



Using Nonfiction Literature

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section
Kathy Egawa and Joanne Hindley Salch, Co-Editors

Bringing the Outside World In

by Stephanie Harvey, Staff
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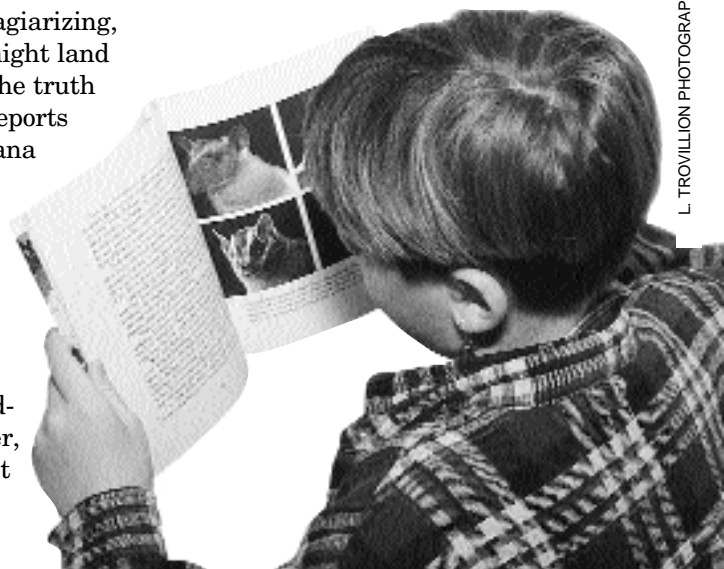
The real world is rich, fascinating, and compelling. Primary kids know this. They burst through the kindergarten door brimming with questions about the real world. Sadly, by middle school their questions have all but disappeared. But this doesn't have to be the case. We can nurture this wonder throughout their school lives. Nonfiction, more than any genre, lets us explore the real world, ask questions, and find out compelling information. If an adult needs convincing, invite him or her over to the nonfiction area of the library. It's here that you will find groups of children pouring over a cross-cut illustration of a castle, reading the latest stats in this month's *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, or scaring each other with photographs of snakes in action. Nonfiction captures aspects of the world that are of proven interest to the students in our classrooms.

But how do we engage in authentic inquiry? The typical school isn't known for being a paragon of real research. Traditional school reports are a case in point. Remember state reports? Each student in the room draws a state name out of a hat.

Albert Einstein once said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." The realm of nonfiction encourages young minds to develop and explore that passionate curiosity.

Audible groans reverberate from kids who draw states that offer no allure. Cheers burst from the lucky kids who draw hot spots like Hawaii or California. The teacher assigns a list of subtopics, which bears a striking resemblance to a *World Book* article, and then each student reads the encyclopedia and spends time rearranging words to avoid plagiarizing, a terrifying offense that might land them a dawn execution. The truth is I not only wrote these reports in school, reducing Louisiana and Nebraska to their lowest common denominators, but I assigned some later on as a teacher. They read like encyclopedias, which is not surprising since we used encyclopedias as models. Real research, however, begins with a question, not an encyclopedic outline.

Albert Einstein once said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." The realm of nonfiction encourages young minds to develop and explore that passionate curiosity. Surround them in nonfiction so they can. Audit the books in your classroom for genre. Many teachers find that the overwhelming majority of their classroom books, outside of textbooks, are fiction. Go in search of engaging nonfiction authors. Get nonfiction trade books, magazines, and newspapers into the hands of kids. Read nonfiction aloud to them. Sponsor nonfiction book clubs and informational study groups. Promote sincere questions. Join your kids in authentic nonfiction inquiry. Choose a topic of interest along with them, ask some questions about it, and conduct research to learn the answers. ▼



L. TROVILLION PHOTOGRAPHY.



Rethinking the Use of Nonfiction

by Kathy Egawa and Joanne Hindley Salch, co-editors

It pleases us to reconsider the role of nonfiction in this issue of *School Talk*. As elementary educators who were once challenged to give nonfiction more than a minor role in our literacy curriculum, we began using nonfiction more consciously a number of years ago. Like many of our colleagues, we have included nonfiction in genre studies, created *text sets* focused on units of study children clamor for (e.g., reptiles, bats, Egyptian life), and even helped develop students' abilities to navigate the nonfiction selections on standardized reading tests. Yet we laugh in recognition of the constrained "state report" assignment that Stephanie sketched out in the introduction—an assignment that is still being given in many variations.

