The average child in the United States spends roughly 4 hours and 29 minutes a day watching TV, 2 hours and 31 minutes listening to music, and 1 hour and 13 minutes playing video games. And how much of their leisure time do they spend reading nonfiction?

Less than 4 minutes a day.

That's the finding from a national study sponsored by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Sure, children are reading outside school—about 25 minutes a day, according to the study. But most of that reading appears to be fiction. Another study found that juvenile fiction outsells nonfiction by more than 4 to 1 (Milliot, 2012).

Even in classrooms, nonfiction appears to be in short supply. Duke (2000) conducted a study of 20 1st grade classrooms and found that informational texts constituted, on average, just 9.8 percent of texts in classroom libraries. The mean number of informational books per child was just 1.2 in low-income districts and a still relatively paltry 3.3 in high-income districts. On average, students spent just 3.6 minutes with informational text each day. Lower-income students fared worse, logging just 1.9 minutes of exposure to informational text (for example, during student reading, teacher read-alouds, or writing activities) during an average school day.

A New Emphasis on Nonfiction

The new Common Core language arts and literacy standards attempt to correct this imbalance by placing more emphasis on reading nonfiction—starting with an equal emphasis on literature and informational text in elementary school (Coleman & Pimental, 2012). At nearly all grade levels, students are expected to develop research skills across content areas with a strong focus on nonfiction, including literary nonfiction; essays; biographies and autobiographies; journals and technical manuals; and charts, graphs, and maps (Gewertz, 2012).

For many schools and districts, the Common Core standards' greater emphasis on text complexity, reading comprehension, and nonfiction likely represents a sea change. Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) found low to moderate alignment—a range of 10 to 48 percent overlap—between states' existing language arts standards and the Common Core standards, with an average alignment of only 30 percent.

In light of this new emphasis, we should ask what the research says about the benefits of reading nonfiction. Is it really worth tearing kids away from *The Hunger Games*, the *Harry Potter* books, or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*? After all, with multimedia consuming so much of students' time, shouldn't we be happy they're reading at all?
What Students Read Matters

For years, we've known that the amount of independent reading students do contributes to their reading skills. Students who read more tend to learn more vocabulary, become more proficient readers, find reading more enjoyable, and thus continue to read more and become ever better readers (Stanovich, 1986). Poor readers, on the other hand, tend to read less and lose ground. Over time, these differences create a widening gulf in learning. Students at the 90th percentile of reading volume (reading 21.1 minutes a day) encounter 1.8 million words a year, while students in the 10th percentile (reading less than one minute per day) read only 8,000 words a year (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001).

Only in the past decade, however, have researchers begun to uncover that it's not just how much students read that matters, but also what they read. In particular, students need to read and comprehend informational texts as often—and as fluently—as they do narrative texts.

Traditional basal texts—which consist of largely narrative content—have come under increasing scrutiny. A comparison of an enrichment reading program and basal reading programs (Reis, Eckert, McCoach, Jacobs, & Coyne, 2008) found that the enrichment reading group scored significantly higher in oral reading fluency than did the basal reading group. Students in the enrichment reading group received instruction on thinking skills during teacher read-alouds; independently read self-selected books; participated in individualized reading conferences; and engaged in a variety of enrichment activities of their choice, including book discussion groups, creative writing, and other interest-based projects. The researchers concluded that providing "structured silent reading of self-selected challenging books, accompanied by supported, individualized reading instruction … may be a promising way to increase reading fluency" (p. 312).

In the Common Core State Standards, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) cite a compelling research base supporting the shift to more complex, nonfiction texts. They note, for example, that students who are able to answer questions related to complex text have a high probability of earning a C or better in an introductory-level college course in U.S. history or psychology.

One reason reading nonfiction may be so important is that it helps students develop their background knowledge, which itself accounts for as much as 33 percent of the variance in student achievement (Marzano, 2000). Background knowledge becomes more crucial in the later elementary grades, as students begin to read more content-specific textbooks (Young, Moss, & Cornwall, 2007) that often include headings, graphs, charts, and other text elements not often found in the narrative fiction they encountered in the lower grades (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009).

How Teaching Needs to Change

In response to the new standards, many teachers may need to shift how they approach both reading and writing. For example,

Book reports will ask students to analyze, not summarize. Presentations will be graded partly on how persuasively students express their ideas. History papers will require reading from multiple sources; the goal is to get students to see how beliefs and biases can influence the way different people describe the same events. (Santos, 2011)

One English teacher who taught a unit on the influence of media on teenagers said that she had previously had her students cite just one source for their papers; this year, she had them read multiple sources, including surveys, newspaper columns, and a 4,200-word magazine article by Nicholas Carr titled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (Santos, 2011).

Teachers may find that this shift pays off in terms of student enthusiasm. Researchers have noted one other benefit of nonfiction reading: the potential to motivate young children to read by tapping into their interests (Caswell & Duke, 1998). This may, in fact, be the most important insight to be gleaned from research. Although students may continue to find fiction appealing, nonfiction doesn't have to be boring. On the contrary, allowing students to explore and pursue their interests within a broad array of informational texts can help them to see that the real world can often be just as surprising and intriguing as make-believe.

References


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Bryan Goodwin is chief operating officer at McREL, Denver, Colorado. He is the author of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success* (ASCD, 2011). Kirsten Miller is a lead consultant at McREL.