A Snapshot of Early Childhood Teachers' Read-Aloud Selections

Leslie La Croix[1] · Allison Ward Parsons[1] · Holly L. Klee[1] · Margaret Vaughn[2] · Sehyun Yun[3]

Abstract

The practice of reading aloud to children is ubiquitous in early childhood classrooms. Teachers read aloud to young children to entertain, to build early literacy skills, to develop domain specific content knowledge and vocabulary, to promote social and emotional development and well-being, and to draw children into community with each other and the world. The types of texts teachers decide to immerse children in matters: children need opportunities to examine fiction and nonfiction texts, to learn from and about history, to wonder about phenomena in their natural, physical, and social worlds. This study explores the range of titles that 445 early childhood teachers reported reading with their students at a single timepoint. It describes the variety of fiction and nonfiction texts teachers reported reading and surfaces rich culturally relevant literature selections use with young children.

Keywords Read-aloud · Fiction · Nonfiction · Diversity

Teachers have long read aloud to entertain and engage young children in literacy, and their text selections are guided by multiple factors including student interest, curricula, themes, events, and holidays. Read-alouds are selected for entertainment and educational purposes (Rosenblatt, 2013), and teachers read frequently to young children throughout the school day using a variety of text formats that include picturebooks, chapter books, charts, poetry, digital texts, and more (e.g., Duke, 2000).

Children's literature is a powerful medium for promoting children's content specific knowledge, supporting children's social emotional development, and reflecting diverse cultural identities. Historically, the proportion of fiction texts in early childhood contexts has been significantly greater than nonfiction texts (Duke, 2000; NCTE, 2023, Pentimonti et al., 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Duke (2000) noted that while genre-specific read-alouds build genre knowledge, children need exposure to many types of texts since characteristics

do not transfer across genres. Duke further noted the prevalence of narrative texts in early childhood classrooms, and the relative ease of adult–child text discussion with fictional storybooks (Duke, 2000). Nonfiction text, on the other hand, has traditionally been less available in early childhood settings (Duke, 2000), and teachers are less likely to choose nonfiction texts as read-alouds (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011), even though research has demonstrated that young children are engaged and interested in nonfiction (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Pappas, 1991; Smolkin & Donovan, 2004). Further, the ever-increasing diversity of children in classrooms should be reflected in the books available to students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to define and analyze the types of text that preschool and kindergarten teachers report reading aloud in order to better understand what children are receiving.

Review of the Literature

Replete with examples of texts that blend and bend text features and narrative practices, children's literature entertains, informs, persuades, and encourages, drawing readers into conversation with the world. Bruner (1990) reasons that examinations of children's "narrative environments will tell much the same story of the ubiquitousness of narratives in the world of children … and of its functional importance in

✉ Leslie La Croix
llacroix@gmu.edu

1   College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, USA

2   College of Education, Washington State University, Pullman, USA

3   Department of Elementary Education, Ball State University, Muncie, USA

bringing children into the culture" (p. 84). Bruner's social cultural perspective guides and informs this work. While seemingly eclectic narratives permeate early childhood environments, the types of texts chosen for read-alouds are influenced by multiple factors including teacher beliefs, student needs, publishing practices, financial resources, curricular mandates, and thematic and seasonal expectations.

Genres in Children's Literature

Considering the characteristics of various text genres and formats helps us better understand what teachers are reading aloud with their young students. Children's literature can be categorized into genres and subgenres based on a variety of criteria. These criteria include the author's literary purpose, tone, content, and style, with no single source of definition across the field (Schneider, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, we organize texts according to style (poetry), content (fiction, nonfiction, mixed) and purpose (social-emotional, cultural diversity). Within fiction and nonfiction categories, there are multiple subgenres with unique characteristics that further define and distinguish text types, which are described in the following sections.

Fiction

Fiction texts are made-up stories that serve primarily to entertain. They feature either past-tense verbs or real-time verbs and contain a predictable chain of events with familiar structural elements such as setting, characters, and a plot with a problem and solution (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Characters can be people, animals, or objects doing ordinary or fantastic things. Exposure to fictional texts can help build children's vocabulary, story comprehension, and awareness of story structure (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Fictional narratives and poetry also support children's phonological awareness as they frequently feature language play within the text, including rhyming patterns and alliteration (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008; Pentimonti et al., 2011).

The fiction genre includes a broad span of subgenres, from realistic fiction featuring human characters doing believable things, to a range of fantasy subtypes. Given the preponderance of fiction published for young children and selected for classroom read-alouds (Weisberg & Hopkins, 2020; Yopp & Yopp, 2006), attention to the range of fiction subgenres is relevant to the present study and described in subsequent sections.

