Encounters with information text: Perceptions and insights from four gifted readers

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Perceptions and insights from four gifted readers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature of engagement with informational text by exploring four gifted students’ responses to children’s information books and informational storybooks. The researchers interviewed the students and students recorded their responses to books in journals over the course of the study. Results indicated that these children expressed a variety of reasons for reading non-fiction and held interesting perceptions and strong opinions about informational content, which varied according to text type. Children identified authors’ purposes and genre differences, and expressed preference for books with depth of coverage along with a creative format.

What do gifted students do when reading informational text that enables them to learn so efficiently and effectively? As children’s information find their way into more and more elementary grade classrooms, we need to identify how students make meaningful connections to informational text and help them find new and more effective strategies for learning from text. Further understanding of gifted children’s responses to informational text may provide perspectives on how to help learners engage and construct meaning in the content areas.

While numerous literacy experts have acknowledged the need for children to experience a wide range of literature in the classroom, the term “literature” is most often considered synonymous with story. In
fact, nearly two-thirds of fourth-graders interviewed during the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress reported not reading information books at school (Campbell, Kapinus, and Beatty, 1995). A recent nationwide survey of teacher read-aloud practices in 537 elementary classrooms nationwide indicated that none of the most-frequently read titles at any grade level were information books (Hoffman, Roser, and Battle, 1993). Moreover, in a recent study, children were asked to discuss the most interesting book or story they had read. Many children could not think of any information books they had found interesting (Gambrell, Codling, and Kennedy, 1994).

Despite the dearth of information books in today’s classrooms, research on children’s reading preferences suggests that many children today, especially those in the middle grades and older, prefer reading nonfiction to fiction (Monson and Sebesta, 1991). Moreover, research on gifted children’s reading preferences (Swanton, 1984) suggests that many gifted children prefer information books to story.

With children’s increasing interest in the nonfiction genre, we need to know more about how children respond to nonfiction books. As Margaret Meek (1995, p. 237) notes:

Critics of children’s literature are apt to exclude nonfiction texts from their accounts of what children read. Yet for many young readers, these picture and caption books are their preferred texts. We know too little about how children actually read books with titles like Roman Britain, Stars and Planets, or Light. We need to know much more about how texts teach children about learning. We need critics who are prepared to judge the nature and quality of the engagement required by the nonfiction offered.

In an effort to explore the nature of engagement with informational text and to learn how capable readers engage and construct meaning from expository text, the authors examined four highly gifted children’s responses to information books and informational storybooks. We felt that understanding the responses of exceptionally capable and efficient readers would reveal important connections that need to be made to engage and learn informational content. We also expected to find useful insights into how students who are gifted think about text types by examining student perceptions of genre differences between informational books and informational storybooks on the same topics. In contrast to
Encounters with informational straight expository information books, informational storybooks are books which combine features of narrative and exposition (Leal, 1992).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recent research in reader response is based upon the view that reading is not a passive act, but a process of continuous interactions between the reader, the text and the context. Readers seek to construct meaning from the text and their responses are dynamic, fluid, and varied. Readers continuously respond to text content through on-going engagement with books.

Different readers construct different meanings from texts (Purves, 1985). In addition, different genres also can influence meaning and understanding of information (Leal, 1992; 1994). In this study of gifted readers' perceptions of two informational genre differences, information books refer to books containing expository text. Such texts depend upon the reader to fully believe the accuracy of the material presented and derive meaning from the text itself (Rosenblatt, 1985). Informational storybooks, conversely, combine narrative and expository text, and require both “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1907) and acceptance of the accuracy of the information presented (Leal, 1990; Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990).

With a few exceptions, the vast majority of studies of response to literature have focused upon children's developmental differences in response to narrative books. Such studies have examined children's development of sense of story (Applebee, 1978), the role of cognitive development in responses to literature (Galda, 1982) and children's interpretation of story themes (Lehr, 1988). Hickman's (1979) research, while also addressing developmental differences in response, broke new ground by exploring naturally occurring instances of response to literature in the environment of the classroom.

