

Mismatch Between Reading Genre and Daily Life Needs: Mixed-Method Case Study of Nonfiction Reading in Three Families

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Abstract

The nonfiction genre conveys information about the world. Although research has shown that our daily life aligns with the nonfiction genre in terms of the nature of its content, format, purpose, and linguistic features, nonfiction genre literacy has been neglected in children's reading in terms both of the number of nonfiction books they read and of time spent by adults reading nonfiction to children. This study adopts an ethnographic approach, documenting the daily life of, and the nonfiction books read in three middle-class families in the U. S. The mixed methods used in this research include observation of participants' everyday life, a book count by genre of each family's book collection, and interviews to determine participants' reading practices and genre choices. It is found that daily life in these families can largely be characterized as nonfiction in a genre sense; however, reading time and materials are predominantly focused on fiction. Thus, there is a significant disparity between the nature of daily life in these families and the reading practices of their children. The children are simply not exposed to sufficient nonfiction genre material, and thus miss available links to authentic world experiences and exposure to various nonfiction content areas. Consequently, it is suggested that nonfiction reading for children should be increased to promote world and content area knowledge and nonfiction literacy skills.

Keywords: Nonfiction literacy, reading, genre choice, content-area literacy, family life, life skills

Introduction

The current study explores daily life routines and nonfiction genre reading of five elementary-to-middle-school-aged children and one preschool-aged child in three families residing in the U. S. The definition and characteristics of the nonfiction genre are presented, followed by a review of existing literature on nonfiction research to argue for the necessity and significance of the nonfiction genre. Finally, reasons for the lack of nonfiction reading are examined. Thus, drawing upon research from [Yopp and Yopp \(2006\)](#) on genre reading choice within school and family settings, this study investigates and draws conclusions on reading genre choice and reasons for particular choices. It extends the scope of Yopp and Yopp's study by documenting the nature of family routines to investigate the relationship between nonfiction genre reading and everyday family routines.

Literature Review

According to [Kristo and Bamford \(2004\)](#), "Nonfiction is the literature of fact—or the product of an author's inquiry, research, and writing. Its primary purposes are to provide information, explain, argue, and/or demonstrate" (p. 12), in contrast to the imaginative nature of fiction. [Trussell-Cullen \(1999\)](#) states that nonfiction "documents and celebrates the real world—and that means everything about the real world that is actual, observable, recordable, demonstrable, and experience able" (p. 2). In contrast, fictionist concerned with information or events that are [imaginary](#) and/or focused on authors' articulation of their internal worlds.

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Regarding literary texts, in particular, nonfiction encompasses a wide variety of literary texts humans use everyday (Pike & Mumper, 2004), including but not limited to picture books, brochures, manuals, self-help books, maps, recipes, world record books, newspapers, magazines, and (auto)biographies (Kristo & Bamford, 2004; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Similarly, the various visual aids present in nonfiction books include illustrations, photographs, tables, indices, glossary, labels, captions, keys, addendum headings, maps, graphs, and diagrams to support the text by representing quantitative information, spatial relationships, and comparisons or patterns (Kristo & Bamford, 2004; Pappas, 2006). Formats or structures and purposes of the genre include (but again are not limited to) enumeration, sequencing, chronology, comparing–contrasting, representing cause–effect relations, and presenting and answering questions (e.g., in Q&A or FAQ format) (Dole, 1997 as cited in Harvey, 1998), again in contrast to fiction, which can be characterized as concerned with plot, theme, dialogue, foreshadowing, conflict, solutions, rising actions, climaxes, and falling actions (Bell, 2004; Evanovich, 2006; Morrell, 2006).

However, these two genres can also be blended to create *narrative nonfiction*, where the author reconstructs facts using a narrative style of writing; on the other hand, a fictional book can also contain significant accounts of nonfiction facts, such as in historical fiction, where the facts of history are to some nontrivial degree faithfully depicted. Kletzien and Dreher (2004), for one example, define nonfiction in a broad sense that includes this hybrid genre; however, others define it more narrowly by excluding such narrative forms. The definition of the nonfiction genre adopted in this study excludes such blended works and refers exclusively to informational texts written on topics requiring the presentation of area-specific factual knowledge for expository, explanatory, or descriptive purposes (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Pappas, 1986; Pappas, 1993).

The importance of the nonfiction genre is twofold: 1) nonfiction texts, formats, and purposes closely align with the experience and needs of everyday life; and 2) nonfiction texts provide wide coverage across subject areas. In fact, Smith (2000) argued that most of the books we encounter in everyday life are nonfiction. Zinsser (2006) delineated the evolution of this nonfiction-dominance in children's literacy development and advocated the importance of nonfiction as a result. He further noted that writing nonfiction as compared to fiction is especially effective for the promotion of children's writing, because "it enables them to write what they know or can observe or can find out [...]. They will write far more willingly about subjects that touch their lives or that they have an aptitude for" (p.100). In addition, these information-oriented texts are commonly accompanied by visual aids that are especially characteristic of the nonfiction genre, as outlined above (Kristo & Bamford, 2004; Moline, 1995; Pappas, 2006). Thus, the nonfiction literacy experience incorporates both information-oriented literacy material and visual aids, and occurs when the reader misinterpreting diagrams on advertisements, receiving instruction, reading traffic directions, examining caloric and nutrition tables on food packaging, ordering in a restaurant, scanning theater programs, using recipes, following map legends, finding information online using a computer search engine, interpreting weather forecasts, scanning a theater program, etc. (Kristo & Bamford, 2004; Leu et al., 2004; Pike & Mumper, 2004).

