Nonfiction is not another name for fiction:
The co-construction of nonfiction in a primary classroom

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2016

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to analyze one 2nd grade teacher’s instructional practices as she helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre.

Research was conducted over the course of 14 weeks with 22 students and one teacher. Data were collected from videos of large and small group instruction; videos of the students working together; and pre- and post- interviews of the teacher and students. In addition, field notes and student work were also part of the data corpus. The major findings of the study include:

1) The teacher taught nonfiction in four ways in order to help her students co-construct an understanding of the genre. She taught nonfiction through text features, content, linking fiction and nonfiction, and the process of creating nonfiction books.

2) When selecting nonfiction books for her students, the teacher considered four criteria as important characteristics of the genre to consider. She asked if the book was nonfiction, adhering to the definition we had created, “Nonfiction contains factual information about the world in which nothing is made up.” The other three criteria were aesthetics, organization and style, and text consideration.

3) The teacher’s close observations of her students’ misunderstandings caused her to change her instruction. She changed her instructional practices in response to
students not understanding the function of text features and having trouble
differentiating between fiction and nonfiction. In addition, she began to study the
complexity and, what she referred to as, the consideration of nonfiction books
when her students had difficulty reading the complex books in the class. As a
result, she changed her instruction by including more considerate nonfiction
books and even worked with her students to help them understand what makes a
nonfiction book considerate.
Acknowledgments

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” Helen Keller

This entire endeavor, from my first day in orientation at Ohio State to this process of dissertating, has been accomplished because of the people in my life who have reminded me of the importance of community in accomplishing big goals.

Pat Scharer, you swooped in to help me out when I needed it most. In the midst of a process that, at times, seemed foreign your scholarly, academic, and personal advice helped me find my way. I am a better scholar because of you. Laurie Katz, Mollie Blackburn, and Barbara Kiefer, the rest of my committee, you have been incredibly generous with your support and time. Thank you for providing feedback, giving out advice, and being references through the job process.

Mrs. Kona, I am incredibly blessed by the circumstances in which I met you because not only did you kindly offer your classroom for multiple research opportunities, welcome my questions and discussions about books, reading, and literacy, provide a welcoming environment for collaboration, but, most importantly, extended a hand in friendship these past four years. My graduate school experience is so firmly rooted in the opportunities I had in your classroom, and I thank you for your incredible support and graciousness in allowing me into your class to share in the amazing learning experiences and environment your created. Thank you for letting me be a teacher alongside you.
Melissa and Bruce, I didn’t realize how much I was longing for a Columbus family till I met you two. Beyond the travel adventures, Sunday night dinners, unending technical support, paper editing prowess, and level-headed advice you provided a space-both physical and emotional-where I was able to relax, feel loved, and restored. You were vital to my survival of the program. Thank you.

CBC, who knew returning a library book could be such a blessing? I had never truly understood the power and love of a church family until I came here. Thank you for allowing me to cry in your kitchens, sleep at your homes, share your meals, and for reminding me, in various ways, how I can do this because of Christ’s strength in me.

It took moving away from friends to realize the gifts I have in several close friendships across the country: Amanda, Laura, Sara, Jinny, Mary, Charli, Trisha, Meredith, and many others. They formed my own personal cheerleading squad as I went through the program. Thank you for the daily reminders that kept me on track, the hilarious cards and gifts, the steady stream of texts and love, the Face Time chats, and, mostly, the honor of being your friend.

My fellow Academic Goddesses, you are amazing and I love you. Thank you for providing accountability, encouragement, and laughter.

And, for Ashley and Joe, for being my people. There are not enough words and time to express what you have meant to me during this journey. I can’t wait to see where next we travel. Thank you.

I come from a family of driven, accomplished, courageous people, who dare to do big things. What a history! The support and encouragement I had from my family
members—brother, sister-in-law, grandmothers, and aunts—helped pave the way for me to carry on the family legacy.

There are not enough words to describe the role my parents have had in my life and subsequent dissertation work. When I first broached the idea of leaving a paying job I loved for a year of uncertainty and no pay check, they said okay, helped me move, and as they got ready to leave, held me in my tiny 300 square foot apartment as I cried and wondered what in the heck I had done. This scene was replicated multiple times through the years. The apartments have changed but the unwavering support, hugs, tough love, weekly letters, prayers, and guidance has not. They have been my anchors in the storm of the past four years. Anything I have accomplished can be traced back to my parents and the roots of support they established early on in my life. So, Mom and Dad, thank you. I am so incredibly blessed to have two such loving, authentic, and giving people as my parents. Thank you so much.
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Publications

Kersten, S. (2016). Nonfiction is not just a fancy name for fiction: Reading and writing nonfiction

        in a second-grade classroom. In D. Bloome & M. Wilson (Eds.), Curiosity, Complexity,


**Fields of Study**

Major Field: Education Teaching & Learning
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is Reading time, and students sit in pairs, huddled around groups of books. Some sit at their tables, others lay on their stomachs on the floor with feet in the air, and some squish together in the red chair in the corner. All grip books firmly in their hands and take turns reading. Two girls get up and walk to one of the many bookshelves stationed around the room and whisper back and forth about which book they want to select. Another boy looks up at a large piece of chart paper taped to the blackboard and moves his lips as he reads the expectations of being an active reader. Students select pencils, markers, and highlighters from the little red buckets scattered around the classroom. The teacher wanders around, frequently bending over the students, asking them about the books they are reading, at times leading them to the book cart and finding a book they may enjoy. There is a general buzz of productivity and excitement around the room. One student, Niki, comes up to me, smiles, and shyly says, “I’m having so much fun.”

The books that Niki (all names are pseudonyms) and her classmates in Mrs. Kona’s 2nd grade classroom at Gooseberry Park Elementary School are reading are nonfiction books about tornadoes, rainstorms, blizzards, and sunshine. This is in contrast to reading instruction in most elementary classrooms which tends to focus on fiction literature (Duke, 2000). Moving away from common misconceptions about nonfiction and misuses of the genre (Colman, 1999, 2007; Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002; Shine & Roser, 1999), Mrs. Kona changed the way she thought of nonfiction—boring, too hard
for primary children, aesthetically bland, and only useful for content area study—and brought the books into her classroom, where she incorporated parts of the science curriculum with components of her reading and writing instruction. This change in her thought process and instructional methods around nonfiction literature was encouraged and supported by the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (Boulard, 2010; Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012; Greene, 2012; Maloch & Bomer, 2013a; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012; Neuman & Gambrell, 2013).

**Background of the Study**

There has been an increased interest in the use of nonfiction books in the elementary classroom. This has been preempted by the recent push from state and national educational standards calling for a massive reform in what children are being expected to read and know. The goal of the recent Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is to prepare students to be international competitors in college and for their future careers by increasing their knowledge about the natural, physical, and social world (Greene, 2012). In order to accomplish this goal, the CCSS are asking for a marked increase in the use of nonfiction texts in the elementary classrooms. By the time students enter the fourth grade, their exposure to literacy should be 50% nonfiction and 50% fiction. The further use of fiction will continue to decrease so that by twelfth grade, students will be reading from 70% nonfiction text and only 30% fiction text (Greene, 2012; Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012). Given these expectations, teachers are being asked to teach a genre that has long been ignored in the elementary classroom (Colman, 2007; Duke, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Pappas, 1991). Specifically, because of this lack of
understanding about nonfiction, teachers have been found to stay away from and not use nonfiction in their classrooms (Tower, 2000).

When Duke (2000) studied several classrooms in both urban and suburban school environments she not only looked at the use of nonfiction books but also at visual print in the classroom, for example, bulletin boards, anchor charts, signs, and available books to determine the many ways in which the children were exposed to nonfiction. She discovered children were exposed to nonfiction on average 3.6 minutes a day, and this was even less in urban environments (Duke, 2000). I will describe this study in more detail in Chapter Two. Subsequent research continued to report that elementary teachers do not share, introduce, or display nonfiction books in their classrooms, resulting in a significant lack of nonfiction literature in elementary classrooms (Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).

Some of the research done on teachers who use nonfiction in their classrooms shows that teachers are confused on how to use nonfiction and, at times, confuse the purpose of fiction and nonfiction, using them in place of each other, as in Rice’s (2002) study where teachers used the fictional *Dear Mr. Blueberry* (James, 1991) as a nonfiction text on whales. Donovan and Smolkin (2001) discovered that teachers frequently selected books for content area study based on appeal, developmental appropriateness, and whether or not the book would be enjoyable instead of looking at the accuracy of the factual content. Books that have been chosen for science instruction on life cycles and insects, such as *The Tiny Seed* (Carle, 2009) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1994), contain very little factual information and are actually fiction books (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001).
What happens when elementary teachers, trying to address the CCSS’s increasing expectations in regards to nonfiction literature, select and teach with nonfiction books in their classrooms where nonfiction has long been ignored or misused? Palmer and Stewart (2003) studied the use of nonfiction tradebooks in primary classrooms and discovered that nonfiction was only used during the occasional teacher read aloud, and when students were given an opportunity to select nonfiction books they were choosing texts that were not at their reading level. Teachers may be choosing fiction over nonfiction books because they may not have an understanding of what constitutes a nonfiction book (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002). Consequently, teachers need to increase their knowledge about nonfiction books, including how to select, use, and teach from them (Palmer & Stewart, 2003).

**Defining Nonfiction**

The genre is largely missing from the elementary curriculum because the term itself is confusing for teachers and educators (Colman, 2007). Nonfiction is the term readily used in adult literature; however, in children’s literature it is more complicated. There are multiple definitions and misconceptions about nonfiction, and these confusion have adversely affected classroom practices (Colman, 2007; Doiron, 1994; Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). Understanding and being able to answer the question, “What is nonfiction?” may help teachers as they select nonfiction books for use in their classroom. In this study I use the term “nonfiction,” but in this review and description of the research on nonfiction literature, I maintain the term used by each researcher in order to represent their beliefs and frameworks.
**Genre.** Text is defined as any “meaningful stretch of language—oral or written” (Derewianka, 1990, p. 17). When considering the genre of the text, the reader focuses on how the text structure and text characteristics are used to achieve a purpose: to inform, to entertain, to argue, or even to explore (Derewianka, 1990). Writers use various linguistic and structural techniques to clearly convey their messages. Text features, language patterns, the form of the texts, and structures are all used to communicate “various communicative goals,” (Pappas & Pettegrew, 1998, p. 36) and differ from genre to genre (Donovan, 2001; Maloch & Bomer, 2013b). The genre and purpose of a text, while not synonymous, are intertwined in order to create a text for a specific audience (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Two broad categories of genre include fiction and nonfiction, and both have different structural patterns (Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005). The purpose of fiction, as a genre, is typically to tell a story, and there are many forms that are used for this purpose. The genre of nonfiction informs, explains, describes, or persuades the reader about a topic through factual information (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Factual genres, in particular, are defined by their schematic structure, features, and purposes (Maloch & Bomer, 2013; Pappas & Pettegrew, 1998). Again, there are many forms of nonfiction, all serving a different purpose. For the sake of this paper, I will rely on Fountas and Pinnell’s (2012) definition of genre as “any type or kind of literary or artistic work or a class of artistic endeavor that has a characteristic form or technique, including music, drama, and studio arts” (p. 2).

**Nonfiction as literature.** Nonfiction is literature. Kiefer (2010) defines literature “as the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language” (p. 5). Nonfiction writers must utilize the same techniques as fiction writers to craft an
accurate, organized, and engaging story. Techniques such as sources, form, structure, style, and research are considered when crafting a piece of literature (Colman, 2007). In fact, McClure (2003), points out that figurative language, emotional involvement, and conclusions help nonfiction “go beyond facts to present eloquent, informed, and well-crafted discussion” (p. 79). The writing style of a book, whether fiction or nonfiction, is what draws readers inside the text, and in nonfiction, information should be presented in a way that helps students read, process, understand, and enjoy the text (Colman, 2007; McClure, 2003). When nonfiction is organized coherently in a way that helps the reader understand the content, it also is “designed to give pleasure, and enlightenment, to arouse wonder” (Kiefer & Wilson, 2011, p. 291).

While many researchers agree that nonfiction is literature, focusing on true information, the difficulty lies in knowing what term to use to describe the wide range of books on the real world that uses real information and facts. I will briefly describe the multiple definitions and difficulties in clarifying the term. I will then end with an explanation of the term and definition that I chose and was used by the teacher, students, and myself throughout the entirety of the research study. The chapter will be concluded with a statement of the problem and my research questions.

**Multiple definitions.** Although more nonfiction is being brought into elementary classrooms to address the expectations of the CCSS, currently, the terms used to describe literature about the real world that uses real information and facts are varied. Nonfiction, information text, informational texts, non-narrative, and expository are all terms that are used in some capacity to describe the genre. Some of the terms overlap with each other, and others are conflicting (Colman, 2007; Maloch & Bomer, 2013b). For some
researchers, the various terms are interchangeable and equivalent others use the terms as though they were subgenres of nonfiction (Donovan, 2001; Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Harvey, 2002; Pappas, 1991, 2006; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Knowing which term to use is difficult because of misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding the genre.

Library of Congress. There are two main classification systems for libraries, the Library of Congress and the Dewey Decimal System. I interviewed research librarians at a large public university library and at The Library of Congress to get a better grasp on understanding how children’s nonfiction picturebooks are classified. The Library of Congress uses a classification system that organizes all of its books by letters in the alphabet (D. N. Herring, personal communication, July 9, 2014). However, with children’s literature, the Library of Congress classifies children’s subject headings differently from the standard Library of Congress headings, providing a more thorough and appropriate designation of juvenile titles (J. Young, personal communication, August 6, 2014). Headings used for Children’s Subject Headings use appropriate terminology and differ more in application of the terms. To differentiate between fiction and nonfiction texts, the Children’s Subject Headings use the terms fiction and juvenile literature. There is no clear documentation on why the terminology juvenile literature was chosen instead of nonfiction (J. Young, personal communication, August 6, 2014). It is hypothesized that the term was chosen to make a distinction between adult and child readers of nonfiction (D. N. Herring, personal communication, July 9, 2014) because the term literature is much broader than the genre of fiction. Another classification system, the Dewey Decimal system, organizes its nonfiction books by discipline according to a
numerical system. Confusingly, poetry, plays, folktales, and fairytales are also classified as nonfiction under this system.

**Common Core State Standards.** The CCSS encourages instruction around increasingly complex texts and divides those complex texts into narrative and informational texts (Draper, 2012). The CCSS uses the term “informational text” instead of nonfiction. The purpose of informational texts is to articulate factual information about the arts, sciences, or social studies (Maloch & Bomer, 2013b). The CCSS include as informational texts newspapers, magazines, textbooks, reference books, maps, information presented in graphics, biographies, and autobiographies (Maloch & Bomer, 2013a; Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012). Cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and problem and solution are typical structures of informational texts as described by the CCSS, and the purpose of such informational texts is to persuade, argue, describe, or explain (Draper, 2012). Informational texts have four subtypes: literary nonfiction, exposition, argument or persuasion, and procedural texts (Bamford & Kristo, 2003; Draper, 2012; Maloch & Bomer, 2013a). If the nonfiction text is written as a story to help students learn about the subject matter, the text is considered “literary nonfiction” (Maloch & Bomer, 2013a). However, the term is confusing because “literary nonfiction” also includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memories, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (Morris, 2013). The Common Core State Standards state that literary nonfiction attempts to explain information about the social world while utilizing the characteristics of literature (Maloch & Bomer, 2013b).
**Academic definition of nonfiction.** What Carr (1987) calls the literature of fact, is what some scholars call nonfiction or informational (Colman, 2007; Harvey, 2002; Palmer & Stewart, 2003). In 1972, Sutherland coined the term “informational books,” with Fisher introducing “information books” (as cited in Colman, 2007, p. 258). Colman (2007) credits Sutherland for being the catalyst towards the use of alternate terms to describe the genre known as nonfiction. It is difficult to find a clear definition of the term within the realm of children’s literature, and the explanations of the term are confusing. Even children’s literature textbooks are inconsistent in how they describe nonfiction literature. Kristo, Colman, and Wilson (2008) described a survey of eight children’s literature textbooks and found that three textbooks discussed nonfiction books in a chapter titled “Nonfiction,” while the other five textbooks used the title “Informational Books.” Definitions of the terms were equally as vague, including, “Nonfiction-informational texts are about the way things are” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 128) and “a genre created mainly to inform readers about a particular subject, issue, or idea” (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002, p. 394). The two top awards in children’s literature for nonfiction books use different terminology the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children recognizes excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children (“NCTE Orbis Pictus Award”, n.d.) and the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award awards the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished informational book published for children (“ALA Robert F. Sibert”, n.d.).

Despite the various terms, scholars all seem to agree that nonfiction, or informational texts, are created to inform readers about a topic. The definitions of the terms also have different foci, but deciding whether or not a text is considered informational or nonfiction
is not determined solely by one feature (Duke, 2000). Scholars use multiple terms and definitions, focusing on differences in content and structure in the texts to highlight the wide variety of texts that fall under the category of nonfiction. In this way, some texts may be considered nonfiction but may not be considered informational or expository due to the features, structures, and content of the text.

Some scholars use “nonfiction” as an umbrella term that contains different types of nonfiction. Duke and Kays (1998) distinguish between all three terms: nonfiction, informational, and expository. Information books are a particular genre of expository text and expository texts are a form of nonfiction (Duke & Kays, 1998). Expository texts are defined by their structure, being described as research reports or persuasive essays and can be about science and social studies topics (Duke & Kays, 1998). Information books are a particular genre of expository text and they report and explain facts about the surrounding world (Duke & Kays, 1998). Harvey (2002) and Yopp and Yopp (2006) both state that informational text is a subset of nonfiction.

Even authors of this genre are in disagreement about the terms. Barbara Tuchman (1985) called nonfiction a “despicable” term because “I do not feel like a non-something; I feel quite specific” (Colman, 2007, p. 258). Yet, Colman (1999) is a strong advocate of using the term nonfiction instead of informational. She states that the difficulty in creating a definition for nonfiction focuses on the basic differences between fiction and nonfiction (Colman, 2007). “Both have facts and information. Both can use imagination. Both provide pleasure. As a writer of nonfiction, I cannot make up the material (Colman, 2007, p. 260). Colman (2007) writes:
The typical semantic association adults and youngsters make when they hear the term information books is encyclopedias or textbooks. The term informational book does not readily trigger associations with the variety of nonfiction books—biographies, history, true adventure, science, sports, photographic essays, memoirs, etc.—that are available and accessible for children and young adults and that can be just as compelling, engaging, and beautifully written as good fiction. (p. 2).

Colman (2007) adheres to the term nonfiction, stating that it is “writing about reality (real people, places, events, ideas, feelings, things) in which nothing is made up” (p. 260).

Researchers also pay attention to the structure of the genre in crafting definitions and choosing terms. Pappas (2006) uses the term informational books stating that they are structured by exposition. Informational books must contain at least four structural elements: topic presentation, characteristic events, descriptive attributes, and a final summary (Pappas, 2006). Sanacore (1991) also studies the structure of a text, looking at the introduction, subheadings, graphs, charts, maps, captions, use of a summary, and discussion questions to determine if the text is informational or not.

The use of narration in nonfiction text has been debated. Some scholars define a book as nonfiction or information by virtue of its lack of narration (Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Moss, 2008). Several researchers do not include biographies and narrative nonfiction in their examples of informational text because they contain narrative structures (Pappas, 2006; Yopp & Yopp 2006). Donovan and Smolkin (2002) and Moss (2008) use the term nonfiction to describe texts that are topic oriented and lacking in narration, contrasting these texts with others that use more narrative writing structures.
To make a distinction between nonfiction texts that use narration, such as literary nonfiction, and texts that do not, other scholars employ terms such as nonnarrative informational texts, that clarify the difference (Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002). The differences are confusing. Narration tells a story (Colman, 1999), yet some scholars, in defining informational or nonfiction, claim that these text cannot have narrative structures. Colman (1999) disagrees, stating that narrative does have a role in quality nonfiction literature.

**Literary nonfiction.** Many nonfiction texts employ formatting and writing strategies that are commonly associated with fiction. These books convey information about a true subject matter in a fictionalized story format (Maloch & Bomer, 2013b; Morris, 2013). These texts have been called fraction, hybrid text, creative nonfiction, narrative informational, narrative nonfiction, or literary nonfiction (Colman, 2007, 1999; Duke, 2000; Hesse, 2009; Maloch & Bomer, 2013b; Morris, 2013; Partridge, 2011). In this study, the teacher selected nonfiction books that she felt did not fall under the category of literary nonfiction. However, I feel that these texts need to be explained as early inclusion of these books caused initial confusions for the students, which I will explain in Chapter 4. In addition, the teacher determined a set of criteria for selecting nonfiction that were, in part, informed by qualities of literary nonfiction. Again, I will further explain this criteria and her selection of the books in Chapter 4.

The CCSS use the term literary nonfiction to “include the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts” (Morris, 2013, p. 57). This genre, according to the
CCSS, uses characteristics of literature to explain information about the real world (Maloch & Bomer, 2013a). Hesse (2009) focuses on the writing style of these texts, saying that creative nonfiction is “writing that is ‘true,’ grounded in reality but aesthetically rich, factual writing meant to be savored rather than simply exhumed or endured” (p. 18).

However, Partridge (2011), believes that the term creative nonfiction is misleading because authors of this genre “don’t create anything that isn’t there already” (p. 70). They instead use the techniques of fiction writing: plot, character development, voice, and theme to give the content emotional meaning, all “without making anything up” (Partridge, 2011, p. 70). Kirby and Kirby (2010) extend this idea when they state,

What distinguished these writings from conventional factual/information text was that they were not only well-researched accounts of real events or experiences but also artful narratives. They employed literary techniques… including using distinguishable first person voice, posing questions, and often injecting uncertainties and ruminations into their factual voice (p. 39).

The difficulty lies in deciding what literary nonfiction is. The CCSS state that biographies and memoirs, personal essays, opinion pieces, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts are literary nonfiction (Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012). This blending of fiction and nonfiction elements makes hybrid books difficult for young children because although they are classified as nonfiction, they still use the conventions of fiction (Colman, 2007).

**The definition for this study.** For this study, I will be borrowing Colman’s (1999, 2007) choice of word nonfiction, to use when describing a specific genre of books.
I agree with Colman (2007), that the terms information and informational books do possess a negative connotation, causing readers to think of dry, formulaic textbooks or encyclopedias. The term informational and information texts misinforms children about the nature and purpose of nonfiction because fictional texts can contain information (Kristo, Colman, & Wilson, 2008). Students need to understand that the differences between fiction and nonfiction go beyond writing style and informational content (Kristo, Colman, & Wilson, 2008).

Nonfiction, because of its prefix, makes a distinction by claiming what it is in comparison to fiction. It is not fiction; it is nonfiction. The content of nonfiction is not made up (Colman, 2007). It is “Non not true” (Rosenthal, 2006, n.p.). “Nonfiction is everywhere. It is the stuff of everyday life” (Colman, 2007, p. 4). Children’s book author Tomie dePaola succinctly states, “Nonfiction. Why don’t we just call it Life?” (as cited in Kristo, Colman, Wilson, 2008, p. 342). This does not mean the information cannot be presented in a narrative way because as Fritz (2001) states, “The art of fiction is making up facts; the art of nonfiction is using facts to make up a form” (p. 759). The information in nonfiction needs to be presented in a way that is compelling and memorable to its readers.

Freedman (1992) argues:

Certainly the basic purpose of nonfiction is to inform, to instruct, hopefully to enlighten. But that’s not enough. An effective nonfiction book must animate its subject, infuse it with life. It must create a vivid and believable world that the reader will enter willingly and leave only with reluctance. A good nonfiction book should be a pleasure to read. (p. 3)
The story cannot stray from the facts; however, writers of nonfiction can use the same narrative techniques traditionally associated with fiction. Narrative does have a place in nonfiction. Rosenblatt (1991) writes, “Narrative [story] is found not only in novels but also in scientific accounts of geological change or historical accounts of political events or social life” (p. 444). When reading a nonfiction book, children should want to learn more and not feel as if they are being lectured (Fritz, 2001). These authors of nonfiction must be held to a high standard of accuracy, yet they must also capture their readers, pull them into the story and make them care about the hardships and triumphs of the characters, believe the problems presented to them, feel the atmosphere of the setting all with the realization that this story is real and really did happen or is happening. The use of such structures should not confuse the reader or misrepresent the information, thus making it difficult to separate fact from fiction, but instead help clarify factual information and support student comprehension (Bamford & Kristo, 2003). This is where the use of text features such as maps, diagrams, index, appendixes, and author’s notes can further explain and support the information presented within the text (Kerper, 2003).

I believe the same criteria that the Orbis Pictus Award uses to judge nonfiction should be used for all nonfiction. When judging, nonfiction books are to meet criteria for accuracy, organization, design, and style (“NCTE Orbis Pictus”, n.d.). All nonfiction books, not just those being reviewed for the Orbis Pictus Award, should be written in a captivating and sound style, use suitable terminology for both the subject matter and the age of its readers, and arouse the curiosity of its readers (Jensen, 2001). Books being judged for the Robert F. Sibert Informational Award also must be texts that “elucidates, clarifies, and enlivens its subject” (“ALA Robert F. Sibert”, n.d.).
Ultimately, nonfiction should enhance and enrich readers’ understanding about a topic and should do so through a variety of textual features in addition to the main content (Duke, 2000; Duke & Kays, 1998; Harvey, 2002). Maps, charts, graphs, appendixes, table of contents, captions, headings, and other reference sources should be part of a quality nonfiction story. Quality nonfiction should, and does, have strong aesthetic qualities that help explain unfamiliar and difficult facts (Doiron, 1994; Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005). These features present information in a visual manner, providing information that may not fit within the body of the text. The information supplied in the maps, charts, and other graphical features deliver anecdotes to enrich student interest.

In informational texts, Duke (2000) looks to see if the factual content is durable, and I agree that the factual content should be trustworthy and stand up to rigorous tests of verification. Quality nonfiction books should include references and additional sources to show readers that vigorous and thorough research has been conducted to ensure the validity of the content and to support student understanding. These references may be included at the end of the text in an index or author’s note and should reveal that extensive research has been done in creating the content of the text. I acknowledge that the books that Pappas (1991, 1998, 2006) calls informational text contain timeless verbs, relational processes, and co-classification; however, I believe the focus of what nonfiction is and is not should be on the content of the story and how it is presented.

