

Commercial Reading Programs: What's Replacing Narrative?

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There has been a widespread appeal for the inclusion of more informational text in elementary reading programs and instruction. This appeal is motivated by claims that children's early reading material is dominated by narrative texts and by recognition of the importance of learning to read other types of text. Commercial reading programs provide a significant source of material used in reading instruction, yet there is little empirical research on the proportion of various text types within these programs. We conducted a systematic analysis of the types of text contained in three of the most widely used commercial reading programs in Grades 1 to 6 in Canada. A comparison of our results to those of previous studies confirmed that current programs contain less narrative than their predecessors. In order to determine whether informational text is replacing the gap created by the reduced amount of narrative, we paid particular attention to the presence of expository texts and other text types with informational qualities.

BACKGROUND

Commercial reading programs provided the dominant materials used for reading instruction in North American elementary classrooms throughout most of the 20th century (Dole & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Phillips, Leithead, & Norris, 2004). In spite of the literature-based movement of the 1980s and 1990s, recent survey and observational studies show that many teachers rely heavily on commercial programs for much of their reading instruction (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000; Moss & Newton, 2002). Thus, although not complete determinants of what happens in reading instruction, these programs are pervasive. Hence, it is imperative to study their content in order to make informed and appropriate instructional decisions.

Student texts for language arts/reading programs have changed dramatically over the last 25 years. A primary catalyst for change was the literature-based movement that had a significant effect on basal reading programs in the U.S. (Cullinan, 1987; McCarthy et al., 1995). The movement toward literature-based instruction called for the use of authentic texts in classrooms, a term that primarily referred to unedited and unabridged literature written by authors of children's books, although informational texts such as magazines and newspapers could also be included (McCarthy et al., 1995). Some state education departments called for literature-based reading programs and publishers of reading programs responded by producing anthologies that purportedly included large quantities of unabridged/original/authentic children's literature (Hoffman et al., 1994; McCarthy et al., 1995; Reutzel & Larsen, 1995).

There have been repeated calls for inclusion of more informational text in children's reading instruction (e.g. Christie, 1987; Duke, 2000; Pappas, 1991), following the height of the literature-based movement in literacy education. Although the definition of "literature" in literature-based reading instruction includes nonfiction informational books (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000), too often the range of literature that is provided consists mainly of narrative (fiction) texts (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997). The predominance of narrative in the early elementary grades has been challenged by calls for varied experiences with other text types, particularly expository or informational (Duthie, 1994; Littlefair, 1991; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Arguments have been put forth regarding such a need (see Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, for a summary). Foremost is the ubiquity of informational text in society, necessitating early exposure in order to build background knowledge, vocabulary, awareness of different text structures and features, and other types of knowledge essential for full access to literacy. Affective and motivational reasons have also been advanced (Doiron, 1994) as well as increased reading motivation and achievement (Guthrie et al., 1996). Gender concerns reinforce the need because evidence that boys are less enthusiastic about reading (particularly fiction) presents yet another serious challenge to the extensive use of fiction (Millard, 1997). Thus, there is a heightened awareness of the need for increased exposure to informational texts in the early grades.

Investigation into the types of writing included in commercial readers is limited, with the most extensive work done in the 1980s (e.g., Flood & Lapp, 1987; Flood, Lapp, & Flood, 1984) Schmidt, Caul, Byers, & Buchmann, 1984) and a few more recent studies (Moss & Newton, 2002; Murphy, 1991; Smith, 1991). Results of these studies point to a narrative or literary emphasis in the materials contained in reading programs. However, most existing research predates the contemporary push for inclusion of more nonfiction and informational texts in literacy instruction. Thus, it is not known how publishers have responded to recent calls in the literacy field and what sorts of text types students are exposed to through the use of student anthologies in commercial reading programs. Has the presence of narrative texts in anthologies waned as a result of the informational text movement? If so, has informational text waxed? What is replacing narrative?

METHOD

Data Sources

The current and most extensively used commercial reading programs in Grades 1 through 6 were identified by the ministries of education in all ten provinces and the three territories. Each identified at least one of the following programs: (a) *Cornerstones Canadian Language Arts* by Gage (1998-2001), (b) *Collections* by Prentice Hall Ginn Canada (1996-2000), and (c) *Nelson Language Arts* by Nelson Thomson Learning (1998-2001). Henceforth, we refer to these as Gage, Ginn, and Nelson. Complete program sets were obtained for this research.

