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Why Use Nonfiction with Young Children?

BY NICHOLE ANNE SHORT

In 1999, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (US Department of Health & Human Service, 2000) emphasized, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Coiro, 2000, p.12). Reading aloud—an adult reading printed material out loud to provide a pleasurable experience for listeners—is one activity that teachers and librarians use daily in their classrooms and during story times to encourage young children, between 2 and 8 years of age, to become excited about reading. However, many would argue that reading aloud benefits children well beyond 8 years of age. Have you ever thought about reading nonfiction aloud as part of a classroom story time? In my experiences as a public librarian and classroom teacher, I have found that reading nonfiction aloud to young children is beneficial. This article will further explore why nonfiction should be incorporated into read aloud and story times, how to select good nonfiction books, strategies for reading nonfiction aloud to children, and examples of nonfiction story times with follow up activities. Although my comments are particularly relevant to younger children, they can be adapted for older students as well.

Why Read Nonfiction Aloud to Young Children?

Too often children equate reading with a process that is tedious, frustrating, and threatening or with the pain of doing numerous worksheets (Schwartz, 1995). We need to teach children to want to read if they are to break out of this negative mindset (Schwartz, 1995). Motivating children to want to read needs to begin at an early age and reading aloud to them provides meaningful, pleasurable literacy events. Classroom and library read alouds are an effective way to motivate. Reading nonfiction books that have relevance to children's interests and personal lives is a strong motivator. Finally, the teacher or librarian modeling a positive attitude toward literacy can positively motivate children to listen to books at an early age and later read them on their own.

Reading aloud to children has many benefits. Children who are read aloud to at an early age develop good listening skills and learn that reading can be an exciting and fun activity because they equate books with feelings of warmth, security, and love. Hopefully they will remember, long after childhood, that reading is an enjoyable habit (Coiro, 2000). When children listen to a story, they are making sense of their world by relating to characters or concepts in the literature. When adults read to children, they impress upon those children that they are worthy of the adult's attention and the time (Coiro, 2000).

Reading aloud to children also stimulates interest, emotional development, and language development (Coiro, 2000). Reading research confirms that there

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are other benefits to reading aloud to children. These include increasing vocabulary, expanding background knowledge, establishing a reading-writing connection, exposing children to experiences outside their own world, encouraging compassion, reshaping negative attitudes, and introducing the texture of the English language rarely heard on television sitcoms (Schwartz, 1995). Another benefit to reading aloud is that teachers and librarians can serve as reading models, so that children can hear how fluent readers employ a variety of voice tones and inflections (Coiro, 2000).

Reading aloud to young children also helps them develop concepts about print. Concepts of print can be defined as, "... an awareness of how print works and how it looks" (Hong Kong International School, 2000). Developing an understanding of the concepts of print is an important part of beginning reading skills. These concepts include:

- how to hold a book
- how to find the cover and the back of the book
- what direction to turn the pages
- knowledge of left-to-right and top-to-bottom
- directionality and the importance of linear letter and word sequence in printed language (Roney, 1980).

Besides being important reading skills, concepts of print are also a part of the Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP). Teaching and modeling the above concepts about print at an early age will benefit young learners.

The best way to introduce and model these concepts is through reading aloud to children where they are close enough to view the text (Roney, 1980). When teaching children how to hold the book, modeling the correct way to hold the book and discussing with the children why the book is held a certain way is beneficial (Hong Kong International School, 2000).

Teachers and librarians must keep in mind that teaching children to treat books with respect is also part

of the concepts of print. Handling a book in front of children, discussing and locating the front and back covers, identifying the author's and illustrator's names, finding the beginning and the ending, and looking for page numbers assists children in learning how to handle a book (Hong Kong International School, 2000).

I have found that asking children simple questions helps to reinforce these concepts. These might include: Where is the title? Can you read it? Where is the author's name? Who is the illustrator? What is on the front and back cover? Where does the book start and end? Questioning also assists in assessing the children's understanding of these concepts on a continuing basis. When dealing with children's emergent literacy, pointing to parts of the book and asking the children to identify them works just as well. I have also found that discussing the illustrations on the front cover of the book engages children and their thought processes and stimulates discussion ideas before beginning to read. Engaging children in pre-reading activities, such as the concepts of print, can be accomplished by having children make predictions about the book, which in turns provides children with a purpose for listening and builds comprehension skills. This pre-reading activity also lends itself nicely to post-reading activities. Discussing the author's and illustrator's roles and providing background information about them enables children to better connect with the book.