Carr (1987) distinguishes between two types of nonfiction. The first type “stuffs in facts as if kids are vases to be filled” and the second type of nonfiction “ignites the imagination as if children are fires to be lit” (p. 620). What Carr (1987) describes as the
second type of nonfiction are the types of nonfiction books teachers should teach to children. Children should “discover that books can be fun no matter which shelf they live on” (Fritz, 2001, p. 87). Nonfiction is a genre that enhances understanding and communicates factual information about our world through the use of text and other linguistic features such as headings, reference guides, and minor text. I recognize that nonfiction has many names, many structures, many features, and many definitions. I want to choose a definition that children—the audience educators and scholars are trying to help—can understand in multiple contexts. I seek to use terminology and contexts that are easily explained to children. Thus, my definition for my research is that nonfiction conveys factual information about the world in which nothing is made up. Nonfiction focuses on a main theme; carries an expectation of highly researched and accurate factual material; contains graphical elements that organize and convey information and enhances understanding; and presents its topic in a visually attractive and appropriate manner for its intended audience. Nonfiction texts may also employ a narrative style in which to explain information. Therefore, nonfiction books need to meet criteria of content, accuracy, organization, style, and format.

**Nonfiction in a Classroom Context**

Research suggests that in order for students to read more nonfiction, teachers need to provide nonfiction books, opportunities to read nonfiction, and careful instruction around nonfiction. This would suggest that the teacher’s process of selecting and using nonfiction books, as well as her arrangement of space and class materials, would be important aspects of a study that investigated how a teacher co-constructs an understanding of nonfiction literature with her students. The teacher’s instructional
methods and how she responds to her students would influence constructions of nonfiction literature as well.

**Statement of the Problem**

Nonfiction does and should have a place in the classroom. Researchers assert that using nonfiction in the elementary classroom has many benefits, including increasing motivation to read (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Kletzien & Szabo, 1998; Pappas, 1991), improving overall reading comprehension (Guthrie et al., 2000; Hall et al., 2005; McGee, 1982; Smolkin & Donovan, 2000), strengthening writing of informational pieces (Chapman, 1995; Donovan, 2001; Duke, 2000; Pappas, Varelas, Gill, Ortiz, & Keblawe-Shamah, 2009; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000), and helping students acquire a register of scientific discourse (Duke & Kays, 1998; Maloch, 2008; Pappas, 2006; Pappas et al., 2003, 2009). While research shows the affordances of using nonfiction literature in elementary classrooms, there has been additional research revealing that teachers rarely display, read, and instruct with nonfiction children’s literature in elementary classrooms (Duke, 2000). Additionally, when teachers do use nonfiction in the classroom, research shows that teachers use nonfiction incorrectly (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice 2002) and do not feel confident using the genre in their classroom. Moreover, the CCSS’s expectations in regards to nonfiction in elementary classrooms pressures teachers to use more nonfiction in their classrooms.

These expectations from the CCSS along with the gap in the research on instructional practices is why more research is needed on the instructional practices of using nonfiction in the elementary classroom. Thus, this research builds on the idea of how one teacher
confronts the lack of nonfiction in her own classroom, knowing that children can read, understand, and learn from nonfiction and begins to change her own misconceptions and teaching practices to help her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre through quality children’s literature. This is important as it may help other teachers as they begin to make instructional decisions about using nonfiction in their classrooms.

**Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to describe how one teacher co-constructed an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her second grade students. As previously stated, most of the research on nonfiction literature focuses on the lack of nonfiction, the misuse of nonfiction in the classroom, teacher misconceptions, and how children can read and learn from nonfiction. Because there are not many studies that focus on the instructional practices of primary school teachers in regards to nonfiction, there is a need to understand what challenges teachers face when incorporating more nonfiction in their curriculum.

**Research Questions**

I was interested in learning how a second grade teacher approached selecting nonfiction books as she strove to include more nonfiction in her classroom. I was also interested in what challenges she would face in helping her students understand the genre. I aimed to identify different themes about how the teacher taught nonfiction as a genre to her students. Thus, I also sought to examine how the teacher changed her instruction in response to her students’ misunderstandings and confusions.

Three main research questions framed the gathering of the data:
1. How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her second grade students?

2. How does this teacher come to define nonfiction children’s literature with her students?

3. How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitation of this study is that I conducted this research in a single 2nd grade classroom during a single academic term. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized on a larger scale. In order to gain a more complete understanding of how teachers and students construct an understanding of nonfiction, similar studies need to be conducted with more students, classrooms, and schools. Also, the school where I conducted the research was in an affluent middle to upper-class suburb and the socioeconomics of the classroom were not diverse. The school housed an extensive library and the teacher and students had access to an incredible range of nonfiction books, as well as a large computer lab where each child had access to his or her own computer and several subscription-only internet based reading and content area programs, which will be explained in later chapters. The classroom had six computers, a SMARTBoard, audio technology, and a projector; thus, my video cameras were not novelty items for these students. This technology was something they were exposed to throughout the school day. The teacher was also able to bring in outside science programs, procure the materials to conduct several science experiments, and acquire the materials for the students to make and construct their nonfiction books. Parents were strongly involved in each of the students’ lives and most of these children were exposed to literature, both
fiction and nonfiction, at home. I acknowledge that these funds and resources are advantageous, however, it does become a limitation within the scope of educational research as this is not a typical portrayal of many public academic school environments.

In Chapter 3 I further discuss how my role as a researcher with a hearing loss could be seen as a limitation to the study. I know my presence in the classroom affected the environment of the classroom because Mrs. Kona included me in the lesson planning, invited me to participate in various lessons, and had me help out in various capacities throughout the unit.

**Summary**

Although others have researched the role and use of nonfiction in the elementary classroom (Duke, 2000, 2003; Duke, Martineau, Frank, Rowe, and Bennett-Armistead, 2012; Maloch, 2008; Maloch & Horsey, 2013; Moss, 1995; Pappas, 1991, 1993, 1998, 2006; Pappas, Varelas, Barry, & Rife, 2003; Pappas, Varelas, Gill, Ortiz, & Keblawe-Shamah, 2009; Pappas & Varelas, 2009; Smolkin & Dononvan, 2000, 2001; Tower, 2000, 2002; Yopp & Yopp, 2000, 2006) there is a need to better understand how one teacher used nonfiction in her 2nd grade classroom. With state and national standards calling for an increased use of nonfiction in the elementary classrooms, understanding instructional practices with nonfiction children’s literature is needed. This research was a qualitative study of the instructional practices of one teacher in one second grade classroom as she helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction literature.
Organization of the Study

In Chapter Two, I discuss the research that relates to my study. Furthermore, I present my theoretical framework for examining the teacher’s instructional practices with nonfiction children’s literature. The third chapter details the methodology used to collect the data. Chapter Four describes the data and the findings. Chapter Five focuses on the implications of the findings and discusses the implications for future research.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In Chapter One I began to address the need for more research on a teacher’s process in helping her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre. I described how the Common Core State Standards’ expectations of an increased use of nonfiction literature in elementary curriculum has resulted in teachers trying to incorporate more nonfiction into their daily instruction. As a result, there is need for research on teachers’ instructional practices with nonfiction literature in the primary grades.

This chapter begins to lay the groundwork for this study through a description of the theoretical framework followed by a review of the literature. The literature review examines why the CCSS expects teachers to spend 50% of their instructional time with what they call informational texts. It begins by describing the research that makes a case for why nonfiction has a role in elementary classrooms by reviewing research on the dearth of nonfiction in elementary classrooms, misconceptions surrounding nonfiction, and the misuse of the genre in the classroom. I will then explain how children learn from and read nonfiction literature. Finally, I will explain the research describing the academic benefits of using nonfiction in an elementary classroom. This literature review examines studies that suggest the importance of teachers using nonfiction in the elementary classroom, and supports a study on a teacher’s instructional practices as she works to co-construct an understanding of nonfiction with her students. In my study I use the term “nonfiction,” but in this review and description of the research on nonfiction
literature, I maintain the term used by that researcher in order to represent their beliefs and framework.

**Theoretical Framework**

I used social constructivism as the theoretical framework for designing my study. Vygotsky, considered to be the leading proponent of constructivism, argued that learning does not take place solely within our minds, thus knowledge is constructed through one’s interactions and engagement with others and through the environment (Smagorinsky, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, meaning is created through speech as language is an integral part of knowledge and cognitive processing, and the contexts children participate in influence the way they think (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2001, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Within this theoretical framework, I looked at how one teacher learned about nonfiction in the context of her interactions with her students, thus studying the process of how she came about that knowledge and understanding and worked to co-construct it with her students.

In social constructivism, learning is a social process (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Pappas, Kiefer, Levstik, 2006). Learning is not an independent experience but instead is a shared performance between the context and the actions that are mediated via communication with others (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Therefore, not only do students construct knowledge through social interactions but also learn ways of thinking through those communal relationships (Smagorinsky, 2016). Pappas, Kiefer, Levstik (2006) argued that “good learning occurs in children when they are interacting with teachers (and in cooperation with peers)” (p. 56). According to Vygotskian principles, the context of a teacher’s classroom influences how learning happens and is developed, and
understanding is first constructed in a shared environment before it becomes an individualized process. The classroom context can influence understanding, and students can acquire knowledge through sharing experiences with others. As a result, to understand what is being learned, one must account for the classroom environment and culture, as well as the people, their backgrounds, and the various nuances those people bring to that environment.

Because learning happens in social environments, language—what the teacher and students talk about to share understanding—is an important tool in learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Since, in a Vygotskian framework, learning should happen in a shared situation, speech is thus used to share meaning. According to Vygotsky, speech is a tool for thinking and serves two different purposes: designative and expressive (Smagorinsky, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). In the designative function, the spoken or printed word is used to represent—designate—meaning. The second purpose of speech is that meaning is generated through the process of saying or writing those words (Smagorinsky, 2013). Speech, in the forms of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, is then used as an ongoing process towards exploring and questioning ideas instead of looking for a predetermined right answer (Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 2006). In the context of a constructivist classroom, ideas are constructed through the process of speaking, developing knowledge and building cognitive processes (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, Smagorinsky, 2013).

The most common idea associated with social constructivism is Vygotsky’s idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1987), the ZPD is described as “What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do
independently tomorrow” (p. 211). Thus, until the child has mastered the concept, he/she must be supported as the material is learned and understood (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). There are four stages of ZPD:

1. Performance is assisted by a more capable other. This stage transitions to the next stage when the responsibility for scaffolding assistance is given to the learner.

2. Performance is assisted by the self. At this stage, the child is not fully independent but carries out the task with assistance.

3. Performance is “developed, automatized, and fossilized” (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p. 186). At this stage, performance is no longer developing; it is already developed.

4. Performance becomes “deautomatized” when the student is no longer able to perform that skill at a proficient level (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p. 186). As a result, the student must go through the stages of ZPD again in order to regain and automatize those skills.

Yet, the progression through these stages and the relationship between the more capable other and child does not happen in a vacuum. In social constructivism, in order to understand the development that happens within a social context, one must take into account the whole context of learning including the environment and the social world in which the child has grown up (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). As a result, both the teachers and the students in this social context are positioned as learners, because the teacher and the students must engage with each other in order to grow in their understanding.
Learning is not a passive process (Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 2006), and is considered an “appropriation” of knowledge according to social constructivism (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 9). Using social constructivism provides a framework for making sense of how the teacher actively guides and directs her students as they consider the different ways to engage with nonfiction. The classroom context, its social character, and the way the teacher identified areas of student confusion through her observations and consequently, modified and changed her instruction in response to those observations framed the classroom itself as a zone of proximal development. These authentic experiences, both through physical manipulation of the texts and social interaction with the teacher and other students are necessary for helping students construct knowledge (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). According to Vygotsky, authentic experiences are those that allow students to take what they know from their own life, what he referred to as spontaneous concepts, and apply and connect those experiences to what they have learned in school (scientific or academic concepts) (Smagorinsky, 2013).

Therefore, knowing that children learn about print through experiences with it (Clay, 1991; Duke & Kays, 1998; Harste, Burke, Woodward 1984; Purcell-Gates 1995), social constructivism explores the social context of a classroom in order to understand individual learning.

**Literature Review**

Nonfiction literature, long considered the “black sheep” of the literature realm, has recently come in vogue due to its emphasis in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Colman, 2007). As I briefly mentioned in the first chapter, the CCSS are sweeping educational reform standards asking for students to be college and career ready in order
to compete on a global scale (Boulard, 2010; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012; Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). To achieve this goal, the CCSS ask that teachers prepare their students to become independent learners, have a foundation for content area knowledge and comprehension, possess and utilize critical thinking in order to understand other perspectives, and discover and supply evidence in creating multiple interpretations (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). The standards, connected to College and Career Readiness Standards, go beyond reader response and comprehension and expect students to analyze, argue, and interpret in multiple contexts in hopes that American students can be competitive with other students internationally (Boulard, 2010; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012). These standards are integrated across the multiple subject areas, ensuring that every teacher teaches students how to engage in multiple concepts in many different subject area contexts (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). The CCSS are mapped out so that students will show a progression of learning and complex understanding throughout their schooling. An increase in the use and instruction of nonfiction texts is an integral part of the expectations laid out by the CCSS. Marinak and Gambrell (2009) believe that the CCSS emphasis on the use of nonfiction text signifies that policy makers believe that reading more of such texts will build a broader content area knowledge.

With legislation like the CCSS pushing for more content area literacy, the importance of nonfiction texts in classrooms has risen. In 2007, informational text became a hot topic in the International Reading Association’s “What’s Hot? What’s Not?” feature and continued to be hot for the next seven years (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007, 2008, 2009; Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2012; Cassidy & Loveless, 2011; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2010). Standardized tests and standards based education such as the CCSS have been a
strong incentive for primary grade teachers to include more nonfiction literature in their curriculum (Greene, 2012; Moss, 2005).

Another reason for the push of more nonfiction literature in classrooms is assessment. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests are administered across the country at grades 4, 8, and 12; these assessments align with the CCSS in the expectation of the balance in instruction between literary and informational texts (Greene, 2012). Because the expectation of the CCSS for fourth grade students is that instruction should be equally divided between informational and literary texts, the NAEP tests for fourth grade students have a 50/50 balance between those types of texts in their assessments (Greene, 2012).

In the past, instruction in the primary grades was spent predominately on fictional texts, and when students entered the fourth grade instruction shifted to emphasize nonfiction text, both literature and textbooks (Duke, 2000; Moss & Newton, 2002; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). This transition to a different genre, and a different way of learning, has resulted in what has often been called as the “fourth grade slump” (Chall & Jacobs, 1983). Tower (2000) found that students were expected to comprehend nonfiction texts without any previous practice or background knowledge in understanding the structure and format of nonfiction text. When studying the amount of information text in second, third, and fourth grade classrooms, Moss and Newton (2002) found that there was little increase in the use of nonfiction texts as students progressed into the upper grades, and in some cases, nonfiction text use was nonexistent. Duke and Kays (1998) felt students’ difficulty with nonfiction texts in the fourth grade was due to instruction moving from “learning to read to reading to learn” (Chall, 1996) that resulted in the use
of more expository texts (p. 296). The slump was also a result of lack of appropriate
teacher support in helping students read, navigate, and understand these unfamiliar texts
Pappas, 1993; Tower, 2000). The CCSS seek to combat this so-called slump by
introducing nonfiction texts in kindergarten (Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012). The
expectation is that 50% of what students read and write will be informational texts in
classrooms from kindergarten through fifth grade, grades that have typically spent
approximately 80-90% of their reading instruction with fictional texts, and whose
classroom libraries consist of 80% fiction (Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012; Harvey,
2002; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).

In order to get an understanding of why the CCSS has adopted expectations relating
to the instruction of nonfiction in elementary classrooms, I look at research that discusses
the presence of nonfiction in the classroom by examining studies that 1) document the
lack of nonfiction in elementary classrooms; 2) document possible misconceptions that
have prohibited teachers from using nonfiction; and 3) document the misuse of the genre
when it is used in the classroom. I then look at research that describes how children
respond to nonfiction as a genre and in two different forms: trade books or textbooks.
Finally, I examine research that explains the academic affordances of using nonfiction in
the elementary classroom in the areas of motivation, comprehension, writing, and
scientific discourse.

**Presence of Nonfiction in the Elementary Classroom**

Researchers have looked at the presence of nonfiction in the elementary classroom,
more specifically, the lack of nonfiction in elementary classrooms. In this section I will
discuss the lack of nonfiction in elementary classrooms in addition to probable misconceptions surrounding nonfiction that may contribute to the limited nonfiction found in elementary school curricula. I will also discuss how nonfiction has been misused in elementary classrooms.

Lack of Nonfiction in the Classroom

Research has shown that students spend most of their reading time outside of school with nonfiction, spending 80-90% of their time reading commonly consumed genres such as newspapers, magazines, online websites, manuals, labels, and directions (Harvey, 2002). Yet in the classroom 80% of their time is predominately spent with fiction (Colman, 2007; Harvey, 2002; Maloch, 2008; Moss & Newton, 2002; Pappas, 1991). Fiction books also outnumber nonfiction books in classroom libraries (Colman, 2007). Duke (2000) argues that the lack of connection between real life and the classroom results in classroom instruction that is one-sided.

Duke’s (2000) now famous study pinpointed how much experience first-grade children have with informational texts. She conducted a study to see how much informational text was used in elementary classrooms during their language and reading activities. During 79 days of observation, looking at visible print such as bulletin boards, anchor charts, and signs on classroom walls, available information books in classroom libraries, and lessons that used informational texts Duke (2000) found that the total time spent with informational text was 282 minutes, which averages to be 3.6 minutes a day. She also found that only 2.6% of the displayed print was informational text. Instructional time spent with informational text was very limited, as students were given very few experiences to read, observe, and listen to the texts. Some teachers did not use any
informational texts in their classrooms (Duke, 2000). Instead, teachers erroneously relied on content area instruction to supply informational text exposure to young children; however, Duke (2000) also discovered that content area instruction did not provide additional informational text experience. Because informational texts have long been associated with content area subjects such as science and social studies, Duke’s (2000) study purposefully looked at the use of nonfiction during the entirety of the school day, encompassing time spent on content area subjects. Even with allotted time for content area subjects, the total time spent with informational text was still 3.6 minutes a day (Duke, 2000).

Similarly, Palmer and Stewart (2003) studied the use of nonfiction trade books in primary classrooms and discovered that nonfiction was only used during the occasional teacher read alouds, and when students were given an opportunity to select nonfiction books they were choosing texts that were not at their reading level. Yopp and Yopp (2006) documented that 68-89% of the books chosen by teachers for read-alouds were narrative.

Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi (2010) conducted a similar study to Duke’s (2000) on the amount of informational texts in second, third, and fourth grade classrooms, which revealed that the instructional time spent with informational texts in the second grade was one minute. They confirmed Duke’s findings about the lack of nonfiction in content area subjects when they also discovered that social studies and science lessons did not provide students with opportunities to interact with informational texts (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).
Further, Moss and Newton (2002) also found that basals, which are relied upon in 95% of classrooms, do not contain high quality informational text. Summer reading lists are predominately fiction, and Colman (2007) found that reading lists from eleven libraries were all fiction. This strong emphasis on fiction in school means that elementary school children have very little instructional experience reading and learning from nonfiction

**Misconceptions Surrounding Nonfiction**

Colman (2007) documented long-standing beliefs about nonfiction such as nonfiction is boring, it will not hook children on reading, it is not relevant, it is not creative or compelling enough, is too hard for children to understand, and it is more appealing for boys than girls as misconceptions that were and are still commonly accepted (p. 259). Additionally, the text features of nonfiction text are also perceived to be unfamiliar and challenging for younger readers (Maloch & Bomer, 2013a). These misconceptions have been a roadblock for teachers in trying to include more nonfiction in their classrooms (Colman, 2007). Earlier scholars like Egan (1993) and Trelease (1989) argued that narrative texts are the best tools in educating young children, saying “of the two forms of literature (fiction and nonfiction), the one that brings us closest and presents the meaning of life most clearly to the child is fiction” (Trelease, 1989, p. 13). When Fritz (2001) began writing nonfiction, she was told “children were apt to be suspicious of nonfiction as another ploy adults used to lure them to the academic world” (p. 87). More current research found that fictional narrative texts have been considered easier to read by teachers because these stories contain a familiar structure, language, and layout (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).
Colman (1999) argues that the reasons for this negative perception of nonfiction text stems from adults who have a romanticized notion of fiction as the genre of choice for children. Editors, educators, reviewers, and librarians project their preference for fiction onto young readers when they choose to publish and select more fiction for children than nonfiction (Colman, 1999). Teachers’ own preferences and misconceptions about nonfiction could be part of the argument as to why fiction dominates classroom reading instruction (Moss & Newton, 2002).

Colman (2007) claims that these misconceptions about nonfiction adversely affect teachers’ instructional practices and contribute to the prevalence of fiction in elementary classrooms. Teachers have been found to be uncomfortable with information books, which results in a dearth of nonfiction instruction (Colman, 2007; Pappas, 1991). Classroom read alouds, book talks, and book studies are dominated by stories (Doiron, 1994; Graves, 1989; Moss, 1995; Pappas, 1991; Sanacore, 1991; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). Tower (2000) discovered that her fourth grade students could not recall having nonfiction texts read aloud to them. Further, reading for enjoyment is associated solely with fictional texts with no thought given to the possible and probable enjoyment of nonfiction (Doiron, 1994). Colman (1999) comments, “Reading nonfiction, I am told, is not real reading” (p. 215).

Another misconception about nonfiction stems from teachers believing that students read and learn from nonfiction texts in the same manner as they read fiction. Shymansky, Yore, & Good (1991) studied teachers’ beliefs about the use of nonfiction material during science instruction. Survey results of over 500 teachers in kindergarten through eighth grade revealed that teachers did not understand the difference between instruction in
reading science texts and fictional texts. Nonfiction science texts involves the use of visual features, technical vocabulary, titles, headings, appendixes, glossaries, and other minor texts that extend and highlight the information present in the body of the text (Kerper, 2003; Kiefer, 2010; Pappas & Varelas, 2009). Reading these nonfiction texts require a different way of reading, thinking, and understand the material, that teachers need to address in their instruction (Crook & Lehman, 1991; Pappas, 1991; Pappas, Kiefer, Levstik, 1990). These misconceptions lead not only to teachers not choosing the genre for their classroom but also a misuse of the genre in the classroom.

**Misuse of Nonfiction in the Classroom**

Teachers misuse nonfiction books in their classrooms by not using the genre during content area study or when discussing topics that require learning nonfiction information. Instead, teachers used fiction books. Therefore, they are using fiction in a manner that the authors did not intend, for example, using a fictional book to teach nonfiction concepts. This incorrect use and resulting lack of the genres in the classroom has contributed to students being confused about the factual or fictional nature of the content they were reading.

Due to misconceptions and hesitancy about nonfiction, some teachers erroneously rely on fiction, a genre they are comfortable with to teach topics best taught with nonfiction (Rice, 2002). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Rice (2002) and Donovan and Smolkin (2001) found teachers using fictional books to teach nonfiction concepts. Some of the books selected “were not written with the intent that they would become part of the science curriculum” (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002, p 563). As a result, due to the lack of factual, scientific content in the book, students were found to remember solely
story ideas and misrepresented the narrative, fictional, information as facts (Jetton, 1994; Rice, 2002).

In Donovan and Smolkin’s (2001) study, elementary school teachers were given the chance to select books for their class science lessons. Fiction and nonfiction books on two science topics, Life Cycles and Properties of Matter, were offered for consideration. When selecting books teachers considered the content, visual features, readability and appropriateness, and range of uses, focusing on the potential storyline of the books. The teachers did not take into account the books’ emphasis on telling information on a topic and most teachers disregarded the potential of the nonfiction features of the book to relay such information (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001). As a result, teachers chose more fiction books to be used in science instruction instead of informational books. Teachers did not know what nonfiction was available for use in their classroom. Studying teacher practices in choosing and teaching informational books Palmer and Stewart (2003) noticed that teachers chose books that were too hard or complex for the students. Researchers agree that assistance is needed to guide their understanding of the differences in genre and support their selection of informational books (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Teachers may be choosing fiction over informational texts possibly because they are insecure about their scientific knowledge about such topics or may not have an understanding of what constitutes a quality nonfiction book (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002).

**Response to Nonfiction Books in Elementary Classrooms**

Though there are studies that show a lack of nonfiction, misunderstandings, and misuses of nonfiction in the classroom, research has shown that students prefer
informational text (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Palmer & Stewart, 2003). Young children’s natural curiosity makes informational books an obvious choice to use in the classroom (Dreher, 2003; Harvey, 2002; Yopp & Yopp, 2006, 2000). Being exposed to informational books is beneficial for children and this bias towards fiction is unrealistic (Doiron, 1994; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). As a genre, nonfiction allows students to explore and ask questions about the real world; nonfiction piques curiosity and engages learners because it provides possible answers to students’ questions (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Harvey, 2002; Hirsch, 2003). Children who read and learn from nonfiction texts have been found to have a stronger attitude toward reading as a whole in comparison to children who do not have time with nonfiction texts (Duke, Martineau, Frank, Rowe, & Bennett-Armistead, 2012). Newkirk (1989) argues, “On what grounds do we say that an informational book on dinosaurs is less meaningful than Where the Wild Things Are?” (as cited in Pappas, 1991, p. 5).

Researchers have looked at how students respond to nonfiction texts. I will describe research that explains how students have and have not responded to the structural differences of nonfiction books in comparison to fiction; I will also detail research on the use and benefits of using nonfiction trade books in instruction.

**Nonfiction Text Structures**

Two studies have been done with children in grades K-3 in regards to differentiation between fiction and nonfiction text structures. Both revealed that primary grade children and struggling readers have trouble recognizing the text structures of nonfiction books. McGee (1982) examined whether good and poor readers from third grade classrooms were able to use the text structures in expository passages to guide their recall. Recalls
were evaluated to see if the structures in the retelling were similar to the author’s structure in the text. In another study by Kamberelis (1999), kindergarten, first, and second grade students composed texts representing three different genres, including informational. After listening to their teacher read an informational book, the students composed their own books based on the features and structures of the book they had just read.

Both Kamberelis (1999) and McGee (1982) found that the students in their studies did not understand the text structures of the informational texts. McGee (1982) discovered that good readers in 3rd grade also had trouble recalling information from the passage, rather retelling what they had learned in a list instead of utilizing the expository structures in the passage to guide their understanding and retelling. In Kamberelis’s (1999) study, students used narrative text structures when they composed their own informational books.

Kamberelis (1999) and McGee (1982) attributed students’ difficulties in reading and understanding of nonfiction to a lack of instruction with nonfiction books. They also credited the complex structure of nonfiction texts as another reason why students have difficulty with the genre (Kamberelis, 1999; McGee, 1982). Students’ construction of nonfiction as a genre was lacking, because “children’s literary diets are particularly not well balanced” (Kamberelis, 1999, p. 452). Studies revealed that children and teachers primarily read from and used fiction books in the classroom therefore limiting time spent learning from nonfiction texts.