Each set contained, in addition to Teachers' Guides and a variety of ancillary materials, a set of student books (anthologies). There were at least two student books per grade for each publisher

with a total of 72 student books distributed as shown in Table 1. The text types of these student books were the focus of this investigation.

Unit of Analysis

All selections in each publisher's anthologies were inventoried by grade. Table 1 shows the distribution of the total 1,106 selections by publisher and grade. Each selection was nested in an instructional set that almost always contained ancillary pedagogical material such as introductory reading tips, author/illustrator information, responding activities, and associated student writings. Some instructional sets contained more than one selection. However, each selection was considered separately as a unit for analysis. All 1,106 selections were coded for this investigation.

Development of Classification Framework

To develop a classification framework, previous studies were examined (e.g., Flood & Lapp, 1987; Flood et al., 1984; Moss & Newton, 2002; Murphy, 1991; Schmidt et al. 1984; Smith, 1991). With the exception of Schmidt, et al. (1984), these studies had methodological commonalities with the work of Flood, et al. (1984, 1987). To optimize comparisons across time and to build on previous research, we utilized a methodology similar to that devised by the Flood, et al. (1984, 1987). Neuendorf's *Content Analysis Guidebook* (2002) was used as a general guide for procedures.

We endeavored to be comprehensive in our coding of text types. Each selection was coded for major genre/text type and subgenre in accord with standard usage. For example, we used narrative to mean a succession of related events over time, generally involving settings and characters (Norris, Guilbert, Smith, Hakimelahi, & Phillips, 2005). This usage includes a variety of genres such as stories (non-realistic, fantasy), realistic fiction, tales, science fiction, and so on. Only major text types will be considered in this paper. Of these, five were relatively uncontroversial and could be found in most previous studies of text types in basals: narrative, poem (including songs), play (including readers' theatre), biography or autobiography, and expository. Five other

Table 1 Number of Student Books and Selections by Grade and Publisher

	PUBLISHER						Total	
	Gage		Ginn		Nelson			
Grade	Books	Selections	Books	Selections	Books	Selections	Books	Selections
1	4	64	12	49	5	47	21	160
2	2	58	10	51	3	52	15	161
3	2	49	5	72	2	47	9	168
4	2	68	5	86	2	53	9	207
5	2	59	5	83	2	66	9	208
6	2	60	5	85	2	57	9	202
Total	14	358	42	426	16	322	72	1106

categories were included to accommodate texts that could not easily fit within such a limited scheme. These will be outlined after a brief discussion of some challenges with text classification.

A variety of conundrums emerged in the process of attempted categorization of selections. For simplicity's sake, these will be reduced to problems of (a) cross-classification, (b) multiple text selections, and (c) hybrid texts. Cross-classification arises because arguments can be made for consideration of a selection in more than one category. Smith (1991) identified this as a problem when "criteria for inclusion are not mutually exclusive" (p. 48). She did not, however, give specific examples or suggest guidelines for dealing with the difficulty. In our data, we experienced cross-classification problems both at the level of major text types and subtypes. For example, biography is generally considered a different subgenre from narrative although, depending on the nature of the information presented, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish a biographical piece from a narrative nonfiction selection. In such cases, we relied on the context of the text and the dominant textual aspects to make our judgment. Coders sometimes experienced difficulties, for example, distinguishing various subgenre types of tales (e.g., fairytales, folktales, tall tales, *pourquoi* tales) or differences between myths and legends. Although there may be theoretical differences and prototypical cases, many of the selections encountered were not clear-cut. In this particular case, we grouped all tales, myths, and legends as a single subcategory under narrative.

A second conundrum involved multiple-text selections. In these cases, there were clearly identifiable text types within a single selection, but it was not always clear whether one type was primary. In cases where one text type was clearly dominant, as in the case of a poetry selection embedded in a much longer narrative, the selection was coded for the overarching genre (narrative, in this case). In cases in which a selection contained more than one major text type and it could not be determined which type was overarching or dominant, the selection was judged as multi-text. For example, an article on endangered species consisting of a poem (with an expository function) and a description of each of four endangered species is a clear case of what we call a multi-text. In practice, however, it may be difficult to distinguish multi-texts from cases where texts are embedded or are hybrid.