While researchers have examined a range of aspects of children's narrative responses, studies of response to nonfiction books have been far fewer. Pappas' (1993) seminal study, which compared 20 kindergartners' ability to retell a narrative children's book with a nonfiction one, has opened the floodgates to an ever-increasing interest in children's response to nonfiction. Pappas' (1993) findings that young children were as capable of retelling informational text as narrative called into
question the usual assumption that narrative is primary, this suggests that young children, and by inference older children, may possess far more control over expository text than has previously been thought.

Studies of the process of response have been guided by the work of Rosenblatt (1978) who suggests that readers assume two roles, or stances, toward reading, and that our emphasis shifts from one to the other depending upon the material read and our purposes for reading. In the efferent stance the reader is concerned with taking information from the text, in the aesthetic stance our concern is for the experience of reading, the feelings and images that come and go as we read. Clearly, stance is not static, it changes as the reader interacts with the text. As Rosenblatt (1991) notes, we can, in effect, read using both stances; we may read for information at the same time we feel emotions about what we are reading. Evidence now exists that children may respond efferently to nonliterary text and may take either stance in response to informational storybooks (Farnan and Kelly, 1993; Maria and Junge, 1994).

The few studies of nonfiction response provide significant information about children’s understanding of such text. Moss (1997) examined first graders oral retellings of a nonfiction book; her results confirm Pap­pas’ findings that young children can comprehend well-written text. Leone (1994) compared second and fifth graders ability to create written retellings of informational, informational storybook, and narrative books. She found that while second graders found retelling informational text more difficult than informational storybook or narrative text, fifth graders’ retellings of nonfiction texts yielded higher scores than did their retellings of fiction or hybrid text.

Other studies have focused upon children’s verbal and written responses to nonfiction, both focused and open-ended. Leal (1994), examining third grade students’ learning of scientific information from two genres of text, found that informational storybooks may facilitate children’s learning of scientific information. Moss and Leal (1994) examined second, fourth, and sixth graders’ written responses to selected questions about nonfiction books and informational storybooks. Farest, Miller and Fewin (1995) analyzed fourth graders’ open-ended journal response to Blumberg’s The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark. These studies demonstrated that through such responses to informational content, children not only learn about text content, but enhance their understanding of information given while gaining insight into the author’s
Encounters with informational craft. It is for this reason that the following study examined gifted readers’ verbal and written responses, both focused and open-ended, to information and informational storybooks.

METHODOLOGY

The participants.

The four gifted students selected for this study, representing a range of giftedness, were aged eight, ten, and two twelve-year-olds. Two were from the Northeast and two were from the southern United States. They were selected based upon: 1) their identification as highly or profoundly gifted; 2) their interest in informational and informational storybooks, and 3) their interest in and willingness to participate in the study. The eight-and ten-year-old, a sister and brother, were considered profoundly gifted with IQ’s scored above 200 and were acquainted with one of the authors prior to the study. The two twelve-year-olds, a girl and a boy, scored IQ’s of approximately 160. They were identified by their gifted teacher as highly gifted and especially interested in reading nonfiction. Based on IQ scores and teacher evaluations, these students were invited to participate in the study. Additional information about each student can be found in Appendix A.

Data collection.

Over a period of six months, each of these gifted readers was asked to respond to selected information books in a journal. In addition, each participant was interviewed and audio-taped by the researchers once each week. These interviews were designed to provide the researchers with more elaborated information on each students’ written responses to information books and informational storybooks.

At the beginning of the study, each student was interviewed to obtain a nonfiction autobiography adapted from Carlsen’s (1988) Voices of readers: How we come to love books (see Appendix B). These interviews provided the researchers with insights into each student’s reading habits and perceptions of the nonfiction genre.

Following the nonfiction autobiography, students were asked to read sets of books relating to two particular science topics: the human body and space. Each set of books included an examination of one information book and one informational storybook on the same topic.
These books were selected for: 1) their relevance to the science topics selected; 2) their scientific accuracy; 3) their attractive design; 4) their easy-to-read format; and 5) their well-known authors who are respected for their level of knowledge and accuracy in presenting informational content. Books that would be easy for these students to comprehend were selected deliberately in an effort to allow these students to focus their attention on the format, structure, and literary aspects of each text, rather than merely on content. The two information books selected were: 1) *What Happens to a Hamburger* (Showers and Rockwell, 1970); and 2) *The Planets in Our Solar System* (Branley, 1987). The two informational storybooks were: 1) *The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body* (Cole, 1989) and 2) *Journey into a Black Hole* (Branley, 1986).

