Nonfiction with age-appropriate content and readability for the primary grades can be a valuable tool for skill development and a source of reading enjoyment for young students.

Practitioners and scholars today are calling for the inclusion of nonfiction in primary-grade classrooms, where in the past fiction has dominated. With the increasing availability of age-appropriate nonfiction texts, this request can now become a reality. In the past, teachers and librarians steered primary-grade children into fiction, partly because most nonfiction in elementary schools was appropriate for intermediate-grade readers. As a result, when expository text was used in K–3 classrooms, teachers often read aloud and interpreted books too difficult for young children to read by themselves (Brown, 1998; Fielding & Roller, 1992; Palmer & Stewart, 2000, 2003). Now, with nonfiction available for emergent readers, students can read books on their independent and instructional reading levels. As a consequence, teachers and librarians face new and exciting challenges as they find, choose, and incorporate nonfiction into their instruction.

Teachers have not been left on their own to figure out how to use nonfiction. How-to texts are available to assist in selecting, evaluating, and teaching this genre (e.g., Bamford & Kristo, 2000; Hoyt, Mooney, & Parkes, 2003). Other books explain how to teach nonfiction writing (Stead, 2002), conduct research with expository text (Harvey, 1998), and use strategies and conduct investigations with informational text (Hoyt, 2002). In addition, a number of journal articles, some of which we cite in this article, provide information on using nonfiction in primary-grade classrooms. On the one hand, this may suggest more work for teachers who already have full instructional agendas; but, on the other hand, it represents new resources for teachers to help students become lifelong readers for information and pleasure. We believe a synthesis of this information will help teachers as they include factual text in their instruction. This article provides a series of three models primary-grade teachers can use to structure their work with nonfiction.

We recognize that much of what is in this article can be found across a broad base of literature, including project-based learning, inquiry learning, comprehension instruction, and writing instruction. In addition, our three models are implicit in several published articles and books (e.g., Barclay & Traser, 1999; Perry & Drummond, 2002). Our purpose is to connect what others have done and provide a simple framework and common vocabulary for educators as they use more nonfiction and communicate with one another about it. This framework is compatible with standards and high-stakes testing because our models allow teachers to adapt instruction to the time they have for nonfiction.

Simply put, we live in an expository world. If we want young readers to effectively use this genre, they must be taught the necessary skills (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997). For example, if educators want younger students to conduct research with informational text, the students must learn how. They cannot jump to the level of independent research all at once. Our three models show primary-grade...
teachers how to scaffold instruction and answer the question “What do I do with nonfiction once I have chosen it?” Using the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Roehler & Duffy, 1984), our models represent a series of stages with the end product being independent use of informational books in the classroom. Gradual release of responsibility involves scaffolding from high levels of teacher support to more student involvement and responsibility. Instruction based on this model has been shown to enhance learning (e.g., Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). We also believe our models represent evidence-based practice. We now turn to a preliminary overview of this evidence. Additional evidence is provided as we discuss the models.

Evidence-based practice

As we have explored nonfiction use in primary-grade classrooms and reviewed the research and resources on the topic, we understand the positive contribution expository text can make in early literacy development. Although nonfiction has not been emphasized in primary-grade classrooms (Duke, 2000b), we know that young students enjoy and sometimes prefer informational texts (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Duthie, 1994; Guillaume, 1998; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Kletzien & Szabo, 1998; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Pappas, 1993; Reese & Harris, 1997). Research shows that younger students can effectively process expository text (Duke, 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Pappas, 1991, 1993). We also know that nonfiction motivates students as they search for answers to questions about their world (Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie & McCann, 1997; McMath, King, & Smith, 1998; Sweet & Guthrie, 1996; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Students are increasingly called upon to organize and display their learning. As a consequence, research and communication skills are being pushed into lower grades, creating the need for more expository text use. Nonfiction can help young readers engage in the critical thinking and research needed to build meaningful knowledge and understanding in content area subjects (McMath et al., 1998; Parkes, 2003).

