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Abstract

Children’s nonfiction once had a reputation as a lackluster genre. However, the nonfiction books published today are noteworthy for their appeal and quality. This study’s purpose was to examine contemporary teachers’ perceptions of recent children’s nonfiction. Fourteen elementary teachers shared their opinions of contemporary nonfiction for children in written reflections, which were inductively analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The teachers addressed the following themes in their reflections: 1) presentation of the books, 2) the potential of books to support elementary readers, and 3) ways books could support learning opportunities. The findings indicate these teachers had a positive response to contemporary nonfiction, but they suggest there is still work to be done to ensure elementary students’ access to a diverse array of nonfiction books.

Introduction

In recent years, nonfiction books for children have received an increased emphasis in the field of literacy education. Scholarship such as Duke’s (2000) now-classic study of the scarcity of informational texts in first grade classrooms has called attention to the importance of sharing nonfiction with children. Further, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, [NGACBP & CCSSO] 2010) have placed more emphasis on reading nonfiction in the elementary curriculum across the United States. Meanwhile, nonfiction has become more prevalent on recommended book lists for teachers, including the International Literacy Association’s Teachers’ Choices Reading List, since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Dreher & Kletzien, 2016). Nonfiction appears to be gaining the recognition that it has arguably always deserved given its affordances as an instructional resource and a means of engaging children in reading.

Much of nonfiction’s newfound prominence could be a result of the genre’s increase in quality (Moss, 2003). Book awards like the Orbis Pictus (National Council of Teachers of English) and the Sibert Medal (Association for Library Service to Children) acknowledge the outstanding quality of nonfiction books published for today’s children. Although nonfiction has been changing since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Moss, 2003), additional changes to the genre have been documented more recently, such as the increase in graphics, text features, and synergy between visuals and text (e.g., Gill, 2009; Miller, 2013; Smith & Robertson, 2019; Shimek, 2018).

However, what elementary teachers think about this “new” nonfiction (Gill, 2009) is an understudied topic. Until recent years, nonfiction has been a neglected genre (Gill, 2009; Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013; Moss, 2003). Teachers believed nonfiction was boring and uninteresting to children (Colman, 2007), and in elementary classrooms, reading fiction was prioritized at nonfiction’s expense (Moss, 2003; Pappas, 1993; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Have the recent changes to nonfiction altered what teachers think about this genre? In this article, I report findings from a study in which elementary teachers were asked to share their perceptions of recently published nonfiction books for children.

This study’s findings may inform the work of both teachers and teacher educators. They may help teachers consider what others perceive as positive attributes of the nonfiction genre, encouraging them to seek books with these attributes to share with students. Including nonfiction books in the classroom is important because reading nonfiction can foster a variety of reading skills (e.g., Jeong et al., 2010; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Further, the inclusion of interesting and engaging nonfiction books may be especially important in the upper elementary grades because some students begin to devalue reading nonfiction between third and sixth grades (Parsons et al., 2018).

In addition, studying what teachers think about nonfiction is important because research suggests that teachers’ personal preferences influence their book selections (Jipson & Paley, 1991). Teachers’ likes and dislikes can impact the range of authors, genres, and content to which their students are exposed (Roser, 2004). Teachers’ book selections matter: a wide variety of reading choices in the classroom is an important factor in fostering students’ motivation to read (Gambrell, 2011). If teachers’ perceptions of contemporary nonfiction books are known and their possible biases toward this genre are understood, then teacher educators are better equipped to educate both aspiring and current teachers about the instructional and motivational value that nonfiction can offer, consequently encouraging teachers to place more nonfiction titles into the hands of children.

Theoretical Perspectives

Defining Children’s Nonfiction

Nonfiction can be regarded as the “literature of fact” (Moss, 2003). Nonfiction books are based on reality (Colman, 2007, 2011; Williams, 2009); they are grounded in real information about people, events, animals, and natural and social phenomena. However, clear definitions of nonfiction are difficult to find (Kiefer & Wilson, 2011), perhaps given the variety of text types that comprise this genre. There is no consistent way that terms related to nonfiction are used in education scholarship (Watkins & Liang, 2014; Williams, 2009).

Some identify subgenres of nonfiction, in particular *informational* or *expository* books and *narrative* or *literary* nonfiction (e.g., Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Duke, 2000; Ness, 2011; Williams, 2009). Informational books are “topic-oriented” and nonlinear (Williams, 2009, p. 253), meaning they may not need to be read from beginning to end; they include content-specific vocabulary and text structures like compare/contrast and problem/solution (Dreher & Kletzien, 2016; Ness, 2011). A book like Katherine Roy’s (2014) *Neighborhood Sharks* is an example of a title that some might classify as informational. Each page spread of the book addresses a new topic

and is introduced with a heading, such as “Endless Teeth.” In contrast to informational books, narrative books are linear and have a story-like structure (Dreher & Kletzien, 2016; Williams, 2009), and they present facts as they occur over a sequence of time (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001, 2002). Biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and titles recounting historical or contemporary events are often considered narrative nonfiction. For example, *Spooked!* by Gail Jarrow (2018) uses a chronological structure to inform readers of the events leading up to the famous Orson Wells broadcast that prompted some Americans to believe an alien invasion was imminent.

Arguably, the dichotomy of *informational* and *narrative* nonfiction may be less important today than it once was. Some nonfiction books published for today’s children include a blend and balance of both narrative and informational text; for example, Joyce Sidman’s (2018) *The Girl Who Drew Butterflies* is a biography, yet ideas from the main narrative are frequently elaborated as expository text appearing within side bars and large text boxes. Further, Watkins and Liang (2014) explain that literary nonfiction is categorized as a form of informational text within the Common Core State Standards (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010), suggesting that the purpose of a text may be more significant than its structure. Perhaps the distinction between informational and narrative nonfiction will matter less as the genre evolves. Indeed, Pappas (2006) notes that understandings of genre are dynamic and ever-changing.

Some also address subgenres of nonfiction such as informational poetry (Duke, 2000) and hybrid texts blending fiction and fact such as books in the *Magic School Bus* series (e.g., Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rohloff & May, 2017; Williams, 2009). Sometimes these hybrid texts are also called “dual purpose” books (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001) or “mixed” books (Dreher & Kletzien, 2016). Others contend that informational comics should be included as part of the nonfiction genre (Dallacqua & Peralta, 2019). For the purpose of this article, nonfiction books are defined as texts with a primary emphasis on conveying factual information, and this includes books that may have some fantasy elements, books employing a comics or graphic novel format, and books representing subgenres of nonfiction such as informational books and narrative nonfiction. Indeed, the teachers who participated in this study examined books representing a variety of nonfiction subgenres as well as books with some fictitious components, such as *Older Than Dirt* (Brown & Perfit, 2017), a comic featuring two talking animals whose back-and-forth banter informs readers about the history of the Earth’s formation.

