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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Providing young children with a better balance between narrative and expository text makes sense. Initially, children develop fluency through familiar narrative structures and themes. As the children achieve reading fluency, however, they benefit from increased exposure to expository text. Supporting this thrust are varied approaches and resources, including installing a classroom library, reading aloud, and using magazines. Maintaining a balance of narration and exposition also means not overdoing one type of text to the deemphasis or preclusion of the other, regardless of the teaching-learning context. The challenge to educators, especially those supporting a whole language philosophy, is to encourage a balance of discourse types as children engage in authentic literacy events throughout the school year. (RS)

Needed: A Better Balance between Narrative and Expository Text

Dr. Joseph Sanacore
Department of Reading,
Language, and Cognition
Hofstra University
Hempstead, Long Island, N. Y. 11550

Supporting children's success in literacy is an important concern of parents and educators. During the preschool years, concerned parents read aloud to their children, take them to the library for storytelling sessions, and serve as reading models. Most of these experiences reflect narrative text.

When children enter school, they continue to be exposed to a preponderance of narrative discourse. Basal readers, big books, little books, and other works of children's literature are among the narrative materials that tend to dominate the primary school setting. Even in whole language classrooms, narrative text is used in virtually all reading and writing activities (Fisher & Hiebert, in press; Hiebert & Fisher, 1990). This preoccupation with one type of text is understandable as children are developing proficiency and confidence with language. Continued emphasis on narrative text, however, can distort children's understanding of literacy; it also can cause difficulties as they attempt to develop fluency with emerging content learning and its related expository text. The challenge to primary school teachers, then, is to provide children with a better balance of narrative and expository experiences.

Establishing a Classroom Library

One way of providing such a balance is to establish a classroom library or library corner. A wide variety of resources should be available ranging from high interest to low reading, from books to newspapers, and from fiction to nonfiction. Children are encouraged to self-select materials based on their

interests and to read at their own comfortable rates. Not surprisingly, as primary school children are developing reading fluency, they tend to select narrative stories with their familiar themes and text structures (Fisher & Hiebert, in press; Hiebert & Fisher, 1990). As children attain fluency, however, they demonstrate more risk-taking by reading aloud to peers, by sharing stories with parents, and by showing an emergence toward new reading interests.

At this stage of development, children benefit from increased reading of expository materials. To provide transitional support, the teacher meets with small groups of children and immerses them in the reading and discussing of narrative and expository materials from the classroom library. He or she also models silent and oral reading of the same materials and, at times, thinks aloud metacognitively about the similarities and differences between them.

During a recent social studies unit, the classroom teacher highlighted the theme of children living in cities. Initially, she shared with the children Michelle Murray's Nellie Cameron which concerns a third grade black girl who is living in Washington, D. C. and is having difficulty learning to read. The teacher and children also shared Dawn Thomas' A Tree for Tompkins Park which is a poignant, "getting-it-together" story about Cub Scout Johnny Wilkins' plan to "put up a big beautiful tree in Tompkins Park." The children seemed comfortable experiencing social studies from a familiar narrative context. Afterward, the teacher focused on the same theme of living in

cities, but she used a social studies textbook entitled The World and Its People: Communities and Resources (Silver Burdett Company, 1984). As she and the children read sections of "Chapter 3, Living in Cities," she occasionally paused and interjected think-aloud comments about how the textbook is similar to and different from the previously shared stories. Specifically, she commented on the section of the chapter entitled "People Have Fun in Cities" as well as some of the subtitles "Many Things to Do," "Jeff's City," "Maria's City," "Nicholas's City," "Cindy's City," and "Frank's City." The teacher and the children also discovered similarities and differences in the sequence of ideas, in illustrations, in "Checkup" questions at the end of the chapter, and in other areas. These types of activities were repeated over a period of time until the children independently gained a sense of transition from narration (with its familiar leading character, goal, obstacles, outcomes, and theme or moral) to exposition (with its introduction, subheadings, charts, graphs, and summary). The children also realized that both types of text structure can be interesting, informational, and meaningful.

This awareness establishes a foundation for building fluency in expository reading and for encouraging a natural thrust toward content area reading. As children progress through the grades and become more sophisticated as readers, they recognize and appreciate specific expository types, such as problem-solution, effect-cause, and comparison-contrast. They also come to realize that certain works of literature, such as Moby Dick, consist of

several discourse types, including narrative, expository, and descriptive. Thus, early exposure to a variety of text structures sets the stage for later success with reading different materials across the curriculum.