Nonetheless, other researchers assert that primary aged students are capable of using the various text characteristics of nonfiction to support their understanding of the genre.
The common assumption that students will have difficulty with nonfiction text features laid out in the above research can be overcome with instruction (Maloch & Bomer, 2013b).

Genre—narrative, non-narrative, information, and hybrid texts—and the features that determine genre such as vocabulary, verb tenses, attributes, visual features, and content are important to student interaction of nonfiction text (Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Kamberelis, 1999; McGee, 1982; Tower, 2002). Pappas (1991) believed there are three main textual features of informational books that distinguish themselves from fictional books: co-classification, present tense verbs, and relational processes. Understanding nonfiction requires knowing how the features and structures in the texts work together to communicate information. Duke & Billman (2009) observed that many of the features in information books including the text structures, specialized vocabulary, timeless verbs, repetition of the main topical theme, and visual features may make them difficult for young readers. Minimal research has been done on how the characteristics of the genre and a grasp of text structure influences primary students’ understanding and recall of nonfiction.

**Students responses to textual features in nonfiction.** Pappas (1991) examined the ways that kindergarten students learned the distinctive language features of informational text through pretend book readings. Through repeated readings and retellings, the kindergartener retold the story utilizing the linguistic features found in informational text indicating that she was capable of creating meaning and discerning the differences between the genres (Pappas, 1991).
Tower (2002) conducted a similar study to see if preschool children would be able to recognize the distinctive features of informational books in their responses to read-alouds. Using information books that did not possess any narrative elements, Tower (2002) read the books aloud to the students allowing them to share their thoughts with the group. Referring to Pappas’s (1991) three distinct elements of informational books (e.g., relational processes, present tense verbs, and co-classification) and the physical features of the genre, Tower (2002) discovered that the students were aware of and did incorporate the textual characteristics of the books into their retellings. Students understood and produced informational text language, interacting “productively with the text” (p. 84).

In another study, children in a kindergarten classroom listened to their teacher read informational books three to four times a week (Duke & Kays, 1998). The students pretended to read an informational book and answered questions regarding the content of the book at the beginning and end of a semester. The researchers noticed a difference in students’ understandings of the features in informational text in the three-month period (Duke & Kays, 1998). Possibly due to informational books being read during read aloud time, “children produced readings more reflective of information book language” (Duke & Kays, 1998, p. 312). These studies suggest that young students are capable of grasping the textual features unique to the genre, yet understanding comes with purposeful instruction with quality and accurate nonfiction books.

**Response with Nonfiction Textbooks and Trade books**

When nonfiction is used in the classroom it is typically through textbooks and trade books. Textbooks are books that are used as the standard work for the study of a
particular subject (Merriam-Webster online, n.d.). Trade books are books that are published for and intended for general readership; some people simply refer to trade books as “library books.”

**Textbooks.** The vocabulary used in textbooks was found to be above the grade-level that the books were intended for (Bryce, 2011; Moss, 1991). In addition, the content of textbooks was found to be unappealing (Moss, 1991). Hurd (1988) described biology textbooks arguing that they are the “most beautifully illustrated dictionaries we have” (as cited in Tyson, 1989). The complexity of the vocabulary and structural content was outside students’ capabilities to understand (Morrow, Pressley, Smith, Smith, 1997). Moss (1991) found the subjects of textbooks typically teach the content in broad, superficial way, preventing in-depth study of a particular subject. Additionally, Billig (1977) argued that because nonfiction textbooks are missing what he called the human element that provides interest and engagement, students may not necessarily understand the facts presented in the textbooks. Textbooks do not use the familiar structures such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and temporal sequence patterns, used in nonfiction trade books that make them accessible for children (Moss, 1991). The lack of such structures in textbooks makes it difficult for children to read these texts with understanding (Bryce, 2011). Another complaint regarding textbooks is that they are outdated when they are delivered to children and typically do not remain current for long periods of time (Alvermann, Swafford, Montero, 2004; Moss, 1991).

**Basal reader.** Basal readers, a research based textbook used in reading and language arts instruction, are used in 85%-95% of elementary classrooms (Moss, 2005; Moss & Newton, 2002; Scharer, 1992; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). Moss and Newton (2002)
analyzed research on content area literature in primary grades by studying six basal readers in second, fourth, and sixth grades published by a variety of companies. The researchers discovered that only 16-20% of the pages in basal readers were devoted to informational literature, with the least amount of informational literature found in second grade basals. However, Moss and Newton (2002) found that teachers used the informational passages in content area instruction in subjects of math, science, and social studies instead of during English Language Arts instruction.

**Advantages of nonfiction trade books.** Through the use of nonfiction trade books students can read a wide variety of nonfiction picturebooks include concept books, photographic essays, identification books, life cycle books, experiment and activity books, journal entries, surveys, and literary nonfiction books (Hepler, 1988; Rice, 2002). Using these nonfiction books to teach science and social studies topics in lieu of textbooks has been advantageous in content area instruction for several reasons (Rice, 2002). Nonfiction trade books tend to be more current than textbooks as new books come out every year instead of every five to 10 years (Moss, 1991; Rice, 2002). With the wide availability of nonfiction trade books, teachers have more control in selecting books based on the wide range of reading levels of students in one classroom (Butzow & Butzow, 2000; Cullinan & Pearson, 2005; Kirkus Reviews, 2015; Moss, 1991; Nowell, 2015). Trade books can be used with multiple subjects and in multiple grades instead of being limited to one grade level (Vardell, 2003). In fact, “textbooks in the content areas simply cannot match the flexibility, depth, or quality provided by trade books” (Rice, 2002, p. 553).
Moss (1991) documented that students found science textbooks boring (Moss, 1991), yet nonfiction trade books can enhance the content areas and are found to be more interesting for students (Butzow & Butzow, 2000). Trade books can also focus on different facets of the same topic, providing the “emotional dimension lacking in textbooks” (Vacca & Vacca, 2008, p. 383) by exploring other people involved in the topic, the processes used to understand and discover the topic, and the places associated with that topic (Moss, 1991). Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman (2007) agree, stating that nonfiction books “can provide the depth and richness of detail not possible in textbook coverage of the same topic” (p. 612). Teachers can focus on one topic and chose to explore such topics in depth.

The information presented in trade books is arranged differently than the “baskets of facts” structure typical in textbooks (Fielding, Wilson, Anderson, 1984; Vacca & Vacca, 2008; p. 383) and the knowledge students acquire from informational passages in basal readers is considered low-level (Billig, 1977). When students read quality nonfiction children’s trade books the material is exciting and holds students’ interest, which aids students in learning from and building meaning from the text (Freedman, 1992). The illustrations, visual features such as maps, captions, charts, and diagrams; research aids like the glossary, index, and appendixes organize information in accessible manners, engaging students and providing another way for students to grasp the concepts presented (Vacca & Vacca, 2008).

**Benefits of learning from trade books.** Nonfiction literature in the form of trade books encourages critical thinking, builds students’ research knowledge, helps create meaningful connections, bridges information across the content areas, and has
implications that go beyond the primary grades (Moss, 1991; Rice, 2002). Colman (2007) discovered that

Kids care deeply about whether something really happened, whether it is really a true story. Kids respond to the immediacy and veracity of a true story and real people with all the multiple perspectives and complexities, whether the story and people are contemporary or historical (p. 60).

Involving the reader emotionally with the text is another way in which trade books help foster meaningful engagement (Fisher, 1980). When students are able to create personal connections with the text it increases their engagement, which in turn increases their knowledge base. Reading information from trade books contributes to “content acquisition, memorable learning, and perspective, and voice in content” (Moss, 2005, p. 199). Because texts help students focus on the human condition (Smith & Johnson, 1994) they are motivating to children and provide opportunities for students to make connections between what they are reading and the real world (Moss, 2005).

Using nonfiction literature to complement the subject being studied also encourages questions by students. Levstik (2003) makes the case that nonfiction is excellent in providing students with a variety of viewpoints as well as showing students the range of genres that can be used in studying a particular subject. These trade books helped students move from only reading about scientific topics and provided an opportunity for students to explore and investigate scientific principles (Lake, 2000). They began to see science from a variety of perspectives instead of the one perspective typically presented in textbooks (Lake, 2000). Consequently, students received a more well-rounded
understanding of a subject when they were given opportunities to read a wide variety of
t nonfiction trade books from a variety of topics.

Currently, primary aged children are more familiar with the format of trade books
than textbooks (Halsey & Elliott, 2006/2007). Moreover, using trade books to teach
content area subjects has been found to help students explore content area topics within a
familiar context (Halsey & Elliott, 2006/2007). Butzow and Butzow (2000) studied the
writing style of science textbooks and science trade books and found that children’s
literature, in the form of nonfiction trade books, adopted a reader-friendly tone, which
made it easier for students to read. Similarly, Saul and Dieckman (2005) found because
scientific information was presented in child friendly language in trade books it
couraged familiarity with the content.

Research by Palmer and Stewart (2005) found that when students were given
opportunities to read and talk about nonfiction literature they engaged in critical thinking
of the information supplied in the content. Because the nonfiction science trade books
were meaningful and authentic, students were provided examples and learned how to
make observations, pose questions, and reach conclusions on specific topics (Alvermann,
Swafford, Montero, 2004).

Affordances of Nonfiction in the Elementary Classroom

A few researchers have looked specifically at the benefits of using nonfiction books
in elementary classrooms. I will discuss four categories researchers use to discuss the
academic affordances of using nonfiction: how nonfiction increases motivation, improves
comprehension, strengthens writing, and helps students acquire a register of scientific
discourse.
Motivation

Studies have shown that students benefit from informational text and are found to prefer it when given a choice between fiction and nonfiction (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Kamil & Lane, 1997; Kletzien & Szabo, 1998; Pappas, 1991). A literacy environment that includes a diverse range of books, including nonfiction texts, is critical to students’ reading success. Giving students an option to read nonfiction provides a chance to capitalize on their interests, possibly improving reading attitudes (Caswell & Duke, 1998, 2000; Pappas, 1991). Caswell and Duke (1998) claim that using informational text provided a “catalyst for overall literacy development” (p. 109). In their research, they provided two struggling readers the opportunity to read informational books on topics of their interests. The students found a “way in” to literacy that had not been there before (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 108). The students became more interested, knowledgeable, confident, and engaged with their reading. Research suggests that students who are motivated to read spend more time reading (Brozo & Flynt, 2008). And those children who read books on their own interests—fiction or nonfiction—are engaged readers and “engaged thinkers and readers are better students” (Brozo & Flynt, 2008, p. 172; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). Spending more time reading books that students are interested in, including nonfiction books, has positive effects on students’ literacy growth (Guthrie, Schafer, Von Secker, & Alban, 2000; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010).

The use of informational text in the classroom may stimulate more active classroom participation from students (Maloch, 2008), encourage meaningful discussions around the text (Moss, 2008), and provide an incentive for students as they use the text to search for
answers to their questions (Palmer & Stewart, 2005). In Duke, Martineau, Frank, Rowe, and Bennett-Armistead’s (2012) research on first grade students reading informational text they found that the students showed less of a decline in recreational reading habits in comparison to students who did not spend time in class with informational text. The use of nonfiction in the classroom can have a positive contribution to student interests and motivation to read, which may translate to stronger reading habits.

**Comprehension**

Studies have shown that the use of nonfiction texts in classroom read alouds improves student comprehension (Hall et al., 2005; McGee, 1982; Smolkin & Donovan, 2000). A wide variety of books in the classroom, representing a range of genres and topics, fosters the use of comprehension strategies (Guthrie et al., 2000). Students who had classroom experiences with informational books had higher reading achievement than students who did not have similar experiences with those texts (Kamil & Lane, 1997; Moss, 2008).

Observing one teacher and her first grade classroom, Smolkin and Donovan (2001), documented that large group read alouds of informational text promoted comprehension in early readers. The scaffolding and discussion the teacher practiced during her read alouds created a situation where the children were engaged in more meaning-making efforts than found with fiction books (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). Reading more nonfiction texts supports the building of background knowledge, which strengthens students’ abilities to comprehend (Squires, 2004). McGee (1982), as well as Hall et al., (2005), found that clear instruction on the various text structures of information texts, including compare and contrast, problem and solution, description, sequence, and cause and effect, helped improve reading comprehension. When students were shown how to
read and use textual features like maps, charts, captions, the glossary, headings, and other features commonly found in nonfiction text, their comprehension also improved (Hall et al., 2005; Maloch, 2008).

**Writing**

In the past, primary school children have been considered unable to write informational pieces (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Kamberelis (1999) found this was because of a lack of informational genres in classroom instruction. However, when students are provided with examples of informational texts and given instruction and opportunities to write informational texts, they are able to do so (Chapman, 1995; Donovan, 2001; Duke, 2000; Pappas, Varelas, Gill, Ortiz, & Keblawe-Shamah, 2009; Wollman-Bonilla, 2000). Teachers who model, provide examples of informational texts, and immerse students in the genre enable students to become competent writers across genres (Chapman, 1995; Kamberelis, 1999; Siu-Runyan, 2003). With this type of exposure and instruction, students begin to use what they have learned from reading in their writing, prompting intertextual responses (Siu-Runyan, 2003). With this awareness, students’ writings reflect the features found in nonfiction (Newkirk, 1987; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Siu-Runyan, 2003).

In Read’s (2001) study, four pairs of first and second grade students worked together to discuss and write a nonfiction piece from selected informational books. Results showed students were comfortable writing information pieces, gathering information from the visual features and content of the informational books (Read, 2001). Students’ writings revealed a clear understanding of the topic and some reflected the structures found in informational texts.
Scientific Discourse

Informational books can exemplify the type of language scientists use as they read, write, and talk (Pappas, 2006). Research indicates that students who interact with nonfiction text take on the specialized vocabulary and acquire scientific discourse (Duke & Kays, 1998; Maloch, 2008; Pappas, 2006; Pappas et al., 2003, 2009). When a preschool child participated in pretend readings of information books, Pappas (1991) discovered that she was capable of “tackling distinctive discourse features of the information book” (p. 460). According to Pappas (1991), the unique discourse features of informational text include co-classification, present tense verbs, and relational processing, and the student used all three in her retelling of the text. In a similar study, over a three-month period where informational books were read aloud to students, kindergarten children produced pretend readings of informational text that were reflective of the language found in those books (Duke & Kays, 1998.)

Smolkin and Donovan (2001) suggest that teachers scaffold information book read alouds to account for the difficulty of nonfiction structures and academic vocabulary. This guidance of the features of nonfiction resulted in students being able to reflect the language and text structures unique to the genre. “Informational texts provide opportunities for teachers and students to use abstract language in their conversations when making connections between concepts in the text” (Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; p. 658). Studies have proven that children are capable of handling the book language of nonfiction. Thus, the “exclusive use of stories may end up being a barrier to full access to literacy. Children need opportunities to use book from a range of genres so they can acquire the book language” (Pappas, 1991, p. 461).
Summary

Current inquiry into nonfiction literature in elementary classrooms reflects three themes in the research: the presence of nonfiction in the classroom, how students respond to nonfiction books, and the advantages of using nonfiction in the classroom. The Common Core State Standards and comparable state standards that call for more instructional time on nonfiction texts were created in response to research on nonfiction.

The presence of nonfiction in the classroom has long been a concern among educators and researchers. Classroom instruction is dominated by the presence of fiction and nonfiction is rarely, if at all used (Colman, 2007; Duke, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Maloch, 2008; Moss & Newton, 2002; Pappas, 1991). This lack of instruction with nonfiction has led some researchers to believe it is a cause of what has been called the fourth-grade slump (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 1983). The belief behind the fourth-grade slump is that children entering the fourth grade have difficulty with the work and reading load because of its heavy emphasis on nonfiction. Since the majority of time spent in grades kindergarten through third is spent with fiction texts, this shifted focus to a genre students are not as familiar with possibly creates issues in students’ literacy development (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 1983). As a result, the CCSS’s expectation that 50% of what students read and write be informational texts by the time they reach fourth grade may help address this so-called slump (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 1983; Greene, 2012).

There have been many reasons attributed to why teachers do not use nonfiction in their classrooms. Beliefs that nonfiction books are boring, not relevant, or too difficult for young children to read or understand are common amongst educators and are a hindrance
to the inclusion of the genre in the classroom (Colman, 2007). Another misconception for the lack of nonfiction in the classroom is that teachers are uncomfortable with the genre and, consequently, use solely fictional texts in their classrooms. Being uncomfortable with the genre can have adverse effects as researchers have found that teachers use fictional texts instead of nonfiction texts during science or social studies instruction.

Research on children and nonfiction shows that children do enjoy and can understand nonfiction literature and, at times, prefer nonfiction over fiction. Studies have been done on students’ responses to nonfiction and reveal that students can recognize the structural and textual differences between nonfiction and fiction. In addition, other researchers have studied how students respond to nonfiction in textbooks and trade books. Nonfiction trade books seem more conducive for children’s engagement and learning as the books tend to be more visually attractive, written in grade appropriate language, focus on one topic, and provide more structural support in the forms of text features. Research on textbooks, including basals, suggests that students lose interest and cannot grasp the subject matter as well as reading with trade books.

In exploring the advantages of using nonfiction in the classroom, researchers have found that when children read nonfiction they are more motivated to read, and more reading begets better reading. Allowing students the chance and opportunity to select and read more nonfiction, students’ reading and informational writing skills improved. Additionally, when teachers use nonfiction during read alouds, students’ comprehension has been shown to improve. Another affordance of using nonfiction is that students are able to acquire the scientific discourse needed to understand the text.
Although these studies discuss probable misconceptions, the misuse, and lack of nonfiction in classrooms, in addition to the advantages of students reading nonfiction, few studies discuss the instructional practices of teachers who are trying to correctly use more nonfiction in their classrooms.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used qualitative research methods to explore patterns in how one teacher co-constructed an understanding of nonfiction with her second grade students. My research took place during the Reading and Language Arts block of Mrs. Kona’s second-grade classroom from January 27, 2015 to May 29, 2015. This chapter explains the methodology and research design of my study. I begin this chapter by reviewing the purpose of the study, my research questions and detailing my role as a researcher. In addition, the participants, scope of the study, and methods of data collection are discussed. I conclude by describing the structure of my data analysis.

Purpose for Study

Previous studies on children and nonfiction texts have documented the lack of nonfiction in the primary classroom, commonly held misconceptions about the genre, and, inversely, the abilities of students to read, understand, and enjoy the complex structures of nonfiction texts (Colman, 1999, 2007; Duke, 2000; Duke & Kays, 1998; Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Pappas, 1991, 1993, 2006; Tower, 2000). In response to those studies, research has been done with teachers using nonfiction in their classrooms; however, data analysis revealed that teachers select fiction texts (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002) or books based on appeal, developmental appropriateness, and whether or not the book would be enjoyable instead of looking at the accuracy of the factual content (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001). In addition, the advent
of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) means that primary grade teachers are expected to increase their instruction and reading of nonfiction, which is resulting in a change in instruction (Greene, 2012; Marinak & Gambrell, 2009; Neuman & Gambrell, 2013).

The CCSS’s 50/50 split between fiction and nonfiction text is not directed solely at English and Language Arts subjects; it targets all the content areas (Greene, 2012). Yet, while the standards provide a framework for instruction around a variety of increasingly complex texts, there are no standards for science, social studies, or other content area subjects. The CCSS addresses only standards for English/Language Arts and Math. The standards for science and social studies are embedded within the English/Language Arts and Math standards; thus, the CCSS seeks to broaden the role of literacies beyond the English/Languages Arts (ELA) classroom by bringing reading into the content areas (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). Given these expectations of the CCSS, teachers are being asked to stop teaching subjects in isolation and meet the standards across all the subjects which results in nonfiction being used during ELA time.

A few studies have been done on responses with nonfiction literature (Doiron, 1994; Donovan, 2001; Jetton, 1994; Maloch & Horsey, 2013; Pappas, 1991, 1993) and pairing fiction and nonfiction books (Crook & Lehman, 1991; Yopp & Yopp, 2000), but there is very little research on what a teacher does to help her students understand nonfiction as a genre. The foci of the previous studies have been on the use of nonfiction in a classroom and not on understanding what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction. Therefore, there is a need for research on primary school teachers’ process while trying to addressing the CCSS by changing instruction to include more nonfiction. This study will document and
analyze how one primary-grade teacher works to help her students construct an understanding of nonfiction in her classroom.

**Research Questions**

For this study, I formulated three research questions:

1. How does the teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature for her students?
2. How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre for her second grade students?
3. How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?

To address these questions I conducted direct observations of the children and teacher in a self-contained 2nd grade classroom, interviewed the children and teacher multiple times during the study, and analyzed video data of the teacher’s large and small group instruction to further explore how the teacher taught nonfiction in her classroom.

**Setting of the Study**

The enrollment at Gooseberry Park Elementary School was approximately 520 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The school was situated in a mostly-white, affluent suburb of a large metropolitan city. According to Great Schools (retrieved from http://www.greatschools.org), the racial ethnicity of the student population for the 2012-2013 school year was 79% white, 11% Asian, 6% two or more races, and 3% Hispanic.

**Second Grade**

In Mrs. Kona’s self-contained second grade class there were 25 students. Two of the students were pulled out for Special Education due to IEPs on behavior, and they were rarely in the classroom while I was there. Of the remaining 23, one student did not have
permission to participate in the study. Thus, 22 students and one teacher participated in the study. Of the 22 students there were eight girls and 14 boys.

The school district used the STAR Reading assessment by Renaissance Learning to assess the students’ reading levels. Mrs. Kona used the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for her own information and planning instruction. She used the DRA to measure reading level, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. She used this information to determine reading groups and individualized instruction. Level 28 of the DRA was the benchmark for end-of-the-year 2nd grade. At the beginning of September, 20% of the class was reading below the benchmark. By the middle of the year, 10% of the class was below the benchmark of 28. On a whole, Mrs. Kona’s class was generally on or above level in reading. When pairing students for this study, Mrs. Kona used the middle of the year DRA scores to create the pairs.

Mrs. Kona felt her students worked best when collaborating and supporting each other; thus, she frequently paired her students for classroom activities. The first week I began my study, Mrs. Kona initially paired the students with a classmate of the same gender who were sitting next to each other. She then rearranged and intentionally selected the pairs the third week of the study. She decided to do this based on how students were getting along with their original pairs and also wanted to pair students based on their reading abilities. She typically paired students who were higher readers with students with struggling readers because she believed the higher-level readers could help support their partner. Again, girls were paired with girls and boys paired with boys. Because of the odd number of students there was one group of three boys.
During the third week of the study three pairs of students were selected to be focus partner-groups for the duration of the study. The focus partner-groups would be video and audio recorded every time they met for the duration of the study. Mrs. Kona helped select these groups, and she selected students that she felt displayed a range of reading levels based on the DRA and paired them with a classmate of a different reading level. One partner-group was Emmet, with a DRA level of 28, and Leo, with a DRA level of 30. Sophia and Alice were the second group. Sophia’s DRA level was 28 and Alice’s was 38. The last partner-group was Sam, with a DRA level of 30, and Zak with a DRA level of 26. Thus, each pair in the focus partner-groups had one student with an above average DRA level and another student with an average or below average DRA level.

The classroom environment included a central gathering area that was marked by bookshelves, Mrs. Kona’s red reading chair, the SmartBoard, and an easel. The classroom library was extensive. Bookshelves were filled with book baskets and every available space was lined with these baskets. There were 42 book baskets around the classroom; 22 of those baskets were for chapter books and the remaining 20 were picturebooks. Each basket was labeled by the series title (Magic Tree House), genre (fiction or nonfiction), topic (animals), or style (poetry). The students did not sit at desks and instead shared small tables with three other classmates. A u-shaped reading table sat in the corner. The walls were covered with student work and charts that Mrs. Kona made to help aid the students in their own work.

Classroom Setting

Mrs. Kona’s classroom was at the end of the second grade hallway, near the back of the school. Like all of the classrooms at her school, the room was rectangular, windows
lining one wall, hooks for students’ coats and bags lining the opposite, and a smart board was hung on the third wall. The classroom had five computers. Four of the computers were for student use and the fifth was connected to the SmartBoard and was Mrs. Kona’s computer. In front of the SmartBoard was the area referred to as “The Carpet.” The Carpet was where the students went when Mrs. Havens did large group instruction. She alternated between sitting in her red armchair at one corner of the carpet or in a chair on the opposite corner next to a tall flip-chart. A display easel flanked the other side of The Carpet and books that Mrs. Kona selected to fit a certain topic or theme were displayed there. When Mrs. Kona was not using The Carpet for large group instruction or for reading a book aloud, the students could gather with partners to do work or they could pull carpet squares from a nearby drawer and use those to sit and read books. Some students were granted permission to sit in the red chair and read. The room was decorated in primary colors. The walls were also covered with student work, an alphabet chart, a Word Wall, wall book shelves, and numerous anchor charts that Mrs. Kona created to help guide students in a variety of writing, thinking, or reading activities. A large number line snaked around the top of the room, and student work hung from a clothesline draped across the windows. Student work was also shown in the hallway and on the class door.

**Book Baskets.** What made Mrs. Kona’s classroom different from the other second grade classrooms was the proliferation of books shelves and the arrangement of student tables. Mrs. Kona had baskets of books on every available space. They were on top of the wall-to-wall air conditioning unit, in bookshelves, and on open table space. She had 43 baskets of books around her room. This did not include the books she had inside her tall wardrobe closet. Of the 43 book baskets, 22 of those were for chapter books. The chapter
books that came in a series were grouped by series and stand-alone chapter books were grouped by either popular author or topic. She did not group her books by reading level. The other 21 baskets were for picturebooks. Of those 21, 13 were fiction baskets, seven were nonfiction, and one basket was set aside for mentor texts for Mrs. Kona’s instruction. The following table lists the labels for the 21 picturebook baskets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Titles of Book Baskets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. *Titles of Book Baskets*

**Student work space.** Mrs. Kona’s students did not sit at desks; they sat at small rectangular tables. Mrs. Kona had always used tables throughout her teaching career and, each time she changed grades or classrooms, she brought the student tables with her. She felt strongly that tables allow for flexible groups, helped support student interaction, and fostered a sense of community. Each table seated two to four students and the students were assigned seats. The seating assignment changed every month based on feedback they provided to Mrs. Kona. Her students filled out a survey every month indicating the names of classmates they wanted to sit with along at their table preference. Mrs. Kona used this information to assign seating assignments and to determine which students were
feeling left out or included among the class. Students shared school supplies, pencils, markers, glue, scissors, and erasers were in red buckets on each desks. Their own books and work folders were housed in blue magazine file boxes that were scattered across the room. Students frequently helped each other find their belongings and books, offered up each other’s chairs to allow partners to sit side-by-side, and shared writing utensils. Mrs. Kona felt these characteristics helped create the sense of community that was important to her. She also worked to make sure her students knew that “work happened” as soon as they stepped into their classroom. She referred to the table groups as “offices.” After explaining an assignment on the carpet she would ask her students to return to their offices. When I asked her about this terminology, she said that she started using the term “office” to help students understand that good work goes on in an office space, just like adults who work in offices. She felt the term suggested a seriousness and importance of the work they would do there.