The Importance of Reading Nonfiction

Though instructional standards such as the Common Core State Standards (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) require the inclusion of nonfiction in the elementary school curriculum, nonfiction’s importance extends beyond a mandate. Research suggests that reading nonfiction has many benefits to children in the elementary grades. Exposure to nonfiction in the elementary grades can prepare children for the kinds of texts they will encounter in high school and college and as adults in the workforce (Jeong et al., 2010). Indeed, nonfiction texts such as websites, newspapers, manuals, textbooks, and technical documents comprise the reading diets of most adults. Furthermore, nonfiction books can teach students about concepts and expose them to content-specific vocabulary, and they are often written in reader-friendly ways that promote comprehension (Moss, 2003). Reading nonfiction can help children build their knowledge about the world (Moss et al., 1997) and make

connections to new and previous experiences (Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Informational books are particularly beneficial for children to read in the elementary grades. School achievement and workplace success require facility with informational text (Duke, 2004), and informational books can help students learn the discourse of disciplines like science (Pappas, 2006). Teachers in grades K-5 believe informational books are beneficial because they help children construct new knowledge, learn reading skills and strategies, and prepare for state tests (Ness, 2011).

Importantly, nonfiction can also motivate children to read (Duke, 2000, 2004; Moss, 2003). Nonfiction can help students satisfy their curiosity about the world (Moss, 2003), and some children would rather read nonfiction. Research findings suggest that some kindergarten students (Pappas, 1993) and first graders (Mohr, 2006) demonstrate a preference for nonfiction. However, Parsons et al. (2018) found that students' value for reading nonfiction declines steadily every year between third and sixth grade, and students in these grades have a preference for reading fiction. Given these findings, especially in consideration of the ways children can benefit from reading nonfiction, modeling an enthusiasm for nonfiction and selecting engaging nonfiction books for today's elementary classrooms is a critical undertaking.

Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Nonfiction

Despite the importance of sharing nonfiction books with children, in the not-so-distant past, nonfiction was overlooked by both teachers and researchers (Gill, 2009; Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013; Moss, 2003). Teachers have traditionally favored sharing fiction stories in the classroom, pushing nonfiction into an unfortunate role as the "stepchild" of children's literature (Moss, 2003, p. 5). Teachers have tended to assume that children prefer reading stories (Dreher & Kletzien, 2016) and believe nonfiction is not interesting (Colman, 2007). Consequently, fiction has been taught more frequently to children in the early grades (Moss, 2003; Pappas, 1993; Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Informational books have been particularly maligned and overlooked (Ness, 2011). Some teachers believe informational books are dull and difficult (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001) and too challenging for students in the primary grades (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). Others worry that children will think these books are not interesting (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002). Indeed, in her landmark study, Duke (2000) determined that first grade teachers utilized informational text, a subgenre of nonfiction, for less than four minutes per day. However, contemporary educators now recognize the value of nonfiction; on average, teachers in grades K-5 report using informational books for approximately 32 minutes each day and recognize the benefits of using these books in their classrooms (Ness, 2011).

Changes to Children's Nonfiction

The children's nonfiction of yesteryear was lamentable for its "dry, stodgy" writing (Stewart & Young, 2018, p. 11). Nonfiction books of the past often demanded a linear reading (Kerper, 2001) and were considered boring by

some (Moss, 2003). Illustrations were drab, and books were written to support the curriculum rather than pique the interests of potential readers (Moss, 2003).

Fortunately, the nonfiction genre has improved dramatically in recent years (Gill, 2009; Miller, 2013; Moss, 2003). Contemporary nonfiction for children features engaging text (Gill, 2009) and is written in a variety of styles such as narrative, expository, and verse (Moss, 2003). There is also greater attention to accuracy, with authors frequently providing information about their process for researching and writing books (Gill, 2009). Indeed, members of nonfiction awards committees such as the Orbis Pictus Award pay special attention to the accuracy of information in the books they evaluate (Wilson, 2006).

In addition, today's nonfiction invites more interaction from readers, such as the inclusion of hands-on activities (Gill, 2009; Moss, 2003), and books with multiple pathways to construct meaning are becoming more common (Kerper, 2001). More nonfiction books than ever are nonlinear and multimodal like books in the *DK Eyewitness* series (Dresang, 2008; Pek, 2018), which often feature full page spreads with images accompanied by text that can be read in any order. Dresang (2008) notes that in the 1990s, *DK Eyewitness* books were innovative in their use of nonlinear and nonsequential book designs that demanded "a hypertextual approach to thinking and reading" (p. 296), but this type of design is now common. Nonfiction published in the present also gives increased attention to visuals and design elements (Gill, 2009; Moss, 2003). Though visuals have been important since the publication of *Orbis Pictus* - the first nonfiction picture book for children - in the 1600s (Kiefer & Wilson, 2011), synergy between words and pictures in nonfiction picture books has increased in recent years, especially in books published since 2011 (Shimek, 2018). Smith and Robertson (2019) also observe that design elements such as dialogue balloons and graphics containing information have become more frequent in nonfiction books published since 2010. Further, many newly published nonfiction books have "some kind of challenging characteristic" like the presence of multiple genres or supplemental information presented in different ways (Smith & Robertson, 2019, p. 198).

Changes to children's nonfiction books can be understood through the framework of Dresang's (1999) theory of Radical Change. This predictive theory explains the evolution in children's books since the onset of the digital age in the 1990s and can be used as a lens for understanding and critiquing the changing landscape of children's literature. In her Radical Change theory, Dresang identifies three types of changes in children's books:

- *Changing forms and formats* (Type One): books that are non-sequential or nonlinear, feature a synergy of text and pictures, and different formats
- *Changing perspectives* (Type Two): books that include multiple perspectives and the perspectives of people who have been historically marginalized (e.g., children and teens, People of Color)
- *Changing boundaries* (Type Three): books that address controversial or once "taboo" subjects, feature complex characters or people, and include endings without neat resolutions

Recently published nonfiction titles for children demonstrate these changes. *Older Than Dirt* (Brown & Perfit, 2017) exemplifies Type One change through its graphic novel format and narration of Earth's history from the perspectives of a comedic worm/groundhog duo. Type Two change is found in books like *We Are Grateful*

(Sorrell & Lessac, 2018), which tells of the traditions of a contemporary Cherokee family, a topic that is often overlooked in children’s literature. *Strange Fruit* (Golio & Riley-Webb, 2017), which addresses the difficult topics of racism and lynching, is representative of Type Three change. Other examples of recently published Radical Change nonfiction books abound, and fortunately so: Dresang contends books with Radical Change features have special appeal to children growing up in the digital age.

