

Attitudes and Perceptions: Craft and Creativity in
the Nonfiction Genres

by

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Abstract

This study reveals the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of three groups of participants regarding nonfiction genres for juvenile readers in grades four, five and six. The data consist of open ended interviews. The sample includes three groups—eleven authors of juvenile nonfiction, ten teachers of juvenile students, and nine juvenile students.

It is noteworthy that the authors' attitudes and perceptions were the most closely aligned of the three groups of participants. Perhaps not surprisingly, the authors viewed the nonfiction genres as exciting, creative, and as having the ability to broaden the reader's perspective. The teacher participants valued the nonfiction genres mostly for pragmatic purposes and their ability to enhance the curriculum. The student participants valued the nonfiction genres for information and truth.

As a result of the data collected, the recommendations include brandishing a new respect for nonfiction and its craft. Moreover, careful consideration of teaching the nonfiction genres including their craft and creativity is necessary. Finally, it is imperative to reconsider nonfiction in the genre spectrum.


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Chapter One

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

This study explored nonfiction genres written for juvenile readers and the prevailing attitudes held by three distinct groups of participants—students from grades four to six, teachers of juvenile nonfiction, and authors of juvenile nonfiction.

Rationale

Researchers (Cairney, 1992; Duthie, 1994; Littlefair, 1992) argue that there are a variety of genres with which students need to be familiar. Nonfiction, according to Duthie (1994), “can have crucial implications for lifelong learning” (p. 58). Hence, this study intended to discover the current attitudes and perceptions regarding the genres of nonfiction.

As educators, we understand that a rich language environment allows many children to use language in a variety of ways. Yet, some children do not develop an awareness of the full range of written language forms (Littlefair, 1992). Therefore, “if we, as educators, are to prepare students for life-long learning, an early introduction and analysis of nonfiction as a genre is a necessary piece of the preparation” (Duthie, 1994, p. 594).

Ironically, the Language Arts Resource Book (1990) acknowledges “the likelihood of students having attained a higher level of proficiency in reading nonfiction is probably minimal relative to their performances on literary material” (p. 91). The British Columbia Ministry of Education stresses that students require knowledge of

strategies for dealing with the content of nonfiction. Mastery of written expository compositions can only be achieved once the student attains a level of exposure and comfort regarding the genres of nonfiction.

Accordingly, one of the Language Arts English Grades 1-12 Curriculum Guide's program goals is "to develop attributes of wonder, curiosity, and independence necessary for lifelong learning" (p. 117). The objective aims "to develop the student's ability to locate information from a variety of sources, including new technology as available and appropriate" (p. 117).

This study examined how the participants define and value nonfiction. It also explored the skills necessary to navigate non-fiction. These skills, which are highly valued in both school and the professional work world, are assumed to be important if an individual is to function as a literate member of society (Duthie, 1994).

Without a doubt, "what children in school are enabled to do in using language is very much a condition of what they have been enabled to learn to do" (Christie, 1993, p. 178). Moreover, Abrahamson and Carter (1991) state, "if we ignore nonfiction in English classes we let youngsters taste only a small piece of the literature pie" (p. 53). As they move through the elementary grades into secondary school, it is expected that students will possess a familiarity with the nonfiction genres, and increasing competence in accessing the information offered by them.

Background to the Problem

Romaine (1991) claims, "there is not a great deal of research related to the importance of nonfiction" (p. 14). In addition, Wray (1995) states that nonfiction is "an

area which has been rather neglected in the past in terms of both research and the development of practice” (p. 1). He adds that, “our practical understanding about how children might be taught to read nonfiction texts have [*sic*] always been less well developed than our insights into the reading of narrative texts” (p. 1). Yet, Snowball (1995) points out that “there is currently a much greater awareness of the importance of reading and writing nonfiction in elementary school classrooms”; moreover, she notes that “approximately 85 percent of the reading and writing in middle school, high school and adult life is with nonfiction” (p. 62).

Research Questions

Authors.

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of authors who write for juvenile readers with regard to the nonfiction genres?
Specifically, how do they define nonfiction?
Why do these authors choose to write nonfiction?
What do they feel they are able to accomplish through this genre? What skills do they think are necessary to navigate nonfiction?

Teachers.

2. What are the attitudes and perceptions of teachers of juvenile readers with regard to the nonfiction genres?
Specifically, how do they define nonfiction?
What value do they place in formal teaching of the nonfiction genres?

What role does nonfiction have in their own classrooms and what do they feel is accomplished through this medium?

What skills do they think are necessary to navigate nonfiction and do these skills need to be explicitly taught?

Students.

3. What are the attitudes and perceptions of juvenile readers with regard to the nonfiction genres?

Specifically, how do they define nonfiction and what do they feel is accomplished through the medium?

Do they read nonfiction texts for enjoyment?

What skills do readers think they need to navigate nonfiction?

Assumptions

1. All participants appeared to answer the interview questions honestly and to the best of their knowledge.
2. The selection of participants is assumed to be representative of authors, teachers and students. The sample of participants seemed to be large enough to warrant making comparisons and contrasts.

Limitations

1. This study was limited to the months of September 1996 through March 1997 with a specific group of participants.
2. All the participants were volunteers and were aware that the purpose of the study was to compile data on attitudes and perceptions regarding the nonfiction genres.
3. Due to busy schedules, it was difficult to obtain more than one-half hour of data from each participant.
4. The population of participants was limited to thirty.
5. The attitudes and perceptions captured by the data were from a particular group of people at a particular time. Attitudes and perceptions are always evolving and subject to change.
6. The researcher chose a qualitative methodology because it best suited the interpretation of the data.

Chapter Two

Related Research

Genre

The term genre, according to James Slavin (1988), can be defined as: an inherited social form, a discursive institution, within which a writer fuses meaning, structure, linguistic features, and pragmatic purposes and effects (cited in Beaufort, 1992).

Genre can also refer “to the way the schematic structure of a text helps it to achieve its purpose” (Cairney, 1992, p. 24). Miller (1990) states that “for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (p. 165). Littlefair (1992) concurs when she writes:

If we are to discuss genre ideas with understanding, we have to pause and consider that ‘genre’ is not about independent, isolated text structure but about the interaction of texts we speak and write, texts we listen to and read and the context in which we all live. This linguistic definition of genre which has emerged is much wider than the one which refers simply to a category of texts. This means that the term ‘genre’ is confusing because we have a pre-conceived understanding of it (p. 3).

An understanding of the traditional conventions of the nonfiction genres is essential. Such understanding provides a frame of reference from which one can trace its development and evolution.

What is Nonfiction?

Several differing conceptions exist regarding the genres of nonfiction. Doiron (1991) states that “nonfiction texts are stimulating and appealing, presenting information in interesting books on a wide variety of topics” (p. 618). Abrahamson and Carter (1987) believe that the strength of nonfiction lies in the diversity of the genre. They think “the best nonfiction is beautifully written, has excellent characterization, tells a fine story, and celebrates life in the same way novels do” (p. 104). Also, they claim “its stirring language, its compelling subjects, and its impressive abilities to provoke thought and challenge beliefs—has [*sic*] shaped philosophies, societies and individuals” (p. 53). However, Pappas (1991) writes: “the information book genre does not deal with specific characters and their goals, personal motives for action, and the like. Instead, information books make general statements about animals, objects, people, and so forth, because their purpose is to inform” (p. 451). According to Freedman (1992), “nonfiction is a pack of facts in pursuit of the truth. Unfortunately, [he says,] facts can’t always be trusted. Facts can be unreliable, misleading, ambiguous, or slippery” (p. 2). These examples, ranging from the simplistic and purposeful to the empowering and influential, demonstrate the range of perceptions regarding the nonfiction genres.

Although recognized, accepted and utilized by the Dewey decimal system, the term “nonfiction” is surrounded by a degree of controversy. Savage (1996) says: “it is a not so subtle way of saying that a work is non literary.” In fact, the term is regarded by some as a reference to an inferior genre. As a result, terms like “informational books” are utilized. However, according to Heeks (1996), the term “informational books” also has

limitations. Heeks (1996) recognizes “the need to examine the distinction between facts, information and knowledge” (p. 433). She writes:

Facts are raw data. Facts are processed to provide information. The processing makes the accessing of facts easier. Knowledge arises when intelligence and understanding are brought to bear on the information (p. 433).

Accordingly, she asserts that “one cannot...equate information with knowledge. Information books serve as the tools which can help readers to knowledge” (p. 433). What readers require are the skills to use those tools to access knowledge.

It would be presumptuous to conclude that nonfiction is simply fact. Nonfiction is a selection and interpretation of facts. Its impact is dependent on the way something is understood. We represent what we understand to be true by using language. And “through language, we symbolize, structure, regulate and give meaning to our experiences” (Miller & Juliebo, 1995, p. 36). According to Bruner (1986), “language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view....The message itself may create the reality that the message embodies and predispose those who hear it to think about it in a particular mode” (p. 121). Therefore, if this is true the genres of nonfiction have the potential to influence and reformulate the way we think about particular topics. With this in mind, mastering the ability to read the nonfiction genres effectively should create an awareness of the form which may have a positive impact on efforts to write the genre.

Historical Perspective

Plagued by the myth that nonfiction is a one-dimensional set of facts, confronted by those who argue that its purpose is not simply the presentation of facts but the ability of the text “to transform into a vision of reality,” the term nonfiction was coined around the turn of the century to help define man’s [*sic*] fascination with science (Savage, 1996).

Designed to improve the readers’ Latin skills by presenting both pictures and words of familiar objects, the earliest example of a children’s information book was the Orbitus Pictus (1658) by J. A. Comenius (Heeks, 1996).

According to Heeks (1996), early books like Comenius’ remind us

that nonfiction may offer pleasure as well as instruction, an imaginative experience as well as information. This duality is apparent as one studies the publications of this present century, but it is noticeable that nonfiction today seems to be serving a range of purposes not apparent three decades ago (p. 434).

Purposes of Nonfiction

There are several purposes that nonfiction genres can serve according to the following researchers. Firstly, Doiron (1994) cites the American Library Association’s Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, who state,

we are in an information age where one of the major goals of education is to develop in children an ability ‘to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information’ (p. 618).

Secondly, Moss (1995) acknowledges that nonfiction expands children's knowledge and contributes to schema development and comprehension. Nonfiction also introduces students to a variety of terms and concepts that the students may never have otherwise encountered. According to Montebello (1972), the best nonfiction "leaves in the child's mind a residue of information about people, times, places, processes and heroes" (p. 63).

And finally, Snowball (1995) emphasizes that "there are many kinds of nonfiction writing, serving different purposes and audiences. If we were to become more aware of the different kinds and how their writing features vary, we can help students become better readers and writers of nonfiction" (p. 62). Hence, it is essential to grasp the purposes of the nonfiction genres in order to fully understand and appreciate them.

Quality Nonfiction

According to Carr (1987), nonfiction can be placed "into two categories: 'nonfiction that stuffs in facts, as if children were vases to be filled and nonfiction that ignites the imagination, as if children were indeed fires to be lit'" (Doiron, 1994, p. 620). Determining what constitutes quality nonfiction, Vardell (1991) cites Bacon (1981) who suggests that "quality nonfiction requires craft: a structure, if not story; simplicity without oversimplification, the choice of revealing example, the relationship of content and structure, the ramification of style and language, the many uses of illustrations" (p. 476).

