Understanding the Text Genre Preferences of Third-Grade Readers

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Abstract

In recent decades, researchers have indicated that U.S. schools have underexposed elementary grade students to informational text. The increased exposure to this genre should be a top instructional priority. In the present study, we explored 46 third-grade students' attitudes toward and perceptions of informational text. Using three data sources (a student survey, individual interviews, and logs of independent reading time), we found that students read nonfiction text less frequently than fictional texts and preferred fictional to nonfiction text. Based on these findings, we provided suggestions on how teachers can help young readers diversify their text preferences.

Key words: informational text, students' attitudes, reading preferences

Recently, teachers and researchers have given much attention to the role of informational text in U.S. elementary classrooms. Though state standards and professional organizations recommended the inclusion of a variety of text genres (International Reading Association, 2000; Reutzel & Gali, 1997), fiction continued to dominate elementary classroom instruction (Casbergue & Plauché, 2003; Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007; Duke, 2000, 2003, 2004; Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Saul & Dieckman, 2005; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Researchers' appeals for an integration of nonfiction reading experiences in the primary grades appear to go unheeded (Duke et al., 2003; Flowers & Flowers, 2009). Because teachers must prepare students to maneuver adeptly through informational text and because reading success is determined by students' interest and engagement (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000), it is imperative that educators develop a better understanding of students' perceptions of the informational text genre.

Defining Informational Text

Informational text provides factual accounts of social and natural occurrences and answers to questions. Informational text guides inquiry, thus leading to understanding and learning, conveys information about or explanations of worldly phenomena, and communicates knowledge (Duke, 2000, 2004; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Duke (2003) explained that although people often use the term *informational text* interchangeably with the term *nonfiction text*, the two terms are not the same. Nonfiction text is an umbrella term including informational text, "how-to" books, and narrative nonfiction. There is no singular feature that classifies text as informational; instead, informational text typically includes a group of features such as specific vocabulary, photographs and illustrations, glossaries and indices, labels, captions, keys, and dialogue bubbles (Duke, 2000, 2003; Pappas, 2006). Essential criteria of informational text include the presentation of a topic, the description of the topic's attributes, and a final summary.

The Instructional Benefits and Importance of Informational Text

A wealth of literature indicates that informational text provided many rich instructional benefits for young readers, including the building of background knowledge (Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Yopp & Yopp, 2000; Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007), vocabulary acquisition (Duke et al., 2003a), and increased reading motivation (Moss, 2005). These instructional benefits have led researchers to conclude that exposing students to informational text at an early age contributed to students' future academic success (Moss, 2005; Palincsar & Duke, 2004).

More specifically, through exposure to informational text, children built their background knowledge of the world and of domain-specific topics. Informational text built the background knowledge that students needed to comprehend core content area concepts (Duke et al., 2003a; Moss, 2005; Young et al., 2007). As informational text is replete with information about the natural and social world, it contributed to topical knowledge acquisition (Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). As children increase their familiarity with new domains of knowledge, they may also increase their comprehension of particular topics.

In addition, informational text promotes vocabulary acquisition. With frequent exposure to informational text, students became more familiar with the language and vocabulary used in this genre (Moss, 2005; Pappas, 1991). Several studies indicated that read-alouds of informational text enhanced young children's vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Duke & Kays, 1998; Webster,

2009). With its in-depth coverage on a particular topic, informational text helps young children increase both their content knowledge and understandings of content-specific vocabulary.

Lastly, teachers cannot ignore the motivational benefits of informational text. For many young readers, informational text increased reading stamina (Moss, 2005). Moss (2002) pointed out that middle school students' motivation increased as they drew connections between their lives and nonfiction texts. Connecting the words on a page to real-life experience motivated children, especially for struggling readers or those who had a high level of interest in informational text (Dreher, 2003; Duke et al., 2003a; Wilhelm, 2002). In a case study of two struggling readers, Caswell and Duke (1998) concluded that informational text assisted in enhancing engagement and motivation amongst the boys. Young students enjoyed reading, writing, and listening to informational texts.

Informational Text in the Elementary Classroom

Despite the many benefits of reading informational text, research has shown that elementary school students were underexposed to informational text and did not receive explicit instruction on how to read informational text (Casbergue & Plauché, 2003; Chapman et al., 2007; Duke, 2000, 2003, 2004; Duke et al., 2003; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Saul & Dieckman, 2005; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). In her study of first-grade classrooms, Duke (2000) noted that the inclusion of informational text was rare, with informational text constituting less than 10% of what is available in classroom libraries and less than 3% of the materials displayed on classrooms' walls and other surfaces. In a national survey of kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers, Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) found that only 6% of the material used during reading instruction was expository. In their survey of 126 primary-grade teachers, Yopp and Yopp (2000) noted that informational text comprises only 14% of classroom read-alouds. A follow-up survey indicated that only 8% of classroom read-alouds in preschool through third-grade was informational (Yopp & Yopp, 2006). This shortage is particularly problematic when considering the degree to which the Common Core Standards (2010) requires 70% of school reading to be informational text.

