This column, overall, is always about research and policy. In this issue, however, we focus on some of what research has had to say about a particular area of instruction—teaching children about informational texts—because of recent developments in curriculum policy. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other state standards (such as those in Texas) purport to prepare students for college and career, and in that pursuit, they insist that young children focus more heavily on informational texts than they have done in the past. Teachers need to know more about the ways readers interact with texts that intend to teach about the world and more about the kinds of teaching that have been shown to support those interactions. With new assessments designed to hold children, teachers, and schools accountable for what children learn to do with these kinds of texts, we can expect a huge industry to develop around products and services that advertise themselves as holding the secrets to success. When policy raises the stakes and creates anxiety among administrators and teachers, one starts to see snake oil being sold as a cure-all on every corner. Now might be a good time to pause and consider some of the evidence.

Teaching innovations generally do not come from research because real innovation can only be carried out through teaching that actually exists, not on teaching that might come to be or that introduces something brand new into the world. Not all good teaching has been the subject of peer-reviewed research, to be sure. But published research can help teachers concentrate on the kinds of evidence, the kinds of systematic inquiry that ultimately should inform the ways we test one set of claims against another. And conversations around research can also be helpful in cueing us to ask questions about why we predict a particular set of conditions, strategies, or procedures would produce a particular kind of thinking, knowing, interaction, or lives for children as they mature.

In a previous column (Maloch & Bomer, 2013), we worked through some of the varying (and shifting) names and definitions that researchers have used for informational texts, as well as the terms used by standards authors. We argued that unclear terms and definitions cause trouble for teachers and other educators and that it is important to be as clear as possible about how we are defining informational texts and what boundaries we are setting for the work we review. Here, we use Duke’s (2000) definition of informational texts—“text written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world (typically from someone presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to someone presumed to be less so) and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose” (p. 205)—and review primarily the research that considers informational texts, as defined in this way. We also focus here on the research that has been done specifically within early schooling contexts; for now, we must leave some important research on disciplinary literacies in the background, though we think readers would profit from giving that research some attention. (See, for example, Moje, Ciechanowksi, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, & Collazo, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Shanahan, Shanahan, & Misischia, 2011.) What we will foreground in the rest of this column is a set of imperatives that have been derived...
It is clear that one important (perhaps the most important) step in growing young children’s knowledge, understanding, and use of informational texts is making these texts available and accessible to them. From these studies and many others, it is clear that one important (perhaps the most important) step in growing young children’s knowledge, understanding, and use of informational texts is making these texts available and accessible to them. Recommendations vary in terms of just how many texts to provide and how to balance these with other genres, and no research has definitively settled the question. For example, Moss and her colleagues (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997) suggest that 25%–50% of the texts in a classroom should be informational. The CCSS recommend that fully half of the texts made available to children be informational in nature.

It’s hard to know what the exact number should be, but it is clear that educators should work to balance their story offerings with informational ones. As we described in our previous column, informational texts are much less common in primary classrooms than are stories (e.g., Duke, 2000; Moss, 2008), although there are indications that teachers are beginning to incorporate more informational texts in their classrooms (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). In addition to larger-scale studies like Jeong et al. (2010) that collect data across a range of classrooms, a growing number of case studies provide descriptive and interpretive portraits of how individual teachers are integrating informational texts.
in their classrooms (see, for example, Bradley & Donovan, 2010; Maloch, 2008; Maloch & Zapata, 2011).

These studies, along with others (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Pappas, 2006; Smolkin, McTigue, Donovan, & Coleman, 2009), suggest that in addition to increasing the quantity of informational texts in classrooms, it is also important to consider the qualities of those texts. In other words, as educators, we should pay attention to what texts we put in front of children. Saul and Dieckman (2005), for example, argue for the importance of text selection in elementary classrooms and suggest that as teachers select trade books for use in their classrooms, they should examine the texts along three dimensions: the content, the quality of the writing, and the design.

