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SUPPORTING EARLY LITERACY THROUGH READING & WRITING

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Kathryn Pole, Ph.D.
Saint Louis University

Assistant Editor

Keisha Panagos, Ph.D.
Scott City R-1 School District

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The Missouri Reader

The Missouri Reader is a peer-reviewed online journal that is published twice per year by the Missouri State Council of the International Reading Association as a forum for thoughtful consideration of issues, practices, research, and ideas in the field of literacy. Its purpose is to serve teachers, parents, consultants, supervisors, administrators, college/university faculty, and others interested in promoting literacy.

Writing for *The Missouri Reader*

You are invited to submit your writing for consideration in upcoming issues of *The Missouri Reader*. Articles, book reviews, and both student and teacher original poetry not published or under consideration for publication elsewhere are welcome. Submissions may be sent electronically at any time. When submitting your manuscript, please send it as a Rich Text Format (RTF) or as a Microsoft Word e-mail attachment. Manuscripts must be submitted in a 12-point font, double-spaced, page numbered, and follow APA (6th edition) formatting. Clear photographs sent as electronic files are welcome. Strongest consideration will be given to materials related to the theme of a particular issue or one of the regular Departments of the journal. Your manuscript should include a front page with your name, position/occupation and affiliation, as well as your business and home addresses, phone numbers, email address, and a short (50 words or less) biography. We also ask that you submit a short abstract (100 words or less). Please indicate the theme or department for which your contribution is most appropriate.

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Manuscripts submitted to *The Missouri Reader* are first reviewed internally by the editor. If it is determined that a manuscript fulfills the mission of *MR*, it is sent to at least two peers for review. Criteria for evaluating manuscripts are: 1) interest to readers; 2) clarity of writing; 3) content-fresh, accurate, consistent, well-reasoned; and 4) blend of theory and practice.

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Contact

Send manuscripts, ad copy, or questions about *The Missouri Reader* to:
Keisha Panagos, Editor
The Missouri Reader
Jackson, MO 63755
573-264-2139
Email: panagosk@scschools.k12.mo.us

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Editor's Comments

Kathryn Pole, Ph.D.

It has been five years since I accepted the position of Editor of *The Missouri Reader*. With this issue, it's time for me to say "farewell." It's been a most rewarding experience working on a journal that has come to be recognized for the quality of its manuscripts. I am proud of the work we've done. I'll be leaving Missouri to take a position in Texas – one that brings me closer to family and new opportunities.

As Editor, I wanted to provide a journal that addressed the needs of the wide membership of the Missouri Council of the International Reading Association – the teachers, students, and university-based people we serve. I think we've succeeded – I was always impressed with the wide range of articles we'd receive for each issue. Sometimes we had difficult decisions because there were so many good manuscripts – and when we switched to being an online journal, I was thrilled that we weren't as limited by page numbers. I enjoyed reading each of the manuscripts, enjoyed reading reviewer comments, and especially enjoyed the e-mails I'd receive from members that let me know that others enjoyed the journal too!

I am really grateful for the opportunity to serve you and to learn so much about the process of producing a high-quality journal. I've worked with some incredible people, and it has been a great pleasure for me. So many people have given support to me – the members of the Executive Board of the Missouri Council, the amazing members of the Editorial Review Board of *The Missouri Reader*, the authors of the manuscripts we published, Beth Hurst, who helped by proofreading some issues, and a former Chair of my Department at Saint Louis University, who provided me with funds for a graduate assistant to help with the work of producing such a journal. I am truly thankful for that graduate student, the now Dr. Keisha Panagos, who gradually worked her way from being clerical help to at this point being completely capable of making the biggest decisions that go into this journal. I am pleased to announce that the Board of the Missouri Council of the International Reading Association has unanimously named Keisha as the new Editor of *The Missouri Reader*! I have the greatest faith that Keisha will make your journal even better than it is now. She's vibrant, energetic, and works hard to ensure quality.

With this, I pass the Editor's Pen on to Keisha Panagos – with the very best of wishes!

Best wishes to all of you, too!

Sincerely,



Kathryn Pole, Editor

Assistant Editor's Comments

Keisha Panagos, Ph.D.

One of my favorite responsibilities of being the Assistant Editor is getting to read all the submissions and being able to establish relationships with the authors on a personal level. Thank you to all the writers that submit your work to the journal. Without high-quality manuscript submissions we would be unable to provide such an excellent resource of literacy practices.

I want to give a special thank you to all the members of our Editorial Board for your hard work and dedication to the journal. Without your thought provoking and critical examinations of the submissions *The Missouri Reader* would be hard pressed to maintain the scholarly and practice based integrity that we strive so hard to achieve.



Thank you to the Editor, Dr. Kathryn Pole for allowing me this wonderful opportunity as Assistant Editor. I have enjoyed working with you over the past four years. Your guidance and love for research based literacy practices has been an inspiration and your guidance and mentorship is very much appreciated. I am very excited about assuming the role as Editor of *The Missouri Reader*. I look forward to the next issue regarding Common Core Standards and urge you to submit your manuscripts.

I hope you enjoy this issue!

Keisha Panagos

GIVE THEM THE WORLD: BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING NONFICTION IN EARLY ELEMENTARY

Jamie Davis

When early elementary teachers consider the books they will use in their classrooms, what aspects of those books do they deem to be the most important? Content, entertainment factor, readability, relevance to current topics, how they relate to benchmark testing, and genre are all considerations. While each of these aspects is valuable in its own way, the genre of the books that teachers choose to use in their classrooms is becoming increasingly important. In today's technological age, students are required to process large amounts of information while being discriminatory at the same time. A large percentage of the information that students come into contact with in and outside of school is nonfiction (Harvey, 1998).

In the past, nonfiction was thought to be inappropriate for students in early elementary (Bortnem, 2008; Duke, 2000; Duke & Kays, 1998; Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Educators believed that the ability to comprehend and assimilate factual material was beyond students' capabilities until the fourth grade or beyond. The belief that narrative text is easier to understand resulted in a curriculum laden with narrative books (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). In their study, Duke and Kays (1998) explored what kindergarten children know about the language of expository texts. They analyzed students in one kindergarten classroom as they interacted with information books at the beginning of the school year and again three months later. They observed students' readings at the end of the three months to be "more reflective of information book language" (p. 312). This study indicates that not only are students in the early elementary grades "capable of interacting with expository text, but actually *enjoy* these interactions" (p. 314). In her review of current research on using nonfiction in early elementary

classrooms, Bortnem states, "Use of informational or nonfiction text is developmentally appropriate in the early childhood classrooms" (p. 33).



A common misconception about nonfiction literature is that students, particularly younger ones, do not enjoy reading nonfiction materials. If one were to observe in a first grade classroom, like the one described in the study by Palmer and Stewart (2003), it would be obvious that nonfiction is popular because they found that 63% of the self-selected books were nonfiction titles. In considering whether young students enjoy nonfiction books, Duke (2003) states, "children often select nonfiction, informational texts

Jamie Davis is a reading instructor at Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield, MO. She received her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and her master's degree in Reading, with special reading certification, both from Missouri State University. Jamie previously taught second grade at Robberson Elementary in Springfield, MO. She resides in Springfield with her husband Joe and their two girls, Maggie and Mya and they all share a passion for reading.

when given a choice" (p. 2). Nonfiction can provide a way into literacy in ways that fiction cannot and motivates younger students (Moss, 2003). Yopp and Yopp (2000) state that "Informational texts can

capitalize on children’s interest and lead them to be more purposeful and active readers” (p. 411).

Benefits of Integrating Nonfiction in Early Elementary

Exposing students to nonfiction at an early age will not only teach students how to best process informational texts they encounter, but can also help students construct background knowledge and strengthen vocabulary, prepare them for what lies ahead in their schooling, provide support during standardized test taking, improve writing skills, and has the power to motivate and captivate.