In addition, Duthie (1994) notes that "nonfiction can have strong voice, be creative, and use techniques from other genres and that nonfiction writers may use their own special techniques" (p. 588). Certainly, some of today's nonfiction has the ability to

take the reader “into the world of new ideas, interesting facts, and possibilities for the future” (Scott, 1994, p. 677). According to Vardell (1991):

the best of the genre (just like the best fiction for children) offers an outstanding model of quality of writing, individuality of style, beauty of expression and creativity in use of language. These books can serve as tools for showing expository prose, text organization, and book design at its finest (p. 475).

Vardell (1991) also thinks “a good informational book should be current and contain the most complete information possible since the main reason a reader chooses nonfiction is to satisfy a curiosity to find out” (p. 476). The distribution of information is achieved both through a well written text and through visual depictions. Elleman (1992) thinks, “the best kind of nonfiction takes children from where they are and builds on that information, extending their knowledge and stimulating them to further research” (p. 29).

Visual Appeal of Nonfiction

Heeks (1996) states, “the most obvious change in information books during the past forty years has been the increase in importance of illustration” (p. 441). Giblin (1987) thinks “the visual look of nonfiction is especially important today, when books have to compete with so many other media for a young person’s attention” (p. 105).

As a result, “many authors of newer nonfiction books have recognized children’s desire to read information and have responded with wonderfully visual, detailed, and interesting books on a wide variety of topics” (Doiron, 1994, p. 618). For example, the

Eye Witness books from Dorling Kindersley offer detailed, authentic visual depictions on any number of nonfiction topics.

Authoring Nonfiction

Doiron (1994) says, “nonfiction writers are also gaining acceptance as ‘real’ authors, creative individuals who are capable of writing interesting engaging texts” (p. 618). Also, Giblin (1987) writes: “over the past decade there has been a dramatic shift in the way juvenile nonfiction books are conceived, written, and published” (p. 104). In the past, nonfiction was thought of as reading solely for information; whereas, reading for pleasure meant reading fiction and narrative texts. Vardell (1991) states:

a quick reexamination of the nonfiction genres show that an exciting renaissance has occurred in both the writing and illustration books for children offer content that is relevant and well-researched on an incredible variety of subjects, combined with clear and interesting style and language (p. 479).

However, the creation of nonfiction books requires constant crafting and workmanship.

Carr (1982) writes:

that good nonfiction writers are like good teachers: They make the reader think deeply and feel deeply. Good nonfiction creates a challenge for the reader involving the linking of facts one to another and testing familiar ideas against new ones so that the reader is able to weave a pattern of increased understanding. What begins as idle curiosity should end as independent thinking (p. 4).

For some readers, the transition from curiosity to critical thinking requires encouragement and guidance through thoughtful teaching, which is facilitated by both high quality nonfiction and carefully focused curricula.

Teaching Nonfiction

Cranny-Francis (1993) states that it is necessary to teach “the variety of text types or styles or kinds—that is genres—that students may need to employ throughout their adult life, in order to be active, empowered social subjects” (p. 114). Yet, Vardell (1991) notes, “we often neglect the opportunity to engage children in learning the information the world offers: ‘We introduce our children to great storybooks and novels, forgetting the fascination of facts’” (p. 76). Doiron (1994) recognizes that as educators:

we need to look for opportunities to incorporate the literature of fact into our literacy programs, not as texts to learn but as rich meaningful experiences. In this way, we can make reading for information part of the pleasure of reading, not the work of reading (p. 621).

Educators can engage student interest by drawing comparisons between several genres to demonstrate the similarities and differences in text construction (Moss, 1987). In the meantime, “we can’t presume that all students know these strategies for reading nonfiction” (Snowball, 1995, p. 63). Cooper (1995) believes that “children need to be prepared for the world of functional reading, so that they can employ the strategies necessary to cope with it” (p. 15). Despite the apparent growth in popularity of nonfiction genres, Culp and Sosa (1993) maintain that most students are not assigned much nonfiction (p. 64).

Therefore, as educators, we must consider selecting nonfiction that is appropriate “to children’s levels of interest and [which has] curricular relevance. The key to successful selection of any book is the knowledge of one’s students, their interests, and their background experiences” (Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1993) (cited in Moss, 1987, p. 124). Cairney (1992) writes, “teachers have a responsibility to introduce students to specific genres, provide models of these texts, and to jointly construct texts with students” (p. 26). British Columbia’s Ministry of Education English Language Arts K to 7 Integrated Resource Package states:

the exchange of information takes places continually everyday. Having the ability to convey and respond to information is essential to students’ success in school and the workplace, and prepares them for the responsibility of citizenship. Using language for a variety of informational purposes and audiences helps students:

- communicate effectively and clearly using various technologies
- read and interpret technical directions and instructions gather, exchange and manage information
- solve problems independently and in collaboration with others
- expand their knowledge base and cultivate analytical and critical thinking (p. 4).

Duthie (1994) adds that “with understanding and tools, young children can grow to be excited, competent, creative readers and writers of nonfiction across all discipline areas” (p. 594). Undoubtedly, an engaging approach to the teaching of nonfiction must be outlined because “children should love nonfiction as much as they love fiction” (Scott, 1994, p. 677).

Reading Nonfiction

Scott (1994) believes “just as with fiction, nonfiction can be read simply for enjoyment” (p. 676). Moreover, according to Hess (1996) “reading comprehension is improved when the reader has a motive for reading” (p. 228).

Abrahamson and Carter (1991) believe that “readers tend to approach books in one of two ways: they either look at what they carry away from the text, or they look at what they can experience through the text. Many educators assume that nonfiction, with its information and facts, provides the forum for the former...”(p. 55). Yet, “educators are beginning to realize that nonfiction also has an aesthetic quality that makes it very attractive and motivating for young readers” (Doiron, 1994, p. 616). According to Moss (1995), “for children to feel that a real person is behind the information provided in a book, they must hear the writer’s voice....” (Moss, p. 29). Cooper (1995) reports: “it does seem clear that reading nonfiction for pleasure is a valuable activity for children, in helping them to build on previous interests and to formulate their own reasons for extending their knowledge” (p. 19). Given these factors—enjoyment, interest, aesthetics and facts—it is apparent why the nonfiction genres can be appealing to so many young readers.

Nonfiction Preferences

Abrahamson and Carter (1991) claim that “when middle-school youngsters are given the freedom to select their own reading material, they often chose nonfiction” (p. 53). Biography is one of the most popular types of nonfiction. Other sub-genres frequently mentioned were “true adventure/suspense stories, information books and self-

help books” (Culp & Sosa, 1993, p. 64). However, many students “commented that newspapers and magazines are the only nonfiction they read” (p. 64). According to Snowball (1995), in the case of reluctant readers, “the way into reading is through books or magazine articles about topics that relate to their hobbies or interests” (p. 62).

Cooper (1995) tried to determine what motivated the reader’s choice of nonfiction. She discovered, after careful investigation, that “the subject was always the first criterion for their choices, and the appearance of the book came only into play when there were several books on the subject they found interesting” (p. 18).

Gender

Yet, girls and boys, writes Langerman (1990), “even at the young age of five or six...expressed strong preferences for rather different types of recreational literature, with boys preferring nonfiction most of the time, and girls preferring fiction” (p. 134). An American study by Southgate (1981) showed that 19 % of 7-to 8-year-olds and 13 % of 9-year-olds liked nonfiction. However, this same study also revealed that boys “showed a greater preference for information books than girls in both age groups” (Heeks, 1996, p. 438).

Conclusion

The rationale for this study supports the idea that the ability to navigate the genres of nonfiction is important for success in both the academic and professional world. The literature suggests that nonfiction has undergone dramatic changes over the past three decades. In addition, several researchers (Cairney, 1992; Duthie, 1994; Scott, 1994)

advocate for explicit teaching of the nonfiction genres. While there are several issues to consider when examining nonfiction, it is apparent that further exploration into attitudes and perceptions with regard to the nonfiction genres is warranted if we are to understand its role in the lives of young readers or the views of their teachers and the authors who create it.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

This study was designed to reveal the prevailing attitudes and perceptions regarding nonfiction genres for juvenile readers. Juvenile readers comprising grades four, five and six students participated in the study. Interviews were used to collect data from three groups—authors of juvenile nonfiction, teachers of juvenile students, and students from grades four to six. Selective sampling determined the participants in each group; achieving equal representation of males and females in each of the groups was a priority.

Semi-structured Narrative Inquiry

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write: “humans are storytelling organisms...[and] the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Interviews are one example of narrative inquiry and are the principle component of the database in this study. With regards to nonfiction genres, I sought to capture the attitudes and perceptions held by each participant. Although subject to my own interpretation, the meaning I derived came through the process of interacting with the participants. As Reisman (1993) states: “meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal” (p. 15). Therefore, the attitudes and perceptions were highly interpretive as they originated from the individual’s own conceptualization.

The quest for each participant’s thoughts about nonfiction came through asking a series of open-ended questions, which allowed each participant to create his/her own

interpretation of the nonfiction genres. For the purpose of this study, the questions were meant to establish a common focus so that a degree of triangulation could be established; consequently, similar questions were posed to participants in all three groups. The analysis involved comparison of the data from the three subject groups to discover if similar themes or discrepancies emerged and it determined how closely aligned the viewpoints were among the three groups.

Subjects

This study proceeded as an inductive analysis with the purpose of making comparisons and contrasts about the participants' values regarding nonfiction.

Author participants.

The 11 authors who participated in this study had all written juvenile nonfiction works during their careers; many had also lectured, taught, illustrated, edited and published respectively. Of the 11 authors interviewed, eight were female and three were male. As the methodology in this report dictated, the participants' identities remained anonymous. However, all authors granted permission for their names to appear in the acknowledgments.

Some of the authors interviewed were featured participants in a conference on literature for children and young adults. Contact was made with the conference organizers, who felt that it would be inappropriate for them to establish contact with the authors. However, the conference committee did encourage me to approach the authors independently. Hence, I traveled to Calgary, Alberta with a cover letter in hand and

individually approached four authors. They responded with great enthusiasm and gave me precious moments from their time-pressed schedules. Five other authors were interviewed in accordance with their availability and accessibility. Of the eleven, six interviews were conducted in person and five interviews were conducted via telephone.

Participating authors were from Vancouver Island, central Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Some of the prestigious accreditations bestowed on these authors included: the Jane Adams Peace Award, the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award for Nonfiction, the Caldecott Honor Book Award, the Rachel Carson Honor Award, the Newberry Honor Book, the New York Academy of Sciences Children's Book Award, the Orbis Pictus Award, the Silver Birch Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, and the Prix du Livre pour Enfants.

Teacher participants.

The ten teachers interviewed were either classroom teachers, teacher-librarians, or librarians. All had experience with students in grades four, five or six. In order to find the appropriate number of participants, recruitment occurred primarily in one elementary school, with the remainder of the teacher's recruited from other locations. Of the ten participants interviewed, seven were female and three were male.

Student participants.

Finally, nine students were recruited from grades 4, 5 and 6. The participants were chosen based on their interest in the study and willingness to participate. Five of the nine students interviewed were female and four were male.

Grade 4, 5 and 6 students were chosen as a target population for two reasons. Firstly, by this stage, most students are proficient readers. Secondly, Norvell's (1950) study discovered that a strong interest in nonfiction books emerges around the fourth grade (as cited in Abrahamson & Carter, 1991).

Setting

The authors and seven teacher participants were interviewed at a time and place of their convenience. The remainder were conducted within the school premises, in order to accommodate with the schedules of the participants. The elementary school where this study was conducted in the Greater Victoria School District in Victoria, British Columbia provides education for approximately 305 students in kindergarten through grade 6. Many of the students attending the school come from upper-middle class backgrounds.