The existence of hybrid texts has been recognized in most previous studies of genre in basals, but there has been no consensus as to treatment. Flood and Lapp (1987), for example, defined hybrids as texts "which have the form of a story and the function of an expository piece" (p. 301). They tabulated these separately but included them as a form of exposition when analyzing subtypes of writing. Other researchers have followed their lead in terms of definition but not necessarily in terms of treatment. Murphy (1991) included hybrids in her expository text counts whereas Moss and Newton (2002) rated hybrid texts "informational" when factual aspects were judged to be predominant and "fictional" when narrative aspects predominated. Smith (1991) used Flood and Lapp's 1987 definition and included "historical fiction, biographical fiction, and fact/information narrative" in her hybrid category.

We took an approach that recognized previous work but expanded the definition. Because the essence of a hybrid was a kind of form-function disjuncture, it seemed reasonable to include forms other than narrative that had obvious functions not generally associated with the form. For

example, in addition to narratives, we found poems, cartoons, plays, and riddles with clear expository functions. There did not seem to be a clear rationale for excluding these forms, which are not used primarily to convey factual information, while considering narratives with such a function to be hybrids. We therefore expanded the definition of hybrid to include other forms that had informational functions not generally associated with the form, although this approach was also not without difficulties. The prototypical personal letter, for example, is generally not written with the purpose of conveying information, although there is no reason why this form could not serve such a purpose (other than that it can result in a somewhat stilted personal letter). Thus, although fairly clear cases of hybrids could be found, the fact that many forms can serve various functions means that “hybrid” is often a relative notion.

In consideration of categories used in previous studies and in light of the conundrums identified, we included five additional major categories in our text coding scheme. A multi-text and hybrid category were included because they each represent different text types in the programs we examined. Three categories were added because their presence in our data suggested possibilities for study: pictorial texts, patterned texts, and other texts. Pictorial texts were defined as wordless pieces like photo essays and reprints of artwork that are not part of a larger text. In some of these cases, a caption, a line of print, or a short introductory section accompanied the images, but the intention of the selection was clearly to encourage the reader to examine the pictures/photographs. Patterned texts are repeated strings of text with some word/phrase substitutions. These repetitions of text patterns (non-rhyming or rhyming) generally show little meaning development as in this example from Nelson 1a: “Jump in the leaves. Jump in the snow. Jump in the puddles. Here we go” (pp. 4-7). In some cases, a repeated text pattern did contain rudimentary narrative elements or appear to have an expository purpose that made the coding decision more difficult as the cross-classification problem became more pronounced. To avoid proliferation of categories, simple early reading texts were included in the patterned text category. These were defined as texts that had an insufficient number of words to code for text type (e.g. Look! Look at ...). Finally, like Murphy (1991), we utilized a catch-all *other* category to deal with a wide variety of low-frequency text forms such as interviews, diary excerpts, letters, reproduced advertisements, and resumes. The category of *other* was used also to code problematic cases that could not be handled by any of the other categories. With these five less orthodox categories and the traditional five noted earlier, our study thus utilized ten major text type categories: (a) narrative, (b) poem, (c) play, (d) auto/biography, (e) expository, (f) multi-text, (g) hybrid, (i) pictorial, (j) patterned, and (h) other.

Calculating Text Type Amounts

We utilized the dual method of calculating text type amounts described by Flood and Lapp (1987) and used in most subsequent studies: percent of selections and percent of pages devoted to each type of writing. A determination of page counts was complicated by the fact that most selections are accompanied by a variety of pedagogical materials that not only surround the selection (pre- and post- activities, for example) but frequently are integrated into the selections by means of textboxes, sidebars, and the like. Thus, such information often shares page space with

actual selection material. In order to avoid inflating page counts for text types, we quantified the amount of space taken up by the pedagogical texts estimated to the nearest 1/4 page, subtracted from the selection page counts, and combined the pedagogical text counts for an estimate of the total amount of all such material. This material, designated *Other Instructional Elements* (OIE) in this paper, is thus a congeries consisting of introductory reading tips, author/illustrator information, responding activities, directions, student writings to accompany a selection, and a variety of other materials presumably intended to aid literacy development.

Procedure and Reliability

The text categorization scheme described above was developed using an iterative procedure. The final coding scheme was adopted only after all team members were in agreement and high levels of inter-rater reliability were demonstrated. All selections were then assigned to two trained coders in a stratified random manner that ensured that selections from each grade and publisher were equally divided between the coders.