Another reason for advocating nonfiction is that our lives change and evolve in deep dependence on content-area-specific information—the hallmark of the nonfiction genre. Nonfiction encompasses technical knowledge and information from a wide range of content areas, such as computer use, mathematics, natural science, history, visual arts, and music (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Kristo & Bamford, 2004; Pike & Mumper, 2004); thus nonfiction promotes learning across the school curriculum and across the range of life circumstances. Nonfiction texts are meant to communicate information about the natural or social world, or as Hirsch (2006) explains, "world knowledge." Nonfiction "can provide students with authentic reading experiences that connect with their lives and expand background knowledge needed to understand core content area concepts" (Olness, 2007, p. 5). For example, interpreting diagrams is related to mathematics skills; using maps and understanding weather forecasts require geological and mathematical knowledge; reading recipes and food packaging and ordering food concerns knowledge in nutrition. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, 2010) suggests that students should have multiple opportunities in all content subjects to "actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views" (p. 3) and nonfiction literacy has become essential in today's curriculum as reading, writing, and arithmetic

(“[Information literacy standards for student learning](#),”1998). [PurcellGates, Duke, and Martineau \(2007\)](#) even advocated that nonfiction genre should be a central element of students’ academic career as early as in preschool. Thus, the inclusion of varied literary genres in all content areas recognizes the significance of nonfiction literacy education.

Aside from meeting the needs of human life, the nonfiction genre exposes children to specialized vocabulary ([Duke & Kays, 1998](#)), supplies them with the language needed to discuss concepts they are learning, offers them experience with diverse text structures and features, and familiarizes them with the language of exposition, thus providing them with knowledge that is essential to strategically process expository text ([Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000](#)). In addition, nonfiction texts serve as a reading catalyst for children who are not motivated to read narrative stories by sparking and connecting to their interests and prior knowledge in nonfiction topics; they become enthused and eager to explore the pages of books about compelling topics like dinosaurs, sports, and volcanoes, profoundly improving their relationship with literacy ([Caswell & Duke, 1998](#)). Reading nonfiction books aloud can be used to promote high-level questions and thinking ([Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993](#); [Vardell & Copeland, 1992](#)), and teachers can use nonfiction books to model these practices ([Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001](#)). Nonfiction texts provide opportunities for both teachers and students to use abstract language in dialogue when making connections between concepts in texts ([Donovan & Smolkin, 2002](#)). Likewise, the amount of the talk during nonfiction book sharing between parents and children is greater and their talk contains significantly greater vocabulary diversity in comparison to when they read narratives ([Price, Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009](#)). Nonfiction texts provide answers to children’s questions about their world ([Hirsch, 2003](#)) and prepare them for future interactions with the kinds of texts they are most likely to read and write as adults ([Kamberelis, 1998](#); [Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002](#)). The world we live in is highly content-specific, a salient feature of the nonfiction genre, and our lives are essentially nonfiction in nature in terms of our interaction with information and our surroundings. Therefore, it is necessary to be able to read, understand, interpret, manage, and use nonfiction information, and it is imperative that children learn to work with nonfiction texts.

Although researchers have provided evidence demonstrating the necessity and importance of the nonfiction genre, fiction remains the dominant genre in children’s reading ([Caswell & Duke, 1998](#); [Duke, 2000](#); [Duke & Kays, 1998](#); [Pappas, 1993](#)). In first-grade classrooms, teachers completed a daily average of 3.6 minutes of nonfiction text-reading ([Duke, 2000](#)). [Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi \(1996\)](#) identified a similar lack in nonfiction reading in primary school as a whole, noting that only approximately 6% of reading time at this level involves nonfiction content. Other scholars have described literacy instruction in the United States as typically subsisting on a steady diet of fiction and literary interpretation ([Caswell & Duke, 1998](#); [Hoffman et al., 1993](#); [Meltzer, 1994](#); [Morrow, Pressley, & Smith, 1997](#); [Venezky, 2000](#)). [Duke \(2000\)](#) showed that nonfiction texts represent an average of less than 3% of the materials displayed on early primary classrooms’ walls and other surfaces. Similarly, [Yopp and Yopp \(2006\)](#) compared 1830 read-aloud activities implemented by 1144 teachers and found a consistent pattern of lack of nonfiction reading in the classroom. In short, researchers and practitioners have pinpointed that elementary instructional practices and classroom materials have heavily favored fiction at the expense of nonfiction texts ([Duke, 2000](#); [Pressley et al., 1996](#); [Venezky, 2000](#)). Fiction is the most common type of literature used by teachers, and several studies have asserted the overly heavy emphasis on it in the classroom ([Donovan & Smolkin, 2002](#); [Hoffman et al., 1993](#)), 2000). [Trabasso \(1994\)](#), as cited in [Dreher \(1998\)](#), noted that “the narrative is especially pervasive in the classroom” (p. 414).