Realistic Fiction Realistic fiction stories are plausible and feature relatable human characters in real-life situations. Characters may describe real or fictional people and locations. Contemporary realistic fiction narratives have modern

settings that children can recognize and identify with (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010; Schneider, 2016). These texts offer children insights into the human condition, inviting them to experience both familiar issues and unique events. Historical fiction narratives are set in the past and must include accurate historical details to reflect the time period in which they are set (Schneider, 2016). Historical fiction stories are intended to make history relatable to readers (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010).

Fantasy Narratives within this fiction subgenre include unrealistic or magical elements that require readers to suspend disbelief. Fantasy is divided into two subcategories, traditional fantasy and modern fantasy. Traditional fantasy includes fairy tales, folklore, fables, and mythology passed through oral storytelling with unknown original authors. Traditional fantasy stories follow conventional introductions and conclusions (i.e., *once upon a time* and *happily ever after*), present vague settings, and include stereotypical characters (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010). Modern fantasy breaks from traditional story patterns by offering unique introductions and conclusions, presenting readers with complex characters, offering specific settings, and the authorship is known (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010). For example, while traditional fantasy follows predictable patterns, modern fairy tales offer twists and less-predictable plots, such as in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989). Children's access and exposure to fantasy far exceeds interactions with realistic fiction and opportunities related to nonfiction texts are considerably smaller (CCBC, 2019).

Anthropomorphic Fantasy A subgenre of modern fantasy is anthropomorphic fantasy, which includes animal and object characters. Typically, anthropomorphic characters think, speak, show emotions, and interact as humans would, and are thought to be appealing and engaging for children (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004; Kiefer & Tyson, 2010). Anthropomorphic characters have traditionally been included in children's literature (Yopp & Yopp, 2006; Marriott, 2002; Pentimonti et al., 2011).

The research on use of anthropomorphic characters in young children's literature is mixed. Some posit that anthropomorphic characters invite children to consider challenging topics in a more comfortable, arms-length way, thereby developing empathy and understanding (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004). Anthropomorphic characters can remove stereotypical and cultural biases that human characters would bring and invite more children to see themselves in the story, thereby cultivating empathy (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020).

Others suggest that anthropomorphism can interfere with children's factual understanding and exposure to humanized animal or object characters can lead them to develop incorrect anthropomorphic perspectives (Waxman et al., 2014). Strouse and colleagues (2018) state that children's ability

to learn and transfer content from picturebooks can be disrupted by some book features and characteristics, particularly in fantasy texts. Further, the inaccuracies inherent in anthropomorphic fantasy can cause additional problems for children learning about the natural world (Strouse et al., 2018), such as the *Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1987) eating candy and getting a stomachache. Recent research has demonstrated that children are so frequently exposed to texts featuring anthropomorphic animals (Hopkins & Lillard, 2021) that they may mistakenly believe that animals can share human traits and habits, such as speaking and wearing clothing (Ganea et al., 2014; Li et al., 2015). The ongoing interest and developing research on the impact of anthropomorphic fantasy on children's learning is important in the present study.

Nonfiction

Nonfiction texts convey facts about disciplinary specific areas (e.g., science, social studies, and math) and vary in text structure and purpose. Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003) identified information texts as a subgenre of nonfiction that conveys facts, with unique structural elements including multimodal features such as graphics and labels, along with timeless verbs and generic nouns, such as "a seed sprouts" (Pappas, 2006; Smolkin & Donovan, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Information texts can employ narrative and non-narrative text structure. Narrative information texts emphasize sequences, processes, and time-related patterns to natural phenomena. These books mimic features found in fictional texts (Dreher & Kleitzien, 2016; Smolkin & Donovan, 2004), making them potentially more accessible to young children, and more appealing for classroom read-alouds. Science information texts describe the natural world. Social studies information texts include narratives describing places, events, and holidays. For the purposes of this paper, we are including biographies as nonfiction social studies texts rather than information texts, following others' research (e.g., Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Pentimonti et al., 2011).

Nonfiction advocates have long called for more genre inclusion in early childhood classrooms (e.g., Duke, 2000; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Nonfiction and its subgenres are important for student engagement in reading and in learning about the natural world (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Pappas, 1991). The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE, 2023) underscores the role of contemporary nonfiction as a "compelling genre that supports students' development as critically, visually, and informationally literate twenty-first century thinkers and creators" (para. 1). Research demonstrates the importance of informational text for developing students' vocabulary and

comprehension of science topics, thereby improving their future school success (Hiebert & Cervetti, 2012; Palinscar & Duke, 2004; Pappas, 2006).

