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The Fiction-Nonfiction Divide: Can Teachers' Personal Reading Preferences Impact the Diversity of Genres Shared in Elementary Classrooms?

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Abstract

Despite expanded efforts to increase the amount of nonfiction literature taught in elementary classrooms and a recent publication boom in the quantity and quality nonfiction children's literature, a disparity still remains. While elementary teachers recognize the need to include more nonfiction, the primary genre for reading and literacy instruction remains fiction literature. Some of this may be about lack of acceptable children's literature selections in the curriculum, but it may also indicate teachers' preference for fiction. Using discourse analysis, this qualitative study analyzed the online discussion board responses of 99 graduate student in-service teachers who were asked about their early literacy experiences. Results indicated overwhelmingly positive early childhood memories of fiction (n=77), including many activities culturally situated within home and family, such as story time and library visits. Teachers did not recall similar early memories of nonfiction. Responses to nonfiction were more closely tied to schooling activities such as report writing and research. Some teachers also indicated a conscious effort to provide students with more exposure to nonfiction genres in their own classrooms. This study highlights the importance of directly addressing teachers' personal preferences in both teacher preparation and in-service professional development to help them move toward more balanced classroom literacy across diverse genres.

Keywords: teaching nonfiction, elementary reading instruction, teacher attitudes, discourse analysis, literacy identity

1. Introduction and Literature Review

The impetus for this study came from two sources. I teach graduate students who are working towards an M.Ed. as reading specialists, and I provide professional development in comprehension intervention for adolescents who struggle with academic text. Across both populations of teachers, I frequently hear talk about how important it is to teach nonfiction text. They can articulate the reasons and can match proficiencies to the CCSS (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). At the same time, I hear conversationally that they're proud of their three-week nonfiction units, but also happy to finish and return to fiction. Three weeks in nonfiction text is not sufficient at any grade level. This may be insecurity about teaching reading with nonfiction (Hong-Nam & Swanson, 2011). But some may be about teacher preference for fiction (Hartsfield et al., 2021; Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013) or a lack of appropriate nonfiction selections in the reading curriculum (MacKay et al., 2020).

Although I focus heavily on teaching reading with exposition in my graduate literacy courses, this past semester, I heard more than one student in my capstone course state outright they chose to skip the nonfiction selections accompanying the reading curriculum. These students have extensively studied exposition as well as designed and provided intervention. They know that many common assumptions about children and nonfiction text have been disproven; including doubts about children's cognitive abilities, and believing young children will not like nonfiction selections. (For thorough reviews, see Kindall and Penner-Williams, 2013, and Russell, 2023a).

Because there is significant research indicating that nonfiction is still not being shared in elementary classrooms (i.e., Duke & Block 2012; Hartsfield, 2021; Ness, 2011) in accordance with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010), I undertook this study to investigate why, even after extensive graduate literacy instruction in teaching reading with nonfiction, my students were still leaning toward fiction and avoiding nonfiction selections.

1.1 Benefits of Teaching Young Children to Read Nonfiction

One of the most important factors for proficient nonfiction comprehension is the reader's broad background and experiential knowledge (Best, et al., 2008). However, the role of background knowledge and personal schema into which new knowledge can be assimilated (Kintsch, 1998) presents a conundrum. Duke and Block, (2012) indicate that a lack of focus on informational text in elementary classrooms is depriving young students of opportunities to build background knowledge. Learners build background knowledge through many sources, including culture, real world experiences, and varied media. Reading is also a primary means through which people build new knowledge. This is particularly true for students in secondary school. The expectation is that students will *learn content* from their textbooks. However, comprehending a piece of nonfiction, such as a biology textbook, requires a very different set cognitive processes from those required for reading a piece of fiction narrative like a novel (Russell, 2023a). In order for developing readers to engage in the content comprehension of a biology chapter, they must first learn how text works by building the necessary text negotiation strategies. These include (but are not limited to): making inferences within and across details and sections of text, understanding how text features support or do not support the body of the text, the unconscious understanding of how an author's chosen text structure carries the meaning, ferreting out the author's claim and purpose, and determining how to deal with unknown vocabulary. Proficient readers apply these thought processes unconsciously or sub-consciously until comprehension breaks down. Proficient reading also requires metacognition. The reader must *realize* they're no longer comprehending and then apply the *most appropriate* strategy to fix the breakdown (Russell, 2023b). There are two critical considerations here. First, the requisite cognitive processes for nonfiction are more difficult than those of fiction literature. Second, if the elementary classroom remains primarily driven by fiction story, children are only learning to navigate the genres of fiction.

1.2 Availability of Nonfiction Children's Literature

Elementary teachers frequently point to a lack of quality materials as a roadblock to including more nonfiction in the curriculum. However, a recent publication boom of children's nonfiction literature has afforded teachers many more choices (Hartsfield et al, 2021). This led me to wonder whether fiction and nonfiction are treated differently by adults and that this trickles into the schools. I started thinking not just about what types of books teachers use, but other ways children have interaction with text, such as books given as gifts, books that are part of a library children's collection, or are on display in bookstores. Because children, parents, and teachers are all influenced by popular literature and publication trends, I was curious as to how nonfiction text fared on best-seller and children's book lists. In a review of what is popular, few lists include much nonfiction at all. The American Library Association's 2023 list of notable books for young children (preschool to age 7) and middle grades children (grades 3 to 5) listed significantly more fiction titles: for young children, 6 of 46, and for middle grades children, 9 of 31 were classified by the Library of Congress (LC) as nonfiction. NPR's Summer Books Poll (Mayer, 2020), included only three nonfiction titles. These lists all contained varied genres of fiction covering social issues such as diversity, acceptance, multiculturalism, and cultural practices presenting factual information in the style of fiction. It is important to note that more nonfiction children's literature is available today than in the past in part because agencies and professional organizations have taken interest in continue to advocate for nonfiction via book awards such as the Giverny Award in Science (15 °degree laboratory, ND).