Teachers as Gatekeepers

Yet appeal to child readers is not always a criterion that teachers use to make selections for elementary classrooms. Jipson and Paley (1991) assert the selective tradition exists in elementary teachers’ book choices. According to their research, elementary teachers often select books because of their content or alignment to the curriculum, but teachers also make choices based on “personal and aesthetic reasons” such as loving the story or a title’s status as an award-winner or a classic of children’s literature (p. 153). Roser (2004) argues that when teachers make book selections based on their unexamined biases and preferences for particular kinds of books, the classroom library and the curriculum reflect these preferences, and consequently, students’ access to a diverse range of topics and genres becomes limited. As Roser explains, the classroom collection becomes skewed when teachers make choices based on personal preferences. Teachers can be regarded as “the gatekeepers for the text children actually encounter in classrooms” (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001, p. 418), a position articulated recently in a leadership brief from the International Literacy Association (2018). From this perspective, teachers have a powerful role in determining what kinds of books their students experience in school. In this article, I take the stance that understanding what teachers think about children’s books is critical because of their role as curricular gatekeepers. Therefore, examining their perceptions of children’s books is a significant undertaking.

Methods

This study explores elementary teachers’ perceptions of contemporary nonfiction books for children. Data were collected during a three-day professional development workshop in June 2019. The workshop included 14 teachers, and it took place at an elementary school shortly after the conclusion of the 2018-2019 school year. The workshop was supported by a Presidential Summer Incentive Award from the University of North Georgia, and the budget allowed for 15 teachers to participate. While 15 teachers originally signed up to participate in the workshop and research study, one teacher did not attend on any of the workshop days.

The 14 other teachers participated fully in all workshop activities. These teachers taught in four school districts located in the southeastern United States, and they had an average of 13.9 years of teaching experience. One teacher, Beth, taught in an affluent, suburban school with a large population of Latinx, White, and Asian students. The remaining teachers taught in rural districts with predominately White student populations; many of these teachers worked at schools receiving Title 1 funds (i.e., schools serving a large number of children experiencing poverty). Table 1 depicts information about the participants, including their self-reports of how

often they used nonfiction books in their teaching and how many nonfiction books they had in their classroom libraries. All names are pseudonyms.

To recruit teachers, I contacted school administrators with whom I have a professional relationship and asked them to share information about the workshop with faculty. All prospective participants were informed that during the workshop, they would be asked to share their opinions about nonfiction books as part of a research study. Teachers signed up for the workshop on a first-come, first-serve basis until the maximum number of participants was reached. Several additional teachers signed up and were placed on a waiting list, but these teachers were no longer available when a spot opened on the first day of the workshop.

Table 1. Participants in the Study

| Name | Position | Years Teaching | Age Range | Estimated Daily Time Teaching with Nonfiction Books | Estimated % of Nonfiction Books in Classroom Library |
|-----------|------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Beth | Grade 1 Teacher | 1 | 40-49 | 30-45 minutes | 60-70% |
| Madison | Grade 2 Teacher | 1 | 20-29 | 15 minutes | 10% |
| Charlotte | Grade 1 Teacher | 5 | 20-29 | 5-10 minutes | 20% |
| Liv | Grade 2 Teacher | 5 | 40-49 | 20 minutes | 10% |
| Elena | Grade 2 Gifted Teacher | 10 | 40-49 | 60 minutes | 20% |
| Nicole | Grade 4 Teacher | 13 | 40-49 | 30 minutes | 60% |
| Carly | K-5 Physical Education & Grade 2 Reading | 15 | 40-49 | 0 minutes | 10% |
| Diane | Grade 3 Teacher | 15 | 50-59 | 10-15 minutes | 30-40% |
| Lisa | Grade 3 Teacher | 15 | 30-39 | 15-20 minutes | 25% |
| Rachel | K-5 Media Specialist | 15 | 40-49 | 120 minutes | Not applicable |
| Lori | K-5 Media Specialist | 23 | 40-49 | 60-90 minutes | Not applicable |
| Macy | Grade 1 Teacher | 25 | 50-59 | 20 minutes | Less than 10% |
| Louise | Grade 2 Teacher | 25 | 60-69 | 60 minutes | 60% |
| Kate | Grade 4 Teacher | 26 | 40-49 | 30 minutes | 40% |

Prior to the workshop, the teachers were asked to complete an online survey about what they would like to learn and what kinds of nonfiction books they would like to receive for their classrooms. Because this survey was administered for planning purposes and completed prior to signing consent forms, data from this survey are not reported here. The survey results were used to determine workshop topics that would be of the greatest interest to the participating teachers. They were also used to help me select books to purchase for the teachers, who each received \$300 of nonfiction books to utilize during the workshop and keep for their classrooms at the workshop's conclusion. Most teachers indicated that they wanted books aligning to the standards of their grade level. For example, many of the second grade teachers requested books about life cycles because this topic is

one of the major units of study in their science curriculum. However, some teachers asked for books about topics that typically appeal to their students, such as animals and sports. I used the teachers' requests to make selections and order books through an online vendor.

Although the teachers' requests were my primary consideration when selecting books, I ensured that all of the books I chose were nonfiction children's books originally published or reissued between 2014 and 2019. Given the study's focus on examining teachers' perspectives of contemporary nonfiction books, I chose books that have been available to children within the past five years. Further, because understandings of the natural and social world are ever-changing, the nonfiction shared with children should be current (Moss, 2003). A five-year range enabled me to purchase recently published books with current information while accommodating participants' requests for books about certain topics.

I used a variety of resources to identify books to purchase for the workshop. For example, I consulted award lists such as the Sibert Medal, Orbis Pictus, and the National Science Teachers Association Outstanding Science Trade Books; I searched for books by topic in children's literature databases such as NoveList; and I examined publicly accessible children's book reviews on websites like *Kirkus* (www.kirkusreviews.com) and *School Library Journal* (www.slj.com). I also drew upon my own knowledge of quality nonfiction as a professor of children's literature and a member of the 2018 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal Committee. When making selections, I sometimes checked the reading levels of books using www.lexile.com if I was unsure whether a book would be accessible to readers in grades K-5.

In addition, I considered characteristics of "new" nonfiction (Gill, 2009) and books exemplifying types of Radical Change (Dresang, 1999) when I made selections. Some of the books purchased had these characteristics, such as *Robins!* (Christelow, 2017), which addresses the life cycle of a robin in a comics-style format, and *Trash Revolution* (Fyvie & Slavin, 2018), which uses punchy writing and engaging graphics to teach readers about pollution and recycling. However, not every book purchased for the workshop had these characteristics. Some books were more representative of traditional nonfiction, such as *Explore with Henry Hudson* (Cooke, 2014) and other titles in the *Travel with Great Explorers* series. As previously noted, books were selected based on participants' requests for certain topics, and some books were chosen because they aligned with the teachers' curriculum even if they did not have "new" nonfiction characteristics. Yet as the findings will demonstrate, these more traditional books were still useful for the study because the participating teachers sometimes compared them to books representative of "new" nonfiction.

