

The place of non-fiction texts in today's primary school

By Lyn White

Historically, fiction texts have dominated classroom instruction and school library collections but there is a significant body of research that suggests the early engagement of primary students with quality non-fiction texts has a positive effect on literacy achievement, reading engagement and the ability to use the expository material students encounter in higher education.

The recent unprecedented rise in digital technologies has significantly increased the literacy demands being made upon primary school students. Students must now be equipped to read and write not only in the print world but also in the digital world. Students' levels of information literacy and their ability to successfully use online digital resources significantly depend upon the ability of students to comprehend vast amounts of expository knowledge. With the current explosion of digital resources and severely limited school budgets, what place do non-fiction texts have in Australian primary schools today?

This 2010 study investigated the perspectives of a small sample of teacher-librarians and primary classroom teachers on the place of non-fiction texts in curricula and their pedagogical use. Teachers' preferences for types of non-fiction texts in terms of text features and production quality were identified. Publishers from two leading Australian educational publishing houses identified current trends and future directions for non-fiction publication designed for use in the primary school sector.

This study identified that a significant number of non-fiction texts are being used regularly for both classroom instruction and research, despite the fact there has been a reduction over recent years in the extent of non-fiction collections in today's primary school libraries.

The research revealed the increasing tendency of the participants to purchase non-fiction texts to resource the newly created classroom libraries that are unfortunately beginning to replace traditional school libraries. The increased production of high quality non-fiction texts by leading Australian educational publishing companies is in response to this emerging trend.

On the basis of this limited study, it can be concluded that authentic literacy and research tasks using non-fiction texts do have a definite place in the education of primary school students. Further, primary students' engagement with non-fiction texts appears to promote literacy

development and provide alternative sources of reading pleasure for young students, particularly boys.

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Non-fiction and informational texts

Duke (2003) defined non-fiction as a broad range of materials that can be divided into three main types: informational, narrative-information and informational-poetic. Non-fiction texts refer to any texts that are factual including biographies, non-fiction narrative and procedural texts.

Bamford, Kristo & Lyon (2002) provide a simple but useful definition: 'Good non-fiction is the artful crafting of factual writing about a topic'(p. 8). Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) use the term 'informational text' to mean one type of non-fiction, the purpose of which:

... is to convey information about the natural and social world, typically from someone presumed to know that information to someone presumed not to, with particular linguistic features such as headings and technical vocabulary to help accomplish that purpose (2003, p. 16).

Kristo and Bamford (2004) also provide helpful, contemporary definitions of both non-fiction and informational texts:

Non-fiction is the literature of fact . . . well-written, well-illustrated books on topics related to science, history, math and the fine arts. The latter includes a wide array of expository or non-narrative writing . . . books, brochures, articles, recipes, newspapers and selections from websites (2004, p. 12).

Expository texts

Moss (2003) defines expository texts in terms of their main purpose, suggesting narrative texts have storytelling as their main purpose, while expository texts are designed to inform, describe or report. According to Meyer (1985) expository text structures include description, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution.

Information literacy

The concept of information literacy is also relevant to this research paper. Although Zurkowski is generally attributed with the development of the term 'information literacy' (Spitzer, Eisenberg & Lower, 1998), the most widely accepted definition of this term originated from the American Library Association's (ALA) Presidential Committee report on Information Literacy (1989):

To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information . . . Ultimately information literate people are those who have learned how to learn . . . (ASLA/ALIA, 2001, p. 1).

For the purposes of this study, Duke's (2003) comprehensive definition of non-fiction was adopted. This definition includes a range of non-fiction genres such as informational and expository texts and non-fiction narrative, but it excludes digital versions of factual texts such as e-books.

Literature review: A historical perspective on the place of non-fiction books in primary schools

In recent decades the use of fiction texts for classroom instruction, recreational reading and literacy development has dominated primary education (Duke, 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Non-fiction, however, has traditionally been a neglected genre in primary schools. Duke (2000) studied 20 first grade classrooms and found that:

... on average, informational text constituted less than 10 per cent of classroom libraries. And informational text represented an average of less than three per cent of the materials displayed on these classrooms walls and other surfaces (p. 202).

Duke concluded that teachers of young children offered them very little exposure to informational text, 'an average of 3.6 minutes per day, even less for children in low socio-economic status settings' (2000, p. 202).

Pappas's (1993) seminal study of kindergarten children's retellings of information texts challenged the long held assumption that young children's literacy development began with the understanding of narrative rather than informational text. Moss (2003) demonstrated that not only could young children reproduce and re-enact the language of informational text but they could also comprehend such texts with considerable skill. Duke (2003) highlighted the sophisticated responses of first grade students to informational texts. Students were able to make intertextual connections – associations between one text and another – in relation to content and style.