1.3 What Is Nonfiction?

With the increase in children's nonfiction selections comes a blurring of lines between fiction, narrative nonfiction, and nonfiction genres (Hartsfield et al., 2021). Thus, it becomes difficult to determine true nonfiction from nonfiction topics contained in a book identified by the Library of Congress as fiction. While children should be exposed to many genres, they don't all possess the same text characteristics as exposition. Interestingly, the 2018 Amazon Parent's Choice booklist (Parent's Choice Foundation, 2018) contained the most nonfiction titles written as true exposition.

The term informational text has become popular in elementary schools to define any text carrying factual ideas. However, the term is not a specific genre categorization. The Library of Congress specifically categorizes children's fiction by genre (i.e. poetry, folktales), but literature entries encompass many types of nonfiction and are categorized by content topic (i.e., recycling, chemistry) regardless of intended audience. In their text structure taxonomy based on authors' textbook design, Chambilss and Calfee (1998) treat exposition as writings for the purpose of communicating facts and information that either argue, inform, or explain. In this work, I try to use the term *nonfiction* to refer to any literature not classified by the Library of Congress as fiction. Sparing use of the word *exposition* is used to mean pieces that might look more like textbook text and academic articles. If the term informational appears, it refers to anything not classified by the Library of Congress as pure nonfiction.

1.4 Research on Teacher Practices and Beliefs

Following Duke's (2000) groundbreaking work indicating the paucity of nonfiction shared in first grade classrooms and the Common Core State Standards (2010) requirement that more nonfiction literature, literacy instruction and experiences

be added to the elementary classroom beginning in kindergarten, scholars began looking at elementary classroom practices and teacher attitudes surrounding genre choice and literacy instruction.

Ness (2011) studied k-5 in-service teachers to determine how often they used informational text in the classroom, what their attitudes might be towards it, and any obstacles they encountered. The author discovered that these teachers (N=318) felt teaching with informational text was important, included it in their daily instruction, and made it available in classroom libraries. She also discovered that the amount of informational text used during instruction increased based on grade level, with the highest usage occurring in grades 4 and 5. What is unknown is *how* that informational text was used. Participating teachers saw time constraints as a significant issue. Ness (2011) reports a fourth-grade teacher stating that because of time constraints she often summarized content text. Other issues included a lack of nonfiction text in the basal reading series, and similarly, a lack of appropriately leveled informational text. A few teachers in the study did state a belief that students found informational text boring.

Kindall and Penner-Williams (2013) found that pre-service teachers who were exposed to instructional literacy strategies using nonfiction texts had improved attitudes toward using informational text during instruction. Two more recent studies have directly addressed pre- and in-service teachers' responses to recently published titles in nonfiction children's literature after exposure via coursework and professional development. Muela, et al., (2024) discovered that even after exposing pre-service teachers to nonfiction children's picture books, their teacher-candidates felt unsure about teaching with or even sharing the genre with young children. Interestingly, participants also indicated they were aware of the importance of sharing nonfiction with children.

Hartsfield, et al., (2021) worked with twelve in-service elementary teachers, grades 1-4, plus two k-5 media specialists (N=14). All took part in a summer professional development workshop. Prior to the start of the workshop teachers filled out surveys about how much time they dedicated to nonfiction text during the school day. The highest number of minutes came from a media specialist (60-90 minutes per day), while a grade 2 reading teacher reported zero minutes per day. Among classroom teachers, 15 to 30 minutes was common. Averaging across all fourteen teachers, 33.9 to 38.2 minutes per day were dedicated to nonfiction. What is more telling, and indeed echoes previous studies is how teachers employed nonfiction. Most reported using it for science and social studies, student research, teaching writing, or reading aloud. No teachers reported using nonfiction for the teaching of reading.

The researchers provided professional development through which participants learned about and were able to engage with a pre-defined corpus of recently published nonfiction titles. Teachers had an overwhelmingly positive response to these newer titles, indicating they were different and not at all boring, and discussing how they could use the books in their teaching. However, responses were also differential. Some teachers reported they'd avoid the books with challenging vocabulary or non-English words found in the multicultural literature. Others shied away from titles lacking colorful visuals and had varied responses to types of text features or lack thereof. Some also directly stated they'd be unlikely to share titles with sensitive topics, indicating teachers' engagement in censorship (Hartsfield, 2021). Other comments were more typical, such as a lack of time for science and social studies. While not directly discussed by the researcher, many teachers also indicated that they would share certain books because they were 'easy to read.' Teachers' avoidance of titles with too many or too few text features, challenging or non-English vocabulary, again calls into question the idea of gatekeeping (Gee, 2014; Hartsfield, 2021).

1.5 Investigating the Research Gap

Research by Quinlan and Curtin (2017) looked directly at the relationship between adolescents' identities and their secondary school experiences. The researchers engaged in questionnaires and focus groups with 25 adolescents ages 13-14 in year two of post-primary education in Ireland. Overwhelmingly, students preferred literacies that "conflicted with the world beyond school boundaries and the school environment itself " (p. 461). Students saw no relevance between what they identified as school literacies and their lives outside of school. They found the curriculum boring, dated, and were generally disinterested. They saw no relationship between in-school literacies and their preferred social literacies outside of school. This finding indicates that little has changed in relationship to students' motivations for secondary school, and the readings required. The secondary school participants in this study are tomorrow's parents.

What I was unable to uncover in my review of literature was any genre-specific work on literacy identity formation. Hartsfield, (2021), Lesley, (2011) and Quinlan and Curtain (2017) all allude to differential treatment of the genres. Is it possible that lack of exposure to nonfiction genres at home, coupled with a less positive context for nonfiction in school continues to perpetuate fewer positive attitudes? We know that teachers' literacy identities affect what and how they teach and that the emotional over-rides the cognitive (Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013). Hall, et al., (2010) state, "Language and literacy are culturally situated and their use depends on the social goals for the community in which they are located" (p.235). Therefore, teachers may unknowingly carry personal early literacy beliefs into their classroom teaching. Gee (2014) noted that literacy identities are formed socio-culturally at a young age. And, as Hall et.al., (2010) indicate, it's difficult to change those identities.