**Participants**

I chose to work with Mrs. Kona’s class because we had already formed an academic relationship having taken two courses together at The Ohio State University while I was working on my Masters. We connected over our mutual love of children’s literature and the fact that we have both taught 2nd grade in the public school system. Knowing that quality children’s literature, both fiction and nonfiction, drove Mrs. Kona’s instruction I knew her classroom would be a good site to observe literature driven instruction. Since the overall purpose of my study was to examine how Mrs. Kona constructed an understanding of nonfiction with her students, it seemed natural to conduct my study in a classroom where the teacher was already using quality nonfiction children’s literature.
Thus, when I started my Ph.D. program, she offered up her classroom as a site in which to do research for several class assignments. My early research in her classroom was also on nonfiction children’s literature so when I decided upon my dissertation topic, I chose to continue my work with Mrs. Kona and her 2nd grade classroom because of what I had already seen her do in regards to teaching with nonfiction. Also, I knew that Mrs. Kona was attempting to incorporate and teach more nonfiction texts in her classroom in response to the expectations of the CCSS expecting that 50% of what primary-grade children read and write is nonfiction. Finally, most of the research done on nonfiction texts has been on the lack of nonfiction in elementary schools, the benefits of teaching with nonfiction, and has been conducted in content-area subjects. Very few studies focused on teacher practices with nonfiction texts as they seek to help their students understand nonfiction as a genre. Consequently, I felt that doing research in Mrs. Kona’s classroom could help fill a void in the current research on nonfiction in the elementary classroom.

Mrs. Kona

Mrs. Kona graduated from a large public university in the Midwest, had taught for 28 years, and spent two years of service credit with the community Parks and Recreation department bringing her total years of service to 30 for the school district. She recently received her Masters in Education from the same university. She taught Kindergarten for seven years, a combination kindergarten/first grade classroom for three years, first grade for eight years, a combination first/second grade classroom for five years, and second grade for three years. She also spent four years teaching Reading Recovery and a year as a Kindergarten Interventionist. The year I conducted my research was the last year she
taught. She served on the Building Leadership Team in 2014-2015 and in early years held positions in the Literacy Team, as a teacher representative to the PTO, Mentorship Team, School Climate Committee, Early Education Committee, the building representative to the local association UAEA, curriculum committees, and a position as a math coach.

We met in one of our classes and talked about the dearth of nonfiction in the primary classrooms and discussed our own struggles with using the genre in our classrooms. Mrs. Kona has been working on incorporating more nonfiction into her classroom in the past three years. Each year she combined a study of fiction and nonfiction to address the ELA standards as well as the district science standards. Her plan for this year had evolved from the previous years’ units based on her continued experience with nonfiction and changing science standards.

In an earlier interview Mrs. Kona explained that her ideas for how she taught nonfiction to her students stemmed from her own reading practices. She said she enjoyed reading fiction books but sometimes those very books sparked questions for her. She gave the example of reading _The Lost Child of Philomena Lee_ (Sixsmith, 2010) and wanting to learn more about the situations and people depicted in the book, so she decided to do her own research and looked up nonfiction books to help her find her answers. She remarked, “I’ll want to read some nonfiction that gives me more information about that time period or whatever was going on…So I try and do it for that reason, because I do think it supports your understanding of you know, a fictional text.” Therefore she wondered if this model was a way to help her students take those first steps towards reading and understanding nonfiction. She believed that students should be
excited about literature and frequently talked about connections, preparing students to read, expanding their knowledge, and exposing them to nonfiction.

**Scope of the Study**

I typically spent three days a week in the classroom for 14 weeks. I was there for about one to two hours each day depending on the lesson that Mrs. Kona has planned. I would arrive between 9:00 and 10:00 am and would leave around 11:30 am. Starting at 9:00, the students were finishing up Reading and Writing Workshop, would break at 9:45 for a 15-minute recess and then begin again with Unit of Study time. During this Unit of Study Time, Mrs. Kona incorporated parts of the science and social studies curriculum with components of her Reading, Language Arts, and Writing block. During my time in her classroom the content focus of the unit of study was Science, specifically the topic of Weather. Unit of Study time would end at 11:10 when the students would break for lunch. It was during the students’ lunch period that I would communicate with Mrs. Kona about the earlier lessons as well as any concerns she had about upcoming lessons. I did miss three read alouds; however, Mrs. Kona shared her observations and lesson plans with me after each read aloud. I incorporated her notes into my data corpus.

**Daily Routine**

The one to two hour Unit of Study time followed a strict routine. When I came in at 9:00 the students were participating in their Reading Centers. Students worked independently or in small groups at a variety of reading-centered activities of their choosing. Options included silent reading, buddy reading, and computer time. During this time the books the students read came from books in their book boxes. Students recorded the books in their book logs. Also, during this time, Mrs. Kona pulled groups of four to
six students to work with on reading topics. The students were grouped by reading ability.

On the days I came in at 10:00, the students had just returned from recess and were asked to sit on the Carpet. The Carpet was the area at the front of the room, next to the SmartBoard, Mrs. Kona’s reading chair, and a large easel. All lessons commenced and concluded with a whole class instructional lesson. Typically, Mrs. Kona began by teaching a large group mini-lesson on a nonfiction topic. She would read a picturebook aloud and model a writing activity for the students. Then, she would issue directions for the day’s activity and the students would partner up in their research partnerships, retrieve their work from their red folders, and begin the activity on their own. The red folders contained everything they worked on throughout the entire study. The students kept their work organized between “Finished” and “Unfinished” work on either side of the folder. There was a continual expectation that students would know what work to begin and finish each day. While they were working Mrs. Kona would walk around and talk to the different partners, providing help, scaffolding, and modeling as needed. Early on in the study, I set up the two cameras with two of my focus partner-groups and the audio recorder with the third focus group. However, after noticing the amount of time the students got up to walk around the room to retrieve books, work on aspects of the project, and work with other students I realized the recorders, both audio and video, captured more background noise than actual student conversation. I then decided to use only the two video recorders and observed the other students. Cameras were placed on the tables the partner groups chose to meet. The students were interested in the cameras but after a few early sessions the novelty wore off and the students completed their work whilst
ignoring the camera. At times the camera would get displaced or knocked over and students would either try to correct it themselves or would come and find me.

After their work time, Mrs. Kona would bring the students back to the carpet to discuss the work they just did. They were expected to share what they did and learned each day. Sitting in a circle, the students would pass the class microphone around and share their work experience. Sometimes the students would have time to go back to their desks and finish or fix their work depending on the class discussion before they were dismissed for lunch.

The unit did not follow a strict set of lesson plans organized in chronological order. Mrs. Kona frequently noticed when students had difficulty with certain topics or their understanding was not complete; she would then retrack and create a new lesson that addressed those gaps or misconceptions in their understanding before moving forward in her lessons. While she had a final plan in mind for the unit, Mrs. Kona changed her daily lessons in response to her students. I did notice three distinct parts in the unit. At the beginning of the unit, Mrs. Kona spent time helping the students read nonfiction and understand the characteristics of the genre. The students began reading nonfiction books, creating research questions, and beginning their investigations in the middle of the unit. The students wrapped up the unit by working on their final projects, their nonfiction books.

**My Role as Researcher**

I positioned myself as a participant observer in Mrs. Kona’s 2nd grade classroom. Initially, I sat at the back and observed Mrs. Kona and the students during whole and small group lesson. My role then changed within the first week of the study as Mrs. Kona
included me in her discussions about the lessons, classroom activities, and students. Our conversations were continual; we talked before and after her large group lessons, during lunchtime, and would email each other often. These discussions resulted in a collaboration based on what we saw happen in the classroom. Mrs. Kona planned all the daily lessons and activities herself but those lessons were sometimes informed by our discussions. In addition, in regards to the students, I spent the majority of my time observing the students and only worked directly with the students if Mrs. Kona specifically asked.

This was the third year that I have done research with Mrs. Kona, and we had built a professional and personal rapport. My previous times in her classrooms have also been to observe her teaching practices in relation to nonfiction as well as writing and reading instruction. This year of research marked Mrs. Kona’s third year teaching 2nd grade and my third year in the doctoral program. In a sense, we had grown together, grown in our understanding of research, reading practices, and the role of children’s literature (fiction and nonfiction) in the classroom. Our knowledge and experience with each other also informed the familiarity in which we approached my role in the classroom. Thus, I would say that my comfort and familiarity with Mrs. Kona, her classroom, and teaching style minimized the impact of being in her classroom conducting research. One of the reasons Mrs. Kona sought me out for discussions and feedback was that she saw me as a “knowledgeable other” (M. Kona, personal communication, January 30, 2015). Mrs. Kona saw my own six years spent teaching second grade in addition to my research interests at The Ohio State University as a person in authority. The students also became familiar with me, addressing me as Ms. Sara and feeling comfortable enough to ask me
questions or for help and guidance. They were aware of my hearing loss and quickly
adjusted to speaking in a manner that I could understand them. In terms of interpersonal
interactions, my hearing loss played a minor role; however, as a researcher my hearing
loss did impact several of my research practices.

Because of my hearing loss, the data collection, and consequently, analysis looked a
little different. While I wear hearing aids, they do not provide the clarity I need in
understanding conversation. As a result, to effectively hear I must have access to the
facial cues of the individual speaking; consequently I have difficulty in group
conversations. I lack the ability to filter conversations and to hone in on a particular voice
of individual. For example, I was able to watch and hear Mrs. Kona during large group
instruction, but when she asked her students to do “partner share” the combination of 22
voices chattering away made it impossible for me to hear what one partnership was
discussing. Additionally, whenever I look down to write notes I lose sight of someone’s
face and thus, lose what that person is saying. Thus, I reacted to these situations, making
accommodations as needed. I tried to talk to the students one-on-one and they were aware
that I might ask them to repeat what they have said. During partner sharing I would
sometimes sit down next to a few students and ask them to talk to me. This was not
always helpful as the noise level continued to make it difficult for me to hear despite my
close proximity to a partnership.

Because my hearing loss played a role in my data collection, I collected data in
multiple ways: field notes of classroom instruction, lessons, and conversations with Mrs.
Kona; videos; interviews; and transcripts of all the videos. All of these combined enabled
me to capture the practices of the classroom. The video data was a major part of my data
corpus; every single video was transcribed to allow me to hear what was going on.

Therefore, the video cameras and transcripts provided a detailed record of the events of
the classroom; however, I was still present during the entirety of the research, composed
field notes, observed all lessons, conversed with Mrs. Kona, and extensively read and
analyzed my transcripts.

Nine transcribers from The Ohio State University’s Office of Disability Services
(ODS) watched and transcribed my video data. I had IRB approval for the transcribers to
see my data. Transcription involves a verbatim recording of the dominant speakers in a
class or video. Five of the nine transcribers’ main role at the university was to transcribe
classes for individuals—students, staff, and faculty—that needed that accommodation.
The remaining four were mainly American Sign Language interpreters for the university
but due to the amount of videos in this project, they were asked to come in as transcribers
as well. Five of the transcribers had previously transcribed for me while I took classes at
The Ohio State University. On a whole, the transcribers transcribed every video I took
during the study, and since I collected about eight to 10 videos every day, the final count
was about 200 videos. I sent my videos to my ODS counselor who then sent the videos to
various transcribers based on their availability and current workload. I did not discuss the
videos with the transcribers at any point during the study. I did provide a list of student
names in order to help them with the spelling of the individuals in the classroom. The
transcribers would then send me the finished transcripts and I received the last transcripts
in June, 2015. It was not until I got the transcripts that I was able to re-watch the videos
since, essentially, the transcripts were a form of closed captioning for myself. There were
moments the transcribers were not able to capture as well due to noisiness and/or video
quality. When I received all of my transcripts I re-watched all my videos along with the transcripts multiple times in order to get an understanding of what happened. I always conducted my interviews in quiet locations and video recorded the interviews as well. I did this as a cautionary measure because, as mentioned above, I still sometimes missed information even in one-on-one settings.

**Data Collection**

I used several methods of data collection throughout the study. This section describes my field notes, interviews, video data collection, student nonfiction picturebooks, and my process for data analysis.

**Field Notes**

I positioned myself as a participant observer in Mrs. Kona’s classroom as I not only observed the classroom but also became a collaborator when Mrs. Kona began to reach out to me about the lessons, the students, and the information they were or were not retaining. These discussions typically happened as we walked the students to lunch and I did not have my recorder on hand. After those discussions I would frequently head back and jot down notes of what was just discussed between the two of us. Mrs. Kona would discuss planning, and any issues that arose in the daily lessons. She saw me as an authority because of my own research with nonfiction as well as my previous teaching experience in 2nd grade. Lessons would organically result from what I dubbed our “lunchtime conversations,” and adjustments to lessons were made due to issues we noted. However, Mrs. Kona did all of the teaching and lesson planning. I never directly instructed the students.
In order to understand how this teacher co-constructed an understanding of nonfiction for her second-grade students, it was necessary to study the context in which this teacher and students worked. I needed to collect as much descriptive information as possible about the environment because it played a role in how the students responded to and learned from the teacher’s instruction. To do this, I analyzed the portions of my field notes describing the physical environment: the bookshelves, seating arrangements, available books, posters on the wall, and instructional sheets the teacher used to provide guidance and outline expectations for the students. I describe these findings in my description of the classroom.

**Video Recordings**

All of Mrs. Kona’s large group lessons were recorded. Multiple videos were recorded each day because her large group lessons were broken up by small group study and student work time. This resulted in eight to 10 videos taken each day to record all the lessons. Due to the dynamic of the class lessons and the fact that the students were frequently out of their seats and walking around the room, recording the student work time became a trial and error process. I initially started with recording three focus groups but quickly shifted to focusing on two groups and taking notes of student work. Cameras were frequently knocked over or repositioned but the audio data were captured as much as possible within the context of a busy, mobile classroom.

**Interviews**

I interviewed both Mrs. Kona and the students multiple times throughout the study.

**Students.** I interviewed the six students three times throughout the study; two girls and four boys. The first interview took place near the beginning of the study. Out of the
six students I used for my initial interview, three met the DRA levels of 28; two students’ levels were at 30; and, one student’s DRA was level 38. Each of the students with DRA levels of 28 were paired with another child of a higher reading level. The students were interviewed separately because I did not want the students to influence each other, and I was concerned about one student doing all the talking. I wanted to make sure each student had equal chance to communicate with me. The students were asked about their thoughts on nonfiction and reading nonfiction. The interviews were semi-structured because while I had some questions prepared beforehand I would follow up and ask for more clarification or explanation depending on the students’ responses. The interview questions are in Appendix A.

The second interview was at the completion of the study. I ended up interviewing all of the students who were given permission to participate in my research (n=22). This decision was based on discussions I had with Mrs. Kona about the students’ work and excitement concerning their final project. She was curious to know what the students thought about their books. The final interviews with the students were conducted both individually and in pairs. They were done in April at the end of the study. At this stage in the study, the students had completed their nonfiction picturebooks. I asked the students many of the same questions I had asked them earlier.

**Teacher.** Mrs. Kona and I talked daily about what was happening in her classroom. We also had two semi-structured interviews throughout the semester. One was the last week of February and the second was the last week of April. I video recorded both interviews. The initial interview happened later in the unit than originally planned due to weather and scheduling conflicts. I began each interview with a set of questions but an
informal conversation would emerge and I would use our talking points to think of new questions that needed to be asked. These interviews were invaluable to providing insight into her thoughts during the lessons. Since I had previously conducted research with Mrs. Kona I had data from those earlier interviews as well. I was able to use that information as well as our own personal and professional relationship to get a deep understanding of her thought process during the lessons. These interview questions are in Appendix B.

**Data Analysis**

Throughout the study, I took field notes; video recorded large group instruction, small group instruction, and two student focus partnerships whilst doing work; conducted pre and post semi-structured interviews with the teacher and students; and helped students while they made their own nonfiction picturebooks. ODS transcribed my videos, which I later re-watched and took notes, recording themes I noticed in the data. In June 2015, I met with Mrs. Kona and shared my field notes, notes from our lunchtime conversations, and transcripts with her as a form of member checking to ensure accuracy, validity, and applicability of my data. Once the data were checked, I triangulated my data, noting patterns and asking myself what happened in the classroom, with the teachers, and with the students as Mrs. Kona constructed an understanding of nonfiction for her students. I had three research questions:

1. How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre for her second grade students?

2. How does the teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature for her students?

3. How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?
Below I have described how I analyzed the data to help answer my research questions.

**Research Question One: How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her second grade students?**

As I observed how the teacher used and instructed with nonfiction books in her classroom, and co-constructed an understanding of the genre with her students, I used grounded theory (Strauss & Glaser, 1967) in order to develop theories about my data. I relied on my field notes, interviews with the teacher, and video data of teacher instruction. Part of my field notes included the memos I created after each lesson, describing the events that transpired. I also referred to earlier interviews with the teacher I conducted in 2013 and 2014. This data were also used because I was interested in seeing how her perceptions of nonfiction since she began teaching 2nd grade shaped her current use and instruction with nonfiction. Additionally, after each pass through the data, where I coded, conceptualized, and analyzed, I created conceptual memos that helped me explore the theories I was developing through my analysis. During the process of coding, I read my transcripts, field notes, and memos multiple times. I color-coded for themes, pulled and matched data by commonalities, and tested the codes for sufficiency, which resulted in codes with a more specific focus. I will explain this process further in this section. In addition, a table reflecting the changes in my codes is in Appendix C.

Since constructing an understanding of nonfiction may come from the use, reading, and instruction of nonfiction picturebooks I was curious to see how Mrs. Kona specifically used these books to co-construct an understanding of nonfiction in her classroom with her students. Initially, I triangulated the data by comparing my field notes, transcripts, and memos to get a detailed picture of Mrs. Kona’s practices and as a
check for validity. I then organized it in chronological sequence to make sense of the teacher’s instructional arch. I used the transcripts from all video and interview data, the memos I created after each lesson, and my field notes. I analyzed the data for conceptual categories, and codes emerged from that initial analysis. I looked for ways that the teacher taught nonfiction to her students. The first cycle of coding questions looked at the following:

a. How the teacher taught that nonfiction “conveys factual information about the world in which nothing is made up”

b. How nonfiction was used by the teacher

Mrs. Kona had a definition of nonfiction in mind as she planned her instruction. Consequently, she had to scaffold and readjust her instructional practices while guiding her students to this definition. I linked these initial codes to social constructivism, noticing that the teacher was constructing knowledge through her engagement with her students. These instructional changes revealed that I needed to narrow my focus and, subsequently, my coding categories. I needed to understand the practices and scaffolding Mrs. Kona used to help her students in this co-construction of nonfiction as a genre.

I then reorganized the data in order to look at it from different perspectives. Whereas before I focused on her use of nonfiction books and how she taught those books, I changed the structure of my codes with additional color-coding and rearranging of the data to focus on her interactions with her students. Through the subsequent analyses of my data, my two codes evolved into multiple codes. These codes developed around specific moments of interactions between the teacher, how she was trying to construct an understanding of nonfiction, and her students’ understandings and misunderstandings.
These coding questions looked at her interactions with her students as well as what she was doing to help them learn how to read and question nonfiction books. Therefore, in the second cycle, my codes shifted twofold: 1) Focusing on how she helped her students through this co-construction of the genre and 2) what her students perceived nonfiction to be.

1) I was trying to see how she was co-constructing knowledge of nonfiction with her students, and how she was using the social context, engagement with her students, and the environment to share and create that meaning. I coded:
   a. Nonfiction has text features
   b. Content of nonfiction must be true
   c. Students as researchers and authors
   d. Process of writing nonfiction
   e. When fiction and nonfiction were used together
   f. Change in instruction

2) When I focused on what her students perceived nonfiction to be, my coding categories were:
   a. Nonfiction has photographs
   b. Nonfiction has text features
   c. Nonfiction looks different from fiction

Because I categorized and compared the teacher’s co-constructions with the student’s perceptions, I was able to identify moments where the students’ perceptions of nonfiction to be incorrect, warranting moments of explicit scaffolding of the students’ misunderstandings. I was intentional about going through a third cycle of the data, and as
a result, my codes shifted and narrowed yet again, as I considered how specifically the teacher was responding to her students. The initial code of, “Change in Instruction” evolved into multiple codes:

a. Change due to confusion with text features
b. Change due to confusion differentiating between fiction and nonfiction
c. Change due to difficulty in the books

I will further discuss this data analysis process when describing the data analysis for my third research question.

After using these codes to analyze the data, I went through a fourth cycle of coding and worked to see how my analysis of the data fit with the emerging theory of social constructivism (Smagorinsky, 1995, 2001, 20013; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). My theoretical framework of social constructivism revealed itself during the analysis as it became very clear that what I was observing of the teacher was a constructivist theory of teaching and learning. I compared and contrasted different aspects of the theory with each coding and categorization of my data. I established validity of the codes by sharing them in monthly meetings with my co-advisors and faculty members. I used the feedback from these meetings to revise and link my data relative to the theoretical framework.

**Research Question Two: How does this teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature with her students?**

Mrs. Kona selected the nonfiction books for the study. The data analysis for this question came from my field notes and interviews with Mrs. Kona. Again, I triangulated the field notes and interview transcripts to get a wider sense for what she considered when selecting nonfiction books for the unit. The transcripts from the interviews helped
shed light on the findings I discovered in the field notes, thus providing multiple and differing perspectives. I looked for emerging themes about how she defined and selected nonfiction literature. In my first pass through the data, “Characteristics of Nonfiction” served as a general marker for any qualities that the teacher thought helped define quality nonfiction. Through later re-readings and conversations with Mrs. Kona, the third cycle of coding evolved “Characteristics of Nonfiction” into multiple codes:

a. Factual Information  
b. Aesthetics of nonfiction  
c. Structural and visual features  
d. Readability  

I analyzed these codes in light of my over-arching research question and explored theory in relation to how her selection and definition of nonfiction children’s literature led to a co-construction of the genre with her students.

**Research Question Three: How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?**

During the above analysis and coding of the data, I noted a major theme in the data: the teacher continually changed her instruction throughout the unit. Subsequently, as I studied what happened, another question emerged: How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction? I went back through the transcripts of the large and small group instruction, teacher and student interview transcripts, my field notes, and memos, and triangulated the data, looking for evidence of themes and emergent theories about how ways of thinking about nonfiction are learned through the give and take of relationships in the classroom. As I explored theory about change, I developed a new set
of codes that focused on what triggered Mrs. Kona’s change in instruction and how she responded. I coded for instances of student confusion and how Mrs. Kona reacted to the students. I was careful to look for what Mrs. Kona was doing that led to those confusions as well as what she did once she realized her students did not understand. Therefore, the initial code of, “Change in Instruction” evolved into multiple codes in the second cycle:

a. Change due to confusion with text features
b. Change due to confusion differentiating between fiction and nonfiction
c. Change due to difficulty in the books

I used those codes to develop new conceptual categories about how Mrs. Kona responded to her students. In addition, I used these codes to develop theory about how ways of learning about nonfiction are also constructed.

Like the codes for the other questions, I established validity of these codes by sharing them during monthly meetings with my co-advisors and selected faculty members.

Trustworthiness

I evaluated the trustworthiness of this research study by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I had already established a relationship with Mrs. Kona prior to the start of my research and spent four months in her classroom in order to continue to develop and extend that trust with her and check my observations. This prolonged engagement and persistent observations provided “scope” and “depth” to my study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304).

I triangulated my three major data sources—field notes, transcripts of video recordings, and transcripts of interviews—to give a balanced picture of my data. Through triangulating my data, I was able to cross-check my results and look for commonalities
across the corpus. Furthermore, I also conducted a member check of my data with Mrs. Kona after I had received all of the video and interview transcripts. We met in late June and we went over my initial interpretations of the data, and Mrs. Kona added to or clarified any analyses I had made at that point. In analyzing my field notes, interviews, and video data I created an over-arching memo of my field experiences and events that transpired during my research. This thick description of the context of my research allowed me to evaluate whether or not the events in my data were transferable to other settings (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When I conducted my pre- and post-interviews of the students and teacher, I maintained reliability have asking the students and Mrs. Kona the same sets of questions. Furthermore, my field notes and the notes I took during interviews were detailed and specific to the research questions I was asking. Additionally, as I conducted this research in Mrs. Kona’s classroom I became part of the study, and became a “mediating factor in the very learning” I hoped to document (Smagorinsky, 1995, p. 201). According to Smagorinsky (1995), I did not contaminate the research environment, but instead “became additional meditational means” (p. 201) in Mrs. Kona’s co-construction of nonfiction and in how she changed her instruction in response to her students.

**Summary**

I utilized qualitative research methods to explore how one 2nd grade teacher helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction literature during a unit of study that combined Science instruction with her English Language Arts block. I observed 22 children and one teacher from January until May.
Data were collected from teacher and student interviews, videos from large and small group instruction, and my field notes from classroom observations and informal conversations with the teacher. I triangulated the data; analyzing and coding the data for emerging patterns. The analysis of the teacher’s conversations and instructional methods around nonfiction were examined for any themes by which her instruction of the genre could be described. Five major themes were seen in the teacher’s response to the students and instruction of nonfiction. These categories include: Nonfiction as Text Features, Nonfiction as Content, Linking Nonfiction and Fiction, Nonfiction as Process, and Responding to Students. Chapter Four presents the description of the physical environment in which the teacher taught as well as the findings from the data analysis.
Chapter 4: Findings

Mrs. Kona, through her instructional practices, lessons, and conversations, sought to build an understanding of nonfiction with her students. Her goals throughout the study were to help her students construct an understanding of nonfiction that would help them as they learned how to read nonfiction, and begin to research, write, and create their own nonfiction books. As Mrs. Kona created these learning opportunities, the ways she communicated with her students, the unit goals, and her instruction surrounding nonfiction texts changed on a daily basis in order to help scaffold her students’ understanding.

