

READING CORNER
for
Educators

MAKING INFORMATIONAL LITERACY PRACTICES VISIBLE

Guest Editor: Meg Gebhard with Rebecca Keenan and Kara Willett

68

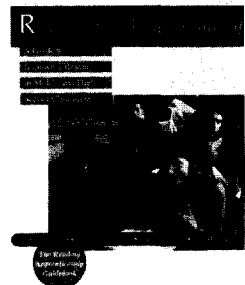
Reading Corner for Educators

This month we review three books that provide teachers with insights into the theoretical and practical aspects of students learning how to read and write nonfiction. These three texts provide teachers with multiple perspectives from which to think about new ways of introducing and supporting students in exploring informational literacy. These perspectives include those of students attempting to read and write informational text, teachers designing instruction to apprentice students in a variety of genres, and authors and critics working to publish high-quality children's nonfiction.

Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms

Written by Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz.

Jossey-Bass, 1999, 193 pp.
ISBN 0-7879-5045-9



The authors use action research to skillfully illustrate the power of all teachers becoming nonfiction reading specialists. They show how teachers can apprentice students to reading practices that make even the most dense, content-specific reading assignments more accessible. The authors describe how this apprenticeship begins when teachers

make their own hidden reading comprehension strategies visible to their students as a way of inviting learners into their reading worlds. Throughout the book, the authors clearly outline specific classroom activities that help teachers support students in making visible the internal processes of questioning, summarizing, predicting, and clarifying one's thoughts as one reads.

Using a social justice perspective, the authors detail how the classroom practices they advocate support learners in reading "gatekeeping texts" and breaking through the "literacy ceiling" students often confront when they try to read and write across the curriculum. Powerful evi-

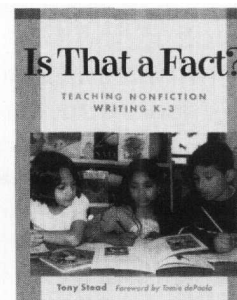
dence is provided of diverse learners developing cognitive strategies as well as "reading stamina" and "reader identities." In this way, the authors do not ignore larger social questions surrounding race, class, and gender as many metacognitive approaches to teaching reading often do. This book contains compelling portraits of skilled teachers working with urban high school students, particularly African Americans and Latinos, as they collectively work to construct academic identities.

Although written for an audience of secondary teachers, the reading apprenticeship approach has many useful applications for elementary school teachers. I have adapted nearly all of the activities outlined in chapter 5, "Acquiring Cognitive Tools for Reading," with first-grade ESL and bilingual students, giving further proof that even very young students can be apprenticed to reading in a thoughtful way. (RK)

Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3

Written by Tony Stead

Stenhouse Publishers, 2002, 252 pp.
ISBN 1-57110-331-7



I have grappled with a number of questions when attempting to introduce my second-grade students to the joys of nonfiction reading and writing. For example, how do teachers help children be true to their own words and ideas when researching and writing about complex new topics? How can we encourage young readers and writ-

ers to engage with different kinds of informational texts and then branch out as they discover new favorite genres? Moreover, how do we introduce our students to the wide variety of nonfiction reading and writing opportunities available to them when the curriculum is already packed with mandated programs, standards, and tests?

Tony Stead addresses some of these questions and others in *Is That a Fact?* He does so by providing a framework for practice that includes a description of nonfiction

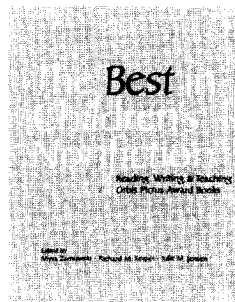
genres and lists of recommended nonfiction materials. He guides the reader through the writing process from pre-assessment to writing first drafts to publishing and back to assessment. He organizes his ideas into useful tables and charts for quick review and supports his "big ideas" with examples of how these practices might work from start to finish. Stead's clear description of classroom activities gave me a taste of the theories behind his ideas. He also supports theory with real-life examples, resource lists, and details about his own successes. Particularly helpful were the individual chapters devoted to specific genres of nonfiction writing, including instructional, descriptive, and persuasive writing. Best of all, these chapters are not prescriptive. On the contrary, they allowed me to think about how the practices he suggests might take shape in my own work with students.

Although I wholeheartedly recommend *Is That a Fact?* to other teachers interested in broadening their reading and writing programs to include nonfiction writing in authentic and meaningful ways, I have concerns regarding administrative mandates that leave little room for a workshop approach to reading and writing instruction. I raise this concern based on my own experiences of trying to negotiate more room for an authentic literacy program in a school that supported no more than 20 minutes of writing workshop a day because the overriding concern was for improving students' standardized tests scores. But upon closer reflection, I have come to the conclusion that the problem is not with authors such as Tony Stead who create exciting, quality reference books for teachers, but rather with school reform initiatives that prevent teachers from using them. (KW)

The Best in Children's Nonfiction: Reading, Writing, and Teaching Orbis Pictus Award Books

Edited by Myra Zarnowski, Richard Kerper, and Julie Jensen
National Council of Teachers of English, 2001, 161 pp.
ISBN 0-8141-0489-4

The editors of this book provide readers with an interesting insiders' perspective of the world of children's nonfiction through a discussion of the history and implications of the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. This award is named after Johannes Amos Comenius's work, *Orbis Pictus (The World in Pictures)*, the 1657 publication widely considered to be the first published children's nonfiction book. Beginning in 1990, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) established the Orbis Award by honoring Jean Fritz's *The Great*



Little Madison. Since then, yearly award winners have addressed a variety of topics including the lives of other historical figures (e.g., Franklin Delano Roosevelt), significant periods in history (e.g., slavery), and topics in science and nature (e.g., space exploration).

The editors have divided the book into three sections. In section 1, members of the awards committee discuss the characteristics of quality nonfiction. The authors identify a number of central debates surrounding the evaluation of children's nonfiction as a genre and make clear that one of the paramount concerns of the award committee is the historical accuracy of information provided to young readers. In section 2, nine authors of award-winning titles reflect on the publishing of nonfiction for children during the 1990s by describing their craft and the politics that shape their work. In section 3, the editors provide a comprehensive annotated bibliography of Orbis Pictus titles for the last decade.

In sum, the editors provide teachers interested in including nonfiction titles in their curriculum with valuable information regarding high-quality trade books currently available and insights regarding how they might evaluate future publications. Missing from their discussion, however, is a fuller treatment of issues surrounding the reading, writing, and teaching of multicultural children's nonfiction. Specifically, given the linguistic and cultural diversity of classrooms in public schools today, there is a greater need to recognize and support the work of authors and teachers who wish to explore topics in culturally responsive ways. As such, the editors could have explored statements of "historical facts and truths" from a critical as opposed to an interpretive perspective of what counts as legitimate knowledge. (MG)

Author Biographies

Meg Gebhard is assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. **Rebecca Keenan** is an elementary ESL teacher and a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. **Kara Willett** is an early childhood teacher in Santa Cruz, California.