Procedure

Each participant was asked to consent to an interview exploring his/her attitudes and perceptions of the nonfiction genres. A letter of consent, explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing anonymity, was sent to each participant and, if necessary, to his/her guardian.

Informed consent allowed for the interviews to be audio-taped for the purpose of transcription, reflection and analysis. A Realistic voice-activated hand-held tape recorder (model no. CTR-85) was utilized during the course of the interviews. All participants appeared comfortable with the device and granted permission for recording to occur.

Those interviews conducted via the telephone were recorded on a standard answering machine and transferred later to audiotape.

The use of multiple sources, allowed the data to be triangulated. As a result, the data were richer and more informative than would have been the case had the researcher “relied on only one source” (Lancy, 1993, p. 20).

Instrumentation

The questions posed to the participants were structured to reveal the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of the nonfiction genres. The initial questions were personal opinion questions, and they were designed to set the participant at ease, to reveal the participant’s background, and to achieve a degree of momentum and rapport for the remainder of the interview. During the last half of the interview, the questions posed required more consideration and explored specific issues such as gender, genre, and value.

Careful consideration was given to the selection, sequencing and refining of the interview questions. It was important that the questions were concise and clear, had smooth transition, and allowed for triangulation. The interview questions underwent several revisions after discussion with my thesis supervisor and numerous colleagues. As well, additional revisions were made based on responses from the initial interviews. An example of a revision was changing the phrase in the student interviews from—what skills do you need...—to—what do you need to know.... Some students were experiencing difficulty with the question as it was initially stated. I did not feel this was a change to the actual meaning of the question merely the wording of it.

Themes and concepts were gleaned from each interview for the purpose of building more thought-provoking questions for the next interview. From the transcripts, I selected and then pursued themes in the next interview session. For example, I had specifically asked both the teachers and students how they would define nonfiction but had neglected to ask the author participants because I assumed it would be presumptuous. After interviewing some authors, I discovered that the answer to this question was not evident in the transcripts; therefore, I amended the questions and asked specifically about defining nonfiction. As a result, I was able to obtain a more definitive answer.

Definitions

The following definitions may prove useful for the interpretation of this study:

- An attitude is defined as a participant's feeling or thinking regarding the genres of nonfiction.
- A perception is defined as the insights, knowledge and understanding a participant communicates regarding the nonfiction genres.
- A value is defined as the worth that a participant places upon the nonfiction genres.
- Nonfiction is defined as a genre that provides the reader with "truth" and fact.

Analysis

The interviews were arranged to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Hence, the interviews occurred in no particular order with representation from any of the three groups. The ordering ensured the opportunity to reformulate questions and allowed concentration on specific areas, according to how the participants in any one group

responded. The only deviation from the intended methodology occurred due to a scheduling conflict. The final two student participants were interviewed together. As a researcher, I was aware of the risk of influence and bias due to the presence of another participant and made every effort to conduct the interview to ensure that both students had the opportunity to provide independent responses.

To ensure confidentiality, each participant received a numerical code which was used to identify the transcripts. Upon completion of coding and analyzing, the tapes, which had been kept in a locked cabinet, were destroyed.

The themes revealed during the course of analysis were: how participants defined nonfiction; what values participants placed on nonfiction; what skills participants perceived as being necessary to negotiate nonfiction; the purpose that participants perceived nonfiction as having; and whether the participants perceived a gender difference with regard to preference for the nonfiction genres. During the coding and analysis process, several themes that had not been previously considered. These themes are discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four

Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The objective of the data analysis was to determine the attitudes and perceptions of authors, teachers and students regarding nonfiction genres. The results of the research were documented according to the information compiled during the interview sessions.

Several themes emerged as the data were transcribed, organized and analyzed. Each theme has been analyzed and discussed in the following pages. In addition, triangulating the data from each of the three groups of participants revealed areas where both similarities and differences appeared. This, in conjunction with the research base, provided the opportunity for interpretation.

Authors of Nonfiction

To begin, I was pleasantly astounded by the response from the authors. Of the sixteen nonfiction writers I contacted, only one declined participation while eleven indicated interest in participating. Four authors did not respond to my invitation. All eleven authors interviewed seemed intrigued by the topic and, as a result, they were exceptionally generous in dedicating time from their busy schedules.

In addition, a broad perspective of the craft of writing nonfiction was gained from locations in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet, despite the varied geographical locations, I was immediately struck by the universal passion expressed with regard to the authors' work and the challenges faced by every nonfiction writer.

Collectively, as the interviews and their books make plain, what these authors accomplish in their profession is the ability to share with children the topics, ideas, and concepts about the world that they find most meaningful: Their books serve as tools for the bridge to lifelong learning.

Defining nonfiction.

The term “nonfiction” is as controversial as the genre is diverse. It would seem that nonfiction suffers, to a degree, from an inferiority complex or, at the very least, from a lack of identity. One writer stated, “in some circles, nonfiction writing is a kind of second-class writing.” Another author recalled having been asked when she was going to start writing real books—fiction, that is.

The Oxford Dictionary (1993) defines nonfiction as “literary work other than fiction” (p. 604). This is one reason why one author did not like the term. She implied that nonfiction “says what it isn’t, not what it is, which” she adds, “doesn’t make it sound very exciting at all.” Moreover, she felt that the term “information book” “sounds so dull.” This stigma “makes it sound like the only reason that [one would] pick up a nonfiction book would be to get information.” This particular author thought that “good nonfiction should be as entertaining as good fiction.” Another author suggested that “we tend not to pay too much attention to nonfiction because it is all around us, email, newspapers, news—all nonfiction, and we assume that it’s not creative, not fun. Nonfiction is creative, just in a different way.”

Why authors write nonfiction.

The authors interviewed reported several reasons why they chose to pursue careers in nonfiction writing. Although many found that they fell into the profession by accident, their reasons for pursuing writing careers in nonfiction were as unique as the writers themselves. For instance, some found nonfiction to be interesting, exciting and challenging. One author said, “I think that it was because it was something I knew how to do quite well.” Another author discovered that he “could work quickly and accurately, so editors began to give [him] more commissions.” One author simply said:

Basically I write for money. Like most writers of nonfiction, I am paid a flat fee. This is usually somewhere between 600-1200 pounds according to the length of the book. I get few royalties. Most publishers of nonfiction work on a kind of ‘fire and forget’ system. They want to cross all the t’s and dot all the i’s straight away and not have it come back to haunt them with royalties. I get some royalties.... But the number of books they sell is very small. They think 5,000 is a very long print run.

Another writer interviewed was driven to write by the desire to “engage young readers in their history.” She said, “if they learn about that [they may] want to learn more about themselves and more about others.” She elaborated:

It’s an expanding kind of thing starting very self-centered—I [reader] read about me and then spread out to read about more and other people. But, first you have to be very centered—Who am I? Where am I from? If you don’t know the answers to those questions then it is very difficult to move on to learn other things.

Audience.

Of the many authors interviewed one in particular expressed her preference for writing nonfiction for children. She said:

children are really intrigued and you can tell them about a rat—that it can jump the length of your bathtub and squeeze through a hole the size of a quarter. Children think ‘Wow’ isn’t this interesting? Whereas, adults think ‘ooh’ rats. Do they belong in a book on wildlife? I’d really rather not read about them except in a book about pest control. By the time we get older, we are thinking more in terms of animals being good or bad, beneficial or harmful in relation to people and the sorts of things they want to accomplish rather than just saying: this rat or this cockroach is just another thing on this planet and it’s an amazing organism in each case. They are survivors. They’ve lived billions of years and probably this whole world will blow up one day but we will still have rats and cockroaches. You have to admire them for that. Kids pick up on that more readily than adults. I find that it gives me an opportunity to explore all kinds of things which might not be of any interest to an adult reader—dung beetles—kids love that and I think it’s fascinating.

Craft.

Several authors also shared their perceptions regarding the crafting of their nonfiction books. One author commented:

I find that writing for children is much slower than writing for adults because I find that I have to choose the level and choose the information and build it very carefully and be very concise because I think that the result that I want to have at the end is the very fast paced result—not a whole lot of words but a lot of information and a sense of what is happening. I find that it takes a lot longer to write shorter. I think that it was Mark Twain who said: If I had had more time I could have written it shorter. With children, the

books are not only shorter but one is always struggling with this level which is interesting.

I enjoy it. Writing for younger readers opens up a lot of appealing topics but it also makes it tricky for the writer....I collect easily ten to one facts of what I use. It gives context. I need to collect them. I need to be sure. There are all these little gems that may not be relevant to kids at their level so I have to go through a lot more than I ever end up using. But, it's wonderful and I love the research. It's fun for me because I am learning all the time. I am learning what matters to me, what I am interested in and I could go on forever doing that. I have to get really severe with myself at some point. I mean, you can never learn everything and I think okay enough already. I have to start working with this material. How can I present it? And that is a creative process. What would interest me and what would I need to know as background? And then I start pulling things out. It's a fun process. And it's hard. As I get into the writing then it starts to get fun again.

During the writing process, the authenticity of the information is always an issue.

This author said:

I think it needs to be fresh and fun as well as the obvious—factual. And the factual is very important to me. I lose sleep worrying about confirming everything. And it is really difficult. I think that if people are not familiar with science that they think things are more cut and dry than they ever are. The information is always changing—always updated. For years we were reading books that wrote that bears had poor eyesight but recent research suggests that they can see as well as humans. You can't just accept information that is getting just a little bit old. You have to be checking. Is this still so? And even then there will be a lot of disagreement among scientists out there.

In addition to the individual crafting of a nonfiction book, some authors recalled how their own work had been influenced by others. According to one author, Marshall MacLuan influenced her nonfiction writing. She elaborated:

From him, I somehow picked up the idea that montage of text images was a basic kind of late twentieth century mode of communication...So I was very influenced by that—ideas that we visit, visual culture and that we cannot communicate effectively with just text. I have always worked from the very beginning with images and text so maybe I am part of the latest wave. I was influenced by that idea. I think that in another way that there is a real blossoming of nonfiction writing and that, I suppose you always recreate the future by recovering the past. In a sense, I suppose that people are going back to some of the original ideas of essay writing from Michel deMontagne because as I understand, what he was doing was very personal, very subjective, very exploratory and people were allowing themselves a latitude with nonfiction texts—even the latitude to fill in the blanks with details that they don't personally know about. A kind of nonfiction storytelling that would have not been considered kosher thirty or forty years ago. So there is the whole notion of creative nonfiction/creative documentary which some writers have decided that they have just appropriated some of the techniques of novel writing to use when writing nonfiction. I am not doing narrative nonfiction. My work tends to be explorations of ideas so I haven't been using those ideas of novelistic techniques. But, if it's a trend to think of nonfiction as a form of literature and to be very aware of the literary qualities of the text then certainly I have been encouraged by that.

Voice.

Interestingly, the authors shared several thoughts regarding voice. Recalling her approach to writing nonfiction, one author stated:

I am me. I am the age group. I am answering questions I had about the subject. I am not a scientist and I am not a historian. But, I've always been interested in those two subjects. So, I find out what I want to know. That's why I answer kid's questions. Because I am a kid. And when you don't know anything, you are not a scientist, you are finding out facts. I think they are interesting. I think they are more interesting. The surprises.