To construct background knowledge and strengthen vocabulary

Researchers have identified a continuum that indicates a strong foundation of background knowledge strengthens vocabulary development which in turn improves comprehension which leads to higher reading achievement. The construction of background knowledge begins years before students enter elementary school with each student having different and varied experiences (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). According to Stanovich (1986), the underprivileged students who enter kindergarten possess half the vocabulary of typical privileged students. Taking into account the variation in the backgrounds of elementary students, the use of nonfiction literature can help to “equalize children’s early experiences and decrease the gap or differences in vocabulary development of children at-risk” (Bortnem, 2008, p. 30). Background knowledge can be constructed and vocabulary knowledge strengthened through the use of nonfiction literature, particularly interactive read alouds. Nonfiction texts can provide children with experiences and world knowledge that is not readily available in their everyday lives (Bortnem, 2008). Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, and Kaderavek (2010) states, “The most established line of research on informational texts has demonstrated that exposure to informational texts benefits students’ vocabulary and inferential language skills” (p. 658). “Reading nonfiction takes readers

outside of their own realm and expands horizons” (Harvey, 1998, p. 87).

To prepare for later schooling

Sanacore and Palumbo (2009) discuss a phenomenon that occurs in the fourth grade that is termed the “fourth-grade slump,” an achievement gap that becomes evident when “some children’s scores begin to decline, starting in the area of vocabulary” (p. 67). They maintain that this gap is caused by an early elementary curriculum laden with narrative text. Some of these children referenced come from low-income families and, as stated earlier, begin school already behind their classmates. In the upper elementary grades and beyond, students are required to read as well as comprehend increasing amounts of informational text, but they lack the skills that are necessary to do so. For the first four years of schooling, the content of reading for these students is primarily narrative text, which differs significantly in structure from that of expository. Duke (2000) states, “Many scholars have suggested that providing more experience with informational texts in the early grades may help to mitigate the substantial difficulty many students have with this form of text in later schooling” (p. 202).

To support standardized test taking

Intensifying pressures on improving standardized test performance provides additional motivation for using nonfiction literature in the classroom. Researchers have reported standardized test content that is highly nonfiction (Moss, 2004; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). On average, 75% of the test content in standardized tests is nonfiction (Moss, 2004). The result is an argument from educators asserting that “student performance on standardized tests will improve if teachers attended more to a genre that is so frequently tested” (Saul & Dieckman, 2005, p. 503).

To improve writing skills

The inclusion of nonfiction literature in the early elementary classroom will not only support reading

development, but writing development as well. As Camp (2006) states, “Reading and writing go hand in hand” (p. 8). If students are to be expected to write in expository form, exposure to this genre is vital. Routman (2005) offers a circular view in stating “Teaching kids how to write expository text improves their overall writing skill and their reading comprehension” (p. 127). Exposing students to nonfiction literature in the early grades will provide them with knowledge of text features they will need for writing in later grades. Hall, Sabey, and McClellan (2005) state, “deficits due to inadequate exposure to these texts and structures spill over from reading to writing (p. 214).

To motivate and captivate

Duke (2000) contends that not only do students need to be exposed to nonfiction in the early grades to help reduce problems later in their schooling, but “not doing so constitutes a missed opportunity to turn on as many students as possible to literacy” (p. 205). Nonfiction books serve to motivate and engage even the youngest students. Motivation plays an integral role in literacy education. “Teachers may have a wealth of knowledge” (p. 226) and may be implementing research based best practices in their classrooms, but if the students are not motivated to read “then there is virtually nothing that teachers can do” (Applegate & Applegate, 2010, p. 226). According to Dreher (2003), information books are powerful tools for igniting interest and curiosity in young students.

Struggling readers will benefit from nonfiction literature instruction as well. Research has shown that reluctant readers can not only become motivated through the use of nonfiction literature but it can also provide a bridge into other literacies (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Unfortunately, many of these readers do not have access to just the books that motivate them to read--nonfiction books. In order to improve reading skills, struggling readers must read more (Routman, 2003). Readers who are met with adversity can get caught in a vicious circle whereby

they experience difficulty with reading, therefore they avoid reading and practice in reading is minimal. Eventually they “fall further behind their peers” (Dreher, p. 25). Providing these students with nonfiction books has the potential to stop the cycle.

Strategies for integrating nonfiction

A number of teaching strategies are available to facilitate the incorporation of nonfiction literature in the early elementary classroom.

Choosing texts

In recent years, publishers have responded to the need for more nonfiction texts written for the primary-grade audience with a tremendous increase in the publishing of high quality, visually appealing, engaging books. Teachers have many books to choose from with an abundance of topics and reading levels (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2011) asserted that “perhaps the greatest difficulty teachers face when selecting nonfiction for the classroom is deciding which books to choose from the large number available” (p. 366). Moss (2003) outlined a procedure called the five A’s that teachers can use to evaluate and select quality nonfiction books. Table 1 shows the evaluative procedure.

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<http://www.missourireading.org/membership/zones>

Table 1. The Five A's for Evaluating Nonfiction Trade Books

The Five A's for Evaluating Nonfiction Trade Books	
Criteria	Questions to Ask
Authority	Does the author identify and credit experts consulted during the research process?
Accuracy	Is text content accurate? Are maps, graphs, charts, and other visual aids presented clearly? Does the author distinguish between facts and theories?
Appropriateness	Is information presented in ways appropriate to the intended audience? Does the author show respect for the reader? Is information effectively organized?
Literary artistry	Does the book have literary artistry? Does the author use literary devices to make information come alive? Is the author's style engaging?
Attractiveness	Is the appearance and layout of the book likely to entice readers?

Source: B. Moss. (2003). *Exploring the literature of fact: Children's nonfiction trade books in the elementary classroom*. New York: Guilford Press.

Once a text has been chosen, instructing on the structure of nonfiction will put the students at an advantage in showing them how to approach nonfiction (Akhondi, Malayeri, & Samad 2011). The structure of nonfiction texts is considerably different than the text structure found in narrative texts. In narrative books there is a beginning, middle, and end with characters, setting, and most often a problem and a solution. Nonfiction texts can be arranged several different ways, utilizing a variety of text structures such as headings, photographs, text organizers (e.g. table of contents or glossary), various font styles, and diagrams (Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Another difference to be noted is that nonfiction texts do not always lend themselves to reading front to back, left to right, as the narrative counterpart. "Nonfiction can be picked up anywhere and makes sense" (Camp, 2006, p. 12). Students who are instructed on these differences through modeling and scaffolding will be successful in reading and their comprehension will be strengthened (Akhondi et al., 2011).

Reading aloud

Using nonfiction texts in early elementary classroom read alouds provides the balance necessary

to fulfill the literacy needs of students (Doiron, 1994). Early elementary classrooms are met with the demands of a full curriculum that lacks adequate time to fit every desired or even required activity into daily instruction. One of the activities often eliminated is taking the time to read aloud to the students. Unfortunately, this is an activity that should be one of the last to go in the selection process. As stated in the report of the Commission on Reading of the National Academy of Education, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). Reading nonfiction aloud provides a model to students on how to interact with the texts. The text features of nonfiction place "different demands on the reader" compared with narrative texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 410). When teachers read nonfiction texts aloud, it sparks the natural curiosity young students possess and motivates them to seek similar books. Another benefit can be seen by observing the books that students choose to read during independent reading time. Research has shown that during independent reading time, students will choose to read texts like those read aloud by the teacher (Vacca et al., 2011).

