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Children's Choices Through the Years: Some Surprising Results

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It's difficult to ignore all the recent teacher talk about the importance of helping our students become adept users of nonfiction texts. With this rising interest and attention being focused on nonfiction books, spurred by the adoption of Common Core Standards, we decided to look at the Children's Choices finalists over the last ten years to determine if there was a connection to what *children* liked to read. We were especially curious about how many of the award winning books selected by children were actually nonfiction. Given our findings, we also decided to investigate further by analyzing all the publishers' title submissions over the same ten years to determine the ratio of fiction to nonfiction titles. In this article, we begin by providing readers with an overview of IRA's Children's Choices Project and a review of studies focused on the use of nonfiction books in elementary school instruction and classroom libraries. We then will share with you what we consider to be very interesting and somewhat telling findings based on our investigation.

What Is "Children's Choices?"

In 1974, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the Children's Book Council (CBC) teamed up to begin an annual project called Children's Choices. Each year, five sites from regionally diverse areas of the United States are selected to participate, with approximately 10,000 children in grades K-6 reading and voting on their favorite books. The result is a list of their (approximately) 100 favorite books, all of which are donated by U.S. children's book publishers for the project. The books, when distributed by the publishers, are pre-categorized as Beginning Readers (Gr. K-2), Young Readers (Gr. 3-4), and Advanced Readers (Gr. 5-6) and distributed accordingly. The goals for the project, as stated on IRA's website, are to:

- Provide young readers with an opportunity to voice their opinions about the books written for them.
- Develop an annual annotated reading list of new books that young readers enjoy reading.
- Assist teachers, librarians, booksellers, parents, and others to find books that will encourage young readers to read more.

At each site the main task for teachers is to make the books accessible to the children and to encourage them to vote in one of three ways: really liked, liked, or did not like. Each vote is weighted from 3 to 1, with 3 points awarded to books that were "really liked." Students are asked to cast a ballot on every book they read from the collection. The voting takes place over a five and half month period. Teachers are asked not to single out a book and use it as a read-aloud unless a student brings an unsolicited book to them and asks them to read the book to the class. Teachers play a big role in circulating the books among the students and classrooms participating, providing time for students to read the books and ensuring that kids are taking time to cast a ballot. Votes are tallied and collected at each site and ultimately submitted to the Children's Book Council whose staff combines and tabulates the totals across the five sites to determine the books earning the most points. Each year's winning results, which consist of books published in the prior year, are available on the International Reading Association's website at:
<http://www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/ChildrensChoices.aspx>

Through our experience as site coordinators and teacher participants of the project, the excitement and reading frenzy that takes place for five and one half months is the type of reaction teachers dream of happening in their classrooms. Participating students eagerly await the arrival of the new books, which disappear from the boxes and into their hands as quickly as their teachers can organize a fair selection process. (See the above link for more about the process and application information).

Use & Presence of Nonfiction in the Classroom

As Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) come into play in many States there has been a call for more nonfiction in the classrooms. This shift in reading materials has resulted in a closer look at numerous articles and attention being given to the skills needed to read nonfiction texts, as well as their general use in the classroom (e.g., Doiron, 2003; Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney & Choi, 2010; Ness, 2011; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Young, T.A., Moss, B., & Cornwell, L., 2007). These various studies consistently revealed scant instructional attention being paid to nonfiction texts within the classroom, with Duke's earlier study (2000) raising the alarm that only 3.6 minutes per day, on average, were given to the reading of informational text in the first grade classrooms she investigated. In a study that followed Duke's protocols, but ten years later, Jeong, et al. (2010) found even more discouraging news in that only 1 minute, on average, was spent daily on instructional time with informational books in grade 2, but had risen to 16 minutes in grades 3 and 4. It must be noted, however, that the most common instructional activities with informational text had to do with reading to complete a worksheet and to conduct round-robin reading. The astounding low numbers from Duke's (2000) study prompted additional investigations, especially given the Common Core Standards' emphasis on nonfiction reading. Ness's (2011) more recent investigation of 318 teachers across six states found the average time spent on interaction with nonfiction texts in the K-5 classrooms studied rose to nearly 32 minutes per day and the classroom libraries in this study contained, on average, about 33% informational texts. It must be noted, however, that this was a survey study, consisting of self-reported data; chances are that had the researchers followed up with classroom observations, as Duke did, the numbers might not be so high.