Another author remarked, "if you care about something deeply and you believe in it strongly enough you would bring to it the passion that you need to both write and illustrate it." She elaborated:

Those who argue that you cannot write about another person's experience unless you have lived it or unless you are intimate within that group I disagree with. It's a form of censorship and I want none of it and I will have no part of it because I think what it is saying is that I can only write about African Americans. And I don't want to be told that. I want to feel that I can write about Eleanor Roosevelt if I want to. She's a woman I admire and care a great deal about and it hurt me if somebody said you can't write about her because you are black and she's white. I think we dig pits and fall in them ourselves when we start constructing these barriers that tell us what we can and cannot do. Now, having said all that I will say this: don't try to write something and half do it because if you do then be ready for the criticism because it's coming. Don't think: Oh, I'll make this a black character and do it. You have the right to do it. I have the right to tear it apart when it doesn't speak the truth. Write about anything you want to write about if you write with the passion and the joy, the enthusiasm and concern. All those emotions that are needed when you write about something that you care about.

Value of nonfiction.

As is apparent, the authors interviewed placed great value in the nonfiction genres. When asked about what they perceived to be the value of nonfiction, the true passion these authors felt for this genre of writing became obvious. One author expressed the view that “we read nonfiction every day. It gives us insight into the world in which we live.” Another felt the value was the ability “to tell someone who is curious about a subject.” Nonfiction serves to “enlarge the child’s view beyond their personal experience. It widens their perspective.” In addition, another author stated, “the whole of human life is there! Finding your way through gives you essential life skills.”

Referring to the nonfiction genres, one author admitted that as a child:

I didn’t like it. It was dull. It was boring. And that’s why I was determined to make it more readable for young readers. I don’t think nonfiction has to be dull. You can tell a good story. We all know the old adage: Truth is stranger than fiction. Sometimes it is. Sometimes the true stories that these people tell are just as engaging as a character you would make up. No, I didn’t read a lot of nonfiction.

Many authors I spoke with hoped that their work would provide the reader with a pleasurable experience. One author hoped that when the reader gets up “out of [his/her] armchair that [he/she] will look around the world and see things that are absolutely ordinary that they haven’t seen before.” “Nonfiction can show the world is a more interesting place than we see at first,” exclaimed another author. She continued, “I think that we take a lot of things for granted just because they are so familiar to us. We don’t see them with outsider’s eyes and see how amazing they really are,” and, “we can’t care

about the things we don't know about." "What really good nonfiction can do is to make the real world glow a little bit more than what it normally does."

Skills for navigating nonfiction.

When asked specifically about the skills required for reading nonfiction, one author commented:

I've been told many times by teachers that nonfiction is easier for kids to read than fiction. And I have been curious about that. I have actually found the same thing with Project Literacy. For an adult, although they may be a new reader, they still have a whole life-time of experience. When you are giving them nonfiction, unless it is a whole new topic, they bring a lot of understanding already to that piece of reading. The same applies to a degree with children. Another reason why nonfiction may be easier is because it breaks things down into points as opposed to a novel or a short story. You can look at things in sections or in two or three paragraphs. You don't have to keep in mind the whole character development or the whole plot as in a short story or a novel. Nonfiction seems to me to have fewer navigation skills than fiction if you are just getting into the reading skills.

In addition, many authors also listed several skills which they believed necessary for young readers to have in order for them to navigate nonfiction successfully. Firstly, almost all authors identified reading skills as an important navigational skill. Secondly, an interest and curiosity about the subject was identified as essential. One author/editor believed that "an interest in the topic and basic reading skills and that should be it. If nonfiction is working properly," she said, "then that is all you need." Another author felt that it was essential "for people to understand that nonfiction is literature, that whether or

not it's stated, that the writer has a purpose beyond the stated text that is going on... Because children have been taught this very simple-minded idea that fiction is made up of stories and nonfiction is fact. [This] interferes with [the reader's] ability to read and certainly their ability to write." Similarly, one author stated "a child who understands how ideas are developed in reading will become a better writer." Finally, regarding the navigational skills required to appreciate nonfiction successfully, one author responded: "I don't know at a conscious level—maybe the idea nonfiction can be fun."

One author/publisher commented on the practical navigation skills of nonfiction reading. He felt that the "use of library cataloguing systems, familiarity with library layouts and procedures, use of indexes and use of glossaries" were essential skills. He stated:

within the nonfiction you need to find the topic—then the books—then the pages—then the words. Once you have done that, you need to start expanding again. From the ideas to the linking ideas. From the linking ideas to organizing them into a sensible result.

This particular author felt that these are "the general skills which are needed by all of us to make sense of the world in which we live. Children use the same skills as adults."

Quality nonfiction.

As for the key components that make for quality nonfiction, according to the author interviewed, the book should be clear, logical, attractive, contain captions and include "a harmonious blend of illustrations and text." Another perspective suggested that "excellent nonfiction books should be exciting to look at and gripping to read." More

specifically, an author should present a book that is well researched and meticulously written—one that presents new accurate ideas with a fresh outlook.

However, Elleman (1992) does identify the following as recurring problems in the nonfiction genres: “awkward, simplistic writing; meaningless, poorly reproduced graphics; inaccurate data; and a mismatching of audience to format” (p. 27). She also cautions that “a page full of photographs may look impressive at first glance but careful scrutiny may yield only superficial or obvious information” (p. 27). The Eye Witness books are a fine example of visual mastery. Yet, according to one author these books lack cohesiveness in the text. He said of Dorling Kindersley:

This company has revolutionized the appearance of books. They have turned information books into beautiful looking objects. I think this company has greatly improved the design of nonfiction books across the board. Other companies have been forced to look to their laurels. However, I have already outlined my deep suspicion and distrust of the actual content of these books. The text in them is really only a design tool used to balance the appearance and the number of photos on a page.

Another author cautioned that:

we seem to see a lot of books that are more than books. Books with bones. Books with sand pails with a shovel and squeaky toys attached or stuffed animals—a whole package of things that aren’t books but that relate to the theme... You get gimmicky books that are set up as toys themselves. As a writer, I feel a little bit dismayed to see all of that because I like to think that the literature, be it fiction or nonfiction, would be enough to stand alone and draw a child without adding these other things.

Although the trend to explore this area must be lucrative for publishing houses, one librarian said that novelty books are impractical for the library system because they could only circulate a few times before they became worn and destroyed.

Purpose of nonfiction.

Freedman (1992) writes: “the basic purpose of nonfiction is to inform, to instruct, hopefully to enlighten. But,” he says, “that’s not enough....A good nonfiction book should be a pleasure to read. It should be just as compelling as a good story” (p. 3).

There were several things that authors I interviewed thought they could achieve through writing in the nonfiction genres. These ranged from having the nonfiction-reader question “who am I?” and “where am I from?”, to the desire “to show children how to try things out for themselves.” The challenge, says one writer, is “to write the clearest information I can and to interest the reader.” Similarly, another author hoped to “provide people with pleasure...to make [nonfiction] an extremely enjoyable way to understand complicated subjects that [the reader] otherwise wouldn’t be able to appreciate.” Finally, another added, “my own agenda as I work through the books is to keep a sense of wonder alive in children.”

Gender.

One of the most controversial issues approached during the course of this study dealt with preferences for particular genres based on gender. While exploring the gender issue, it seemed apparent that this was a difficult area in which to achieve a consensus. Certainly, some authors seemed skeptical—“I don’t write it for a girl or boy. I just write a

story and hope that it will be read,” or, “I am not 100% sure that I buy that there is a split.” Another author replied that her books “are not deliberately designed to appeal to either.” And one author stated, “I don’t believe in separating anyone. Not boys, girls, ethnic groups, not black or white.”

Other authors appeared more conscious of the gender issue. Stated one author, “I do try where possible to give a male and female dimension to what I write.” This author wanted to depict “women playing an important role in the society of the day.” He said, “this is a very deliberate and conscious policy on my part because I think that women get a raw deal in history.”

Regarding book topics, one author felt that “girls will read a book about boys. Boys are hard pressed to read books about girls after a certain age level.” Another author stated, “I think that my books have a universal appeal. Especially, the animal books. Both boys and girls like animals.”

As for format, one writer felt that “girls tend to be more into relationships and you can imagine that a story format would really appeal to them. It gets beyond the information into the relationships.”

Trends.

When discussing the latest trends in nonfiction books, one author commented that there “is a real blossoming of nonfiction writing.” More specifically, trendy topics according to one author/ editor included sport-related books and craft activity books. Another author noted that recently there had been a lot of books dealing with “high tech.”

Interestingly, the most prominent trend in nonfiction books was their visual appeal. Giblin (1987) wrote that “the visual look of nonfiction is especially important today, when books have to compete with so many other media for a young person’s attention” (p. 105). Visuals, according to one author, give the book “pick-up-ability.” Moreover, “the visuals have to be pretty strong because [the reader] is not reading the text at that point.” Interestingly, one author participant noted that, today, “kids are so visually oriented and I don’t think that we can ignore that even if we are worried about it.” Yet, as mentioned previously, things must be kept in perspective because “the design can sometimes seem to be more important than the content.”

Other criticisms of popular nonfiction series included the observation that paragraphs tended to be segmented and disjointed, and that writers sometimes fail to link thoughts. One author said: “I am not happy with this kind of approach....Students find them difficult because the relationships are not spelled out for them and the information isn’t there—each fact will answer a question but raise several more questions.”

Fiction in nonfiction.

The concept of using fictional techniques within the nonfiction genres was another theme which provoked differing opinions. Interestingly, the authors were divided to varying degrees with regard to the legitimacy of placing fiction within a nonfiction text. Although the majority supported the mixing of the two genres as a natural evolution in the creative process, some authors disagreed. One stated, “if it’s nonfiction, then it’s got to be nonfiction.” She elaborated, stating that she and her writing partner try not to add conversation unless there is some documentation to draw from a newspaper. Another

writer agreed, stating: “you have to say the truth.” She adds, “anybody who really writes nonfiction is true to their subject.”

In contrast, the opinions of those who support incorporating fiction into nonfiction are stated below:

- **I think that there are places where you can introduce techniques of fiction into nonfiction.**
- **Fiction techniques help liven up books.**
- **I think that it can be useful to help reach the audience you might want to reach....I think that there is a real role for that kind of mix.**

Some authors cautioned how fiction should be woven into nonfiction books. One author suggested:

I think that it is important in that kind of book to explain what people are doing. If you are connecting the dots and you have as many dots as possible and you've made sure that your dots are in the right places, it seems to me that it is a perfectly legitimate way of presenting it.

Another author added, “as long as the fiction is identified as fiction, then it will have a place.” Moreover, “stories can usefully be used within a nonfiction book to get across information.” One author justified his view, stating: “I can imagine many situations where an extract from fiction would help to highlight and illustrate a point....A skillful writer could use this to give atmosphere to his/her text.” Freedman (1992) concurs, stating: “the task of the nonfiction writer is to find the story, the narrative line that exists in nearly every subject” (p. 3).

Recognition of the nonfiction genres.

The final theme pursued with author participants dealt with recognition of the nonfiction genres. One author plainly stated:

It puts me at a slight disadvantage when it comes to the way that books are treated by reviewers and literary media because picture books, coffee-table books, illustrated books are given a kind of once-over by those people. [This] book is the first of my books that has received a major review. I have always had my nose slightly out-of-joint because of this and I didn't understand why it was, not even the [previous] book which did deserve some recognition. With realistic minds, I have to say that that was quite credible and it could have benefited from a bit more attention, but I had it explained to me this year that they don't ordinarily review illustrated books because they still live in some kind of previsual world where text seems to warrant a greater merit than a combination of text and pictures. So, there has been some disadvantage, not only on my writing nonfiction which is a highly suspect genre from the point of view of some people, but also working with illustrations. But, for a variety of reasons, it's really what I want to do because it opens the books to a whole different group of readers than otherwise would find them and its a perfectly legitimate thing to do in the late 20th century.

Summary.