Mixed Fiction and Nonfiction

Of additional interest in the present study is the notion of texts that blend fiction and nonfiction elements. Donovan and Smolkin (2001) describe mixed text, or dual-purpose text, as a "fuzzy" category that presents some facts in an entertaining way to engage children (p. 417). For example, *The Tiny Seed* (Carle, 1970), combines elements of fantasy elements and nonfiction facts.

Social Emotional Themes in Children's Literature

Early childhood curricula promote young children's social emotional development. Teachers use narrative texts with social emotional themes to engage children in conversations related to feelings, friendship, build a sense of belonging, and support positive identity development (Nikolajeva, 2013). Fiction stories may include emotions with which young children have little life experience, thereby offering vicarious opportunities to respond to characters' experiences. Illustrations can also provide visual information to show children how characters feel, helping children learn to recognize and understand emotions (Nikolajeva, 2013), such as in *The Way I Feel* (Cain, 2000). Important to the present study, anthropomorphized characters in fiction texts are often used to convey emotional messages to be interpreted by children to understand human conditions, as in *The Bad Seed* (John, 2017). Social-emotional themes are also present in nonfiction texts to support children's understanding of emotions, psychological needs such as love and acceptance, and positive self-concept.

Diversity in Children's Literature

Children's books are an effective means of imparting social and cultural knowledge as they offer insights into different values and perspectives. Books that feature diverse human characters and themes can foster positive attitudes towards self and others (Bishop, 1990; Wee et al., 2015). The terms *parallel cultures* and *parallel communities* are used to describe "cultural groups that have a history of marginalization in the United States" (Crisp et al., 2016, p. 33). Within parallel cultures are multitudes of intersectionalities that enrich the books children read (Möller, 2016). Authentic narratives authored by and about people living within and across parallel communities are increasingly accessible. These narratives span genres and offer insights into peoples' lived experiences, including distinctive cultural aspects of ethnicity, religion, and gender identity.

Texts may emphasize interracial intersectionalities as discussed in *Superheroes are Everywhere* (Harris, 2019) or describe distinctive cultural experiences as in *Don't Touch my Hair* (Miller, 2018). Other texts convey "people are people" by positioning members of parallel communities as main characters without centering their culture in the narrative (Möller, 2016, p. 69).

Teachers' text selection is crucial since children's literature can demonstrate social cooperation and human interconnectedness. It can promote development of critical thinking and empathy in children by highlighting how inequality often leads to differences (Thomas, 2016). The content of diverse children's literature must be critically analyzed (Bishop, 1992). It is not enough for students to have access to diverse literature simply because it is diverse (Thomas, 2016). Bishop (2012) argues,

> for those children who historically had been ignored—or worse, ridiculed—in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up. Near invisibility suggested that books and literature, while often pleasurable, were in some sense apart from them. At the same time, the children whose images were reflected in most American children's literature were being deprived of books as windows into the realities of the multicultural world in which they are living, and were in danger of developing a false sense of their own importance in the world. (p. 9)

In considering limited opportunities for children to experience an array of diversities within texts, NCTE (2023) emphasizes nonfiction may serve to redress this gap as it explicitly "addresses historical silences; explores historic and contemporary events rooted in racism, oppression, and violence; and highlights courageous trailblazers and organized groups working toward societal transformation and liberation (para. 3). Similarly concerned with expanding children's access to diverse children's text, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at University of Wisconsin-Madison annually analyzes children's literature for representation, reporting trends over time. The CCBC documents increasing availability of children's literature that reflects a broad spectrum of diversities (Lindgren et al., 2023). While half of the books in their 2019 analysis featured White characters and 27% featured animal or 'other' characters, between 2018 and 2021 the number of children's books written by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color has increased in nearly every category (CBCC, 2023).

Value and Purpose of Read-Alouds in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood teachers read aloud for a variety of reasons. Read-alouds spark and sustain children's interests, support concept and content knowledge, enhance vocabulary, and increase early literacy and language skills. Interactive reading techniques, where teachers engage students in conversations about books before, during, and after reading in order to build oral language and comprehension have been successfully implemented in a wide range of school settings (e.g., Arnold et al., 1994; Wasik et al., 2006; Whitehurst et al., 1999). In a meta-analysis of 31 studies of interactive read-alouds with preschool and kindergarten students, Mol and colleagues (2009) found that high quality read-alouds support oral language and print-related skill development.