As I went through the transcripts of the daily large and small group lessons, along with my field notes and interview data, five themes emerged in her instruction and response to student understanding and misunderstanding. I documented that she taught nonfiction in very specific ways. She taught nonfiction: 1) As a genre with text features; 2) by emphasizing the content of nonfiction; 3) by linking fiction and nonfiction, and, 4) by teaching nonfiction as a process, defined as understanding the genre of nonfiction through the process of thinking like an author of nonfiction through researching and writing. In each of ways she taught nonfiction—1. Nonfiction through Text Features, 2. Nonfiction through Content, 3. Nonfiction through linking fiction and nonfiction, and 4. Nonfiction through Process—she encountered many challenges along the way, which resulted in the fifth theme in the data: 5) Response to the students’ misunderstandings.
The unit did not follow the sequential order Mrs. Kona originally planned on, as she had to react to and with her students’ beliefs regarding nonfiction. When Mrs. Kona realized her students did not have the necessary background knowledge on nonfiction she had to adjust her lesson plans and instruction to fill in those gaps and provide clarification.

In this way, Mrs. Kona used her dialog with her students as a means to help them make better sense of the particular subject of nonfiction. According to Vygotsky (1978), language has two functions, as a communicative tool and as a psychological tool. As a communicative tool, language is shared and jointly developed, whereas a psychological tool, language is used for planning, reviewing actions, and reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, when Mrs. Kona co-constructed with her students, they jointly created knowledge and understanding via their conversations. Mercer (2000) refers to this joint intellectual activity where people “use language to transform individual thought into collective thought and action” as interthinking (p. 8). Edmiston (2014) synonymously uses the term active-thinking for construction, wherein construction of knowledge is a social practice. Meaning, therefore, is always composed in social relationships.

This chapter explains my findings for my three research questions:

1. How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre for her second grade students?

2. How does the teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature with her students?

3. How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?

First, I describe the context for the study. I describe two aspects of the classroom environment: 1) the teacher and her rationale for creating this unit of study, and 2) an
explanation of the unit. Next, I describe how the teacher came to define and select nonfiction children’s literature with her students. Then, I describe each of the four themes that emerged in the data in response to the question of how this teacher co-constructs an understanding of nonfiction with her primary students: 1) Nonfiction through Text Features, 2) Nonfiction through Content, 3) Nonfiction through Differentiation, and 4) Nonfiction through Process. Last, I respond to the final question by describing how the teacher’s observations of her second grade students’ confusions and misunderstandings resulted in a change in her instruction. I will end the chapter with a summary of my findings. I have included a table of my research questions and the data sources I used to analyze and describe the findings of each question in Appendix D.

Background Description of the Classroom

The Classroom Teacher

Mrs. Kona has been a teacher for 28 years, alternating between Reading Recovery®, Kindergarten Intervention, Kindergarten, First grade, and Second grade. She also spent eight years teaching multi-aged classes of kindergarten and first graders or first and second graders. She spent her entire career in the same school district: a small, public school district in the suburb of a large city. The year of the study was her final year of teaching before retiring from the profession. While teaching she was active in school leadership, holding several grade-level and school wide positions, and was committed to her professional development by attending continuing education classes, and using her own time to read many books on teaching practices, theory, and beliefs. After her 25th year of teaching she decided to take a sabbatical and enroll full time in the local university to get her Masters degree. By her own admission, she was as much of a student
as her own students. She was constantly reading scholarship on teaching practices, perusing teaching and book blogs, and would frequently reference her knowledge to her students and myself.

Throughout her teaching career, she had seen many changes with the advent of state and national standards but, she said, “in spite of all of these changes, my work with the students in my room has always been based on observation and reflection—what they can do and what they need to learn next.” Her beliefs were informed by Vygotsky’s (1987) theory of education, specifically the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, and she used that theory to shape and drive the way she supported her classes of emerging learners. A constant factor in her teaching career was her use of quality children’s literature. She used her own money to fill her classroom with children’s picturebooks and chapter books. She used these books across the curriculum, in math, science, social studies, and English Language Arts, always seeking opportunities for her students to read, write, talk, and share with these books. Early on she created many thematic units based on popular children’s books, and when the standards became part of her teaching she adjusted her lessons, adopting Project Based Learning (PBL) as part of her process.

**Project Based Learning.** PBL is a teaching method that derives from the constructivist thought that students “learn by doing” (Dewey, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). PBL students gain deeper understandings of course material when they are provided with opportunities to construct knowledge by working and engaging with real world ideas (Kraichik & Blumenfeld, 2006, Markham, 2011; “What is Project Based Learning?”). In this methodology, teachers address content standards, and in the case of Mrs. Kona, the
Common Core State Standards, by using four key features to drive the learning environment:

1) Asking open-ended driving questions that detail a problem to be solved
2) Participation in inquiry to learn the main ideas
3) Collaboration between teacher and students to answer the question
4) Scaffolding to help students learn the content

To answer the driving question, students create and present an artifact that displays their learning (Blumenfeld, et al, 1991; Krajcik, et al, 1994; Krajcik, Czerniak, & Berger, 2002; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

Explanation of Unit

The study began on January 27th, and was planned to take six weeks but lasted 14 weeks. Mrs. Kona had multiple lesson plans prepared and her goal was two-fold: 1) She wanted her students to read nonfiction books on weather related topics and take notes on the information in the books and 2) the students were going to read a fiction book that mentioned weather, note any questions they had during the reading of the book, and then use those questions and their notes from their nonfiction books to guide them as they created a nonfiction book. Lessons were prepared with the expectations of the CCSS in mind. Mrs. Kona wanted to address the CCSS expectations of an increased use of nonfiction in the primary grades, specifically the English Language Arts standards for 2nd grade that call for the use of more complex texts:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.2.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2-3 text
complexity band proficiency with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. (English Language Arts: Reading Informational Text Grade 2, 2014)

She believed that by having the students start with reading a narrative fiction text, she would then use nonfiction as a way to support student understanding of that text. Thus, they would be able to use the more familiar—fiction—books to help them create questions that would then be answered as they began to write and create nonfiction, thus addressing the standards and meeting the district science standards for 2nd grade.

With these lesson goals, Mrs. Kona wanted her students to understand why they were getting ready to study weather. She set the stage by saying, “Weather is a very important part of our lives because it really kind of predicts what we’re going to do, how we’re going to dress, how we’re going to spend our time—if we’re going to be inside or outside for recess—it affects us in so many ways” and continued to activate their schema by asking the students to discuss topics that go with weather and weather words. She wanted her students to begin to think as researchers and find weather-related information for inclusion in their own nonfiction books.

**Daily schedule.** I typically came into class at 10:00. The students were just coming back from a 15-minute recess. Once they got settled, Mrs. Kona would begin what she dubbed the “Unit of Study” time. She considered this time, from 10:00 till 11:10 when they were dismissed for lunch, a period of time where she would combine Reading Language Arts, Writing Workshop, and Science or Social Studies study. She would call the students to the carpet and start with a large group mini-lesson. During this lesson she would always use a children’s picturebook as her guiding text, whether it was a nonfiction or fiction picturebook. Her lessons were frequently created in response to the
previous day’s lessons, noting whether students had trouble with their understandings and creating lessons in response to those gaps in understanding.

After the large-group lesson she would send the students to do partner-work. Early on in the study the students selected their own partners, but once they started researching and creating their own nonfiction books, they were assigned partners. Students were typically given 20-25 minutes to work with their partners and then Mrs. Kona brought the class back to the carpet for either a follow-up lesson or to have them share their work. The students would sit in a large circle and, speaking into a microphone to ensure their voices were heard, would either describe their work or share a portion of their writing with the class. Mrs. Kona would frequently interject, asking clarifying questions, and inserting her own opinions during these sharing times. They would stop when it was time to go to lunch. It was during the walk to lunch where Mrs. Kona and I would discuss what just went on in the hour before. I soon realized the importance of these conversations as Mrs. Kona would express any frustrations she had with the lessons and we would sometimes collaborate on possible lessons to address any gaps in the students’ understanding.

On seven occasions I came to Mrs. Kona’s class at 9:00 when she was doing her Reading Block. During this time, students were working in centers, silently reading, writing in their journals, or participating in a guided reading group. Five other times I came back at 12:15 when the students came back from lunch and recess. This time of day was set-aside for Sustained Silent Reading Time (SSR). Students would select books from their book boxes, the classroom library, or the school library. They were expected to sit at their tables and read their books (Figure 1).
After SSR, Mrs. Kona would do a large group read aloud. The students were expected to sit “criss-cross applesauce” on the carpet, facing Mrs. Kona sitting in her red chair. Mrs. Kona would alternate between reading a chapter book and reading a selected picturebook. She would always read a fiction text during this time but frequently would read a small excerpt from a nonfiction text to pique and support their understanding. I will explore this more later on in the chapter.

**Research Question:**

*How does this teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature for her students?*

**Selection of Books**

While she embraced using nonfiction in her classroom, Mrs. Kona did not want to forget about the fiction texts she loved. She decided to begin combining fiction and nonfiction together two years ago when she was organizing her classroom bookshelves. She saw her Magic Tree House chapter books by Mary Pope Osborne and also noticed Osborne’s Magic Tree House Fact Trackers. The Fact Tracker books were nonfiction.
companions to the individual chapter books and supplied more information on the topic and helped answer questions. For example, *Magic Tree House #3 Mummies in the Morning* (Osborne, 1993) came with *Magic Tree House Fact Tracker: Mummies and Pyramids* (Osborne, 2001). She felt that pairing a fiction and a nonfiction book would help her students when they created questions before, during, and after their reading: “I would draw my students in through the fiction story and deepen their understandings with a nonfiction text on the same topic.”

When it came time to do this particular study, Mrs. Kona looked for other real-world examples to pair fiction and nonfiction books and ended up using the website BookFlix (“BookFlix”, 2015) as her inspiration (Figure 2). BookFlix pairs fiction and nonfiction books according to various topics such as Earth and Sky, and the students listened to the books being read.

Her students loved the time set aside to use BookFlix and that quickly became her inspiration for the study.

**Book criteria.** Mrs. Kona hand-selected all the books in her classroom and extended the same consideration for the nonfiction books. Early in the study she asked me to help her select the nonfiction books for the unit. We began this conversation by discussing how the nonfiction books were being used and understood by her students. Then, Mrs.
Kona and I used that information to talk about the criteria necessary in selecting the nonfiction picturebooks. The first question we asked was: Is the book really nonfiction? This, we quickly found out, was a rather complicated question. We decided to start with what we knew—nonfiction is about real information. However, we saw books that contained real information but was delivered via flying school buses and talking animals. We recognized that those books containing narrative and fantastical elements are considered hybrid texts, which I discussed in Chapter One. Our definition and expectations for nonfiction books needed further clarification.

Using my own research experience and background on textual analysis, I broadened the definition of nonfiction to state that nonfiction conveys factual information about the world in which nothing is made up (Colman, 2007). That definition provided the framework in which to look at children’s nonfiction books but we noticed another issue. Some children’s nonfiction books were filled with facts and nothing was made up but reading the books reminded us of reading a grocery list. Others seemed to have a soporific effect, causing our eyes to glaze over whilst reading them. We knew we needed to consider other criteria when selecting the books. Before the start of the study, I spent time checking out nonfiction books from the library that addressed the unit of study topic Mrs. Kona chose to explore—Weather. What I originally thought would be an easy process became more difficult as I noticed books that had incorrect information, were visually dull, were too complex, and were, frankly, boring. I brought my frustrations to Mrs. Kona and she decided that she needed to revaluate the qualities she looks for in selecting nonfiction books. I observed that Mrs. Kona began to develop criteria for these books that was remarkably similar to her own criteria when selecting nonfiction books.
for herself. Mrs. Kona stated, “I’m not going to select a book that has dated photographs or looks like an encyclopedia entry. Why would I expect my students to do the same?” Mrs. Kona did not want to be bored or confused; neither, she suspected, did her students. Beyond checking books for factual content data analysis indicated that she considered three other criteria for assessing and selecting nonfiction books for the class: 2) Aesthetics, 3) Organization and style, and 4) Text consideration (Colman, 2007).

Aesthetics. Knowing that we do indeed judge a book by its cover, aesthetics played an important role in her text selection. Picturebooks, both fiction and nonfiction, are considered art objects (Kiefer & Wilson, 2011) when the design elements and illustrations all work together to attract and interest the reader. Questions she asked herself included: Does the use of colors entice and excite the reader? Do the illustrations or photographs make you want to pour over the page? Visually, is too much going on? According to Mrs. Kona, *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998) was a perfect example of an aesthetically pleasing book with its hand-colored woodcut illustrations, thick black border, and sidebars that combined informational anecdotes with detailed snowflake illustrations. Thumbing through the pages, she told me that readers could imagine how standing outside, admiring and thinking about the soft snow falling was a catalyst for Willie Bentley to develop a camera to capture the delicate intricacy of each snowflake. The organization and aesthetics caused the story to come to life.

However, this is where Mrs. Kona encountered another dilemma concerning images in nonfiction books. Her students were used to seeing nonfiction books with only photographs, but the pictures in *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998) were illustrations done by an artist. One student, Grace, originally thought *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998) was
fiction because of its illustrations. Mrs. Kona addressed this misconception through several mini-lessons that asked the students to closely analyze the content of nonfiction books instead of focusing on the illustrations. Because of this scaffolding, Grace and her classmates soon understood that *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998) was a true story, with true information, and where nothing was made up. Based on this experience she decided to intentionally look for nonfiction books that used illustrations instead of photographs. Her hope was that by exposing the students to nonfiction picturebooks in a wide variety of illustration styles, she would help broaden their conceptions of the genre.

*Organization and style.* Her third criterion was organization and style. Information should be easily accessible through charts, labels, captions, table of contents, diagrams, index, and other visual features. The illustrations and visual elements of nonfiction books are important because they help readers understand the concepts in the book (Kiefer, 2014; Moline, 2012). Mrs. Kona believed these visual features can be seen as extra resources for children’s learning, arguing that if nonfiction books are well organized students should be able to easily locate information and read the text. Another reason text organization was important is because readers do not always read books from cover-to-cover, and can use visual features to quickly access information. She felt that this characteristic helped her students find exactly what they were looking for, which established a sense of confidence as both readers and researchers. Once she pointed out how a map easily showed students areas of the country where tornadoes hit and emphasized it was another way for the students to learn about tornadoes. She later told me that these features are incredibly important for her students because they help support her students as readers.
Text consideration. One of the biggest complaints against using nonfiction in the primary grades is the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the genre for younger, developing readers (Colman, 2007; Maloch & Bomer, 2013a). Mrs. Kona wanted her students to be able to read the book themselves, or with her guidance. Mrs. Kona selected books that were appropriate, in her words: “considerate texts.” She first saw this term on an education blog that she followed and liked how the author contrasted considerate texts with complex texts. She felt considerate texts were written, structured, and illustrated in such a way to help her students easily read the book, while complex texts did not have the same visual and textual scaffolding to support readers. The kinds of questions Mrs. Kona asked when determining whether a text was considerate included: Did the books provide visual scaffolding in the form of pictorial clues, headings, or captions? Was there too much text on the page? Are the words on the page not too hard nor too easy? If the main body of text was above the reading level of the reader, were the other textual elements considerate enough? Mrs. Kona acknowledged that sometimes even “if the text was simple, the concepts [can be] like, very, very difficult.” For instance, we originally selected Seymour Simon’s (2001) Tornadoes as a text to use in the class, but quickly realized it was too text heavy and difficult for the 2nd grade students. A switch to Simon’s (2002) See-More Readers: Super Storms ended up being a more considerate choice both in lexical density, terminology, and content wise. Consequently, stronger readers were able to read the text fluently while others were able to use the text features, photographs, and bolded vocabulary to help support their reading and understanding of the text.

A nonfiction book that Mrs. Kona frequently worked with was Gail Gibbons’s (1990) Weather Words and What They Mean. When I asked Mrs. Kona why she gravitated
toward this book she told me it was considerate, and in a classroom of children with a wide range of reading levels she felt this book provided enough scaffolding that allowed every child to participate in reading and understanding the terms. In the book, Gibbons explains common weather related vocabulary like atmosphere, clouds, rain, and meteorologist. Each word is accompanied by bold, colorful illustrations. The words are defined, put in sentences, and also positioned in a scenario that visually explains the context. She pointed out that some students could not read “meteorologist”, but were able to use their own prior knowledge to interpret the illustrations and sentences to help them identify the word. This book was not used as a dictionary or encyclopedia but was used as a support text throughout the entire study.

When selecting nonfiction books, Mrs. Kona did not just think of the books’ capacity to tell information; she also looked at the illustrations, asking herself if she would pick up the book based on the aesthetics alone. Flipping through the books, she looked to see if any textual features clearly conveyed facts in an easily accessible manner. She checked the organizational structure, wondering if students would be able to follow the information in the story. Reading the words, she asked herself if her class of students with their wide range of reading abilities would be able to read, understand, and enjoy this text. She changed the way she thought about and therefore, selected nonfiction books, which consequently changed her instruction with nonfiction. However, recognizing that nonfiction, “like fiction, is an art form, designed to give pleasure, and enlightenment, to arouse wonder, and to reveal our capacity for self-awareness and understanding”(Kiefer & Wilson, 2011, p.291) did not account for the difficulties young readers would have in understanding the differences between fiction and nonfiction.
Research Question:

*How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her second grade students?*

In this section, I explain the four different ways Mrs. Kona taught nonfiction to her second grade students based on data analysis of field notes, transcripts from small and large group instruction, and transcripts from student interviews and teacher interviews.

**Teaching Nonfiction through Text Features**

Earlier in the school year, Mrs. Kona taught a unit on animal habitats and, as she later told me, she specifically taught the students about a variety of text features found in nonfiction such as headings, captions, table of contents, glossary, index, bold words, tables, and diagrams, and directed the students to look for information in those text features. She said that she thought the students would be able to remember those lessons and apply that knowledge to this current unit. When she first introduced the nonfiction books on weather topics, she told the class, “You already know how to use nonfiction books because there are certain text features…” The students were asked to read nonfiction books and write down information they were learning from the book. After the students spent time working in partners on this activity, Mrs. Kona brought the class back to the carpet to share their findings. The students wrote down items such as “table of contents,” “book title,” “heading” and other text feature terms. They did not write down information they learned from the books, but instead seemed to name text features of the books. She realized that “this whole idea of text features was really strongly set in their head, you know, before we started this unit” and while students were able to name a wide variety of text features, the students lacked the knowledge of the function of nonfiction
text features. Consequently, Mrs. Kona shifted her instruction in order to teach what she saw as the two purposes of nonfiction: to convey information, and as a map to find information in the book.

**Text features convey information.** During a large group read aloud, Mrs. Kona, pulled out Gail Gibbon’s (1990) *Weather Words and What They Mean*, did a picture-walk through the book, and asked her students:

Now sometimes the words are big and I think there’s a reason Gail Gibbons made them like that. Why do you think she made some of them big and then some of them smaller? What do we know about that when we’re looking at a nonfiction text? What does that usually mean?

Not all the students were able to answer the question. One student mentioned that they thought words were bolded to help the reader see the words better. Another group mentioned that the words were bolded because “they were important” but were not able to say why those words were important. Students named and recognized text features in nonfiction, however, did not seem to know or understand the purpose of the features.

When she noticed the students were unable to locate information in the book, Mrs. Kona decided to conduct another mini-lesson. Mrs. Kona started off the mini-lesson by revealing why she was changing her instruction. “I thought I needed to kind of help you narrow [understanding what the nonfiction text features can teach you about weather] down a little bit.” She created two different worksheets to help the students learn how to read the nonfiction text features.
Figure 3 shows a worksheet where the students selected a nonfiction book, checked off the text features they found in the book, and had to write up what they learned by looking at that text feature.

She tried to convey that nonfiction supplies information in a very specific way through text features, telling her students, “Text features in nonfiction books many times help us find the information we need.” For her students to read nonfiction, they needed to be able to understand the textual structures of nonfiction and how to use those structures to their advantage when reading.
During large group read aloud time, she would stop and point out the text features in the books and explain how that feature conveyed information. When reading *Martin Luther King Jr.* (Mara, 2009), Mrs. Kona pointed to the glossary and told the students “it gives you the definitions” of words in the book. She pointed out the index and headings, explaining the role of each to her students, saying “That’s why we have text features, so we can find the information we need when we need it.” When she introduced the book *Clouds* (Saunders-Smith, 2000) in a reading group, she did a picture walk and had the following conversation with her students:

Mrs. Kona: Let’s open it up. We’re just going to kind of look through real quick…So, we’re going to learn about that, about how clouds, how they change and look differently… And look here at the title, the heading, “How a Cloud Forms and Changes,” Interesting. That’s going to be an interesting page for us to look at. Okay, turn again. There’s another great photograph of how cloud can look…And then here, I see a bold word. What’s that bold word?

Student: Meteorologist

Mrs. Kona: Oh, so this might help you, because you’re going to be learning about meteorologist. Okay, here’s another meteorologist on the next page, and he’s studying a certain kind of cloud formation: Hurricanes. All right? Here’s a caption. It says, ‘This satellite picture shows huge hurricane clouds spinning and swirling around.’ And there’s a bold word here…And what’s nice is they give us a little way to pronounce it. Do you see the—right next to
In this scenario, she pointed out the text features to help the students see that the text features were supplying information in the book. However, even in the midst of her instruction, she still felt that students were having trouble understanding how the text features convey information. During an interview a quarter of the way through the unit she told me:

Now what’s going to be interesting now [about the rest of the unit] is, because I’ve found this happened too, if they have a nonfiction book, and they’re looking for specific information, like if they can tell you, oh, this is the table of contents, they still don’t know how to use them. Do you know what I’m saying? Like, they still, they’ll say, oh yeah, table of contents, …so if they start looking for what is tornado safety,…they’re really going to know how to go to a book and find [that information].

She went on to reference the CCSS on standard Literacy.RI.2.5 “Know and use various text features (e.g., captions, bold prints, subheadings, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text efficiently” and said that she felt that she needed to spend more time on helping the students understand the purpose of nonfiction text features.

As a result, Mrs. Kona also had lessons explicitly teaching the students about specific visual and textual nonfiction features and how to use them for information gathering. One such lesson focused on diagrams in nonfiction books. Showing a diagram of a volcano, she pointed out the labels, the cut-aways, the use of color, and the arrows pointing to
different sections of the volcano. Stressing that the diagram is “trying to communicate information,” the students learned about the formation of the volcano and the flow of lava by looking at the diagram. After this lesson, students put their learning into practice, locating a diagram in a book, writing down what they saw, and explaining what they learned from the diagram. Hazel and Zoe noticed that their diagram of a hurricane was trying to tell them exactly how a hurricane forms. They understood the arrows were pointing out the churning water and the captions were explaining about the eye of the hurricane. These features helped them understand the information. Yet, there were times when Mrs. Kona, after a mini-lesson and class discussion on text features, would look over at me and say, “I don’t know if they are understanding this,” worrying about whether students were really grasping these characteristics of the genre.

**Text features as maps to find information.** Mrs. Kona also emphasized that these text features are a way to help readers find information. During her large group read alouds with her students, Mrs. Kona shared that readers would typically read fiction books from cover to cover but “sometimes when you’re reading nonfiction books, you don’t read the book all the way from the beginning to the end.” Thus, during a large group read aloud of *Weather Words and What They Mean* (Gibbons, 1990), Mrs. Kona shared how she found information in the text:

> And, this is one thing I do like about nonfiction texts. Sometimes you can just go to the information you need. This one [*Weather Words and What They Mean* (Gibbons, 1990)] I had to just kind of flip through because there wasn’t really an index or a table of contents. Because Gail Gibbons organized it in such a way that the rain, the weather words are really big—they are all capital letters, and I can
look at them real quick. Plus, the picture helped. This one, I was able to go right to this page, um, again, because it was, you know, kind of a big heading, but there’s also, in the questions, which is kind of like the table of contents, I knew it was going to be in here so…

During two other large group read-alouds she again modeled using the text features of a nonfiction book to find information. Once, while holding up the book *Why Does Lightning Strike?* (Martin, 1996) and flipping through the pages of the book she talked her students through her thought process of finding information on rainbows by saying, “Then, in this book *Weather*, I actually used the index, and I looked up rainbows,…and they gave me several page numbers. So I went to the first ones, 48-49, and I found this [page].” Later, she used the same instructional strategy with *DK Eyewitness Book: Weather* (Cosgrove, 2007), when she told her students:

I was looking for information about fog. I found this *Eyewitness Book: Weather* (Cosgrove, 2007), and what I did was I first looked in the beginning, and the table of contents to see, and I did find on page 22, “fog” and “mist.” So I went there, to page 22, and I found this…and yesterday, we talked about the fact that fog is a cloud that formed right at ground level. So it was kind of fun to think about that you walked into school yesterday through a cloud.

Modeling this behavior was a common occurrence for Mrs. Kona. Since she used nonfiction books in her instruction that included various amounts of text features, she wanted to help her students understand that if a certain book did not have a specific text feature they could still use other text features to help them locate information. She had
this discussion while reading Seymour Simon’s (2002) *Super Storms* to find information on thunder and lightning.

Mrs. Kona: So, I have this book right here called [Super] Storms. All right…I’m going to check the table of contents. Now, if your nonfiction book doesn’t have a table of contents what could you do? What would be another option? Can you turn and talk to your partner?

Jillian: So you would probably look in the index.

Mrs. Kona: You could check an index. Now…in my book, there isn’t an index. Is there anything else you could look for quickly that might help you find your topic or what you’re going to try and answer, your question?

Louise: The glossary

Zak: A heading

Mrs. Kona: There could be a heading. And this book has lots of headings. So, all right. So, thunder and lightning.

She stresses this concept again during a conference with Leo and Emmet about the nonfiction book they were creating. The boys were reading *The Story of Snow: The Science of Winter’s Wonder* (Cassino, 2009), looking for information about snow to go in their nonfiction book on blizzards. Mrs. Kona met with them to see how they were doing in reading and finding information in the book. She had the following conversation with the boys:

Mrs. Kona: What’s your first question?

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Emmet: What makes snow?

Mrs. Kona: …Now, this is a book we learned doesn’t have a table of contents or an index. But what does it have that makes it so helpful?

Leo: Headings

Mrs. Kona: Headings and big words. So, let’s see if there’s anything that says something about snow.

Mrs. Kona, Emmet and Leo proceeded to flip through the book and read the headings on each page. Using the headings to guide them, they eventually stopped at a page that talked about how snow is formed and found information to answer their question, “What makes snow?”

The students came into the unit with an understanding of the variety of text features but Mrs. Kona realized that she needed to spend time on helping the students understand the dual purpose of text features in nonfiction: to convey information and as a map to find information in the book. In fact, when asked about how they knew a book would tell them about rain or snow or fog, students would point at the Table of Contents and tell me, “The information is right here.”