Fortunately, in recent years, informational text use appears to be on the rise in elementary classrooms. In a study of a second-grade classroom, Maloch (2008) revealed that one-fourth of 2,000 available books are nonfiction. This percentage indicates a significant increase from Duke's (2000) previous work. In a survey of 318 K-5 teachers, participants used an average of 31.55 minutes (*SD*=14.16) of informational text a day (Ness, 2010). Jeong, Gaffney and Choi (2010) reported that 14% of materials in second-, third-, and fourth-grade classroom libraries were informational text. Thus, it appears that teachers seem to be receiving the message about the instructional importance of and increased need for informational text.

How Young Children Benefit from Informational Text

A growing body of research reveals that young students can be successful with informational text. More specifically, young children could successfully explore written language (Richgels, 2002), learn about informational book language (Pappas, 1993), retell informational text (Pappas, 1993; Moss, 1997), learn content from informational text (Duke & Kays, 1998; Leal, 1994), understand author's craft (Farest, Miller, & Fewin, 1995), and participate in sophisticated discussions of informational text (Heller, 2006). Young children could also successfully apply comprehension strategies to informational text, such as drawing intertextual connections (Oyler

& Barry, 1996), examining the purposes and features of informational text structures (Maloch, 2008), and constructing written responses to informational text (Moss & Leal, 1994). In sum, the reasons to support the use of informational text in elementary classrooms far outweigh any potential obstacles to impede its use.

Primary Grade Students' Perceptions of and Choices for Informational Text

Informational text can be appealing to primary-grade students. When given the chance, early elementary students were likely to choose informational text (Moss, 2005). In a study assessing first-grade students' book choices during recreational reading, Mohr (2006) discovered that 159 out of 190 students prefer to read nonfiction picture books. When voluntarily choosing to read informational text, a student's gender, age, race, and cultural heritage may affect his/her text choice (Young et al., 2007). Doiron (2003) revealed that though both boys and girls chose fictional books more frequently than informational books, boys were more likely than girls to choose informational books.

Students chose to read informational texts for a variety of reasons. Motivation stemmed from a desire to learn; subsequently, students viewed informational text as sources of knowledge. Additionally, a student's text selection had inherent connections to his/her personal interests and the structures of the text (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Leal & Moss, 1999; Mohr, 2006). Thus, teachers must not only incorporate informational text into daily instruction, but also allow opportunities for students to select informational text in their independent reading.

Rationale for and Purposes of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore third-grade students' attitudes toward and perceptions of informational text. The research study addressed the following questions:

1. How frequently or infrequently did third-grade students claim to read informational text?
2. Did third-grade students express a preference for fictional or informational text?
3. Was there a match between students' self-reported text preferences and their reading habits?
4. Why did third-grade students like / dislike reading informational text? What types of informational text attracted and detracted third-grade students?

This research stemmed from the first author's observations of and curiosity about the nature of students' text selection and reading preferences in her third-grade classroom. Though underexposed to the genre, many of her third-grade students learned to love informational text. In collaboration with the second author, a university professor with research interests in the area of teachers' use of informational text (Ness, 2010), we undertook this research in order to understand the reasons why young students like and dislike reading informational text. Our decision to focus on third grade purposely aligned with the beginning of the state English Language Arts exams; consequently, instruction in third grade is highly focused on students' abilities to navigate through informational text.

An overarching objective of this study was to better understand students' text choices. Guided by reading engagement theory (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000), we believed that knowing what motivates students to like or dislike a specific genre could inform classroom practice and help broaden young readers' exposure to a variety of text genres. In the elementary grades,

intrinsic motivation, or motivation that stemmed from curiosity, enjoyment, and interest, was a strong predictor of reading success (Guthrie et al., 2000). When students viewed a reading task as interesting, meaningful, or challenging, they were more willing to invest time and effort in the task. Furthermore, students who were engaged in a task have an easier time grasping, retaining, and transferring knowledge (Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2000). Learning more about students' preferences of informational text could lead to successful implementation of a child-centered approach to reading instruction (Haynes & Richgels, 1992), which included a broad base of genres. Additionally, understanding why students like and dislike informational texts could help educators tap into reading interests in this genre.