After all selections had been coded, a random sample of 10% of selections from each grade and publisher was chosen. Selections in this sample were coded independently. Using a mismatch inter-rater reliability procedure, agreement on major text type category was determined to be 84% percent.

RESULTS

Percent of Selections Overall

Figure 1 shows the quantity of each text type as an average percentage of total selections across all grades and publishers. The data showed that there were more narratives than other text types, although poetry ran a close second. Together they accounted for 54% of all selections. Expository/informational texts were the third most frequent of all selections. The results for the remainder of selections can be viewed as falling into two groups. The percentages for three categories were roughly comparable: other, hybrid, and multi-text. Together, these accounted for the same percentage of selections as expository texts. The remaining four categories made up only 10% of all selections: auto/biographical, patterned, plays, and pictorial. Of these, only plays were found at each grade level, patterned texts were found almost exclusively in Grade 1, and pictorial texts were most frequent in Grades 1 and 2, where no auto/biographical texts were found. These data suggest a dominant literary emphasis in commercial anthologies, when *literary* is defined as narrative and poetic selections, as together, they accounted for 8% more than the eight remaining text types (46%).

Percent of Pages Overall

The data on percentage of pages devoted to each text type indicated a similar pattern to the data on percentage of selections with a few interesting differences (see Figure 2). Narratives

occupied more pages than any other type. Poetry, however, dropped from second to fourth place because, although poetry accounted for 26% of all selections, texts of this type tend to be short and thus took up only 8% of all pages. Literary selections (i.e. narratives and poetry) still dominated at 44% of pages compared to 54% of selections.

The second most abundant text type reported was not one of the ten major text types but the other instructional elements (OIE) that were interspersed throughout the selections. Among text types, expository occupied the second highest number of pages, accounting for fewer than half the pages taken by narratives. Beyond these text types and instructional elements that took up 77% of all pages, two groupings of results again occurred. Other, multi-text, and hybrid types collectively accounted for the same percentage of pages (15%) as expository texts. The remaining four text types (patterned, play, auto/biographies, and pictorial) together accounted for the same percentage of pages as poetry (8%), but had the uneven distribution patterns by grade as noted above.

Figure 1 Percentage of Selections by Text Type across Grades and Programs

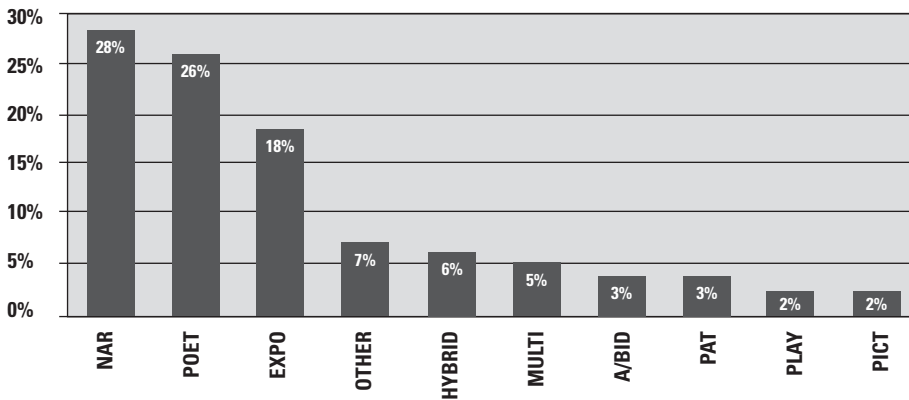
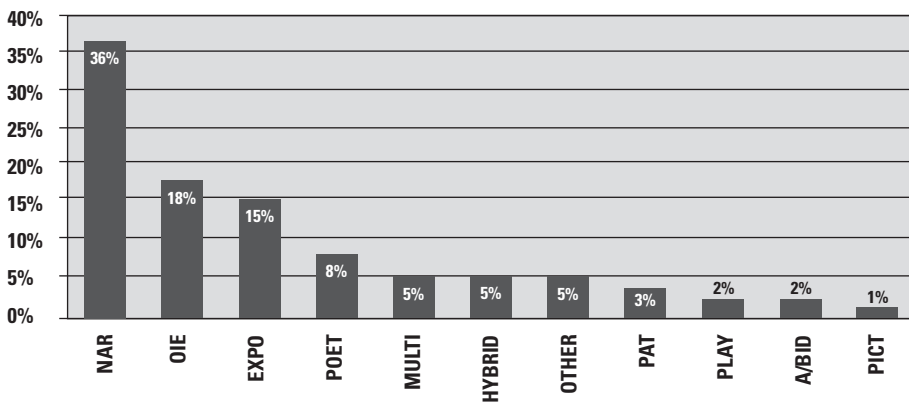