Not only have various studies indicated little time is spent on intentional and purposeful instruction and navigating of nonfiction texts in the classroom, but classroom libraries also reflect a lack of nonfiction titles available to their students (Kletzien, 2004; Ness, 2011). Teachers often purchase or acquire fiction titles for their classroom libraries and perhaps assume the school library will provide nonfiction; however, school library resources tend to be scant in schools serving a low-income population (Neuman & Celano, 2001). A closer look at the school library collection of nonfiction titles is also limited in ratio to the overall school population. Duke (2000) found that the percentage of informational texts found in classroom libraries ranged from 0.06% (in a low SES school) to 25% (in a high SES school). In addition, classroom libraries tend to reflect a lack of nonfiction titles available to their students (Kletzien, 2004). Doiron's (1995) early study of classroom libraries found that over 85% of the books in elementary classrooms were paperback novels teachers had purchased from book clubs and book fairs. Later, Doiron (2003) conducted a 3-year study of school library circulation records and found that over two-thirds of the information books that circulated were checked out by boys, with total circulation records indicating a ratio of 60% fiction to 40% nonfiction checked out by both genders. This study alone indicates children's strong interest in nonfiction material; our look at Children's Choices finalists over the years lends additional confirmation - and a few lingering questions - about children's reading preferences.

Methodology

For this investigation we looked at all the titles submitted for Children's Choices by the publishers over the past ten years, a total of 5,924 books. As co-investigators, we divvied up the lists and went through them title by title to determine if they were fiction or nonfiction. In addition to standard nonfiction, we included biographies, any alphabet books that were truly informational as opposed to recreational, such as Dereck and Beverly Joubert's *African Animal Alphabet* (2011), and we included how-to books such as *Thanksgiving Day Crafts* (2005) by Arlene Erlbach. In this way, our analysis of the titles paralleled Williams' (2009) framework for classifying the content of texts as narrative nonfiction, expository, and hybrid, all of which are "fact-based texts" (p. 252). On any title for which we were unsure about its designation, we used a variety of methods to establish if it was truly nonfiction. We consulted the "Look Inside" option often available through online book sellers to see if the copyright page was featured in order to determine if there was a suggested call number or subject heading that designated it nonfiction,

such as “Juvenile Literature;” and, when possible, we read portions of the text if it was available digitally. We also consulted professional book reviews for clues as to its designation, and, in extreme cases, we consulted WorldCat to see how regional libraries catalogued a book. Each book list was checked twice by two different members of the team. We used the same criteria throughout as we looked at the Children’s Choice winners from 2004 to 2013.

Referencing both collections of titles – the total submitted by the publishers and the actual winners each year - we tabulated the number of fiction vs. nonfiction. We used descriptive statistical methods to arrive at the percentage of nonfiction submissions from the total submissions (Table 1), the percentage of nonfiction winners from the total number of Children’s Choice winners (Table 2), and the percentage of nonfiction winners relative to the number of nonfiction submissions (Table 3). The analysis of these two tables are discussed in our findings section. Additionally, we prepared three graphs that show our findings in a variety of ways. Graph 1 compares the total number of nonfiction submissions to the number of nonfiction winners; Graph 2 indicates the percentage of nonfiction submissions by grade categories; and, Graph 3 shows the reader the percentage of winning nonfiction by grade categories. Each table and graph gives the reader a slightly different view of the data, which we will explain in the next section, Findings.