We also have evidence that achievement improves when students read nonfiction. Some of this evidence comes from anecdotal accounts written by teachers who describe success with nonfiction and student research. We cite these studies throughout the remainder of the article. Other evidence comes from classroom-based studies. For example, struggling second-grade readers exhibited increased ability to focus on a task, follow directions, and work together (Schmidt, Gillen, Zollo, & Stone, 2002). They also demonstrated increased understanding of concepts in the unit. Richgels (2002) described a successful nonfiction program in a kindergarten classroom, and Korkeamaki, Trainen, & Dreher (1998, 1999) stated that second graders learned strategies, applied them to reading and writing nonfiction, and enjoyed the instruction.

The three models

The three models teachers can use to structure their nonfiction work are (1) teacher-directed instruction, (2) scaffolded student investigation, and (3) independent student investigation. Demands on students and teachers increase as teachers scaffold students through each model, starting with Model 1 and moving sequentially through the two others. We illustrate the models with the topics of frogs and life cycles (see Table 1), although teachers can choose themes from other content areas—there are numerous nonfiction books now being published for social studies and other subjects. Strategies and teaching ideas provided under each model are not exhaustive but representative and illustrative of research-based instruction that can occur within that model. Before teachers implement the models, however, students need to become familiar with nonfiction.

Setting the stage for implementation

As teachers set the stage, they focus on familiarizing students with nonfiction and organizing for instruction. Teacher read-alouds are an important means to familiarize students with nonfiction. As teachers read aloud, students learn content, vocabulary, and “the sounds of print” (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Duke & Kays, 1998; Moss, 2003; Moss et al., 1997; Pappas, 1991, 1993). Listening to and discussing nonfiction can activate background knowledge and motivate young readers to learn more about a topic. Teachers
can use read-alouds to introduce the format and structure of nonfiction, discuss similarities and differences between reading nonfiction and fiction, and explore student interests and preferences. Through newsletters and school parent-night instruction, teachers can also encourage parents to read nonfiction with their students at home.

As setting the stage progresses, students and teachers prepare to move to Model 1, where systematic instruction with nonfiction occurs and students’ knowledge of the genre and their capacity to work with it grows.

**Model 1—Teacher-directed instruction**

In the past, when teachers read aloud and interpreted difficult nonfiction, young readers learned information but failed to read expository text (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Students must tackle expository text themselves to become fluent and strategic readers of this genre. In order for students to do so, teachers need to directly instruct how to navigate and extract information (RAND, 2002). This requires a shift from teachers reading aloud difficult material to strategic reading instruction in appropriately leveled materials and from interpreting text to giving students skills to interpret text for themselves. But to do this, teachers need enough books—either classroom sets or multiple copies for small groups—and they need to model techniques and strategies for reading. For example, students should understand they can search for specific facts about a topic rather than read from cover to cover as in fiction. Organizational features such as headings, index, and glossary are comprehension tools; visuals (e.g., photos, diagrams, charts) supply additional information. Asking questions about text features, content, and vocabulary activates prior knowledge and helps students process text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Wood, Pressley, & Winne, 1990). Graphic and semantic
organizer instruction improves comprehension and helps students visualize and remember information (Banikowski & Mehring, 1999; Marzano, 1998; Robinson, 1998).

There are many content reading strategies underpinned by research that can be taught. These are described in numerous books and articles (e.g., Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Hoyt, 2002; Moss, 2003; Parkes, 2000; Tierney & Readence, 2000). We illustrate a few of these strategies as we describe what Model 1 looks like in classrooms. As young readers learn to use comprehension strategies through direct instruction and teacher modeling, they develop skills to independently access expository text in content area subjects.

A big book and class set of a nonfiction title are a great way to begin this process. Because “reading does not occur in a vacuum,” readers need a purpose (RAND, 2002, p. 15). There are numerous ways to set purposes for reading. One of the most popular is K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), which we have observed primary-grade teachers use with nonfiction. List-Group-Label (LGL; Taba, 1967) is another strategy. One second-grade teacher uses LGL to help her students set a purpose and access prior knowledge and experiences on a topic. Although research on LGL is not extensive, several studies encompassing a wide age range of students have shown promising results (see Tierney & Readence, 2000).