Ultimately, a total of 167 unique titles were purchased for the workshop. Some titles were purchased in multiple quantities, such as *Grand Canyon* by Jason Chin (2017), which aligns to science and social studies standards in several grade levels. Each teacher received a total of approximately 20 books. Between six and eight books were distributed to each teacher every day of the workshop.

A university colleague with literacy expertise collaborated with me to design and facilitate the workshop sessions. During the workshop, teachers learned about the recent changes to the children's nonfiction genre as

well as other topics of interest such as reading comprehension strategies and using nonfiction books as mentor texts for student writing. The workshop activities were intentionally designed to allow teachers to interact with their books. For example, after learning about Radical Change types (Dresang, 1999) and examples of Radical Change in current books, the teachers evaluated their own books to locate examples of these changes. Similarly, after a presentation about how to develop and utilize multimodal text sets, the teachers selected some of their books and located other resources to design a text set for an instructional unit of their choice.

At the end of each workshop day, teachers were asked to produce written reflections to share their perceptions of the books they examined. They were given reflection pages with open-ended prompts such as “Which book would you be most/least likely to share with students and why?” and “Which book did you enjoy most/least today, and for what reasons?” Prompts varied each day of the workshop, and between six and nine prompts were included on each reflection page. Asking teachers to produce a written reflection in response to prompts was an efficient way to collect insights from the 14 participants in the short amount of time available during the workshop, and this method allowed the teachers to gather their thoughts while their impressions of the books were fresh. Indeed, Beeghly (2005) found that when college students were asked to provide a written response to literature, they had time to think and organize their ideas without interruption. On the first day of the workshop, teachers were also asked to complete a questionnaire about how they use nonfiction in their classroom. The questionnaire was adapted (with permission) from Ness’s (2011) study of teachers’ attitudes about informational text. However, the wording of the questionnaire was changed from “informational text” (as in Ness’s original version) to “nonfiction.”

Teachers’ reflections were typed and placed in a spreadsheet for analysis. Given the exploratory nature of the study, I utilized the inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Berg, 2007), which involves determining themes through analysis of the data rather than examining the data through an existing framework. A teacher’s response to a given prompt served as the unit of analysis.

To analyze the data, I first assigned each response an open code according to its meaning. Some responses were given multiple codes because they communicated multiple ideas. For example, on the first day of the workshop, the teachers were asked what they thought about the changes they noticed in contemporary nonfiction. Liv wrote the following: “The two biggest things I found were the illustrations and subject matter. The illustrations were more vibrant and descriptive. The subject matter is more descriptive and goes more in depth.” This was coded as both “visuals” and “depth” because Liv addresses why she prefers the visuals as well as the in-depth subject matter. During this initial phase, I recorded memos to capture emerging ideas and themes.

Following the open coding, I organized the data into two broad categories: *positive perceptions* and *negative perceptions* as a way to begin looking for patterns within the data. Responses conveying positive perceptions of the books were placed in one tab of the spreadsheet, and responses conveying negative perceptions were placed in another tab. Informed by memos recorded during open coding, I analyzed all of the teachers’ responses and the corresponding open codes, and I determined major themes that teachers addressed in their reflections. These major themes included: 1) *presentation*, such as visual elements, writing, format, and text features; 2)

engagement and accessibility, such as the readability of the books and their potential to engage or interest readers; 3) *pedagogical potential*, such as classroom uses for the books and ways the books supported learning standards; and 4) *content*, such as the subject matter, information, or themes in the books. Each response was then coded a second time according to one of these themes.

After coding according to these four themes, it became clear that responses coded for *pedagogical potential* and *content* suggested the learning opportunities that nonfiction books can afford. Thus, these two themes were collapsed into a broader theme, *opportunities for learning*. The data were then coded a final time according to the three themes of *presentation*, *engagement and accessibility*, and *opportunities for learning*. These themes are addressed more fully in the following section. To honor the teachers' ideas and add trustworthiness to my interpretations of the data, I incorporate many quotes from their reflections in the description of the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Findings

Teachers' Uses of Nonfiction

As noted in the previous section, participating teachers completed an adapted version of a questionnaire originally developed by Ness (2011). The purpose of this questionnaire was to determine how often and in what ways the teachers were already using nonfiction in their classrooms. They self-reported how often they use nonfiction in their teaching and what percentage of nonfiction books were in their classroom libraries. These self-reports are included in Table 1. The teachers reported using nonfiction in their classrooms from a low of 0 minutes to a high of 90 minutes. Carly indicated that she does not use nonfiction at all in her teaching; although she instructs a segment of early intervention reading to second grade students, she primarily teaches physical education. Lori reported using nonfiction the most (90 minutes) in her role as her school's media specialist. Some teachers said they use nonfiction for a certain number of minutes, while other teachers provided a range (e.g., 30-45 minutes). If numbers on the low end of these self-reported ranges (e.g., 30 minutes when 30-45 minutes were reported) are calculated into an average, the participants spent 33.9 minutes per school day with nonfiction text. If numbers on the high end of these ranges are calculated into an average, the result is 38.2 minutes. When asked about factors limiting their ability to use nonfiction books in the classroom, four participants said that time was an issue. Lisa and Nicole also noted it is difficult to find appropriate books about some topics.

Teachers also estimated the percentage of nonfiction books in their classroom libraries. These percentages ranged from a low of "less than 10%" (Macy) to a high of 60% to 70% (Beth). If Macy's non-numeric response is excluded, and percentages on the low end of the reported ranges are calculated into an average, then the teachers had an average percentage of 31.4% of nonfiction books in their classroom libraries. If percentages on the high end of the ranges are calculated into an average (with Macy's response excluded), then the teachers had an average percentage of 33.2% of nonfiction books comprising their classroom libraries.

In the questionnaire, the teachers indicated how they use nonfiction in their classrooms. Reading aloud, student research, teaching writing, and teaching/introducing content were the most commonly reported ways they incorporate nonfiction in their teaching. Of the 14 teachers, 12 said they use nonfiction books when teaching science and social studies, 11 indicated they use nonfiction in English language arts, and 9 stated they use nonfiction to teach math. Lori, a school media specialist, said she uses nonfiction in other ways, such as teaching students about careers and behavior.

The teachers identified numerous benefits for using nonfiction in their classrooms or media centers. The most commonly noted benefits were engaging students in reading, teaching about text features, learning content and vocabulary, and reinforcing learning standards. However, the teachers were also asked to identify the challenges their students encounter with nonfiction. Half of the teachers said challenging vocabulary is a reason why students struggle with nonfiction, and six of them indicated the higher reading level of nonfiction texts creates difficulties for their students.

To sum up these findings, nearly all of the 14 participating teachers reported using nonfiction in their teaching and including nonfiction books in their classroom libraries. They utilized nonfiction in a variety of ways across content areas. They recognized several benefits of sharing nonfiction books with students, but they also explained the ways that nonfiction can be challenging for children in the elementary grades.