Although this body of research improves our understanding of the issue for the lack of nonfiction reading practices, their focus has mainly been confined to classroom practice. That is, little research has been conducted to investigate the genres of children’s reading at home. One exception is the study by [Yopp and Yopp \(2006\)](#), who studied not only classroom reading practices by genre but also documented the nonfiction reading practices of 20 kindergartners at home by genre over the course of a school year. The researchers collected monthly reading logs of books read aloud by parents to their children at home. Data included a total of 1,847 unique titles reported by parents or other family members. A consistent pattern was found in this home reading: at home, children have far less exposure to nonfiction texts than to fiction texts. Only 7% of the books were nonfiction, or an average of 5.5 nonfiction books per child. Thus, students’ literary diets at home are largely fiction. In examining the books parents read to their children, Yopp and Yopp found that nearly half of the 20 children had been read two or fewer nonfiction texts during the entire seven months when the reading logs were kept, and two of the children had been read no nonfiction texts at all during this period.

Yopp and Yopp's (2006) study provides valuable insights into the imbalance between nonfiction and fiction genre reading at home. On the basis of their findings, Yopp and Yopp (2006) advocated that more nonfiction be read aloud by parents and teachers alike, and further suggested two possible reasons for the minimal use of nonfiction texts in read-aloud settings that they found, one being that teachers and parents may not consider nonfiction genre reading enjoyable themselves, and the other being that teachers and parents may shy away from nonfiction because of lack of read-aloud experience in that genre and/or an unfamiliarity with the range of nonfiction children's books available. Indeed, compelling and colorful nonfiction books with high production values are remarkably well received by children. Many children enjoy the vivid content found in nonfiction books, such as children's science books, history books, and animal books.

The current study takes the investigation of these issues further by examining the imbalance between reading genres and the mismatch between the genres of books read by children and their daily life conditions and needs. The inclusion of nonfiction texts in the primary grades has received a great deal of attention in the professional literature in recent years, and researchers have urged teachers to incorporate more nonfiction texts in their classroom reading practices. In addition to sharing nonfiction texts through read-aloud activities, literacy experts have encouraged teachers to provide diverse classroom libraries that include nonfiction texts for children to access in their own exploration (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004).

Methods

The current study employs an ethnographic, multi-case study approach in order to document, describe and analyze the nature and genre of family life and reading practice in three families in the U. S. over three months, or 110 observational hours. The participants include the children of all of the participating families and their mothers. All the families self-reportedly promote their children's reading and can be described as middle-class families with ample resources in terms of reading materials. All the mothers are college educated; all the participating children were between the ages of 7 and 12 at the time of this study. All the data collections took place in the participants' home. The data collection methods include observations, interviews, and artifact collection. The study observed the daily family life and related events in the participating homes. These family events were then coded into different content areas, such as math, physics, history, arts, and nutrition. Artifact collection and analysis was conducted by counting the number of children's books at each participant's home, categorizing them into fiction and nonfiction books, and counting the number in each category. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction books follows the definition provided in the previous section: *nonfiction* refers to informational materials written on topics requiring the presentation of area-specific factual knowledge for expository, explanatory, or descriptive purposes; fiction concerns make-believe stories with characters, plots, themes, conflicts and solutions. The physical storage and display of books in each family was also documented. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children and their mothers to further the understanding of their family life, reading genre preferences, and reading routines and time allocation/usage. These interviews took place in the participants' homes. During the interview, the participants used some of their books as aids to help them answer the researcher's questions. Sometimes, the participating adults began reading the books to their children, or the researcher, with the approval of the participants, chose books for the participants to comment on or to read. The interview session then became an observation session as well. The interview questions are listed in Appendix.

The observations were documented using a digital voice recorder to take field notes detailing participants' reactions and responses during the interviews, allowing a more detailed and multifaceted perspective on family life and reading habits. The researcher came in without any predetermined parameters. The total observational time for each family was about 36 hours. Originally, 12 visits of three hours each were scheduled for each family over the course of three months. Such a schedule was possible for Family I to maintain, but Families II and III were not able to accommodate this original research design schedule. For those families, therefore, fewer visits with longer observation hours in each visit yielded the same amount of time and collected data. In all, around 110 hours of observation were conducted.

In Family I, the participants were Sara and her daughter, Shelly. In Family II, the participants were Alice and her children, Robert and Amanda. In Family III, the participants were Nancy and her children, Anna and Victor. (All the names of the participants are pseudonyms.) The researcher ensured conformity with institutional internal review board requirements and obtained IRB approval. Recruitment was done in the local community, through word of mouth. The requirements were that the children and parents do read and that there are books at home. These three families expressed their interest in participating in the study, and consent forms were then given to the parents and children.

Findings and Discussion

The findings for the current research are described in two parts: the first, documenting the family lifepactices and events and the vocabulary used; and the second, documenting the reading genre(s) of the participating families. The findings for the first part are from the observations of daily family life in each participating family, as outlined above. The findings for the second part consist of the numbers of fiction and nonfiction books counted and categorized in each household and interviews with parents and children on their reading genre choices.

Nature of Family Daily Life

The data on the family routines observed are recorded in Table 1 in the end of this section. Observable routines are displayed in the first column, followed by content areas covered, literacy materials and visual aids used, and the purposes of the routines. The data are analyzed from the perspectives of frequency of each routine, content areas covered, literacy materials, and visual aids used, and purpose of the routines, followed by a more in-depth discussion of one daily routine from each family.