Methodology

Research Site and Participants

Data collection occurred at the William School (all names are pseudonyms), a Title I public school serving 560 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. The William School is located outside a major metropolitan area on the east coast. In the year prior to data collection, the population of the student body was 5% Black, 21% Hispanic, 38% White, and 36% Asian. Seventeen percent of students were identified as English language learners and 19% qualified for special education services. Thirty-eight percent of the students were eligible for free lunch and 15% were eligible for reduced-price lunch. In the year prior to data collection, 78.3% of the student body demonstrated proficiency on the English Language Arts state tests.

The William School followed a balanced literacy approach to reading, which included a 90-minute block of time for reading workshop, read-aloud, shared reading, and word work. In each classroom where the researchers collected data, there were carpets surrounded by bookshelves filled with bins containing books. The books ranged in genre and level, and were sorted by reading levels, by genre (Poetry, Nonfiction Books, Picture Books, Series Books), and theme (such as polar bears, weather, mathematics). Teachers housed student-created books and the texts used in student-led book clubs in separate sections. Colored stickers on the outside cover of the books indicated their reading level, according to the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading Leveling System (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Students had weekly access to the classroom library. As part of the reading curriculum, third-grade students visited their classroom libraries to choose texts for the week. Teachers instructed students to choose texts that matched their "just right" reading level, which was determined by running records and teacher observation. If a book's reading level was not clearly indicated, the teacher helped students to read the first page and ask themselves, "Did I have trouble with more than five words on the page?" and "Did I have trouble retelling what I just read?" If the answer was no, then the student was allowed to consider the book "just right." Additionally, teachers gave students the opportunity to select "choice" texts (texts that may not be on their reading level but that they wish to read). The choice texts could be on any topic or genre.

Participant Selection

At the beginning of the school year, all 78 students were enrolled in the three third-grade classrooms at the William School completed a survey of reading preferences (Appendix A). All of the third-grade teachers adopted the survey in an effort to understand their students' reading preferences. After completion of the survey, parents and/or guardians received a parent consent

letter. All students with both parent consent and student assent were included in the study. The research team secured forty-six permissions (24 female and 22 male), yielding a response rate of 59%.

Data Sources and Collection

Data sources for this qualitative study consisted of (a) a survey of students' reading preferences (Appendix A), (b) individual student interviews through Mohr's Interview Protocol of Children's Book Preferences (2006) (Appendix B), and (c) teacher observations during independent reading time, known as *Relax and Read* (Appendix C). The next paragraphs provide information on each of these data sources.

A Survey of Student Reading Preferences. As a part of teachers' efforts to understand their third-grade students' reading preferences, the teachers administered a written survey of their opinions about and their experiences with nonfiction texts. At the beginning of the school year, students took approximately 15 minutes to write answers to their questions, independently. The research team designed the survey to probe for students' engagement with and understanding of informational text, as well as their overall genre preferences.

In the first question, the research team presented children with a text set of six books and asked them to select the book they would most like to read. The books of the set included two fictional picture books, one fictional chapter-book, two narrative informational texts, and one informational text (see Table 1). Our intent with this question was to provide students with a variety of texts and understand how they selected texts during weekly trips to the classroom library. Furthermore, Chapman et al. (2007) noted that when teachers gave students the opportunity to choose from a text set, their responses appeared more genuine. In the second question, students reflected on their reading experiences by reviewing their book logs and determining the genre that they read most frequently both in and out of school. The research team used a book log daily in these classrooms to track student's independent reading selections. This question attempted to examine the match between students' self-reported text preferences and their reading habits. The final questions asked the students about their previous experiences with informational text, in order to determine what attracts and detracts students to nonfiction texts.

Individual Interviews. Using modifications from Mohr's Interview Protocol of Children's Book Preferences (2006) (Appendix B) to further explore and understand preference among students, we conducted individual interviews with seven students (3 female, 4 male) from three different classrooms. We selected students with a wide range of academic abilities and reading levels. Additionally, because of our particular interest in informational text, we purposefully selected students who expressed a preference for informational text in their survey responses and overall reading selections. The student interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions that explored students' rationales for choosing particular texts.

To minimize coercion and to capture authentic responses from students, we relied upon an outside interviewer. The interviewer was a paraprofessional with 15 years of working experience. Although the interviewer worked in one of the third-grade classrooms, she was not responsible for the classroom management or grading of any participants. The research team audiotaped and transcribed all the interviews. These interviews followed a semi-structure format;

the interviewer encouraged students to expand on their responses and often posed follow-up questions to students' initial responses.