I know that my graduate students are well versed in teaching with nonfiction. I wondered if their statements and attitudes stemmed from a larger cultural differential treatment of the two genres. Through an online discussion board that was part of their literacy M.Ed. coursework, I queried my own students with the hope of uncovering whether early literacy experiences affected their genre preferences and what, if any, differences existed between their early memories of exposure to both fiction and nonfiction literature.

2. Theoretical Frame

In my travels through elementary school buildings, I see evidence of children's fiction in every hallway. Bulletin boards full of artwork and posted writings about favorite fiction characters. Where is the evidence of nonfiction text? It seems to me, through both conversation with teachers and student artifacts, that the two genres are treated very differently. One is deemed 'fun' and the other is reserved for 'learning facts.

Kindall and Penner Williams (2013) state on page 23, "Ironically, beliefs typically operate independently of cognitive information that one associates with knowledge. Beliefs and attitudes have been shown to be impervious to contradictory cognitive knowledge." This is an enormous statement. The idea that the emotional will always override the cognitive in light of cultural preferences toward fiction, explains why teachers who are effective in teaching nonfiction still prefer to teach with fiction. Indeed, Muela, et al., (2024) discovered that even after exposing pre-service teachers to nonfiction children's picture books, their teacher-candidates felt unsure about teaching with or even sharing the genre with young children. Interestingly, participants also indicated they were aware of the importance of sharing nonfiction with children.

Where then, does that preference toward fiction begin? Part of the answer lies within the sociocultural practices we've just considered. Jim Gee's (2014) discussion of language in relation to discourse analysis provides some understanding of how language perpetuates culture. When we speak or write anything, it has a *situated meaning* (p. 65) arising because language cannot happen devoid of context. It stands to reason that various genre types also cannot be considered devoid of the context in which they exist. It is context that provides meaning. Håland**,** et al., (2021) discovered that Norwegian first-grade teachers used very little nonfiction text during read-alouds and tended to rely on known, older, fiction resources, supporting Hartsfield' s (2021) discussion of "teachers as gatekeepers" (p. 6) because they tend to make choices about shared literature based upon "unexamined biases and preferences for particular kinds of books" (p. 6). Thus, it is entirely possible that children's lack of exposure to nonfiction instructional materials is at least in part a culturally situated phenomenon based upon the unexplored preferences of all adults who share books with young children.

Language, and thus, situated meaning, is directly related to the development of early literacy identities. A significant body of work exists surrounding the relationship between pre-established literacy identities and teacher classroom practice (i.e., Hall, et al., 2010; Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013; Sulentic-Dowell, 2006**)**. In a 2011 study, Lesley states, "I have come to question the part pre-service literacy identities play in their developing beliefs about the relevance of content area literacy instruction" (p. 26). Her research centered around pre-service teachers' resistance to providing content literacy instruction for adolescent struggling readers. Following the discourse work of Gee (2005), Lesley (2011) identified four discourse master models related to personal school experiences that helped to explain attitudes. She stated that "pre-service teachers arrive in a content area literacy class inclined to replicate these master models of school literacy in their imagined future instruction" (p. 32). The first and second Master Models are about personal beliefs as they relate to school experiences. In the first, Lesley (2011) describes school experiences overriding any home experiences. For participants who were successful in school, memories were positive. For others, recollection of school literacy tasks was negative. In all cases, school tasks took precedence over any other type of literacy activity. The second master model uncovered pre-service teachers' beliefs that literacy abilities were unchangeable. Students who identified themselves as struggling readers in elementary school carried that belief into adulthood. In the third model, participants described experiences of being assessed in reading instruction and having little choice about what to read. The fourth model is a reflection of boredom and disengagement. "Virtually all students wrote about becoming bored and thus disconnected from the majority of reading assignments presented to them in school settings" (pp. 30-31). In a related fifth model, respondents reported they had little room for choice, exploration, or creativity.

3. Participants and Methods

Participants were 107 graduate students at a small private university in the Midwest. The university's demographic is primarily white (77%). While total student population is fairly even across men and women, that is not the case in the graduate literacy courses. Only five respondents in this study were male, and all were Caucasian. Because of the asynchronous nature of the courses, I was unable to determine age. However, all participants already held undergraduate degrees in education, possessed a k-12 teaching license, and were pursuing a graduate-level state licensure.

Because these participants were also my students, at the start of each semester, participants who agreed signed a consent form allowing me to use the data from one particular discussion board prompt. The letter also indicated the following: a)

their responses would be anonymous, b) I would not work with the data until after the semester concluded, and c) their participation or lack thereof, and personal responses to the discussion board would in no way affect their course grade.

Beginning with Spring semester, 2020 and crossing the span of two years, or six semesters (including summer terms), students taking asynchronous online graduate literacy courses were asked to respond to an online discussion board prompt. Specifically, they were asked to talk about early reading experiences at home and in school. They were also prompted to write about their exposure to both fiction and nonfiction. Because all graduate literacy courses were taught by this researcher, students were given this prompt at the beginning of the course to prevent course materials from directly impacting responses.

Please take a minute and tell us about yourselves. Include your current teaching or professional endeavors. Please also tell us about your early literacy experiences at home and in school. What do you remember? How did that affect you? Do you remember reading fiction and nonfiction?

Figure 1. Discussion Board Prompt

While I responded to prompts on the discussion boards as courses progressed, I did not officially download or work with the data until Fall, 2021. At that time, responses were copied into a blinded data set. Because some students took more than one course over that time, any duplicate responses were removed. The result was 107 unique responses.