Table 1: Total Number of Nonfiction Submissions per Year

Year	No. of Submissions	No. of Nonfiction Submissions	Percentage of Nonfiction
2013	589	75	13%
2012	677	57	8%
2011	706	86	12%
2010	552	72	13%
2009	591	97	16%
2008	514	117	23%
2007	639	85	13%
2006	534	73	14%
2005	471	78	16%
2004	651	117	18%

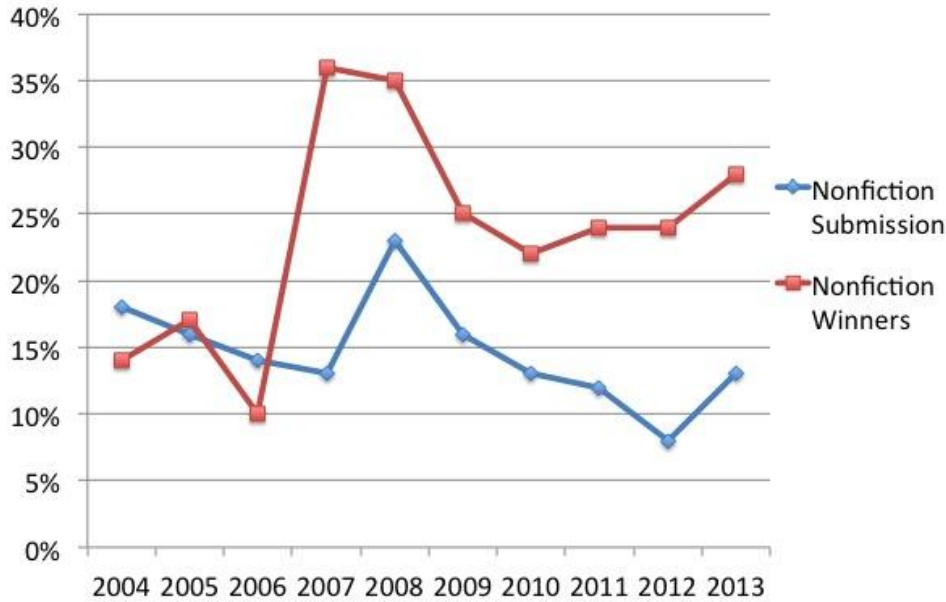
Table 2: Percentage of Children's Choice Nonfiction Winners

Year	No. of Winners	No. of Nonfiction Winners	Percentage of Nonfiction
2013	96	26	27%
2012	85	20	24%
2011	85	20	24%
2010	91	20	22%
2009	97	24	25%
2008	92	32	35%
2007	99	36	36%
2006	96	10	10%
2005	103	18	17%
2004	99	14	14%

Findings

When we tabulated the nonfiction totals from all the submissions and compared them to the percentage of nonfiction winners, we found some surprising results. Of the 5,924 books submitted by the publishers over the past ten years only 857 books, or 14%, were nonfiction (Table 1). For each of the individual years, the percentages of nonfiction choices were quite low, with 2012 being the year in which students were given the fewest number of nonfiction books (8%) to read and rate. In 2008 students were given the largest percentage of nonfiction titles to read and rate (23%) and that is the same year in which the total number of winning nonfiction titles is highest (35%) (Table 2). Surprisingly, even though 2012 had a low number of nonfiction submissions, the number of winning titles was on par with other years that had a higher percentage of submissions (see Graph 1).

Looking more closely at the number of winning nonfiction books from each year in Graph 1, you can see a steady rise, from 14% in 2004 to a dramatic 36% in 2007, with the exception of 2006. Beginning in 2007, the percentage of nonfiction titles acquiring Children's Choice distinction remains above 20%.



