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# Series Preface to Classroom Insights

**D**ivision 15, Educational Psychology, of the American Psychological Association and Corwin partnered to create the Classroom Insights from Educational Psychology series for teachers in an effort to reduce the widening gap between research and theory on learning, teaching, and classroom practice. Educational psychology is a discipline that seeks to understand the integration among human development and learning, classroom learning environments and instructional strategies, and student learning and assessment. In this way, the field of educational psychology is among the most relevant and applicable for teachers.

Although we have seen great advances in our understanding of student learning and instructional practices over the last decade, these advances are not highly visible in today's classrooms, preservice and graduate teacher education programs, or professional development for teachers. Consequently, classroom practice for the most part does not seem to be highly influenced by current research and theory in educational psychology. Yet there are international calls for "scientifically based practices," "research-based methods," or "evidence-based decisions" in our schools. As part of the solution to this problem, this series of short, easily accessible

books for teachers is designed to synthesize in-depth, high-quality research to be used in a variety of educational settings, and it is endorsed by Division 15.

As the Classroom Insights series evolves from its first volumes under founding editor Dr. Barbara McCombs, we as editors continue to work with teachers and researchers to identify the topics that are most relevant to educators. We are guided by research that honors the highest quality learning environments with practices proven to support all students, help them succeed in their schooling, and sustain their love of learning. The goals of this series are threefold:

- To give practicing and preservice teachers access to current advances in research and theory on classroom teaching and learning in an easily understood and usable form
- To align educator preparation, graduate study, and professional development with current advances in research and theory, which have not been widely shared with teachers
- To highlight how the most effective teaching practices are based upon a substantial research base and created within classrooms, rather than applied in a “one-size-fits-all” or “silver-bullet” approach across classrooms

Classroom Insights provides a series of specialized books to inform teaching and learning in PK–12 classrooms by focusing on what is most important and relevant to today’s teachers. In some volumes, the applications are limited to specific age levels or characteristics of students, while in most volumes the ideas can be broadly applied across PK–12 settings. Classroom strategies are integrated throughout every book, and each one includes a wide array of resources for teachers to use to study their practices and improve student achievement and classroom learning environments. Finally, many of these research-based applications will be new

approaches and frameworks that have never been published in a series for teachers.

As series editors, our goal is to provide the most up-to-date professional series of teacher resources for connecting teachers with the highest quality and most relevant research in our field of educational psychology. We have planned for every page to provide useful insights for teachers into their current practices to transform classroom learning for their students, themselves, and their school communities.



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and shared reading of informational texts as a context for learning both at home and school. Her most recent work has been associated with the Scientific Literacy Project (<http://www.purduescientificliteracyproject.org>), where she has focused on the integration of informational texts with science inquiry activities and on investigating the development of children's socially derived meanings about science. Visit her at <https://collaborate.education.purdue.edu/edst/youli/default.aspx>.

# Introduction

**T**he adage “learn to read and then read to learn” sums up what has long seemed a sensible approach to education. Reading is, after all, crucial for our everyday activities and is a part of all other academic subjects. Therefore, reading and the language arts have held a privileged position in the early school years, with fictional stories being predominant. Significant and meaningful instructional time for content areas such as social studies and science is typically allocated only once children have mastered reading, after third grade. It has become evident, however, that although focusing primarily on reading instruction during the first few years may sound a reasonable course of action, it actually sets children up for significant problems in the upper elementary grades and beyond. In particular, children’s unfamiliarity with instructional text and with the content knowledge that is usually presented in informational books leads to too many children struggling to understand informational text and learn subjects such as science.

Children need to have early and positive learning and emotional experiences in the subjects and skill areas in which competence and motivation are important for school and beyond. Without experiencing nonfiction books, children will not be sufficiently familiar with the genre-specific skills needed to read and understand the informational texts that present social studies and science content. Children in the early grades need to read and learn about geography, history, technology, or science intentionally (i.e., more than as a result of sporadic out-of-school experiences) so they develop

## 2 Engaging Young Children With Informational Books

background knowledge and vocabulary in these subjects. Deficiencies in foundational knowledge and skills undermine children's interest and enjoyment in subject areas as well as their confidence that they can be successful in learning them. Therefore, without considerable experience with informational books, children will likely *not*

- develop the ability to comprehend informational text,
- be able to analyze and synthesize information and create reasoned and coherent arguments,
- have a sturdy base in the sciences and social studies that will support building the understanding necessary for people to be informed and literate citizens, and
- pursue subjects like science when they make educational and occupational choices, because those subjects are considered to be too difficult or not interesting.

Different professional organizations, representing a variety of interests, have expressed concerns that converge with the points we have just noted. We elaborate on these concerns next.

### CURRENT CONCERNS

#### **Insufficient skills to comprehend informational texts**

The independent, not-for-profit organization ACT (2006) reported that only about half of American 12th graders have the reading skills needed “to enroll and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing entry level coursework at a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school” (p. 3). Insufficient skills for reading and understanding informational text are particularly problematic, because this genre represents the majority of reading required for higher education and work-related training programs (National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). Business groups

note that insufficient literacy skills are a major contributor to the current serious shortage of skilled workers (Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2012), and the importance of being able to read, comprehend, and write informational text is not going to wane any time soon. The fastest growing professions require literacy skills that are higher than average, particularly in terms of informational texts (Sparks, 2012).