3.1 Using Discourse Analysis to Frame the Narratives

Gee (2014) describes discourse analysis as attending to the "ways in which situated meanings are associated with social practices" (p.68). Further, these associations or relationships contain cultural and societal implications for "things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods and power" (p.68), and can even act as gate-keepers of social practice. Bolstering this notion is Alcántara-Plá's (2024) work indicating that while emotions are personal, they are responsive to context and represented in speech. My teachers' written responses represent personal beliefs and attitudes.

Knowing that I wanted to employ discourse analysis, I engaged in an inductive approach to identify patterns without imposing a theoretical view. (Wolcott, 2005). Further, because I was both researcher and instructor for the course, I was aware of my own biases. I entered into a coding process understanding that I was looking to uncover patterns. Agar (2013) indicates that no patterns in human social research (HSR) are linear, and that there can be more than one interpretation. The interpretation of this researcher is also socially situated (Gee, 2014) and represents a *rational reconstruction* of "who the research subjects are and what they are doing" (p. 80).

On the first read, I simply jotted notes in the margins, such as *fiction at home, going to the library, mom/family most significant, struggle,* identifying the central gist of each response. As I engaged in that first reading, I realized some responses were also not usable because they were not relevant to the prompt. This left 99 relevant prompts from the original total of 107.

I then conducted a second reading to determine basic frequency data, such as the number of participants mentioning the influence of family. The prompts overwhelmingly spoke either of early literacy experiences with fiction and the positive influences of significant adults or of experiencing difficulty with reading as a child. Following that, I began to re-read each prompt, deciding if my initial annotation was an accurate representation of the major gist. During this third read, I flagged responses that specifically mentioned nonfiction text (n=42) and created a second set of marginal annotations directly addressing responses to nonfiction.

Using the second set of annotations, in a fourth re-read, I identified themes across responses. This task was challenging because participants discussed many things in relation to early literacy experiences. I considered breaking up responses across categories, but chose not to do so. I felt they needed to remain intact and that this reporting should be representative of the entire gist of each response.

Due to the asynchronous nature of the literacy courses, I was unable to engage in member checking. I enlisted the assistance of two colleagues. Both are in the field of education, but neither specializes in literacy. One holds an MFA in English, and the other a PhD. in curriculum. Each read the responses to determine the category or sub-category into which they believed each response fit. Via discussion, we came to 100% agreement regarding the categorization of responses.

4. Overview of Results

Gee discusses discourse models being largely unconscious 'stories' that are part of what is taken to be 'typical or normal' (p. 71), and is echoed by Hartsfield et al., (2021). Similar to Lesley's (2011) Master Models of discourse, my analysis revealed two major Discourse Models (DMs). Further, my recursive process led to a clear categorical hierarchy with sub-categories addressing nonfiction that stemmed from the two primary Discourse Models: DM 1- Positive Experiences with Fiction, and DM 2 – Struggling as a Young Reader.

4.1 Use of the Term Nonfiction

As discussed previously, the lines constituting the genres of nonfiction are blurred. This work is not intended to try and define the genre of nonfiction. For purposes of this study, the term nonfiction is interpreted solely by the participant respondents. Their responses have been reprinted verbatim.