Applying LGL to the topic of frogs, the teacher asks, “What do you know about frogs?” Students write facts on sticky notes and put them on the chalkboard. As a class they organize the facts and place them under categories they identify. From these categories, the teacher helps the students generate questions (NICHD, 2000), which become their purposes for reading. For instance, to the question “Where do frogs live?” the teacher models how to locate answers in the table of contents and index of a Big Book. She turns to the pages listed, reads the information aloud while focusing on the question, and models how to extract facts while ignoring extraneous details. For example, in a section on habitats, the author explains that frogs live near water to keep their skin wet and then describes how frogs use their skin to breathe and drink by taking in oxygen and water. Although these details about the skin go beyond the question about where frogs live, they suggest a reason for the habitat. This extra information causes students to think critically and become active readers when the teacher asks, “Can frogs live in the desert? Why or why not?” This example also illustrates how to begin to model the critical reading process.

After completing the habitat question, the teacher selects other questions from the LGL activity and creates a simple study guide for students to record their answers. The teacher then helps students explore nonfiction books to answer such questions as “What are baby frogs like?” “What is the life cycle of the frog?” “What are other interesting facts about frogs?” This last question stimulates additional interest in the topic and provides a chance to share attention-grabbing information.

According to the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), question answering can guide and monitor reading comprehension. Based on our research, we believe study guides are appropriate for primary-grade classrooms when they are used to model how to focus on, record, and organize information (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). This is unlike our nonfiction research in intermediate grades where we asserted that study guides and worksheets became fill-in-the-blank activities that contributed little to student learning (Palmer & Stewart, 1997). With younger students, a study guide serves as a tool for teachers to model key processes and for students to practice those processes as they learn to extract information from nonfiction.

After further fact gathering, students summarize their findings on their study guide and do hands-on activities with the text. Summarizing has a long history of research and has been shown to be a powerful comprehension strategy. In a meta-analytic study, Marzano (1998) found that teaching students to summarize significantly enhanced their learning. In addition to summarizing, students might make a diagram and label the parts of a frog or create headings in a book that has none. If the book lacks a table of contents, index, or glossary—or if they are incomplete—young readers can create or improve them. If students understand the structure of a text, they will better grasp its concepts (Duke & Pearson, 2002). The teacher can help students write a simple report from their study guide answers, then make a frog life-cycle wheel that graphically depicts the stages. (See Science and Models for using nonfiction in the primary grades 429.}

Part of teacher-directed instruction should focus on critical reading of nonfiction text (Lamme & Fu, 2001). Some nonfiction appears to be written quickly and contains confusing or conflicting information. Students need to understand that sometimes comprehension difficulties stem from problems in the text rather than in the reader. For example, in Ponds and Rivers (2000) young readers cannot tell which labels match the drawings in a life-cycle diagram. One nonfiction book names three stages of a frog’s life while another describes four (Holmes, 1998; Zemlicka, 2003). A research-based strategy called Questioning the Author helps students develop the ability to read confidently and critically (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; McKeown, Beck, & Worthy, 1993; Sandora, Beck, & McKeown, 1999). Students learn to ask, “What does the author mean?” if a text is unclear. We witnessed a third-grade teacher read several nonfiction books about planets to her class. When she encountered conflicting facts, she asked her students why this might occur. The class discussed how one book had a recent copyright date and, therefore, might contain more up-to-date information. The students also learned that discrepancies might occur because an author used incorrect information or did not include enough detail.

Once students have a foundation for reading expository text, teachers can help them choose appropriate books for independent reading. Today, young students can access nonfiction for independent reading on a variety of topics and reading levels because many publishers produce primary-grade nonfiction. Teachers can organize book tubs of leveled nonfiction on a single topic, such as frogs, or arrange them according to type of text: how-to, information, description, general topic, specific topic, or content area subject (Stead, 2002). Several teachers we know match students to texts in a variety of ways. For example, Kathy (pseudonym), a first-grade teacher, regularly assesses her students' reading levels, places nonfiction books in three or four tubs based on these levels, and attaches index cards to each tub with names of students at that level. When reading levels change, Kathy modifies the index cards accordingly, and as the class improves she adjusts the difficulty of the books in the tubs.