Perceptions of Contemporary Nonfiction

The teachers had an overwhelmingly positive response to the contemporary nonfiction titles they examined during the three days of the workshop. All 14 teachers expressed an appreciation of or preference for “new” nonfiction (Gill, 2009) in comparison to more traditional nonfiction books. They believed the nonfiction genre has changed for the better. As Rachel noted, “In today’s world, we need to compete with technology for the attention of our students. The „new“ nonfiction books tend to be more engaging.” Kate made a similar remark: “With access to technology it is important to also „up the game“ with the books students read.” Diane believed the recent changes to nonfiction “are awesome for kids” and explained that when she was a child, “Nonfiction was VERY difficult for me and BORING!” She contrasted the nonfiction books from her youth with the books available for children today, which she said are more interactive and colorful. Beth’s thoughts about contemporary nonfiction were shared by many of the other teachers: “I love the „new nonfiction.“ It is more engaging, inviting, and offers more entry levels for all students. It makes reading nonfiction fun and cool . . . Not just for us nerds!”

Three themes were prominent when the teachers shared their perceptions of contemporary nonfiction children’s books:

- *Presentation:* Teachers addressed the visual elements, writing style, format, and text features of the books.

- *Engagement and accessibility*: Teachers considered their own interest in the books, why their students would find the books engaging, and whether the books were readable (i.e., accessible) for students in the elementary grades.
- *Opportunities for learning*: Teachers described how the books could be used in classrooms to teach content or support learning standards.

Presentation: "They are different from traditional nonfiction"

Often, the teachers commented on the visual elements of the books such as illustrations and photographs. They appreciated books with colorful and vivid images and believed their students would feel the same way. As Lisa explained about *What a Waste* (French, 2019), "[The book was] so colorful, attracting, bold text/words, graphics and real life pictures. Kids will love it and learn while reading at the same time." Louise especially enjoyed the photographs in *The Hidden Life of a Toad* (Wechsler, 2017): "Pictures are alive!" Beth said she would be likely to share *Bloom Boom* (Sayre, 2019) with her students because of the "close up pics of seeds, buds, flowers, etc." and she liked that *Triangles* (Adler & Miller, 2015) included "fun, supportive illustrations." Some of the teachers felt particular books were aesthetically pleasing and made comments like Lori's: "*Dinosaurium* [Murray, 2018] is beautiful. Love the colors. Like a tea stain." Nicole appreciated the "beautiful art to accompany the text" in *Rivers of Sunlight* (Bang & Chisholm, 2017), and Charlotte said both *Perfectly Peculiar Plants* (Thorogood & Ronca, 2018) and *Neighborhood Sharks* (Roy, 2014) were "beautiful".

However, teachers had less appreciation for books lacking visual features. Carly said that among all the books she received during one session, she would be least likely to share *What is Climate Change?* (Herman, 2018) with her students because "it lacks visuals (color)." Two teachers said they disliked the visuals in *Tomochichi* (Schwartz, 2016) because "the illustrations are not overly engaging" (Madison) and "the illustrations aren't as vibrant and big" (Liv). Interestingly, this title is from the *Social Studies Readers* series and was presumably written to support the social studies curriculum rather than pique the interest of readers, suggesting it is more characteristic of traditional nonfiction books. Louise did not appear to like the other books in this series although they supported the second grade curriculum; she commented that *Mary Musgrove* (Maloof, 2016b) "reads like a textbook" and *James Oglethorpe* (Maloof, 2016a) was the "least appealing" book.

The teachers also considered text features when sharing their thoughts about the books. Madison noted that *A Seed is the Start* (Stewart, 2018) had "diagrams/captions add[ing] additional information," and Rachel appreciated that in *The Hidden Life of a Toad* (Wechsler, 2017), "the glossary has pictures along with the words." Some teachers appreciated the more traditional nonfiction books because of their text features. For example, Carly said the *Travel with Great Explorers* books "have many different types of text features that have great information and great visuals." Some teachers noted that certain books did not have good text features. For instance, Lisa and Diane both said *Buried Sunlight* (Bang & Chisholm, 2014) did not use many text features, and according to Diane, "the pictures are very bright and busy. I feel it makes it difficult to find the text features that are used." Though Rachel liked the glossary in *The Hidden Life of a Toad* (Wechsler, 2017), Madison and Beth both noticed that the book does not have any text features except in the backmatter.

The teachers did not make many comments about the format of the books. However, Kate observed that “Students enjoy comic type books” when she examined *Science Comics: Solar System* (Mosco & Chad, 2018). Nicole also liked how *The Split History of the Battles of Lexington and Concord* (Haugen, 2018) uses a different way of organizing the text. It is structured as a flip book; the book is flipped one way when reading about the perspective of the patriots, and the book is flipped the other way when reading about the British perspective. Liv did not like the book *Tomochichi* (Schwartz, 2016) “because the pages aren’t as big.” While Madison said she “loved the illustrations” in *Give Bees a Chance* (Barton, 2017), she felt the format of the book – which includes dialogue balloons and descriptive text scattered in various places across the pages – “would make it really hard to read aloud and would be overwhelming to young readers.”

Writing style was important when the teachers evaluated the books. They enjoyed books with interesting language, such as Elena when she observed that *Seeds Move!* (Page, 2019) “described the ways seeds move in very detailed and fun ways (snap a ride, burst open, slightest jostle).” Kate loved the introduction to *So Tall Within* (Schmidt & Minter, 2018): “The hook on the first two pages made me want to read more and look for text to text connections to tie into writing/social studies.” On the day she received the book, she summoned me over and showed me the first page, commenting on the elegant writing in the introduction. Lisa also liked the “writing segues” in *When Grandma Gatewood Took a Hike* (Houts & Magnus, 2016). Three teachers seemed to dislike the writing in books which included languages other than English. Macy and Madison both remarked on the difficulty of the Cherokee words appearing in *We are Grateful* (Sorrell & Lessac, 2018), and Charlotte said *When Angels Sing* (Mahin & Ramirez, 2018), a book mingling Spanish with English, “had words I had a hard time pronouncing. Did not hook my interest.”

Some teachers considered books that were presented from unusual or multiple perspectives. Madison liked *Sun!: One in a Billion* (McAnulty & Lewis, 2018) because it “told why the sun was important from the viewpoint of the sun. He also used fun language.” Liv enjoyed *I Am Jackie Robinson* (Meltzer & Eliopoulos, 2015) “because it has the points of view of children.” Nicole appreciated the “different perspectives” on the American Revolution, a topic addressed in her grade level’s standards, in both *Revolutionary Rogues* (Castrovilla & O’Brien, 2017) and *The Split History of the Battles of Lexington and Concord* (Haugen, 2018), and Kate made a similar remark about *Revolutionary Rogues*.

