
October 2014

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Recommended Citation

Norman, Rebecca R. and Roberts, Kathryn L. (2014) "Practicing what We Preach: Relationships between Third-, Fourth-, and Fifth-Grade Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Related to Genre," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol47/iss1/4>

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Practicing what We Preach: Relationships between Third-, Fourth-, and Fifth-Grade Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Related to Genre

by Rebecca R. Norman, Mount Saint Mary College, and
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For years, the field of literacy has been calling for greater genre differentiation in elementary schools (e.g., Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2004; Chapman, 1999; Duke, 2004; Flowers & Flowers, 2006) for a variety of reasons ranging from student preference and motivation (e.g., Caswell & Duke, 1998; Guthrie, et al., 2004) to the “fourth grade slump” (e.g., Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010) to the fact that students need to be able to understand these texts to function successfully in the world outside of school (Ogle & Blackowicz, 2002). The exact balance of text types recommended varies from general, such as the International Reading Association’s (2000) recommendation of multiple genres, to more specific, such as Duke and Pearson’s (2002) recommendation of 1/3 narrative, 1/3 informational, 1/3 other texts. Now the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) are calling for a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading in elementary school (and additionally calls for persuasive texts in the writing standards). Despite this push, research would indicate that elementary classroom libraries and instruction have remained, for the most part, focused on narrative text (e.g., Duke, 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2006); though the reason for this disconnect is unclear.

In this article, we discuss part of a larger study examining the literacy beliefs and practices of a

nation-wide sample of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers. Specifically, we address the following questions: (1) What types of texts do teachers believe their students need to read? (2) What is the balance of genres in 3rd, 4th, and 5th-grade classroom libraries? (3) Do teachers build their classroom libraries in ways that are commensurate with their beliefs about the types of texts their students need to read?

Theoretical Framework

We entered into the design of this study with the premises that comprehension is the purpose of reading and that readers’ skills and the processes they use to comprehend texts differ by genre (Duke & Roberts, 2010; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Kucan & Beck, 1996; Stamboltzis, 2000). Because reading different genres entails different skills, it naturally follows that children need to spend significant time reading texts from a variety of genres in order to become more familiar with text structures and purposes, and to develop strategies for comprehending them. In other words, we believe that there is a version of “Matthew Effects” (Stanovich, 1986) for genre, meaning that the more time a person spends interacting with a particular genre, the more proficient with that genre he or she will become. However, when little time is spent on a genre, comprehension of that genre will likely suffer.

Method

We elected to use an electronic survey for this study in order to reach a national audience, and in the hopes that the ease of the electronic format would result in higher rates of response. The survey included multiple choice, Likert, and short answer questions, and as such required mixed methods for analysis.

Participants

The electronic survey was sent to 864 third-through fifth-grade teachers. Using the four regions of the United States (West, South, Midwest, and North East), we used stratified random sampling to select 4 states from each region, 6 districts from each state's Department of Education database, 3 schools from each district, and 3 teachers from each grade (3-5) within those schools. Email addresses for the teachers were publicly available through district or school websites.

In total, 152 teachers responded to the survey, 125 completing all items relevant to these analyses (a response rate of 14.47%). Of those 125 respondents, 18 (14.40%) reported teaching in urban schools, 38 (30.40%) in suburban schools, and 68 (43.87%) in rural schools (1 respondent declined to answer). In terms of grade level, our sample included 34 (27.20%) third-grade teachers, 46 (36.80%) fourth-grade teachers, and 42 (33.60%) fifth-grade teachers (3 teachers did not respond to this item). Almost a third of our sample had been teaching for 20 or more years ($n=36$, 28.80%). The next largest group was teachers who had been teaching 0-5 years ($n=28$, 22.40%), followed by 10-15 years ($n=26$, 20.80%), 6-10 years ($n=19$, 15.08%), and finally 15-20 years ($n=16$, 10.26%).

Data Collection Procedures

A link to the survey was emailed to all selected teachers. Results were returned anonymously, except in cases in which teachers provided contact

information for the purposes of volunteering to administer a survey to their students at a later date. The survey software allowed us to resend the link to those teachers who had not yet responded two weeks later. One month after initial distribution, we downloaded the survey responses into a statistical program for analysis.

Instrument

The full survey to which participants responded included 62 items, including questions about their instruction in all subjects (e.g., "On average, how many hours per week do you spend teaching social studies?"), but focused mostly on beliefs and practices related to teaching literacy. This paper focuses on the teachers' responses to two sections of the survey related to: (1) what types of texts teachers believed students need to read (i.e., "In your opinion, what kinds of texts do your students need to read?") and (2) their classroom libraries (e.g., "What percentage of your books/texts would you classify as fictional narrative?", "What percentage of your books/texts would you classify as informational text?", "What percentage of your books/texts would you classify as poetry?"). The first question was written in short answer format; for the latter set of questions, participants were asked to select one response from a range of percentages (e.g., 0-10, 11-20, and so on).