Reading Aloud

A natural extension of the classroom library is reading aloud to children (Trelease, 1989a, 1989b). This vital activity exposes the child to:

- A positive reading role model
- New information
- The pleasures of reading
- Rich vocabulary
- Good grammar
- A broader variety of books than he'd choose on his own
- Richly textured lives outside his own experience
- The English language spoken in a manner distinctly different from that in television sitcoms or on MTV (Trelease, 1989b, p. 16).

Reading aloud in the context of a classroom library also motivates children's book selections during their free time. Martinez and Teale (1988) found that kindergarteners who were read to daily chose those books from a classroom library center more often than books that were not read aloud. These researchers suggest that young children be introduced to a broad

range of books, including story books, concept books, nonfiction books, informational books, and books with predictable structures.

One practical approach to encouraging such variety is to focus on personal topics, such as grandparents. Initially, the teacher might encourage an active class discussion of grandparents and great grandparents. After activating the children's interest in and knowledge of the topic, the teacher might read aloud a story, such as Tomie de Paola's Now One Foot, Now the Other, Patricia MacLachlan's Through Grandpa's Eyes, Helen Oxenbury's Grandma and Grandpa, Ruth Sonneborn's I Love Gram, or Charlotte Zolotow's My Grandson Lew. Then, the teacher might read aloud interesting informational material about grandparents from a children's pamphlet, newspaper, or book. This material could relate to grandparents who are ill, to elderly people who live in nursing homes, or to grandparents who take care of their grandchildren. As children listen to and compare the two read-alouds, they tend to develop deeper feelings for elderly loved ones. They also increase their awareness of and appreciation for both narrative and expository text. With sufficient exposure to this type of activity, children are more likely to read a variety of discourse with increasing fluency.

When selecting books for read-aloud sessions and for the classroom library, the teacher should consider the intended audience. Materials for young children usually support their basic egocentric concerns, their desire to know more about themselves, and their interest in other living things. Assuming

that they will not be interested in other areas, however, is a mistake. For example, independent readers probably would be best-suited for Ron and Nancy Goor's In the Driver's Seat, but many younger children would enjoy the photographs of the Concorde jet, race cars, and eighteen-wheelers (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987). Thus, in selecting materials, the teacher should be flexible, interested, and enthusiastic. He or she should also not feel defeated if a book chosen is not well-matched with children's needs and interests. There will be many opportunities throughout the school year to choose a balance of narrative and expository materials for reading aloud and for the supportive classroom library.

Using Magazines

Children's magazines are an excellent medium for contributing to a balance of text structure. They provide updated, readable informational articles as well as fiction, poems, and jokes. They also introduce children to the enjoyment of content area reading. Olson, Gee, and Forester (1989) suggest magazines for content learning, and they include:

For language arts--

Child Life (P.O. Box 567, Indianapolis, IN 46206)

Children's Digest (P.O. Box 567, Indianapolis, IN 46206

Stone Soup (P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063)

For social studies--

Ebony, Jr. (820 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605)

Scholastic News (730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003)

Weekly Reader (245 Long Hill Road, Middletown, CT 06457)

For science--

Chickadee (P.O. Box 11314, Des Moines, IA 50340)

Nature Scope (8925 Leesburg Pike, Vienna, VA 22180)

Scienceland (501 Fifth Ave., Suite 2101, New York, NY 10017)

These and other magazines not only provide a variety of discourse types but also support the lifetime reading habit (Sanacore, 1990). As children read about areas of interest, such as animals, they realize that the information is useful. Some articles consist of practical ideas for taking care of a pet, while others concern specific suggestions for taking a pet to the veterinarian's office. Magazines can also serve as a transition to informational books as well as realistic fiction. Miriam Schlein's What's Wrong with Being a Skunk? is an example of the former, while Charlotte Graeber's Mustard reflects the latter.

In addition, magazines stimulate writing. Children can meet in small groups and can write narrative stories about themes they experienced. They also benefit from reading different articles about a similar topic, writing a summary of their articles, and discussing comparisons of how the topic was treated. Another worthwhile activity is to have children write letters in response to a story or an article they read. Teachers may also guide children to summarize main ideas of articles by helping them to create a semantic web, an outline, or an annotation; then, the children may share their summaries (Olson, Gee, & Forester, 1989). Activities such as these help learners to internalize and

generate a variety of text and to be active thinkers as they connect the reading and writing processes.