Figure 2 Percentage of Pages by Text Type across Grades and Programs

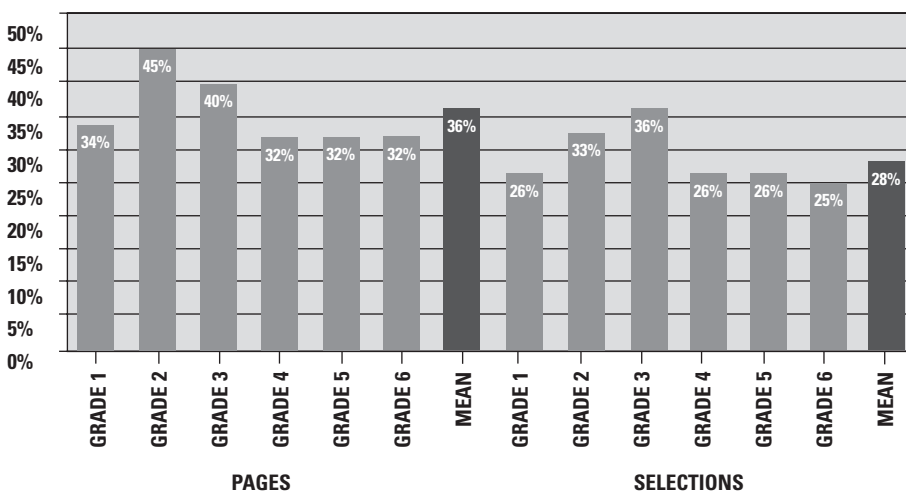


Narrative and Expository Text Amounts by Grade

We were particularly interested in the amount of narrative relative to *informational* text in commercial reading programs. Although uses of the term informational in the literacy field do not necessarily map exactly onto the meaning of expository text, we took this category to be the major discourse type that most accurately represented such informational text. Some studies (e.g., Flood & Lapp, 1987) noted a decrease in narrative and a corresponding increase in exposition with grade level. Figure 3 summarizes the quantity of narrative texts in the three programs in our study by grade. There was a similar pattern in the page and selection percentages with the higher percentages being found in Grades 2 and 3. The fact that Grade 1 percentages were lower than Grades 2 and 3 may be explained by the fact that patterned texts, which were found almost exclusively in Grade 1, made up 17% of the selections and pages in that grade. There was no clear evidence in our study, however, of a decreasing number of narratives with grade advancement, as percentages simply peaked at Grades 2 and 3, and leveled off at Grade 4. Overall, our data suggest that roughly a third of all pages and selections were devoted to narratives, with the lowest percentages at the highest grades. The fact that the page percentages were larger than the selection percentages indicates that narratives tended to be longer than other text types.

Expository/informational text amounts by grade are summarized in Figure 4. The means indicate, on average, fewer than 1/5th of selections and 1/6th of pages were devoted to expository texts. In contrast to the pattern shown for narratives, the selection percentages were higher than the page percentages, indicating that expository passages tended to be short. By grade, the patterns for page and selection percentages were very similar with the fewest selections and pages devoted to exposition at Grade 1. These percentages increased dramatically at Grades 2 and 3 and then decreased considerably by Grade 4, never to recover the percentages found at the second and third

Figure 3 Percentage of Narrative by Pages and by Selections by Grade across Programs



grade. Thus, these data do not show a gradual increase in exposition as did the data reported by Flood and Lapp in 1987.