With teachers’ text selection in mind, Pappas (2006) set out to better understand the trade books offered to children during science instruction. She analyzed approximately 400 information books to identify critical/common features of information books as well as the dimensions along which information books may vary. Her results, which we review in more detail in our previous column (Maloch & Bomer, 2013), lay out defining elements present in what she called “typical” information books. Books that do not have the required elements she identified as “atypical”; these included hybrid texts with both narrative and expository structures (and fiction and nonfiction elements). In their analysis of information books, Donovan and Smolkin (2002) call these hybrid texts “dual purpose” (books characterized by at least two purposes—to tell a story and to present information).

Pappas (2006) and Donovan and Smolkin (2002) recommend that teachers read and make available to students “typical” information books more often than “atypical” or “hybrid texts” (although they are open to the integration of hybrid texts in elementary classrooms). Their caution is that students should have regular access to high-quality informational texts that represent typical examples of informational genres. This argument makes sense given the research indicating that comprehension is genre-specific (Duke & Roberts, 2010). In other words, the strategies readers employ to move through and make sense of texts are specific to the kinds or types of texts they are negotiating. That idea, along with the idea that children learn what they are exposed to, indicates that we need to pay attention to providing high-quality informational texts that represent the genres we want kids to learn.

Create Authentic Opportunities for Engagement

The first step, then, to growing children’s understandings of informational texts is to make these texts available in classrooms and pay attention to the qualities and structures of those texts. Also clear in the research is the importance of engaging students in authentic reading and writing of such texts. In a significant study conducted by Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau (2007), researchers found that second graders’ growth and performance with informational texts was strongly related to the degree to which teachers provided students with authentic opportunities to engage with informational texts. In their study of 420 second and third graders, Purcell-Gates et al. (2007) focused on students’ reading and writing of informational texts and procedural texts. Assessing students’ learning of these kinds of texts using multiple outcome measures, Purcell-Gates et al. (2007) found that providing students with real-world reasons for engaging with informational texts was the most significant factor in improving their reading and writing of these texts. It is interesting to note that explicit teaching about how to approach such texts showed almost no significant impact.

These researchers defined “authentic literacy activity” as:

a) reading and writing of textual types, or genres, that occur outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose, and b) reading and writing those texts for the purposes for which they are read or written outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose (p. 14).

Examples of authentic literacy activities include reading a newspaper article about something the child is interested in, composing flyers to advertise an event for the community, or reading across multiple texts to inform their own questions. These
kinds of activities stand in contrast to ones that are driven by “school-only” purposes, such as spelling tests, short passages with comprehension questions, and test preparation activities.

Is it really so surprising that when children are engaged with texts for real purposes that their reading and writing of such texts improve? In fact, we know from other research (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dreher, 2003; Guthrie et al., 2009) that young children are often motivated by informational texts, and their inclusion inside classrooms can be quite engaging to children. The work of Guthrie and colleagues with CORI—Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction—demonstrated the power of teaching practices directed toward fostering motivation and engagement. In CORI, teachers engage students in reading and writing of informational texts in combination with hands-on activities, all related to one central conceptual theme. Other recent research into the integration of science and literacy similarly investigates the value of centering children’s reading and writing around inquiry into topics of interest to the children (e.g., Pearson, Moje, & Greenleaf, 2010; Varelas & Pappas, 2013).

**Engage Students through Interactive Read-Alouds and Discussion**

A third theme in the research on informational texts is the value of engaging young children in interactive read-alouds and discussions of these texts. As we have discussed in a previous column (Maloch & Bomer, 2012), engaging students of any age in sustained, productive discussion can lead to growth in comprehension, engagement, and content learning. The work in the area of informational texts has particularly highlighted the benefits of *interactive* read-alouds with young children.

The phrase *interactive read-aloud* was coined by Barrentine (1996), who described interactive read-alouds as instructional conversations in which the teacher poses questions throughout the reading “that enhance meaning construction and also show how one makes sense of text” (p. 36). Interactive read-alouds are an attempt to move away from a centralized model of discussion in which the teacher asks the questions and responds or evaluates the students’ answers. Instead, in these conversations, students spontaneously offer up their own responses, observations, and questions (Maloch & Beutel, 2010). While the teachers maintain an active role in these discussions, students are encouraged to verbally interact with the text, their peers, and the teacher as they work to construct meaning with a shared text.