Discussing and locating the front and back covers, the author's and illustrator's names, the beginning and end of a book, and in some cases the page numbers also assists children in developing directionality skills. When we teach directionality to young children, we need to confirm that they have a sense of the front and back of the book in order to understand which direction the pages are turned. This sense of directionality cannot be developed until children understand the concept of the front and back of the book. Pointing to the words, as the teacher or librarian reads aloud, helps children understand directionality of the text (Ferris State University, n.d.). In pointing to the words, children learn that text is read from left to right and from top to bottom. Asking children to

find the front and back of the book and the first word on the page, as well as which way to turn the page, also assists children in developing concepts about print (Hong Kong International School, 2000).

One of the best ways that I have found to teach these concepts of print, in the classroom and in the library, is to ask children what part of the book I am pointing to as I point to the different parts of the book. To teach or review with the children the correct way to hold a book, I hold the book incorrectly and ask the children if I am holding the book correctly. If the children indicate no, then I continue to rotate the book until the children tell me that I am holding the book correctly.

Why Nonfiction?

Exposing children to nonfiction at an early age introduces them to the way nonfiction is written and how it is different from fiction (Coiro, 2000). This experience introduces the organizational structure of nonfiction text. From repeated contact, children develop the reading skills necessary to comprehend nonfiction (Moore, 1998). Reading nonfiction aloud to children provides them with an opportunity to see books as a vehicle for understanding the world around them as well as for finding answers to their questions. Using nonfiction during read aloud stimulates discussion among the children about the book's topic. Furthermore, reading nonfiction aloud to young children, on a regular basis, familiarizes them with the sound of the nonfiction writing structure and introduces them to the role of access features in nonfiction writing. This early exposure to nonfiction focuses the children's attention on key text features, such as table of contents, index, captions, headings, subheadings, and glossary, that are used to organize the information presented in the book (Moore, 1998). Understanding and knowing about these text features assist young children in comprehending nonfiction text. Another major advantage is that children become familiar with the way nonfiction is written, which provides them with skills to comprehend material presented to them in text books in school (Vardell, 1998). Reading nonfiction aloud to children provides them with opportunities to enrich and expand their schemata about a variety of topics.

This can be extremely helpful in content areas such as science and social studies. The teacher or librarian can use nonfiction read alouds in place of textbooks or to further explore topics only highlighted in the text. Overall, reading nonfiction aloud to young children has many benefits that include introducing them to specific nonfiction content as well as familiarizing them with the genre's unique language structure.

How To Select Quality Nonfiction Books For Young Children

There are three major aspects to keep in mind when selecting quality nonfiction books for children. These include:

- the age of the children
- the children's interests
- the children's prior knowledge

These will all assist the teacher or librarian in selecting the correct book to read aloud. In addition to the points listed above, there are other criteria to keep in mind when selecting quality nonfiction books. These include:

- appeal
- accuracy and authenticity
- content and quality of material
- organization
- format
- visuals

The teacher or librarian should be mindful that the book must be appealing to children. Choose a book that appeals to you as a reader because it has strong, accurate content presented in a concise, creative, and fascinating manner. Choose a book that you are personally passionate about. When you share a nonfiction book that interests you, young children are more likely to be interested also.

Accuracy and authenticity are the most important aspects to look at when selecting a nonfiction book (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001). "Accuracy is key. If the book isn't accurate, simply don't use it"

(Bamford, 2002, p.10). When reading aloud to children, there is a need to present accurate information since it is easier to teach new concepts than trying to unteach a concept at a later date. To look for accuracy and authenticity in a book, check the author's credentials, awards the book has won, and acknowledgements, such as credits, on the verso page. Individuals, who are authorities in their fields, often write children's nonfiction books. Sometimes authors of informational books may be freelance or established writers, which does not necessarily mean that they are experts in the areas in which they write. Another factor to consider is the book's copyright. A more recent copyright is desirable, but

does not automatically ensure accuracy (Bamford, 2002). I always read the book carefully, and check any details I might question, before reading it aloud to young children. This is necessary in order to provide a quality and accurate read aloud for children.

Another way, in addition to a close reading beforehand, is to check reputable children's book reviewing sources such as School Library Journal or Horn Book Magazine (Huck et al, 2001).

