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,
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.

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!”

References


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