The attitudes and perceptions of the authors interviewed were fairly congruent regarding definitions, skills, and values. The themes which evoked the most varied responses were the issues of gender and the place of fiction within the nonfiction genre. Certainly, some authors found the gender issue to be a non-issue; others were very conscious of its presence and strove to deal with it in their work. The place of fiction within nonfiction genre theme demonstrated how closely some authors adhered to the

traditional nonfiction genre and how others were both willing to and flexible about working within more fluid, undefined boundaries. Moreover, discussion of the Dorling Kindersley publishing company raised many interesting points regarding visuals and the correlation between visuals and text.

Teachers on the Nonfiction Genres

The teacher participants offered several perspectives with regard to attitudes and perceptions of nonfiction genres. As with the author participants, teachers proved to be extremely generous in taking time from their busy schedules for the interviews. Five of the participants interviewed were from one school in Victoria, British Columbia. Of these participants, four were classroom teachers of juvenile readers and one was a teacher-librarian.

The remainder of the participants included four classroom teachers: one fifth grade learning disabilities teacher, one teacher who worked with and researched grade five and six students, one grade four classroom teacher, and a second grade classroom teacher. The grade two teacher provided a unique perspective, revealing some of the evolving attitudes and perceptions of readers in the younger grades. The final participant in this category was a youth librarian from the Greater Victoria Public Library.

Nonfiction genres: A classroom perspective.

All nine teachers interviewed felt that they actively participated in and guided the book selections of their students. One teacher felt that guidance was necessary, especially if students “are not making very wise choices.” The teacher-librarian mentioned showing

students award winning books and how they are labeled in the library. Eventually, she said “I notice after a time that parents say that their children are starting to bring home books that are well written and better books from what they would first take out of the library.”

Six of the nine teachers reported that their students see them read in the classroom. The other three felt that a quiet reading time provided an opportunity to work individually with students. Asked if the books read aloud to their students were predominantly fiction or nonfiction, eight teacher participants reported “fiction.” One teacher felt that it was entirely dependent on the units being studied in class at the time. Another teacher suggested that with elementary children, “you have to fill their imagination. I think fiction does that. Also, there is a lot more scope to it.”

Defining nonfiction.

Various perceptions of the nonfiction genres emerged as the teacher participants attempted to define the term nonfiction. One teacher stated: “I would define nonfiction as information books. Books or materials that you would use to find things out.” Other participants defined nonfiction “as having its basis in reality,” and “nonfiction to me is looking at natural phenomenon, things around our world and discovering more about the world around us—about people, about places, about animals.” Other definitions were:

- **Nonfiction is real.**
- **Nonfiction is factual.**
- **It’s information-oriented as opposed to novels or literary readings.**

One teacher stated: “nonfiction, for me, would be books on sports, science, history, biography. Anything that is not a made-up story, basically. Craft books and books about hobbies....” In contrast, another teacher said “nonfiction is any literature based on fact and research. Information that has been put together to communicate without a lot of emphasis on imagination or creative expression or imagery. It is a very factual kind of writing.”

Teaching nonfiction genres.

Bosma (1992) states, “the role of the teacher is to provide strategies and opportunities for learning and to project enthusiasm for wanting to learn”(p. 46). Moreover “...if the voice of inquiry is used, students are apt to be stimulated to learn more on their own” (p. 46).

Of the nine teachers asked if specific genres should be explicitly taught to students, seven said yes. The general consensus was that modeling different genres would broaden the students’ awareness of different types of literature. However, one teacher felt that explicit teaching was not essential at the second-grade level. Her primary concern was that her students possessed an awareness of the difference between fiction and nonfiction.

Opinions regarding the teaching of nonfiction genres included the following:

Well, I think from my point of view as a teacher would be this: if you give students simply nonfiction then this is going to stymie their view of what literature, what printed matter, is all about. So, to me, I would say the most detrimental thing would be too much of one thing and what attitudes it creates. That would be the crucial part because I know with children, if they have been through the school system as it is now and many of us have and still will until we can get rid of mass education. Nonfiction material is not well accepted or appreciated. It’s tolerated, that’s what it is. That sets up

for life-long learning. I don't think, except for self-help books, that adults look for nonfiction books in that way. Those are popular. But, I think that most people turn to fiction because it offers more to the imagination and so on and so forth. It's too bad that there isn't a more wholesome approach to and respect for nonfiction. It's crucial in that it develops certain attitudes throughout your life.

Another teacher remarked:

I think with nonfiction text that we have to be careful that there is not a cut and paste approach where there is a lot of pictures that don't necessarily have anything to do with the text that is being presented. There are a lot of books out there that may be visually impressive but when you look at the correlation between the visuals and the text it isn't. Kids want to get it because on the surface it looks interesting but when they dig into it they may find that they have problems understanding how the pictures and the text fit together. To me the use of a glossary so that kids have a support when they are reading something if they want to go back. It helps them to go back to the text. I think that it has to be organized in such a way that it is inviting going back to the text. The Magic School Bus series invites the reader to enter into the text on a variety of different levels. I think that that is really important in a nonfiction text. It's not a book that you can just read to the class. You have to explore it further to do it justice. I think that we have to show that to kids that reading nonfiction means knowing about the glossary and table of contents and realizing that you can enter into the text on a variety of different levels. The glossary, the connection between the text and the pictures, labeling, diagrams- a lot of Eye Witness books have a 3-D cross section of what is being discussed—so it's getting into the chaotic organization of it all where they can see the connections and enter in at any point. You don't have to read it from start to finish. You can enter in at different points and still understand. A book that invites further response so that after a student has read it they can continually go back to but also explore different books on that topic as well—so that they can start to compare resources and see the similarities and differences. It's not just stating the facts but looking at the supports within that

book to expand a students' understanding on a specific topic so that they start to see that it's not just a plus b equals c but, that there's a,b,c, d,e,f...you can go on and continually expand upon the knowledge base.

Still, another teacher said:

I think that the students respond really well to it because with a little guidance from the teacher they can pick out things. They can interpret. They can look at the diagrams and the pictures. I think that they can discover a life through nonfiction books just by exploring it in many many ways. The visuals, even if they can't read the sentences to a great extent, they can still....I think they can be used from the beginning of school all the way through. I would say that there would be drawbacks if you set it in front of a student and expected them to write a paragraph at the end. That's out of the question. But, if it's handled in the right way books could be around all the time. I think that it is amazing what we discover from them.

And finally, another teacher participant explained:

I think that meaning and content are crucial as well so that we can ensure in our instructional framework that we are establishing a setting where we are inviting response from students using a variety of different genres. I think that it is important to have students' input into the kind of topics that they like to study. I think that the personal ownership in wanting to explore something is important. In the exploration you focus on a variety of perspectives. For example, letter form, critique, report, narrative. I think that it is important for kids to see that it is not necessarily fixed and that there are so many different ways of presenting. Books may use multiple genres to present a topic. I think that it is our job to establish a context for bringing this to the forefront in inviting response. And I equate this with critical literacy, that we are presenting students with skills so that they can look at a text and not just assess it from a surface content....In my study, the initial response students gave to a text was an emotional, intuitive one—I liked

it...but, it didn't go beyond that. I think that that is where we as teachers have to try and start digging deeper. How was the text organized? What information did the person think was relevant? How did it help you understand how the topic was being discussed? Then the students will begin to understand how an author has organized the text to make it inviting. Then they start to see how they can utilize those tools themselves. I guess that is where my thrust is right now as a teacher. Trying to invite that range of response and trying to challenge not accept at face value what is being read but to look deeper beyond the surface level. This is how they [the author] have done this. I agree or disagree with it because.... There is a reason behind it. If students approach books not just looking at the form but at the meaning and the content they can say that this is a difficult text to understand because....This is where you can get into the different purposes of English.

Voice.

Another important issue addressed by the teachers was voice. One teacher said:

We have to be aware of that in addressing that different type of voice and the use of nominalizations and expository texts can be really difficult for students to comprehend. We have to bring that out—the different types of language use when presenting some topics—especially description and classification of ideas. Teachers have to take a step back and say did I understand this? If I am having difficulty with it, how can I expect the kids to grasp it?

Value of nonfiction.

All teachers, to varying degrees, agreed that nonfiction had value in their classrooms. Some felt that nonfiction had equal value to fiction. Another felt that it was a constant struggle to maintain an equitable balance between the two. One participant stated, “the value of it is that it is definitely a means of communication....That's its true

value. That's its accepted value by these children. It supports their learning and provides them with factual information needed. It isn't overly exciting" he stated. "That's for sure."

Another teacher said, "it's integral to my curriculum. I couldn't teach without nonfiction books because it is enrichment. It is information. It teaches skills as well as an interest." Further, one teacher participant described the value of nonfiction as providing for the individual the opportunity "to expand beyond any risk of a false perception that I am the center of the world." He elaborated: "there is a great big world out there....You had better stretch to realize yourself. It's a prerequisite to stretch to be successful."

Skills for navigating nonfiction genres.

Several skills believed essential for a juvenile reader to navigate nonfiction successfully were cited by the participants. These included:

- a basic understanding of phonemes to determine what is on the page;
- vocabulary, comprehension, knowing basic ideas;
- an ability to pick out the main points in a text;
- an ability to navigate the glossary, the index, parts of the book and supplemental resources such as dictionaries;
- an ability to make connections between the visuals and the text;
- an understanding of how the language in the text is manipulated to achieve the purpose;
- knowledge of the different purposes the text serves.

One teacher participant also felt that “skimming for information and not having to worry about reading every little word” was an important skill. Students, she said, “have to understand that they don’t have to start at the beginning and go to the end.” Another teacher emphasized that students must develop their thinking processes and skills of reasoning and deducing. This teacher noted that, “it is quite difficult for those who aren’t literate, new English readers or those who are not skilled at reading, to get information unless it is through visuals. I guess,” she said, “I think that’s a bit limited.” Another teacher stated:

I think they should see it for what it is. I think that we should spend some time working together and trying to get the perceptions together and decide what is nonfiction for these children. What do they see it as? And, work with those perceptions and say : Now, this is the way you use nonfiction, appreciate nonfiction. This is the way nonfiction is written a lot of the time. So, I think that there are characteristics that we should emphasize. It’s more an awareness thing. I wouldn’t want to teach a course on the characteristics of nonfiction. I think that you should be aware of what people usually consider as nonfiction. What is your impression of nonfiction and let’s work with that.

Quality nonfiction.

According to the teacher participants, quality nonfiction would include the following criteria:

- **a degree of readability;**
- **an appropriate age and reading level;**
- **currency, clarity and accuracy;**
- **a good table of contents, index, glossary;**

- **a good layout with not too many words on a page;**
- **bold typeface or italics used to draw attention to certain information;**
- **a bright cover with the illustrations adjacent to the text.**

One teacher commented, “I don’t think that you get a lot of nonfiction that is written in an entertaining and creative way. So, I think that they, [students] should get to know that this is the standard format.” This participant continued, “some of the responses that you get from children are: ‘This is boring.’ ‘This is dull.’ May be if they understood more of what the author has to do to get information across?”

Purpose of nonfiction.

When asked why they believe their students choose to read nonfiction, the teacher participants felt that curiosity and interest were the primary reasons. One teacher said, “by the age of ten [students] are beginning to realize that there is a whole big world out there and they are curious to find out about it.” Another reason cited for students choosing nonfiction was information. The teacher participant who taught second grade even said, “we read for information. That is the purpose of my units. And [the students] know that there are books that they can go to for information.”

In the classroom, the quest for information often resulted from interest and curiosity. One teacher remarked, “it’s amazing how children reflect your curriculum in terms of the books that they look for in the library.”