Inviting others into the classroom to read is an excellent way to incorporate nonfiction into the read aloud curriculum. Teachers can collaborate with other teachers in the upper grades to develop a reading buddy activity in which the buddies in the upper grades come to the lower-grade classroom to read. The teacher can request that the reading buddies alternate genres of narrative and nonfiction to ensure the important balance. Another engaging activity is to invite a *mystery reader* into the classroom to read. The mystery reader can be the principal, a parent or other family member, or someone from the community. The activity can be connected to a thematic unit in which the mystery reader selects books related to the unit. The teacher can also give the reader free choice with a request for a balance of narrative and nonfiction.

Reading nonfiction aloud does not simply have to be done by the teacher or those outside of the classroom. Students themselves can read aloud as well. Hurst, Scales, Frecks, and Lewis (2011) identified a sign-up-to-read activity where students sign up to read, select a book, practice their book, and read to the class on their chosen day. This activity gives students a "reason to read" (p. 439) and encourages discussions among the class. Practicing the book before reading to the class promotes rereading, which improves fluency (Hurst et al., 2011). Teachers can implement this strategy throughout the school year, highlighting nonfiction at certain times to ensure the necessary balance between narrative and nonfiction.

Supplying books or magazines on tape or compact disc is a great way to provide students with an opportunity to interact with nonfiction literature. These can be set up as a listening center that students visit during independent time or as a choice during literacy center time. These do not have to be purchased as a set; the teacher can simply record the text using her own voice. Students can be given the opportunity to practice a book and record it as well.

Classroom library

Students with access to classroom libraries will read considerably more than those who do not (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009). A classroom library that is organized and offers a wide selection of nonfiction texts at various reading levels will benefit all students, especially struggling readers (Dreher, 2003; Routman, 2003). Exposure to nonfiction is not limited to books. Magazines, newspapers, brochures, and the Internet are additional forms of nonfiction that students can explore. *Time for Kids* or *National Geographic for Kids* are a few examples of magazines that teachers can subscribe to (Routman, 2003). Purchasing just a few subscriptions or sharing with other teachers is an option for bringing these magazines into the classroom as opposed to investing in a classroom subscription. According to Yopp and Yopp (2000), "Informational books should constitute

a significant portion of the classroom library so they are readily available to students during free reading or book choice periods” (p. 413).

The following are ways that teachers can supplement classroom literacy needs; they can:

- collaborate with the librarian to arrange a mobile library system in which every two to three weeks nonfiction books are rotated;
- talk with their administrator and ask that portions of the funds be allocated to support the research-based practice of building the classroom library (Routman, 2003);
- look for nonfiction titles at used bookstores, library sales, garage sales, and classroom book clubs such as Scholastic;
- collaborate with other teachers to develop a book share program where they trade nonfiction books with each other.

Paired books

An excellent strategy to enhance literacy learning through incorporation of nonfiction literature is using

paired books. Teachers may find this an easy way to start if they are not currently using a lot of nonfiction in their literacy instruction. They may also find this strategy to be a good way to include variety in literacy instruction. Camp (2006) described the process of choosing paired or twin books, as a way to “introduce and reinforce content-area material while targeting key language arts skills” (p. 7). She indicated the benefits of using twin books include facilitating the activation and construction of background knowledge, improving comprehension and writing skills, motivating students, engaging students in critical thinking activities, and enabling the teacher to satisfy state curricular requirements.

Numerous choices are available when planning lessons using twin books. Table 2 shows some examples of the pairings Camp (2006) suggested.

Table 2. Twin Books to Enhance Literacy Learning

Fiction Book/ Author	Nonfiction Book/ Author	Unit of Study
<i>Postcards From Pluto: A Tour of the Solar System</i> by Loreen Leedy	<i>Do Stars Have Points?</i> by Melvin and Gilda Berger	The solar system
<i>Woodrow, the White House Mouse</i> by Peter W. Barnes and Cheryl Shaw	<i>The Race for President</i> by Leigh Hope Wood	The presidential election
<i>Stellaluna</i> by Janell Cannon	<i>Bats</i> by Celia Bland	Nocturnal animals
<i>Amazing Grace</i> by Mary Hoffman	<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> by Robert Coles	Multicultural unit

Yopp and Yopp (2000) advocated the pairing of fiction and nonfiction books to enhance students' learning. They indicate the fact that many times when students are exposed to narrative books, questions will emerge. In pairing nonfiction with fiction books, many times, these questions are answered. An example Yopp and Yopp provided is reading *The Very Quiet Cricket* by Eric Carle. After reading this story, the students might have some questions about crickets. Reading *Chirping Crickets* by Melvin Berger can help to answer these questions. Introducing the nonfiction book before the narrative book can help to activate and build background knowledge which in turn will "enrich the students' understanding of and appreciation for the story" (p. 413). Yopp and Yopp suggested pairing the book *Tiger With Wings: The Great Horned Owl* by Barbara J. Esbensen or *Owl* by Mary Ling with *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. They concluded with the statement that "not only can fiction spark the questions that lead children to nonfiction, but nonfiction can build the background knowledge that allows children to more deeply appreciate fiction" (p. 413).

Content area

Nonfiction trade books can be used to supplement content area text books and instruction. Vacca et al. (2011) state that nonfiction offers "the kind of meaty material that entertains students at the same time it informs" (p. 363).

Teachers can use nonfiction books to target district and state content area standards. Wood (2003) posited that "content area literacy entails finding the most current, age-appropriate materials and methods to coordinate with and meet the requirements of state and local curricula" (p. 15). The standards written by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2008) in the areas of science, math, social studies, and communication arts in kindergarten through third grade can be supported with the use of nonfiction literature. The textbooks that are written for the early elementary grades, if available, may not cover content topics sufficiently. Some examples of how teachers can incorporate nonfiction books to match content area standards can be found in Table 3.

The primary purposes of the Missouri State Council are:

1. To improve the quality of reading instruction at all levels by:
 - encouraging the study of the nature of the reading process;
 - stimulating and promoting research dealing with all aspects of reading;
 - acting as a clearinghouse for information relating to reading; and
 - encouraging the development of high quality teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service.
2. To develop an awareness of the impact of reading by
 - encouraging the development of worthwhile reading tasks and permanent interests in reading;
 - promoting the formation of lifetime habits of reading; and
 - developing an appreciation of the value of reading in a democratic society.
3. To promote the development of literacy for all persons to a level which is commensurate with their capacity.
4. To encourage the organization of new councils in areas not now adequately served by the International Reading Association.
5. To communicate and promote the purposes of the organization through
 - a reading conference, supported by the various local councils, the location and time of which shall be decided by the Board; and
 - A State journal and other materials which may be printed at the discretion of the Board.
6. To support the efforts and activities of local councils in Missouri
7. To coordinate literacy development efforts with other organizations with similar goals.
8. To celebrate, recognize, and support various forms of literature by:
 - participating in Missouri state book awards;
 - sharing book recommendations at local council meetings, board meetings, and leadership retreats;
 - focusing efforts to encourage reading aloud in homes and at school; and
 - assisting public and private schools in literacy development and the use of literature.