### **Deficiencies in analysis, synthesis, and argumentation skills**

Being able to analyze and synthesize information, think critically, solve problems in innovative ways, and learn new things are some of employers' most important considerations when hiring, rated even above subject-matter expertise (Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2011). This reflects the reality that in order to keep up with the inevitable technological advances of the near future, workers will need more than just today's knowledge; they will need 21st century skills (National Research Council, 2010). These skills involve being able to think flexibly, develop and learn new information, seek out and make sense of a range of information, consider various perspectives, weigh different options, draw conclusions, and communicate them effectively to others. Inquiry activities, which involve students questioning, evaluating, organizing, analyzing, challenging, and synthesizing informational sources, are an especially effective context within which to develop these skills (National Research Council, 2012). Through engaging in inquiry, students can experience topics in social studies or science "as a weave of questions and interpretations" rather than "a staggering assemblage of facts" (Gewertz, 2012, p. 9).

### **Too few skilled workers for an increasingly complex, technological, and global society**

Many organizations warn that the United States is facing a shortage of workers in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (National Academy of

Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, & Institute of Medicine, 2010). Furthermore, the current gap between supply and demand for skilled workers is expected to increase (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2012). What is mentioned less often, however, is that because technology has permeated so many industries and occupations, even jobs that do not fall within a STEM field nevertheless require workers to be STEM-capable (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2012). Therefore, it is important that all students graduate from high school with STEM skills and knowledge.

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The newly developed Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) represent a comprehensive and cohesive response to addressing the concerns just outlined. A cornerstone of the standards is that students must develop literacy skills in multiple disciplines, from the beginning of school onward, so that “fluency and comprehension skills evolve together throughout every grade and subject in a student’s academic life” (Sparks, 2012, p. 6). The CCSS “demand better analysis and argumentation skills, a greater emphasis on academic language, and greater attention to students building content knowledge and reading skills from independently tackling information text” (Neuman & Roskos, 2012, p. 207).

In the early elementary grades, the CCSS introduce a number of changes from current, individual states’ standards (Berkin, 2012; International Reading Association, 2012; Neuman & Roskos, 2012). The most notable include the following:

- Explicit preparation to read informational text
- Reading materials that are substantively and meaningfully linked to content areas
- Use of more academic or technical vocabulary
- More informational writing

These four areas are the core instructional strategies described in this book. Specifically, we address the use of informational reading and writing resources as a way of (1) enriching and expanding the English language arts curriculum in the early elementary grades and (2) simultaneously providing instruction in other content areas. Because our work has involved integrating science-related informational text into kindergarten classes, we will use examples from that content area and grade level. However, the same ideas and strategies apply to other content areas (e.g., social studies) and to elementary grades beyond kindergarten.

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter 1, we begin with an overview of reading as the top priority in the early grades. We discuss the characteristics of narrative and fictional texts, and we outline reasons for the predominance of narrative fiction. We then discuss what children learn *uniquely* from informational text and review the serious consequences that follow from an early narrow literacy focus on fictional genres.

In Chapter 2, we consider the educator arguments that young children learn most easily through narrative and that informational or expository text is too difficult and should be introduced later. We provide evidence to show that those arguments are erroneous; young children can *comprehend* informational text, even after a single read-aloud experience, and can *accurately retell* the text's content.

We examine, in Chapter 3, the concern that young children do not find informational books interesting. We then present evidence showing that, in fact, young children find informational texts *extremely interesting* and, moreover, that there is no difference between girls and boys in their enjoyment of these texts.

In Chapter 4, we consider criteria that educators can apply when deciding which informational books to use in their classrooms. We examine issues of accuracy in various types of

informational texts, children's ability to distinguish fact from fiction—a matter that comes into play in hybrid texts that include both informational and fictional content—and consider the role of images as well as issues of equity.

Next, in Chapter 5, we review the evidence on the vital role of shared reading in literacy development and discuss research-based strategies that promote young children's literacy. We also present interactive book-reading strategies that are appropriate to use with informational genres and that can be effectively implemented during read-alouds in order to support children's development of literacy and content knowledge.

In Chapter 6, we focus on pairing informational texts in subject-area disciplines with writing specific to those content areas. After first reviewing the role that writing plays in supporting reading, we discuss how writing activities can be used to document inquiry. We present numerous examples that demonstrate kindergarteners' informational writing associated with book-reading and inquiry activities and that represent a wide range of children's abilities.

Finally, in Chapter 7 we discuss children's access to informational books at home and consider why and how regular parent-child reading and conversations around these books play important roles in addressing children's thirst for new knowledge. We argue for the use of strategies that, when implemented both at home and school, can serve as common tools for parents and teachers to enrich and provide continuity in children's learning experiences. Also, we present examples of ways that educators can guide and support parents' efforts to read and discuss informational books with their children.

Our hope is that this book shows how you can incorporate informational books in your reading and English language arts curriculum, while at the same time providing rich opportunities for your students to learn crucial subject areas that have typically been underserved (e.g., science, social studies, informational and subject-specific writing). In doing so, we also address how you can realistically address the CCSS in the early grades, in addition to meeting the best practices that are



recommended for teaching science (National Research Council, 2007, 2012) and social studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012b).

### PAUSE TO REFLECT

1. What do the authors discuss in this Introduction that:
  - a. surprises you: points that you had never considered?
  - b. irritates you: ideas with which you disagree?
  - c. pleases you: positions that you have always held?
2. What questions do you have about informational texts and young children before you begin reading this book? What do you look forward to reading more about?
3. What teaching practices or pedagogical beliefs do you hold that might be in conflict with the purposes of this book? How might your current practice be informed?

### HIGHLY RECOMMENDED READING

International Reading Association Common Core State Standards Committee. (2012). *Literacy implementation guidance for the ELA Common Core State Standards* [White paper]. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.reading.org/Libraries/association-documents/ira\\_ccss\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.reading.org/Libraries/association-documents/ira_ccss_guidelines.pdf)