In their journals students were invited to write anything they wanted as well as to respond to the following four questions for each book:

1. What do you think was the most important information in this book? This was aimed at identifying student perception of important content.
2. What did you learn from this book that surprised you? OR: What did you learn that you didn’t know before? This was aimed at identifying new content.
3. What else would you like to know that the book didn’t tell you? This was used to identify missing content.
4. What would you tell a good friend about this book? This was used to identify affective response and its impact.

These questions were designed to provide the researchers with information about students’ engagement and understanding of science related texts as well as to discern their prior knowledge about the topic of each. In addition, question four provided the researchers with information about students’ personal responses to each text.

After reading these books and recording their answers to the above, students responded to another four questions for each book:

1. Would you classify this book as fiction or non-fiction? Why?
2. What do you think was the primary purpose of the author in writing this book?
3. In what ways does the information book differ from informational storybook(s)?
4. Within each set of books on the same topic, which one did you prefer? Why?

In addition, each student evaluated the books read by responding to questions adapted from Carter and Abrahamson's (1990) guidelines (see Appendix C). All questions for these interviews were selected to elicit each student's habits, preferences, and understanding of information books and information storybooks.

Student journal entries and interview data were read and student responses were categorized and sorted into like groups. Journal entries were cross-checked with interview data in order to ensure that emergent categories reflected student perspectives and intentions. Transcripts and journal entries revealed clear themes that emerged from the data. These categories, for example, included themes such as “desire to learn” as a reason for reading nonfiction. For example, in one of her journal entries, Becky noted that she read nonfiction because “It teaches me about the things I want to know.” This statement was coded as “desire to learn.” It was cross checked with interview data that reflected the same theme. For example, in one interview, Becky reported “Nonfiction lets me learn more about history, inventions, and science fact.” These themes are elaborated upon in the following section.

DISCOVERIES

We uncovered many useful insights into student engagement with informational texts. The following discussion will focus on four areas that emerged as we examined students’ responses to these information books: 1) students’ reasons for reading nonfiction; 2) students’ perceptions of textual content; 3) students insights about text types; and 4) students as literary critics.

Student reasons for reading nonfiction.

Students’ responses as to why they read nonfiction generally fell in three categories: a desire to learn, to provide pleasure, and to stimulate their imagination through unusual information and/or humor.
Desire to learn.

These four students offered a range of reasons for reading nonfiction, most of which pertained to their love of learning and desire to acquire information about specific interests. Adam, age 12, had an answer that was typical of the group: “I like learning things...I read anything I can find that interests me...the workings of the earth, nature, war, Einstein, math...” Michael, age 10, enjoys reading about primates, science, and art, while Maeghan, age 8, enjoys reading about animals, bugs, veterinarians, and cats. Becky, age 10, pursues her interests in science through reading about scientists, astronauts, and inventions. All of the children noted that nonfiction books influenced them by adding to their storehouse of knowledge; Maeghan, for example, indicated that nonfiction books helped her “fit things with things I have already learned.”

Desire to provide pleasure.

All of the children read nonfiction for pleasure. Michael, who is a voracious reader, noted that he especially enjoyed The History of Art by H.W. Jason. Interestingly, his teacher heightened his interest in the book by providing him with information about the artists. Michael noted that, “She told us the nitty gritty on all the painters and most architects.” Adam did not identify a specific book, but noted that he enjoyed reading about Einstein. “Looking at the basis of quantum mathematics through Einstein’s eyes is really weird.”

Desire to stimulate imagination with unusual information and/or humor.