Fiction read-alouds invite teachers to engage students in discussions of character, setting, problem and solution. Stories can provide a nurturing environment through which to expose children to novel vocabulary, syntax, semantics, grammar, and phonological awareness skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Dwyer & Neuman, 2008). Nonfiction books also provide young children with important access to language and specific text structure and features (Pappas, 1991). Although informational books are seldom used in early childhood classrooms, increased interactive read-alouds could yield strong effects for language development, including content vocabulary (Duke, 2000; Palinscar & Duke, 2004; Pappas, 2006) and related conceptual knowledge needed for later school success (Neuman, 2011).

What Do PreK and K Teachers Read Aloud?

While the extant literature supports teacher read-alouds across genres, a longstanding concern is the prevalence of fiction text shared with young children (e.g., Dickinson et al., 1992), yet children should be exposed to a wide variety of genres in order to become proficient readers (Teale, 2003). Duke's research with first grade students (2000) called for more attention to nonfiction texts. Yopp and Yopp (2006) analyzed over 1000 preschool-Gr 3 teachers' read-aloud choices and found that most were narratives. Yopp and Yopp further noted that the 167 book titles named by preschool teachers included 68% narrative and 5% informational text. Their results reinforce Duke's (2000) call for broad genre exposure in early childhood settings.

In 2011, Pentimonti and colleagues described their analysis of 13 preschool teachers' reading logs. Participating teachers logged each book title read aloud in their classrooms over a 30-week period. The researchers coded a subset of each teacher's reading log and found that narrative texts were most frequently read aloud, with 284 (86%) of books coded. They coded 18 informational texts (5.4%)

and 28 mixed genre texts (9%), which aligns with Yopp and Yopp's (2006) findings. Further, Pentimonti and colleagues analyzed texts to support preschoolers' language and literacy development and noted that 95 books (29%) included language play such as rhyme. Of additional interest in the present study, they noted that 35 coded texts (11%) included a multicultural focus, defined as a specific origin statement in the text, words or phrases in languages other than English, religious observances and multicultural holidays, physical and mental exceptionality, or visual evidence of non-White main characters depicted in the illustrations (Pentimonti et al., 2011, p. 211).

Together, previous findings note the preponderance of fictional texts and the relative lack of informational text and diverse text among teachers' read-aloud choices in early childhood classrooms. To better understand current patterns, we surveyed early childhood teachers to document which texts they selected for classroom read-alouds to address three questions:

1. What titles did early childhood teachers report reading aloud to children in the spring of 2022?
2. What genres and subgenres were represented in the titles?
3. How did diverse representations of historically underrepresented communities surface in the texts teachers reported?

Methods

In Spring 2022, an electronic survey was deployed through Qualtrics to a nationwide sample of United States public and private preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten teachers, including Head Start, charter schools, secular, and faith-based contexts. The survey invitation was distributed through multiple channels: a purchased list of teachers' email addresses, listservs for literacy and early childhood educators, social media, and snowball sampling. Three reminder emails were sent to the purchased list of teacher email addresses. All respondents were incentivized to participate through an optional drawing for ten Amazon gift cards valued at $30.00 each. Survey participants were asked to broadly consider the types of texts they used for different instructional and aesthetic purposes throughout the school day, and at various points were invited to describe their use of various text formats and genres. Data in this study stems from one open-ended survey question: "What is a title of a recent text you have used for a read-aloud?" Given the exploratory nature of the survey, we kept the survey question open-ended to honor the wide variety of text formats teachers might elect to use as a read aloud (e.g., picturebook, chapter book, poem chart, big book, textbook, etc.).

Participants

In total, 445 teachers responded to the question asking for the title of a recent read-aloud. Of the respondents, approximately 58% were kindergarten teachers and approximately 40% worked in preschool or prekindergarten contexts. The remaining teachers taught in mixed-age combined prekindergarten and kindergarten settings (see Table 1). For analysis purposes, and to facilitate the presentation of our findings, we combined teachers into two main groups, Prekindergarten (PreK) and Kindergarten (K). PreK teachers include those who identified as working in preschool with 3–4-year-olds, 4–5-year-olds, and in preschool multiage settings; K teachers include kindergarten teachers with 5–6-year-olds and teachers working in multiage preschool and kindergarten contexts.