Table 3. Meeting Content Area Standards Using Nonfiction Books

Meeting Content Area Standards Using Nonfiction Books		
Content Area	Standard	Title/Author
Science	Plants	<i>A Seed is Sleepy</i> by Diana Hutts <i>Looking Closely Through the Forest</i> by Frank Serafini
	Animals	<i>Actual Size</i> by Steve Jenkins <i>Elephants Can Paint Too</i> by Katya Arnold
	Rocks and Soil	<i>Rocks & Minerals: A Gem of a Read</i> by Dan Green <i>The Dirt on Dirt</i> by Paulette Bourgeois
	Force	<i>I Fall Down</i> by Vicki Cobb
Math	Describe the mental strategy used for computation	<i>Math for All Seasons</i> by Greg Tang
	Shapes	<i>Shapes, Shapes, Shapes</i> by Tana Hoban
	Measurement	<i>Length</i> by Henry Pluckrose
Social Studies	Native American culture	<i>Many Nations: An Alphabet of Native America</i> by Joseph Bruchac
	Rights and responsibilities of citizens	<i>Citizenship</i> by Ann-Marie Kishel
	Maps	<i>Me on the Map</i> by Joan Sweeney <i>As the Crow Flies: A First Book of Maps</i> by Gail Hartman
	Knowledge of contributions of non-Missourians	<i>All by Herself</i> by Ann Whitford Paul
Communication Arts	Nouns	<i>Cache of Jewels</i> by Ruth Heller
	Poetry	<i>Where in the Wild</i> by David Schwartz
	Read and follow simple directions	<i>Milk to Ice Cream</i> by Inez Snyder

Discussion

With the inclusion of nonfiction literature in the early elementary classroom, teachers help students understand that fiction is not the sole source of enjoyable literacy (Yopp & Yopp, 1994). Multiple ways can be used to integrate content area instruction with nonfiction. However, Sibberson (2011) contends “focusing more on curriculum content” (p. 1) neglects the critical process of modeling to students that nonfiction can be read for enjoyment as well.

Teachers can engage in meaningful instructional opportunities that will help to “make reading for information part of the pleasure of reading, not the work of reading” (Doiron, 1994, p. 621). Doiron has asserted that one of the best ways to achieve this goal is through reading quality nonfiction books to students. Teachers can use the following books recommended by Sibberson (2011):

- *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* by Isabella Kathkoff, a book about a “turtle and a hippo that became unlikely friends” (p. 1).
- *Hero Dogs: Courageous Canines in Action* by Donna M. Jackson, an “engaging nonfiction read with several separate stories about dogs” (p.1).
- *You Forgot Your Skirt, Amelia Bloomer* by Shana Cory, a book about “the woman who invented bloomers and the fight for women’s rights” (p. 2).
- *Bat Loves the Night: Read and Wonder* by Nicola Davies, a book that encourages “students to savor the language of quality nonfiction” (p. 2).
- *Why Why Why Can’t Penguins Fly* by DeLa Bedoyere, a book that can be used to demonstrate the idea that some nonfiction “can be read in any order” (p. 2).
- *My America: A Poetry Atlas of the United States* by Lee Bennett Hopkins who “explores regions of the United States through poems” (p. 2).

Being exposed to nonfiction in early elementary through meaningful literacy activities provides students with an advantage in many areas of education and in later schooling. It

facilitates ease with expository forms of texts students will encounter in upper elementary and beyond. Inclusion of nonfiction in early elementary will support children with low socioeconomic backgrounds by supplying them with crucial background knowledge they commonly lack. Research has shown that nonfiction is appropriate and can be used successfully in the early elementary grades (Bortnem, 2008; Duke, 2000; Duke & Kays, 1998). This genre can engage students by tapping their interests and increasing motivation to read (Dreher, 2003). Young students are greatly fascinated with the world around them. Nonfiction provides a pathway for them to satisfy their curiosities and broaden knowledge, a way for teachers to give them the world.

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STRENGTHENING WRITING WITH GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Darlene Small

The prognosis for students' success in the 21st Century is providing them with opportunities to be active instead of passive in their learning. One way to accomplish this is through cooperative learning (Uchida, Centron, & McKenzie, 1996). A second way to accomplish active learning is through the use of graphic organizers designed to organize prior knowledge and learned content (Dunston, 1992). Teachers are the most important aspect in helping students become more active learners in today's classrooms (Gillies, 2006).

Graphic organizers are visual ways for students to organize information into an easy to understand format, and they provide students with a map for connecting prior knowledge (Dye, 2000). McMackin and Witherell (2005) reported that the use of graphic organizers help students assimilate and expand their thoughts about texts. When graphic organizers are incorporated with Six-Trait Writing and writing process instruction, students show great improvement in their writing skills (James, Abbott, & Greenwood, 2001). Furthermore, Kang (2004) noted the use of graphic organizers help teachers develop abstract lessons while providing a way for students to visually increase and become more involved in their own learning.

Cooperative learning groups provide students with a way to be active in their learning while fostering positive interdependence with their classmates, accountability for their learning, supporting and complementing classmates as they are learning, social skills, and higher-level thinking skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Kang (2004) ascertained "visual organizers are effective in terms of helping to elicit, explain, and communicate information because they can clarify complex concepts into simple, meaningful, display" (p. 58). Research supports the idea that graphic organizers assist students in understanding key concepts of a text (Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004; McMackin &

Witherell, 2003). Kang (2004) reported graphic organizers may be selected by teachers before instruction to assist students in reading, during instruction teachers and students can use graphic organizers to see information for reading and writing in more visual ways, and after instruction, graphic organizers can be used to assist students in the writing process.

James et al. (2001) looked at ways to help struggling students become good writers. Their model for writing included Six-Trait Writing combined with graphic organizers and direct instruction in 30-minute sessions. During the 30-minute sessions, students identified a topic and used graphic organizers and Six-Trait Writing to begin their writing projects. The graphic organizers were used during pre-writing for brainstorming and during draft writing for organization of their topic. Organizers were color coded to help struggling



Darlene Small has been teaching for nine years at Sparta School District. She has taught first grade and fourth grade and is currently teaching Title I Reading. Darlene graduated with her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education in 2002 from Missouri State University. Her passion for reading and seeing her students become higher-level readers with a passion for books encouraged her to get her Master's in Reading and a Reading Specialist Certification from Missouri State University in 2011. In her free time she enjoys tennis, swimming, hiking, reading, and bowling.

students construct each component of their writing. James et al. concluded that graphic organizers combined with six-trait writing can help students become successful writers.

Research Design

This research study utilized archival data collected and analyzed by the researcher from her own classroom to improve reading and writing practice through the use of graphic organizers combined with cooperative learning. In particular, as a part of regular classroom instruction during the second semester, instruction focused on using graphic organizers combined with cooperative learning groups of mixed academic ability during daily classroom writing time.

During the first week of the second semester, students worked in their groups to discuss the rubric and graphic organizers they were using for their writing. From the second week through the end of the study, as a part of regular classroom instruction, students spent day one of each week working on the graphic organizer with their group and talking about the writing project. Day two of each week was spent working individually on their draft of the project. Days three and four of each week was spent working in their groups using graphic organizers and the rubric to edit and revise their writing. On day five of each week students worked on publishing their writing and reading their writing to their group. This archival data was analyzed for this study. In addition to working in their groups, each student was given two individual benchmark writing assignments as a part of regular classroom instruction using a graphic organizer to determine individual success. After eight weeks, as a part of regular classroom instruction, students filled out a questionnaire to determine their perspectives on cooperative learning and graphic organizers.

Participants

Archival data for this study was obtained from 16 first graders in a rural southwest Missouri elementary school: eight girls and eight boys. This

sample was chosen purposively for the study because the researcher was the teacher of this classroom of 16 students. This type of sample is being used to help the researcher improve instruction in her classroom.

Instrumentation

An attitude survey adapted from The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) was given to the students at the beginning and end of this study as a part of the regular classroom instruction. This survey was adapted by changing the questions from reading questions to questions about graphic organizers and cooperative learning. The Garfield images from the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey were used unchanged in the adapted version (McKenna & Kear). This survey consisted of six questions that relate to using graphic organizers combined with cooperative learning to determine the students' attitudes about using graphic organizers and cooperative learning to activate their prior knowledge and assist their writing skills. The survey was constructed using a four-point scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. In order for the students to complete this survey correctly, the survey was read to the students by the teacher. Archival data in the form of graphic organizers and students' writing was analyzed to look for students' progress throughout the study. As a part of regular classroom instruction, students' writing was kept in their writers' notebook each week unless it was displayed in the hallway. Archival data was collected and analyzed from observations that were in the form of field notes kept as a part of regular classroom instruction. As a part of regular classroom instruction, field notes were jotted down on antidotal record sheets while the teacher worked with and observed the cooperative groups during writing time each day.

