Structures for Best Practice Classrooms (Daniels and Bizar 1998) articulated those principles into "six structures for best practice classrooms." Best Practice High School is, as its rather awkward name implies, an attempt to put those ideas to the test of actual practice in a real school—a step rarely taken by university-based education scholars. Rethinking High Schools succeeds by demonstrating both the exhilaration and the enormous practical difficulty of that work.

The book is well organized, with a chapter on each of the school’s major design features. The authors know that not many of their readers are likely to follow their example and actually start a school, so they are careful to make clear in each chapter how its strategies, and the research supporting them, could be applied in an individual classroom or in small-scale collaborations within existing schools. The book is also engagingly written, with the voices of students and teachers well represented. (And for more of these voices, and faces too, there is a video, Rethinking High School: Best Practice in Action, and two websites to visit: www.rethinkinghighschool.com for the book, and www.bphs.org for the school.) There’s plenty of humor and anecdote here—about, for example, the history teacher (not at BPHS) who in a faculty meeting devoted to the possibility of block scheduling was heard to remark: “Hundred-minute periods? I don’t know if I can talk that long!” And there are also passionate statements of principle: “Grades stand between young people and their education.”

The final chapter offers a moving vignette of graduation day for the first class through the school—the majority of them now headed off to college—and concludes with the words of co-lead teacher Tom Daniels, who died before he could see his students take that walk across the stage.

*We are a work in progress.*

*This is the hardest work we have ever done.*

*We are in this for the long haul.*

Whether or not you think you might someday take up that particular work, Rethinking High School belongs alongside books like Meier’s The Power of Their Ideas and Mike Rose’s Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America—in other words, with the books that sustain our imagination of what public schools can and should do for all our students.

**Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3**


**Reviewed by Kim Douillard.**

Typically, I approach professional books written for teachers of students in kindergarten through third grade with a well-founded skepticism. These are the books with the cute pictures of children, colorful pages, and too often, a lack of content. These books seem to ignore any effort at advancing thoughtful, meaningful learning, instead focusing on pictorial outlines of teddy bears and famous Americans that children are expected to color. I resent these authors’ implied ideas that “cute” is more important than substance and that my students are not capable of rigorous academic work.

In fact, my students are cute—both in appearance and in the comments they make based on their life experience of eight years of less. They are also incredibly curious, ask insightful questions—many that I wish I had asked first—and are capable of tackling important subjects and complex ideas. Naming the nine planets in the solar system does not satisfy their curiosity about space, yet for younger students, that is often the extent of their study of the universe. Neither my students nor my colleagues need watered down approaches to teaching and learning.

*Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3* by Tony Stead gives me hope. Stead actually believes that primary students can compose a variety of nonfiction texts including recipes, reports, scientific explanations, and even persuasive arguments. He begins by acknowledging the power of nonfiction with young
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children and the woeful lack of nonfiction writing instruction in the early grades. He quotes Donald Graves: “Unfortunately, little nonfiction, beyond personal narrative, is practiced in classrooms. Children are content to tell their own stories, but the notion that someone can write about an idea and thereby affect the lives and thinking of others is rarely discussed” (4). Stead suggests that teachers broaden their definition of nonfiction writing. He reminds us that there are many purposes for nonfiction writing beyond the research report. Nonfiction writing can describe, explain, instruct, persuade, retell, and explore. The writing can take a myriad of forms including letters, definitions, poetry, directions, debates, reviews, cartoons, scripts, and interviews.

Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3 is broken down into two parts. Part one, titled “Teaching Nonfiction Writing,” focuses on a general overview of nonfiction writing and the thinking and research processes students will need in order to undertake it. Stead addresses barriers many teachers face when teaching nonfiction forms, including the difficulties of helping children locate, access, interpret, record, publish, and share information. He also considers another obstacle: getting young children to write independently. Many teachers lament that their young students “can’t write” because they are not able to read the students’ attempts or because their students aren’t willing to risk incorrect spelling. In the chapter called, “Helping with Spelling,” Stead encourages teachers to “find effective methods to encourage children to approximate—to try spelling words they want to use—so that their message becomes paramount in their writing, and is not governed solely by spelling” (72). He goes on to describe the development of spelling based on the stages identified by Richard Gentry and gives suggestions for working with students at each of these stages to encourage their independence and the development of writing.

Part two, “Explorations in Action,” focuses on five specific formats of nonfiction writing and gives direction for how to apply them in the primary classroom. These include instructional writing, descriptive reports, scientific explanations, persuasive writing, and nonfiction narrative. In each chapter, Stead takes us into a classroom and shows each step of the process with children. He begins with an overview of the particular text type, breaking down the purpose, listing forms it can take, identifying the text structure and language features, and giving an example produced by a primary-aged student. Useful as these student examples are, I believe students could also benefit from looking at real-world examples of each type of writing as a way of seeing the goal we are working toward within the genre. Students need to see what they are aspiring to accomplish, beyond the classroom assignment. Models of this sort would help me better understand how to break down the task for students and increase the complexity when they are ready, rather than assume that all my students will produce the same end product.

At the beginning of each nonfiction writing study, Stead encourages teachers to assess their students by having them attempt the particular genre before instruction begins. This way, teachers are not wasting time teaching what students already know and can focus on those areas where students need instruction. To help with this assessment, he provides a rubric for each genre that includes attention to the purpose, craft, research skills, and surface features (mechanics). The rubric can easily be adapted to fit the individual needs of a particular classroom (and stretched to apply to higher grades as well). What I like best about the rubric is that it doesn’t focus only on correctness. Instead, the craft of the particular genre—including the structure, language features, and the writer’s voice—are made the heart of the assessment. This is another place where a real-world sample would be helpful. The rubric items could then be examined using both the student sample and the real-world sample, then compared to help develop instruction that meets the needs of the writer.

Throughout the book, Stead makes his own pedagogy clear. He believes that young children can be successful with nonfiction writing, that it has value even when it is not directly connected to school, district, or state assessments, and that time spent on an in-depth study of nonfiction forms pays off in the long run.

Stead’s book has helped me understand that it is possible to write a professional book for teachers like me that does not condescend to teachers and students. Yes, this book does include cute pictures and endearing student comments, but it is also filled with content about teaching nonfiction writing. Stead gives us evidence of students inquiring into topics that interest them, researching to find information, and writing about what they have learned so others can learn from them. Reading Stead, I see ways to make my own nonfiction writing instruction richer and more rigorous, incorporating some of his ideas, and adjusting others to fit my own approaches. Is That a Fact? Teaching Nonfiction Writing K-3 is a resource that respects young students and their teachers.

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