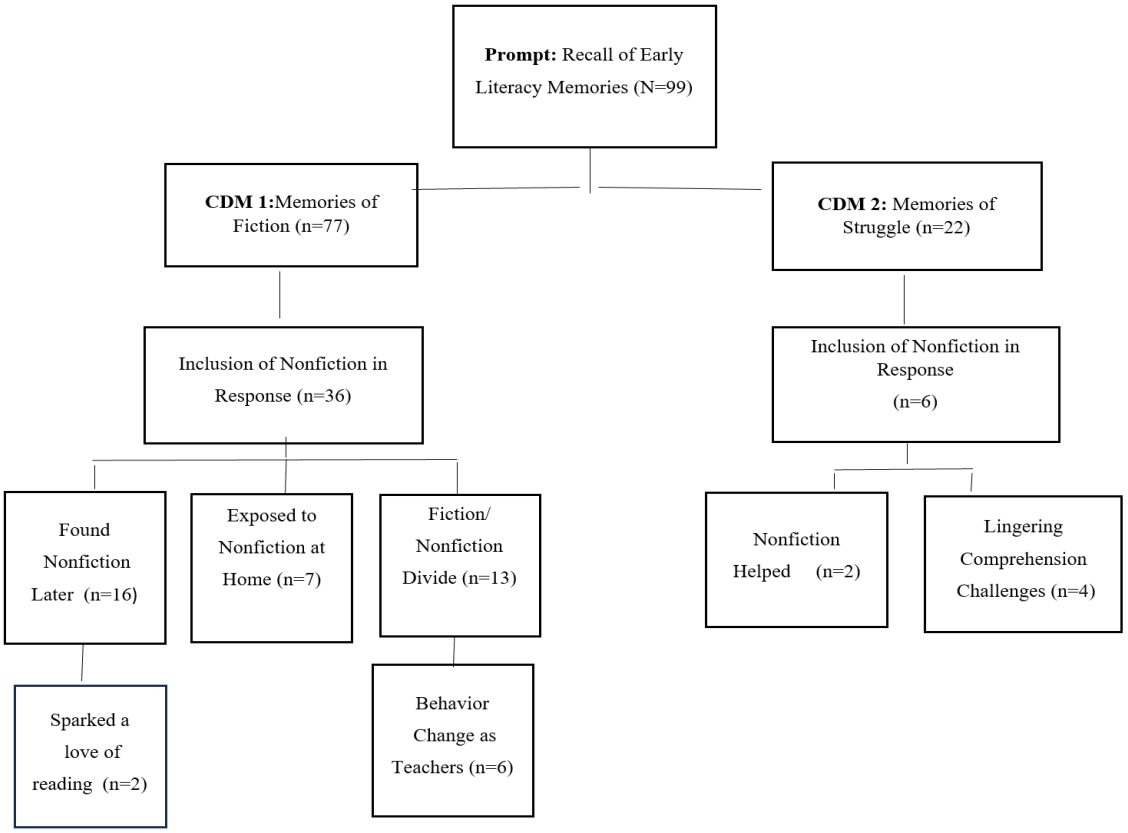

Figure 2. Hierarchy of Responses to Nonfiction Prompt

4.2 DM 1: Positive Experiences with Fiction (n=77)

In this DM, 44 participants discussed only fiction while 36 more discussed both genres**.** Participants all discussed positive early childhood experiences with fiction (n=77) talking primarily about a love of fiction, often describing how parents or families fostered that love. Some told stories of trips to the library or summer story hours. Others recalled curling up with good books. Of those respondents, 53 also indicated the powerful influence of adults, generally parents (7 mention a teacher), who included home experiences such as reading bedtime stories.

> *Regarding early reading experience, two come to mind: group trips to the library with my mom, aunt, and cousins, who were all within a couple years in age, and the book mobile when I lived in a very small town. I was reading at a 7th grade level in 2nd grade if I recall correctly. I went to 12 schools growing up and struggled with making and keeping friends, so many times books were my only friends.) I've always loved the library.*
>
> *When I think back to my early experiences with reading I am reminded of when I first fell in love with reading. In first grade I began reading Junie B. Jones. I was good at reading and it made me fall in love with it. The more I read the smarter I felt. I was able to talk with teachers one on one and have meaningful conversations that made me feel important. This ended up showing me how much reading was valued and I continued that love on throughout school. In fifth grade, I began reading series. This was the year that I first picked up a Harry Potter book. I was hooked. I had already loved the movies, but the books took me to another place.*

While fiction-only responses are not included in the analysis of responses addressing nonfiction, they speak directly to participants' positive early memories. The fact that 44 respondents did not mention nonfiction even when prompted is also telling.

*4.3 Fiction versus Nonfiction Themes (n =*77)

Inside of the 77 positive fiction responses, almost half (n=36) also included nonfiction memories, but no responses focused solely on nonfiction. From those 36 fiction plus nonfiction responses, three categories and two sub-categories emerged.

1. *Found Nonfiction Later*. This category is comprised of teachers who found nonfiction as adolescents or adults (n=16). Two respondents (n=2) felt that finding nonfiction later in life became a pathway into a larger love of reading.
2. *Exposed to Nonfiction at Home.* Another group recalled being exposed to nonfiction at home (n=7).
3. *A Fiction/Nonfiction Divide.* A final group discussed a split between home and school or between the treatment of fiction and nonfiction (n=13). Within this category, a sub-category emerged of teachers making efforts to change their professional practice based on personal childhood experiences (n=6).

4.3.1 Found Nonfiction Later (n=16)

The dominant theme in this category was related to specific nonfiction genres or topics. Respondents all discussed early fiction reading and finding nonfiction when high school or college afforded them exposure. Many also indicated highly personal connections to topics; often biography, autobiography, and elements of history. Self-help and pedagogy were also mentioned.

> *"When I started learning about history and WWI and WWII and the Holocaust, I became much more interested in nonfiction. But before that I think I preferred fiction stories.*
>
> *"I did not read a lot of nonfiction until I got to college and starting taking African American History Courses. Then, I fell back in love with my own culture and the beauty of our struggle.*
>
> *"I do not think I read nonfiction for fun or at all until I discovered the beauty of Seventeen Magazine."*

A second, more unique pattern occurred with two responses. In this case, respondents who found nonfiction later also regarded it as a pathway into a larger love of reading.

> *"I did not begin to really enjoy reading until my last semester of undergrad at [name of college]. This was the first time I was exposed to books about leadership and ways to improve yourself as a leader or a coach. Now I enjoy more variety of books.*
>
> *"As a child, reading was not my friend. … It was not until I took AP US history in my junior year of high school that I started to enjoy reading. I started to find fiction and nonfiction that appealed to my love of history. …. Since then, I have become an avid reader and not just of historical fiction and nonfiction.*

Respondents who found nonfiction later or whose high school and college experiences actually sparked a love of reading is an important consideration when choosing curricular materials and varied texts. This is an important finding. There is a population of young students who prefer to read nonfiction and do so for pleasure (Alexander & Jarman, 2018).

4.3.2 Exposed to Nonfiction at Home (n=7)

This category is unique because these participants specifically state exposure to nonfiction at home in one of two ways. Either the child had a personal interest in a nonfiction topic, or adults provided examples of nonfiction in the home.

> *"Growing up, I was most interested in nonfiction books about the ocean and animals. I was very interested in nature and also loved the photographs in the coffee table animal books we collected."*
>
> *"My mom was a high school English teacher, and thus our house was always full of books. My father, who has degrees in engineering and an MBA was also a big reader, though primarily nonfiction."*
>
> *"I do not remember reading a ton of nonfiction books. However, I do remember having a plethora of National Geographic in our house that my siblings and I enjoyed."*
>
> *"As a kid, I was always fascinated by books about archaeology. Any time my mom took us to Barnes and Noble, you could find me browsing the books on ancient artifacts."*

As with other research on the influence of family, these responses directly indicate that teachers who grew up enjoying nonfiction had early exposure to the genre, highlighting the impact of early caregivers. Young children are interested in the world around them. This curiosity can easily extend into books. Emergent literacy theory indicates that the more experiential learning children have and the more language is attached to that learning, the better students will fare in school (i.e., McNaughton, 2014).

4.3.3 A Fiction/Nonfiction Divide (n=13)

This group directly discussed feeling differently about reading fiction and nonfiction as children. All 13 indicated they

viewed fiction as a pleasurable activity, while comparing nonfiction to some type of school task. Four directly mentioned textbooks while three others discussed research reports and projects. Two specifically mentioned differential treatment of fiction and nonfiction in elementary school.