Data Analysis Procedures

First, we ran frequency counts to see how often each percentage band appeared for fictional narrative and information (see Tables 1 and 2), looking specifically to see whether teachers were near the recommended 33% for each (following the more conservative recommendations of Duke & Pearson, 2002). We did not run this type of counts for the other genres listed as there was no minimum expectation beyond that their sum total would not exceed 33%. We then analyzed teachers' responses to the first short-answer question and identified those who specifically men-

tioned fiction (or specific subgenres of fiction, such as fantasy) and/or informational (non-fiction) text as being most important for their students to read. We then cross-referenced their responses with the reported percentages of those genres in their classroom libraries to see if they indicated that at least 31-40% of books were of those genres. Looking across all responses, we then asked whether and to what extent teachers' library compositions reflected what they viewed as the most important texts to which students should be exposed.

Results

What types of texts do teachers believe their students need to read?

The results of our analysis suggest that the majority of the teachers believe that a combination of fictional narrative and informational text are important, some even mentioning that the diversification should also include many other genres. For example, a fourth-grade teacher from Georgia wrote that students should be reading "non-fiction, fiction, textbooks, magazines, computer materials". Similarly, a fourth-grade teacher from Idaho wrote that students should be reading "anything they can get their hands on. Novels, articles, picture books, comics, newspapers, cereal boxes, writings of classmates, poetry, classics". In total, 62 teachers called for both informational and narrative texts (n=39 or 31.20%) or a variety of texts (n=23 or 18.40%). As one fifth-grade teacher from Montana wrote, "In an ideal world it would be 50/50".

Interestingly, over a third of the teachers (n= 45 or 36.00%) specifically mentioned informational text as the type of text that was most important for their students to read; 29 of those 45 teachers *only* mentioned informational or non-fiction text. For example, a fifth-grade teacher from Utah, commented, "I think my students need to read more informational texts". Similarly, a third-grade teacher from Utah, responded, "Non-fic-

tion. I think it holds their interest longer, builds stronger academic vocabulary, and supports content we are not always able to present in the classroom." This emphasis on informational text stands in stark contrast to the five teachers (4.00%) who prioritized narrative texts, such as the fourth grade teacher from Pennsylvania who insisted that it was important for students to only read "fun stories! I am sick and tired of non-fiction."

It should be noted that these numbers do not add up to 125 as an additional 13 teachers' (10.40%) responses were not related to genre. For example, a third-grade teacher from Missouri, replied that "leveled readers and scripted basals are good for reading", a response that made no reference to genre.

What is the balance of genres in 3rd, 4th, and 5th-grade classroom libraries?

Although the majority of teachers mentioned that students need to read a variety of genres, their self-reporting of the contents of their classroom libraries indicates that they mainly consist of fictional narrative texts. Of the 123 teachers who reported having classroom libraries, 23 (18.70%) reported that 30% or less of their classroom libraries consisted of fictional narratives while 88 (71.54%) responded that 30% or less of their libraries were comprised of informational text. Similarly, 52 (42.27%) teachers' classroom libraries included more than 61% fictional narrative (approximately double the recommended proportion), while only 1 (00.81%) teacher's library contained more than 61% informational texts. Upon further exploration, the one teacher who did report that more than 61% of his or her classroom library was comprised of informational books taught exclusively math and science. See Tables 1 and 2, respectively, for frequency counts for teachers' self-reported percentages of narrative and informational text in their classroom libraries.

Do teachers build their classroom libraries in ways that are commensurate with their beliefs about the types of texts their students need to read?

Of the 107 teachers who thought it was important to read informational text (either solely or in combination with other genres), one teacher did not have a classroom library, 74 (69.16%) indicated that less than 30% of the books in their classroom libraries would be classified as informational text; 32 (29.91%) indicated that between 31%-60% of their library was informational text, and one (0.90%) indicated more than 61% consisted of informational text. When asked about the percentage of fictional narratives in their classroom libraries, 20 of these 107 teachers (18.69%) indicated that 0-30% of their classroom libraries consisted of fictional narratives, 40 (37.38%) indicated 31%-60%, and 45 (42.06%) indicated that 61% or more of their libraries consisted of fictional narrative text. In fact, five of these teachers (4.67%) even identified 81-90% of the books in their library as fictional narrative even though all of them either specifically mentioned the importance of informational text or responded that students needed to read a variety of texts.