Oyler (1996; Oyler & Barry, 1996), for example, studied a teacher implementing interactive read-alouds of informational texts and reported a heightened level of student engagement. She reported on the ways students spontaneously shared their observations, questions, and suggestions during the discussions and how they engaged in meaning making in dialogue with one another. Oyler’s research, along with others (Maloch & Beutel, 2010; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001), exposes the comprehension and response work that young children are capable of when engaged by their teachers in active discussion around informational texts. One potential in these kinds of conversations is the way in which students’ and teacher’s comprehension and response processes might be “laid bare” in the conversation (Barrentine, 1996; Oyler, 1996; Sipe, 2000). That is, as students and teacher openly discuss their responses and sense making, students’ reasoning and comprehension work often becomes visible to their peers.

Students also learn about text from these discussions. In a study of kindergartners, for example, Duke and Kays (1998) found that, after three months of almost daily read-alouds of informational books, the students showed more skill with the distinct linguistic features of information books. These researchers concluded that informational book read-alouds resulted in “fast-developing knowledge of information book language” (p. 295). Similarly, in Bradley & Donovan (2010), researchers report a case study of a second-grade teacher working to integrate more informational texts in her classroom.
In a three-week focus study on weather, the teacher incorporated focused read-alouds of information books that included discussions of genre elements, features, and organization. Over time, the researchers found that students’ use of genre elements was greater and their writing was more focused. Bradley and Donovan (2010) argue that their work supports the use of model texts as important scaffolds for writing instruction and “the repeated exploration of model texts to discuss the elements and features of typical information books” (p. 258).

Overall, research suggests that primary-grade children respond well to read-alouds of informational books, learning genre knowledge (Kamberlis, 1998; Tower, 2002), making intertextual connections (Oyler & Barry, 1996; Maloch & Beutel, 2010), building comprehension (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001), and building their content learning (Heisey & Kucan, 2011).

**Be Explicit When Necessary**

The final theme we will discuss is the role of explicit instruction in relation to work with informational texts. To be sure, the term “explicit” can be defined in different ways. On the one hand, explicit means being clear—being precise in explaining what something means or how something works. Clarity, though, is a function not just of a teacher’s language, but of students’ transactions with that language (Bomer, 1998). Most studies of informational text learning do include descriptions of teaching that are in some way explicit about text features, structures, and/or strategies. On the other hand, “explicit instruction” has become a phrase that points toward very particular notions of direct instruction. The research in the area of primary classrooms and informational texts is mixed when it comes to the value of explicit instruction, and that certainly should make us question assertions that explicit instruction is the one necessary ingredient for informational text comprehension and composing.

Explicit prescriptions about textual features, without access to the texts themselves or the authentic conditions under which they are produced, would hardly be a rich environment for learning. And at least some research (Purcell-Gates, et al., 2007) seems to indicate that teachers’ words may not be doing nearly as much as many people assume they are. Still, few would argue against teachers being as clear as possible in supporting young readers and writers in developing their reading and writing of informational texts. We saved this theme for last because being explicit in one’s instruction only makes sense as contextualized by and situated within the earlier themes.

A few studies have investigated the efficacy of explicit instruction in regard to informational texts and with primary-aged students (third grade or lower). The work of Williams and colleagues (Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 2005), for example, demonstrated that direct/explicit instruction in text structures (e.g., compare/contrast) can lead to better understanding of that particular text structure in new texts (students did not demonstrate transfer to other text structures). Other than this work, we know of no research that examines the impact of explicit instruction of text structure in the primary grades, although other work has been done within the context of upper elementary grades and middle school (see Martin & Duke, 2011, for a review of studies done with students with reading difficulties).

Beyond the teaching of text structure, being explicit about comprehension strategies has also received attention from researchers. However, only a small subset of work in explicit comprehension instruction has targeted primary grades and expository text. One study was conducted by Reutzel, Smith, and Fawson (2005) who compared single-strategy instruction with multiple-strategy instruction of informational text with second graders. Although they found no statistically significant differences, the multiple-strategy instruction group scored higher on some measures, leading the researchers to conclude that multiple-strategy instruction presented a “clear added value” (p. 298).