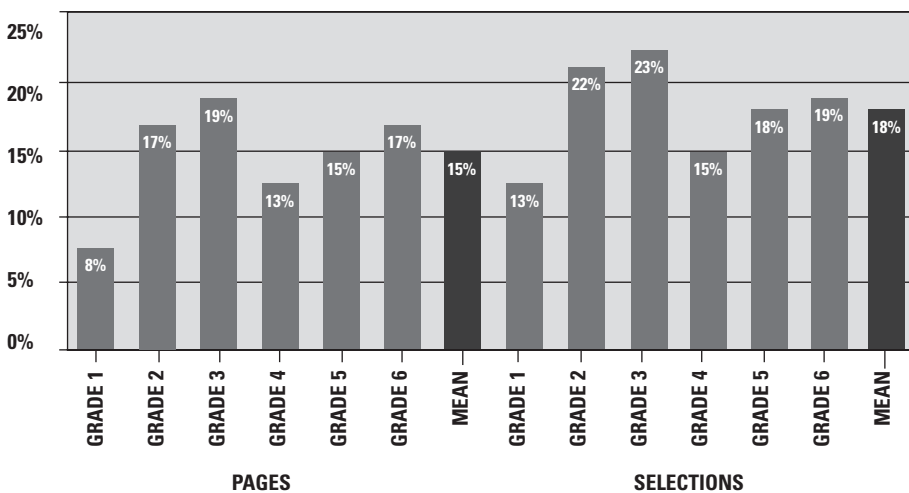
Percentages of Multi-Text, Hybrid Text, Other Text Types, and OIE by Grade

Overall percentages indicated that three categories (multi-text, hybrid, and other) accounted for as much material as expository text (18% of selections, 15% of pages). Additionally, 18% of all pages consisted of pedagogical material (OIE). As indicated in Table 2, there were more multi-text types and other text types at the upper elementary grades (4th, 5th, and 6th) than at the early elementary grades (1st, 2nd, and 3rd). Hybrid texts, however, tended to decrease with grade. OIE material appeared least in Grade 1 (7% of pages). There was a substantial increase in Grade 2

Table 2 Selection and Page Percentages of Multi-Text, Hybrid Text, Other Text Types, and OIE by Grade

Grade	Multi-Text		Hybrid Text		Other Text Types		OIE
	% Sels	% Pgs	% Sels	% Pgs	% Sels	% Pgs	% Pgs
1	4	4	9	8	6	5	7
2	6	5	8	6	4	3	11
3	2	1	8	4	4	4	22
4	6	7	4	5	10	6	23
5	6	6	5	4	10	7	24
6	7	7	4	2	8	7	22

Figure 4 Percentage of Expository Text by Pages and by Selections by Grade across Programs



(11%), after which the amount of OIE material more than doubled (22-24% of pages) for Grades 3 to 6.

Comparison to Previous Studies

In order to determine whether there have been noticeable changes in the literary emphasis of commercial reading programs during the last decade, we investigated the differences between our results and those of previous studies of text types. Exact comparisons were not possible due to differences in methodology and study foci. Moss and Newton (2002) for example, reported on the presence of fiction and informational literature, categories that we would expect largely to overlap with the narrative and expository categories we used in our study, although not entirely, given that their definition of *informational* included hybrids. Also, they appear to have counted only selections with trade book counterparts, whereas our analysis used all selections regardless of origin. These comparisons must therefore be interpreted with these differences in mind.

The summary of studies presented in Table 3 shows that our results report the lowest percentages, both in terms of pages and of selections, for narratives of all the studies compared here. As noted above, narratives were still the most prevalent text type at all grade levels, but the amount of narrative in our study was far below previously reported levels. Earlier studies reported that up to 2/3 of all text (by page counts) in reading programs was narrative, whereas our numbers suggest that roughly 1/3 was narrative.

DISCUSSION

We began this study with the question of whether the amount of narrative has decreased in commercial reading programs, and if so, what is replacing the narrative content? In comparison to previous studies, our results support the conclusion that narrative has diminished dramatically, with little or no increase in informational/expository text. How can we understand these results given that there has been a widespread call for more informational text?