In Family I, the following family routines were recorded: cooking, eating, making snacks, asking children to wash up, preparing for the bath, cleaning up the house, making phone calls, answering emails and text messages, making plans, reviewing homework, practicing a musical instrument, watching TV, playing dolls, listening to music and stories on CD, reading brochures, reading food packages, discussing summer camp choices, and reading instructions for new toys. In Family II, participants were observed cooking, eating, asking children to wash up, cleaning up the house, making phone calls, answering emails and text messages, reviewing homework, watching TV and DVDs, playing with siblings, cleaning the swimming pool, preparing for swimming, shopping, making lemonade, caring for the yard, doing laundry, playing computer games, inviting the neighbors over, painting nails, playing dress-up, and reading food packages. For Family III, cooking, eating, making phone calls, answering emails and text messages, making traveling plans, watching TV and DVDs, playing with siblings, reading brochures and catalogues, shopping, doing laundry, playing computer games, inviting neighbors over, reading food packages, discussing rules of games, discussing summer plans, and reading instructions for new toys were documented. There were 54 family routines documented at all the participants' houses: 18 events at Sara's house (Family I), 20 at Alice's (Family II), and 16 at Nancy's (Family III). It should be noted that although only 30 events are presented in Table 1, 54 events were observed including duplicates. All of the observations of daily family events at Sara's house took place in the late afternoon and evening, and lasted for approximately three hours. An average of 18 nonfiction family literacy events occurred on each visit, which converted to six nonfiction family events per hour, or one every 10 minutes. These figures were similar at the other two houses indicating that nonfiction literacy events have a strong frequency and presence in the lives of these families. These findings are consistent with those of Smith (2000), who prizes nonfiction texts as the dominant genre of human life. In the same vein, Pike and Mumper (2004) anticipate that approximately 80% to 90% of literacy events for children are likely to be nonfiction in nature.

As previously discussed, the nonfiction genre concerns factual information and often supplementary visual aids, with specific purposes but across content areas. In these three families, the following content areas were routinely covered: nutrition, chemistry, math, physics, literacy, science, health, biology, personal hygiene, fine arts, performing arts, history, technology, geology, botany, finance, and engineering. Although similar content area knowledge can also be gleaned from reading fiction texts, nonfiction presents information in a purposeful and systematic fashion directly addressing life tasks. Children with any particular interest in a content area may find their questions answered more adequately by nonfiction than by fiction. In addition, the expository language particular to nonfiction is similar to that which prevails in human life, making nonfiction reading essential to literacy development (Pike & Mumper, 2004; Smith, 2000).

The literacy materials employed included user manuals for electronics, such as rice cookers, blenders, vacuum cleaners, swimming pool motors, laundry machines, and toys; instructions displayed on spice bottles, food packages, and detergent boxes; artist biographies on CD covers; and self-help books, recipes, commercial advertisements on soap bottles, calendars, planners, maps, TV programming guides, summer camp brochures, membership registration forms, travel agent catalogues, newspapers, magazines, restaurant takeout menus, concert program guides, internet, the *Guinness Book of World Records*, letters from relatives, emails, text messages, and gym brochures. All these materials fall into the category of nonfiction, according to Pike and Mumper (2004). As to visual aids, a particular feature of nonfiction, their abundance was self-evident: nutrition and caloric information and ingredients were found on food packaging and in recipe books; illustrations, photographs, labels, keys, captions, diagrams, glossaries, and indices were found in electronics instructional manuals; travel brochures included photos, diagrams, graphs, captions, subtitles, tables of contents, maps, legends, illustrations, and labels; there were pictures on the restaurant takeout menus; captions and headings on the concert programs; indices in reference books; and diagrams in the newspaper.

In terms of the formats and purposes of the genre, enumeration, sequence, chronology, compare–contrast, cause–effect, and question–answer were all found in the data, echoing the findings from (Dole, 1997 as cited in Harvey, 1998). In playing with her siblings, Shelly (Family I) used cause and effect to explain to her little toddler brother that “If you bounce the ball on the floor, it will bounce back. If you do it too hard, it might hit your face and you will cry.” At dinner table, Shelly’s mother explained to her children that “If you do not eat vegetables, you won’t get your vitamins.” And in making meals together, she explained that adding pepper to the food causes the spicy flavor. Children were also making their own logical discoveries. Shelly announced when playing with her dolls that “If you separate the doll’s hair into three strands, and go like this and this again, you get a braid!” A pattern of question and answer followed Shelly’s asking her mother, “Can we play ball now?” In return, her mother answered, “No, we are having dinner soon and the living room is not a good place to play ball.” Sequential structure was also evident in the observations. In making lemonade, Alice from Family II showed her daughter, Amanda, “First, you need to get ten lemons, sugar, and water. Then, get the cutting board, a long stirrer, a pitcher, and the knife. Wash everything, including the lemons. Next, cut all the lemons in half and squeeze the juice into the pitcher. After that, add the sugar and some water. Stir it. When the sugar dissolves, then add more water. Finally, try a spoonful of the lemonade for taste.” Cases of compare and contrast were also documented: in playing with her dolls, Shelly compared their outfits; making a plan for summer camp with Victor and Isabel, Nancy compared and contrasted between the two programs the children were attending.

To sum up, the strong presence of interaction with the nonfiction genre in the daily lives of the families considered in the current study reflects the reality of the observation that family life is of a nonfiction nature and that children are likelier to encounter nonfiction situations and texts than we may think. Thus, supporting children develop nonfiction literacy competence is warranted ([“Information literacy standards for student learning,” 1998](#)).