Table 1

Texts Presented During Student Survey

Title	Author	Genre	Lexile Level
Hooray for Reading Day	Margery Cuyler	Realistic Fiction	380L
The Napping House	Audrey Wood	Fiction	
Fire and Floods	Kate Waters	Informational	610L
Wayside Schools Gets a Little Stranger	Louis Sachar	Fiction	440L
Henry's Freedom Box	Ellen Levine	Narrative Informational	380L
Passage to Freedom	Ken Mochizuki	Narrative Informational	670L

Relax and Read. Because an additional objective of our study was to capture students' independent text selections when not influenced by the classroom teacher, we incorporated observations of students' book choices over a six-week period during an independent reading period titled *Relax and Read* (Appendix C). *Relax and Read* occurred in the classroom once a week. During this time, the teachers gave students approximately 35 minutes to read a book of choice from any genre. The students could have brought the book from home, borrowed it from the classroom or school library, and/or picked the book based on a recommendation by a classmate, teacher, family member, or friend. At the conclusion of the *Relax and Read* period, students responded to a prompt in which they recorded what they chose to read (title, author, and genre) and their reasons for their text choice.

Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the multiple sources of data, we first focused on the quantitative components of the student survey. The research team tallied the data to understand the total number of students who responded in particular ways (e.g., the total number of participants who preferred fictional books and the total number of students that preferred nonfiction books). We then analyzed the additional data using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by reading and re-reading student responses to code for emerging categories. After identifying key themes, we added and refined categories until we accounted for all responses (see Table 2 for a sampling of themes). To understand the match between students' expressed text preferences and their actual text choices, we compared the survey results to information provided on the *Relax* and *Read* responses. To provide a more descriptive and balanced view of the data, we triangulated data across multiple sources (interviews, open-ended survey responses, and open-ended *Relax and Read* responses).

Table 2

Key Themes Emerging from the Data

Themes	Example of Student Response
Preference for genre	Because I like to read real books.
	Because I love reading about nonfiction and about what happened in the past.
	I read picture books the most because you can't imagine anything so you look at the pictures in them. If you can't read them you can look at the pictures.
	I love reading fiction books the most.
	They are make believe and I like it.
Interest	I think they are cool.
	The books are very interesting and they tell about something.
	Because it is fun and you have lots of information.
	I read this genre the most of fiction because it's interesting to me and I think it is fun to read.
Guided by curriculum	Because we use fiction books for two months and we use nonfiction books for one month.
Humor	Because its cover and illustrations are very interesting and funny.
	Because its funny.
Desire to learn	I want to learn about floods.
	Because it's about fire and floods and I like to learn about fire and water.
	Because fire and floods are two of my favorite things to learn about.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand third-grade students' text preferences and their attitudes towards informational text. Data from students' surveys, interviews, and independent reading selections revealed several themes, discussed in detail below.

Frequency of Nonfiction Reading

Several studies have reported on the scarcity of informational text within the elementary classroom (Casbergue & Plauché, 2003; Chapman et al., 2007; Duke, 2000, 2003, 2004; Duke et al., 2003; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Saul & Dieckman, 2005; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). These studies, however, have focused on teacher perception, whereas our curiosity stemmed from students' perceptions of informational text. As was found in previous studies focused on teacher perception, our student participants claimed to read nonfiction texts less frequently than fictional texts. Figures 1 and 2 display the breakdown of how often students claim to read nonfiction texts in comparison to how often students claim to read fictional texts.

Figure 1

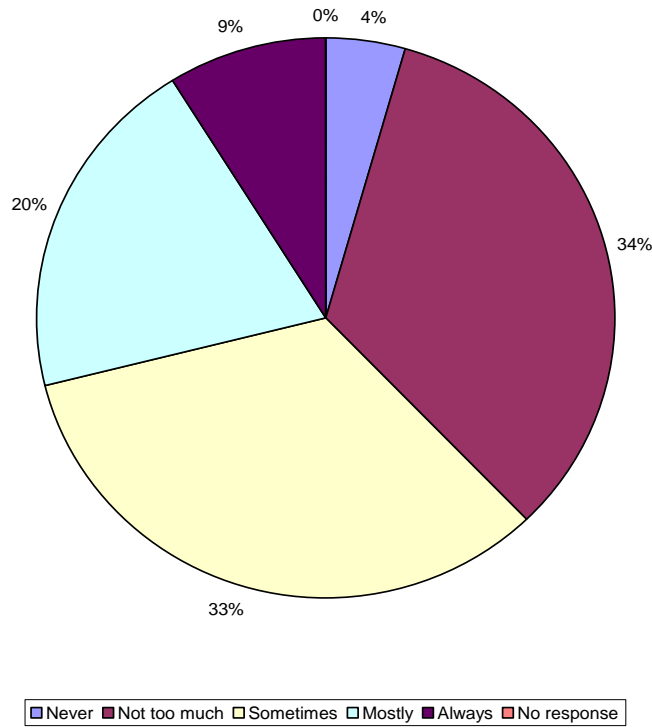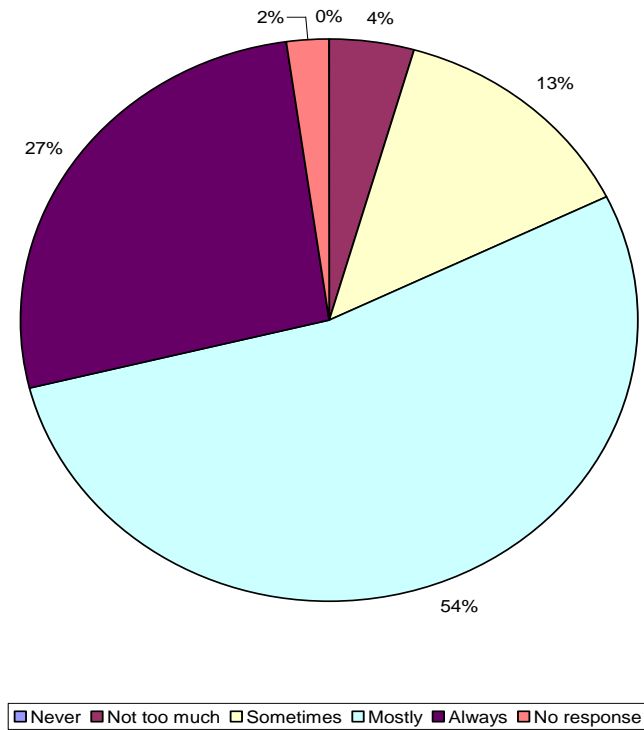*Students' Self-Reported Frequency of Nonfiction Reading*