Table 3 Comparison of Percentage Narratives and Expository Texts in Other Studies

Comparative Studies	Narratives		Expository Texts	
	% Pages	% Selections	% Pages	% Selections
Flood & Lapp (1987) (1983 Program Date)	66	41	11	18
Smith (1991) 1989-1991 Program Dates)	57	37	19	27
Murphy (1991) (1983-1988 Program Dates)	60	32	12	14
Moss & Newton (2002) (1995-1997 Program Dates)	66	45	20	18
Our Study (1996-2001 Program Dates)	36	28	15	18

Understanding Estimates of Narrative

Several plausible explanations can be invoked to explain the differences between our results and those of previous studies. First, the phenomenon of fewer narratives may, to some extent, result from methodological differences between studies. We utilized more categories than other studies because of the difficulties we experienced with simple categorization. As a result, some texts that were coded hybrids or patterned text, for example, may have been considered narratives in other studies. This methodological difference alone would not account for such large differences, however, because patterned texts were found only at Grade 1 and most studies claimed to have considered hybrids as expository texts. In any case, our hybrid category was broader than narratives with expository functions and, even if all selections coded hybrids in our study were added to narrative, the total narrative percentages would still not be as large as those reported in previous studies. Thus, methodology alone seems an inadequate explanation of the large differences in results.

A second difference between other studies and ours is program publication dates, with some published as long ago as 1983 and as recently as 1997, and ours in 2001. In the intervening time, the literacy field witnessed a groundswell in the direction of increasing children's exposure to informational texts in the elementary grades. Thus, a second explanation for our results is that the phenomenon of fewer narratives in commercial programs is real, a reflection of publishers' responses to criticisms of narrative-dominated programs and the informational-text move of the past decade. This explanation cannot account for differences between our results and those of Moss and Newton (2002), however, and leaves unanswered the lack of change that we found in the amount of informational text. Perhaps the most significant difference between us and Moss and Newton is that they counted only selections with trade book counterparts and we counted all selections.

As shown in Table 3, the selection percentages we found for expository text are exactly the same as two previous studies, and page percentages are within a 5% range of all previous studies noted here. Thus, there is some consensus with all studies reporting expository page amounts of 20% or less (range: 11% - 20%). We conclude from these results that informational/expository text amounts have not increased in response to the decrease in narrative texts that we reported.

Although we take the meaning of expository to overlap with what is meant by informational text, we believe that it is by no means clear exactly how these terms overlap in actual usage. In an attempt to elucidate the relationship between expository and informational text types, we perused the research and professional literature. Although we found a strong convergence in notions of informational, expository, and nonfiction texts, there was by no means consensus in how these terms were used. In many cases, the terms were used interchangeably, whereas in other cases, writers were careful to make distinctions. Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) and Lukens (2003), for example, pointed out that informational text is a type of nonfiction that is distinguishable from other forms of nonfiction such as biography. Narrative is often juxtaposed with expository to delineate two major text structures, while expository is equated with informational text (e.g.

Gambrell, 2002). For some, however, informational text is not necessarily expository, nor does the term expository exclude text with narrative characteristics. Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997), for example, noted that exposition is “found in information trade books” but such books “need not be exclusively expository in nature” because “more and more titles blur the lines between two or more genres or combine narrative and exposition in unique and creative ways” (p. 420). Thus, at least some hybrids and mixed-genre texts could well be considered informational text by some definitions.

Reference books were not particularly helpful in clarifying the relationship between the meanings of expository and informational text. An early dictionary of reading (Harris & Hodges, 1981), for example, defined both exposition and narration as “one of the four traditional forms of composition in speech and writing” (presumably, these are argumentation, description, exposition, and narration). They stated, the “primary purpose” of exposition, however, is “to set forth or explain,” and “it may include *limited* (italics ours) amounts of argumentation, description, and narration to achieve this purpose” (p. 111). The same dictionary defined “information book” as “a nonfiction book of facts about a subject” (p. 155). Surprisingly, given the attention directed to informational text over the past decade, a more recent literacy encyclopedia (Guzzetti, 2002) does not include a separate entry for informational text. The term is, however, more or less equated with expository text in the entry on narrative and expository text (Gambrell, 2002, pp. 385-388). Expository texts “inform, explain, or persuade” (p. 385) and communicate “information about the natural or social world” (p. 386). Expository texts “make use of a number of text structures such as cause-effect, compare-contrast, time-order, simple listing, and problem-solution” (p. 386-387). Texts that “combine qualities of both narrative and expository texts” (biographies, autobiographies, and historical fiction are given as examples) are referred to as “hybrid texts ... ‘soft’ expository and infotainment text” (p. 385). Thus, by this definition, informational text would appear to exclude hybrids and other possibly mixed genre or “other” forms with a variety of functions.