So for this issue, we went in search of teacher stories that could further push our collective understanding. In what other ways are teachers seamlessly using nonfiction in their curriculum? What *text sets* have they pulled together? And how are the students responding?

John Dewey noted years ago that learning coalesces in the library—a place where children can bring their experiences, problems, questions, and the particular facts they have found

and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others. He offers that this is "the organic relation of theory and practice; the child not simply doing things, but getting also the idea of what he does. Harmful as a *substitute* for experience, reading is all-important in interpreting and expanding experience" (1900, p. 85).

You'll see Dewey's ideas in action here. Both of our teacher stories illustrate the ways students have used nonfiction to think about their interactions with the world around them—Vivian Vasquez's four-year-olds as they consider the effect of pollution on whales, and Monica Edinger's fourth graders' study of immigration. We offer a *text set* bibliography from a unit of study in *Different Ways of Knowing*, a comprehensive school reform initiative of the Galef Institute, a nonprofit organization that provides teaching strategies to integrate history and social studies with the arts and math and science. Finally, we include a list of award-winning nonfiction. We hope that browsing this list might serve as a springboard for shaping your own curriculum studies! ▼

An Alternate Study of the U.S.

The following bibliography is part of the list from the *Different Ways of Knowing* curriculum module A *Geography Journey: Adventuring in the U.S.* (Galef Institute, 1996).

It gives readers another option for how one might conceptualize a study of the United States beyond state reports. As with many text sets, both fiction and nonfiction titles are included.

- Children's Atlas of the United States* (Rand McNally), 1992
- Coral Reef* by Barbara Taylor (Dorling Kindersley), 1992
- Crinkleroot's Guide to Walking in Wild Places* by Jim Arnosky (Bradbury Press), 1990
- Desert Giant: The World of the Saguaro Cactus* by Barbara Bash (Sierra Club Books/Little, Brown), 1989
- Forest Life* by Barbara Taylor (Dorling Kindersley), 1992
- Geography from A to Z: A Picture Glossary* by Jack Knowlton (HarperCollins), 1988
- The Gift of the Tree* by Alvin Tresselt (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard), 1992
- High in the Mountains* by Ruth Yaffe Radin (Macmillan), 1989
- Life in the Deserts* by Lucy Baker (Scholastic), 1990
- Life in the Oceans* by Lucy Baker (Scholastic), 1990
- Pond Life* by Barbara Taylor (Dorling Kindersley), 1992
- Ranger Rick's Nature Scope* by Judy Braus, Editor (National Wildlife Federation), 1985
- Signs Along the River: Learning to Read the Natural Landscape* by Kayo Robertson (Roberts Rinehart), 1986
- Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea* by Vera B. Williams and Jennifer Williams (Greenwillow Books), 1988
- Trees and Leaves* by Althea Braithwaite (Troll Associates), 1990
- Mountains and Volcanoes* by Barbara Taylor (Kingfisher Books), 1993
- Rivers and Oceans* by Barbara Taylor (Kingfisher Books), 1993

For more information, contact the Galef Institute at www.dwoknet.galef.org or telephone 310-479-8883. ▼

Getting beyond “I like the book”:

Putting a Critical Edge on Kids’ Purposes for Reading

by Vivian Vasquez, American University, Washington, D.C.

During class meeting time, in a room I shared with 16 preschool-aged children, four-year-old Lily talked about a news segment she had seen on television the night before. She had watched a report on the pollution in the St. Lawrence River, located in southeastern Canada. The pollution was caused by chemical waste dumped into the water by a manufacturing company on the shore of the river. From the news, Lily learned that Beluga whales live in the river and have therefore suffered the consequences of absorbing chemical waste into their bodies. Given this new knowledge, I decided to revisit a text we had read previously about Beluga whales.

In this teacher story I will share some of the conversations that we had regarding the book *Baby Beluga* by Raffi (1990) and how we moved our conversations beyond statements such as “I like the book because . . .” or “My favorite part is . . .” toward using non-fiction resource books to question the way that Beluga whales are portrayed in books such as *Baby Beluga*.