Never | Not too much | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | No response

Figure 2

Students' Self-Reported Frequency of Fiction Reading

Never | Not too much | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | No response

Results indicated that students read fictional text more frequently than nonfiction text. About 54% of the students claimed to read fiction most of the time, while only about 20% claimed to read nonfiction most of the time. Furthermore, only about 5% claimed to read fiction infrequently, while about 22% chose to read nonfiction infrequently. Participants also reviewed their individual book logs to report on the genre that they read most frequently. Individual book logs indicated that 80% of the students most frequently read fiction. Only 16% claimed to read nonfiction books most frequently, while 4% reported picture books as the genre they read the most.

Although the results revealed that students read fictional texts most often, their responses were different when expressing their intent for future reading. When asked about which type of text students hoped to read in the upcoming school year, they indicated preferences dispersed more evenly among genres. Eighteen students (12 male, 6 female) – or 40% of our participants - stated a desire to read nonfiction texts. Twenty-three students (10 male, 13 female; 51% of the participants) hoped to read fictional text, while four students (0 male, 4 female; 8% of the participants) hoped to read picture or poetry books. It is important to note the disconnect pointed out by our data: Though most students appeared to be reading fictional text more frequently, a significant portion stated the desire to read more nonfiction text in future schooling.

Students' Self-Reported Text Genre Preferences

Survey data indicated that students preferred reading fictional text to informational text. Out of the 45 participants, 30 students (14 male, 16 female) stated a preference for fictional text, while only 12 students (6 male and 6 female) espoused a preference for informational text. Three students gave equal preference to both fictional and informational text. The results from students' *Relax and Read* logs confirmed the findings of the initial survey; data from 159 *Relax and Read* responses completed by the 45 participants indicated that students chose to read fictional text 121 times and informational texts only 38 times.

Table 3

Students' Frequency of Genre Reading

Frequency with which students self-reported reading information across all reading habits	Percentage of students ranking frequency at this level for nonfiction reading	Percentage of students ranking frequency at this level for fiction reading
Never	4.44%	0.00%
Not Too Much	33.33%	4.44%
Sometimes	33.33%	13.33%
Mostly	20.00%	53.33%
Always	8.89%	26.67%
No Response	0.00%	2.22%

Different trends emerged, however, when students were asked to select from individual titles; in fact, students here demonstrated a more equal preference for both informational and fictional text. In initial surveys, students selected a book from a variety of genres; here, 25 students (17

male, 8 female) picked an informational text and 20 students (5 male, 15 female) selected a fictional text. Table 3 displays students' text selections as disaggregated by gender. Seventeen male students chose an informational text, while only eight female students did. Conversely, 20 female students chose a fictional text, while only five male students did the same. Thus, it appears that male students showed a preference for selecting informational text, while their female counterparts opted for fiction.