Interestingly, these students particularly appreciated books with narrative qualities and humor. Michael identified good nonfiction as “interesting and having narrative qualities. Also, if it tells you funny stories and has anecdotes.” Becky noted that she liked books that “have a story to keep you interested.” Adam put it differently, stating “I like books that let you have fun while learning.” All of the children expressed a preference for books with fascinating, unusual facts or bizarre, unexpected information. Becky, for example, expressed surprise at learning from Journey into a Black Hole that “a thimbleful of gases compacted weighs billions of tons.” Becky expressed a preference for books that “pull you in...and speak to the reader.” She found the Magic School Bus books to be particularly strong in this area.
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TEXTUAL CONTENT

As noted, these four gifted students were asked to reflect upon important content, new content, missing content, and affective content in these information books and informational storybooks. The following discussion explores how these gifted readers engaged these two different types of text. In an attempt to consolidate the findings, Table 1, Text Type Differences in Student Perceptions of Content, provides an overview of student perceptions.

**Information books.**

In regard to students’ thinking about information books, these four students generally reported discrete facts, found in-depth coverage of concepts missing, and viewed the presentation of information as “boring.”

**Information storybooks.**

Responses to informational storybooks were quite different from response to information books. Generally speaking, across all four questions, students gave greater and more thoughtful responses with this type of text and seemed to engage the information more thoroughly, focusing more on concepts and ideas generated by the text rather than discrete facts.

**STUDENT INSIGHTS ABOUT TEXT TYPES**

The second phase of the study yielded important information about the ways in which students perceived the different types of text. Students were asked to classify each book as fiction or nonfiction, identify the author’s purpose in writing the book, cite differences between information and informational storybook genres, and identify likes and dislikes among the text. To more clearly illustrate perceived differences, Table 2, Text Type Differences in Student Perceptions of Genre, differentiates genre characteristics identified by students.
Table 1

Text Type Differences in Student Perceptions of Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Information Books</th>
<th>Information Storybooks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Important Content</strong></td>
<td>Students focused on specific, discrete factual information along with comments about the illustrations.</td>
<td>Students focused on major concepts such as the white blood cells role in fighting disease, with fewer comments on discrete pieces of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Content</strong></td>
<td>Very few things stood out as new in the information books and when they did they were specific facts such as the distance of the planets from the sun.</td>
<td>Many new, unusual and interesting facts and concepts were reported such as how the human body defends itself. Students also found the story structure for <em>The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body</em> new and intriguing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Missing Content</strong></td>
<td>Missing information focused on specific concepts rather than discrete information, with students desiring a greater depth of information. They pointed out that these books didn’t answer their “why” questions or explain outcomes such as what happens to the fat content of a hamburger.</td>
<td>Missing information involved mysteries such as where objects come out after they go in a black hole, concepts such as origins of bacteria and the relationship of the planets to black holes, and motivations, including skepticism about the possibility of black holes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affective Content</strong></td>
<td>Responses were generally negative, viewing the texts as simplistic, boring and therefore lacking in interesting Information.</td>
<td>Responses were strongly positive, connecting the use of imagination to engagement with text, and noting that this type of text makes learning fun</td>
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Table 2

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<th>Text Type Differences in Student Perceptions of Genre</th>
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<td><strong>Information Books</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Text Type Classification</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>All students clearly identified the books as nonfiction with straight facts. Adam reported the information “all jumbled up” and Michael called and Adam it as a “random recollection of facts in a simplistic view.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Author’s Purpose</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students understood the goal of Information book writers as purely Efferent, to provide the reader a Simple book of facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Had straight, bare facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Didn’t go anywhere or try to bring you into it by making connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*It didn’t give you anything really Interesting to think about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Jumped around from topic to topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Titles also were straight fact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likes and Dislikes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Bland, not too interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Too strait laced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Good art work, a good artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Fascinating details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Text type classification.

Classifying these books was no challenge for these students. The non-fiction was clearly non-fiction because, according to Adam, its information was presented as “straight facts softened for younger kids” while the informational storybook was a combination of fantasy and fact, noting that “it definitely tells more of a story.”

Author’s purpose.

All students had definite ideas about the author’s purpose in writing these texts. The students understood the goal of the information book authors as purely efferent, e.g., to provide different types of information on the topic. In contrast, when identifying the author’s purpose in the informational storybooks, students identified their dual nature, efferent and aesthetic, to both provide information and, as Mike said, to do it “in an entertaining genre.” Meaghan noted that, “It makes you learn facts without making it boring.”