In Model 1, teachers model how to interact with and extract information from expository texts. They use nonfiction to teach content as well as comprehension and critical reading skills. The emphasis is on teacher-directed instruction. In Model 2, which we discuss next, the focus shifts to students taking more responsibility. This shift exemplifies the gradual release of responsibility that underpins our framework.

Model 2—Scaffolded student investigation

After working through the topic on frogs in Model 1, the teacher broadens the assignment to animal habitats and life cycles. The expanded topic allows for greater diversity of student interest and requires more books at appropriate reading levels to keep everyone reading and exploring. Because peer interaction promotes discussion and increases reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000), students now buddy up and select an animal based on the available nonfiction in the classroom. They read about their animal and discuss what they learn; then they answer questions on a study guide similar to the one used in Model 1. The buddies write a report from the study guide questions, create a life-cycle wheel and poster, and present information to the class. Research indicates that question answering, summarizing, and postwriting activities positively influence reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000; RAND, 2002). Next, students compare their animals to what the class learned about frogs. The class then makes an animal comparison chart and lists information under the categories of habitats, baby animals, life cycles, and interesting facts. Students compare animal life-cycle wheels and attach their wheels to the chart. Identifying similarities and differences and graphically depicting relationships improve comprehension and recall (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; RAND, 2002). We observed a second-grade teacher and her students complete a unit like the one described. The comparison chart was a focal point for discussion long after the unit ended.

As we have explained, Model 2 allows students to begin to independently use the reading and research skills they learned in Model 1 while the teacher monitors performance and behavior. We now turn to a description of Model 3 where students move toward independent use of nonfiction.
**Model 3—Independent student investigation**

After teachers scaffold students through the first two models, young learners should be ready to research topics of their choice. These investigations are student generated and, although adults may assist, are not sent home to complete. Students select a topic of interest, ask probing questions, gather and synthesize information, and create a product (Barclay & Traser, 1999; Guthrie, 1996; Owens, Hester, & Teale, 2002; Perry & Drummond, 2002; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Short et al., 1996).

We have witnessed primary-grade teachers having great success with independent research projects. Students readily complete the task when they are adequately prepared, given freedom to pursue their interests through meaningful assignments, and provided an adequate and appropriate text base. A natural way to incorporate this model into the classroom is through thematic instruction, which is broad enough to capture all student interests.

After teachers have guided students through a class topic (frogs) and buddy topics (animals), they move to short-term projects that are self-selected and completed in three to four sessions. This allows teachers to further monitor students and double-check skills in reading, synthesizing, and reporting. Short-term projects are mini-versions of independent student investigations. If these projects are successful, then students can dive into self-selected study that requires several weeks to finish. With short-term investigations, students might only explore one question, not unlike those described in Model 1 (i.e., What is the habitat of the frog?). They might create a brief report or visual for a short class presentation. These projects enable teachers to monitor students one more time before releasing responsibility to them for more in-depth investigations (Barclay & Traser, 1999).

We suggest two approaches for independent student investigations. A teacher can introduce a class unit, such as weather, and then have students choose subtopics that motivate them to become mini-experts. Either the teacher identifies subtopics or helps students find those that relate to the unit. The second approach gives students free choice of a topic. Both approaches, however, must be based on available nonfiction. In classroom observations, we have often noted too few books at appropriate reading levels for in-depth investigations. For example, we watched an enthusiastic teacher launch into a unit based on nonfiction only to find that she lacked sufficient numbers and levels of books. She spent more time scrambling to find books and coordinating the use of the ones she had than watching her unit unfold. Although adults can help students process difficult text, the core reading should be in appropriately leveled nonfiction.