Results

During the first week of instruction on graphic organizers, students used a Hamburger graphic organizer to write about where they camp, what they need to camp, and things they do when they camp.

Some students showed extensive prior knowledge of all of camping, while other students knew where to camp but not things they might need. For example, Johnny knew he could camp in the woods, but struggled to come up with the things he needed and what he could do while camping. Tim, however, showed extensive knowledge of camping. Tim goes camping at Beaver Lake and knew he needed his tent and fishing pole. He goes fishing and swims in the lake. When students were placed into cooperative groups of three they were able to talk about camping. The students gave each other ideas and prior knowledge was shared. Conversations revolved around personal camping experiences being shared with students who had not been camping before. For example, Tim shared about his hunting and fishing experiences with Johnny. Johnny in turn was able to write about needing things like sticks to start a fire and cook fish. As the students shared experiences, they were able to fill in their organizers and begin to think about what they would do if they were camping.

During the last week of instruction the students used a beginning, middle, and end organizer to write about being an owl and flying over a park, city, beach, or zoo. The students picked where they wanted to fly over and were put in groups by park, city, beach, or zoo for cooperative learning to help fill out organizers. Most students picked a place they had prior knowledge of because they had been there. Willie realized he knew nothing about a beach and decided to switch his choice to the city.

As students worked in their groups they talked about things they saw in each location and how they might look if they were flying far away or closer to the place. They also talked about words they could use to describe each thing they saw. The organizers showed knowledge of all the places. For example, Willie, Elizabeth, Tim, and Ryan wrote on their organizer of how tall buildings can look small from far away and very tall from close up. Bryan, Billy, Casey, and Jim talked about how the animals looked small far away and how they looked the right size close up. They used words like tiny and green, and small to

describe the animals. Lacy, Vicky, Trenton, and Angel wrote about the blue beach looking small from far away and how tiny the people of the beach look from far away. The students enjoyed sharing knowledge and when one student was unsure they were able to listen to other group members and write down an idea on their organizer.

The first benchmark writing prompt was for students to write directions from the park to the school using the map they were given. While some students could do this with ease, the class average shows that students were struggling overall to write directions in a way for a person to follow from start to finish. The second benchmark prompt, which was given after five weeks of working with graphic organizers, was for students to use a graphic organizer to compare and contrast two animals and tell what each one needs. According to field notes, students filled out the Venn diagram first then began writing their comparisons. Field notes also stated that some students were writing beginning, middle, and end on their Venn diagrams to help them remember how their writing should flow on the final copy.

Students' writing scores increased each week as they used cooperative learning and graphic organizers to complete the writing process. During week one, students used cooperative learning and graphic organizers to write a story about camping. In their cooperative groups they edited their papers using the editor's checklist organizer. The conversations regarding editing were on spelling and neat writing over content. The class average score on this writing was a 2.7. During the fifth week, students were writing a paper using graphic organizers and cooperative learning to compare and contrast Johnny Appleseed and Martin Luther King Jr. Conversations for the editor's checklist revolved more around content and helping each other look up more specific information about each person and what they did in their lives. The class average for this writing was a 3.1. During the eighth week, students wrote a story using graphic organizers and cooperative learning about an owl flying over a park, city, beach, or zoo. According

to the field notes, student's conversations for editing revolved around putting adjectives into their sentences to make them more vivid and checking to make sure their partners had a beginning, middle, and end to their story. The class average for this writing was 3.7.

Evidence of higher-level thinking showed on all the organizers and final products throughout the study. Students' conversations during week one revolved around personal camping experiences while filling out their organizer with their group. During editing in the first week, conversations revolved around spelling and neatness. Higher-level thinking was noted on several graphic organizers for things needed when camping. For example, Karen stated she needed a clear spot to put her tent and shared this with her team. This sparked conversations about how to find a clear spot when camping.

Summary

Archival data collected from instruction of graphic organizers combined with cooperative learning and writing projects was analyzed using attitude surveys and teacher observations made during regular classroom instruction to see if there was an increase in student's prior knowledge, writing scores, and higher-level thinking skills. Overall, the students benefited from using graphic organizers in increasing their prior knowledge and higher-level thinking skills. An increase in writing scores was seen after the implementation of graphic organizers combined with cooperative learning.

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CREATING A LITERATE ENVIRONMENT

Lara Sims

Teachers must be cognizant of the learning environment they create for children. A literate environment encompasses many aspects of the classroom such as daily reading and writing instruction, read alouds, classroom libraries, and classroom design. This type of environment is especially important in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, while students are in the emergent stage of learning. “Emergent Literacy is defined as the process of developing an awareness and control of print language, which occurs before young children begin reading and writing conventionally” (Inan, 2009, p. 2518).

Students in the emergent stage of reading are in the process of building a relationship with reading and writing. “Young children in the state of emergent literacy discover the critical set of concepts about print which is necessary for being successful in later stages of literacy and learn how pleasurable reading books and being read to is (Inan, 2009, p. 2518).” Inan further contends that educators must be mindful of the environment they create for children, as it has a large impact of their children’s emergent literacy skills. An environment that is exciting and promotes literacy skills encourages children to try out new literacy experiences. The following ideas will address the literate environment in the kindergarten classroom in order to better improve children’s emergent literary skills.

Environmental Print

According to Seefeldt and Galper (2001), a literary classroom should have print throughout the room. This type of print is called environmental print and is often the first experience students have with letters and words. “Environmental print is the print found in the natural immediate environment of children, which includes logos, labels, road signs, billboards, clothing labels, coupons, newspaper advertisements and fast food paraphernalia”

(Kuby & Aldridge, 2004, p. 106). To provide kindergarten students with a print-rich environment, take advantage of all your wall space. Labels should be placed throughout the classroom with corresponding pictures. By using pictures, children can make a connection between the word and its meaning. A teacher can also spot light print by creating charts with new words or to anchor what you have been discussing to display in the classroom. For example, in my classroom, the students have been learning about the author Mo Willems. We created an anchor chart of all the things we noticed about his books and it hangs in our library. “These displays offer children the opportunity to see how print is used to document their experiences and activities” (Seefeldt & Galper, 2001, p. 10).

Classroom Libraries

Well developed classroom libraries help develop strong independent reading skills in students, as measured by standardized tests (Routman, 2003). “In classrooms that contain

Lara Sims is currently a kindergarten teacher at Jeffries Elementary school in Springfield, Missouri. She received her B.S. in Elementary Education from Drury University in 2009. Lara will graduate with her Masters in Literacy from Missouri State University in fall of 2012. She loves seeing young children develop into readers and writers.

well-designed library centers, children interact more with books, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading, choose reading as a leisure time activity, spend more time reading, and exhibit higher level of reading achievement” (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinex & Teale, 1993, p. 480). The classroom library should be a place that is inviting to students and where they are

immersed in a wide variety of texts. The kindergarten classroom may be the first time students have seen a library or experienced different genres of books. Your classroom library should allow children access to a variety of genres, including informational texts, mysteries, and fantasies.

According to Routman (2003), “An adequate classroom library will have at least two hundred books, but an excellent library will have more than a thousand” (p. 67). Your classroom library should include both fiction and nonfiction texts. It is also a good idea to put former read-alouds into the library for students to read independently (Routman, 2003). Take note of books that are popular with the students in your classroom, and try to provide multiple copies of the book. Not only will this allow students to have access to any text they want, but they can also read the book with a partner. In addition, a classroom library should contain books used during shared reading and those written by students or teachers. In my classroom, I try to create a class book at least once a month. Once the book is completed, I read it aloud to the class and then place it in our special “Kids as Authors” tub in the library. These books are my students’ favorite and are always popular during independent reading time.