Madison summed up most teachers’ opinions about the way these books presented information when she noted, “I think [my students] would like them because of the fun illustrations. Also, because they are different than traditional nonfiction.” As Madison’s comment suggests, the teachers seemed to value the beauty of the books and the appealing ways in which text, images, and text features were presented in these contemporary nonfiction titles.

Engagement and Accessibility: “My kids would see it as a game”

In addition, the teachers wrote about how the books would be engaging and accessible to their students. They addressed accessibility when they shared that some books would be reader-friendly for elementary students,

such as Kate when she said *Revolutionary Rogues* (Castrovilla & O'Brien, 2017) would be “easy for younger children.” Likewise, Madison said *Jimmy Carter* (Haldy & Bane, 2016) “gives information in an easy to read format.” However, the teachers felt that some books were too long or difficult for their students, and they would be less likely to share such books. As Madison stated about *Aliens from Earth* (Batten & Doyle, 2016), “It is really long. I think it would be hard to keep the students engaged for the book.” Similarly, Charlotte said *Remember Little Bighorn* (Walker, 2015) is “very long and not super kid friendly,” and Lori felt *Newton's Rainbow* (Lasky & Hawkes, 2017) “is a bit long and begins to get too involved.”

The teachers considered how the topics of some books were personally interesting to them and would be interesting to students. For example, Lori felt *Coming Up Clutch* (Doeden, 2018) would have a lot of appeal in her library: “I love sports and find students love to discuss sports. It is a great meeting of the minds. High interest books are an important part of our collection.” Diane planned to share *I Am Jim Henson* (Meltzer & Eliopoulos, 2017) with her students because “the kids love the Muppets,” and Kate said she would share *Sea Otter Heroes* (Newman, 2017) and *Death Eaters* (Halls, 2019), which are both about animals, with her fourth grade students because the books are “high interest.” Sometimes teachers believed their students would simply not be interested in certain books. Liv thought *James Oglethorpe* (Maloof, 2016b) would not be “interesting for the age group I teach” although the book’s subject supports the social studies standards of her grade level. Nicole and Kate both said their students would not like *Explore Forces and Motion* (Swanson & Stone, 2016), but they thought it could be useful as a resource for teachers.

Other teachers considered the individual characteristics of their students when reflecting on the books. Although Madison, a second grade teacher, liked *Jimmy Carter* (Haldy & Bane, 2016) for her students because it is easy to read, Elena (also a second grade teacher) said it would be “too basic for my gifted students.” While Kate thought students would be interested in *Sea Otter Heroes* (Newman, 2017), she also recognized that it “may be too difficult for lower level fourth graders,” a significant consideration for a teacher with many striving readers in the class.

Some teachers were drawn to the interactive elements in books and believed their students would be, too. Diane especially liked *Which One Doesn't Belong?* (Danielson, 2016), which asks students to evaluate which shape in a series does not belong and justify why. As she explained, “My kids would see it as a game, and they would love proving their point.” Similarly, Macy thought her students would appreciate *Who Am I?: An Animal Guessing Game* (Jenkins & Page, 2017) for its interactivity: “Students in my class would be so engaged with this book in trying to determine which animal the pictures and clues are depicting.” Charlotte liked *It's Up to You, Abe Lincoln* (Hirschfeld & Hirschfeld, 2018) because it is “a choose-your-own-adventures type book which I thought was very cool.” Others were interested in the do-it-yourself activities in some of the books, such as *The Amazing Life Cycle of Plants* (Barnham & Frost, 2018), *Geology Lab for Kids* (Romaine, 2017), *Fooled Ya!* (Brown & Bornoff, 2017), and *Magnets Push, Magnets Pull* (Adler & Raff, 2017).

Overall, the teachers considered whether books were reader-friendly when making their evaluations of the titles given during the workshop. In addition, they thought about the potential of these books to engage their students

and remarked on their own interest and enjoyment as readers. As their comments suggest, they seemed to have a special appreciation for books with interactive elements.

Opportunities for Learning: "This could be used for so many things"

The teachers also noted the many learning opportunities afforded by contemporary nonfiction. When discussing biographies, they considered the importance of theme. For example, Diane appreciated *Nothing Stopped Sophie* (Bardoe & McClintock, 2018) because it is "great to show female success in math and science" and "a great example of perseverance and hard work and how they pay off," an impression that Charlotte also expressed about the book. Diane and Lisa both agreed that *When Grandma Gatewood Took a Hike* (Houts & Magnus, 2016) was an excellent choice for showing students what it means to persevere. Others commented that books could help students appreciate cultural diversity and respect for others. Rachel noted *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014) is about "understanding differences in others," and Elena appreciated that *We Are Grateful* (Sorrell & Lessac, 2018) "shares stories of modern day Cherokee families expressing gratitude."

Other teachers considered specific pedagogical possibilities for the books. Beth received two titles from the *A True Book: National Park* series, and she noted, "Each book had all of the text features that I teach/introduce in my grade level." Similarly, Macy thought the "headings, captions, [and] diagrams" in *There Are Fish Everywhere* (Haworth & Teckentrup, 2018) would be "useful when teaching text features to first grade students." *Which One Doesn't Belong?* (Danielson, 2016) garnered positive reactions from all of the teachers who received it, but Lisa was especially drawn to it for teaching purposes. She explained:

There are no right or wrong answers, builds confidence in kids to speak out in front of others, look at and understand different concepts and perspectives, work on class discussions, makes geometry more real and relatable, lets the teacher see how the kids are thinking.

Lisa's comment suggests the book could make teaching geometry more interesting for students, meanwhile giving teachers an opportunity to formatively assess students' thinking processes.

Curricular alignment was also important to the teachers. For example, Kate noted *So Tall Within* (Schmidt & Minter, 2018) would provide "a great introduction to Sojourner [Truth] to students," especially because "we have so many books on Harriet Tubman but little on Sojourner." Nicole was excited to receive *Death Eaters* (Halls, 2019) for one of her science units and explained the book "will be a great addition to our studies on producers, consumers, and decomposers and helping to differentiate these organisms from decomposers," and Elena said *The Sun is Kind of a Big Deal* (Seluk, 2018) includes "content match[ing] our standards very closely." Macy teaches a specialty class about horticulture at her school, and she indicated she would use *Seeds Move!* (Page, 2019) and *Hey, Water!* (Portis, 2019) to enhance her students' learning about seeds and the water cycle, respectively.

In addition, the teachers explained why they would not use particular books for learning opportunities within their classrooms or libraries. Their reasons varied. For example, Elena said *Perfectly Peculiar Plants* (Thorogood & Ronca, 2018) would be "overwhelming as a read aloud," but she would still use it "as a center

type book.” One teacher, Diane, said she would not share *Economics Through Infographics* (Kenney & Stankiewicz, 2014) with her students because she has a “lack of time for social studies” in her third grade classroom. “Heavy” or extensive content was a reason why some teachers would not use particular books. Diane explained that *Hopping Ahead of Climate Change* (Collard, 2016) “seems very ,heavy” in content,” and Lisa believed the *Travel with Great Explorers* books “are not as useful to teach because they are heavy in content.” Similarly, Beth observed that while *Grand Canyon* (Chin, 2017) is a “double honor book, the amount of info on each page was overwhelming for my summer brain.” Lori found some merits in *Two Men and a Car* (Garland, 2019), but she said the author “gets lost a bit in the history and sometimes dry facts about [Al Capone and Franklin Roosevelt].”