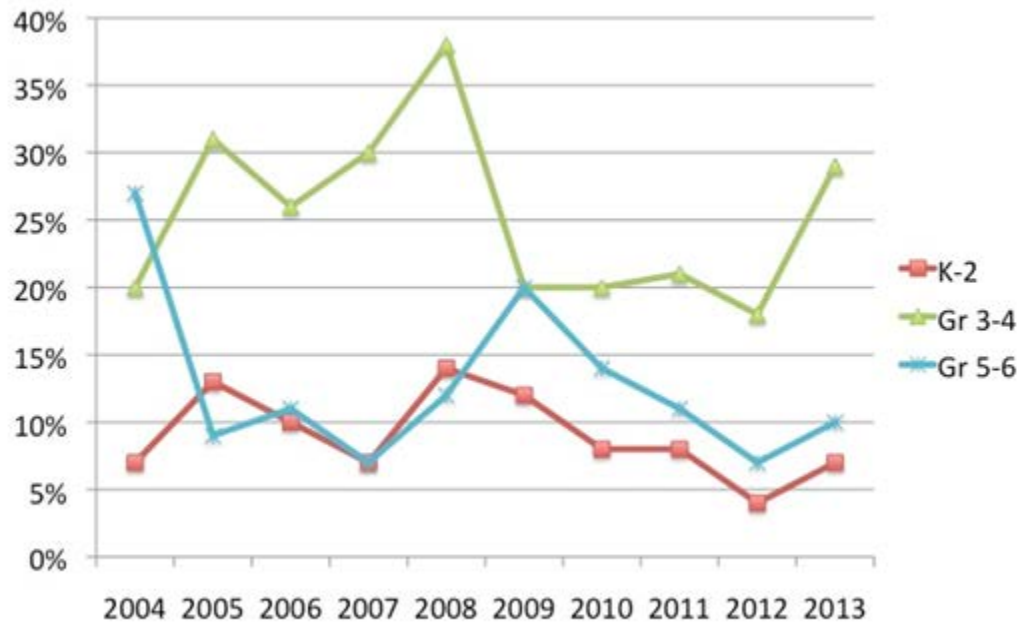
Graph 1: Percentage of Nonfiction Submissions and Winners

Table 3 represents the 857 Children’s Choice winners over ten years, showing that 210 of the winning books selected were nonfiction. An overall yearly average of 25% of the winning books selected were nonfiction. From the year 2007 forward, the average number of winners rises to 29%. The last two years showed a significant rise in the percentage of winners to 35%.

Table 3: Percentage of Nonfiction Submissions That Won:

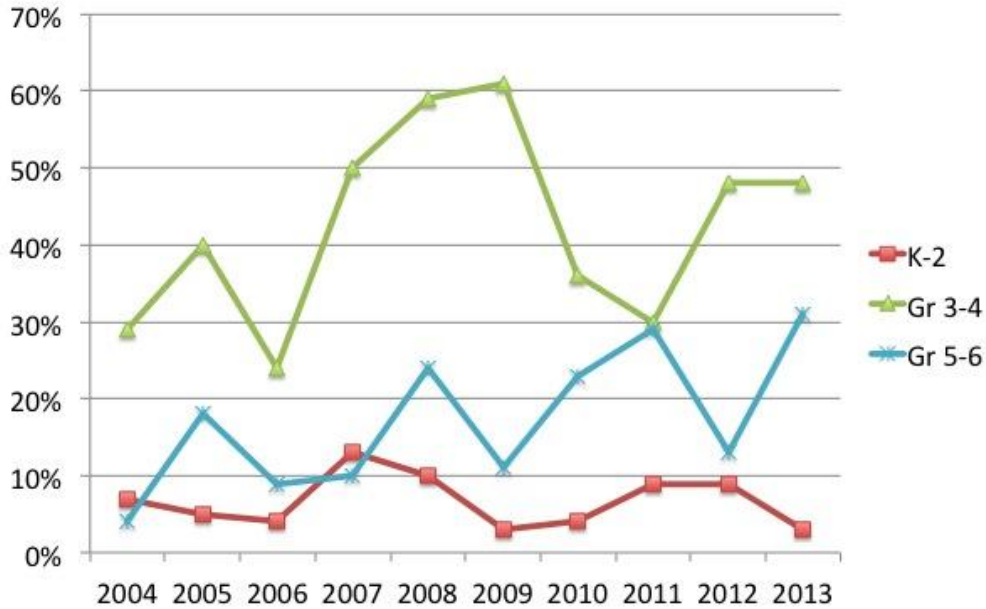
Year	No. of Nonfiction Submissions	No. of Nonfiction Winners	Percentage
2013	75	26	35%
2012	57	20	35%
2011	86	20	23%
2010	72	20	28%
2009	97	24	25%
2008	117	32	27%
2007	85	26	31%
2006	73	10	14%
2005	78	18	23%
2004	117	14	12%