Read Alouds

Kindergarten students need to experience a wide variety of texts, including fiction and nonfiction texts. Read-alouds should also include simple texts with predictable stories and repeated patterns as well as more difficult texts with complex ideas. Books with repeated patterns allow children to simply enjoy the story, learn the pattern quickly and join in. Examples of books with repeated patterns would be *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* by Bill Martin, Jr. and Eric Carl or *In the Meadow* by Yukiko Kato. Reading simple and predictable books builds students’ confidence as readers and helps them see patterns in the text (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007).

Reading aloud more complex stories allows kindergarten students the opportunity to synthesize, infer, and experience new vocabulary (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Examples of more complex read alouds include *Henny Penny* by Paul Galdone and *Corduroy* by Don Freeman. This should be done with the assistance and guidance of the teacher. According to McGee and Schickedanz (2007), “effective interactive read-alouds include a systematic approach that incorporates teachers’ modeling of higher-level thinking, asking thoughtful questions calling for analytic talk, prompting children to recall a story in some way within reasonable time frame” (pp. 742-743). By doing this, students are not only using higher level thinking skills, but they are actively involved in the read aloud. When students are actively involved, they are more likely to make connections with material and retain the information.

Word Walls

Tompkins (2009) writes “Words wall are collections of words posted in the classroom that students use for word-study activities and refer to when they’re reading and writing” (p. 139). These collections can be a valuable tool in the kindergarten classroom if used correctly. Word walls can be created using words from a thematic unit, classroom names or high frequency words. When students see these words displayed in the room and have the opportunity to use them in their reading and writing, they will retain the information.

Routman (2005) writes “A word wall is only a useful literacy tool if you and your students understand and value it as a reference” (p. 165). In order to expect students to use a word wall, they should be explicitly taught how to use the word wall and be given time to practice with assistance. Before placing a new word on the wall, students should practice stretching out the word and saying the word. Students can also help place words on the wall, in order to bring attention to the word and its location. Placing words on the wall also help improve letter

recognition skills. The words on the wall should also be flexible. By using Velcro or pins, the words can be regrouped or alphabetized. In addition, once all students have mastered a word, it can be removed to make room for new ones (Routman, 2005).

Conclusion

In order to make our students lovers of reading, we must provide an environment that promotes a love of reading and writing. Research has proven that there is a link between the classroom environment and the literacy skills of the students within it. When teachers create a learning environment that is inviting, stimulating and rich in language, young children are encouraged to try new activities (Inan, 2009). Roskos and Neuman (2011) write that a literate environment should energize students and create a sense of belonging and ownership. It creates a place where students learn together about real words, discover how to use their mind, and imagination. The different aspects of a literate environment discussed in this article, can help you do just that.

In my classroom, I have seen these aspects greatly impact my kindergarten students. I see my students looking at our word wall in order to help them write their friends' name inside their books during writer's workshop. I also love seeing my students go into my classroom library, pick out a book that I have read aloud previously and try and read it themselves. I am confident that the environment I have created for my emergent readers and writers is effective.

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IMPACT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS ON LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Hannah K. Sanders

Enhancing children's literacy achievement has been identified as a top priority in education policy and research (Masseti, 2009). According to Massetti, reading is a critical foundation for children's academic success. She contends a love for reading and a solid foundation of basic literacy concepts will help a child achieve more in the school setting. Lynch (2011) states, "It is widely known that early learning opportunities are important for young children's cognitive development" (para. 1). The preschool years are important for children's language and literacy development and the practices of their teachers have an impact on how much children learn (Lynch, 2011). When teachers work with early learners, they are responsible for laying the foundation for their learning later in life. It is critical and absolutely necessary that students are encouraged to learn and encouraged to step outside of their comfort zones while being supported by a teacher. Teachers have to consider outside factors when working with early childhood students. Factors such as family, home life, socio-economic status, and developmental issues all play a role in how the student will learn reading skills (Lynch, 2011). Coles (2008) states:

Reading is the most essential life skill known to man. Reading is the springboard to success that every classroom needs to nourish, but most importantly a preschool classroom, where fresh minds are the most malleable. (para. 1)

According to Lynch, if children are not read to at home and do not attend a preschool or early childhood program before kindergarten they are less likely to develop a real interest in reading.

According to Gonzalez and Nelson (2003), understanding language is the first step to becoming literate. Preschool and early childhood programs are a stepping stone for children to be thriving young readers (Hooper, Roberts, Nelson, Zeisel, & Fannin, 2010).

Making Early Learning a Priority

Early schooling is still doubted by much of the population even though it has become more accepted over the last decade.

Bowman (2009) provided four contributing factors that she believes are responsible for the influx in approval of early schooling and education in the past generation:



Hannah Sanders' passion for education comes from the desire to make a difference in the lives of young children, especially children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Her goal is to help them become productive citizens and self-sufficient life-long learners. She received bachelor's in Early Childhood Education and a masters in Literacy from Missouri State University. She is now going out into the field of education to be a teacher and make a positive impression on the lives of young children. In her spare time she enjoys spending time with love ones, being outdoors, exercising, baking, and curling up with a good book.

News media reports reflected the importance of brain development in the early years; educational research showed long term social benefits with preschool attendance; financial analysis studies displayed economic and social savings; an increase in both parents working caused many to seek daytime care. (p. 124)

According to Rivalland (1999) literacy experiences are said to begin from the day a child is born. She contends that “all of us, whoever we are, if we have anything to do with children or make decisions or policies about children, are responsible for making children literate” (p. 3).

Importance of Preschool

Stuber and Patrick (2010) conducted a three-year study to determine the skills and assets children bring with them to kindergarten and what they learn while they are there. Stuber and Patrick’s preliminary results from the follow-up studies showed that early learning practices in the home and in the schools have long-term effects. Stuber and Patrick also found that children who entered kindergarten with a high level of skills maintained that level of skills through third grade. They found that one thing parents can do that had the most significant impact on third grade achievement was talk to their children about what happened during the day. In kindergarten, the authors found that the most powerful activity the parents did was read to their children daily. Stuber and Patrick listed the top five activities that positively affected kindergarten students’ scores:

- Someone reads to the child at home.
- The parent and child talk about what happened during the day.
- The child reads along with or reads to others.
- Someone takes the child to a museum, library, learning center or activity center, or zoo.
- Someone teaches the child a sport or takes the child to a sporting event.

Not only do teachers have an impact on students’ success in school, but the parents play just as big of a role in making that happen.

According to Xu and Gulosino (2006), the difference between a child simply attending an early childhood program and not attending an early childhood program makes a substantial difference in the outcome of the child’s schooling success. Teacher effectiveness and parent involvement are also major contributing factors to a child’s success.

The Importance of Early Learning for Children in Poverty

Klein, Knitzer, and the National Center for Children in Poverty (2007) report that “for low-income preschoolers, increasing early literacy and math skills is vital to closing the achievement gap between them and their more advantaged peers” (p. 2). The report focuses on strategies that can be used to help low-income children catch up with their peers in math and literacy. The report indicates that cognitive scores of the highest socioeconomic children are 60 percent higher than children of lowest socioeconomic group. The report says that children from middle-income families by the third grade know about 12,000 words whereas children from low-income families only know about 4,000 words.

Klein et al. (2007) acknowledges that closing the gap is a large task that requires much planning and action not only in the classroom but at the local, state, and national level as well. Early care and early learning are vital aspects to increasing the highest risk students’ math and literacy scores. Klein et al. state that the challenge is in the hands of the individuals working directly with low-income preschool students.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a significant difference in the scores on the language portion of the DIAL-3 between children who attended preschool or early childhood programs prior to kindergarten and those who did not. A casual-comparative study

was utilized to determine if there was a relationship between children’s scores on the literacy section of the kindergarten screening of those who attended preschool and those who did not. A random sampling of scores from 70 kindergarten children was utilized: scores from 35 students with no preschool experience prior to kindergarten, and 35 students who have attended an early childhood program for at least two years with an equal number of boys and girls in each group. Archival data was obtained from school records. The study was conducted at one elementary school in southwest Missouri.