Genre differences.

These students’ conclusions about the differences between text types held some keen insights about the nature of literary genre. They readily noted the blurring of the lines between fiction and nonfiction; Michael even coined a new term for this gray genre with “n-fiction.” Becky and Adam noted that this genre combined elements of story with fact, and all of the students were able to cite specific parts within each of the books where one genre took precedence over the other.

Preferences of books and text types.

The children unanimously preferred the informational storybooks to the information books, praising the informational storybook format. Michael preferred this genre because “the information was given to the reader in more complicated terms.” Interestingly, all of the children viewed this book as more appropriate to their ages and expressed real enjoyment in reading the book. Maeghan summarized their strong endorsement of the informational storybook with, “This type of book makes you want to drop everything you are doing and get right down to reading it.”
STUDENTS AS LITERARY CRITICS

Given the task of evaluating both information books and informational storybooks, these gifted students easily became literary critics. In fact, their evaluations were carried on throughout the project and reached a summary level in the final evaluation questions. Students’ critical evaluations addressed the following areas: 1) creativity encompassing originality and humor; 2) illustrations; 3) writing format and organization.

Creativity/originality/humor.

These children exhibited sincere appreciation for the creativity and originality that occurred in the content and/or presentation in the informational storybooks. Michael zeroed in on the remarkable ability of Ms. Frizzle, telling us that “I think the author of the Magic School Bus series would make a wonderful teacher because she makes learning fun in a creative way. A teacher who can make students learn without the child knowing it is a magician.” Adam noted that he enjoyed the originality of The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body because of its humor. “I liked looking at classrooms. The kids are just like the kids at school. It is really funny. They talk about stuff they shouldn’t be talking about.” Becky noted that she would like to have been in Ms. Frizzle’s class.

In contrast, students were critical of the authors of the informational books, quickly pointing out what they considered their lack of creativity. Becky noted that What Happens to a Hamburger “was ordinary. If you read a book about that it should be stylish.” Adam noted that the author of The Planets in Our Solar System appeared to be “trying to be like Joanna Cole but was unsuccessful.”

Illustrations.

Illustrations were frequently mentioned as an important factor in evaluating these information books and information storybooks. Adam noted that younger children often look at illustrations before reading the text. He was not impressed with the illustrations in What Happens to a Hamburger; he noted that they were “repetitive” and not “exciting” like those in the Magic School Bus books. He stated that if he were the publisher, he’d get Bruce Degan to draw pictures and that might enliven the
hamburger book. Becky noted that in general she preferred photos to drawings "because they are much more accurate."

Becky described the illustrations of the children in *The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body* as ones "kids can relate to," noting that "it was better for the imagination and fun to read." She also noted the comprehensiveness of the illustrations, stating that "the diagrams showed every part of the body, not like *What Happens to a Hamburger.*" Michael made similar comments: "My favorite illustrations are with the school bus taking the children on their journey. I like seeing the happy face of the teacher loving her job of teaching and the children enjoying all of her knowledge." Similarly, Adam noted that part of the reason he enjoyed *Journey into a Black Hole* was that it had a "good artist."

**Writing, format and organization.**

Again these students had definite ideas about what is good writing and organization by authors, preferring the writing style of the *Magic School Bus* books. All four children read nonfiction like writers, noting stylistic devices that keep them engaged. For Adam, clarity and coherence were important. He felt that good nonfiction results when "the writer has all the information he could ever find and it is written well ... well enough so a kindergartner could understand it." He disliked when authors overwhelmed the reader with information or "things you need to help the person learn gradually." He disapproved of books that "jumped around." Michael felt that a good writer uses lots of anecdotes and examples and puts them in a logical order: "I don't like books that are a random recollection of facts." As Maeghan pointed out, "I think the most well written book was the *Magic School Bus* because it makes you learn facts without making it boring. It is also written without having to look up words in the dictionary."

Both Adam and Michael commented on the organization of facts in the information books, reporting the text organization to be unclear and even confusing. Adam complained about the text organization as "jumbled up facts" in *Planets,* while Michael noted that both nonfiction texts "contained random recollections of facts."