Graph 2 represents the percentage of nonfiction submissions for each group of readers, (Grades K-2, 3-4, 5-6). With the exception of the year 2004 more submissions have consistently been available for the Young Readers Group (grades 3-4). In both the Beginning and Advanced groups, publishers submitted far fewer nonfiction titles for those ranges; in 2012 as little as 4% of the total number of books submitted for the Beginning Readers were nonfiction.



Graph 2: Percentage of Nonfiction Submissions by Grade Category

Graph 3 represents the percentage of nonfiction winners. Over the ten year span, the Young Readers group (grades 3-4) showed a clear appreciation for nonfiction, selecting more than 50% nonfiction titles as winners in three of the ten years. The overall average of K-2/Beginning Reader winners is 9% and consistently below 10% with the exception of 2007 and 2008. With the Advanced/5-6 winners, the percentage fluctuated between 10% and 30%.



Graph 3: Percentage of Winning Nonfiction by Grade Category

Discussion

We came to several conclusions, based on the results of our investigation. It appears children, especially those at the “Young Reader” level (Grs. 3-4), have had a steady interest in nonfiction all along. It’s curious, though, that publishers have underrepresented nonfiction submissions in the annual Children’s Choice book options. Over the ten years, only 243 out of 2,793 titles (9%) submitted for Beginning Readers to evaluate, are nonfiction. We are left to wonder if children would choose more nonfiction winners if there were more titles from which to choose. Clearly, when 80-90% of the books submitted are fiction, the winners will represent that uneven weight as well. We can speculate about the dearth of nonfiction submissions from the publishers, the first of which is perhaps that nonfiction books, at least at the Beginning Reader level, may not be plentiful.

For the young, beginning readers, there is the on-going challenge of providing the right amount of information about and technical terms for a topic without overwhelming children who may not have much background information or experience. Still, studies have shown K-2 children to be quite attracted to and interested in the wealth of topics offered in informational texts (Casswell & Duke, 1998; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Read, 2005; Young & Moss, 2006), and even if the text or concept load of a text is too difficult, children will still be attracted to a nonfiction text if there is an abundance of attractive visual elements, such as photographs, and the topic is of interest to the individual child (Palmer and Stewart, 2003). Duke’s et al. (2013) most recent study that investigated how well young children from Pre-K through 3rd grade perceive eight specific features of graphical text, such as whether or not a graphic fits appropriately with the text (Relevance), and if the graphic shows more information than the text (Extension), indicates to educators and researchers just how much we take for granted about children’s perceptions and understandings of visual material offered in nonfiction texts. So, even though children may be attracted to the visual information provided in informational books, they may not understand its significance. Balancing all these factors is the challenge for writers of informational texts for young readers. These are not so much the issues with the Advanced Readers category, so we are puzzled by why nonfiction submissions are so underrepresented at this level as well.

For decades, we have often referred to a child’s early school years as the time when they “Learn to read,” while in later years they, “Read to learn.” Children’s interest in nonfiction materials indicate they can and do read to learn from an early age, especially if the material is on a topic about which they take an interest, but children do not

automatically notice or understand the relevance or purpose of nonfiction text features. We teachers need to focus more instruction on the text features - and their purposes - found in most nonfiction and informational texts. Just three sample informational text skills articulated in the Core Standards for 2nd grade demonstrate this need:

- Know and use various text features (e.g. captions, bold print, subheadings, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text efficiently.
- Explain how specific images (e.g., a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.
- Describe how reasons support specific points the author makes in a text (2010, p. 13).