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Researchers such as Guthrie (1996), McMath, King & Smith (1998) and Yopp & Yopp (2000) suggest that not only can young students effectively engage with non-fiction texts, but that such engagement

actually builds upon the innate curiosity of young children about their natural and social worlds, assisting them in their quest for understanding. Additional research over the past ten years (Oyler & Barry 1996; Smolkin and Donovan, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) has established that non-fiction texts are developmentally appropriate for young students. The integration of non-fiction genres into instruction appears to provide benefits for young children in terms of vocabulary development, reading interest, content knowledge and increased competence in both print and digital literacy.

Vocabulary development

There appears to be a strong connection between vocabulary development and comprehension. The International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) recognised this association and emphasised the need to expose young children to a range of vocabulary, including the vocabulary found in non-fiction texts which is more technical and specialised than the vocabulary encountered in narrative texts. Information texts can facilitate the development of vocabulary and word knowledge in young children (Reese & Harris, 1997).

Reading interest

The reading interests of students are critical to the promotion of reading engagement and comprehension. Routman (2003) suggests a variety of reading material increases student motivation and that: "reading comprehension test scores are more influenced by students' amount of engaged reading than any other single factor" (2003, p. 69).

Several studies have shown a heightened reading interest for informational text over narrative in the primary age group. Hartman (2000) for example, found that students in first, second and third grades chose information texts as often as they chose fiction, with boys being particularly more likely to select information texts. A three-year study by Doiron (2003) particularly highlighted the preference of boys for non-fiction texts. The study tracked library books borrowed by students in grades one to six and found that although all students borrowed more fiction (60%) than information books (40%), boys checked out more than two-thirds of all the information books. The recent explosion of this genre in terms of availability, variety and production quality may well be resulting in a further increase in students' preferences for non-fiction texts for recreational reading. Such a situation challenges perceptions concerning a purely utilitarian use of such texts.

Content knowledge

Content area knowledge and literacy achievement at both primary and higher- education levels appear to be enhanced when young students are given opportunities to engage with non-fiction texts. Yopp & Yopp (2000) and Moss (2003) contend that young students will experience less difficulty with secondary-

level subject texts that are predominantly content based if they are exposed to non-fiction in the primary grades. The successful reading of such texts requires instruction that acquaints students with the intrinsic organisation, structures and distinctive features of the different types of non-fiction texts. Expository texts comprise most of the reading students will do in higher grades and subsequently in the adult world. Hartman (2002) contends:

If you really want to prepare a middle schooler for later success, teach that student how to fluently read, write, and critique informational discourse. The research on workplace, community, and academic performance all indicate that non-fiction literacy is central to long-term success and survival. (2002, p. 4)

Print and digital literacy

Literacy achievement is dependent upon the successful development of a range of reading and writing skills. According to Venezky (1982), the majority of reading and writing activities that adults engage in are non-fiction in nature. The use of non-fiction texts by primary school teachers and teacher-librarians facilitates the development of informational writing skills and the production of alternative text types such as procedural, expository and instructional texts.

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The definition of what it means to be literate includes the ability to use new communications such as the Internet, e-mail and social media. Kamil & Lane (1998) note that almost 96 per cent of websites contain non-fiction information. The vast majority of material read by students online is expository in nature. For example, in order to access information, analyse, evaluate and organise web content, students need to develop a range of critical reading skills that differ markedly from those required to read narrative text. Explicit instruction in expository text plays a critical role in equipping young students for the literacy demands of today's digital society. Martin and Rothery (1980) argue that competence in writing non-fiction genres offers students access to 'power':

Persuasion, explanation, report, explanation and discussion are powerful forms of language that we use to get things done and thus have been 'the language of power'. It can be argued that students who leave our classrooms unable to operate successfully within these powerful genres are denied access to becoming fully functioning members of society. This suggests we can no longer accept the overwhelming dominance of recount in our students' non-fiction writing (p.131).

Research method

Data was sought from two cohorts: a selection of teacher-librarians and a group of primary classroom teachers from both government and non-government schools. The participants were asked to respond to email questionnaires. Personal interviews were also conducted with publishing managers from two of Australia's leading educational publishers.

The first questionnaire was sent to 26 teacher-librarians who were members of the School Library Association of Victoria. The questions were designed to investigate current borrowing trends, students' age and gender preferences for non-fiction texts, and the research and recreational uses of such texts in primary school libraries. The teacher-librarians were asked to evaluate publishers' attempts to meet curriculum needs and to consider the future of non-fiction texts. Responses to the following questions were sought:

- What have you noticed about borrowing trends for fiction versus non-fiction texts among primary school students over the past five years?
- How do you account for these changes?

