guided reading lessons.

Chapter 5 examines children's independent reading of informational text. Examples of practices a first-grade teacher uses to motivate children to read informational text independently are provided. These practices include read-aloud, stocking classroom libraries with informational text, displaying books that have been read aloud, and sending books home with children.

Chapter 6 focuses on teaching children to write informational text, and it provides descriptions of two primary teachers who encourage their students to write informational pieces. Examples are provided to demonstrate how students are encouraged to conduct research on a topic and are supported through the steps of the writing process within the context of informational text. This chapter also addresses some common problems that teachers may encounter such as student plagiarism. Suggestions are provided on how to counter this problem and others. Three highlights of this chapter include a detailed listing of the unique features of informational text, a rubric for assessing children's informational writing, and the names of "twenty authors of informational text worth studying." Authors mentioned include Alike, Gail Gibbons, Jerry Pallotta, and Seymour Simon.

Notably absent from this listing is George Ancona, a well-known author of informational books who has won the prestigious Washington Post/Children's Book Guild Nonfiction Award. Of course listings are by their very nature exclu-

sionary, and all authors can't be included. But considering the fact that only one of the 20 authors mentioned, Ifeoma Onyefulu, a Nigerian living in London, is a person of color, it is unfortunate that Ancona, a Mexican American, was not mentioned. I would argue that the lack of inclusion of informational text by authors of color is a weakness throughout the book. Ancona has written books such as *Bananas: From Manolo to Margie* (1982), *The Piñata Maker* (1994), *Harvest* (2001) and *Murals: Walls that Sing* (2003). Other notable authors of informational text not mentioned include Patricia McKissack and Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve. Although many of the books McKissack has written are considered biographies, she has also written informational books such as *The Inca* (1985) and *The Maya* (1985). Sneve has written a series entitled "First Americans" that contains informational books about Cherokees, Sioux, Iroquois, Navajos, Cheyennes, and Seminoles. Reading these books might lead to a discussion about why the author chose to name the series "First Americans" and help teachers to contemplate why a unit on "Native Americans" might be problematic.

It is important that students be given opportunities to read books by people of color because oftentimes the racial background of the author influences the manner in which a book is written, even when the sole purpose is to relay information about the natural and social world. Also, research indicates that allowing students to read books which reflect their experiences aids comprehension. For example, Schmidt (1986) found that when Mexican-American students read a passage about Mexican-American lifestyle changes, their level of comprehension was much higher than when they read passages in which the subject matter was less pertinent to their lives. All students should be exposed to diverse viewpoints and given opportunities to read informational text that speaks to their life experiences, values, and cultural norms.

Chapter 7 focuses on incorporating informational text in the content areas and provides examples of how several primary teachers accomplish this task. For example, one teacher used leveled "little books" to cover required science concepts such as the weather, while another teacher used them to teach a social studies lesson on farms. Guidelines are presented on how to select books for content area instruction. These guidelines include issues such as accuracy and authorship. In addition several strategies (e.g., using context clues to unlock the meanings of words) for helping children to read in the content areas are described.

Chapter 7 also contains a brief section on asking critical questions (e.g., Whose viewpoints are excluded?). Although *Reading and Writing Informational Text in the Primary Grades* is a worthwhile resource, I think more attention to critical literacy would have strengthened the book. The authors write that the questions which encourage critical thinking are "very grown-up" but that chil-

dren can learn to ask and respond to them. However, numerous studies have addressed the difficulties of encouraging adult educators to engage in critical literacy and their resistance at times to do so (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997; Leland, Harste, Ocepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999; McNair, 2003; Willis, 2003). For example, I doubt if most teachers who read this book will even notice, much less question the lack of informational books that are written by people of color. The abovementioned studies suggest that critical questions are not necessarily “very grown up”, and that educators would benefit from reading about how critical literacy can be utilized within the context of informational text. For example, Gail Gibbon’s book, *New Road* (1983) could allow teachers to explore gender issues by engaging children in a discussion about whether the author may have deliberately chosen to include pictures of female construction workers in her book. Issues pertaining to cultural phenomena such as race, class, and gender can and should be addressed within the context of informational books.