The classroom teacher can stimulate the varied uses of magazines by reading aloud parts of interesting articles, stories, poems, and jokes. Then, he or she reminds the children that they can complete what was read aloud by selecting the appropriate magazine from the classroom library. Obviously, sufficient copies of the magazine should be available.

Benefits

Supporting different textual experiences provides a variety of benefits, some of which are worth mentioning:

1. Children develop flexibility in reading diverse text structures.
2. Such diversity supports an expanded context for solving problems and thinking critically.
3. Early exposure to exposition nurtures a foundation for ease and facility with content area reading.
4. Since basal readers consist of a preponderance of narrative selections (Flood & Lapp, 1987), increasing the use of expository text provides a better balance of discourse types.
5. As children explore different materials, they increase their interdisciplinary perspective for completing authentic tasks.
6. Children come to realize that all types of reading materials can be functional, enjoyable, and challenging.

A Caution

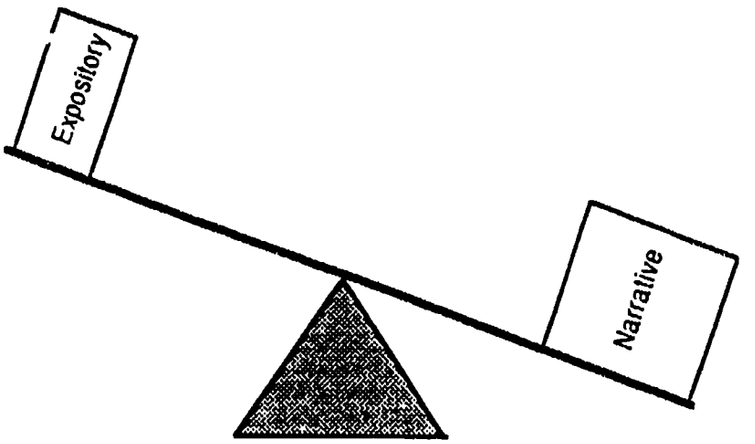
Organizing a classroom library, reading aloud, and using magazines and other updated materials are only three ways of exposing young children to different discourse types. As educators observe success with exposition, however, they may excessively encourage its use, thereby deemphasizing the importance of narration. This potential problem could become more evident in early content area experiences, since classroom teachers frequently use textbooks as dominant instructional resources. This limiting practice not only diminishes the enjoyment of content learning but also sends a message to young children that narrative materials do not serve a useful function for content area reading. To the contrary, a variety of literature should be used across the curriculum, including historical fiction, science fiction, biography, autobiography, and diary. In addition, teachers should encourage different resources, such as textbooks, anthologies, paperbacks, magazines, and newspapers (Sanacore, 1990). These considerations provide a flexible context for creating the lifetime reading habit, for including literature-based approaches in content learning, and for supporting a better balance between narration and exposition.

Summary

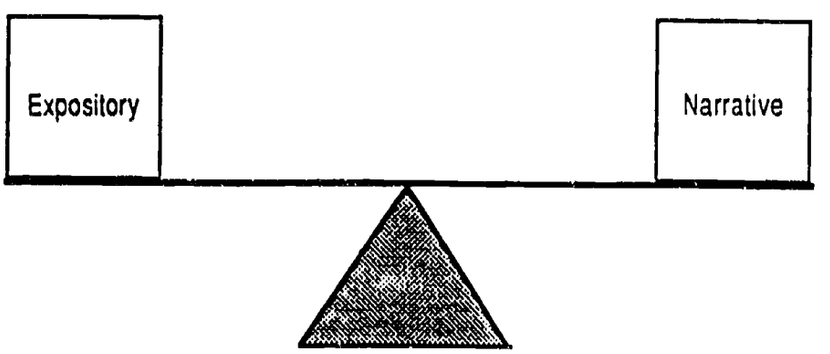
Providing young children with a better balance of textual experiences makes sense. Initially, children develop fluency through familiar narrative structures and themes. As the children achieve fluency, however, they benefit from increased

exposure to expository text. Supporting this thrust are varied approaches and resources, including the classroom library, read alouds, and magazines. Maintaining a balance of narration and exposition also means not overdoing one type of text to the deemphasis or preclusion of the other, regardless of the teaching-learning context. The challenge to educators, especially those supporting a whole language philosophy, is to encourage a balance of discourse types as children engage in authentic literacy events throughout the school year.

Traditional



Balanced



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