> *"I have never been a big fan of nonfiction books for pleasure reading. As a child I saw them simply as textbooks.*
>
> *"I loved getting lost in fiction stories but typically viewed nonfiction as dry and boring."*
>
> *"I would go to the library with a friend and randomly grab anything off the shelf. I'd go home with 20 books and read them all before they were due. I didn't read nonfiction unless I had to for school."*
>
> *"Growing up, I definitely favored fiction. I rarely picked up nonfiction books unless for a project of some sort."*
>
> *"At home, I read for enjoyment. At school, I read to learn new concepts."*
>
> *"At school, we read more fiction than nonfiction books and mostly used nonfiction when we were completing research reports on a given topic."*
>
> *"In school I would say we read more fiction than nonfiction selections. We used basal readers as our mode of instruction. Most basal reading programs, I believe are 3:1 fiction to nonfiction."*

It is difficult to determine if differentiated treatment influenced these respondents. What is clear, however, is that somewhere these adults who are now classroom teachers, had enough differential experience to decide that nonfiction text was related to a "textbook" or "a report." A finding supported by Quinlan and Curtin (2017).

4.3.4 Behavior Change as Teachers (n=6)

A strong sub-category also emerged from analyses of these 13 responses. Six participating teachers directly mentioned trying to provide different experiences in their current classrooms.

> *"I know I thought of nonfiction as text books whereas I saw fiction as pleasure reading. As a teacher, I am really working towards including more nonfiction material in my reading groups. (I have found that my third-graders really enjoy biographies and animal books.)"*
>
> *"I try to offer my first graders a wide variety of nonfiction books, and some prefer it over fiction."*
>
> *"My favorite genre was definitely realistic fiction. It was hard to convince me to read anything different! My goal in my classroom is to give students experiences with many different books so they can build their own opinions about them."*

What is telling about these unprompted responses is that teachers who hold negative views are attempting to provide their students with experiences different from their own. Drake, et al., (2001) indicate that literacy identities progress throughout life and across both home and school. Indeed, in the last quote, the teacher states that she wants her students to "build their own opinions."

4.4 DM 2: Memories of Struggle (n=22)

The second primary DM is quite different. For these participants, memories of their struggles as a reader overshadowed all else. The overwhelming narrative revolved around reasons for the difficulty and related feelings. In many cases, there was no mention of genre (n=16). Most also discussed whether they overcame early struggles. These negative experiences took precedence over discussing exposure to books in or out of school as a child. While not all respondents answered the prompt directly, because so many included narratives of struggle and some *did* discuss genre, I felt this category required and deserved separate analytical consideration. While each story was unique, common themes emerged across the responses involving comprehension challenges (n=13) or negative memories of early intervention (n=4).

> *"I was always two grade levels behind. That was until the end of third grade when my reading level became average. I can remember my third-grade teacher reading chapter books to us and she would make time about 15 minutes every day to read. She made me want to be a teacher by her compassion and dedication to me."*

Four others discuss a love of reading as adults. While these readers speak negatively of school experiences, three directly credit family or other adult intervention for their success, and one credits personal perseverance.

> *"My mom would read books to me and she got me into mysteries and adventure books….[My Mom] tried to get me to enjoy reading but my school didn't. I hate to say that, but it's true. I didn't have guidance when it came to picking out books and sticking with them.*

The four participants who mentioned early intervention also discussed outcomes. Some specifically mentioned a diagnosis,

others did not. All four respondents indicate continuing to struggle in adulthood or still needing to read slowly.

> *"My family and teachers did not figure out that I was dyslexic until I was in* [intervention] *in first grade. Instead of learning how to read I memorized the books. I hated learning how to read so much that I destroyed my family's septic system because I attempted to flush my take home books down the toilet. Eventually I went through* [a different intervention] *which involved a lot of tears and many years, but taught me how to read and comprehend."*

For these respondents, outcomes of that struggle were as important as the struggle itself. All 22 discussed their outcomes: whether or not they felt they overcame struggle, when in life that happened, and what may have been the impetus. Interestingly, 10 mentioned a positive home experience with reading stories, but a negative school experience with learning to read, feeling less adequate, and being forced into special classes. However, not all of these narratives directly mention fiction or nonfiction. These findings are similar to others who have discovered that early experiences related to reading achievement are fixed and carry into adulthood. **(**Hall, et. al., 2010; Lesley, 2011).

4.4.1 Nonfiction and Struggle (n=6)

Inside the 22 responses regarding struggle, only six tied nonfiction to their struggles. Those six also indicated whether their experiences had a positive or negative outcome, and discussed a dedicated teacher who aided them. These narratives divided into two themes.

1. *Nonfiction Helped.* Two of the teacher respondents felt that finding nonfiction helped them as readers (n=2). They describe it as a 'way out' or an alternative path into reading.
2. *Lingering Comprehension Challenges.* Four (n=4) respondents discussed feeling as though still they have lingering comprehension challenges with nonfiction texts.

4.4.2 Nonfiction Helped

Two responses specifically discussed a lack of enjoyment in reading until a teacher helped them discover nonfiction topics that captured their interest. The responses in this category are similar to those of respondents in the DM 1 who discuss finding nonfiction later in life.