The Match between Students' Self-Reported Text Preferences and Their Reading Habits

An additional purpose of this study was to understand any emerging patterns between which text genre students espouse to prefer and their actual text selections, particularly when given the opportunity to select books for independent reading. To address this line of inquiry, we compared participants' survey responses with their text selections during *Relax and Read*. Fifteen students (4 male, 11 female) showed a direct match between their self-reported text preferences and their reading habits. Thirteen of these students consistently preferred fiction across multiple data sources; they chose the fictional book when presented with a variety of text selections, they stated their preferences for fiction in several survey questions, and they explained that they hoped to read more fictional text throughout the school year. Two students showed similar consistency across data sources, but ranked informational text as their preference.

Twenty students showed a correlation between their preference and their reading habits. These students fell into two categories. Fourteen of these 20 students (9 male, 5 female) chose to read fiction most of the time during *Relax and Read*, reported reading fictional text most frequently, and stated their preferences for fictional text in survey questions. However, 10 out of the 14 (7 male, 3 female) chose an informational text when presented with a variety of text selections, and eight (4 male, 4 female) out of the 14 stated that they hoped to read more informational text throughout the school year. Four of these 20 students chose an informational text when presented with a variety of text selections, stated their preferences for informational text in several survey questions, and explained that they hoped to read more informational text throughout the school year; however, these students chose to read fictional text more than informational text during *Relax and Read.*

How Informational Text Topics Attract Students

A final intent of the study was to understand how the topic of a text influenced a student's text choice. To address this question, we relied upon students' responses to survey questions as well as open-ended interviews with a select number of participants. It appeared that students' text selection was highly influenced by the topic of the informational books, as demonstrated in their survey responses. In fact, 25 students (13 male, 12 female) selected a book because of their preference for its topic or out of an interest in learning more about its topic. When asked what made an informational reading experience enjoyable, students provided the following comments, all indicative of the importance of the book's topic:

1. "I enjoyed reading this book because I like big and wild cats."
2. "[I selected the book] because it's my favorite sport."
3. "[I selected the book] because I really want to learn about space and what happens in space."
4. "I enjoyed reading this book because I want to see how Abraham freed the slaves."
5. "[I selected the book] because I like sea animals and they have so much information."

When the research team asked students about their least favorite informational text, their comments related to the book's topic, such as "I did not enjoy read the book about frogs because I am not interested in them" or "because I do not like bugs." The influence of text topic on students' opinions of the book appeared across multiple data sources. Students mentioned the specific topic of the book 20 times on the *Relax and Read* prompt sheets when describing why they chose to read the book. Similarly, in individual interviews, when asked why students picked a particular book, they made statements such as, "Cause I don't know much about animals and I want to learn more"; or "I wanted to know more about sitting bull."

In order to understand which specific text topics are of interest to students, we examined the list of titles that students provided as their favorite and least favorite informational texts. Books about animals or insects drew strong opinions; nineteen students listed a book about animals or insects as the best nonfiction book they ever read, while 16 students listed a book of the same topic as the worst. Books related to science topics appeared with similar popularity; thirteen students listed a book about science-related topics as their favorite nonfiction book, and 13 listed one as their least favorite. Other text topics included people (listed as five students' favorite nonfiction book and another five students' least favorite nonfiction book), geography (mentioned explicitly by three students), and sports (provided by one student).

Another reason students were attracted to informational text was a desire to learn. Thirteen students identified an information book as their favorite because it met their desire to acquire facts and information about a certain topic. In individual interviews, similar patterns arose when we asked students to explain their text choices. Students responded by saying, "[I selected the book because] I don't know that much about animals and I want to learn more..."; "I looked through it and it seemed like a good book because I like to learn about different animals"; and "[I selected the book because] I want to know more about Sitting Bull." Furthermore, out of the 38 times students chose to read a nonfiction text during *Relax and Read*, they stated their desire to learn 17 times (11 male, 6 female) as the reason they chose the book.

Discussion

The results of this study offer insights into third-grade students' attitudes towards and perceptions of informational text. Key findings included:

1. Third-grade students demonstrated an increased familiarity with and preference for fictional text.
2. The self-reported text preferences of third-grade students often matched their reading habits.
3. Third-grade students showed an interest in reading nonfiction text in future reading and later grade levels.

The key implications stemming from these findings are discussed below.

Students' Increased Familiarity with and Preference for Fictional Text

First, findings revealed that the third graders in this study had more familiarity with and exposure to fictional text. This study revealed that informational reading is still relatively scarce in the primary grades almost a decade after Duke (2000) brought the issue to light. Additionally, our

results confirmed earlier research highlighting how teachers underexpose elementary school students to informational text (e.g., Duke, 2003, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 2000, 2006).