Conclusions from the Study

The results of this study suggest that teachers have gotten the message that they need to expose their students to a broader range of text genres than simply fictional narrative. In fact, this study suggests that teachers seem particularly attuned to the importance of informational text. An astounding 86.99% of the respondents clearly believe that it is important to expose students to, at the very least, informational text, and many also reported a need to expose them to a wide variety of genres. However, it seems that *believing* that it is important for children to read texts from a variety of genres is not enough. For many, the composition of their classroom libraries stands in stark contrast to their reported beliefs about the

texts that children need to be reading (see Figure 1 for quotes exemplifying this phenomenon).

There are many possible explanations for this discrepancy, and the idea that the effects of teachers' beliefs are mediated by other factors is not new (see, for example, Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Graden, 1996). One explanation may be that teachers are relying heavily on the use of textbooks to expose their students to informational text. Though we did not collect data on the types of texts being used during science, social studies, and math instruction, we do know that 76 (60.80%) teachers reported that they often or always teach literacy skills during science, 78 (62.40%) during social studies, and 60 (48.00%) during math. However, this should be

Figure 1.

Selected quotes from teachers regarding what texts students need to read.

In your opinion, what kinds of texts do your students need to read?

“Non-fiction.” (Marian, 4th grade, Massachusetts, 61-70% of classroom library is fictional narrative)

“Non-fiction. It teaches a whole spectrum of skills that cannot be attained from fictional text alone.” (4th grade, Georgia, 61-70% of classroom library is fictional narrative)

“They need to read a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, but need more non-fiction exposure.” (4th grade, Arizona, 71-80% of classroom library is fictional narrative.)

“Non-fiction may be the most important.” (5th Grade, Minnesota, 81-90% of classroom library is fictional narrative)

interpreted with caution as “literacy instruction” could be anything from spelling and use of graphic organizers to reading of connected text, and everything in between. Similarly, we did not ask about the genres of texts that teachers used for read alouds, though this was explored by Duke (2000), who found very little use of informational texts as read alouds in first grade classrooms; and also more recently by Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi (2010) who came to the same conclusion when researching second-, third-, and fourth-grade classrooms.

Although these explanations are plausible, we believe the explanations for the discrepancy are likely simpler: knowing that you should do something is not the same as knowing how to do it, having the resources to do it, or being able to make it a priority. If we want teachers to act on their beliefs about genre diversification we need to help them to do so by providing professional development related to text selection, promotion of classroom library books, and matching of texts to readers. We also need to provide teachers with the resources, both in terms of time and financial support, to build libraries of high-quality books from a variety of genres. Finally, we need to send a strong, clear message to teachers and school administrators that these actions need to be made priorities because exposure to informational text is crucial to success in school and life, as well as to the motivation of many young readers.

What's Next?

The good news is, although building a classroom library is a long-term process, taking the first steps is easy. You (or the teachers you work with, if you are not a classroom teacher) can make a balance of genres a priority in your classroom starting today. First, take an inventory of your library to see what genres are represented, privileged, and left out. Do you have about a third fictional narrative (e.g., fantasy, realistic fiction, historical fiction), a third informational, and a third other types of texts (e.g., poetry, biography,

comic books) in your classroom library? If yes, congratulations! You are providing your students with a well-balanced exposure to texts. If no, make note of what genres you may need. As you add to your library, be sure to prioritize these under-represented genres. As a fourth-grade teacher from Arizona pointed out, students need to read “anything and everything: fiction, nonfiction, newspapers, bulletin boards, letters, instruction manuals...students should have access to and be encouraged to read anything and everything that an adult would be privy to and offered explanations as to why they are all important along the way.” With each text you add to your collection, you have the potential to move one step closer to giving your students that opportunity.

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Table 1.

Response to “What percentage of your books/texts would you classify as fictional narrative?”*

	Response	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1/3	0-10	3	2.40
	11-20	7	5.60
	21-30	13	8.39
More than 1/3	31-40	13	8.39
	41-50	12	7.74
	51-60	23	18.40
	61-70	28	22.40
	71-80	17	13.60
	81-90	7	5.60
	91-100	0	0.00

*123 teachers represented as 2 reported that they did not have classroom libraries.

Table 2.

Response to “What percentage of your books/texts would you classify as informational?*

	Response	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1/3	0-10	23	18.40
	11-20	32	25.60
	21-30	33	26.40
More than 1/3	31-40	21	16.80
	41-50	8	6.40
	51-60	5	4.00
	61-70	0	0.00
	71-80	1	0.80
	81-90	0	0.00
	91-100	0	0.00

*123 teachers represented as 2 reported that they did not have classroom libraries.