Table 1: Family Routines Observed and the Associated Content Areas, Literacy Materials, Visual Aids, and Purposes

Family routines	Families observed engaging in the routine	Content areas	Literacy materials	Visual aids	Purposes
Cooking	Family I, Family II, Family III	nutrition, chemistry, math, physics, literacy, science	rice cooker’s user manual, ingredients on spice bottles, self-help books, recipes	tables of ingredients, labels, illustrations, photographs, keys, indices, glossaries, captions, graphs,	enumeration, sequencing, cause–effect, question–answer

Eating	Family I, Family II, Family III	nutrition, biology, mathematics, chemistry, physics	writings on milk cartons, cereal boxes, seasoning bottles	headings, diagrams ingredient tables, labels, illustrations, photographs, keys, indices, graphs, diagrams	sequential, cause- effect, question- answer
Making smoothies	Family I	nutrition, physics, mathematics	blender operating instructions, measurements on a pitcher and measuring cups, manuals, recipes	illustrations, photographs, tables, indices, glossary, labels, keys, captions, headings, graphs, diagrams	cause-effect, sequencing, question-answer
Asking children to wash up	Family I, Family II	health, physics, biology, hygiene	brand advertisement on soap bottle	tables, labels, graphs	cause-effect, sequencing, problem-solution
Preparing for bath	Family I,	health, physics, biology, hygiene	instructions on shampoo bottle, temperature readings on faucet	tables, labels, keys, headings	enumeration, sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution,
Cleaning up the house	Family I, Family II	physics, mathematics	operating instructions on vacuum cleaner, instructions on detergent bottle	operating manuals, labels	enumeration, sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, question-answer
Making phone calls	Family I, Family II, Family III	literacy, reading, mathematics	calendar, planner,	tables, labels, keys	enumeration, sequencing, question-answer
Answering emails and texting messages	Family I, Family II, Family III	technology, computer literacy	calendar	photographs, labels, keys	enumeration, sequencing, problem-solution, question-answer
Making traveling plans	Family I, Family III	geography	calendar, planner, map	legends, illustrations, labels, keys	enumeration, sequencing, problem-solution, question-answer
Reviewing homework	Family I, Family II	literacy, mathematics	worksheet, textbook	graphs, indices, illustrations, tables, labels captions	enumeration, sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution,

Practicing musical instrument	Family I	mathematics, fine arts, physics, history		music notes, illustrations, photographs, tables, indices, glossaries, labels, keys, headings	question-answer sequencing, compare-contrast
Watching TV and DVDs	Family I, Family II, Family III	technologies	TV programming guide, primary sources, multiple media	manuals, photographs, captions	sequencing, cause-effect
Playing dolls and play-dough	Family I	arts, physics	manuals	photographs, tables	sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect
Playing with siblings	Family II, Family III	physics, math			sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, question-answer
Listening to stories on CD	Family I	fine arts, physics	music introduction on CD cover, manuals, multiple media	illustrations, photographs, tables, indices, labels, captions	explanation, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, question-answer
Reading brochures and catalogues	Family I, Family III	mathematics,	brochures, maps, biographies/ autobiographies	photographs, diagrams, graphs, labels, legends, captions, subtitles, tables of contents, maps, keys, illustrations, captions	explanation, sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, question-answer
Cleaning swimming pool	Family II	chemistry, mathematics	instructions on the packages, brochures, manuals for swimming pool	motor diagrams, tables, graphs, illustrations, glossary, labels, keys, captions	sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, question-answer
Preparing to swim	Family II	physics, chemistry	instructions on sunscreen, weather forecast reports, instructions on sunscreen	table, graph, photographs, tables, labels, captions	sequencing, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, question-answer
Shopping	Family II, Family III	mathematics, nutrition, finance,	price tags, material tags, flyers, brochures,	graphs, food menu, keys, labels, maps,	enumeration, sequencing, compare-contrast,

		biology, botany, chemistry	newspapers, magazines, biographies	illustrations, photographs, captions, graphs, diagrams	cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Making lemonade	Family II	nutrition, mathematics, chemistry	recipe books, manuals, self-help books	table, graphs, photographs, illustrations, photographs, labels, keys, captions, diagrams	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Caring for the yard	Family II	botany, chemistry, mathematics	Instructions on fertilizer bags, operating information on lawn machines	diagram, headings, graphs, illustrations, photographs, labels, keys	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Doing laundry	Family II, Family III	chemistry, engineering, physics, mathematics	instructions on using detergent, operating instructions on the laundry machine, manuals	graphs, illustrations, photographs, tables, labels, diagrams	sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution
Playing computer games	Family II, Family III	technologies, physics, mathematics	manuals, game instructions, multiple media, the internet and other digital technologies	illustrations, photographs, tables, graphs, labels, keys, captions	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Inviting neighbors over	Family II, Family III	literacy	invitations, brochures, digital technologies	illustrations, photographs, labels, graphs, captions	sequencing, question–answer
Painting nails	Family II	chemistry, physics, mathematics, health, arts	manuals on how to paint nails with special patterns, self-help books, newspapers, magazines	Photographs, diagrams, indices, labels, keys, headings, illustrations, photographs, captions	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Playing dress-up	Family II	arts, math, physics			sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Reading food packaging	Family I, Family II, Family III	nutrition, chemistry, mathematics	ingredients, nutrition information, instructions on food packages, recipes	tables, indices, diagram, photographs, captions illustrations, photographs, labels, keys,	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer

Discussing the rules of games	Family III	history, mathematics, health, biology, sports	multiple media, internet and other digital technologies	captions, illustrations, photographs, labels, graphs, captions, diagrams	enumeration, sequencing, compare–contrast, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer sequencing, compare–contrast, solution, question–answer
Discussing friends and summer camps	Family I, Family III	sports, mathematics, health, physics, biology			enumeration, sequencing, cause–effect, problem–solution, question–answer
Reading instructions for new toys	Family I, Family III	physics, mathematics	brochures, manuals	illustrations, photographs, tables, index, labels, keys, captions, addendum, headings, graphs	

Reading Genre

The other dimension of the current findings emerges from the artifact analysis—the documentation and analysis of the number and genre of books in each household. Through artifact analysis, it was found that all of the participating families had only very small numbers of nonfiction books. The number and genre of books in each family are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The Number and Genre of Books in Each Participating Family

	Number of nonfiction books	Number of fiction books	Total number of books	Percentage of total number of books that were nonfiction
Family I	66	665	731	9%
Family II	13	112	125	10%
Family III	17	155	172	10%

In Shelly’s collection of books at home, the proportion of fiction to nonfiction books reveals a strong preference towards fiction. Shelly’s house had 665 children’s books in total, out of which only 9%, or 66 books, were nonfiction books. Sara, the mother, stated that the majority of the nonfiction books were part of series that had been presents from Shelly’s aunt. Shelly led the researcher to her bedroom, where most of the books were stored. There were nonfiction series on the human body, plants, animals, and historical figures. These books were stored at the end of the shelf, behind other household items. Compared to other serial and non-serial books, stored randomly in the center section of the bookshelf, which showed wear and tear, these nonfiction books seemed quite new. When asked about the nonfiction books on the shelf, both Shelly and her mother recalled that originally all the books were stored without any particular rationale. Over the years, however, the books that were read most were moved to the center of the bookshelf for easier access and those less read, mostly nonfiction books, were gradually pushed to the end of the shelf. As a matter of fact, nonfiction books were hidden behind a toy storage chest, as if they had no presence in the room.

Indeed, both the mother and the daughter believe that they have probably never touched those books: “They are just there.” As to the reason why they had not read these books, neither Shelly nor Sara had an answer. The researcher took out one book from the series on the human body and presented it to Shelly. Shelly flipped through the pages, concentrated on certain pages, and skipped others.

After several minutes, the researcher asked Shelly her opinion. Shelly nodded and said, "It's fine." Although Shelly's response was not overly enthusiastic, she did not reject the book, either. The researcher proceeded to present another book, on theater production; this time, Shelly spent a prolonged time reading and even started a conversation with her mother on the school play she was currently participating in. Shelly's mother explained to the researcher that Shelly was very interested in theatre and had been very involved in the school play. Shelly's reactions to these "just there" books surprised her mother, who murmured to herself, "I did not know she would read those books." These two examples led to speculation that Shelly might actually have some interests in nonfiction, and it might be that the nonfiction genre had not been presented to her in a compelling fashion in the past. Once she had the opportunity to read nonfiction, she might find a sense of connection to the genre.

The total number of books in Alice's house is 125. Of them, 112 are fiction books. That accounts for 90% of the entire collection of books, which means that nonfiction books comprise only 10%. Alice's daughter, Amanda, reports that she likes fictional chapter books; yet she also expressed an interest in nonfiction books, especially books about animals. Most of her favorite nonfiction books pertain to animals, especially ocean animals. When the researcher examined and counted the books on the shelf, Amanda took out a book about various species in the ocean and started to read, becoming totally immersed in the book for an extended period. Amanda's brother, Robert, likes to read books about adventures. However, he also reads nonfiction books. According to Robert, he likes nonfiction books because he can gain interesting information.

The total number of children's books in Family III is 172, out of which only 17 (approximately 10%) are nonfiction. This number actually surprised Nancy, the mother. She suggested that both Victor and Anna seemed to like to read all kinds of books and that she was sure that Victor was interested in nature and science. She had thought they would have more nonfiction books at home.

Even though each family owns different numbers of books, a consistent pattern is that nonfiction books compose much less of the collection than fiction ones do. In the interviews, both parents and children admitted that they seldom choose nonfiction books to read. In terms of frequency, Sara, the mother in Family I, estimates that her family might read nonfiction books once or twice a month. Sara's daughter, Shelly, tried but could not recall precisely how often she reads nonfiction books. However, in general, she was sure that "We do not read those things (nonfiction books)." When asked how long they would spend reading nonfiction books if they chose to read them, neither Sara and Shelly was sure, but both agreed that they would not spend too much time reading nonfiction because "It is boring," as expressed by Shelly. In Family II, the children do like nonfiction books, especially on animals and the ocean. Therefore, when asked why nonfiction is not much read or provided at home, the mother, Alice, was quite puzzled as well. In Family III, the mother, Nancy, also has a difficult time estimating how often they read nonfiction books. She reads to her children a great deal from children's magazines, and thinks that she might have read from both fiction and nonfiction sections. However, her children said, "We read stories." The researcher asked the children to elaborate on the types of "stories" they read, and the children quickly pointed out texts featuring fictional characters, setting, plot, and dialogue. When asked to estimate average reading time for nonfiction book-reading sessions, Nancy said that she does not pay attention to the time, but believed that it was not generally "too long." In conclusion, although the precise frequency and duration of time that the families spend reading nonfiction was not available, all of the participants agreed that the frequency was low and the duration, short.