Countering the results of Moss (2005), who found that students in first through third grades were more likely to choose informational books, the students of this study displayed a preference for fictional text. Similar to the work of Boraks, Hoffman, and Bauer (1997), many of the participants in this study identified fictional text as their favorite genre. This response led the researchers to ask several follow-up questions about the origin of students' preference for fictional text. Do students prefer fictional text because they saw their teachers use it more frequently in classroom instruction? Did students prefer fictional text because they were more comfortable with maneuvering through the familiar genre? Ultimately, we believed that this preference for fictional text was a learned behavior, where exposure and familiarity influence students' preference of the genre.

Our belief that students have a learned preference for fictional text has important instructional implications. Kofmel (2005) argued that it is impossible for readers to develop preference for a genre without exposure to the genre. Moreover, she argued that a student must also establish a relationship with a particular genre in order to appreciate it. If students select fictional text merely because of their lack of familiarity with informational text, teachers must then show young readers the purposes of and the advantages for informational text. As teachers are more deliberate in showcasing informational text, students may then be more likely to select it in independent reading. Being that primary grade students had limited exposure to informational text, it was no surprise that the students of this study prefer the fiction genre.

It is also possible that students in our study seemed to prefer fictional text because it was more readily available in their classroom libraries. It is possible that teachers stocked the classroom libraries with more fictional texts because they likely owned more fictional texts and did not have funds to purchase informational texts. Logically, then, if teachers stocked classroom libraries with more fictional than informational text, students may select fictional text more frequently. While we did not specifically look at the breakdown of text genre in the classroom libraries of this study, it would be interesting to look for a possible connection between text availability and student reading preferences.

Students' Desire to Read More Nonfiction Text

While the students of this study saw themselves as fiction readers, they expressed curiosity for alternate genres in their ongoing reading. This trend is consistent with Moss's (2005) work, which explored the appeal of nonfiction text among primary grade students. As noted by Boraks et al. (1997), students' desire to read more nonfiction text challenged teachers to promote a wider variety of texts within primary grade classrooms. We must also consider that the research study itself influenced students' text choices. It is possible that students expressed a desire to read more informational text because they aimed to please the researchers. In any case, our hope is that teachers will capitalize on students' expressed desire to read more informational text. We encourage teachers to find creative and engaging ways to incorporate informational text into classroom instruction. Additionally, we encourage teachers to look at their own classroom libraries to ensure that informational text is readily available.

Mirroring the findings of Mohr (2006) regarding the informational selection processes, the majority of participants in this study were highly influenced by topic as well as a desire to learn

or be taught. As with previous studies (Doiron, 2003; Young et al., 2007), students were particularly attracted to books about animals, insects, and science topics. These engaging topics served to motivate students, especially struggling readers. The students in this study viewed nonfiction reading as both meaningful and challenging. As reading engagement theory (Guthrie et al., 2000) explained, students who viewed a reading task as meaningful were willing to invest more time and effort into the task. Furthermore, students who were engaged in a task had an easier time grasping, retaining, and transferring knowledge (Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2000). Thus, teachers should help students understand how informational text can address their natural curiosities.

Instructional Implications: Bringing More Informational Text into K-5 Classrooms

As our work reveals that students are still largely underexposed to informational text but express a curiosity in the genre, we join the many researchers (Duke, 2000; Duke et al., 2003; Flowers, & Flowers, 2009; Moss, 2003) who encourage teachers to increase their use of informational text in classroom instruction and libraries. Fortunately, there is an abundance of high-quality informational text. Leal, Cunningham, and Mowrer (2006) noted that informational books "have made major advances in providing interesting topics in an appealing manner" (p. 1). Teachers today are fortunate to have available "an influx of informational text…covering almost any subject" (p. 2). As publishing houses have made informational text both more attractive and more engaging for students, teachers must capitalize on this abundance of text.

It is not merely enough to increase the quantity of informational text; teachers and librarians must focus on the quality of these texts and select books with much thought and care. Moss, Leone, and DiPillo (1997) suggested that teachers and librarians consider five criteria when selecting informational text: (1) the authority of the author, (2) that accuracy of the text content, (3) the appropriateness of the book for its audience, (4) the literary artistry, including engaging information and devices to hook readers, and (5) the appearance and attractiveness of the book. When selecting quality titles on a wide range of topics, teachers can take advantage of multiple resources, including book reviews from the American Library Association, and awards for nonfiction titles such as the National Council of Teachers of English's Orbis Pictus Award and the American Library Association's Robert F. Siebert Awards. Teachers must stock classroom libraries with informational texts representing a range of reading levels so that the genre is available to both English Language Learners and struggling readers.

In addition to increasing the number of quality informational text used in classroom instruction and included in classroom libraries, teachers should use informational text as a teaching and learning tool. Teachers also need to learn the academic consequences of the unequal representation of informational text. Elementary educators and researchers must help teachers see the instructional opportunities in informational text. Professional development efforts could help teachers incorporate informational text into read-alouds (Duke & Kays, 1998), into guided and independent reading (Duke, 2004), into lessons on decoding and phonemic awareness (Duke, Martineau, Frank, & Bennett-Armistead, 2003), and into reading comprehension and writing instruction (Duke, 2004, Purcell-Gates & Duke, 2003). If teachers could see the benefits of using informational text to address the entire spectrum of literacy skills, then they may be more likely to use it.