These children were surprisingly sensitive to text formats. In their criticism of various books, they sometimes offered suggestions for alternative ways of presenting information. Becky noted that she disliked the format in *What Happened to a Hamburger.* She suggested format and
visual changes that could improve the book; she recommended that the book show a family taking a trip to a doctor’s office, recommending that one of the children be examined by the doctor. She suggested the book show the inside of the organs with photographs.

Becky also offered suggestions for improving the format of *Planets*. She noted that she would give “more detailed pictures,” constellation maps, and “a test you could do yourself.” She also said she’d give “before and after thoughts about the moon. We used to think... but now we know that....” She noted that the format in *Journey into a Black Hole* was “pretty good” with a little kid asking questions and a scientist who keeps interrupting him.

**SUMMARY**

The results of this study offered insights into the nature of engagement with informational text and gifted readers’ perceptions of and motivations for reading nonfiction. It provided a view into the minds of four gifted readers as they interacted with different informational genres.

In summary, the findings revealed that gifted readers read nonfiction because of a desire to learn, to find pleasure and to stimulate their imagination through unusual information and/or humor. The findings also revealed that student perceptions of textual content varied according to the text type. They found the text types intriguing and one student even coined a new term for the informational genre, calling it “n-fiction” which is “between fiction and nonfiction.” Moreover, the results indicated that while these students may have been interested in the science topics addressed in each of the books, their level of engagement with the informational texts was deeper and provided more conceptually-related responses than did their level of engagement with informational texts. This is consistent with research studies by Leal (1992, 1994) indicating students’ higher engagement and greater learning with informational storybooks.

These students read these informational books like writers. They exhibited great sensitivity to the ways in which authors chose to organize information in their books, and expressed clear preferences for texts that went beyond the conventional to provide “mind-boggling details” that served to stimulate their imagination. They expressed dislike for book formats containing facts that were organized in less-than-clear ways.
They also observed text illustrations carefully, scrutinizing them for accuracy and appeal.

They readily identified the authors' purposes and genre differences between the two types of texts. They clearly understood the authors' efferent purposes with the informational books and combined efferent and aesthetic purposes with the informational storybooks. They responded both efferently and aesthetically to these books, indicating that they preferred to have fun and use their imaginations while learning factual content. At the same time, they expressed appreciation for the depth of coverage of the content along with a creative format.

These findings suggest that these gifted readers' engagement with information text was heightened when both affective and efferent responses were evoked. It appeared that the informational storybook genre may be superior to the information book genre in this area, at least in terms of the books selected for this study. These findings, too, suggest that the evocation of both forms of response results in more pleasurable, and thus more engaging, reading experiences for youngsters.

Obviously, the present study barely scratches the surface of our understanding of the nature of engagement with informational text and children's perceptions of and understanding of different types of information texts. There is clearly a need for additional research studies that explore response to non-narrative text. Many information book authors employ narrative strategies that are not as obvious as those found in Cole's *Magic School Bus* books. Further studies might reveal additional information about how other informational texts that incorporate such narrative features engage students with the content. Moreover, additional studies with non-gifted and/or younger children might provide further insights into children's understanding of information book text structures and the vehicle for engagement.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The message of this present study is clear. Engagement with informational text is not only possible, but probable when the text is able to include the following: 1) Unusual information and/or humor; 2) a depth of content coverage within a creative format; 3) intriguing information focused on capturing students' conceptual interest; 4) both efferent and
Encounters with informational aesthetic purposes; 5) mind-boggling details that stimulate the imagination; 6) accurate and appealing illustrations.

In addition, it is significant to note that when students read books like writers, or literary critics, they are able to engage the text at varying levels, noting characteristics of text structure, content coverage, and interest appeal. A strong implication of this study is that students could benefit from learning to be critics of information books. The understanding of text structure is central not only to comprehension, but also to engagement. Student understanding of information book text structure could also be further enhanced by teaching children to be information book authors and critics. Indeed, providing students more opportunities to experience informational text as author and critic has the potential to develop more critical thinkers and writers while engaging students with important content area learning.

