One of the best ways to lure your primary teachers into collaborating with you is to focus on the many early literacy skills that are inherently integrated into a library research project. Think about it: Research is a real-world application of those early literacy skills that are often necessarily taught in isolation in the classroom.

When primary students use a nonfiction book to locate needed information, either in the pictures or the text, they are applying such early literacy skills as reading comprehension, print awareness, establishing a purpose for reading, and distinguishing fact from fiction. Additionally, when students record their research notes, either in pictures or words, they are using such early literacy skills as writing messages using conventions of left-to-right movement, using phonological knowledge to map sounds, and writing to record ideas. When students share new knowledge learned through research, they are once again applying literacy skills by drawing conclusions from information gathered and communicating their new knowledge to others.

Baiting Your Hook

The first step to integrating early literacy skills within a library research project is to bait your hook with knowledge of the standards-based curriculum for which primary teachers are responsible. State and national curriculum standards drive classroom instruction. Since the library media center is an extension of the classroom, the school library media specialist (SLMS) tackling primary-level library research should be well versed in the grade-level curriculum.

The Texas state curriculum is called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The kindergarten TEKS provides a guide to early literacy skills that could integrate with a library research project (see figure). The following examples from two elementary schools illustrate the integration of the kindergarten TEKS into a research project. The first example is from Bowie Elementary, a K–6 school delivering a half-day kindergarten program to approximately twenty-two students per class. Hamilton Park Pacesetter Magnet, the second example, is a prek–6 magnet school, with five classes of twenty students in a full-day kindergarten program.

Kindergarten Research at Bowie Elementary

Each spring, Bowie conducts a kindergarten animal research project. A research guide in booklet format contains questions to investigate, such as “How many legs does your animal have?” with the numbers 0, 2, 4, 6, and 8 listed underneath. The students look through their resources, in this case ABDO’s Checkerboard Books series (see sidebar on page 42) on animals, and circle the correct answer. While students can often locate the needed information in the pictures, they are still practicing important literacy skills. (See skill 12-B from figure.) In other sections of the booklet students draw pictures of their information, complete fill-in-the blank sentences, and write original sentences.

The SLMS walks the students through the research booklet page by page, reading each question or set of instructions aloud and pausing for the students to locate and record their
information. The teacher and SLMS help the students locate the needed information and support their note taking, which is done by highlighting the relevant text with brightly colored sticky notes.

After their individual research is completed, the kindergarteners are paired to compare their animals. After brainstorming, each pair gives a short oral presentation to the class explaining the similarities and differences between their animals.

**Kindergarten Research at Hamilton Park Pacesetter Magnet**

In the late fall, students at this library work in small groups researching one of three kinds of bears—polar bears, brown bears, or black bears. The process begins with the teacher and SLMS distributing a variety of stuffed or plastic animals. The students use their observation skills and the stuffed animals to brainstorm appropriate research questions.

As the students brainstorm, the SLMS acts as a scribe and facilitator. In doing so, the SLMS helps the class focus on the form and structure of the research questions and works with students to be sure their questions can be answered. Questions students have developed for this research project include, “What does this bear look like?” and “Where does it live?”

The SLMS creates a mini-booklet or graphic organizer that the students use to record their answers and draw their pictures. Students are divided into three groups, with each group responsible for a different bear. Groups locate the answers to their research questions using books that are written on an early literacy level (in this case, Capstone Press’s Pebble Books series and ABDO’s Checkerboard Books series; see sidebar on page 42). The teacher and SLMS circulate through the library as students record the answers to their questions in their mini-booklets or graphic organizers.

Upon research completion, the teacher offers a variety of ways for the students to share their information with the rest of the class. Some of these closure activities include creating a page using Kid Pix that includes one fact and a student-drawn picture of the animal; small-group sharing to identify similarities and differences among their bears; and orally presenting newly learned information to the class or another class.

**Collaboration Roles**

A key element in the successful collaboration involves the clear division of instructional roles for the teacher and the SLMS during primary-level research. The SLMS is process-oriented, performing such tasks as organizing the research project, evaluating and collecting the necessary resources, and teaching the students how to access, record, and use information as outlined in national information literacy standards.

The teacher’s role is content-oriented; the teacher is responsible for ensuring that the appropriate early literacy skills, academic content, and appropriate standards are being addressed as well as for monitoring student progress and assessing student work. Naturally the SLMS integrates and supports the curriculum content and the development of early literacy skills.

**Tackling Challenges**

There are several challenges to overcome when working with emerging readers. Over the years, it has become evident that instructional timing is critical. At the beginning of the year, Bowie and Hamilton Park kindergarten research consists of drawing pictures and circling answers. The research booklet is read aloud while the students
Young students meet their standards. They are more willing to cast off on library projects. Bowie and Hamilton Park primary teachers have added at least three research projects. Bowie and Hamilton Park SLMSs have discovered some tricks to ensuring success during the primary-level research process. These tricks have been tested over several years with many different primary teachers and students.

Tips and Tricks for the Big Catch

Bowie and Hamilton Park SLMSs have discovered some tricks to ensuring success during the primary-level research process. These tricks have been tested over several years with many different primary teachers and students.

First, read the mandated curriculum for the primary grade you would like to lure into a library research project. Highlight the curriculum standards that mesh with the information literacy research process, paying special attention to early literacy skills. Also identify core content areas, such as science and social studies, that lend themselves to a library research project.

The more connections your proposed research project has with the curriculum, the more likely the primary teacher will be willing to participate.

Second, prepare a rough mockup of the research project. Include an estimate of how much time the project will last, as well as any other information that might help the students keep track of which words they are recording in their notes. Additionally, the sticky notes provide a concrete representation of the fact that the text on the page is providing the answer for an information need.

Netting the Big One

When the SLMS is aware of the grade-level standards, he or she becomes a collaborative ally, valued as a teacher by the classroom teacher and students. Students benefit from this collaborative approach because they are exposed to different teaching styles and expertise. Collaborative teaching of early literacy skills results in smaller instructional groups, a factor that has been correlated with increased student achievement.

Primary students can work on research for a relatively long period of time. Bowie and Hamilton Park students have stayed focused on their research for more than an hour. Conversely, a well-designed research project can last for as little as fifteen to twenty minutes.

When the students are in the library, be prepared for lots of noise, discussion, and questions. These conversations will signal that enthusiastic, motivated, and eager young researchers are having fun while establishing the foundation to becoming literate lifelong learners.

Reference