Respondents were predominantly female (96%) and white (80%). Over half of respondents reported working in Title I schools (60%) and 57% reported working in under-resourced communities. Collectively, respondents averaged 15 years of teaching experience with 93% reporting they were licensed to teach and 86% indicating they worked in public-school settings including federally funded Head Start program and charter schools. Five respondents identified more than one text title and their additional titles were included in the coding process.

Content Analysis

Teacher respondents offered 358 unique title responses. Eighteen titles were removed from the dataset because there was not enough contextual information to accurately identify the text provided. If incomplete text titles could be reasonably assumed, the response was retained for further analysis. For example, we included "Piggy and Elephant Book" because we could code based on series consistency. Conversely, "Dr. Seuss" was removed from further analysis: while we could assume the title was fiction, we could not determine if the text would contain a rhyming pattern. Of the remaining 340 titles, seven more titles were removed because they were curricular texts (e.g., Frog

Table 1 Numbers of participants by grade/age level taught

Grade or age level	N
Preschool (3–4-year-olds)	16
Preschool (4–5-year-olds)	110
Preschool (multiage)	50
Preschool and Kindergarten (multiage)	9
Kindergarten (5–6-year-olds)	260
Total	445

Street, PebbleGo). Accordingly, 333 titles from 262 different authors were coded and analyzed.

We engaged in a multi-phased content analysis aligned with our research questions. First, we defined codes of interest beginning with the overarching categories of fiction, nonfiction poetry, social emotional, or mixed and then narrowed to specific subgenres (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Kiefer & Tyson, 2010; Schneider, 2016). We also established guidelines for determining evidence of ongoing rhyme schemes, social emotional themes, and parallel cultures to acknowledge diversities reflected in the books. It is beyond the scope of this work to analyze texts for representational authenticity or quality, so intentional review of texts identified as reflections of diverse communities is warranted.

The resulting codebook was piloted, discussed amongst the research team, and refined with nuance and examples of subgenres. The first two authors used provisional coding techniques and simultaneous coding strategies to independently code the entire dataset (Saldaña, 2009). A third author reviewed texts independently and a second round of consensus occurred. Finally, a fourth author independently coded an additional, separate 20% of titles. To corroborate codebook definitions and confirm title accuracy, we each searched titles on Amazon, YouTube, Internet Archive: Digital Library, and personal book collections. A digital archive of each title was created that linked to websites with a read-aloud for each text with clearly visible pages to inform consensus conversations and identify text structures and content. Codes were compared and discussed until mutual agreement was reached, following principles of researcher triangulation (Merriam, 2009).

During analysis, anthropomorphic fantasy served as a broad fantasy category with two subcategories, one for animals and another for all other personified objects. The realistic fiction and historical fiction subgenres were condensed due to low numbers of historical fiction. Similarly,

we combined the modern fantasy and unlikely scenario subgenres to group fantasy texts that featured humans as the main characters.

Findings

Teachers reported 428 read aloud titles with enough contextual detail to analyze. Findings are presented according to our research questions, with specific detail for PreK and K teacher- reported titles. We include sample titles to illustrate the breadth of texts reported.

What Titles Did Early Childhood Teachers Report Reading Aloud?

Eric Carle's titles were named more frequently than any other author (7.78%, n = 26), with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) cited more frequently than any other title (n = 14, PreK = 5, K = 9). Dr. Seuss titles were the second most provided (n = 23), and *Green Eggs and Ham* was his most reported text (n = 8). Texts by Mo Willems (n = 11) were also reported by teachers, along with titles by Robert Munsch (n = 8) and Ezra Jack Keats (n = 7). Publication years ranged from 1930 to 2021. *The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930) was the title with the earliest known publication year. Table 2 presents an analysis of text titles according to decade of publication along with the most frequently reported title.

What Genres and Subgenres Were Represented?

Teachers reported reading aloud a wide variety of texts with children. Shown in Fig. 1, fiction was the most represented genre (n = 342). Other genres were reported less frequently,

Table 2 Text titles and frequency by decade published

Year	Number of titles	Most frequently reported title by decade
1930–1939	1	*The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930)
1940–1949	7	*Caps For Sale* (Slobokina, 1940)
1950–1959	7	*The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957)
1960–1969	42	*Green Eggs and Ham* (Seuss, 1960) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969)
1970–1979	19	*The Lorax* (Seuss, 1971)
1980–1989	52	*The Mitten* (Brett, 1989)
1990–1999	54	*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 1996)
2000–2009	88	*Bear Snores On* (Wilson, 2002)
2010–2019	119	*Pete the Cat* series (Dean, 2014; Dean, 2018; Litwin, 2012)
2020–2021	27	*Meesha Makes Friends* (Percival, 2020)