**Teaching Nonfiction through Content**

One day Mrs. Kona took her students to the school’s computer lab to spend on hour on an online program named BookFlix. Mrs. Kona used BookFlix as a real-world example of matching a fiction and a nonfiction book, which provided the inspiration for her students’ final project. Scholastic BookFlix is an online resource that pairs video picturebooks with grade-appropriate nonfiction ebooks.
For example, one such pairing is *Click, Clack, Moo* (Cronin, 2000) with *Let's Visit a Diary Farm* (Sweeney, 2006). Each page is displayed and virtually flipped on the screen and students follow along as an audio narrator reads the book. The students used their own login information to access the program and select book pairings to listen to and read. They were asked to complete a worksheet (Figure 4) comparing and contrasting the two books.

![Worksheet](image)

**Figure 4. Worksheet comparing the books in BookFlix**

On that same worksheet was two short answer questions, “Why are these books paired together?” and “How does the nonfiction book help you enjoy and understand the fiction book?” While the students were working, we noticed that some students’ book
pairs where in fact two nonfiction books, specifically two biographies, such as Doreen Rappaport’s (2001) *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* and *Martin Luther King Jr* by Wil Mara (2002). This was the start of another shift in Mrs. Kona’s instruction as she began to respond to her students and teach on what she saw as the defining factor of nonfiction: content that is true and not made up.

**Obstacles to understanding.** Through individual conversations with students, Mrs. Kona and I realized the students were considering the biographies like *Martin’s Big Words* (Rappaport, 2007) and *Rosa* (Giovanni, 2007) as fiction. These biographies were illustrated with collage and abstract art, did not contain many, if any, text features, and were written in a more narrative or poetic style. The biographies these books were paired with, *Martin Luther King Jr.* (Mara, 2002) and *Rosa Parks* (Mara, 2007), respectively, visually looked like picturebooks that the students commonly associated as nonfiction because of the straight-forward expository text, photographs, and the use of various text features. After the students’ time was complete in the computer lab Mrs. Kona told me that she felt the whole class needed a lesson on the differences between the two books. Reacting to the students’ misunderstandings, she decided to spend more time investigating the two books about Martin Luther King Jr. She wanted her students to question the characteristics and content of the books.

In the rest of this section, I will do two things. First, I will explain how this lesson prompted Mrs. Kona to help her students understand nonfiction by focusing on the content of the genre. Secondly, I will describe how Mrs. Kona helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction by teaching the content of nonfiction.
**Characteristics of nonfiction.** Starting with Mara’s (2002) text because, as she later told me, the students recognized it as more visibly nonfiction than Rapapport’s (2007) book, Mrs. Kona played the book and frequently stopped to tell the students, “I want you to think about what you already know [about nonfiction].” She thought aloud, pointing out text features and referring to previous texts and experiences learning about Martin Luther King Jr., “…That’s like the glossary…And we just had that celebration. That was the reason we didn't have school that day was to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” After the students watched the book she asked them, “What kind of book would you say it is?”

The conversation that followed between the teacher and her students revealed the fallacy in what the students were thinking about what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction.

Mrs. Kona: What would you say it is?

Student: It’s real.

Mrs. Kona: Do you think it’s true?

Student: Yeah.

Mrs. Kona: Okay, So what do you know about books that are true? What kind of book is it?

Student: Nonfiction

Mrs. Kona: You think it’s a nonfiction book. And what makes you think that?

Student: That it was [the book used] photographs.

When the student said that the book was nonfiction because it had photographs, Mrs. Kona did not correct him or ask for further explanation. Instead, she opened up the conversation to the class, asking them to name other characteristics of nonfiction books. Using their prior knowledge of nonfiction and fiction books, the students’ responses
showed that the recognized a visual difference between fiction books and nonfiction books. One student pointed out that the book is nonfiction because the text is on white paper and the words are placed on different places on the page. He compared the book to storybooks where the paper tends to be different colors and the words are either at the top or the bottom of the page. This student noticed a textual difference between the two genres. Leo recognized that the way information was displayed on a page was different from fiction and nonfiction, telling the class:

I know a way to know [the difference between fiction and nonfiction] because like stories take up, like when you turn the page, it’s where you left off. But, in a nonfiction book, it [the text] stops and when you turn the page it is like about a different thing.

Another student noticed vocabulary differences, stating that the words in nonfiction are sometimes bigger, sound different, and “have meaning.” One girl said the book was true because they (the students) still celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Students were making connections with what they already knew and continued weighing what they believed to be a rationale for making a nonfiction book nonfiction against Mara’s book. The students never mentioned the content of the book as a deciding characteristic, and Mrs. Kona never affirmed or negated what the students offered as explanation. After this brief discussion about why Mara’s book was nonfiction, Mrs. Kona played Rappaport’s (2007) Martin’s Big Words.

**Recognizing the content.** When the book was finished, Mrs. Kona confirmed that the first book was nonfiction and then asked the students to tell her a couple of things that were the same in both books. She wanted the students to supply information about the
content of each book. The students were able to do this, noting that both books included King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, King’s multiple marches, the cause he was trying to fight for, and personal information. Once Mrs. Kona established factual connections between the two books, she again asked the students about the genre and the following conversation happened:

Mrs. Kona: What would you say it is?
Ezekiel: Fiction
Ezekiel: It’s like not real.
Student: Like the picture is painted

Several other students chimed in agreement and continued the discussion that Martin’s Big Words (Rappaport, 2007) is fiction because it does not have photographs. Again, the students expressed the notion that nonfiction as a genre that does not have painted pictures. Painted pictures is what makes a book “not real”. In response, Mrs. Kona backtracked, asking the students:

Okay. Now, wait a minute. Let’s think about this. We just talked about the information in both books, right? Did the information match? So was the information true in this [Mara’s text] book? Did this book [Rapapport’s text] match this book [Mara’s text] and the information?

The students responded yes to all of her questions, and when she asked them what they knew about Mara’s text the students responded that the book was nonfiction. Mrs. Kona tried to create a connection in understanding again, asking the student that if that
book is nonfiction and the information in Rapapport’s book matched Mara’s, “What’s confusing you that is making you think that [Rapapport’s] book is fiction?” Again the students mentioned that the painted pictures made them think the book was fiction.

The students were confused by what they knew about nonfiction and were using their own background knowledge—incorrect or correct—to fill in the gaps of their understanding. After the above lesson, Mrs. Kona and I talked about where the students were coming up with this idea that nonfiction equals photographs or that nonfiction equals text features. Mrs. Kona reflected back on her own teaching practices when she taught first grade and admitted that when she taught nonfiction she only focused on the text features of the book, teaching that those text features supply information, never emphasizing the differences in content between the two genres. She wondered whether the current first grade teachers were also teaching nonfiction in the manner and asked, “Are we doing it all wrong?” She brought up the Common Core State Standards and said that the first grade standards ask that students, “Know and use various text features to locate key facts or information in a text” but it isn’t until 2nd grade that the standards state that children should know “the main purpose of the text.” Mrs. Kona wondered if it would better serve the students if the students focused on the purpose of nonfiction over text features.

It was at this moment that Mrs. Kona realized that her unit would not follow the “neat,” sequential order that she originally envisioned. She had to respond to these misunderstandings, and by doing so, reflected on her instructional practices up to this point. Acknowledging that her earlier lessons on finding text features and looking up weather related content may have perpetuated the students’ reliance on the idea that what
makes a nonfiction book nonfiction is its text features, Mrs. Kona changed gears and decided to now focus on helping her students understand what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction. She wanted her students to read and question the texts and in her instruction she began to stress that the most important thing in understanding the genre of nonfiction was studying and questioning the content of the book.

The exploration between the two Martin Luther King Jr. books continued as Mrs. Kona engaged in a concluding question and answer dialogue with her students:

Mrs. Kona: So here’s some big learning right now, that just because a book has paintings or drawings does not necessarily make it fiction or nonfiction. What makes it fiction or nonfiction is what it’s about. Okay, so if we think about these two books, what are both books about?

Students: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr!

Mrs. Kona: Do they both have true facts in them?

Students: Yes!

Mrs. Kona: Things that really happened?

Students: Yes

Mrs. Kona: So both books are what?

Students: Nonfiction

Mrs. Kona: Nonfiction! That’s right. Biographies are nonfiction books, even if they have drawings in them. You can decide if it is fiction or nonfiction by reading the book.
At this point, the students left to go to lunch. Mrs. Kona and I were able to talk about the above activity. In our discussion, Mrs. Kona brought up that she was not aware that the students had these confusions and she needed to model careful and close reading of nonfiction books to help the students understand what they needed to do in deciding the genre of the book. She began to refer to her students as researchers and said that they, as researchers, needed to know how to determine whether the content of a book is on factual information.

**Developmental appropriateness.** A few days after the BookFlix Lesson on Martin Luther King Jr., Mrs. Kona came to me for advice. While she found the BookFlix Lesson revelatory, she was frustrated because she felt some of her students still did not “get it.” A few of them were still equating nonfiction with books that only had text features like a table of contents, glossary, index, and headings. Others still adhered to the belief that nonfiction only has photographs. Even with the lessons on the differences, and her reiterations of what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction, and acknowledgment of how far some of her students had come in their understanding of nonfiction, Mrs. Kona wondered, “Is this too difficult for them to understand?” She brought up the idea that maybe the CCSS are not developmentally appropriate. In the first and second grades, the CCSS asks teachers to teach students about text features, and “should the CCSS state ‘differentiate between fiction and nonfiction’” before teaching text features? “Are we putting the cart before the horse?” when it comes to our students developmental abilities to learn and cognitively understand these things.

We discussed the research showing that children as early as Kindergarten recognize the structural differences between fiction and nonfiction (Pappas, 1991; 1993; 2006) and
began to question the validity of those studies: “Is that just surface level understanding?”

Our conversation soon shifted back to Mrs. Kona’s students and what she could do to help them. We came up with an idea comparing a variety of nonfiction books, using books that had illustrations, no text-features, and a narrative writing style. Would the students be able to focus on the content of those books instead of the visual features of the book?

*Studying the content of nonfiction books.* Each pair of students was given three nonfiction books. As she passed out the books, Mrs. Kona made sure they knew that every book they were looking at was nonfiction. The students were given books that had photographs, books did not have photographs, and books with various amounts of text features, if any. Mrs. Kona and I purposefully chose a wide sampling of nonfiction books. The students were asked to read each book and fill out a chart. Figure 5 shows an example chart Mrs. Kona completed during a modeling exercise before the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Pictures</th>
<th>Text Features</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Cloud Book</td>
<td>Tomie De Paola</td>
<td>Drawings</td>
<td>Title index</td>
<td>Different types of clouds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Pictures</th>
<th>Text Features</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weather Forecasting</td>
<td></td>
<td>Photographs Drawings</td>
<td>Table of contents Bold face words Glossary Headings Diagrams Maps captions</td>
<td>This book is about how people predict the weather.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Reproduction worksheet comparing the content of nonfiction books
worked on their own.

One book she spent a lot of time discussing was *The Cloud Book* (DePaola, 1984). She started by asking, “When you very first saw it [*The Cloud Book*], before we started doing all this in-depth look at this stuff, did anybody think that’s probably a fiction book?” The entire class raised their hand in answer to her question. When she asked them why they thought it was fiction, the students said it was because of the illustrations and the lack of traditional text features. She read the book for the class, frequently stopping and asking students to compare the information in the book to their knowledge about clouds from previous readings and class activities. When she finished she asked, “Was the information—do you feel it was true and factual?” The students had to support their answers and they decided the book was indeed true and factual. At the end of her mini-lesson she asked the question she had been asking throughout the unit: “What’s the most important thing? The biggest thing that will help you know if it is a nonfiction book, is if you look at the content.” The students then had the opportunity to work with their partner on the worksheet, following the same methods that Mrs. Kona modeled. At the end of the lesson she brought the class back to the carpet and, again, reviewed the ideas that not all nonfiction books have to have a table of contents or photographs, instead, as a researcher and a reader, you need to focus on the content.

At the end of the unit after all of Mrs. Kona’s lessons emphasizing the content, Jillian told me that she has to ask a book questions to determine whether it is fiction or nonfiction: “You’re looking for either, and this helps you,…you have to see would this really be true?... You kind have to see it in your head first.” Jillian went on to explain that just because you open a book and it has fact boxes or labels and you can guess that it is
trying to tell you real information, you still have to question the book because, “the content is the big thing about nonfiction and fiction books. It doesn’t matter if there’s drawings or photographs, it doesn't matter if there’s a title name, doesn’t matter what the pictures are like, it matters what the content is.”

**Teaching Nonfiction through Linking Fiction and Nonfiction**

Another way that Mrs. Kona taught nonfiction was by using both fiction and nonfiction together. She used nonfiction to support student understanding of a fiction book. When I asked her why she did this, she told me about her own reading practices, referring to how reading *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (Sixsmith, 2010) caused her to stop and look up other nonfiction sources to help her understand why Irish nuns back in the early 20th century forced young women to give up their children. This experience of reading nonfiction to help fill in the gap of her own understandings on a topic caused her to think about how her students might benefit from this same support. She then referenced both *The Magic Treehouse Fact Trackers* and the BookFlix program, stating that both the series and the program pair nonfiction with fiction as a way to provide additional information to the fictional content, and she believed that combining the genres would be helpful to her students. She stated:

Well, you know, my whole reason for using fiction with this study was I felt like the fiction does a good job of helping them relate to their own lives. It brings it down that they can connect it to their own life experiences—like the topics of weather… And so I felt like the fiction, once we had helped clarify a little bit about what constitutes nonfiction, the fiction then, I don’t know if for me, if that really helped clarify, going back and forth between the two might have done it. But my bigger goal with using
fiction was to help them connect it to their everyday lives. And that’s what I feel the fiction did a really good job of. You know, I could read and share, or they could read about a nonfiction concept, fog, but, if they saw fog in their daily lives, or if they had a story about fog, then it was like, oh (nodding).

Because of these beliefs, Mrs. Kona chose to use nonfiction and fiction in combination in two ways in her classroom. She combined fiction and nonfiction during her large group read alouds and she had her students create a nonfiction book to support a fiction book.

**Nonfiction and fiction during read alouds.** During the study, Mrs. Kona would gather her students to the carpet after recess, show the cover of a nonfiction book, and begin to read a passage—not the whole book, and frequently selecting an excerpt from the middle of the book—that would provide background for a topic they were about to read in a fiction book. For example, she read *Feel the Wind* (Dorros, 2000) to give the students some context as to the wind that was referenced in the fiction book, *The Wind Blew* (Hutchins, 2012). She thought this was important for two reasons: It made the nonfiction texts more accessible, and it provided background information.

**Accessibility.** After sharing a fiction and nonfiction book, Mrs. Kona stressed during an interview that she was trying to create a connection between the nonfiction texts and the fiction. The reason why she used both books in a read aloud is because, “it’s natural for us all to connect information through an experience. And yet, I, especially when you’re learning about something. I mean,…I really feel that to understand a topic, you know, whether it’s historical or science you have to connect it to something you already know or understand.” Using an example of thunderstorms, Mrs. Kona stated that if she
shared a fiction book about children being caught up in a thunderstorm, her students would connect to that experience, which will help them connect to the content in a nonfiction book about thunderstorms. She goes on to say, “that’s what I feel like the fiction does. It makes the nonfiction text more accessible” and it is why she uses the books together to provide background information.

When she began to read *Before the Storm* (Yolen, 1995), she started by creating a connection from the text to the students as a way to help the students understand why she wanted to make a connection between the content of the book. She modeled making personal connections by thinking out loud for her students. Mrs. Kona shared about her time growing up in the summer and feeling hot and sticky. She modeled a connection between the children in the book and her own upbringing, telling her students:

But the kids in this story? I don’t think they have air-conditioning. I don’t know—it’s an inference I’m making because, based on the story, I know that from growing up, and from right now, being an adult that when it’s really hot and sticky outside, I go inside to cool off. These kids don’t end up going inside. So it makes me wonder if they have air conditioning. I don’t know. That’s just an inference I am making on my experience and what happens in the book.

Mrs. Kona went on to tell her students that she wants to know more about why the weather would be so hot and sticky outside. She referenced an earlier experiment the students did regarding hot and cold air, and told the students that now that they know it was “so hot and sticky” in the book, they need to read some nonfiction to learn more about this weather. She felt this was an example of accessibility because the students were making a connection with something they have had experience with: hot and sticky
weather and thunderstorms, to the factual knowledge of how those weather conditions are formed. According to Mrs. Kona, their prior experiences made it easier for them to understand the information about thunderstorms. I will talk about this more in the next section.

**Background information.** Beyond making nonfiction more accessible to her students, Mrs. Kona also used nonfiction and fiction together in read alouds in order to provide background information. When she began to read the fiction book *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* (Shaw, 1988) she told her students:

> But before I read to you about clouds, I want to share some information about clouds. And the book I’m going to use is a book we’ve used before, *Weather Words [and What They Mean]* by Gail Gibbons…So I’m going to read you a few pages, and then I may show you some things. So be really good listeners because this will help you. Okay, it will help you understand the book I’m going to read, which is this one [*It Looked Like Spilt Milk*]…

She proceeded to read a few pages that talked about clouds. She pointed out pictures and headings that mentioned types of clouds and she also highlighted specific vocabulary the students might not have been familiar with, like “fair weather.” She also asked the students questions about the nonfiction science information, “What do we know when clouds start really coming together?” After she spent time going through the nonfiction text she began her read aloud of *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* (Shaw, 1988) by saying, “So now I’m going to read *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*. I want you to think about what kind of clouds are these. Are they cumulus?” While reading the fiction book the students began
to question whether the animal shapes in *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* (Shaw, 1988) were actually cumulonimbus or nimbostratus clouds based on what Mrs. Kona just read earlier.

Mrs. Kona continued using nonfiction books to provide background information throughout the unit. Before she read *Before the Storm* (Yolen, 1995), she began by doing a quick picture walk of the book, pointing out that it is supposed to be a really hot, sticky day and the characters in the book are anticipating a storm. She then read a section from a Time for Kids book, *Storms*, (Editors of Time for Kids, 2006) stating, “Let’s see what this book has to say about storms.” Once she read the excerpt, she asked her students to think of things they might look for in the sky or feel in the air before a storm might strike. She then picked up a fiction book and told the students, “I’m going to ask you at the end of the story, what were the conditions leading up to the storm? Ok? So be thinking about that.” She used the nonfiction book as a way to fill in the gaps that students’ may have had when reading the fiction book.
Mrs. Kona followed similar procedures with eight other texts. Table 2 lists the fiction and nonfiction texts that she used during a read aloud to inform each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction book</th>
<th>Background Information Provided</th>
<th>Nonfiction book</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>It’s Summer</em> (Glaser, 2003)</td>
<td>Rainbows</td>
<td><em>Weather Words and What They Mean</em> (Gibbons, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>And the Sun Came Out…And the Rain Came Out</em> (Dragonwagon, 2003)</td>
<td>Rain</td>
<td><em>Rainy days (What’s the weather?)</em> (d’Aubuisson, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Farmer John’s Tractor</em> (Sutton, 2013)</td>
<td>Flood</td>
<td><em>Flood! (Natural Disasters)</em> (Bauer, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Blizzard</em> (Rocco, 2014)</td>
<td>Blizzard</td>
<td><em>Snow and Blizzards</em> (Hardyman, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Twister!</em> (Beard, 2003)</td>
<td>Tornadoes</td>
<td><em>Tornadoes</em> (Burby, 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Fiction and Nonfiction books that inform each other

**Creating a nonfiction book to support a fiction book.** Additionally, Mrs. Kona thought pairing a fiction and nonfiction book together provided a “real world model” for her students. Because of her beliefs in Project Based Learning and the importance it places on providing real-world problems to help students critically think and problem solve, she wanted to provide an example of pairing the two genres that her students could understand. Consequently, she found the BookFlix program with its pairing of fiction and nonfiction books to provide that example. She continued, saying:
And so my goal was, okay, that’s our real world model, because I think when you do something like this project based learning and they have a task to complete, they have to do the real work, they have to, there has to be something out there they’re trying to construct. That really makes sense in the real world.

Because Mrs. Kona felt combining the two texts helped the students by providing a greater understanding of how nonfiction books support their understandings of real events, people, places, and things she wanted the students to put this understanding in practice by creating their own nonfiction books. I will talk more about this process of creating nonfiction in the next section.

**Teaching Nonfiction through process**

Mrs. Kona did not have the students begin the process of creating their own nonfiction books till March. The unit took several steps that I will summarize below.

First, Mrs. Kona and the school librarian selected 15 fiction picturebooks that discussed a weather related topic. The students, divided into pairs, took turns selecting one of the available fiction books. Table 3 lists the fiction picturebooks selected by the students. (One pair selected a nonfiction book, the biography *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998).) Secondly, the students read the book and wrote down three to five questions they had about the weather related aspects of the book. For example, Jillian and Louise chose Sarvinder Naberhaus’s *Boom Boom* (2014), and recorded the following research questions: How do the seasons change? What makes the seasons? and What are the seasons? Once they had their questions, the students began researching several nonfiction books on their weather related topic in order to find answers to their questions. Mrs. Kona, drawing from Pappas, Varelas, Gill, Ortiz, and Keblawe-Shamah’s (2009)
directive in their study on multimodal books in science-literacy units, gave her students the following directions for creating their nonfiction books:

Your book should include both writing and drawing. It should look like the nonfiction books we read that have print and pictures. You can use your science journals, diagrams, word lists, news magazines, graphic organizers, and any of the weather work we completed in class, the work you collected in your red folder, to help you answer your research questions. This should be a book with your words and research—not something you copied word by word from a published book.

With that directive and their notes from the nonfiction books they read, the students, as authors, created an outline of their book, then a sloppy copy, moving to a rough draft, and then finally, their final copy of the book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Fiction Book or Biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice and Sophia</td>
<td><em>The Rain Came Down</em> (Shannon, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeke and Jason</td>
<td><em>The Snowy Date</em> (Keats, 1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey and Mikey</td>
<td><em>Groundhog Weather School</em> (Holub, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ and JT</td>
<td><em>Brave Irene</em> (Steig, 1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jillian and Louise</td>
<td><em>Boom Boom</em> (Naberhaus, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo and Emmet</td>
<td><em>The Terrible Storm</em> (Hurst, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel and Zoe</td>
<td><em>Thunder Cake</em> (Polacco, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace and Niki</td>
<td><em>Snowflake Bentley</em> (Martin, 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin and Zak</td>
<td><em>Twister</em> (Beard, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis, Bryson, Ezekiel</td>
<td><em>Blizzard</em> (Rocco, 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. *Students' fiction book or biography*

When she taught nonfiction through the process of creating it, she felt her students were not only more invested in their learning about nonfiction and about the weather related topic but also, ultimately, understood the genre of nonfiction in a more complex
way. She contrasted this project with what she called typical lecturing and examples and said that making the books required the students to use the genre, “They had to live it, you know. And I think they had a very natural curiosity about some of these topics.” While the fiction piece “helped remind them of how weather plays a role in their lives…it’s like a background experience,” creating the nonfiction piece gave them that knowledge they needed to understand their topic.

Through the process of making nonfiction, Mrs. Kona continued to teach about nonfiction. She positioned her students as both researchers and authors. As researchers, the students read a variety of nonfiction books, taking note of both how information was conveyed and what information was being told. They created weather questions, collected data, and conducted experiments. For example, JT and AJ asked the questions, “What is wind?” and “When is it windy?” Beyond reading information about wind in nonfiction books, the boys made a windsock, placed it on a tree outside their classroom, observed it daily, and kept a journal where they recorded windy days. Louis, Bryson, and Ezekiel created questions about blizzards, and asked how snow fell from the sky. This led them to an explanation of the water cycle so they conducted an experiment where they created a water cycle in a baggie. They hung their baggies on the classroom window and daily observed the three major phases of the water cycle. They then used this information to help them answer their question about snow.

As authors, the students had to make creative decisions on how to write and display information in their nonfiction books. They had to examine the text features in the nonfiction books shared information. Mrs. Kona would ask the students to put on their researcher hats or author hats as they went to work on their books in their “offices.” She
considered herself the editor of the project and was there to help the students. As she
taught nonfiction, three themes emerged while she helped students understand nonfiction
as it related to their creation of the books: 1) Nonfiction answers questions, 2) Nonfiction
conveys information, and 3) Nonfiction is considerate.

**Nonfiction answers questions.** When Mrs. Kona would begin her large group read
alouds with a fiction book she asked her students if they had any questions regarding the
fiction passage. She read *Daisy Dawson on the Farm* (Voake, 2013), and wondered what
happened when there is a water shortage in a community. Her students wondered how the
characters were going to survive with no water in the pond and also wondered what the
animals could do to get water back in the dried out pond. They had a lot of questions
about drought and how it affects animals and human. At this point, Mrs. Kona pulled out
*Sizzle: A Book About Heat Waves* (Thomas, 2005), and told the class that they may be
able to find answers to their questions in this nonfiction book. She emphasized that
nonfiction answers questions students may have about a topic, and followed this format
for all of her read alouds that included fiction and nonfiction.

Additionally, when the students began the process of creating their nonfiction books,
Mrs. Kona stressed that their nonfiction books needed to answer questions. During a
lesson she told her students, “We’re going to decide, ‘What’s the question?’ For example,
‘What is the wind or what is a blizzard?’” She positioned her students as authors and
researches by asking them to think about how the nonfiction books were going to answer
the questions they had about their weather topic.

After reading the fiction book *Before the Storm* (Yolen, 1995), she asked her
students:
What would be a topic that might be studied for a non-fiction book to pair with this? …Now, if you were a kid—let’s say you were going to try and help a kindergartener learn about thunderstorms, what would be three questions that you could ask in a nonfiction book [that you will create]?... think of questions for thunderstorms that might help a kindergartener understand thunderstorms.

Her students responded with a variety of questions, “Why do thunderstorms happen? Why does it rain? How does lightning happen?” Mrs. Kona followed up this conversation by telling her students that if they created a nonfiction book to pair with Before the Storm (Yolen, 1995), it would answer the questions they had, because “nonfiction gives information to the questions we have.”

**Nonfiction conveys information.** In addition to teaching that nonfiction conveys information, the students also learned that nonfiction conveys information in a variety of ways. Mrs. Kona told me that it was important for her to teach this because when her students created their nonfiction book she wanted them to be able to clearly answer and explain the answers to their questions they created. Like “real nonfiction authors” her students needed to think about how they wanted to “get the information across.” She taught her students that in the process of making authorial decisions they needed to convey information through text features and that information needed to be relayed in their own words.