Why are the nonfiction books being neglected? The researcher found that the participating parents' beliefs and attitudes play an important role in determining whether their children read nonfiction material at home. For instance, Sara was not very familiar with nonfiction texts and did not feel comfortable reading them to her children. In her youth, Sara did not know how to work with nonfiction texts; here earlier relationship with nonfiction will be explored in the next paragraph, but now, with her own children, she still does not know how to handle nonfiction texts and believes that nonfiction is for reference only and irrelevant or necessary for children. Therefore, when she purchases books for her children, and usually when she reads to them at home, she favors fiction books. As mentioned above, Sara stated that most of the nonfiction books had been gifts from her sister and that she rarely read them with her children. In Family III, Nancy is aware that Victor and Anna's school promotes nonfiction reading. Nancy states that the nonfiction genre is important, but she does not know how to proceed with nonfiction book reading. For example, should she read from beginning to end as she would with fiction books, or should she only read the parts that interest the children? Should she read nonfiction books every day?

How long should she read? The participating parents' reflections on their experience exhibit their own unfamiliarity with the genre of children's nonfiction, which leads to a lack of interest in reading nonfiction with their children and to the belief that nonfiction books will be too difficult for their children. As a result, they shy away from nonfiction books in their home reading. The data corroborates the earlier findings of Smolkin and Donovan (2001) that many adults' preference for fiction stems from an unfamiliarity and a lack of comfort with nonfiction texts in the lower grades.

In addition to parents' level of *familiarity* with nonfiction texts, their *interest* in the genre is also decisive in the choice of genre for shared reading at home. In this study, Sara maintained that she did not have an interest in nonfiction and therefore did not read those books to her children. Nancy is not attracted to nonfiction writing in her own life either. She reads narrative novels in her free time. Nancy has had similarly negative experiences with nonfiction texts to Sara. Nancy believes that nonfiction text is dry and uninteresting, and because of her lack of interest in nonfiction, favors fiction books over nonfiction ones during shared reading. Nancy states, "I do not like nonfiction books, so I do not feel like reading them, either." Sara has similar sentiments, and adds that she assumes the same would go for her children. "It is really boring. And I don't think Shelly would be interested in it." Scholars have discovered that in the upper elementary grades, teachers' own personal interest in fiction and/or misperceptions about nonfiction have resulted in an underutilization of nonfiction texts (Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Teachers favor fictional writing because of their own personal interest in narrative literature. Such findings echo the conclusions of Trussell-Cullen (1999), who bluntly points out that most teachers simply do not know what to do with nonfiction texts.

Why are teachers and parents drawn to fiction? The quality of nonfiction books may be one factor. Sara, the mother in Family I, described the nonfiction texts she read in her school days as "dense, technical, and dry." The researcher asked Sara to explain why she thinks nonfiction is "dense, technical and dry," and if she was never interested in chemistry, physics, or biology, subjects she had contact with through nonfiction texts. After some thought, Sara recalled that she did like the experiments in the science lab. However, the textbooks were packed with too much information, far beyond her comprehension; the writing style was not engaging for her as a child; the print was small; and there were hardly any pictures to appeal to children's curiosity. When examining the nonfiction books in the three participating homes, the researcher found that many were in small print with dense language and that because of the small number of nonfiction books, the choice of topics was very limited, further feeding a vicious cycle of lack of interest. It is possible that quality and variety might be the factors impacting genre choice, not the genre itself. In other words, if the information in the book is compelling and presented with high production values, it might engage readers regardless of whether it is delivered in a nonfiction book or in a fiction one. Moss (1995) found that nonfiction children's books were often of poor quality. When making reading choices, it is natural for teachers to select books of the higher quality that will be motivating and engaging to children and promote a positive experience. Just as Sara experienced in her own youth, the caliber of children's nonfiction once left much to be desired. Compared to fiction books, nonfiction tended to be of mediocre substance and format, not interesting or appealing to children, and largely ignored by the literary field when it came to medals and acknowledgments (Moss, 1995).

Fortunately, the situation is improving, as reflected in Sara's observation that the nonfiction trade books produced for children these days are attractive, child-friendly, age-appropriate, and diverse in topic. "It is really nice," said Sara as she expressed her amazement at the quality of nonfiction books available these days. Moss (1995) and Vardell & Copeland (1992) noted that the increasing recognition for nonfiction genre authors from literary organizations and that the caliber of the children's nonfiction genre has taken a major leap; books are now offered on a wide range of topics and written at many different ability levels, with colorful and enriching pictures, formats, and illustration styles. As Doiron (1994) commented, students "are not bored by facts, data, or information; they are only bored by how such information is presented or by what they are expected to do with it" (p. 618).

Finally, the participating parents all express a concern that their children will find nonfiction books to be too difficult for their children and will not interest them as a result. The participating mother in Family III, Nancy, feels that the content of the nonfiction genre is too hard for her children, pointing out that the content of nonfiction texts may be unfamiliar to them and beyond their domain of knowledge.