For 14 titles no date is available as they are traditional folk/fairy tales with no singular official publication record

Kindergarten Nonfiction Text by Content Area Domain

Fig. 1 Frequency of types of text

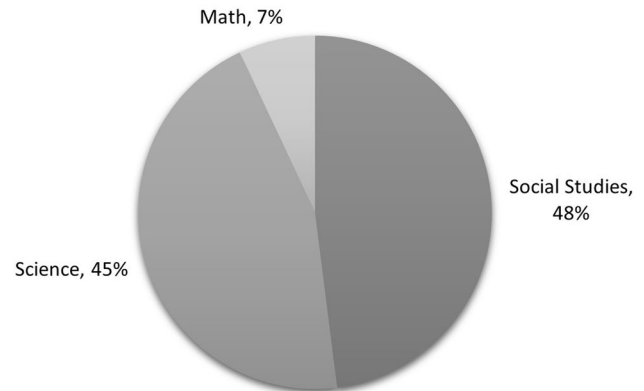## Preschool Nonfiction Text by Content Area Domain

Fig. 2 Frequency of subgenres of fiction for preschool teachers
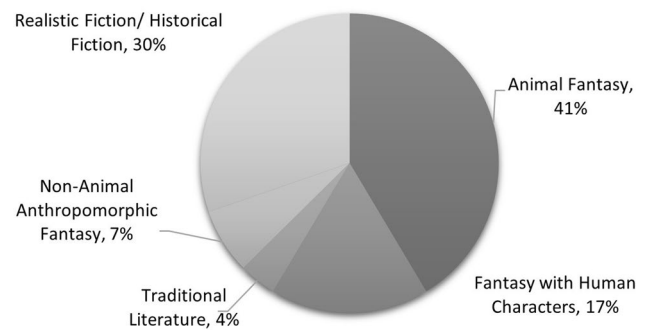
Kindergarten Fiction by Subgenre

Fig. 3 Frequency of subgenres of fiction for kindergarten teachers

such as nonfiction titles (n = 68), mixed texts (n = 7), poetry (n = 6), and social emotional (n = 5) texts.

Fiction Texts

Collectively, teachers named 342 fiction texts (PreK = 140, K = 202). Two subgenres were detected: *Realistic fiction/ historical fiction* (n = 88) accounted for about one-quarter of fiction texts, while *fantasy* texts (n = 254) comprised the remaining three-quarters. Deeper analysis of the fantasy subgenre found *Traditional literature* comprised 8% of fantasy texts and *modern fantasy,* which was sub-coded into *anthropomorphic animal fantasy* (59%, n = 151), *fantasy with human characters* (23%, n = 58), and *anthropomorphic fantasy with characters other than animals* (10%, n = 25).

Anthropomorphic animal fantasy was the most frequently reported text type (PreK: n = 69, K: n = 82). Figures 2 and 3 display the frequency of fiction subgenres for prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers, respectively. Examples of animal fantasy include *Miss Bindergarten Celebrates the 100th Day of Kindergarten* (Slate, 1998) (K: n = 3), *Slugs in Love* (Pearson, 2006) (PreK: n = 1; K: n = 1) and *Bruce's Big Storm* (Higgins, 2019) (PreK: n = 1). Anthropomorphic fantasy with non-animal characters comprised 7% of the fantasy texts offered by both PreK (n = 10) and K (n = 15) teachers. Examples of anthropomorphized characters included snowmen, vehicles, robots, and crayons (e.g., respectively *Snowmen at Night* (Buehner, 2002), *I'm Dirty* (McMullan, 2006), *Love Z* (Sima, 2018), and *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt, 2013).

Modern fantasy titles with human characters appeared in 16% of the texts reported by PreK teachers (PreK = 23) and 17% of titles offered by K teachers (K = 35). Examples include *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (Barrett, 1978),

Ada Twist, Scientist (Beaty, 2016), and *The Magic Treehouse: Dinosaurs Before Dark* (Osbourne, 1992).

Traditional literature comprised 8% of texts provided by PreK teachers (n = 11) and 4% of titles reported by K teachers (n = 9). Examples include *Over in the Meadow* (Wadsworth, n.d.) (PreK: n = 1, K: n = 1), *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Galdone, 1981) (PreK: n = 1, K: n = 2), and *Rainbow Bird: An Aboriginal Folk Tale from Northern Australia* (Madden, 1993). Realistic fiction comprised 30% of fiction titles reported by kindergarten teachers (K = 61) and 19% of titles offered by prekindergarten teachers (PreK = 27). Some realistic fiction texts conveyed important identity messages, such as *Sulwe* (Nyong'o, 2019). Other realistic fiction texts were more playful, like *The Book with No Pictures* (Novak, 2014) and *Junie B. Jones and Some Sneaky Peeky Spying* (Park, 1994). Collectively, realistic fiction themes centered on families, pets, and ways of being in the world.