**Information conveyed through text features.** Mrs. Kona shared that in the process of creating the nonfiction books that she wanted to be careful that her students still understood that what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction is the content is about factual information in which nothing is made up. She wanted to make sure that the students
understood that the use of text features is one aspect of nonfiction books, and is used as a means of communicating the real information. She told her students:

   With your partner, you’re thinking about how am I going to create a nonfiction text that teaches someone about those things? What’s it going to look like? That’s where you can find a nonfiction book…you’re going to look and see how did they organize the information, right? How did they make it—how did they help me understand? Did they have some labels and some arrows? Did they have an explanation?

   When Mrs. Kona read nonfiction books during read alouds she would point out how the information was communicated via text features. Reading an *Eyewitness Explorers: Weather Book* (Farndon, 1998), she told her students, “I think it is interesting, when you look at these illustrations, you might think a little how in your nonfiction book, if you’re doing a diagram or an illustration what you are trying to tell your readers.” The use of text features as a means of conveying information became a way for her students to make sure their readers would be able to find and understand the information in their nonfiction books. Mrs. Kona continually stressed that her students, as authors, needed to be thinking of how they could organize the information to “make it easier for someone to read and understand the science concepts you’re trying to teach.”
As a result, her students, during the construction of their nonfiction books, were intentional about how they were going to display and share information. For example, when discussing his rough draft with Mrs. Kona, Calvin was considering the use of a

![Calvin's diagram of a tornado](image)

Figure 6. Calvin's diagram of a tornado
diagram to show the parts of a tornado. When Mrs. Kona asked him why he was using a diagram instead of writing the information in a paragraph he replied, “Well, because, ‘cause for me, it’s a lot more helpful where I can actually see like how they collide kind of.” (Figure 6.)

Leo and Emmet had a similar discussion when drafting their nonfiction book on blizzards. They told Mrs. Kona that they would going to tell readers what makes snow by using a fact box so they could share “little facts throughout the book.” Additionally, they were going to create an experiment for looking at snowflakes because they saw other nonfiction books do the same (“just like a normal nonfiction book”) and it would be easier for readers to learn about snowflakes through an experiment than from reading about in a paragraph.

*Information conveyed in their own words.* Beyond conveying information through text features, Mrs. Kona also taught her students that they needed to write that information in their own words. She told them, that as authors, they needed to write the information in “your own way.” She taught the students their writing needed to sound like something they might have read in a nonfiction book but it is also “their own words.” Since authors of nonfiction do not plagiarize, her students were also expected to write their books using their own language, and were taught how to write down the information through several mini-lessons on note taking and summarizing. After the students practiced rewriting their notes she shared Zoe’s work with the class, telling the students, “Now these are Zoe’s words. These are not the author’s words. This is Zoe!” After Zoe read her sentences, Mrs. Kona asked the class, “Does that sound like the second grader Zoe?” When editing the student work during the stages of writers workshop, Mrs. Kona
would frequently ask the students if what they had written was in “their own words like authors of nonfiction books.”

**Nonfiction is considerate.** The idea of consideration came up when Mrs. Kona was trying to select nonfiction books for her students. She was struggling with the idea of text complexity as outlined by the CCSS. The purpose of reading complex texts according to the CCSS is for students to be “challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they have read. This stresses critical thinking skills that are required for success.” Moreover, the use of complex texts contributes to new modes of thought for the students. Mrs. Kona questioned the idea of complex texts when she noticed her students were having trouble understanding nonfiction. She wondered if the CCSS, in its stance to encourage the use of more complex texts neglected to consider the readability of the texts for younger readers:

> They (CCSS) want it to be a good book that kids can read and learn new information from. But sometimes people also think the book should be kind of a hard book, okay? But I don’t know that in second grade we need books that are so hard for us to read, nonfiction books that makes it really hard to understand the new science we are looking for.

She began to talk about and consider the idea of “considerate texts.” Discussing nonfiction books, Mrs. Kona wondered, “Are nonfiction authors trying to make the text not only complex but considerate of the reader?” Mrs. Kona referenced a blog she followed and said “most of what makes a nonfiction text complex is rooted in choices that the author makes that may present challenges to the reader.” This was important for Mrs. Kona because her driving question in selecting the books for her students was, “I
want to provide my students with books that are complex, maybe have new vocabulary but that are also considerate of an eight-year-old.” As a result, when her students began the process of creating their own nonfiction books, an important component of the nonfiction books was that it was considerate for their own readers. She helped her students understand the idea of consideration by talking about text consideration and the audience of the book.

**Defining text consideration.** Mrs. Kona interchanged the words “friendly” and “considerate” when talking about nonfiction books that were readable for her 2nd grade students. She wanted her students to understand the concept of considerate texts because they were to create their own considerate nonfiction text. Mrs. Kona taught her students that a considerate text had many elements to help its readers read the content of the book. A considerate text had words that were “not too hard, not too easy.” In addition, a considerate text used bold words to signify important vocabulary; did not have “too many words on the page”; used headings to show what information readers were able to read; and used diagrams and other text features that explain information. Mrs. Kona’s students also agreed that a considerate book had a picture on every page because it helped them see what they were reading.

**Audience.** Mrs. Kona wanted her students to understand that good nonfiction books are “friendly” or “considerate” because, as authors, when they wrote their books they needed to be aware of who was reading their books. The students looked at examples of nonfiction books that were lexically dense, used terminology appropriate for high school students, and had complex concepts, and the students decided that those nonfiction books were not appropriate for them as second grade readers. As a result, they realized that the
nonfiction books they wrote needed to be friendly for their classmates. Mrs. Kona told her class:

Because remember the whole idea, the number one idea, the number one idea that I want you to go away with is who is going to read this and what do I want to teach them? Are they going to be able to understand when I finish my part of the book? Thinking of your audience…the audience can either be kindergarteners, first graders, second graders… You’re going to teach somebody something that maybe they don’t know about, weather based, on your research. Someone’s got to understand it. They need to understand the words, but what kind of things are on a page that also helps people understand something besides just the words?

The students decided that pictures, diagrams, fact boxes, and headings were text features they could use that would help their audience understand the topics they were trying to teach them. When Mrs. Kona did a mini lesson with Calvin and Zak about their nonfiction book on tornadoes, she asked them, “So what are you going to do to help people learn about that?” Sam decided they needed a bar graph because it would be easier for everyone to find out about the number of tornadoes in the United States.

**Research Question:**

*How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?*

In this section, using data analysis of field notes, transcripts from small and large group instruction, and transcripts from student interviews and teacher interviews, I explain how Mrs. Kona’s observations of her second grade students’ confusions and misunderstandings resulted in a change in her instruction. She observed her students having difficulties and misconceptions with 1) the function of text features, 2) knowing
how to determine whether a book was fiction or nonfiction, and 3) the readability of nonfiction books.

**Function of text features**

When I began to answer my first research question, I described how Mrs. Kona responded to her students’ lack of understanding about the function of text features and, as a result, changed her instruction to teach two purposes of nonfiction: to convey information, and as a map to find information in the book. In this section I will describe her observations of specific student behavior and, consequently, how that observation changed her instruction.

**Teacher observations.** At the beginning of the unit, Mrs. Kona felt that her students understood that nonfiction was more than books with text features but when she dug deeper she realized they did not. They had this “idea of text features really strongly set in their head” yet they did not understand that text features convey information and are used as a map to find information. During a lesson where the students were asked to write down information they learned from text features, Zoe came up to me and whispered, as if she did not want Mrs. Kona to hear her, “What are text features?” I pulled her aside and quickly realized that while she could name a variety of text features—table of contents, maps, diagrams, glossary, and captions—she did not know the purpose of those features. Soon after it was time for the students’ recess break so I was able to share Zoe’s confession with Mrs. Kona. Interestingly, Mrs. Kona had a similar experience with another pair of students at that same time. Her students also revealed that they did not know the function or purpose of nonfiction text features. Referencing the CCSS’s expectation that students “know and use various text features” Mrs. Kona told me, based
on the experience her and I just had with her students, that if the students “start looking for ‘What is tornado safety?’ I’m not sure they’re really going to know how to go to a [nonfiction] book and find the answer to that question, which is what this [the CCSS] is referring to: ‘know and use text features to locate facts or information.’”

Mrs. Kona shared how Calvin and Zak read *Twister!* (Beard, 2003) and from their reading created the question, “What is tornado safety?” because they thought people should know what to do if a tornado comes. But, when they brought a nonfiction book to Mrs. Kona, they did not know how to look for answers to that question. Calvin flipped through the book to see if he could find the word “safety” and Zak looked for pictures that “showed safe things.” Neither boy used the table of contents, index, or other features to see if those features would help them find any information. After their quick perusal of the book they both decided that they would not be able to help them. Mrs. Kona told me she looked through the book and found a section on helping people cope with a tornado that may have helped Calvin and Zak answer their question.

**Change in instruction.** As a result, Mrs. Kona helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction by teaching them that text features convey information and are used as a map to find information in nonfiction books. The day after her discussion with Calvin and Zak about finding information relating to tornado safety and my conversation with Zoe, Mrs. Kona created a new lesson for the students on investigating nonfiction text features. She had the students do a “book dive” where they looked at a wide variety of nonfiction books and had to find various text features. Once they found a text feature they had to read it and write down what information they learned from that text feature. For example, Leo found an index in the book *Snow and Ice* (Davies &
Oldfield, 1994) and used that index to locate information on birds migrating in the winter on page 20 of the book. He learned that not all birds migrate during cold months. After the students had time working on this assignment, the class sat on the carpet and shared their findings. Leo shared what he learned about birds and also told the class that it was easy finding the information because he used the index. Emmet had a similar line of thought when he shared that he wanted to find out what snow was made of, and the table of contents in his book helped him find information that answered his question (“Ice and snow are freezing water!”). Mrs. Kona felt this lesson began to help students learn how to use the text features as a way to find information.

When Mrs. Kona’s students began to create their own nonfiction books she felt that they were able to apply and show evidence of their new understanding about text features. All of the students included textual features of some kind in their nonfiction books. Louise and Jillian told me that their book on seasons had to have a table of contents because otherwise “how will our little brothers find the information on how seasons change?” Calvin decided to create a bar graph depicting all the tornadoes in five states between the years 1962-1991. He felt that readers would have an easier and more enjoyable time reading and getting information from a bar graph versus him writing the same information in sentences. (Figure 7)
Calvin wanted his readers learn about tornadoes “in a variety of ways.” Zeke and Jason wrote in their book on snow “The rain got cold and turns into snow when it gets 32 degrees or colder.” They decided to include a diagram of a thermometer where they colored red mercury stopping at 32 degrees so people had different ways to read the information.

Figure 7. Calvin's bar graph depicting the amount of tornadoes in five states

Determining whether a book is fiction or nonfiction
In this section I describe the confusions that Mrs. Kona observed the students having in regards to understanding the structural differences between fiction and nonfiction, and the role that the author’s purpose plays in whether a book is fiction or nonfiction.

**Teacher observations.** Initial interviews with the students revealed that they believed a nonfiction book had “facts and real information in it.” However, several students also mentioned that their favorite fiction books also had facts. Alice told me that she loved the *Magic Tree House* books and said they are “kind of like fiction, but they give facts about stuff.” Calvin told me he loved historical fiction books because “they are really nonfiction. They tell you facts about history things” and he used his hands to make air quotes when he finished that thought; “but ‘it’s like already happened.’” He went on to say, “So I don’t really understand why they have the word fiction in there, but the historical part is because it already happened and it is true.” Mrs. Kona told me that these sentiments were common amongst her students. Her students would say that nonfiction books have true information in them but because some of their favorite fiction books had “true information” they had trouble differentiating between the two. The inclusion or absence of text features was shown to be the deciding factor about why a nonfiction book was nonfiction.

When Zak was handed the book *Lightning* (Edison, 2012), he said it was nonfiction because “it looks real because of its photographs.” Emmet gave the same response, and added that you have to look at the binding of the book to determine its genre. Alice told me that you can find out whether or not a book is nonfiction by checking to see “if there are some nonfiction text features you can see.” She went on to say that readers would
also need to see if there was an index, a glossary, or cool experiments, or more facts inside the book to determine its genre.

**Change in instruction.** Mrs. Kona changed her instruction in two ways. First, she addressed the structural differences between fiction and nonfiction. Secondly, she worked with students who thought fiction books were nonfiction because of the presence of factual content. In these situations she changed her instruction to talk about the author’s purpose in writing those books.

**Structural differences between fiction and nonfiction.** Mrs. Kona told me that she learned a lot about her students through their interactions with fiction and nonfiction books. When she realized that her students believed the presence of photographs and text features were the characteristics that defined whether or not a book was nonfiction she began to ask herself:

What are they paying attention to? So, you know, what part of the book are they paying attention to? And is how they’re trying to make sense of the book…is it helpful to their understanding? Or is it not? So are they just like flipping through and looking at pictures? Or are they actually trying to read…so that’s interesting to me about how that, how they access information from it.
Mrs. Kona said this questioning of the students’ reading and processing of nonfiction caused her to change her instruction. She began every lesson asking, “What’s the most important thing?” in regards to knowing if a book is nonfiction or not. “Remember, the most important thing is the content. What the book is about? This is the biggest thing that will help you know if it’s a nonfiction book, if you look at the content.” She also created a large anchor chart that was divided into two columns: Fiction and Nonfiction. (Figure 8).

This chart was filled out over the period of a few weeks. Mrs. Kona added information to either side of the column as the students came to understand the defining aspects of each genre. For example, when the students first thought nonfiction was defined by the presence or absence of photographs Mrs. Kona wrote “photographs” in the Nonfiction column. But, when the students learned that nonfiction could have illustrations she added that to the column as well. After the lesson on the two Martin Luther King Jr. biographies and additional lessons where the students looked at a wide variety of nonfiction books including those with illustrations and those that did not have text features Mrs. Kona asked her students, “What’s the most important thing?” When the students began to realize that the “most important” defining feature of nonfiction is that it contains true
One day she decided to continue to review this idea of classifying fiction and nonfiction. She put the anchor chart on the board and asked her students:

Mrs. Kona: What’s the number one reason that classifies a book as fiction and nonfiction?

Student: That nonfiction has true information and facts.

Mrs. Kona: Okay, what about fiction?

Student: It has a story from the author’s imagination.

Student: It’s about the content.

Mrs. Kona: It’s the content! It’s what’s in the book.

At this point she wrote the word “content” at the top of the chart and then put asterisks by the content sections. She hung this anchor chart in a prominent place in her classroom for her students to see, and frequently referred to it in subsequent lessons, especially when students encountered nonfiction books that did not have text features that they expected. For example, Niki noticed that *Weather Words and What They Mean* (Gibbons, 1990) did not have a table of contents. In response to this, and similar observations from students, Mrs. Kona drew more attention to the text features and their role in a nonfiction book by having the following conversation with her class:

Mrs. Kona: Can someone tell me why their book is still nonfiction even though it doesn’t have these things? Does anybody have a book that does not have photographs in it? Can you tell me why we would still consider it nonfiction?
Hazel: Um because if there’s drawings, it doesn’t matter; it’s still gotta be true information and has to have real facts.

At this point, Mrs. Kona pointed to the chart and tapped the word “content” that she had written in at the top of the chart and emphasized that the students need to be close readers of the content of the book to determine whether the book is fiction or nonfiction.

**The role of author’s purpose.** Mrs. Kona also had one-on-one conferences with her students where they spent time reading about and focusing on the content of the nonfiction book. One day Leo told Mrs. Kona that he just read two nonfiction books in the BookFlix program. One book was a nonfiction book titled *A Shark Pup Grows Up* (Zollman, 2005) and the other book was the fiction book, *The Great White Man-Eating Shark* (Mahy, 1990).

Mrs. Kona and Leo sat side by side at a small table. She started the conversation by asking Leo what he thought about *The Great White Man-Eating Shark* (Mahy, 1990). Leo told Mrs. Kona that the story was nonfiction “because it tells you, like, what to do if you are, like, nose-to-nose with a shark or if you see a dorsal fin when you’re in the water.” He was enthralled with the safety tips provided—“leave in a quiet and dignified way”—and even recognized the description of the shark, has having sharp teeth and a pointy head, as being realistic. Mrs. Kona later told me she knew she could not just tell him the book was fiction because, in a way, he was correct, there was true information provided in the story. Instead, she began by asking him about the subgenre of realistic fiction. He acknowledged that in realistic fiction books some of the situations could actually happen, but probably would not. They continued by talking about the content of the story. She began to direct him towards author’s purpose, asking him, “What’s this story about?” He
responded that the purpose was to teach kids what to do if a shark is near you. They then discussed the components of a fiction book, including the characters, setting, problem and solution. While Leo thought it was “pretty awesome” that someone could pretend to be a shark and scare people, he finally acquiesced, saying that it probably could not happen. Combined with his understanding that the characters were made up and knowing that the whole book was not true he finally came to the understanding that in a nonfiction version of this book “everything would have had to actually happen.”

When the students began to create their nonfiction books, Mrs. Kona asked the students to tell her the difference between their fiction books and the nonfiction books they were going to create. Bryson stated that, “It [Nonfiction] still has true information. Because this [is] stuff [pointing to fiction book] that could not happen.” This comment unearthed another underlying issue in the students’ understanding. The students began to differentiate between fiction and nonfiction, saying that nonfiction was about true information that really happened and fiction did not contain any true or real information.

When Mrs. Kona began to talk about the two book pairings she said:

You are going to compare two books for the study… fiction book and then the nonfiction… so I want you to write in the content, is it a story from an author’s imagination? Or is it something with true information and facts?

Immediately, Louis raised his hand and said his fiction book was nonfiction, revealing an issue in students’ categorization between realistic fiction and nonfiction books. The following conversation revealed the issue:

Louis: My book’s nonfiction and it has characters.

Mrs. Kona: Which book?
Louis: Blizzard [Blizzard (Rocco, 2014)]

Mrs. Kona: Ok, we’re going to talk more about that. Is it really nonfiction?
Louis: Not all of it.
Mrs. Kona: Because there’s some made up stuff in there? (Louis nods his head) So it’s fiction. Okay, but I’ll talk more about it.

Louis was recognizing the difference between factual, real-life content but was not sure if that meant the book was fiction or nonfiction. Mrs. Kona’s instruction on the differences between the two genres relied on the idea that the main difference between fiction and nonfiction was the content. After the above conversation, Mrs. Kona glanced at me and mouthed the word “Wow.” Later when it was just the two of us, she told me:

You know it’s really interesting, because people who are in charge of what kids should learn in school say that kids need to know fiction and they need to know nonfiction. But we have books that kind of, can you know, that are confusing. That are not clear to us, and Louis has one [Blizzard (Rocco, 2014)] in his lap right now.

(To be clear, Mrs. Kona was not talking about literary nonfiction books, which blend together narrative elements of fiction with the expository structures of nonfiction. In both the above and subsequent examples, Mrs. Kona is discussing nonfiction books and realistic fiction picturebooks.)

To address Louis’s misunderstanding, and the “hole” she found in her reliance on teaching that only nonfiction has real information, she reemphasized the author’s purpose in Blizzard (Rocco, 2014). Louis and his partners, Bryson and Ezekiel, thought Blizzard (Rocco, 2014) was nonfiction because it told about experiences—a boy and his
community dealing with the effects of a blizzard—that they said “can really happen.”
When she asked them why they thought Mr. Rocco wrote the book they said to tell a
story about people and a blizzard. However, Mrs. Kona felt she needed to dig deeper into
the book to make sure they were able to identify the fictionalized aspects of the story. She
wanted them to look for more “clues” that would help them determine the genre. Mrs.
Kona asked them, “So, I’m just wondering in this book, if we go back and look through
this book, what could have, what could be the author’s imagination and not part of the
real thing that happened?” She then went page-by-page and asked the class about
different aspects of the book. The students acknowledged that squirrels could not stamp
out the word “Tuesday” nor could raisins spill out of their box and manage to line up,
spelling the word “Friday” as they do in the story to mark the passing of time. Mrs. Kona
also pointed out that the author wrote that this story was “based on [his] experience as a
ten-year old boy” but the purpose of the story was not to tell real, factual information
about blizzards. It was a story based on one person’s experiences.

During the final interview Mrs. Kona reflected on her students’ confusions on the
differences between fiction and nonfiction, and understanding the purpose of nonfiction.
She hypothesized that her students’ fixation on photographs and text features prevented
them from considering the content of the book. She told me that this aspect of the study
surprised her. She “did not anticipate that would be a misconception” and did not plan on
spending time on addressing the differences between the genres and studying the content
of nonfiction books.
Readability of nonfiction books

During the process of making their own nonfiction books, the students were placed in positions as authors and researchers. As authors they were to write and create a nonfiction book that looked like the nonfiction books they had been reading. As researchers, they were asked to read numerous nonfiction books on their weather related topic, take notes, and use their notes to write their nonfiction books. Yet, she noticed that the students were having difficulty taking notes because of the difficulty of the books.

Teacher observations. With her expectation that the students read a variety of nonfiction books to aid their research, Mrs. Kona noticed her students were struggling with their reading. She had a big cart filled with nonfiction books on various weather related topics but found her students having difficulty with the complexity of some of the texts. Her students were unable to take notes from some of the science books because they had trouble reading the books. She shared that she felt caught between trying to meet the CCSS’s expectations of complex texts and making sure her students could read those texts. She said:

I feel like I want to provide my students with books that are complex, maybe have new vocabulary but that are also considerate of an eight-year old. I think that’s the difficulty, matching those books up…Because the way that some of the books are written, like you said, it’s just like let’s just pour as much as we can in here, and you know…

Mrs. Kona felt that some books were just stuffed with facts and information but were not written with seven-and eight-year-olds in mind. As a result she felt her students were not able to approach the books as researchers. Approaching the book as researchers meant
that students would be able to read books with the mind set of trying to find information to answer their questions. Mrs. Kona felt that if students could not read the book in order to find research that answered their questions they would not be able to be authors and write their nonfiction books. The readability of the books was very important to her; she considered a book readable if it used vocabulary familiar to her students and used pictures, photographs, maps, diagrams, and other text features that helped students read, understand, and figure out information independently or with minimal scaffolding.

**Change in instruction.** Since she was noticing her students were having trouble she decided that she needed to help her students in their selection of books for the project. She told me:

> With my students right now, we’re trying to come up with these questions, like their research questions, but I think I am going to help with book selection of research books. So even though there’s that huge cart out there with all that stuff on it, I think I’m going to go through and I’m going to you know, try to narrow their choices a little bit. At least maybe with everyone I’ll try to match them with a book, and then if they want to go to other books, they can for other information, for diagrams or something like that. But as far as reading and gaining information that they can then understand and then put in their own words, they’ve, we’ve got to be careful about matching those non-fiction books.

Mrs. Kona gave each set of partners one book she determined to be considerate for them. The students were allowed, and encouraged, to read other nonfiction books to help them as they researched answers to their questions. However, there were times that she saw students reading books that she considered “inconsiderate” and would either suggest
another book or would sometimes pull the students aside and read the passage to the students. Since the goal of the unit was for the students to create nonfiction books that kindergarteners, first graders, and other second graders could read, she felt her students would only be able to create considerate texts if they saw and read considerate texts themselves.

Final Thoughts

As Mrs. Kona sat down for her final interview, she reflected on three decades of teaching primary grade children. Of her early teaching career, she recalled creating elaborate thematic units rooted in children’s literature where students wrote stories, created paintings, and drew on large sheets of paper. She referred to this learning as “joyful and messy” with no high stakes attached. When state and national standards were introduced, Mrs. Kona remembered having to study the directives and plan units around expectations of what her students should know and be able to do. Not wanting to give up using children’s literature, Mrs. Kona utilized principles of Project Based Learning and created projects steeped in children’s literature and meaningful questions that would be appropriate for her students. She reluctantly let go of the elaborate experienced-based projects from her early teaching career, and worked to provide opportunities for her students to ask questions, find resources, and apply information. And when new standards expected teachers to use more nonfiction, she planned information-based lessons where students would be able to sustain that line of inquiry while engaging with a wide variety of nonfiction books.

However, including more nonfiction in her classroom lessons was not an easy process for Mrs. Kona. Not wanting to give up the fictional stories that she felt to be an
integral part of her classroom, she made sure her students’ experiences with nonfiction books were based in “real-world” examples such as Mary Pope Osborne’s Magic Tree House series and Fact Trackers, and Scholastic BookFlix. Yet, when she realized that teaching nonfiction to her students was more than just providing opportunities to read the genre Mrs. Kona felt she had to “get them off the idea that nonfiction has to have text features or photographs.” She marveled about the many misconceptions her students had about nonfiction and the time she had to spend scaffolding and helping them understand the genre, stating, “I didn’t anticipate having to do that [spend time correcting those misconceptions].”

Mrs. Kona did not regret the extra time spent on the study and was very happy with the direction the unit took. When I asked her why she felt the study was a success even with the difficulties in student understanding, she said she felt that student engagement was very high, they developed a sense of pride about the nonfiction books they created, and, ultimately, her students ended the study having a better understanding of the genre of nonfiction. She admitted that before she started this particular unit in her 2nd grade class, “I’m not really sure I knew what encompassed nonfiction. I mean that’s honest! You know?” Acknowledging her own lack of understanding about what “constitutes the genre,” she said she learned about her students’ interactions with the books; wondering how they made sense of the books and tried to access information from it. She valued the conversations she had with her students during both large and small group lessons because they helped her understand how her students were thinking about the books. Mrs. Kona felt that if she had not listened to and responded to those conversations with her students they would not have been able to create their own nonfiction books.
Moreover, Mrs. Kona extended the perceived successes of the unit to a critical look at teacher practices with nonfiction books. She wondered what her students’ future 3rd grade teachers would focus on with nonfiction and if they would continue to confuse students by focusing on text features and photographs as the reason for why nonfiction books are nonfiction: “…with the way that teachers are teaching based on the Common Core, based on the language of the Common Core, you know, when they go to third grade, the teacher may not emphasize this idea about the most important thing is the content.” Mrs. Kona admitted that she felt this study was “exciting” because it could bring awareness to teachers to be more explicit in how they teach nonfiction. She said:

I think for teachers and curriculum, I think teachers need to come to an understanding of what is nonfiction. And I really think that’s a huge thing…There’s an important part of language arts professional development because I do think that teachers immediately go to the idea that nonfiction books that include text features.

Mrs. Kona continued questioning teacher practices in relation to nonfiction, saying that teachers may spend too much time teaching to the Common Core State Standards without taking the time to figure out if students are actually confused because about the genre because of the literal interpretation of the standards. Her decision to spend more time dissecting “what makes nonfiction nonfiction” did not take away from student enjoyment of reading the books. In fact, both Mrs. Kona and I shared stories of students coming up to us and speaking proudly about their books and we even found out that multiple students were beginning to write their own nonfiction books at home because they enjoyed the unit. Hazel told me that her new book was going to be “awesome”
because she knew what she needed to include to make it a “real nonfiction book.” She said she was doing a lot of research to make sure her content of the book was “completely real” and factual.