She asked, "They do not know so many words, and nonfiction books can have very difficult words that they have never learned or heard of, [so] how can they understand the nonfiction books?" Sara, the mother in Family I, shares a similar concern that nonfiction books will be too challenging for her children: "I am not sure if [Shelly] would get this. The vocabulary will be a problem for her."

The worries of the participating mothers echo the findings of earlier research, which suggests that books in the nonfiction genre are too difficult for children and that children simply lack interest in nonfiction texts (Moss & Hendershot, 2002). Is nonfiction intrinsically too difficult for young children to understand? Until the early 1970s, scholars believed that young children comprehended narrative texts more easily than expository texts and consequently that they should not be exposed to nonfiction books until the middle grades (Egan, 1988; Reese & Harris, 1997). However, subsequent scholars challenged this notion, and have shown that even young students are capable of learning from nonfiction texts and that greater exposure to such texts generally increases students' capacity to work with them (Duke & Kays, 1998; Pappas, 1993). Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989) argued that bilingual children need and are able to develop academic language on the basis of content-based reading, in both languages. They maintained that effective language instruction for second language learners needs to combine explicit instruction with implicit learning through texts on other real-world topics in the target language—a purpose that nonfiction is clearly better suited to than fiction. To that end, those authors proposed a conceptual framework for integrating language and content information instruction, to be used in four different settings—regular classes, English as a second language classes, language immersion classes, and foreign languages in elementary schools (FLES) classes—to illustrate the application of their framework.

Implications, Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of the study reveal that human life is highly nonfictional not only in its literal characteristics but also in its literary ones. Nonfiction events and vocabulary were observed in the daily lives and reading practices of three families. However, nonfiction reading is largely absent at home. Consequently, it is suggested that parents should increase nonfiction reading time and materials in home reading to help their children work with the nature and needs of daily life.

Although the case study approach affords and rewards in-depth research investigation, the findings from case studies are confined to participating case families and may be ungeneralizable to other populations. It is suggested that future research adopt approaches other than case study to further the understanding of the issues discussed in the current study. In addition, this study showed that children's nonfiction reading is influenced by parents' own experience with this genre; further study can investigate whether the profession of the parents or other characteristics has an impact on their choice of genre. For example, would parents working in the sciences differ in genre choice from those in the humanities when reading to their children? Another limitation lies in the age of the child participants. The participants in the study are mainly elementary school children. Little is known about the reading practices and nature of family literacy events in families containing children of other ages. Therefore, future research should study children in other age groups to understand whether the same lacking of nonfiction reading is present at other developmental stages. Last, although this study, which included three girls and three boys as participants, chose not to study gender differences in reading genre choice, gender could also be a salient variable in understanding these choices. Therefore, future research should also study the impact of gender differences on reading genre to further enhance the scholarly understanding of this topic.

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Appendix: Interview Questions for Parents and Children

Parents

- 1) Do you read to your children?
- 2) What types of books do you like to read to them?
- 3) Do you read nonfiction books to/with them?
- 4) If so, how often do you read nonfiction books to/with them?
- 5) Do you think that your children like nonfiction books? Why or why not?
- 6) What is your own experience in reading nonfiction books?

Children:

- 1) Do you like to read?
- 2) What types of books do you like to read either by yourself or with your parents? Why do you like to read these types of books, and why not other types?
- 3) Do you read nonfiction books by yourself or with your parents? Why or why not?
- 4) If you do read nonfiction books, what kind of nonfiction books do you read?
- 5) How often do you read nonfiction books either by yourself or with your parents?
- 6) What is your own experience in reading nonfiction books?

Here are some nonfiction reading passages, worksheets, and online practice activities to give students practice. I recommend using the online versions of the activities if you have access to technology in your classroom. It will save you some grading and these activities include questions formatted as extended response in addition to multiple choice. Students can print, save, or email their results. I think it's pretty cool. Just make sure you tell students to save their scores and responses for their own records, if you are using email delivery. Then they will always have a backup for record.

Mismatch between reading genre and daily life needs: Mixed-method case study of nonfiction reading in three families. *Journal of Education and Human Development* 2015. Shared reading at home and bilingual children's heritage language development: Case studies of three Chinese-American families. *Journal of Education & Social Policy* 2015. Languages. View Dr. Ya-Ning (Amy)'s full profile. See who you know in common. Get introduced. Contact Dr. Ya-Ning (Amy) directly. The 2004 report, *The Internet and Daily Life*, addressed leisure readers who read online, but like most of the Pew studies, the results were self-reported, and only five percent of respondents reported doing the majority of their leisure reading online. Has this changed in the last few years? Is it significantly different among teens versus the adult readers of the Pew study? The Kaiser Family Foundation has conducted similar research to the Pew studies, which was published in the report, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8 to 18 Year Olds*. As reading research shows that men and women have distinctly different interests in reading genres and reading habits, using the case studies will be used to gain deeper understanding of individual and representative participants in the study. When we read texts in our own language, we frequently have a good idea of the content before we actually read. Book covers give us a hint of what's in the book, photographs and headlines hint at what articles are about and reports look like reports before we read a single word. The moment we get this hint - the book cover, the headline, the word-processed page - our brain starts predicting what we are going to read.