What We Did

Prior to reading *Baby Beluga* we generated a list of words that described the whales that Lily had talked about during class meeting. Using a text set composed of various nonfiction resource books on Beluga whales, we came up with the following list:

in danger	no power
not safe	hurt
need help	hungry
sick	scared
dying	almost extinct

After reading Raffi’s book we created a second list of words to describe the whales in the song/book:

free	singing happy
happy	on the go
snug	playing
safe	comfortable
fun life	splashing around for fun

We looked at both sets of words to consider how the whales are portrayed differently in the song/book, by the non-fiction books we had read, and by the television news program. One of the children asked, “What is real?” This question helped me to realize that “for at least some of the children the boundaries between life in books and life as

they understand it are blurred” (O’Brien 1998, p.10). In response we talked about how different texts offer different perspectives of the world. We also talked about how important it is to think about other ways that a text could be written or presented. I felt that this rewriting of text could be a way to get past seeing the book as the way life really is for the Beluga whales. In doing so we are engaging in the construction of different meanings.

The children talked about how they liked singing the song, but that the song “doesn’t give us a good idea of what is happening with the whales in the river [St. Lawrence].” As a result of the read-aloud, we engaged in rewriting the song.

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The Orbis Pictus Award

Each year, the winners of NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children are selected from among many titles. The Orbis Pictus Committee, currently co-chaired by Karen Patricia Smith and Richard M. Kerper, formally announces the winner at the Books for Children Luncheon, held each year at NCTE’s annual convention. Here are the winners and honor books for the last six years—sure bets for your nonfiction library.

1999 *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance*, Jennifer Armstrong (Crown); **Honor Books:** *Black Whiteness: Admiral Byrd Alone in the Antarctic*, Robert Burleigh, illustrated by Walter Lyon Krudop (Atheneum); *Fossil Feud: The Rivalry*

of the First American Dinosaur Hunters, Thom Holmes (Messner); *Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest*, Steve Jenkins (Houghton); *No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War*, Anita Lobel (Greenwillow)

1998 *An Extraordinary Life: The Story of a Monarch Butterfly*, Laurence Pringle, paintings by Bob Marstall (Orchard Books); **Honor Books:** *A Drop of Water: A Book of Science and Wonder*, Walter Wick (Scholastic); *A Tree Is Growing*, Arthur Dorros, illustrated by S.D Schindler (Scholastic); *Charles A. Lindbergh: A Human Hero*, James Cross Giblin (Clarion); *Kennedy Assassinated! The World Mourns: A Reporter’s Story*, Wilborn Hampton (Candlewick); and *Digger: The Tragic Fate of the California Indians from the Missions to the Gold Rush*, Jerry Stanley (Crown)

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(See Figure 1.) We decided to send the money from our classroom store (where we sold cereal to those who had forgotten their snacks) to the World Wildlife Fund of Canada, which had taken up the cause of the Beluga whales. As a reminder of this action, we decided to

rename our store the “Save the Belugas Store.”

The action to support the cause of the Beluga whales was different from previous experiences I had had with children dealing with environmental issues for a couple of reasons.

First, this experience was not just about accumulating knowledge to discover more about a particular topic or to become better educated about environmental issues. Yes, our work included becoming more aware of what is actually going on with the Beluga whales. Before deciding what action to take, we read nonfiction books, gathered information from the World Wide Web, and had several in-depth discussions. However, this research was only the beginning. It represented the groundwork for taking action to help change the whales’ living conditions.

Second, this experience was the first time we explored the different ways that a particular issue or topic is represented in various texts. Doing so helped the students understand the importance of considering multiple perspectives. Through this the children began to understand that truth and reality are socially constructed. By teaching with a critical literacy perspective, I’ve been able to offer my students and myself space in which to raise social and cultural issues. ▼

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1997 *Leonardo da Vinci*, Diane Stanley (Morrow Junior Books); **Honor Books:** *Full Steam Ahead: The Race to Build a Transcontinental Railroad*, Rhoda Blumberg (National Geographic Society); *The Life and Death of Crazy Horse*, Russell Freedman (Holiday House); and *One World, Many Religions: The Ways We Worship*, Mary Pope Osborne (Alfred A. Knopf)

1996 *The Great Fire*, Jim Murphy (Scholastic); **Honor Books:** *Dolphin Man: Exploring the World of Dolphins*, Lawrence Pringle, photographs by Randall S. Wells (Atheneum); and *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II*, Penny Colman (Crown)