Mrs. Kona remarked on how proud and accomplished her students felt with their finished projects and, again, asserted:

If we don't help students and teachers come the conclusions that nonfiction doesn’t always have to look like that [have photographs] or have specific text features, they’re going to miss out on a wealth of exciting books and experiences with these texts. They are going to miss out…learning that, just because there’s no table of contents and there is no index that there isn’t something to learn in that book.

She felt this construction of nonfiction as a genre was so important, and believed spending time teaching nonfiction through text features, content, linking fiction and nonfiction, and through process was what helped her students appreciate and understand the wide variety of nonfiction texts in the classroom. Mrs. Kona was set to retire a few weeks after our final interview and she even mentioned that she wished she had another year to do a similar study with another group of students. She said, “Knowing what I know now” about teaching nonfiction, she felt that she could guide future students to rich experiences with nonfiction books.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Chapter Five begins with the problem of the study, explaining the problem, purpose, and subsequent research questions followed by the procedures of collecting data and a brief summary of my findings. Then, I describe the implications of my study by further explaining my findings and making connections to areas of teacher practices, early childhood literacy, and children’s literature. Finally, I make suggestions for future research.

Problem of the Study

Current research revealed a lack of nonfiction in the elementary schools in regards to instruction with nonfiction, availability of nonfiction books, and reading of nonfiction books (Colman, 2007; Duke, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Moss & Newton, 2002; Pappas, 1991). Additionally, research showed that children can learn from and enjoy nonfiction books (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Palmer & Stewart, 2003) but teachers are unsure of how to use the genre in their classrooms and, at times, misuse it when they use nonfiction books in their teaching (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Rice, 2002).

The purpose of this research, then, was to look at one 2nd grade teacher’s instructional practices as she helped her students co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre. This involved an examination of the classroom and environment the teacher created, an analysis of the teacher’s instructional strategies when teaching with
nonfiction, and a description of the change in her instruction as a result of observing her students (mis)understandings of the genre. This study addressed the following questions:

1. How does the teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature with her students?

2. How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her second grade students?

3. How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?

**Procedures**

This study was guided by a social constructivist framework understanding that knowledge is constructed through one’s engagement with others and through the environment as those social contexts influence and teach ways of thinking (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2016). In this classroom, Mrs. Kona co-constructed an understanding of the genre of nonfiction through frequent large and small group read alouds and discussions.

**Research Site**

One teacher and 22 students in a self-contained classroom were observed three times a week for 14 weeks. I conducted my study in a 2nd grade classroom in a medium sized public school district in the Midwest. The research began in January 2015 and was completed in May 2015. The teacher combined a Science unit on weather with her English Language Arts block with the goal of her students creating a nonfiction book on a weather topic that would help support an understanding of a realistic fiction book. Specifically, students read a fiction book on a weather related topic, drafted questions
from their reading, and using research strategies, took notes from other nonfiction books to help them write their own nonfiction book.

**Data Collection**

I collected video data from January 2015 to May 2015. My data corpus included over 200 videos of large and small group instruction, videos of the students working together, and pre and post interviews of the teacher and students. In addition, field notes and student work were also part of the data corpus. I analyzed the data looking for themes and patterns in the teacher’s instruction. My analysis revealed five main themes in the teacher’s instruction of nonfiction as a genre. This analysis provided an understanding of how this teacher taught nonfiction in her classroom to help her students co-construct an understanding of the genre.

**Findings**

In this section I will review the findings from this research study. The major findings of the study include:

1) The teacher taught nonfiction in four ways in order to help her students co-construct an understanding of the genre. She taught nonfiction through text features, content, linking fiction and nonfiction, and through the process of creating nonfiction books.

2) When selecting nonfiction books for her students, the teacher considered four criteria as important characteristics of the genre to consider. She asked if the book was nonfiction, adhering to the definition we had created, “Nonfiction contains factual information about the world in which nothing is made up.” The other three criteria were aesthetics, organization and style, and text consideration.
3) The teacher’s close observations of her students’ misunderstandings caused her to change her instruction. She changed her instructional practices in response to students not understanding the function of text features and having trouble differentiating between fiction and nonfiction. In addition, she began to study the complexity and, what she referred to as, the consideration of nonfiction books when her students had difficulty reading the complex books in the class. As a result, she changed her instruction by including more considerate nonfiction books and even worked with her students to help them understand what makes a nonfiction book considerate.

Implications

These findings contribute to the research showing that there are many issues surrounding the instruction of nonfiction in elementary classrooms (Colman, 2007; Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Duke, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Moss & Newton, 2002; Palmer & Stewart, 2003; Pappas, 1991). To help students understand nonfiction, teachers need to respond to students and know how to modify instruction based on students’ misconceptions. These findings have implications for effective instruction and teacher education, early childhood literacy, and children’s literature, which I will explore in this section.

Effective instruction and Teacher education. I believe this study begins to address and fill the gap in the current body of research on topics relating to issues of effective instruction and teacher education: 1) What does effective instruction look like when using nonfiction books?, 2) How do teachers select nonfiction books for their students?, and 3)
What happens when teachers combine both fiction and nonfiction books in a unit of study?

**Effective instruction.** Previous research on the use of nonfiction in the classroom has focused on the lack of nonfiction in the classroom (Duke, 2000) and the problems with teachers using nonfiction incorrectly in their classrooms. For example, Donovan and Smolkin (2001) documented that teachers select fiction texts instead of nonfiction books to teach nonfiction concepts. Both of these studies focus more on what teachers are not doing and do not specifically address what teachers need to do to help their students. Additionally, there has not been much research on instructional practices in using nonfiction with students. Earlier research by Duke & Kays (1998), Pappas (1991), and Tower (2002), documents that children are aware of and capable of understanding the textual characteristics of nonfiction books when the information is instructed via purposeful instruction. In particular, Pappas (1991) studied teachers using nonfiction books during large group read alouds. She found that students were able to adopt the discourses of the genre after repeated teacher read alouds of nonfiction books, but her study focused on the students not on the teacher’s instructional practices. The question becomes, beyond read alouds what do teachers need to do to help their students understand the genre? And, what happens when teachers respond to students’ misconceptions and confusions about nonfiction? My study affirms the findings of previous studies that teachers are uncomfortable with the genre and are unsure of how to teach with it while also adding to the research by exploring what effective instruction looks like when using nonfiction. It also provides insight into the framework that guided the teacher’s instructional practices, the processes she employed while teaching with
nonfiction books, and how the teacher came to understand and responded to the expectations of the CCSS. Additionally, this study fills in the gap on instructional practices by documenting how one teacher responds to her students’ needs in regards to their confusions with nonfiction.

Before she began her unit on nonfiction, Mrs. Kona shared that she was not comfortable with teaching nonfiction but knew she needed to work on addressing the expectations of the Common Core State Standards. Mrs. Kona utilized large and small group instruction that was rooted in social constructivism, engaging her students in conversations about their beliefs about nonfiction. She did not merely read nonfiction books aloud but instead took the time to help the students understand the genre. The students’ conceptions and misconceptions were addressed through social interactions that encouraged different ways of thinking about nonfiction. These different ways of sharing meaning took form in the variety of ways Mrs. Kona chose to teach nonfiction.

My research not only shows a social constructivist view of teaching nonfiction but also documents the process Mrs. Kona followed as she discovered that her students did not understand what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction. Mrs. Kona believed that students needed to understand how to read and question the nonfiction books in order to discern if the content was “factual information in which nothing is made up.” In the final interview, Mrs. Kona shared that emphasizing the content of nonfiction was incredibly important because students would miss out on a “whole wealth of nonfiction books” if they maintained the fallacy that nonfiction books only had photographs. Mrs. Kona spent time with her students studying the content of nonfiction and, as a result, students learned
how to carefully read and analyze the content of books, comparing the information to other trusted informational sources.

This practice of teaching nonfiction became contingent on change and flexibility, as Mrs. Kona adjusted her teaching practices to help her students. Furthermore, she modeled and asked her students to question the books they were reading, using the knowledge from her instruction to help them make educated decisions about the genre of the book. The students were able to apply this knowledge to the construction of their own nonfiction books. The social character of the classroom supported an active nature of constructing knowledge. Students were never told that a book was fiction or nonfiction; instead, were part of a class inquiry to determine the genre. This engagement may have been why students seemed to enjoy and engage deeply during the study. Clearly, more research on how teachers work to help their students understand nonfiction is needed.

This study is important relative to understanding the CCSS since addressing those standards was the impetus for this unit. Thus, effective instruction also involves understanding and preparing lessons that meet the CCSS. The majority of the research done on nonfiction children’s literature was done pre-CCSS and this study begins to raise questions about teacher educators addressing the expectations of the CCSS. Current research on the CCSS has focused on interpreting and understanding the CCSS (Draper, 2012; Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2012; Maloch & Bomer, 2013a, 2013b) and not what teachers think about while addressing the CCSS. My study adds to this body of research by asking whether or not young children have the capacity to fully understand the genre of nonfiction; additionally, it explores how a teacher’s interpretations of the CCSS affected her interpretation and subsequent implementation of the standards. When Mrs.
Kona taught nonfiction, she frequently challenged the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by asking if it was developmentally appropriate. When wondering if asking teachers to focus on text features before focusing on content is the way to go she asked, “Are we putting the cart before the horse?” Because, teaching nonfiction text features is not inherently wrong but is the teacher’s switch from text features to content challenging the CCSS? Mrs. Kona’s challenges of the CCSS, questioning the developmental appropriateness and intention of some of the aspects of the standards, led her to be reflective in how she interpreted addressing the standards in her class lessons.

**Selection of nonfiction books.** This study also informs research on teacher education because it addresses how a teacher considers and selects nonfiction books for her classroom. Donovan and Smolkin (2001) conducted a study where they asked teachers to select from a variety of fiction and nonfiction books for inclusion in a science unit. They discovered that teachers considered the content and readability of nonfiction books when selecting the books. My study supports this finding as Mrs. Kona considered the idea of “text consideration” when selecting books for her students. She wanted her students to be able to read nonfiction books themselves or with minimal scaffolding from her. However, in Donovan and Smolkin’s (2001) study, they discovered that teachers did not consider or even discuss with their students the genre differences between fiction and nonfiction. Additionally, teachers did not discuss with their students that nonfiction science books had a different structure than fiction books. In Donovan and Smolkin’s (2001) study, teachers often chose fiction books because of the lower lexical density and what they perceived as more relatable content. Also, they found that teachers were uncomfortable
and unprepared to teach with nonfiction books. Donovan and Smolkin (2001) asserted that this was problematic and students need exposure to quality nonfiction books.

Thus, this research is important because it shows how one teacher moves beyond misconceptions about nonfiction and carefully thinks about the genre when selecting and instructing with the books. Mrs. Kona assessed the books by developing criteria that asked if the book was nonfiction, if it was aesthetically pleasing, was well organized, and was “considerate” of young readers. She considered a wide variety of nonfiction for inclusion in her unit and spent extensive time talking about the variety of structural and textual features that students would encounter in nonfiction books. Moreover, she spent time helping the students differentiate between fiction and nonfiction books.

**Combining the genres.** My research also fills a need for research on what happens when a teacher uses both fiction and nonfiction together in a study. Research that has been done on this combining of genres is typically practitioner oriented. For example, Crook and Lehman’s (1991) article provides strategies and resources for teachers interested in using fiction and nonfiction together. Yopp and Yopp (2000) also shared many strategies that teachers can use to teach nonfiction text in primary grades. Both of those articles share reading activities that connect fiction and nonfiction; however, I could not find any empirical research actually conducted in primary classrooms, looking at how student learning is affected when teachers combine the genres to support and challenge student understanding.

Mrs. Kona frequently linked fiction and nonfiction books together because she felt that students needed a “way in” to nonfiction books and the personal connections frequently established through fiction books allowed students to access the nonfiction
content, and bring background knowledge to their readings. In accessing the nonfiction content, she felt that her students needed to connect the nonfiction information to something her students already know or understand. She saw this link as an important means for the students to have a more thorough understanding of events happening in stories. By doing this, her students, knowing that nonfiction answers questions, were able to create nonfiction books that provided the background knowledge and “way in” to the fiction book they paired with their book. Thus, my study is important because it is research on what happens when a teacher combines fiction and nonfiction together in a study and supports earlier practitioner research on how combining the genres helps enrich student learning (Crook & Lehman, 1991; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

**Early childhood literacy.** This study has implications for early childhood literacy because it shows the role nonfiction children’s literature plays the instructional practices of primary grade children. Donovan and Smolkin’s (2002) study on kindergarten and 2nd grade children’s cognitive abilities to understand the differences between fiction and nonfiction revealed that the students had trouble making a distinction between the factual and fictional content. My study supports this study by adding more research showing young children, specifically Mrs. Kona’s 2nd grade students, having difficulty understanding the differences in the genre. Where my study branches off from Donovan and Smolkin’s (2002) and adds to the current body of research is that it begins to show what one teacher did to guide her students to their own construction of nonfiction as a genre. My study, because it shows Mrs. Kona using nonfiction during her English Language Arts block and working to scaffold her students’ understanding of the genre, also supports research by numerous scholars that assert instruction with nonfiction books
contribute to a more well-rounded literacy development in children (Brozo & Flynt, 2008; Caswell & Duke, 1998; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010).

Mrs. Kona addressed her students’ confusions about the differences between fiction and nonfiction. By providing opportunities for the students to read nonfiction books and by addressing their confusions about the genre, Mrs. Kona may have encouraged positive literacy behaviors that are attributed to nonfiction texts in earlier studies: more active classroom participation (Maloch, 2008), more meaningful discussions (Moss, 2008), and the use of such texts as a way to find answers to questions students may have (Palmer & Stewart, 2005). Therefore, my study contributes to the discussion about the role nonfiction literature plays in early childhood literacy although more research focusing specifically on student learning is also needed.

This study is also important to early childhood literacy because it adds to research on the importance of interactive read alouds with young readers (Barrentine, 1996; Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Pappas, 1991; Sipe, 2008). In Smolkin and Donovan’s (2001) study they discovered that teachers did not believe that nonfiction could be used in a read aloud setting. My study adds to the body of research on the benefits of interactive read alouds by showing how Mrs. Kona used nonfiction, an oft-ignored genre, in her read alouds. Mrs. Kona used nonfiction in much the same way research has shown fiction to be used in read aloud settings by modeling and scaffolding comprehension strategies, creating textual and personal connections, and engaging her students as readers.

**Children’s literature.** This study contributes to the field of children’s literature by supporting research on the importance of using nonfiction trade books to teach content
area subjects. Mrs. Kona predominately used nonfiction trade books in the unit and she developed criteria in selecting the books that I discussed in the Effective Instruction and Teacher Education section. Research on nonfiction trade books shows that the use of trade books over textbooks is advantageous in content area instruction for several reasons (Rice, 2002). Nonfiction trade books tend to be more current that textbooks (Moss, 1991; Rice, 2002); teachers have more control in selecting books on a wide range of reading levels for students in one classroom (Butzow & Butzow, 2000; Moss, 1991) nonfiction can enhance the content areas; and, quality nonfiction trade books are found to be more interesting for students (Butzow & Butzow, 2000). Trade books can also focus on different facets of the same topic, providing the “emotional dimension lacking in textbooks” (Vacca & Vacca, 2008, p. 383) by exploring other people involved in the topic, the processes used to understand and discover the topic, and the places associated with that topic (Moss, 1991). My study adds to this body of research about the benefits of using trade books because the flexibility that the use of trade books affords allowed Mrs. Kona to consider the complexity of the books when giving them to her students.

Furthermore, this study raises questions about what makes a nonfiction book nonfiction. Previous research is inconclusive on how to define nonfiction for children’s literature (Colman, 2007; Duke, 2003; Harvey, 2002; Kristo, Colman, and Wilson, 2008; Maloch and Horsey, 2013; Palmer & Stewart, 2003). My study documents how one teacher struggles with defining nonfiction for two reasons: 1) Using her own definition of nonfiction to guide her selection of nonfiction for her students and 2) helping them understand the genre. Mrs. Kona and I developed a definition of nonfiction that she used to support her selection of nonfiction books. When her students encountered fiction and
nonfiction books that raised questions about whether or not the book was nonfiction, she responded to their misunderstandings and guided them to the definition of nonfiction that she had created. Also, Mrs. Kona was very careful about not including more literary or hybrid nonfiction books in her unit because she did not want to further confuse her students. In our final interview she wondered if it was beneficial to help her students have a foundational understanding of nonfiction before they were exposed to literary and hybrid books. This research advocates for a clear definition of nonfiction that both teachers and students can use as they read nonfiction.

When Mrs. Kona realized that the BookFlix program did not always pair a fiction and nonfiction book together as the website purported, she questioned how books were labeled either fiction or nonfiction. The pairing of two biographies, one written in a more narrative style, was what prompted the students’ confusions about the genre. Mrs. Kona said she found a wide range of literary nonfiction texts but tried hard to not include them in her study because she did not want to further confuse her students; however, literary nonfiction texts are becoming more popular and common in classroom libraries. Thus, Mrs. Kona wondered what questions would be raised if she had included more hybrid or literary nonfiction texts. She also wondered if these types of nonfiction texts should not be introduced to students until they had a foundational knowledge of nonfiction as a genre.

This study is also important in the realm of children’s literature because addresses how the students learned about the genre of nonfiction through the process of creating their own nonfiction books. Pappas, Varelas, Gill, Ortiz, and Keblawe-Shamah (2009) conducted a study where primary grade children created their own nonfiction books on an
animal related topic. Their teachers did not explicitly teach the scientific registers common to nonfiction yet the students incorporated those features into their books as well as visual characteristics common to the illustrations and photographs in nonfiction books. My study supports and further clarifies Pappas, et al’s (2009) study on the value of multimodal books in understanding science content. Mrs. Kona did explicitly teach about nonfiction as a genre, and emphasized the visual features, which resulted in her students producing rich texts that employ a variety of modes in representing meaning. In each of the ways Mrs. Kona taught nonfiction, the end goal of the project was to have her students create their own nonfiction books. Thus, she helped her students co-construct an understanding of the genre through their construction of the nonfiction books.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research encourages several questions that could be explored in other research studies. More research is needed on teachers’ instructional practices with nonfiction texts, the importance of teaching nonfiction as a genre, and on how much can children fully understand about the complexities of nonfiction.

Teachers Instructional Practices

This study was completed with one particular teacher and should be replicated with other teachers at other grades. Multiple cases would foster insights into how teachers’ perceptions or own misconceptions about the genre affect their own instructional practices with nonfiction. Also, this study looked at a 2nd grade classroom; what new knowledge can be learned from other grades? Replicating this study in schools that do not have the resources that Mrs. Kona had at her disposal is also important. It would also be
interesting to conduct a study that follows several teachers’ instructional practices in relation to nonfiction to see if one strategy was better than others.

Moreover, Mrs. Kona used social constructivist practices to inform her instruction. Does this type of instruction have long-term implications for helping students understand the genre? Because Mrs. Kona invited her students to question the nonfiction and fiction books in her classroom, how does critical literacy play a role in understanding nonfiction literature?

**Teaching Nonfiction as a Genre**

This study focused on how one teacher helped her students co-construct an understanding of the genre. Does teaching nonfiction in this manner have implications for how students read and understand other nonfiction passages? Could this type of genre study help students over time as they encounter more and more nonfiction books? A longitudinal study following one group of students who have received this type of instruction as they progress through school would provide an in-depth look of teaching nonfiction as a genre.

**Children and the Complexities of Nonfiction**

This study revealed that students experienced difficulty understanding the genre of nonfiction. Therefore, studies are needed to identify students’ capacity to fully understand the complexities of nonfiction? Future research is needed with other students from diverse student populations, as well as in a variety of school environments, on how they understand nonfiction. What affects their beliefs and understandings about nonfiction? How do they define nonfiction? How do students develop understandings about literary nonfiction?
Summary

During this four-month study, Mrs. Kona co-constructed an understanding of nonfiction as a genre with her 2nd grade students. It was not a straightforward process and required the teacher to be flexible and change her instruction in order to meet the needs of her students. Her observations of her students revealed that they had difficulties and misunderstandings about the genre and, consequently, her instruction changed to address those difficulties.

This study addresses, supports, and addresses gaps in the current body of research around nonfiction texts. Research shows that teachers have difficulty selecting nonfiction texts, yet this study reveals how one teacher came to define and select nonfiction literature. This study continues to show that students are capable of understanding the structures of nonfiction, yet extends the research by showing children equate nonfiction with its text features and have trouble fully understanding the complexities of the genre. Research has been done on how teachers use nonfiction but has focused on their misunderstandings and misuses of the genre. This research adds to the current body of research by providing a portrayal of one teacher’s reflexive practices as she seeks to help her students co-construct an understanding of the genre of nonfiction. The teacher’s literacy practices surrounding the co-construction of nonfiction continually moved from spaces of confusion and misunderstanding to spaces of acknowledging the intricacies and potential of nonfiction as a genre.
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Children’s Literature References


Appendix A: Guiding Questions for Student Interviews

- What type of books do you like to read?
- What can you tell me about nonfiction books? (showing examples)
- How do you know this book is nonfiction?
- What makes a book nonfiction?
- Why would you say this book is nonfiction
Appendix B: Guiding Questions for Teacher Interviews

- Why do you use nonfiction in your 2nd grade classroom?
- When do you use nonfiction in your 2nd grade classroom?
- What is the role of nonfiction in your 2nd grade classroom?
- What difficulties have you encountered in using nonfiction in your classroom?
- Throughout this academic year, how have you perceived the children responding to nonfiction?
- Can you explain your rationale for combining fiction and nonfiction together?
- From your perspective, in what ways do you think students benefit/not benefit from a combined study of the genres?
- How do you allow student discussion during whole and small group read-alouds?
- Do you foresee any difficulties in students’ understanding of nonfiction?
## Appendix C: Changes in Codes

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<th>Initial Cycles of Codes</th>
<th>Data Supporting Code</th>
<th>Interpretive Summary</th>
<th>Resulting New Coding Questions</th>
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| 1. Teaching of nonfiction | Nonfiction “conveys factual information about the world in which nothing is made up” | When Mrs. Kona taught nonfiction she stressed that nonfiction was this not that. | • How teacher co-constructed knowledge of nonfiction with students  
• How did Mrs. Kona help her students through the co-construction of the genre?  
• What did her students perceive nonfiction to be? |
| 1. How nonfiction was used by the teacher | Teaching nonfiction as “true information” and asking students to find that information | Mrs. Kona used nonfiction to have students find “true information.” | |
| 2. Nonfiction has text features | “You already know how to use nonfiction books because there are certain text features…” | Mrs. Kona stressed that nonfiction books have text features. I noticed moments where the students’ perceptions of nonfiction to be incorrect. | |
| 2. Content of nonfiction must be true | “So what do you know about books that are true? What kind of book is it?” | Mrs. Kona taught students to look at the content of the book. I noticed moments where the students’ perceptions of nonfiction to be incorrect. | • Nonfiction has photographs  
• Nonfiction has text features  
• Nonfiction looks different from fiction |
<p>| 2. Students as researchers and authors | Students were asked to write their own nonfiction books by researching for information and writing as nonfiction authors. | As researchers, students need to read, find, and document factual information on a topic. As authors, they need to make choices about conveying information so readers can understand and learn about the topic. | |</p>
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<th>Initial Cycles of Codes</th>
<th>Data Supporting Code</th>
<th>Interpretive Summary</th>
<th>Resulting New Coding Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Process of writing nonfiction</td>
<td>Authors of nonfiction must write factual information in their own words</td>
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<td>2. When fiction and nonfiction were used together</td>
<td>“I felt like the fiction does a good job of helping them relate to their own lives”</td>
<td>Mrs. Kona differentiated between the genres and used them to inform each other.</td>
<td>• Change due to confusion with text features&lt;br&gt;• Change due to confusion differentiating between fiction and nonfiction&lt;br&gt;• Change due to difficulty in the books</td>
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<td>2. Change in instruction</td>
<td>Changing instruction based on student feedback.</td>
<td>When teaching nonfiction, Mrs. Kona changed her instructional strategies when she noticed student confusion.</td>
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<td>3. Characteristics of Nonfiction</td>
<td>“What makes a nonfiction book nonfiction?”&lt;br&gt;“What choices to the authors make to help readers as they read the books?”</td>
<td>When teaching nonfiction, Mrs. Kona considered characteristics that dictated how she defined and selected nonfiction literature for her students.</td>
<td>• Factual Information&lt;br&gt;• Aesthetics of nonfiction&lt;br&gt;• Structural and visual features&lt;br&gt;• Readability</td>
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<td>4. Nonfiction through text features</td>
<td>“Sometimes you can just go to the information you need.”</td>
<td>Text features are utilized to help students locate factual information. Mrs. Kona moved away from emphasizing text features to focusing on the purpose.</td>
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<td>4. Nonfiction through content</td>
<td>“What’s the most important thing?”</td>
<td>Deciding the author’s purpose of a book and studying the content is what helps students decide whether or not a book is nonfiction.</td>
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<td>4. Nonfiction through linking fiction and nonfiction</td>
<td>“I really feel that to understand a topic, you know, whether it’s historical or science you have to connect it to something you already know or understand.”</td>
<td>Mrs. Kona used the two genres to help students “find a way in” to the topics. They were taught that nonfiction can provide factual support and background knowledge to help them “fill-in-the-blanks” of their understanding while reading a fiction book.</td>
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<td>4. Nonfiction through process</td>
<td>“You’re thinking about how I am going to create a nonfiction text that teaches someone about those things?”</td>
<td>When researching, studying, designing, and writing their own nonfiction books students learned about the purpose and function of nonfiction books.</td>
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## Appendix D: Research Questions and Data Sources

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<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
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| How does this teacher co-construct an understanding of nonfiction as a genre for her second grade students? | • Field notes from classroom observations  
• Field notes from informal discussions with teacher  
• Video data of large and small group lessons  
• Teacher pre- and post-interviews  
• Student pre- and post-interviews |
| How does the teacher come to define and select nonfiction children’s literature with her students? | • Field notes from classroom observations  
• Field notes from informal discussions with teacher  
• Teacher pre- and post-interviews  
• Analysis of classroom books |
| How do the teacher’s observations of her students change her instruction?        | • Field notes from classroom observations  
• Field notes from informal discussions with teacher  
• Video data of large and small group lessons  
• Teacher pre- and post-interviews |