However, sometimes, noted other participants, the interest in a specific genre may result from the student's internal motivation. One participant referred to a student, "I have one boy who just likes real things—books on science, dogs, space. He's a little boy who likes things to be realistic. Sometimes I think it is a personality thing. May be it could be your exposure—what you have been exposed to when you are young and at home."

Gender.

Interestingly, with regard to the gender issue, of the ten participants interviewed, six felt that the gender of the student influenced his/her book selection, three felt that gender had no impact, and one was undecided: "I think you wonder if it does or it doesn't."

If gender contributed to a tendency towards the nonfiction genres, one teacher thought that it was because boys were more interested in things that were real. Yet, she noticed that in her classroom, although the girls tended to gravitate towards fiction, if they were steered in the direction of nonfiction they would be satisfied to read it. In this teacher's experience, her female students chose to read books on Nadia Comeniche and Helen Keller because they reflected some personal importance to the reader. Similarly, another teacher confirmed "girls might pick nonfiction. Some of my girls were reading the Diary of Anne Frank. They pick nonfiction if it is personally appealing to them. If it gives them information. Boys tend to like facts and so on like The Guinness Book of World Records." Remarked another teacher participant, "certain types of stories might appeal more to girls than boys. I think that it is more of a question that some kids are readers and will read anything."

Another teacher participant explained:

I have some kids in here who are entirely interested in reading nonfiction. I don't know whether fiction bores them or whether they are so interested in facts. I have one student who would never not choose to read nonfiction. And he's not alone actually. Especially, boys at this level, they tend to want to know how things work. It tends to be boys more than the girls. And sometimes when you are doing a unit that tends to spark a lot of interest.

It is noteworthy that the second-grade teacher participant remarked: "I don't notice it at this stage because we share topics. I would think with animals the girls would be more interested but everyone is interested. Except with sports books—the line is drawn....The boys are really into sports. But," she claims, "as far as science, animals, biography....It may change as they get older. I have a feeling it does."

Trends.

In terms of the latest trends in the nonfiction genres, one teacher participant remarked, "I think that in the nineties that children are more visually oriented. Certainly, with what is being published in nonfiction these days. Text is reduced, information is portrayed through illustrations whether it's diagrams or maps or photographs, drawings, whatever is appropriate." If one book has better illustrations and photographs, students will be drawn to rather than to a book have more information and which may be more useful. According to both librarians, the Dorling Kindersley publishing house has been largely responsible for these changes and has had a tremendous impact on nonfiction books over the past 10 years. In addition, one teacher participant acknowledged:

Certainly, there are a lot of different types of nonfiction and certainly lots of different types of information out there. The speed with which kids can access information, I think is going to have a big impact on expectations—how they use the medium as opposed to how they use the index. So, that might have an impact later on down the road with books themselves.

Another aspect mentioned during the course of the interviews was the increasing use of multimedia CD ROMs and the Internet. It was suggested by the youth librarian that often, on the Internet, “you can’t find out about the authenticity of the author and how accurate the information is. I think,” she said, “one of the big issues that is going to be out there for students who have access is how to determine the accuracy of the information depending on the format that it is in.” She continued, students must recognize that, “depending on where the information is coming from, it could be biased....I think you can use books with students that do represent different points of view just to introduce that there is different ways of looking at subjects...as opposed to accepting that everything printed is true.”

Another major trend addressed was that more books reflect a variety of cultures. The librarian noted, “I think that there is a lot of interest in [culture]and it is something that teachers are looking for—to be more inclusive of other races and so on.”

Finally, many teacher participants identified the sub-genres of biography and science as areas where wonderful books have been recently published. Yet, one teacher felt that there was still room for growth in the field of history. She said “that history is still not as good as the science.”

Awareness of nonfiction genres.

One theme that emerged among the teachers was: providing students with a sense of awareness of the nonfiction genres. Said one teacher:

I think that it is important to introduce genres to students. In one of my parent interviews, a parent mentioned that her child was fascinated with nonfiction. He had done Houdini for the biography project. She said that she had always read fiction to him. And now she was beginning to read nonfiction to him because it had been introduced to him and he really liked it. She had never thought to read him that before.

Another teacher said, “I notice after time that parents say that their children are starting to bring home books that are well written and better books from what they would first take out of the library. I think that is because of the exposure.”

Summary.

With regard to the nonfiction genres and its purpose and function in the classroom curriculum, one teacher stated

I think we should see it for what it is. I think we should spend some time working together and trying to get the perceptions together and decide what is nonfiction for these children. What do they see it as? And work with those perceptions and say, “Now, this is the way you use nonfiction. This is the way nonfiction is written a lot of the time.” I think that there are characteristics that we should emphasize. It’s more an awareness thing.

Without a doubt, the attitudes and perceptions of the teacher participants were more diverse than those of the authors. Unlike the authors, who possessed a passion for the

genre, the teacher participants' utilitarian views of the genre were much more pragmatic. If the nonfiction genres provided information and interest for the student that justified its inclusion in the classroom curriculum.

Readers of Nonfiction

The nine students interviewed during the course of this study were in grades 4, 5 and 6. They included: four grade four students (two male and two female); three grade five students (two female and one male); and two grade six students (one male and one female). The tenth student, despite repeated reminders, was unable to provide a signed parental consent form before the deadline and was therefore unable to participate. The students provided insight into the attitudes and perceptions held by juvenile readers regarding the nonfiction genres.

Nonfiction genres: A reader's perspective.

Abrahamson and Carter (1991) claimed that students, when given the freedom to select reading material, would choose nonfiction. During the interviews with the students, two participants identified nonfiction as their preferred genre: four said that they liked both fiction and nonfiction equally; and three identified fiction as their preferred choice.

Six of the nine students reported that no one helped them to decide what books to read. Two said that they were sometimes advised by their parents and siblings. Only one student reported that he had read books recommended by his teacher. Interestingly, as reported earlier, all the teachers interviewed said that they actively participated and guided the book selections of their students.

Defining nonfiction.

When defining nonfiction many students stated that “nonfiction is real.” One student elaborated on the definition explaining “fiction is something that never happened so I think it can be more interesting. Nonfiction is things that happen. Sometimes, it can be interesting.” Another said “in fiction, they tell a story but with nonfiction, you get to learn information”; still another noted “you can’t always trust fiction. I’ve grown up with older books and they were right then but, they are no longer right now. And, you may get two different things because they are made by two different scientists and stuff.” This participant also said she would deal with contradictions by trying to determine “which one makes the most sense after looking up a few big words in the dictionary.”

Choosing to read nonfiction.

When asked why they would choose nonfiction, participant responses were remarkably similar. Several students said that they were motivated to choose nonfiction when they needed to find out something. Similarly, as Cooper’s (1995) study suggested, subject matter was the motivating factor with students’ choice to read nonfiction. One student said, “usually, if I watch a movie I want to find out a little more about that. After I watched Jurassic Park, I wanted to find out more about dinosaurs.”

The youth librarian echoed this motivation, stating: “marketing and television have an impact on what kids ask for. We get asked for Bill Nye, things from Reading Rainbow. Kids are made aware of specific books....It’s amazing what an impact television has and that is certainly true for nonfiction.”

Another teacher participant explained “some kids don’t like reading stories that aren’t true books. They find they are interested in particular subjects. So, they like to read about them—dinosaurs, biography, animals.” This teacher felt “that the books match [the students] interests more than fiction does.”

Skills.

The students were able to identify several skills they believed essential for the successful navigation of the nonfiction genres. One student explained, “you would have to have a certain level of vocabulary. You would have to know what you were reading. Like what it’s about.” Another participant elaborated, saying: “I think you have to understand a lot.” In addition, “a good imagination so you can picture in your head what happened,” a good memory, knowledge of the topic, and enthusiasm were other skills the students felt necessary for successful engagement with nonfiction. As stated previously by one teacher participant, the ability to think critically about a text and to question the authenticity of the information is essential for literacy.

Quality nonfiction.

According to the students, there were several key components that contributed to exemplary nonfiction. One student said, “a good nonfiction book would be when you learn a lot of things about how other people live.” Another criteria noted was “a lot of information and pictures.” One student explained, “I think it needs excitement. It needs some description but I don’t think it can be overly descriptive like Moby Dick where it goes on and on and you just can’t get through the chapter. It needs to be specific to show

who it is going to appeal to.” Another student also cautioned “some of the nonfiction books I’ve read go blagh, blagh, blagh....Maybe make it, not tell a lie or anything, but make it more interesting saying it in an interesting way.”

Gender.

Unlike the author and teacher participants who had definitive responses regarding gender and genre preference, the students in some instances had not considered that gender might factor into students’ genre selections. “I don’t know,” was the response given by half the participants. The others considered the question and made the following remarks:

- **If it’s a mystery or something scary then it would be for the boys or like otherwise it would probably be for a girl. [female, grade 4]**
- **I think it can appeal to both because there is different topics in nonfiction and because anyone can like nonfiction. [male, grade 5]**
- **Probably boys...because there are a lot of books about history and stuff and lots of boys like to read about that kind of thing. [female, grade 4]**
- **I’d say it would appeal a little more to boys than girls because boys might be more interested in dinosaurs and rockets and that stuff. It seems that there is a little more selection for the boys than there is for the girls. [female, grade 6]**

These responses are indicative of Southgate’s (1981) study, which showed more boys than girls having a preference for nonfiction books.

Summary.

In conclusion, the student participants identified aspects of popular culture as motivating their interest in certain nonfiction topics. They identified interesting writing as an important aspect of exemplary nonfiction. They also felt that the skills required for successful navigation of the nonfiction genres included a good vocabulary, a good memory, and a general understanding of the topic. It appeared as if the students chose nonfiction according to their interest in the topic with apparently little, if any, influence from adults.

It was interesting to observe that, for the most part the student participants had very definitive explanations regarding the nonfiction genres. For example, the definitions they provided essentially said: this is what nonfiction is and this is what it's not.

Another noteworthy observation made was the obvious self-awareness the student participants had of themselves as readers. According to Norvell's (1950) study, a strong interest in nonfiction books emerges around the fourth grade. Certainly, the ability of the grade six participants to articulate their thoughts was impressive. These students appeared to have a firm handle on their attitudes and perceptions regarding the nonfiction genres. In general, the researcher found that the fourth and fifth grade participants required more prompting to facilitate their answers. The researcher assumes that self-awareness as a reader and the ability to articulate one's thoughts develops with experience, exposure and maturity.

Finally, one of the most interesting observations derived from the student participants' responses was the attitude held by the female participants that the nonfiction genres may appeal more to boys than to girls. This is noteworthy because the grade two

teacher participant said she noticed no preference amongst her students. This suggests that an attitude regarding gender and the nonfiction genres may emerge around the junior grades.

Comparing, Contrasting and Synthesizing the Data

It is evident from this study that diverse attitudes and perceptions exist among the three groups of participants regarding the nonfiction genres.

Defining nonfiction.

It was apparent that most authors did not believe that the term nonfiction truly revealed what the genre had to offer. The term, as a result, contributed to the attitude that the only reason to read nonfiction was for information. This attitude was reinforced by the teachers, who perceived the nonfiction genres as real, factual and informative. Similarly, the students viewed nonfiction as real, factual and informative. While accurate, these conceptions could be considered to reflect a limited appreciation of the scope and power of nonfiction.

Although one author eloquently illustrated that nonfiction was creative, one teacher felt that nonfiction was information compiled to communicate “without a lot of emphasis on imagination or creative expression or imagery.” In addition, the students felt that, with nonfiction, “you get to learn information.”