Texts with Rhyme Schemes

Across subgenres, rhyme scheme patterns were observed. Collectively, 15% of read aloud texts contained a noticeable rhyme scheme ($n = 64$, PreK $n = 30$, K: $n = 34$). Of these, most were fiction ($n = 55$) or poetry ($n = 6$). Nonfiction texts ($n = 2$) and social emotional texts ($n = 1$) were less likely to include a meaningful rhyme scheme.

Social-Emotional Text

Teachers reported specifically authored social-emotional texts as well as examples that used narrative fiction, nonfiction, or poetic conventions to communicate messages with strong social-emotional themes. In this sample, 6% of texts emphasized social-emotional themes ($n = 24$, PreK: $n = 8$, K: $n = 16$). Of these, five were coded primarily as social-emotional texts. In addition, teachers reported reading aloud texts with strong social-emotional content that were primarily categorized as poetry ($n = 1$), fiction ($n = 16$), and nonfiction ($n = 2$). Accordingly, texts were dual-coded if the overall text purpose emphasized central social-emotional themes.

In the fiction + social-emotional texts, authors presented a central character through whom the storyline was communicated. Realistic fiction + social emotional texts could include a story arc as in *Enemy Pie* (Munson, 2000), use a main character to express affirmational thoughts as in *Marvelous Me: Inside and Out* (Bullard, 2002), or use present tense "I" language to communicate central concepts as in *I Promise* (James, 2020). Two nonfiction, informational social studies texts focused on identity development with themes of self-advocacy and positive self-concept: *The Lying Liar Called Racism* (Fuerte, 2020) and *Superheroes are Everywhere* (Harris, 2019).

Nonfiction Texts

Nonfiction accounted for 16% of the 430 reported texts. Most nonfiction texts followed narrative style. Teachers reported more nonfiction texts associated with social studies ($n = 39$) than informational science texts ($n = 27$) or informational math texts ($n = 2$). For example, *Wolves* (Gibbons, 1994) was coded as informational science text. A preschool teacher reported reading aloud *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020). Coded as an informational social studies text, Cortez describes historical and cultural details that center on the Black experience. This text also uses boldface print, a common nonfiction text element (Smolkin & Donovan, 2004), to emphasize essential content and each focal letter, as illustrated by the following excerpt, "**F** is for **folklore** by the light of the moon, for **family**, for **freedom**, for jumping the broom" (p. 13).
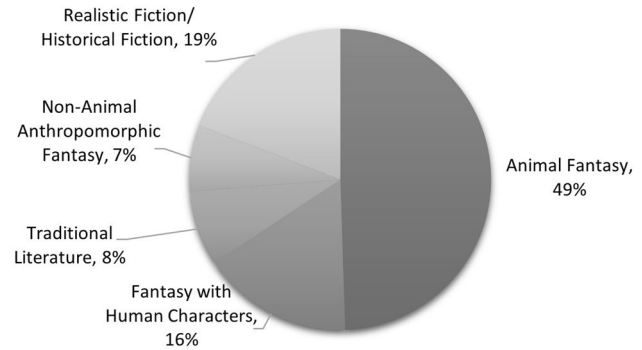
Preschool Fiction by Subgenre

Fig. 4 Frequency of nonfiction text by content area domain for preschool teachers
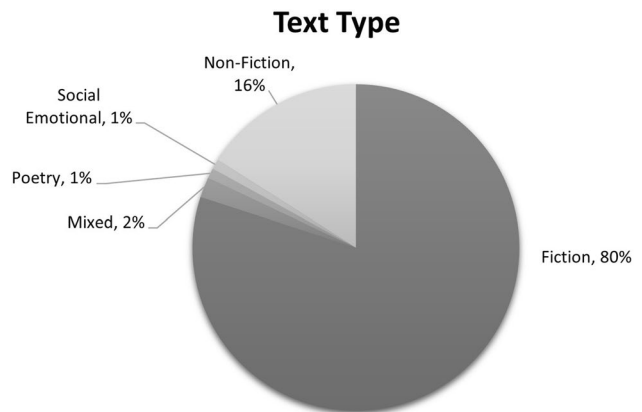
Text Type