Lastly, we encourage teachers to make themselves more familiar with their students' reading preferences. If teachers see students naturally tending towards one genre of text, they may be

better equipped to steer students toward other genres. A survey of preferences can maximize teachers' knowledge of student interest and inform classroom instruction. By understanding how students' interests relate to reading engagement theory (Guthrie et al., 2000), teachers may be better equipped to diversify students' text selections. In addition, teachers must consider the implications that gender may have on text choice. Though our data stemmed from a relatively small population, we did notice that boys expressed more interest in informational text. Thus, we encourage teachers to find innovative ways to aid girls in selecting informational text.

Future Directions and Concluding Thoughts

While our work focuses solely on third-grade students, it would be logical to extend similar work to other grades. Future research also should explore teachers' attitudes toward informational text and whether teachers' text preferences affect classroom practice. Because the scarcity of informational texts in elementary classrooms may be tied to teachers' reluctance to use it in their classroom instruction (Duke, 2000; Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Saul & Dieckman, 2005; Yopp & Yopp, 2000), a study of how teacher's text preference influences students' text preferences may provide a comprehensive examination of teachers' attitudes toward the genre.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of helping students in primary grades find an entry point into informational text. The third-grade students in this study demonstrated a desire to read informational text, but their classroom reading habits told a much different story. Our hope is that as teachers incorporate informational text into their daily routines, students will increase their comfort level in both selecting and using informational text.

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APPENDIX A:
A SURVEY OF READING PREFERENCES

Third Grade Student Reading Survey

1. Look at the four books on the table. If you could choose only one book to read, which book would it be?

    Why would you choose that book instead of the others?

2. Look at your book log. What genre of books do you read most frequently?

    ___ Picture Books ___ Poetry Books ___ Non-fiction Books ___ Fiction Books

    Why do you read this genre the most?

3. ___ I like <u>fictional books</u> (made-up stories) better than nonfiction books (real stories).

    Why do you prefer to read <u>fictional books</u>?

<div align="center">OR</div>

    ___ I like <u>nonfiction books</u> (real stories) better than fictional books (made-up stories).

    Why do you prefer to read <u>nonfiction books</u>?

4. How often do you read <u>nonfiction books</u> (real stories)?

    ___ Never ___ Not too much ___ Sometimes ___ Mostly ___ Always

5. How often do you read <u>fictional books</u> (made-up stories)?

    ___ Never ___ Not too much ___ Sometimes ___ Mostly ___ Always

6. What was the best <u>nonfiction book</u> you ever read about?

    Why did you enjoy reading this <u>nonfiction book</u>?

7. What was the worst <u>nonfiction book</u> you ever read about?

    Why did you not enjoy reading this <u>nonfiction book</u>?

8. This school year which type of book do you hope to read the most?

    ___ Picture Books ___ Poetry Books ___ Non-fiction Books ___ Fiction Books

MOHR'S INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF CHILDREN'S BOOK PREFERENCES

I have many books here for you to look at. Look carefully at all these books and then decide which one book you would like to have as your own. You can only pick one of these books to keep, so take your time to choose your favorite one.

1. Did you pick one book that you would like to keep? Show me which one is your favorite. I would like to ask you a few questions about this book and I want to write down some of what you say. Is that okay?

2. What kind of book is it? [If the student needs help, ask,] Is this book a storybook or an information book? How do you know? (focus on genre)

3. What do you think the book is about? (focus on topic)

4. Tell me, why did you pick this book to keep? Why is this one [book] your favorite one in this group [of books]? (focus on personal connection)

5. What makes this book so special? What do you like about this book? (focus on features)

6. When you look at books, what do you look at in [or notice about] books that makes you want to read them? (focus on general selection strategies)

7. How did you make your decision to pick this one [book]? What did you do to decide? (focus on selection strategies for this book)

8. Do you think other students will like this book? Who else do you think might like this book? Why or why not? (focus on social aspects)

9. What are you going to do with this new book of yours? (focus on purpose and intent)

10. Is there anything else you want to tell me about this book?

Thank you for talking to me about these books. I will put your name down for this book and bring it to you in your classroom next week so that you can take it home with you.

APPENDIX C:
RELAX AND READ RESPONSE SHEET

Today during *Relax and Read,* I chose to read _____ written by
_____. The genre of this book is _____.

I chose to read this book because

_____
_____
_____.