However, a few teachers said they would take away the opportunity to learn when they indicated they would not share books with sensitive topics. Madison, Beth, and Rachel said they would not be comfortable sharing *The Hidden Life of a Toad* (Wechsler, 2017) with students because it includes a photograph of mating toads. As Madison explained, “this would scare me to share with children,” and Beth, a first grade teacher, said she was “just not ready to share pics of mating toads with my firsties!” In addition, Macy indicated that among all of the books she received on the third day of the workshop, *What are the Ten Commandments?* (McDonough & Foley, 2017) is the one she would be least likely to share with students because of the “subject matter.”

The teachers’ comments revealed that contemporary nonfiction books represented an array of learning opportunities for elementary students, such as teaching about theme and text features and supporting the curriculum in different content areas. When Lisa reviewed *When Grandma Gatewood Took a Hike* (Houts & Magnus, 2016) and observed, “this could be used for so many things,” she represented the sentiments of many participating teachers in regard to the contemporary nonfiction books they examined. Though the teachers made many positive remarks about the learning opportunities afforded by the books, they also addressed reasons why they would not use certain books for teaching and learning, such as their length, depth of content, and sensitive subjects.

Discussion

This study found that K-5 teachers and media specialists had a largely positive response to contemporary children’s nonfiction, and they considered qualities like presentation, the potential to engage students, and opportunities for learning when evaluating books and considering them for use with elementary students. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The sample size was small ($n = 14$), and teachers self-selected into the study. For these reasons, their viewpoints cannot be generalized to the larger population of elementary teachers within the United States or within the region where the study occurred. Despite these limitations, the findings yield some insights that are worth consideration from teachers and teacher educators.

According to the questionnaire distributed on the first day of the workshop, the teachers in this study said they teach with nonfiction books between 33.9 minutes to 38.2 minutes per day. In Ness’s (2011) study, participants reported teaching with informational text for an average of 31.55 minutes per day. While the teachers in the

current study self-reported using nonfiction for slightly longer amounts of time than the teachers Ness surveyed, it is important to note that Ness asked participants about their use of *informational text*, defined as “a type of nonfiction that conveys information about the natural or social world” (p. 52). Because nonfiction was defined more broadly in the present study, making a direct comparison between the findings of both studies is not warranted. However, it is interesting to note that Ness’s data were collected during the 2007-2008 school year, several years prior to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Data in my study were collected in 2019, several years following the adoption of the Common Core, yet teachers reported utilizing nonfiction books just slightly more often than Ness’s participants. This could suggest that the Common Core’s increased emphasis on reading nonfiction has not influenced actual instructional practices in some cases, but more research is needed to draw this conclusion. Indeed, future research might compare how often teachers utilize fiction versus nonfiction, and future research might rely on direct observations of classroom instruction rather than self-reported estimates.

In Ness’s (2011) study, teachers estimated that informational text comprised an average of 32.77% of their classroom libraries. In the present study, teachers estimated that nonfiction comprised between 31.4% and 33.2% of their classroom libraries, yet this percentage should actually be lower because Macy’s estimate (“less than 10%”) was excluded from the calculation. Once again, the findings of this study are similar to Ness’s. Given the increased attention that nonfiction has received as a result of the Common Core State Standards (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010) and the increasing quality of the genre, one might predict that teachers in 2019 would have more nonfiction books in their classroom libraries than teachers in 2007 or 2008. The similarities between both sets of findings could indicate that although teachers recognize nonfiction’s importance, they may not have the resources to add nonfiction titles to their classrooms. In addition, the findings might suggest that some teachers may not value nonfiction as much as they value fiction. Fiction books once dominated elementary classrooms (Moss, 2003; Pappas, 1993; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). While this could still be true today, additional research is needed to investigate this conjecture.

The findings of this study also corroborate what Donovan and Smolkin (2001) found when they asked teachers to make text selections for science instruction. Teachers in their study attended to visual features like photographs and graphic supports much as teachers in the current study cared about the presentation of books such as visuals and lively writing. Likewise, Donovan and Smolkin’s participants considered readability and the “fun” factor when choosing books, while teachers in this study addressed readability and the potential of books to engage their students. Finally, the teachers in the Donovan and Smolkin study thought about the pedagogical possibilities and content of books, and teachers in the current study addressed the learning opportunities that nonfiction books could afford. The similarity of these findings suggests that presentation, possibilities for student engagement, and learning opportunities could be important criteria that elementary teachers use to select nonfiction books for their instruction and classroom libraries. Indeed, these criteria align with the selection principles (a framework for making book selections) that the American Library Association (2019) recommends for school libraries. This is encouraging, especially in light of Jipson and Paley’s (1991) finding that some elementary teachers depend on personal preferences when making selections.

Implications

The most important point of this study is that contemporary nonfiction for children was positively received by participating elementary teachers. As Beth explained, the nonfiction being published today is “not just for us nerds.” Though the number of participants in this study was small, the findings reveal that some teachers may have a more favorable view of “new” nonfiction (Gill, 2009) than the nonfiction of yesteryear. This sentiment was expressed by Diane, a third grade teacher who noted that the nonfiction of her youth was “BORING,” yet the nonfiction available to her current students is “awesome.”

Many teachers in the study appeared excited about their books and looked forward to receiving new selections on each day of the workshop. The findings show that from the perspectives of teachers, nonfiction can be fun, engaging, and useful in elementary classrooms. Though teachers have recognized the value of nonfiction, particularly informational text (Ness, 2011), in elementary classrooms, the findings reported here demonstrate that some teachers have a genuine enthusiasm for the nonfiction published today. Perhaps these findings will encourage skeptics to take another look at nonfiction, a historically overlooked genre of children’s literature (Moss, 2003). Indeed, in my role as a teacher educator, I have often observed that teacher candidates who enter my children’s literature course have a negative view of nonfiction initially, yet exposure to engaging, high quality nonfiction in the class often changes their point of view. Given the importance of reading nonfiction in the elementary grades, promoting the use of nonfiction in elementary classrooms is a worthwhile endeavor.