This division in perceptions is reflected in the research itself. Abrahamson and Carter (1987) claimed that “the best nonfiction is beautifully written, has excellent characterization, tells a fine story, and celebrates life in the same way novels do” (p. 104).

In contrast, Pappas (1991) said “information books make general statements about animals, objects, people, and so forth, because their purpose is to inform” (p. 451). Hence, the diversity and subjectivity in attitudes and perceptions appear to be applicable to all those who encounter the nonfiction genres .

Value of nonfiction.

The value placed on the nonfiction genres varied to a great extent. The students perceived the nonfiction genres as being able to provide information and truth. Although some participants identified nonfiction as an important part of the curriculum, others thought that, while nonfiction “supports [students’] learning and [provides] them with factual information needed,” it played a more peripheral role. The authors had a more holistic philosophy. They valued the nonfiction genres because of the insight they provide into the world and ordinary things, claiming it widens the reader’s perspective.

The research indicated that familiarity with the nonfiction genres could increase students’ awareness of the types of nonfiction writing and their purposes. In addition, the ability to access and process information, to increase knowledge and comprehension, are skills that would be developed through exposure to the nonfiction genres.

Skills to navigate nonfiction.

When asked what skills were necessary for the successful navigation of nonfiction genres, the students felt that a good vocabulary, an interest, and a general understanding of the topic would suffice.

The teachers agreed with the students, adding that readers should possess an ability to integrate the parts of the book and to make connections between visuals and text. Moreover, readers, according to the teacher participants, need an understanding of the purpose of the text and how the language in it is manipulated to achieve the purpose.

The authors also agreed, elaborating that reading skills and interest were necessary skills for successful navigation of nonfiction. Further, readers who possess a familiarity with the library system, readers who have the ability to link ideas and thoughts from the text, and readers who understand how ideas are developed, have the potential not only to become better readers but also better writers.

Quality nonfiction.

The authors identified the key components of quality nonfiction as clarity, logic, attractive presentation with a correlation between the illustrations, and a text which is well researched and uniquely written. According to the teachers, the criteria for quality nonfiction included bright illustrations, currency, clarity, accuracy, and an appropriate and well organized presentation. The students felt that lots of information and pictures were the crucial components for exemplary nonfiction. In addition, the students also stressed the importance of being concise and of presenting information in an interesting way. Similarly, the research emphasized currency, clarity, creative technique, effective use of illustration and strong voice as criteria for quality nonfiction books.

Purpose of nonfiction.

It is noteworthy that the authors deemed the purpose of the nonfiction genres as a vehicle with which to have the reader question who they are and how they fit into the world. Interestingly, one teacher participant echoed the same belief. Students, he said, must “stretch to be successful.” Moreover, another teacher noted that juvenile readers are at the age where they realize that a whole world is out there, just waiting to be discovered. The student participants suggested that curiosity—the need to find out, was what led them to the nonfiction genres.

Gender.

In concurrence with the research, most of the author participants recognized, particularly for recreational readers, that the gender issue may play a role in a reader’s preference for specific genres—notably boys, who often choose nonfiction. The teacher participants definitely felt that boys showed strong preferences towards the nonfiction genres, in general; however, the female students were reported to read autobiographical and biographical genres. The student participants believed that the nonfiction genres could appeal to both boys and girls; yet, some female students admitted that particular topics, such as dinosaurs and rockets, might be more appealing to males.

Trends.

Without doubt, one of the most important trends in the nonfiction genres was visual presentation. Several authors and teachers mentioned that, with the advent of the Eye Witness books by Dorling Kindersley, a new era in juvenile nonfiction had emerged.

In support, when the student participants were asked what would attract them to a book in the library or bookstore, three of the nine immediately identified the front cover picture and the design.

Fiction in nonfiction.

Finally, with regard to the use of fiction within nonfiction, many of the authors felt that, if done properly, the use of fiction could enhance nonfiction text. Both the teacher and student participants agreed that the inclusion of fictional techniques in nonfiction text made for a more interesting reading experience.

Chapter Five

Discussions, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

As indicated in Chapter One, it was assumed that a cross-comparison analysis might reveal several similarities and some noteworthy differences in the attitudes and perceptions of the participant groups. The results of this study indicate that several diverse attitudes and perceptions did exist among the three groups.

It is worth mentioning that, despite geographical diversity, the authors' attitudes and perceptions were the most closely aligned of the three groups of participants. Perhaps not surprisingly, the authors viewed the nonfiction genres as exciting and creative, and as having the ability to broaden the reader's perspective. The teacher participants valued the nonfiction genres mostly for pragmatic purposes and their ability to enhance the curriculum. Finally, the student participants valued the nonfiction genres for information and truth.

Critiquing the Methodology

This study revealed several avenues regarding perceptions and attitudes of the nonfiction genres that still warrant investigation. Unfortunately, time was a limiting factor.

In retrospect, I would have revised, refined and focused further the questions for the student participants because I felt that some students had difficulty with certain questions. As well, I would have considered interviewing two or three students together.

Due to a scheduling conflict, the final two students were interviewed together. The dynamic proved to be quite productive because these two students appeared more comfortable and confident together.

I believe also that it would have been beneficial to make some informal observations of classroom lessons, to determine how students respond to nonfiction in the classroom environment.

Finally, I would have attempted to form a focus group with representation from all groups of participants because I continue to believe that the outcome of the discussion would prove invaluable.

Strengths

Certainly, one of the strongest aspects of this study was the diversity of the participants in each group. As a result, several areas relating to the nonfiction genres—illustration, editing, publishing, librarianship—were discussed. In addition, the participants represented a cross-section of ages, grades, experiences and specialty areas.

The candid responses of the participants resulted in data which reflected the essence of their personalities. As well, the interview questions facilitated the emergence of several themes and allowed synthesis of information to occur.

Strategies, Suggestions and Implications

The results of this study raise a number of issues which are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Publishers.

It was indicated during the course of this study that the nonfiction genres are sometimes regarded as inferior. Therefore, a marketing strategy that emphasizes new approaches to content with accessible complementary information that stimulates and promotes further exploration may be appropriate. Certainly, better recognition and consideration by reviewers regarding nonfiction would prove beneficial for authors, publishers and nonfiction book sales. Furthermore, highlighting the proactive, interactive, and creative aspects of nonfiction—the “learning by doing”—might also convince classroom teachers of a text’s potential for the classroom setting.

In addition, an association with an author persona might also prove beneficial for nonfiction sales. Certainly, marketing a change in the mindset towards nonfiction would prove mutually beneficial to publishing houses and authors alike. Dorling Kindersley’s Eye Witness series has proven that a market exists for fresh innovative approaches in nonfiction.

It was also interesting to note that both the teacher and student participants recognized that excellent nonfiction exists in the areas of science and technology; however, both groups of participants also felt that there was a need for more nonfiction books pertaining to history. Hence, this perceived need could be addressed by publishing companies.

Teacher educators.

Surprisingly, I, knew very little about the nonfiction genres before I began this research project as part of my graduate work. As a certified teacher, I believe that it is

imperative to stress in the Teacher Education Program an awareness of the purposes, forms, functions and creative processes of the nonfiction genres. Teachers cannot effectively teach what they do not know. Therefore, a more definitive approach to genres and their components would be beneficial. Moreover, practical experience, the opportunity to see how working with genres can influence reading and writing skills, and careful scrutinization of the grade level requirements in language arts as outlined by the provincial Ministry of Education would also prove beneficial.

Teachers.

It is important to address what is already taught in the classroom with regard to the nonfiction genres. Moline (1995) acknowledges, “when we are teaching students to read we are not only showing them how to read, we are also telling them what reading is like and what reading is for” (p. 5). Most juvenile readers can identify the difference between fiction and nonfiction; moreover, most students also possess a familiarity with the purposes and skills required to navigate the genre successfully.

However, more emphasis needs to be placed on reading the nonfiction genres for pleasure and the recognition of the creative techniques employed by the authors to communicate their message. Undoubtedly, such emphasis would improve the readers’ appreciation of the genre and may also assist in their own personal expository writing. Moreover, if students are aware that the text is purposefully organized and illustrated, then they become sensitive to the writer’s purpose; hence, “we can show students that writing is above all communication with a reader who will expect [our] text to be accessible, memorable, concise and clear” (Moline, 1995, p. 3). Certainly, educators

might also refer to questions similar to those outlined in Figure 1 as a tool for assessing the appropriateness of a nonfiction book for classroom use. Undoubtedly, an effective way to determine the effectiveness of the text is to ask thoughtful and critical questions.

Juvenile readers.

Perhaps the willingness to read the genres for pleasure will increase with awareness and appreciation of the creative process and craft behind writing for the nonfiction genres. In addition, with the advent of the technological age, readers must discover and learn effective measures to determine the authenticity of information that they encounter. Moreover, the ability to take several sources of information, to interpret and derive meaning, is paramount for the responsibilities of citizenship according to Cranny-Francis (1993), Duthie (1994), and the English Language Arts K to 7 Integrated Resource Package.

As an educator.

One of the most vital lessons I have learned from this study is the importance of regularly seeking the viewpoint of students. Certainly, information revealed through conversations with children can assist educators in identifying both areas where we are accomplishing our objectives and areas which require improvement.

In addition, I would seek to emphasize the creativity and craft of the nonfiction genres in my lessons in the hopes that my students would leave my class having embraced and appreciated nonfiction for its true value. I believe that this can be achieved through

thoughtful introspection and asking oneself questions like: What does this mean to me? What might it mean to students? How important are these skills going to be in the future?

Future Research

In my opinion, this study has only touched a few issues regarding the attitudes and perceptions of the nonfiction genres. There is great potential for further investigation. Other studies could explore for parents' attitudes and perceptions regarding the nonfiction genres. As well, further research into the influence of marketing and popular culture may prove revealing.

Specifically, I would ask both students and teachers exactly what marketing strategies appeal to them. I would ask the students specifically about Eye Witness books and other popular nonfiction series. I would inquire more about inferencing. I would delve into students' awareness of the author as a personality. I would also like to find out more about primary and emergent readers and nonfiction. I would ask about terms like "edutainment" and "relaxed nonfiction" because these are new terms emerging in the industry. I would also consider following up the gender themes further and in greater depth by focusing on techniques that teachers use to teach nonfiction. Finally, I would further investigate the impact of technology and the media on the nonfiction genres.

Unanticipated outcomes.

Two unanticipated outcomes occurred from this study. First, one author participant suggested that this study had the potential for publication. Second, another author participant contacted me to discuss the preliminary findings of this study. As one

of the key speakers at a literacy conference, she wanted to share the information with other authors and educators.

Contributions.

The process of this study has provided me with invaluable research experience. It has made me carefully consider my responsibilities as a researcher and the methods with which I can most effectively fill that role. From gaining access into the field to interpreting and analyzing the data, this process has forever enlightened me to the issues faces by researchers in the future educational studies that I read.

Finally, I'd like to emphasize that only through the honesty and frankness of the participants in this study was I able to achieve such rich data.

Conclusions

This study was an exploration into the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of three specific groups of participants regarding the genres of nonfiction. As one author pointed out “the [real] story is how we learn on a deeper level.” By taking information and piecing and threading it together, it suddenly becomes more meaningful to the reader. Without a doubt, hearing the “story” of each participant has helped me to understand more clearly the prerogative held by these three groups of participants regarding the nonfiction genres.

Although the attitudes and perceptions of the three groups of participants were diverse, they do share a similar thread—the certainty that the nonfiction genres are part of our everyday lives and that during the course of one’s life, one will read from the genres of nonfiction for information, and hopefully, for pleasure. This researcher has also

learned that in the quest for knowledge, it is equally important to realize that the process is one of the most exciting parts of the journey.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Copy of Research Questions

Appendix B: Copy of Letters

Appendix C: Copy of Consent Forms

Appendix D: Tools for Assessment

Appendix AQuestionsAuthors.