These three skills alone indicate the importance being placed on the specific skills associated with comprehending and using nonfiction texts throughout the grades, since basic concepts related to reading and understanding informational text begin in kindergarten and continue on through the grades with ever greater complexity. Even if you live and teach in a state that has not adopted Common Core Standards, the imperative to help children become competent users of nonfiction materials remains. We urge all teachers to have a steady supply of nonfiction books and encourage them to consider using nonfiction books to teach reading.

Based on our 60+ collective years of teaching reading we have noticed that the profession often measures reading success in the primary grades by the individual student's ability to read picture books and then transition into beginning chapter books such as the *Magic Treehouse Series*. As we move up in grade level the profession often measures reading success by students' ability to read and comprehend more complex narrative chapter books. We have overlooked nonfiction books in this narrow view of reading success. Teachers may not realize that many children, if given a choice, will gravitate toward nonfiction books. Nonfiction also does not fit neatly into all the activities associated with book reports, booktalks or read alouds. It seems clear to us that we teachers underestimate the power of nonfiction in the reading process.

Further research could look more closely at the impact of Common Core on the increased awareness of nonfiction. What characteristics of nonfiction books do children find the most appealing? More studies on teacher use of nonfiction are needed as well as a closer look at the impacts on reading development that using nonfiction as the primary text might yield. Site-based studies that investigate children's interactions with each other regarding the Children's Choice submissions could yield valuable insights into the features and qualities children find most alluring about the books they favor; conversely, such studies could also reveal what children find off-putting, difficult, or unappealing.

Conclusion

Clearly children have demonstrated an interest in reading and interacting with nonfiction and informational texts. Though publishers are taking heed of the demands for nonfiction to meet the emphasis the Common Core State Standards are placing on informational text (Rosen, 2013), it remains to be seen if they will also ramp up the number of nonfiction submissions for children to judge via the Children's Choices selection process. We hope publishers do and we especially hope teachers and librarians will continue to promote nonfiction in their schools and libraries. And, we especially hope that teachers will increase their inclusion of and attention to nonfiction texts in the daily school lives of their students. For lists of outstanding nonfiction books for children, see Children's Nonfiction Book Awards, below.

***Children's Nonfiction Book Awards** (as derived from each organizations' websites):

*See each web link for each award's lists of annual winners

Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: Honors outstanding children's and young adult literature in three categories: Picture Book, Fiction and Poetry, and nonfiction. Two Honor Books may be named in each category. On occasion, a book will receive a special citation for its high quality and overall creative excellence. The winning titles must be published in the United States but they may be written or illustrated by citizens of any country. The awards are chosen by an independent panel of three judges who are annually appointed by the Editor of the *Horn Book*.
<http://archive.hbook.com/bghb/past/past.asp>

Children's Book Guild nonfiction Award: Honors an author or author-illustrator whose total work has contributed significantly to the quality of nonfiction for children. nonfiction is written or illustrated work which arranges and interprets documentable facts intended to illuminate, without imaginative invention, the following fields of knowledge: science, technology, social science, history, biography, and the arts.
<http://www.childrensbookguild.org/>

Orbis Pictus Award: Promotes and recognizes excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children. The name Orbis Pictus, commemorates the work of Johannes Amos Comenius, *Orbis Pictus—The World in Pictures* (1657), considered to be the first book actually planned for children. The annual award is sponsored by NCTE and includes up to 5 Honor books, as well as an additional list of highly recommended nonfiction books published in the last year.
<http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus>

Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal: Awarded annually to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished informational book published in the United States in English during the preceding year. The award is named in honor of Robert F. Sibert, the long-time President of Bound to Stay Bound Books, Inc. of Jacksonville, Illinois. Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) administers the award.
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibertmedal>

AAAS/Subaru SB&F Prizes for Excellence in Science Books: Celebrates outstanding science writing and illustration for children and young adults. The prizes are meant to encourage the writing and publishing of high-quality science books for all age groups. AAAS believes that, through good science books, this generation, and the next, will have a better understanding and appreciation of science.
<http://www.sbsonline.com/Subaru/Pages/PrizesHome.aspx>

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