The DIAL-3 is a developmental screening test that views development as a range of functioning and not as a fixed point. The DIAL-3 is a screening instrument; it’s not an intelligence test or a diagnostic test. The purpose of this assessment is to identify children with potential

developmental delays who are in need of further assessment or special education. It also serves the purpose of identifying children who may be “at risk” for environmental or developmental reasons. The screening can also be used for research reasons. The DIAL-3 is also used as training for people entering the field of early childhood education, reading, and child and family development. The scores the student receives on the DIAL-3 can also be a guide for teachers when preparing for the school year.

Results

Table 1 presents the statistical difference using the Independent *t*-Test. The results indicated there was a significant difference in the scores on the language portion of the DIAL-3 in students who attended preschool compared student’s who did not.

Table 1. Independent Sample *t*-Test: Language Portion of the DIAL-3 Assessment Scores

Group Statistics					
	program	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	1.00	35	19.4857	4.55923	.77065
	2.00	35	21.9143	2.94430	.49768

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
score Equal variances assumed	4.332	.041	-2.647	68	.010	-2.42857	.91738	-4.25917	-.59797
Equal variances not assumed			-2.647	58.157	.010	-2.42857	.91738	-4.26480	-.59234

To the extent the subjects were representative of typical preschoolers and based on the findings of this study, the following conclusion appears to be warranted: The results of the study showed a statistically significant difference in the scores on the language portion of the DIAL-3 between students who attended preschool prior to kindergarten and students who did not. The students who attended preschool prior to kindergarten had significantly higher scores. This difference could be attributed to the number of years the student was in preschool and the quality of the preschool program.

Conclusion

According to Marjanovic Umek, Kranjc, Fekonja, and Brajc (2008), “early experience, knowledge, and skills that children acquire before the onset of formal education have an important effect on children’s later development and success in school” (p. 571).

Winter and Kelley (2008) stressed the important role that preschool can play in a child’s development when they stated:

Forty years of research has provided convincing scientific evidence that high

quality school readiness programs yield positive outcomes for children. Children who attend such programs are more likely to have better cognitive and language development than peers who did not attend preschool (p. 264).

Research has shown and continues to show the importance preschool plays in children’s early literacy development.

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GROWING UP IN RED CHINA: REPRESENTATION OF THE CHINESE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

Lina Sun and Kathryn Pole, Ph.D.

Since 1978, when the Republic of China began implementing reforms in its economic and emigration policies, an increasing number of Chinese immigrants have entered North America. While most of them entered as students and visiting scholars, many of them eventually, after years of acculturation, acquire citizenship or legal resident status. They establish families, and have children who enter the school system. Books that reveal episodes of history can help children who are separated from their heritage form authentic cultural identities (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). These books also allow all children, Chinese or not, to understand and appreciate the heritage and culture of others (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008).

Many people in the growing community of adult immigrants from China were born during the 1950s and the 1960s, and experienced one of the most significant political events in China's contemporary history—the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Cultural Revolution limited the freedom of people all over China for over 10 years. In this violent and sweeping revolutionary transfiguration, multifaceted social forces, tensions, and conflicts created chaos in the lives of everyday Chinese citizens.

Museums, temples, churches, colleges and universities were dismantled, and public art was replaced with life-size portraits and plaster busts of Chairman Mao. Houses of people thought to be counterrevolutionary were pillaged. Personal

collections of classical books, correspondence, stamps, photo albums, and even flowers, were confiscated, burned, and destroyed. Anything and everything conflicting with Mao's teachings were condemned. Intellectuals, writers, party rulers, experts in all fields, well-to-do farmers, landlords, gentry, and business owners, along with anyone who had the slightest relationship with foreign countries, were labeled as "bad elements" or "the five black categories of people." They were forced to wear dunce caps and had heavy cement placards hung by thin iron wires around their necks. They were publicly vilified and mercilessly beaten by the Red

Lina Sun is a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Saint Louis University, where she specializes in second-language acquisition and children's literature. Before coming to the U.S. for doctoral studies, she was a university lecturer and researcher in The Republic of China. She is a nationally certified educator of Chinese as a Foreign Language, and has several years of teaching experience in Chinese universities.

Kathryn Pole, Ph.D., is a member of the Literacy Studies faculty at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research interests weave critical literacy, teacher decision-making, education policy, and socially just forms of schooling. She teaches courses in literacy, children's literature, and research methods.

Guards. These torturous physical abuses often left people permanently handicapped or mentally insane.

What made it even more excruciating was that daughters and sons were required to “cut lines” or disclaim their “politically faulty” parents, and display their revolutionary loyalty to Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party. In order to survive the political environment and ensure personal advancement, friends, relatives and spouses had to inform against one another - forced to write fabricated confessions against beloved family members under threat of mistreatment, such as verbal abuse, sleep deprivation, and beating. China’s youth was drastically hurt by the Cultural Revolution, which denied educational opportunity and left them inadequately educated, with physical damage and psychological trauma. From the late 1960s until the end of the Cultural Revolution, urban students were sent away to rural farms to be reeducated by doing backbreaking manual labor.

With traumatic nightmares and haunting memories of political persecutions, as well as bloody military fights among different Red Guard factions that sometimes split families, some expatriate Chinese writers found their voices in their newly adopted countries through the publication of personal memoirs about their experiences in China. Most of these books have been written for adults seeking to understand this era of Chinese history.

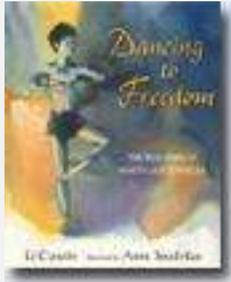
Nien Cheng’s gripping autobiography *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1987) marked the beginning of these reflective autobiographies. It was followed by Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* (1991), Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea* (1994), and Da Chen’s *Colors of the Mountain* (1999), and more. This body of literature represents a distinctively unique form of writing by Chinese writers in the Western English-speaking world, and has

become one of the most important venues for Western readers to get to know China. These stories are sometimes assigned to high school students in social studies or world history classes, or are required textbooks for college students in political science or Asian history classes, and serve as a foundation in the West's understanding of Chinese history.

Picture Book Memoirs Reflecting the Cultural Revolution

Though children's books adapted or abridged from adult memoirs in English abound in the Western world, accurate children’s picture books relating to Chinese history are not common. A memoir encapsulates a particular moment or era through the telling of an individual’s story, remembered and told so that others can understand. Because it is important, from a multicultural perspective, to introduce children to the history of people around the world, in this article, we will introduce two critically acclaimed children’s picture book memoirs by accomplished Chinese writers - writers who immigrated to North America after witnessing years of tumultuous historical events during their childhoods.

The two picture books we introduce represent the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of Chinese expatriates who experienced the tumult as youth. These narratives, as told by Chinese immigrants writing in English, are sociocultural windows into personal memories. They dramatically recount gripping personal and family members’ ordeals and political persecution in the Cultural Revolution, the struggle to escape, and conclude with expressions of appreciation of the newly found freedom in their adopted land.