1995 *Safari beneath the Sea: The Wonder World of the North Pacific*

Coast, Diane Swanson (Sierra Club Books); **Honor Books:** *Wildlife Rescue: The Work of Dr. Kathleen Ramsay*, Jennifer Owings Dewey (Boyd’s Mills Press); *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade against Child Labor*, Russell Freedman (Clarion Books); and *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*, by Patricia C. McKissack and Frederick L. McKissack (Scholastic)

1994 *Across America on an Emigrant Train*, Jim Murphy (Clarion Books); **Honor Books:** *To the Top of the World: Adventures with Arctic Wolves*, Jim Brandenburg (Walker); and *Making Sense: Animal Perception and Communication*, Bruce Brooks (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) ▼



Save the Belugas Song
By the J.K.s

Baby Beluga in the deep blue sea
Please help us so we can be
The garbage in the water
Doesn’t let us be free
Please save us from this pollution.

Baby Beluga, Baby Beluga
Is the water safe?
Is the water clean?
For us to live in?

Figure 1

Primary Sources: Portals to the Past

by Monica Edinger, *The Dalton School, New York, New York*

Over the last few years, my fourth-grade students and I have become more and more intrigued by firsthand materials, often called primary sources. Too often, primary sources are associated with difficult documents most suitable for high school or university students to understand; however, I have learned that they can be intriguing, puzzling, and stimulating sources of information for elementary students as well. Whether interviews or journals, old buildings or old portraits, primary sources offer a powerful way to learn about the past.

My classroom theme for the year is immigration, one my students greatly appreciate, having themselves recently moved from a K–3 lower school to a grade 4–8 middle school. We visit Ellis Island, old and new immigrant neighborhoods of New York City (where we live), and, most important, get firsthand information



about recent immigration through oral history interviews with immigrants. All of this original material helps my students to better appreciate and understand the works of nonfiction and historical fiction they read. They are delighted to come across a pickle vendor in a story after having visited Gus's Pickles on Essex Street or to recognize Gertel's Bakery in an old photograph. There is no doubt that primary sources deepen their appreciation of the hardships and joys that New York City immigrants past and present have gone through.

After learning about New York City immigrants, my students take on a greater challenge: a study of far earlier immigrants to North America—the Pilgrims. Already familiar with the usefulness of primary sources, my students are ready and anxious to use them to discover what the Pilgrims' immigration experience was like. Was it anything like coming to Jamaica in 1994? Did those steerage passengers who ended up on Ellis Island have anything in common with the *Mayflower* passengers? Why did the Pilgrims come? What did they leave behind? What was it like when they came? With no Pilgrims to interview, we turn to the next best thing: primary sources. These students, with plenty of adult modeling and support, read excerpts from *Mourt's Relation* (1622, 1985), a firsthand account of the Pilgrims' journey and first year in America. Additionally, I read to them from *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1856, 1952), Governor William Bradford's memoir, give them an inventory

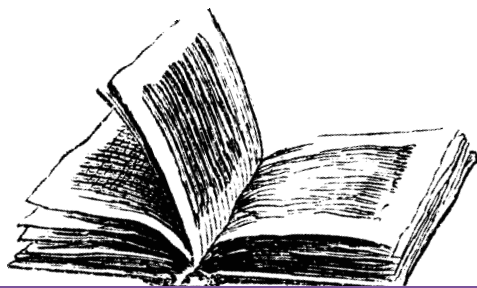
There is no doubt that primary sources deepen their appreciation of the hardships and joys that New York City immigrants past and present have gone through.

of the *Mayflower*, period maps of New England, and more. These primary sources add immeasurably to my students' sense of the past and of immigration, now extending over a 400-year period, from 1620 to 2000.

Yet more exciting for them is an even greater challenge: figuring out what is real and what is made-up in historical fiction. Using primary sources, students relish a critical examination of a work such as Kathryn Lasky's *A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple* (1996). They enjoy pointing out that her description of the First Thanksgiving has been taken directly from *Mourt's Relation*, all the while questioning if it is historically accurate for Remember to visit an Indian settlement. Inspired, they go on to create their own fictional Pilgrim stories, using primary sources just as Lasky did.

By the end of the year, my students not only know a great deal about immigration—current and historical—they also have developed remarkable skills at investigating history through real stuff. For them, primary sources are a perfect peek into the past. ▼





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