In an enlightening article entitled “Sheltering Children from the Whole Truth”, Linda Lamme and Danling Fu (2001) critically analyze an informational book entitled *Rice is Life* (2000), written by Rita Gelman, who was mentioned in chapter 6 as one of “twenty authors of informational text worth studying.” Gelman spent time traveling in Bali, Indonesia, and observed the process of rice growing as an outsider. Fu actually spent several years working on a rice farm in China. Upon reading *Rice is Life*, Fu responded, “[a]s a person who worked in the wet rice fields for three and a half years, I felt this book was too beautiful to be real.” (p.15). Fu also mentioned the following Chinese saying about rice, “Rice tastes good and sweet, but every single grain is soaked with sweat and blood” (p. 16).

Lamme and Fu (2001) contend that Gelman’s perspective as an observer led her to romanticize the process of rice growing. Consider the difference between the manner in which Gelman and Fu describe the process of rice growing. Gelman (2000) writes:

The boys and girls are “fishing” for dragonflies with poles tipped with sap. When the dragonflies touch the sap, they stick. The children remove the wings and put the insects, still wriggling into a bamboo skewer. Later the children will cook them over a fire. In Bali, dragonflies are tasty snacks. . . . The rice plants in their seed beds are big enough to be planted in the fields. The farmer lifts out a handful of seedlings and places them on a tray. When the tray is filled, he begins planting. (unpaged)

In contrast Fu (2001) writes:

I could never forget lifting seedlings. We had to get up around two or three in the morning and sit on a little stool in the water to lift up the

seedlings. We had to use our fingers to dig into the mud, loosen the soil, and pull the plant up gently and skillfully with roots buried in the mud. . . . We also had to move our bodies with the stool. After hours in the water, our backs, our hands, our little fingers, and our whole bodies ached for days but we had no time to rest. All kinds of insects were crawling on our hands, legs, or even into our pants. . . . With our backs bent so low that our faces almost touched the ground, we scooted backwards for miles in the wet fields (p. 16).

The authors concluded by saying that *Rice is Life* “does not tell the whole story about the labor involved in growing rice” (p. 17). The perspectives of the working-class laborers who toiled in the fields were excluded. Lamme and Fu’s analysis indicates that critical literacy within the context of informational text can also serve as a catalyst for helping children and adults to develop a social critical consciousness.

Chapter 8 offers suggestions on ways to include informational text in print-rich classroom environments. These suggestions range from placing informational text in classroom libraries to displaying students’ informational writing to adding informational books to play areas. Several photographs of classrooms that are print-rich with informational text are included.

Chapter 9 addresses some of the dilemmas teachers may encounter when utilizing informational text in their classrooms. Possible dilemmas addressed included dealing with curriculum mandates and the difficulties associated with trying something new. Feasible suggestions are presented for dealing with these issues.

Chapter 10 focuses on professional development study groups. This chapter, like all of the previous ones, has a solid research base and is supported by numerous studies on effective teacher professional development. Study groups are recommended as an effective tool for professional development, and information on ways to create successful study groups is included. Suggestions for professional development within the context of these study groups include videotaping colleagues using informational text, sharing professional resources (e.g., journals, articles, etc.) and creating a book club to read informational texts for adults.

Appendix A identifies resources for locating quality informational texts. Resources identified include professional books and nonfiction awards such as the NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award.

Appendix B contains a listing of professional books about incorporating informational text in the primary grades.

I recommend this book and believe that it will be as beneficial to teacher educators and literacy scholars as it will be to primary teachers. This speaks to the remarkable way in which the authors interweave research and practice throughout the book. However, I encourage those who choose to utilize this book as a resource to make a special effort to include informational books by authors of color. The suggestions for utilizing informational books that are described in this book also can be applied to their books. For example, one of the ideas mentioned in the book is to invite a mail carrier into the classroom to conduct an interactive read-aloud with a book like Gibbons' *The Post Office Book: Mail and How it Moves* (1982). Likewise, an artist from the community could be invited to come in and read Ancona's book, *Murals: Walls that Sing* (2003). It is almost impossible to read this book and not come away from it energized and excited about the rich possibilities of utilizing informational text.

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