When looking at a book's accuracy and authenticity, it is important to look for books that do not have stereotypes (Huck et al, 2001). Stereotyping, as defined by Huck, occurs in a book that "omits significant facts [or] tells only part of the truth; a book that presents stereotypes pretends, wrongly, to have told the truth" (p. 507). This in turn leaves readers with incorrect information. An example of this would be the impression that all scientists are male and Caucasian (Huck et al, 2001). Stereotypes in nonfiction are frequently found in books about other countries. For example, these stereotypes may include sweeping generalizations about "everybody," or generalizations with no facts to support their claims. When looking at the accuracy and authenticity of a book, the teacher or librarian must also beware of anthropomorphism, which is the "... assignment of human feelings and behaviors to animals, plants, or objects ..." (Huck

et al, 2001, p. 509). "Young children perceive new things in terms of their experiences and feelings" (Huck et al, 2001, p. 509). Anthropomorphism should be avoided because children will think that animals act and have feelings like humans and could in turn think that they can play and talk to wild animals. It also conveys an unscientific attitude. Therefore, anthropomorphic texts do not have a place in early childhood—or any—nonfiction read alouds.

The content of the book is another aspect to consider when selecting a nonfiction read aloud. When looking at the book's content, it is important to keep in mind the scope and depth of information presented in the

content of the book (Bamford, 2002). The teacher or librarian must decide if the information is detailed or introductory, which in turn affects the age group for whom the book is intended as well as the extension activities that can be incorporated. The book needs to

contain quality information, which is age appropriate, accurate, and provides the information that a teacher or librarian wishes to teach to the children.

There are other aspects of book selection to keep in mind. When looking at the text in nonfiction books for young children, look for books with focused text that gives some information, but not too much information (Canizares, 2000). Look for books where the organization of the text flows naturally. When selecting a book, one must also beware of books that sacrifice meaning while attempting to control vocabulary or length. In books that are brief, the information and the presentation should be clear so that children understand the concepts that have been read to them (Bamford, 2002).

When looking at the format of the page, a small amount of simple text and a large picture are best for young children. A good example of this is *The Zieglers and Their Apple Orchard* (Flanagan, 1999). In this book, the author describes the Zieglers' daily activities that keep the orchard functioning: prun-

The book needs to contain quality information, which is age appropriate, accurate, and provides the information that a teacher or librarian wishes to teach to the children

ing and spraying the trees, cutting the grass in the orchard, picking the apples, and selling the apples. In this example, the simple text covers one fourth of the page, with the picture covering three fourths of the page. This allows children to extend their competencies without overwhelming them (Moore, 1998). Also look for books with clear large photographs or illustrations that help children to focus on the content of the book (Canizares, 2000).

In selecting a book, one must also keep in mind the visuals that have been added to clarify information or assist in the reader's understanding (Huck et al, 2001). Visuals can be defined as illustrations, captions, sidebars, or other access features, such as the table of contents or index. The purpose of the visuals is to strongly support the text since they convey information to the reader or viewer. Additionally, the visuals provide information that is not supplied in the text (Huck et al, 2001). Some questions to keep in mind when looking at the visuals include:

- Does it support the reader's understanding?
- Does it help to make the information clearer and, thus, more accessible to readers? (Bamford, 2002)

In answering these two questions, there are other concepts to keep in mind. One is how clear are the visuals? Do they focus the reader's attention on the content? The visuals are there to support the text and assist the reader in comprehending what is read. Another concept to keep in mind when evaluating visuals is the amount of content included in the pictures. Is there enough content in the picture to support the text. A third concept is the quality of the reproduction. Will young children be able to recognize what the visual is? Finally, is there a logical presentation and layout in regards to the text (Huck et al, 2001)?

Strategies For Reading Nonfiction Aloud to Young Children

There are three main strategies for reading nonfiction aloud to young children. The first strategy is a cover-to-cover read aloud. In doing this, the teacher or the librarian reads the book from front cover to

back cover, reading all of the content in between. This method of reading aloud heightens the children's interest in the text, which is necessary to process and understand new concepts and information. A cover-to-cover read aloud also lends itself nicely to follow up activities based on the topic covered in the book.

A second read aloud strategy is a participatory read aloud, or a shared read aloud, where the teacher or librarian reads aloud part of the text and students, as a group, read aloud another part of the text. During this type of read aloud, the teacher or librarian and the students alternate reading. Participatory read alouds work best with older students who are able to read. One way to conduct a participatory or shared read aloud is to have the teacher or librarian read aloud from a big book, while the children follow along in their individual readers. Another way to conduct this type of read aloud is for the teacher or librarian to make overhead copies of particular pages that the children can read together (Moore, 1998). Using either of these two examples of participatory or shared read aloud allows all children to read together so that no child is singled out.