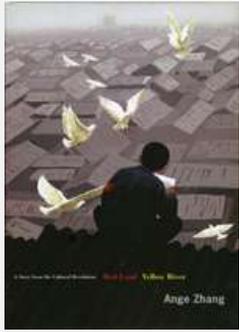
***Dancing to Freedom: The True Story of Mao's Last Dancer* (Li Cunxin, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas, Walker & Company, New York, 2007)**

The author of this book, Li Cunxin (pronounced *Lee Schwin-Sing*), was born into an impoverished peasant family in a remote area of Mao's communist China. At the age of 11, an extraordinary and completely unexpected chance came Li's way. One day, officials from Beijing came to Li's school to select potentially suitable students to be trained for Madame Mao's ballet company - a glorious mission to serve in Chairman Mao's revolution. The officials selected a girl and said, "You are going to be a dancer." As the officials were leaving, the teacher tapped the shoulder of one of the men, pointed to Li and asked, "Why don't you try him as well?" Li, then, was selected to train in Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy. Seven years of brutal discipline and harsh training taught him resilience, determination and perseverance. Li's drive and relentless hard work transformed him into one of the best dancers in China. When he was 18 years old, Li was awarded one of China's first cultural exchange opportunities to travel to America, where he danced as a soloist with the Houston Ballet. Two years later, Li defected to the U.S. — a dramatic event involving the then American vice-president George Bush, Sr. and the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. Li went on to join Houston Ballet as a lead dancer, and later won two silver and a bronze medal at three International Ballet Competitions. In 1995, Li and his family moved to Australia, where Li danced as a principal with the Australian Ballet. In 1999, Li made a successful career transition from ballet to finance. He is now a senior manager at one of the largest stockbrokerage firms in Australia. An international motivational speaker and a best-seller author, his indomitable will to succeed is inspiring. The story, first told to adults in the author's

bestseller *Mao's Last Dancer* (Cunxin, 2004), and later turned into a film by the same title (2009), is retold as a picture book that shares the poignant and inspiring memoir of a boy caught in the throes of life in Maoist China.

This fascinating story is poignantly brought to life by Anne Spudvilas' hauntingly masterful water-and-ink brush paintings. Spudvilas, one of Australia's foremost picture book illustrators, traveled with Li to China, where she studied traditional Chinese brush-painting, a technique that lends authenticity to her illustrations. The somber grays and blues of the first part of the story grippingly highlight the drabness and cold poverty of Li's young years, and his harsh training during the Cultural Revolution. These images stand in stark contrast to the sudden burst of flamboyant color as his story moves to America, success, and stardom. The details of people's subtle expressions and surroundings are also beautifully and authentically drawn, and flowing ink lines convey the fluidity of dance.

Because this is an abridged account of a much longer story, some political context is missing. For example, the author didn't explain that his deflection to the U.S. was strictly prohibited in the 1970s - a period when the Chinese government controlled people's lives and possessions with an iron fist. Children will probably need a teacher's help to connect the historical facts with Li's experiences. Teachers wanting to build context for the story can find relevant information by reading Li Cunxin's full-length autobiography or seeing the film.



***Red Land, Yellow River: A Story from the Cultural Revolution* (Written and illustrated by Ange Zhang, 2004, Douglas & McIntyre)**

Ange Zhang (pronounced *On-Gay Jahng*)'s peaceful world was shattered when his father, a well-known writer and a high-ranking Communist Party official, was arrested like a criminal at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Desperate to be like everyone else, as a teenager Ange joined the Red Guard. Later, when Mao disbanded the Red Guard, Ange was sent to a village far from home, where he spent three years learning to be a farmer. Eventually, he was reunited with his mother in a labor camp, where he worked in a factory that made erasers to go on the ends of pencils.

In 1977, with the Cultural Revolution over, Ange was accepted into the highly competitive Central Academy of Drama to study theatre and design. Twelve years later, as the Tiananmen Square Massacre unfolded, Ange was working as a visiting set designer at the Banff Center for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. In the aftermath, the Canadian government offered asylum to Chinese visitors, and Ange accepted. He currently works in Toronto as a theatre designer, cartoon animator, and children's book illustrator.

Red land, Yellow River (2004) focuses on a three-year period in Ange's own life-story. Born in a period that was characterized by a long string of madly fervent and traumatic political campaigns, Ange found it difficult to distance his childhood from the bloody rampage and riots of the Cultural Revolution. When Chairman Mao unleashed his campaign and the Red Guards infiltrated his school in 1966, Ange felt only pride, because both of his parents were high-ranking officials in the Communist Party, and had helped bring Mao to power. His father was a famous writer, best

known for composing the lyrics to "The Yellow River Cantata," a set of popular songs of Chinese patriotism.

But before long, Ange witnessed his father's public humiliation as an intellectual and counterrevolutionary, and observed upheavals in family life, schools, and Chinese communities. Ange was surrounded by overwhelming episodes of chaos: his home ransacked by the Red Guards; his father's antique Ming vases and paintings destroyed; and the family books locked away. His family was ostracized from their Chinese community. In simple yet direct prose, Ange describes how these injustices and unfair treatment did nothing to dampen his revolutionary fervor for Mao's cause:

"I didn't know why all this was happening and no one would explain it me. It seemed no one knew. I was ashamed and angry. I recited Chairman Mao's quotations over and over, even though I did not understand much. To show the Red Guards that I was as loyal to Chairman Mao as anyone else, I even changed my name from Ange to Weige, which meant to safeguard the revolution. . . . But things kept happening to remind me that I was not like the others" (p. 14-15).

To his mother's horror, Ange formed his own one-person unit of the Guard, shaving his head and arming himself against other rebel factions. He was desperate to fit into the zealous revolutionary student movement. "All I wanted was to be just like the other kids," he recalls, "to wear the olive green uniform with the red armband."

Eventually, he discovered his father's hidden books, locked in bookcases sealed with paper strips bearing the Red Guard's emblem. Ange took the hinges off the bookcase door to keep the locks and seals intact. Day after day he visited his father's book-filled study, reading banned books by Victor Hugo,

Charles Dickens, and Jack London. He realized through reading that each of us is unique and we all need to pursue our own destiny. Ange found joy in the books he read at night, and took his first tentative steps on the path to becoming a visual artist - a journey we witness through his luminous illustrations in this picture book. His message is one of hope - oppression cannot squelch individuality and the power of dreams. The book ends with a brief epilogue on later events in his life and a seven-page section describing “China’s Cultural Revolution.” Throughout the story, Ange’s dreams and struggles symbolize the bewildered reaction of that generation to history: How were they to face their traumatic past and heal psychological pains?

Ange’s artistic style, characterized by bold angles and vivid, saturated colors, hints at the feel of old propaganda posters, and seems perfectly matched to the surrealism of the period he is depicting. The digitally rendered reproductions of period posters, black and white family photos and intriguing images of archival artifacts (stamps, seals, and old books) are reminiscent of everyday life during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. They evocatively describe what was like to be swept up in political turbulence, and speak eloquently about his emotional reactions.

Sharing Multicultural Literature with Students

Multicultural literature provides a gateway through which readers can enter into a character’s world. The school curriculum should include a variety of texts from diverse cultures (Frye, 1957). Integrating these books into literacy curriculum will not only enhance students’ critical thinking skills and cross-cultural awareness, but also fosters students’ personal connections with literature, such as empathy and compassion. For an authentic immersion in the textual world, readers’ imaginations of ethnic characters’ actions and motivations can be built upon

and verified against readers’ contextual knowledge of the characters’ world (Cai, 1995). And “possession of knowledge or insight—historical, philosophical, psychological, political ... may yield a specific angle of vision or powerful organizing frameworks” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 147). Teachers may find it useful to open their students’ minds to other systems of values, and to guide students to “inquire into the varying effects of these different social and moral codes upon the human beings whose lives they regulate” (p. 166).

These picture book memoirs and autobiographies published by Chinese writers who left China after experiencing the Cultural Revolution serve as a significant source of contemporary Chinese history and culture. They are a verbal monument to Chinese history, and shed light on the importance of literature in shaping the image of China in Western cultures.

These books, while offering two very different storylines, have their own distinct regional and personal flavors, featuring different personal experiences and literary artistic merits. They exuberantly depict a realistic account of what that period of history meant to individuals caught in the political turmoil, and the indomitable spirit that can overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers.

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Purchasing Information

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