- Are borrowing trends influenced by gender?
- To what extent do students choose non-fiction texts for recreational reading?
- To what extent do students still use non-fiction texts for research?
- Does the age of the student influence their use of non-fiction texts for research?
- Do students rely on digital resources to the exclusion of non-fiction resources?

Seven teacher-librarians responded to the study (23%). The respondents had five years or more experience in their role and one teacher-librarian was able to provide a significant historical perspective on how students' use of non-fiction texts for recreational and research purposes had changed over the past ten years.

The second email questionnaire was sent to 12 classroom teachers from four primary schools; both government and non-government metropolitan schools were represented in the sample. The sample included different socioeconomic and demographic school populations. The questions were designed to investigate the nature and extent of student engagement with non-fiction texts, teachers' preferences for text types and the future of such texts. The primary classroom teachers were asked:

- To what extent are your students engaged with non-fiction texts in your classroom?
- For what purposes are your students using non-fiction texts in your classroom?
- What do you consider to be the main benefits of such engagement for your students?
- What features do you value in non-fiction texts?
- What do you consider to be the future of non-fiction texts in the context of the digital revolution?

Ten classroom teachers provided data for this study (83%). The respondents represented all grade levels, had ten or more years teaching experience and were predominantly female. Only one male teacher informed the study.

Personal interviews were held with the Primary Publisher, Macmillan Library from Macmillan Education Australia and with a publishing manager from a leading Australian educational publishing company that wished to remain anonymous and is referred to in the study as Company A. The publishers' responses, though limited in number, provided an alternative perspective on the research topic. The publishers were asked to comment on changes in the market for non-fiction texts, the current situation, and the nature of future publishing directions.

Research findings

Teacher-librarians

The analysis of the data from the teacher-librarian questionnaire produced the following key findings:

1. Despite the recent decline in both fiction and non-fiction borrowing from the sample school libraries, non-fiction books on interest subjects continue to attract a significant number of borrowers.
2. The number of fiction books borrowed by boys has increased due to the success of publishers in attracting this historically difficult market.
3. Boys tended to borrow more non-fiction texts than girls.
4. Younger students were more likely to engage with non-fiction texts for a greater variety of purposes than older students.
5. Students' use of non-fiction texts for research was dependent on school policy and teacher practices.
6. Although senior students generally preferred to use the Internet for research, all the respondents highlighted the problematic nature of such research.
7. The teacher-librarians were uniform in their preference for particular text features and formats of non-fiction genre. The general agreement was that educational publishers were meeting the

recreational and research needs of teachers and students with the publication of high quality texts.

8. The respondents unanimously agreed that high quality, interactive non-fiction texts with digital content would continue to have a place in primary school libraries.

The plethora of digital products available to young students would appear to be providing strong competition to print and yet five out of six teacher-librarian respondents maintained that students still want to borrow both fiction and non-fiction books. The most experienced teacher-librarian maintained that:

... there is an intense interest in non-fiction books about everything from dinosaurs, cars, disasters, sport, volcanoes to mythical creatures. I certainly do not think the availability of the Internet has had much impact on the interest in non-fiction in these interest areas at all, but it may have impacted on personal borrowing for research into curriculum topics.

Of particular significance was the recent increase in the number of fiction books currently being borrowed by boys. Reflecting on her return to school in 2001 following a twelve-year break, one study participant observed that there has been a significant increase in the number of suitable books for boys over this period.

Nevertheless, it appears that the relatively long-standing trend of boys preferring to engage with non-fiction texts for recreational reading as suggested by Dorion (2003) is continuing. This preference is particularly noticeable amongst students in upper primary grades. A teacher-librarian with over ten years' experience commented: . . ."boys will borrow non-fiction before fiction 98% of the time".

All the teacher-librarians maintained that younger students in grades prep to three engaged with non-fiction texts for both recreation and research purposes. They considered the expository nature of web information, the lack of easily accessible websites and the limited literacy levels of younger students made digital research very difficult for this age group. These students are being directed by teachers to use age-appropriate, factual series such as those published by Macmillan Education.

One teacher-librarian was extremely concerned about the narrow definition of research held by many primary school children:

We work hard in the library here to discourage the notion that research=googling and are training the kids to use data charts, take notes from books and cut and paste [information] from websites into electronic data charts.

