



Building Knowledge Through Informational Text

By Nell K. Duke, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, and Jennifer A. Knight

This is a special excerpt from a chapter in the articles *Knowledge Development in Early Childhood: Sources of Learning and Classroom Implications*¹

Two-year-old Spencer announces that Jackie Robinson played baseball a long time ago and that at that time “black people had to sit in the back of the bus.”

Five-year-old Cooper explains, “Sharks like the smell of blood. To try to get away from a shark you should punch it in the nose, eyes, gills, or maybe even fin. Hammerheads are less likely to attack you than tigers, bulls, and great whites.”

These children did not learn these things from personal experience (let’s hope!) or in conversation with their parents or teachers. They learned these things from informational books that were read aloud to them. While hands-on experiences are essential to learning, informational texts offer additional means of knowledge building.

Although children develop knowledge from many types of texts, informational texts seem particularly well-suited for the task. By definition, informational text is intended to convey information about the natural and social world. Even young children can learn from this type of text—some even prefer it (Maduram, 2000; Mohr, 2003; Monson & Sebesta, 1991; Oyler & Barry, 1996; Tower, 2002). Yet despite its potential as a tool for knowledge building and literacy, informational

texts typically play a relatively small role in preschool, primary grade, and intermediate grade curricula (e.g., Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). This needs to change.

Designing Instruction for Children to Build Knowledge from Text

One of the most important things a teacher can do to help children build knowledge from text is to establish compelling reasons for children to read informational texts (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). When children ask questions about why dinosaurs are no longer around or what happens to trash after the garbage truck picks it up, for example, a teacher can work with children to consult relevant texts to find the answers. Children may also participate in projects that generate a desire or need to know information. For example, in one classroom, the idea to design and produce a product (i.e., trail mix) for a fund-raiser led children to consult and produce relevant informational texts. In another project, children gathered information about animals from texts, as well as from firsthand observations, in order to write guides for their local zoo (see Halvorsen, Duke, Brugar,

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Block, Strachan, Berka, & Brown, 2012 for research on such projects; see Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012 for descriptions of many such projects).

Even without a specific project, a teacher can find ways to help children share and apply the knowledge they are building from informational text. For example, after reading aloud an informational text (which we hope you do often!) children can write letters to someone about something they have learned. Some teachers have children convey orally what they have learned to others, such as presenting to children in a lower grade, parents, or other adults in the school community.



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Opportunities to apply knowledge gained from informational reading are also valuable. For instance, after reading a text on how to read maps, children can then read and interpret a map of their own neighborhood or help plan an upcoming field trip by examining a map of the site. Or, after reading about weather patterns, children could collect data on local temperature ranges and rainfall and represent the data in a series of simple graphs—and even make predictions about future weather patterns around their school.

At the outset of this article, we quoted young children conveying their new knowledge on topics that interested them. When two-year-old Spencer was asked where he learned that information, he exclaimed proudly, “In my book!”

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Nell K. Duke is an award-winning researcher with an interest in informational literacies in young children, comprehension development and instruction in early schooling, and issues of equity in literacy education. A Professor of Language, Literacy, and Culture and Faculty Affiliate in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan, Nell has worked closely with teachers to address how research can help support teachers in their practice. She has coauthored many books including, most recently, Heinemann’s *Reading and Writing Genre with Purpose in K-8 Classrooms*.



Anne-Lise Halvorsen is Assistant Professor of Teacher Education, specializing in social studies education, at Michigan State University.

Jennifer A. Knight is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University.

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