For student-generated topics not related to a unit, the teacher might begin with an idea sheet or topic cards. An idea sheet helps students think about topics they might investigate. They fill in the blanks in unfinished sentences, such as "I have always wanted to learn about..." or "I have always wanted to visit..." Topic cards contain topics the teacher selects from state or district standards for students to organize according to interest. For example, with cards containing the words *birds, habitat, caterpillars, magnetism, healthy foods,* and *electricity,* a second grader may choose *caterpillars* as a first choice of study and *birds* as a second. Topic cards have an additional benefit of allowing teachers to control research based on available books.

After students pick topics, they do self-selected reading in appropriately leveled nonfiction to build background knowledge. They begin to ask probing questions, and the teacher helps generate meaningful and interesting questions to study. During designated blocks of time, students work alone or with peers or intermediate-grade students as they research, organize information, create a product, and orally present what they learned.

To organize information, students might create study guides patterned after those in Models 1 and 2. They might also "web" their questions and write answers on a separate sheet of paper. One second-grade teacher has students glue four library card pockets inside a manila folder. Then they write a research question on each pocket. As students find answers to their questions, they jot them on cards and place them in the appropriate pockets. Students compose reports based on these questions and answers. They also use the information to produce a product (e.g., nonfiction book, diorama, poster, pop-up book, or flipbook). Other authors suggest additional ways to help young students become independent researchers and writers (Barclay...
The intrinsic motivation generated through exploring a self-selected topic is usually enough to keep most students involved. But students want to share what they learn, so an authentic audience, such as parents or other school classes, becomes important (Many, 2002). Students consider their audience as they plan their projects. After projects are completed, students practice their presentations and present their learning. Some schools have project fairs where students display their work and answer questions as parents, other students, and the public circulate through the displays. After they are finished, students reflect on their learning by completing self-evaluations about their use of time, completion of work, presentation, and suggestions for improvement. The teacher also evaluates each student’s process and product.

During the implementation of Model 3, classroom management is important. Having a class full of students working on different projects can be intimidating even to veteran teachers. Some teachers monitor student progress with a wall chart listing steps to be completed. Students’ names are placed on the chart, and, as they finish each step, the teacher lets them check it off. Other teachers put charts inside students’ folders to check off during conferences, or they create contracts that accomplish the same management goals (e.g., Barclay & Traser, 1999). In short, teachers who are successful with Model 3 carefully and systematically monitor student progress.

Final thoughts

Our models are a road map for primary-grade teachers to follow as they use informational books and as access to appropriate nonfiction expands. We have written elsewhere that a partnership between classroom teachers and librarians is essential for locating and using nonfiction (Palmer & Stewart, 1997). We underscore that assertion. But we also suggest that teacher partnerships are just as essential. Nonfiction can become an important tool in meeting standards and accountability requirements, but if teachers work alone, the process may be slowed.

Teachers are instructional engineers. Just as an engineer takes pride in seeing a structure or device come to fruition, teachers thrive on seeing students “get it” as a lesson unfolds. Nonfiction can become an important part of students “getting it” and teachers feeling pride in their work. To guarantee as much success as possible in this engineering process, we recommend that teacher teams begin by setting the stage and then moving sequentially through the models.

Throughout this article we have chosen our words carefully and restricted what we explored. For example, we used the term investigation instead of inquiry because we see investigation as a precursor to true student inquiry. In a similar manner, we did not consider the relationship between nonfiction research and the writing process or explain how to craft expository pieces using text structures, but other authors have (e.g., Barclay & Traser, 1999; Perry & Drummond, 2002; Vukelich, Evans, & Albertson, 2003). We did not delve into project-based learning, student inquiry, or community building in the classroom, but again other authors have (see previous citations). What our models provide is an organizing framework with common vocabulary from which teachers and librarians can collaboratively launch into more sophisticated instruction. But in order to take this next step, teachers need to read the references cited in this article and other relevant literature to obtain additional insights into nonfiction instruction. As collections grow, as teachers become comfortable with this new teaching resource, and as primary-grade students become independent researchers, nonfiction can be a vehicle for skill development and another source of reading enjoyment for young students.

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References


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