> *"My earliest memories of reading were not happy ones other than with my parents. I was in one of the lowest levels of reading groups in early elementary school. I disliked reading with a passion because I knew it was something I struggled with and it meant I had to do more work with the teacher compared to my friends….. That was until my fourth-grade teacher realized I had a love for facts. She shared nonfiction texts with me …. Mrs. W aided me in learning that my love of facts could be beneficial to improving my love of reading through nonfiction.*
>
> *"My third-grade teacher understood my struggles and used different strategies to help me read. She knew I liked biographies because I liked to know more about people and places. This is where I would ask for more and more books. It was still a struggle for me but I enjoyed it so it was not as bad. At the beginning of third grade, I was at a first-grade level. At the end I was at a third-grade reading level."*

4.4.3 Lingering Nonfiction Comprehension Challenges

Four participants directly mentioned continuing to struggle with nonfiction comprehension into adulthood. Two of those responses compared current fiction and nonfiction comprehension experiences. In both cases, respondents mentioned enjoyment of fiction while still struggling with nonfiction as adults.

> *"Many times, books were my friend. I always loved the library. Reading was never a problem for me – as long as I find it interesting. Reading comprehension for textbooks, on the other hand, I still struggle with. I finally figured out how to take notes -another thing they don't explicitly teach in school.*
>
> *I loved phonics units and library visits and was in the G & T program in 4th grade. Then came junior high…. And I got my first D. That was the beginning of a downward trend in grades that didn't rise above C level in most classes. Since I didn't know what the problem was, I didn't know how to fix it and that followed me most of my life. I still struggle with reading nonfiction."*
>
> *"Growing up, I loved fiction. You could usually find me reading Junie B. Jones, Judy Moody, and Magic Tree House…. I also remember nonfiction. I struggled with comprehension. I would read a paragraph and have no idea what I just read once I got to the end. Because of this, reading was never my favorite past time. It was not the thing I immediately went for. Once I got older into high school and college, nonfiction texts got easier and I started reading for pleasure more often but would not consider myself a reader.*

Some responses here are similar to those in DM 1. Importantly, some in this category also preferred nonfiction. This is a logical conclusion, as this population of students is part of the larger population of all students. What makes their experience different is struggle.

5. Discussion

This study investigated what, if any, differential preferences elementary teachers had toward fiction and nonfiction text. Many of their stories were not surprising. For this group of in-service teachers, across both DMs, differential attitudes toward fiction and nonfiction did exist. Findings echo much of what research and theory already tells us (i.e., Hartsfield, 2021; Håland et al., 2021; Gee, 2014; Lesley, 2011). Participants in DM 1 had positive memories of fiction attached to other social and cultural practices such as bedtime story hour. Teachers' early memories of nonfiction were much more tied to schooling. While no causal connections can be made based upon this study's analysis, and future work will help to further define culturally situated genre preferences, findings across both DMs coupled with existing research, make it possible to propose courses of action for both professional development and future research. Figure 3 summarizes these possibilities.

5.1 Home versus School Memories

Responses of the 31 participants who indicated a divide between the treatment of fiction and nonfiction ran the gamut. Some only connected nonfiction text to writing reports and reading textbooks, others did indicate they believed nonfiction text was treated differently in school. This divide between pleasure and school reading is not new. (i.e., McKenna & Kear, 1990; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000.) Research indicating the close connection between identity and instructional practice is clear (i.e., Drake, 2001; Howard, et. al., 2020; Parr & Campbell, 2011).

These responses also provide new insight into the cultural treatment of nonfiction as well as into how gatekeeping (Gee, 2014) is perpetuated. Across both DMs many participants who had positive attitudes toward fiction believed nonfiction was reserved for school reports, included only textbooks, was not exciting, or difficult to read. This finding lends knowledge of genre-specific identity development to Lesley's (2011) discoveries. Negative recollections of nonfiction occurred within the school setting, while positive memories with fiction were situated at home (Quinlan & Curtin, 2017; Gee, 2014**)**.

While these responses are indicative of differential genre preferences and personal attitudes, they also represent the feelings (Alcántara-Plá**,** 2024) associated with this identity development. Explored or unexplored bias may be present (Hartsfield, 2021). However, teachers are not at fault. They were subjected to the same sociocultural gatekeeping suggested by both Gee (2014) and Hartsfield (2021). Further, preferences alone cannot be considered bias. There is a difference between the effect of unexamined preference and the conscious choice of one title over another.

5.2 Behavior Change as Teachers

Six respondents also indicated they were trying to provide more nonfiction genres to students in their own classrooms. It is important to note that the original prompt did not ask participants to write about current classroom practice. Those teachers who did also indicated reasons why they were pushing past their own personal preferences. Reasons included not wanting their students to experience the same negative feelings, or wanting children to be able to form their own opinions across genres.

According to Gee (2014), we must assume that teachers are operating within an historically prevalent and culturally ingratiated discourse model. While some research indicates that teacher practices are difficult to change, (i.e., Hall et al., 2010), other studies, (i.e., Kindall & Penner-Williams, 2013, Rodgers et al, 2022) indicate that exposure to nonfiction text and disciplinary instructional practices can alter pre-service teachers' attitudes toward teaching with nonfiction text. The question then becomes what nonfiction methodologies should be taught and practiced?

Literacy professors Howard, Hu, and Faulconer (2020), examined how sharing literacy identities affected instructional practices. They state: "Findings from the study reveal that our literacy stories shaped our identities, our identities and beliefs shaped our instruction, and our reflective process shaped change in our practice (p.1). Taken together research in both pre- and in-service instruction (i.e., Rogers et al., 2023) along with research in deep reflection (i.e., Lesley, 2011), might indicate that the most powerful avenue would be to connect that reflection directly to teaching methodologies. Before the pre-service teachers in Lesley (2011) could accept responsibility for teaching struggling adolescent readers, they first had to consider personal biases. They did so via an in-depth writing assignment to create a personal historical narrative which involved discussion and follow-up throughout the course. Some participants discussed making personal attempts to change their behaviors. It is impossible to determine whether these new practices are directly related to course activities or any other in-service professional development. Future research linking deep reflection on genre biases in personal literacy identity directly to professional development in methods and strategies for use with nonfiction text across populations of pre- and in-service teachers as well as literacy instructors, could inform both k-12 and higher educational instruction.