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Encounters with informational


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**Appendix A**

**Student Participants' Biographical Notes**

Michael was a profoundly gifted 10-year-old who was an undergraduate university student at the time of the study. He soon graduated with a B.A. in anthropology from the University of South Alabama as the world's youngest university graduate. He has since obtained his M.A. in chemistry. Michael began reading at age three. He generally prefers fiction reading to nonfiction because "it lets me imagine." Michael noted that for many years his reading had consisted largely of fiction, but that in recent years he has developed a greater interest in nonfiction. He noted that as a university student most of his reading is factual, and therefore his "escape" reading is usually fictional — "except when I am reading about primates." Michael typically selects books about science of "everyday life." His favorite nonfiction book was *The History of Art*, which was a textbook for one of his university classes. He noted that he does not like nonfiction books that are "a random recollection of facts."

Becky was a 12-year-old middle school student at the time of the study. She noted that she liked both fiction and nonfiction equally because "there are certain appealing aspects in each type." She enjoyed nonfiction because it "gives you a bit of reality." Her interest in nonfiction stemmed largely from her deep interest in "the thought of going into space. The people who write them know what they are writing about. The newer books give you a thrill. You just
can’t put them down.” She noted that she had read nonfiction since the second or third grade. She enjoyed exploring new topics through nonfiction. She especially enjoyed books relating to “history, inventors, and science fact.” She viewed Sally Ride’s To Space and Back as her favorite nonfiction book because “it gave insight into her life and how she felt. Not just a whole bunch of facts.” She reads one or two nonfiction books each month. She felt that a good nonfiction book includes “facts and a story that keeps you interested” and bad nonfiction was comprised of “a ton of facts that are not really in order.”

Adam was a 12-year-old middle school student at the time of the study. He enjoys both fiction and nonfiction, but enjoys the latter because he “likes learning things... the workings of the earth and nature... Einstein and math.” His interest in nonfiction began when he was around 3, at which time he began perusing encyclopedia volumes about knighthood and heraldry. He noted that most of his nonfiction reading is for pleasure rather than for school; he reads about 30-50 nonfiction books each month. He felt that a good nonfiction book is “written well enough that a kindergartner could understand it.”

Maeghan was eight years old and in the fifth grade at the time of the study. She noted that she prefers nonfiction to fiction because it allows you to “learn about things.” She noted that her interest in the genre has increased over time, and that she especially enjoys reading about animals, bugs, veterinarians and cats.” Her favorite nonfiction title was Koko’s Kitten. She noted that the nonfiction books she reads “help me fit things in with things I have already learned.” She noted that the best nonfiction titles have interesting covers and titles, as well as appealing pictures. She stated that she had never seen a bad book, except ones on “snakes or alligators. They’re gross!”

Appendix B
Nonfiction Autobiography

1. Do you prefer fiction or non-fiction? Why?
2. How has your interest in nonfiction changed since you first started reading?
3. How do you select nonfiction books? Are there any particular kinds you especially enjoy?
4. Describe the best nonfiction book you have ever read. Why was it a favorite?
5. What nonfiction books have you read the past year? Why did you read these? Which one was the best? Why?
6. How do nonfiction books you have read influence or affect you?
7. How often do you read nonfiction books?
Appendix C
Evaluation of Nonfiction Book Reading

Students' directions: For each of the following questions, select one or more of the books you have read and write out your answers:

1. Tell how this book would be different if it had been written in 1950.
2. Describe your favorite illustrations. Which illustration do you wish you had done yourself? Why?
3. Would this book make a good documentary? Why?
4. Explain what you think the author did to research and write this book.
5. How would this book be different if it had been written for an adult? For a kindergarten student?
6. What kind of teacher do you think the author would make?
7. If you had a chance to interview the authors of this book, what would you ask them?
8. Describe three facts, theories, or incidents that you found particularly interesting. Tell why.
9. Examine the title and jacket of this book. Do they present a fair representation of the contents of the book?
10. Select the book you think was the most well written. Pretend a book company is considering publishing this book and you must defend this book. Describe what you would say to persuade them of its value in learning.