An answer to the question of whether informational text has increased in commercial reading programs depends to a large extent on the definition(s) one employs and the text categorization schemes that one uses. Because the determination of text types is somewhat controversial, we cannot say definitively that quantities of informational text have not increased in commercial reading programs. However, although expository text counts do not show an appreciable increase, at least some of the texts that fell into our categories of hybrid, multi-text, and other texts may be considered informational by some standards. These three text categories made up 18% of all selections and 15% of all pages.

Our results suggest that text types in commercial reading programs are diversifying and that at least some of this diversification is related to the informational text movement. Several observations converge to bolster this hypothesis. First, earlier studies found narrative domination to a far greater extent than we did. Second, with the exception of brief mentions of hybrids, most often defined as texts that have the form of narrative and the function of exposition, previous studies reported little difficulty with fairly straightforward categorization schemes compared to the difficulty we experienced with a more elaborate scheme. Moss and Newton (2002) reported 85%

agreement on assignment of selections to categories, a figure not unlike ours (84%). Although our methodology and terminology differed (they focused on informational and fictional texts), we attempted to reflect the complexity of texts that are found in more recent anthologies and the difficulties of categorizing selections that can be seen as having multiple purposes and blurred text types. We may have found more blurring than was the case in the past.

Although expository percentages have generally not increased, our results also suggest that publishers have attempted to integrate selections with informational purposes into their programs through a wider variety of text types. In this study, for example, most hybrids had an informational purpose, although they may have taken a variety of forms (e.g. narrative, poem, cartoon, etc.). Interestingly, there tended to be more of these texts in the early elementary grades suggesting an underlying belief that information is more understandable, engaging, or otherwise effective in these forms than in clear expository forms at these grades. Conversely, multi-texts and other text forms tended to be more plentiful in the upper elementary grades, a finding that suggests increasing diversity in text forms, and presumably functions, at higher levels. At least some of the forms and functions in these groupings are informational in nature. We found, for example, interviews, letters, and personal commentaries that appeared to have informational purposes, although they would not be considered informational text by some definitions.

Our study raises a number of questions and issues for further investigation. Are texts in commercial reading programs generally more diverse with an increased infusion of selections with informational characteristics? Are there more multi-genre and hybrid text types than in the past? Can the characteristics of these text types be better delineated? Beyond these questions is a host of issues concerning the implications of these texts for the reading process and the teaching of reading. Advocacy for experience with a wide variety of text types at earlier ages is by now fairly commonplace, but what do we know about how students process and learn from texts that obscure or mix genres and text types? Reading acquisition and learning from texts cannot be viewed apart from instruction, raising questions about the most effective use of these texts. Will the contents of these commercial reading programs be more effective than their predecessors in advancing literacy? Clearly, if text offerings in these widely used reading programs are diversifying as this study suggests, there is plenty of room for further investigation and, possibly, for new concerns.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Calls for increased experience with informational text in the elementary grades have intensified in the past several decades. Most previous studies have shown that basal reading series consisted primarily of narrative text selections with few informational text offerings. This examination of the text types present in the three most widely used Canadian commercial reading programs found that, although narrative was the most prevalent text type, the amount was considerably less than previously reported. This finding suggests that publishers have responded to the information text movement by decreasing narrative content. The question raised by the decrease, however, is whether informational text has increased. Our results may be considered to

be both optimistic and pessimistic. The good news, at one level, is that narrative content has decreased. The bad news is that a well-known genre, narrative, has decreased and has been replaced by text types that blur the boundaries of ready text recognition for struggling emergent readers. The mixture of informational content evident in the programs we analyzed appears to have switched, imported, and transformed the conventions of text types. We see no educational issue in such deviations for advanced readers; we do see some potential problems for emerging readers, however, who are struggling to read and to identify the conventions of text types. The familiarity of text type affords young readers the power of predictability, an ease of decoding, and a grasp of form, function, and purpose. Diversity of text is important in the reading repertoires of young children. However, whether rare and infrequent exposure to such hybrid texts and types increases children's reading ability is a pertinent and pressing question. Our study also highlighted, albeit indirectly, the glaring absence of attention to two of the major types of discourse: descriptive and argumentative texts. The rationale for increased diversity of text types applies also to descriptive and argumentative texts through which children acquire expertise to experience school and life success in an even broader range of text types. Our current findings show a decrease in narrative and an increase in diverse text types and point to the need for further research on the effects of such changes for children being instructed with current commercial reading programs.

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