Another trend noted by the study participants was the tendency for senior students to rely primarily on Internet research, even though many do not have the skills to locate, analyse and critically evaluate the web information. The extent to which senior students used the Internet rather than printed informational texts appeared to be determined by school policy and teacher preference. One participant commented:

Some teachers borrow many non-fiction books for their classrooms and students are encouraged to use these texts for research, while other teachers, particularly graduates, promote the exclusive use of the Internet for research.

Students in each of the four schools were encouraged by most teachers to use both digital and printed texts. Teachers were the most influential factor in determining the extent to which students engaged with information texts for research purposes.

All teacher-librarian participants stressed the need to explicitly teach students research skills and lamented the continuing decline in the number of teacher-librarians in primary schools and the effect of this situation on the next generation of students:

This is a shame because in my observation, classroom teachers are not explicitly teaching research skills. They tell the children to go and research – they don't necessarily tell them how to. Relying on digital resources in primary school doesn't create effective researchers.

As expected, the teacher-librarians outlined a comparable list of preferred features and formats for informational texts to the list provided by classroom teachers. Suitable language, visually attractive design layouts, interactive formats, photographic images and a variety of graphic presentations for information were the key considerations when making purchasing decisions. There was a strong preference for multiuse text and digital Australian products. Macmillan Education was applauded for its excellent response to the text and digital needs of primary educators.

Classroom teachers

The analysis of the ten classroom teachers' data suggested a few of the same themes; however, their responses highlighted a greater range of benefits and purposes for the engagement of primary students with non-fiction texts than did the teacher-librarians' responses.

1. All teachers reported a significant level of student engagement with non-fiction texts for guided reading, literacy circles and book groups. A junior primary teacher explained: "60 per cent of level 1 and 2 students use non-fiction as guided reading material". They also highlighted the significant number of 'take home' readers in this genre.
2. Literacy sessions in the sample schools focused equally on fiction and non-fiction books. Teachers supported the Reese & Harris (1997) conclusion that vocabulary development is significantly affected by the extent to which students are exposed to the specialised vocabulary used in factual rather than narrative text.
3. Comprehension skill development was considered to be another primary purpose for engaging students with factual texts, as was the need for students to learn how to effectively and accurately represent the vast amount of information available to them.
4. Teachers considered that non-fiction texts provided students with transferable frameworks that enhanced and extended their own writing. Instruction in recognising different text types such as persuasion, explanation, report and procedure began in the Prep level with the use of simple non-fiction texts. All the classroom teachers commented on the need to make the implicit knowledge of text types explicit for their students. Non-fiction 'Big Books' were particularly useful as they provided a shared modelling experience. The need to learn to write in a range of genres other than narrative was thought to be an important reason for using non-fiction texts with primary students. The teachers seem to have accepted Wray and Lewis's (1997) challenge to provide students with the 'language of power'.
5. The natural curiosity of students about the world around them (Reese & Harris, 1997) was highlighted by the classroom teacher sample. Teachers representing all levels of primary education considered that such curiosity was more directly satisfied by engagement with books about 'real life' as distinct from stories. Reading to 'find out' motivates students to choose factual books about an enormous range of topics including sport, natural disasters and animals. All respondents commented on the increased availability of high-quality visually attractive texts for young students. A junior primary teacher from a school with a highly transient population with 75 per cent English as a Second Language (ESL) students stressed the crucial role of factual texts in literacy development for these children: "Factual texts provide links for our children with the real world. Stories are not enough, they need to see real people, real food, real parts of our Australian culture and this is not really achieved through narrative. Engaging with non-fiction texts provides the vicarious experiences the ESL kids need to make up for their limited experiential base".
6. All teachers highlighted the high interest value of information texts for students, particularly boys and reluctant readers, who appreciate the non-linear reading style of non-fiction genre. These teachers believed this reading style was particularly important to develop as it characterises online reading.
7. Middle years' teachers commented that their practice of linking non-fiction texts to units of study gave students a purpose for reading. One such teacher has: ". . . used books on forensic science

where students are intrigued about methods of facial reconstruction, DNA, etc, etc . . . It is better to be reading something than nothing. For students who have very little interest in reading for enjoyment or relaxation, they see a purpose in gaining factual information in their area of interest."