One obstacle to this type of teaching are the nonfiction selections found in basal reading series. Braker-Walters (2014) discovered that while the common core is recommending that 50% of instruction be conducted in nonfiction text in grade 4, across three basal series, the percentage of nonfiction selections was only 31%, and, these selections took up only an average of 14 to 18 pages per series. In a similar analysis of eight basal series, Stephens (2007) reported that while the *number* of selections appeared balanced, actual page counts were not at all balanced, with far fewer pages devoted to nonfiction, indicating the length and quality of nonfiction selections were sub-par. It is likely not possible for one series to provide all necessary materials. It is possible to engage teachers in nonfiction genre analysis to help them learn to select appropriately leveled nonfiction text. (Russell, 2023b).

5.3 Memories of Struggle

A more surprising discovery were memories of struggle so strong participants didn't completely answer the prompt. This is an important finding and echoes the work of Hall, et al., (2010). Memories of struggle were socially situated in school and overrode positive home memories. These insights lend themselves to recommendations for both teacher preparation programs as well as k-12 curricular practices. Only six of these respondents included any mention of nonfiction text and four believed they continue to struggle with nonfiction as adults.

5.3.1 Young Children's Early Exposure to Nonfiction Text at Home and in School

The overwhelmingly positive early memories of fiction reported by teachers in this study make clear that young children's exposure to literature and experiences with print help to develop early literacy identity. Bedtime stories, environmental print, trips to the library or bookstore undertaken with caring adults is critical to the formation of positive attitudes (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). An important contribution to this body of knowledge are the responses of participants who also had early positive experiences with nonfiction text. Teachers who had fond memories of exposure to nonfiction at home or in school had equally positive attitudes about reading nonfiction and found it to be a pleasurable experience they carried into adulthood.

One possible avenue for increasing young children's positive interaction with nonfiction is through parent education. Saracho and Spodek (2009**)** discovered that while parents were supportive of their children's literacy development, they believed it to be about worksheets and foundational skill development to the detriment of children's motivations, interests, or enjoyment of literature. During parent education workshops, the researchers observed parents choosing from the literature provided and implementing suggested instructional strategies; altering literacy beliefs, practices, and parent-child interactions. Parent's belief that early literacy is only about foundational skills is not surprising. Classroom teachers could help more informally by making nonfiction selections and possible discussion topics or questions available for sharing at home.

5.3.2 Specific Implications for k-12 Reading Supports

Similar to the findings of Lesley (2011), for the teachers who viewed themselves as struggling readers, it became the most critical factor in shaping their literacy identities. Importantly, many described very positive early childhood experiences at home. However, their lasting impressions were negative school experiences. This is suggestive of a need to reconsider how educators think about challenged readers in a school situation. To be sure, readers who struggle need differentiated supports. However, the larger question lies in what can be done to change how students *view* this assistance. Russell (2023b) suggests that professional educators reflect on their thinking about struggle as a deficit, and instead begin to consider all developing readers from a standpoint of situation model proficiency that includes the interplay between reader and text (Kintsch, 1998). Instead of questioning what gaps need to be filled, we might ask what the next logical step is to help readers move closer toward needed proficiencies.

Recommendations for Practice	**Implications**
Integrating personal reflection into the study of nonfiction text and methodologies for pre-service teachers, graduate students, and in-service teachers.	Personal reflection about genre bias coupled with solid instruction may lead to more effective nonfiction literacy instruction.
Helping parents discover nonfiction text selections to share with their young children	Earlier exposure to nonfiction children's literature at home may lead to more positive early memories of nonfiction.
Replacing the deficit model with a model of proficiency	Considering needs of students as opposed to focusing efforts on deficits may help alter student perceptions
Advocacy for change across gatekeepers beyond teachers	Increased cultural and curricular exposure to nonfiction selections may help alter general awareness
Recommendations for Future Research	**Implications**
Literacy identity surveys across diverse populations of parents	Descriptive studies to determine the impact of cultural, gender and age differences on types of literature shared with children.
Literacy identity surveys across diverse population of first-year undergraduate students across all majors of study	Descriptive studies to determine what genre biases students have upon leaving high school and why. And, to determine if genre biases exist across majors of study.

Figure 3. Recommendations and Implications

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The participant pool in this study is limited. In-service teachers taking graduate courses in literacy are all motivated by the topic and have chosen courses for very specific professional reasons. Further, this particular sample is primarily female, suburban, and lacks diversity. It is also limited due to the asynchronous nature of instructor-student communication. The participant pool lacks some demographic data such as age, years of teaching experience, and type of undergraduate licensure. This researcher has also indicated awareness of her personal biases in conducting the data analysis.

What is important are the preliminary findings that genre preferences might be socially situated and that teachers can carry those preferences into the classroom. This analysis uncovered some very genre-specific beliefs and feelings held by these teachers. It is reasonable to assume that asking the same question across other populations would yield a broader range of results. Research including diverse populations, such as parents with young children, and first-year undergraduate students before they've taken any courses, could inform beliefs and attitudes across multiple demographics.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to determine whether in-service elementary teachers who were taking M.Ed. literacy courses held differential preferences toward fiction and nonfiction genres. Findings revealed that in discussing a preference for fiction literature, respondents wrote primarily about early childhood home experiences such as bedtime stories. On the other hand, teachers who wrote about nonfiction experiences situated them in relation to school tasks such as research for a report. Importantly, some teachers displayed reflection regarding their own genre preferences and indicated they were consciously trying to change their own professional practice to include more nonfiction for their current elementary students. While this work adds information about genre-specific literacy identity development among elementary teachers, we cannot determine which direction influence flows. Does it start with parents and teachers, or as Gee (2014) indicates is there a larger assumed socially situated practice? In future research, discourse analysis **(**Gee, 2014), might help to explain many of the variables concerning how nonfiction texts are viewed and socially carried forward.

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