1. Tell me how you came to write nonfiction? What are you trying to accomplish in your books? **How would you define nonfiction?** What motivates you to write?
2. Did you choose to read nonfiction as a child? Where do you think your interest in non-fiction originated?
3. Where do you get ideas for your books and how do you decide if a non-fiction topic is worth pursuing?
4. What are the latest trends in non-fiction writing? Have these had any impact on your books?
5. Do you deliberately shape your books so as to make them marketable?
6. Do you write for any particular age group? How does this influence the way you approach your books?
7. Do you think that your books appeal most to boys or girls? Why?
8. How do you catch and hold the interest of a reader?
9. What degree of creative license can you employ in your writing? What role does your editor play in shaping your books?
10. How important is the visual impact in your non-fiction books?
11. What do you think are the key components that make for excellent non-fiction?
12. Are there any elements of non-fiction that you think are necessary for readers to be aware of in order to navigate nonfiction successfully? (What are they?)
13. Is there any place for fiction in non-fiction accounts?
14. What skills do you think readers require in order to navigate non-fiction successfully?
15. What are the skills you believe children need to navigate nonfiction?
16. From your perspective, what value does nonfiction have?

Teachers.

1. When you think back on the books you read aloud to your class, would you categorize them as predominantly fiction or nonfiction?
2. Do your students have the opportunity to see you reading? What are you usually reading?
3. Do you actively participate in your students book selection? How ?
4. What are the reasons that you think students would give for choosing to read nonfiction?
5. Are your students exposed to equal amounts of fiction and non-fiction texts? What is the ratio of fiction to nonfiction? How do you determine this? do you feel that there is an adequate amount of quality nonfiction texts available to your students?
6. How would you define nonfiction?
7. What do you consider to be qualities of a good non-fiction text? Could you describe some of your criteria?
8. Do you believe that teachers should systematically introduce students to specific genres and provide models of those genres? (explicit vs. implicit teaching)
9. Are there any elements of non-fiction that you think are necessary for your students to be aware of in order to deal with nonfiction successfully? (What are they?)
10. What skills do you think readers require in order to navigate non-fiction successfully? How do you address these skill in your classroom?
11. At what age should non-fiction be introduced to students? Why?
12. Do you believe that the gender of the student influences his or her selection of books? How? In what ways? Could you elaborate?
13. Would you agree with Duthie's contention that "non-fiction can have crucial implications for lifelong learning"? What might these be? (Duthie, p. 58)
14. What value does nonfiction have in your classroom?

Students.

1. What kinds of books do you like to read? Can you give me some titles of your favorite books or tell me who your favorite authors are?
2. Does anyone help you decide what books to read? Who?
3. How would you describe yourself as a reader? How many hours of reading would you say you do in a week? What sort of reading?
4. What sorts of books are at your house? Would you describe them as mostly fiction or non-fiction? How would you describe the collection?
5. Can you tell me what the difference is between fiction and non-fiction? (Define nonfiction.)
6. Where can you find examples of non-fiction text ?
7. Do you like to read non-fiction? Why and when would you read non-fiction?
8. Do you think that nonfiction appeals more to boys or to girls? Why?
9. Where do you read non-fiction most? (school, home, etc.)
10. Do you prefer to read non-fiction in general or do you read it because a certain topic interests you? Do you enjoy reading nonfiction?
11. What makes a good non-fiction text? As a reader, what qualities do you look for in a quality book? Can you describe what the text would look like?
12. What skills do you think readers require in order to manage non-fiction successfully? **What do you think you need to know to be a reader of nonfiction?**

Appendix B

Copy of Letters to Participants

Dear Author:

I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Arts Program at the University of Victoria. At present, I am working on a study regarding Prevailing Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Nonfiction Genres.

The intent of the study is to discover how authors, teachers, parents and students feel about the genres of nonfiction. I am especially interested in what led you, as an author, to write nonfiction and what you perceive to be its value for the junior level reader.

In order to undertake my study, I would appreciate the opportunity to obtain your perspective by either arranging to talk with you at your convenience. Please note that your participation is voluntary.

Feel free to consider my request at your leisure. Enclosed is a consent form with which you may either accept or decline my invitation. I understand that you may have a very busy schedule.

I would like to compile the responses to the questions. Please know that you will remain anonymous unless you indicate otherwise. All responses will be designated codes to protect identities. You have the right to refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer. Only myself, the researcher, and my graduate supervisor will have access to the data.

I look forward to your response to my invitation. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. In the event that you have further questions, I invite you to contact me or my graduate supervisor to satisfy any inquiries you might have. I have enclosed a self addressed envelope should you wish to respond in writing. Thank you for your cooperation. I am very much looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Holly Kinkaid

Dear Superintendent:

I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Arts Program at the University of Victoria. At present, I am working on a study regarding Prevailing Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Nonfiction Genres.

The intent of this study is to discover how authors, teachers, parents and students feel about the genres of nonfiction. In order to undertake this study, I would like the opportunity to talk with members of a staff and student body in your school district about their feeling regarding the nonfiction genres. This process would be carried out as a semi-structured interview and should not require much more than a half hour of the participants time. I am enclosing copies of the questions that I am proposing to ask for the purpose of this study. All participants will have the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I would like to audio tape the interview. If taping would prove to be an inconvenience, I am able to take notes. Please know that all data collected will be kept confidential and used only for the sole purpose of this study. Each respondent will be given a code number for identification purposes, the tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet and destroyed when the study and oral defense have been completed.

May I have your permission to undertake this study in your school district? I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. In the event that you do have further questions, I invite you to contact me or my graduate supervisor to satisfy any inquiries you might have. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Holly Kinkaid

Dear Principal:

I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Arts Program at the University of Victoria. At present, I am working on a study regarding Prevailing Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Nonfiction Genres. I am focusing on readers at the grade 4,5,6 level.

The intent of this study is to discover how authors, teachers, and students feel about the genres of nonfiction. In order to undertake this study, I would like the opportunity to talk with members of your staff and student body about their feelings regarding the nonfiction genres. This process would be carried out as a semi-structured interview and should not require much more than a half hour of the participants time. I am enclosing copies of the questions that I am proposing to ask for the purpose of this study. The participant will not have to answer any questions that he/she does not wish to answer and he/she may opt out of the study at any time without penalty on employment, grades or academic standing.

I would like to audio tape the interview. If taping would prove to be an inconvenience, I am able to take notes. Please know that all data collected will be kept confidential and used only for the sole purpose of this study. To protect the subjects anonymity, the responses will be assigned a numerical code number. The tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet. The tapes will be destroyed upon completion of the study and oral defense.

I have enclosed the approval for research form from the school district. May I have your permission to undertake this study in your school? I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. I invite you to contact me or my graduate supervisor to satisfy any inquiries. Thank you for your cooperation. Enjoy your March break.

Sincerely,

Holly Kinkaid

Dear Teacher:

I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Arts Program at the University of Victoria. At present, I am working on a study regarding Prevailing Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Nonfiction Genres.

The intent of this study is to discover how authors, teachers, and students feel about the genres of nonfiction. Specifically, I am interested in what you, as teacher, perceive to be the value of the nonfiction genres. In order to undertake this study, I would like to talk with you at your convenience and possibly conduct a follow up interview to clarify and build upon any emerging themes from the previous interview. This should not require much more than a half hour of your time. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to withdraw from the study completely without penalty.

With your permission, I would like to audio tape the interview. If taping would prove to be an inconvenience, I am able to take notes. Please know that all data collected will be kept confidential and used only for the sole purpose of this study. Your anonymity will be protected by using code number to identify the results from individual subjects. The audio tapes shall be stored in a locked cabinet and they will be destroyed once the thesis and oral defense are completed.

I look forward to your response to my invitation. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. In the event that you do have further questions, I invite you to contact me or my graduate supervisor to satisfy any inquiries you might have. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Holly Kinkaid

Dear Parent:

My name is Holly Kinkaid and I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Arts Program at the University of Victoria. At present, I am working on a study regarding Prevailing Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Nonfiction Genres.

The intent of this study is to discover how authors, teachers, and students feel about the genres of nonfiction. Specifically, I am interested in how your child, as a student, feels about reading nonfiction.

In order to undertake this study, I would like to talk with your child. This conversation should take no longer than one half hour of his/her time and will be scheduled so as not to disrupt his/her learning. Please know that your child will have the opportunity to end the conversation at any time should he/she wish to or he/she may withdraw completely from the study at any time without penalty to grades or academic standing.

With your permission, I would like to audio tape the interview. If taping would prove to be an inconvenience, I am able to take notes.

All data collected will be kept confidential and used only for the sole purpose of this study. The anonymity of your child will be protected by using code number to identify the responses obtained from each subject. In addition, the tapes shall kept in a locked cabinet until they have been transferred to written form. Only myself, the researcher, and my graduate supervisor will have access to the data. The tapes will be destroyed once the study and oral defense are completed.

I look forward to your response to my invitation. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. In the event that you do have further questions, I invite you to contact me or my graduate supervisor to satisfy any inquiries you might have. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Holly Kinkaid

Appendix CCopy of Consent Letters

My signature on this form indicates that I will consent to participate in a study by Holly Kinkaid regarding the prevailing attitudes towards the genres of nonfiction.

I have received an explanation about the nature of this study and its purpose. I understand the following:

1. I am a volunteer and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty regarding employment, grades or academic standing.
2. The data I provide will remain confidential and will be destroyed upon completion of the project. My identity will also be confidential.
3. If I withdraw from the study, the data which may have been acquired by the researcher shall be destroyed.
4. Only the researcher, and the graduate supervisor will have access to the data.
5. I may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. I know that I am a volunteer and I may decline without fear of penalty.
6. I will, upon request, have access to the project following its completion.

I have received explanations about the nature of the study, its purpose, and procedures.

Signature of Participant

Date

My signature on this form indicates that my son or daughter will participate in a study conducted by Holly Kinkaid regarding the prevailing attitudes towards the genres of nonfiction.

I have received an explanation about the nature of this study and its purpose. I understand the following:

1. My child is a volunteer and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty to grades or academic standing.
2. Should my child choose to withdraw from the study, any data that may have been acquired by the researcher shall be destroyed.
3. The data provided by my child will remain confidential and will be destroyed upon completion of the project.
4. Only the researcher and the graduate supervisor will have access to the data.
5. My child may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. I know that my child may decline the invitation without fear of academic penalty.
6. I will, upon request, have access to the project following its completion.

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

My child is able to participate in this project.

My child is unable to participate in this project.

Appendix D

Tools for the Assessment of Nonfiction Genres - Figure 1

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subject Matter: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the authority of the source stated? - How well are the key words defined? |
| Language Use: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How appropriate and effective is the vocabulary? |
| Accuracy: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the information up-to-date? - Is there a distinction between fact and opinion? |
| Approach to Content: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are new ideas and diverse perspectives on the subject investigated? - Is the subject given an appropriate context? - Is the information in the book easily accessible? |
| Organization of the text: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the organization of the text appropriate with regards to the content and audience? - Is the vocabulary appropriate? - Are indexes, glossaries, maps and bibliographies included in the text? |
| Style of the book: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the voice appropriate for both the content and the audience? - Does the text stimulate interest for the reader and encourage them to make further explorations on the topic? |

VITA

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Title of Thesis:

Attitudes and Perceptions Regarding Nonfiction Genres

Author


Holly Anne Kinkaid
Wednesday, September 17, 1997.