8. Unlike the teacher-librarians whose primary focus was the use of non-fiction texts for research, classroom teachers suggested a more diverse range of purposes. All participants emphasised the use of non-fiction texts for the teaching of different genres of writing, such as procedural texts, expository texts and instructional texts. The opportunity to explore different text features and information graphics could only be achieved with non-fiction texts. Nevertheless, classroom teachers did comment on the invaluable role of non-fiction texts in providing initial research experiences, especially for young children. One teacher commented, "non-fiction is used as a model for initial research and then [the students] progress to the Internet".
9. All the classroom teachers shared the teacher-librarians' preferences for high quality, well-designed and appropriately-paced texts. The presentation, extent and complexity of text language were considered to be of paramount importance, particularly for younger students. The ability to use non-fiction resources on interactive whiteboards was also highly desirable.
10. Six of the ten classroom teachers believed non-fiction texts have a limited future, predicting the Internet will become the main research tool and source of information. Students were reported to be attracted to multimedia presentations of information and one teacher suggested that "perhaps e-readers will take over and online book stores and apps stores will dictate use". The remaining four respondents stressed the importance of such texts for younger children who continue to experience difficulty in accessing digital information. One teacher observed that young students often spend considerable time trying to do Internet research, only to find the information is too difficult to understand. A few teachers would like to see an increase in the number of interactive texts that are reasonably priced for the schools market.

Publishing personnel

The personal interviews with publishing personnel provided some very different perspectives on the research question to those of the teacher-librarian and classroom teacher cohorts. The publisher and publishing manager shared a common assessment of the continuing decline in market demand for non-fiction resources.

Company A's manager described her company's shift in focus from its traditional role in the resourcing of school libraries to providing non-fiction texts for classroom libraries. With the continuing decline in the number of primary school libraries and teacher-librarians, the primary classroom library is becoming a more viable market for their products. The reduction in school budgets has necessitated the production of low-cost non-fiction on high interest topics for the dual purposes of recreational reading and research. The Internet has significantly reduced the demand for and hence production of non-fiction library reference material such as encyclopedia sets and teacher reference texts. She considered the production of non-fiction texts such as e-books, although still problematic at the moment, might well be a viable publishing option for her company.

The Primary Publisher at Macmillan Education was more positive about the state of the market but admitted that hardback sales of non-fiction texts are in decline. She believes there is still a demand for factual content but the form it takes has changed; hard copy text alone is not marketable. Her company is responding to the demand for a greater range of non-fiction topics and the inclusion of more digital content in such texts. Companion 'Digital Sets' containing CD-ROMs with web links are provided for the majority of their current non-fiction series. Their high-quality text formats and features are being designed to incorporate a new array of visual media.

Macmillan aims to engage young readers with non-fiction texts for both research and recreational purposes. The fact that Macmillan Education Australia has won Primary Publisher of the Year from 2007–2010 inclusive suggests the company is achieving such aims.

Company A's manager commented on the ways in which her company is seeking to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into core literacy and numeracy resources. Classroom packs with topics suited to all levels of primary education are now being produced. To keep production costs as low as possible, old literacy titles are being reprinted in larger format and there is a move towards a magazine style format for new non-fiction titles, graphic novels and picture non-fiction will feature in future publishing lists.

Macmillan's Primary Publisher stressed the importance of the ESL market for non-fiction texts to build basic vocabulary and concepts, as web information is often more difficult for such students to access. She also explained that classroom teachers prefer to use non-fiction texts to revise and consolidate topic information with their primary students. The publisher highlighted the need for her company to "go beyond CD delivery" in response to today's education market demands for multimedia formats and digital delivery. The provision of more affordable broadband may in time make web delivery more financially viable for schools. However, Company A's manager echoed Oblinger & Oblinger's (2005) observation that:

in a wired world, it is easy to assume that all students have access to a computer . . . A 'second-level digital divide' may exist based on machine vintage, connectivity, online skills and computer-use support (p. 15).

Conclusion

Societal expectations and students' educational needs continue to challenge primary educators on many levels. The unprecedented availability of a greater variety of technological and pedagogical tools is redefining the place of non-fiction texts in primary schools. This limited research tentatively concludes that the study's primary school teacher-librarians and classroom teachers believe that high quality, visually attractive and digitally linked non-fiction texts are intrinsic to literacy development, achievement and reading engagement.

The classroom teachers in this study are changing the role of non-fiction texts in primary education – it is no longer the neglected genre as suggested by Duke (200). Information texts are being used to create a community of learners who are able to write in a variety of genres for a variety of purposes thus taking up Martin & Rothery's (1980) challenge to move beyond simple recounts. This limited study has shown that explicit instruction in a variety of text types, including non-fiction, forms an integral part of reading and writing pedagogy.

However, the use of non-fiction texts for research purposes appears to have become secondary to Internet use, particularly for older primary students. Prominent educational publishers in Australia are actively responding to the changes in market demand for non-fiction resources. Low-cost, high interest factual texts in a variety of interactive formats are being produced for the resourcing of the burgeoning primary classroom libraries. Digitally linked non-fiction texts are creating a middle road for publishers and educators and maintaining a place for non-fiction texts in the Australian primary schools today.

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