Teaching sets of comprehension strategies—what some refer to as multiple-strategy instruction
Michelle’s classroom, explicit attention to text features and strategy work was embedded in the reading and writing of informational texts across the curriculum. That is, her explicit instruction emerged in response to students’ needs as they engaged together in the reading and writing of such texts. This case study provided a detailed portrait of how one elementary teacher embedded explicit instruction inside a community and curriculum focused on inquiry (Maloch & Horsey, 2013). Case studies such as this one (see also, Bradley & Donovan, 2010; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001) offer teachers ways of conceptualizing how key instructional ideas come together into a cohesive and integrated approach to the teaching of informational texts.

**Final Thoughts**

Although we agree with Bradley & Donovan (2010) who suggest that we have “little information about how a systematic approach to helping students identify information books’ elements and features will help improve their understandings of how to read and write informational texts” (p. 247), we argue that what research does tell us is enough to move forward in our instruction around informational texts. That is, put informational texts—including a range of text types—in the hands of children, guide them to and through authentic activities with those texts, engage the students in active dialogue around those texts, and be explicit about comprehension strategies and text structures and features as warranted by students’ developing understandings and performance in those texts.

Policy makers, to be sure, will focus on the explicit strategy instruction discussed in the research literature. However, what seems abundantly clear to us from the research is that this explicit instruction is only effective for real reading and writing inasmuch as it is situated within authentic opportunities for reading and writing informational texts—opportunities that reflect what children might encounter outside of school. Only within these contexts of immersion, demonstrations, and support will explicit instruction make sense to young readers and writers, at least in ways that may transfer to new contexts and propel their continued inquiry and learning.
References


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**MAKING THE CASE: RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR VALUED PRACTICES**

In recent years, schools have been under increasing pressure to teach to the test, often resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum that squeezes out teaching methods that invite children into literacy and critical thinking in more engaging ways. We regularly see teachers having to defend their instructional decisions and practices to administrators, colleagues, parents, and district-level overseers, drawing on research as evidence. To that end, we are adding to the Research and Policy column, where appropriate, a concise summary of research relevant to each particular column. As we are imagining it, teachers might copy these summaries to have as a ready resource, with a bulleted list of claims on the front and a reference list on the back. We hope these summaries will be useful to teachers making decisions in their classrooms and defending those decisions to others. The front and back of this issue’s one-pager are on the next two pages.

—Beth Maloch & Randy Bomer
MAKING THE CASE: RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR VALUED PRACTICES

Research Supporting Informational Text Use in Primary Classrooms

Research indicates that informational texts are under-represented in many elementary classrooms, especially at the primary level. Research about instruction related to informational texts suggests that young children should be exposed to a wide variety of informational texts—including a range of text types. Students benefit from engaging in authentic literacy activities, including both reading and composing opportunities, that reflect real-world purposes.

- Early childhood and primary classrooms should make large numbers of informational texts available to children (Duke, 2000a; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Moss, 2008).
- Every classroom should have a rich classroom library with an ample supply of varied kinds of texts, including expository texts and narratives, fiction and nonfiction. Teachers and students need immediate access to a rich array of stories, information books, magazines and newspapers, essays, persuasive texts, biographies, historical narratives, and procedural texts (Duke, 2000a; Duke, 2000b; Kamberelis, 1998).
- Exposure to and instruction around particular text types result in students’ acquisition of those text forms in their own writing and in their reading (Pappas, 1993; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Tower, 2002).
- Engaging young children in authentic literacy activities—activities designed with real-world purposes—can lead to improved informational text comprehension and writing (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).
- Interactive read-alouds of informational texts engage students in active and collaborative meaning making and can provide opportunities for informational text learning (Maloch & Beutel, 2010; Oyler, 1996; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001).
- Explicit instruction may improve young children’s understandings of text structures, features, and text-appropriate comprehension strategies when embedded within a broader approach to informational text learning that includes extensive access to a broad range of informational texts, authentic activities with those texts, and opportunities to engage actively and collaboratively with and around such texts (Maloch, 2008; Purcell-Gates, et al., 2007; Williams, 2005)

On the back of this sheet, you will find the above-cited references. For a more extended discussion, see Maloch & Bomer’s article in the January 2013 issue of Language Arts.