The third read aloud strategy, caption reading, could also be called a motivational read aloud. Caption reading is motivational because the teacher reads only the captions, not the entire text. Reading only the captions may interest some children in the content matter, which in turn will entice them to read the book or ask to have the entire book read to them. This method of reading nonfiction also intrigues children (Vardell, 1998). A wonderful example of a nonfiction book for young children that includes captions is *Little Panda: The World Welcomes Hua Mei at the San Diego Zoo* (Ryder, 2001). This book describes how Hua Mei grew from a baby into a one-year old panda. The book describes the growth process, daily activities, care, and eating habits of pandas. There are captions on every other page that explain and add additional information to the text. This is also a wonderful example of a photographic essay.

The method selected to read nonfiction aloud to children depends upon the type of nonfiction book that is selected and the layout of the book. Reading

the selected book ahead of time enables teachers or librarians to select an appropriate method of reading the nonfiction text to a young audience.

Examples of Nonfiction Story Times With Follow-Up Activities For Young Children

Nonfiction books lend themselves to follow up activities whether they are child-initiated or teacher- or librarian-initiated. There are many concepts in nonfiction literature that children can explore further through these activities, whether they are in the content areas of art, math, social studies, or science or another content area. Follow up or post-reading activities reinforce the concepts presented in the read aloud and encourage further exploration of concepts through additional activities as well as further reading on the topic.

An example of an art activity for very young children is creating apple trees using construction paper with precut tree trunks, apples, and leaves. This would be a follow-up activity after reading aloud *The Zieglers* and *Their Apple Orchard* (Flanagan, 1999) or *I Am An Apple* (Marzollo, 1997). Another post-reading activity is writing about a favorite season, drawing pictures of this season or creating a tree, similar to the one described above, then describing what the tree looks like during that season. Any of these activities would follow up reading aloud *Sky Tree: Seeing Science Through Art* (Locker, 1995). Thomas Locker uses oil paints to create beautiful illustrations then describes the changes that trees go through as the seasons change. Each page includes questions about the pictures that can be used for personal reflection or discussion.

Michael Dahl has written a wonderful series of dinosaur books for young children: *Winged and Toothless: The Adventure of Pteranodon*; *T. Rex: The Adventure of Tyrannosaurus Rex*; *Three-Horn: The Adventure of Triceratops*; *Swift Thief: Adventure of Velociraptor*; and *Long-Neck: The Adventure Of Apatosaurus*.

These books have large illustrations with little text on each page. They have information detailed but simple enough for young children's understanding. The captions provide additional information. A math activity graphing the different characteristics of each dinosaur the children encountered might follow reading these books about dinosaurs. The graph could display the names of the dinosaurs on one axis and the dinosaurs' characteristics across the other axis.

An enjoyable follow up activity for young children after reading *World Dances* (Maurer, 1997) would be to learn a dance from another country. *World Dances* provides an overview of dance and the different types of dances that are unique to different cultures. There are three additional titles in the *Let's Dance* series that

could be used in the same manner.

Young children like to celebrate holidays. The series *Holiday Histories*, published by Heinemann, provides young children with background information on each holiday and why we celebrate it,

in terms they can understand. After reading *Arbor Day* (Ansary, 2002), young children could plant a class tree or root avocado pits to produce individual seedlings. This follow up activity could be further developed into a study on trees. Any of the books in the *Holiday History* series would lend themselves nicely to post-reading activities to reinforce social studies concepts of why the country celebrates these holidays. Using post-reading activities reinforces the concepts in the book and allows children to further explore their creativity.

Conclusion

Nonfiction should be incorporated into read alouds and story times. Teachers and librarians need to be aware of their responsibility to select good nonfiction books, include nonfiction in their read alouds, and include follow up activities to extend the nonfiction experience. These are all part of providing young children with positive nonfiction experiences. The

Teachers and librarians need to be aware of their responsibility to select good nonfiction books, include nonfiction in their read alouds, and include follow up activities to extend the nonfiction experience.

benefits of nonfiction read alouds include: familiarity with nonfiction writing and preparation and practice for comprehending school textbook material. As

teachers and librarians, we should continue to explore and generate ideas that include nonfiction for young children in the classroom and library.

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Freeman, E., & Person, D. (1992). *Using nonfiction trade books in the elementary classroom: From ants to zeppelins*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

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Web Sites

American Library Association: Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal: http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/sibertmedal/Sibert_Medal.htm

National Council for the Social Studies: *Notable Trade Books for Young People*. <http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable>

National Council of Teachers of English: *Orbis Pictus Nonfiction Award*. <http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/orbispictus>

National Science Teachers Association: *Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K-12*. <http://www.nsta.org/ostbc>

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