Though the teachers in this study used criteria such as readability, potential to engage students, and curricular alignment when reviewing books, there was some evidence of the selective tradition in their written reflections. Jipson and Paley (1991) found that “personal and aesthetic reasons” guide elementary teachers’ book selections (p. 153). In this study, several teachers commented on the aesthetic value of their books, noting that some books had especially beautiful visuals or writing. Presumably, teachers who had a special appreciation for a book would be likely to recommend it to students or use it in a lesson. After all, sharing a beloved book with students is one of the joys of teaching. Aesthetic value should not be a sole criterion for selecting nonfiction books in elementary classrooms, yet when teachers appreciate books for their beautiful illustrations or writing, there is potential to spread this appreciation to students. Recommending books based on one’s personal enjoyment or appreciation is not an inappropriate practice as long as the classroom or library collection is representative of a diverse range of topics aligned to the curriculum and students’ interests.

The selective tradition (Jipson & Paley, 1991) also seemed evident when a few teachers expressed unfavorable views of books that included words in languages other than English. On the first day of the workshop, Charlotte named *When Angels Sing* (Mahin & Ramirez, 2018), a biography of musician Carlos Santana, as the book that she would be least likely to share with students in part because it had words she could not pronounce. Likewise, Macy said she would be least likely to share *We Are Grateful* (Sorrell & Lessac, 2018) “simply because of the pronunciation of words in this text.” Madison also identified *We Are Grateful* as a book she would probably not share with students; she expressed that the Cherokee words in the book would make it “very hard to read,” but

she said it would be “fun to read” regardless. These findings indicate that some educators could be uncomfortable with books featuring words in multiple languages.

While the teachers’ concerns seemed related to the perceived challenge of pronouncing non-English words rather than concerns about sharing culturally diverse books with children, the effect is still the same: They would be less likely to share these books with students. The importance of sharing culturally diverse books with children is becoming widely known within the education community. For example, the International Literacy Association (2019) included the following in its *Children’s Right to Read* position statement: “Children have the right to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world.” When educators avoid sharing books because the language is perceived as too challenging or too difficult to pronounce, they strip children of opportunities to experience diversity through literature. Although only a few teachers in this study made comments about non-English words, their sentiments could be shared by other educators. This suggests a need for increasing teachers’ awareness about the value of books with diverse people and languages, a responsibility that educator preparation programs could assume.

Further, it is troubling that some teachers suggested they would engage in preemptive censorship. Preemptive censorship (sometimes called self-censorship) occurs when educators avoid using books because they are afraid of the controversy the books will create (Fanetti, 2012). Teachers preemptively censor books for a variety of reasons, including fear of parental backlash (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019), fear of confronting controversial topics in school (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998), and fear of corrupting children (Dresang, 2003). Preemptive censorship has unfortunate consequences such as limiting students’ exposure to diverse ideas (Boyd & Bailey, 2009).

In this study, a few teachers suggested they may preemptively censor titles. For example, Madison, Beth, and Rachel said that among all of the books they received on the second day of the workshop, they would be least likely to share *The Hidden Life of a Toad* (Wechsler, 2017) with children because it includes a photograph of toads mating. This is concerning because discomfort with the topic would motivate these educators to avoid sharing an age-appropriate book. With its inclusion of vivid, close-up photographs documenting a toad’s life cycle and accurate information, *The Hidden Life of a Toad* arguably merits a place in classrooms where animal life cycles are in the curriculum. The suggestion of preemptive censorship in the study reveals that teacher educators and professional development facilitators may need to help teachers understand that book choices for the classroom should be based on selection principles (e.g., American Library Association, 2019) rather than discomfort with a topic or fear of controversy.

Recommendations

Because the teachers in the study had a largely positive response to contemporary nonfiction books for children, it is possible that other educators may find merits in these books, too. The titles described by teachers in this study are a great starting place for educators who wish to add more engaging nonfiction titles to their collections or curriculum. However, both teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to learn more about how nonfiction

is changing. Although Dresang's (1999) *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* was published 20 years ago, her predictions about the changing landscape of children's literature were prescient; the changes she predicted are increasingly evident in the books published for children today. Educators might examine resources like *Radical Change* as well as professional journal articles to help them better understand how nonfiction (and children's literature more generally) is evolving.

As a result, educators would be better equipped to seek out books with characteristics of *Radical Change* or characteristics of the "new" nonfiction (Gill, 2009) to share with students. Teacher educators are particularly encouraged to share contemporary titles when instructing pre- and in-service teachers about nonfiction books in children's literature and literacy methods courses. As my own observations as a teacher educator suggest, university students are often drawn to books with characteristics of the "new" nonfiction (Gill, 2009), and exposure to these books sometimes changes their opinions about nonfiction for the better.

Among the teachers in this study, only three teachers had classroom libraries comprised of 50% or more nonfiction books. This finding could indicate that fiction books are still prevalent in the classroom libraries of some teachers. Given this possibility, teachers are encouraged to take an inventory of their classroom libraries to determine the ratio of nonfiction to fiction books. If fiction books are predominant in their collections, teachers are encouraged to take steps to add more nonfiction to their classrooms. This could mean informing school administrators of the significance of reading nonfiction in the elementary grades and advocating for increased classroom and library budgets that would enable educators to purchase more nonfiction. Teachers could also investigate grants from corporations and nonprofit organizations and apply for funds to help them build their nonfiction collections. Likewise, teacher educators could support schools in their local communities by seeking funds for the purpose of adding nonfiction to school and classroom libraries. Indeed, part of the motivation for this study (and the grant and workshop associated with it) came from a desire to support schools with their goal of increasing students' access to nonfiction books.

Finally, educators at all levels are encouraged to model enthusiasm for reading nonfiction. Because children tend to lose their motivation to read nonfiction between the third and sixth grades (Parsons et al., 2018), it is especially important for elementary teachers to show students how interesting and engaging nonfiction books can be. Teacher educators should also demonstrate a passion for nonfiction when working with university students; these students will one day be the teachers who are responsible for helping children develop and maintain their interest in reading. Educators are advised to keep up with the "latest and greatest" in children's nonfiction by examining book reviews in publications such as *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and *The Horn Book*, consulting awards lists such as the Sibert Medal and Orbis Pictus, and perusing blogs such as Kid Lit Frenzy (www.kidlitfrenzy.com), which features an annual nonfiction picture book challenge.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that nonfiction books were well-received by participating teachers. Although the sample was small, the findings suggest teachers, teacher educators, and professional development providers should seek

books with “new” nonfiction characteristics (Gill, 2009) to share with elementary students as well as with pre- and in-service teachers. Interacting with these books may go a long way in terms of building teachers’ appreciation for nonfiction, a genre that has been maligned in the past (Gill, 2009; Moss, 2003; Stewart & Young, 2018). In turn, raising teachers’ awareness of the noteworthy elements of contemporary nonfiction could promote increased use and engagement with these books in schools. Future research could contribute to our understanding of how teachers perceive nonfiction books, especially “new” nonfiction, by exploring this topic within a larger sample and across different geographic locations. In addition, as the nonfiction genre’s quality and prominence continue to rise, future research may further examine the percentage of nonfiction books accessible in classroom and school libraries and how often and in what ways nonfiction books are utilized in elementary classrooms.

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