Fig. 5 Frequency of nonfiction text by content area domain for preschool teachers

Six titles (PreK = 3; K = 3) were coded as mixed texts, indicating the author used fiction and nonfiction elements to communicate information associated with specific disciplines. Mixed texts were subsequently coded for content area alignment and integrated into nonfiction text analyses. Examples include *The Tiny Seed* (Carle, 1970) coded as science and *It Feels Good to be You: A Book About Gender Identity* (Thorn, 2019) coded as social studies. Including the mixed genre texts provided, teachers reported reading aloud more social studies-focused texts (PreK = 14, K = 26) than science-focused texts (PreK = 13, K = 20). Figures 4 and 5 display the frequency of nonfiction subgenres for preschool and kindergarten teachers, respectively.

Biographies and autobiographies made up 62% of the social studies texts and were more frequently reported by kindergarten teachers (n = 18). Biographies included *Now & Ben: The Modern Inventions of Benjamin Franklin* (Barretta, 2006) and contemporary autobiographical texts like *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017). Fourteen social

studies texts were identified by prekindergarten teachers, and only two reported reading auto/biographical texts: one offered *Ruby Bridges Goes to School* (Bridges, 2009) (also noted by two kindergarten teachers) and the other referenced an online website "Do you know about African American heroes?" (National Geographic Kids). Other preschool social studies titles were more eclectic, with themes of communities and transportation (e.g., *Buildings, Buildings, Buildings* (Stamper, 2010); and *School Bus* (Crews, 1984).

Analysis of science information texts also revealed thematic patterns. Weather and seasonal texts surfaced, such as *Feel the Wind* (Dorros, 1989) (Prek), *Spring is Here* (Gomi, 1989) (Prek & K), and *How a Seed Grows* (Jordan, 1960) (K). Another thematic pattern included animal books like *All About Penguins: Discover Life on Land and in the Sea* (deNapoli, 2020) (K). Science information texts also explored health and body concepts, insects, and living and non-living things.

Two math informational texts were reported by prekindergarten teachers: *Billions of Bricks, A Counting Book About Building* (Cyrus, 2016) and *What's Down the Block* (Kaiser, 2013), which features measurement. Kindergarten teachers did not report any math-focused titles.

Diversity in Children's Literature

Teachers (PreK: n = 26, K: n = 52) reported texts that reflect diversity in culturally intentional ways. Texts with reflections of parallel cultures (n = 77) comprised 18% of reported read-aloud titles. Seventy percent of these texts amplified the experiences or reflections of Black Americans (n = 57). For example, *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) (PreK n = 4), is considered a "people are people" text with Blackness observable in illustration only (Möller, 2016, p. 69); this type of text was recognized throughout the sample. Other examples that center Black/African American main characters include *Jabari Jumps* (Cornwall, 2017) and *Me and Mama* (Cabrea, 2020). Teachers also reported reading texts that honor the "distinctiveness of [the] African American cultural experience" (Möller, 2016, p. 66), including *Brown: The Many Shades of Love* (James, 2020), and *Dream Street* (Walker, 2021). Historical fiction and biographical/autobiographical texts surfaced the experiences of Black Americans as enslaved people: *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine, 2007); civil rights activists: *The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks* (Levinson, 2017); musicians: *Trombone Shorty* (Andrews, 2015); and scientists: *Mae Among the Stars* (Ahmed, 2018).

Teachers also reported using texts that centered the voices and experiences of people from other parallel communities including Asian Americans (n = 3), Latine (n = 3), Indigenous (n = 2), and Pakistani (n = 1) (e.g., respectively *Bee Bim Bop* (Park, 2005); *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014); *D is for Drum: A Native American Alphabet* (Shoulders, 2006); and *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017). Two teachers also shared texts that center the experiences of transgender and gender expansive children: *When Aidan Became a Brother* (Lukoff, 2019) and *It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* (Thorn, 2019).

Parallel communities also include bilingual/multilingual communities. Six texts were either authored fully in Spanish or integrated Spanish into the body of the text. Translations of traditional literature such as *Los Tres Cerditos* (Kratky, 2015) and texts originally authored in Spanish like *El Loro Tico Tango* (Witte, 2004) were noted, and *Manana Iguana* (Paul, 2004) integrated Spanish and English.

Teachers also reported reading texts that talked about diversity. In this set of texts, specific parallel cultures were not represented but included ways of thinking and talking about inclusion, racism, and valuing diverse ways of being in the world. For example, in *The Lying Liar Called Racism,* Fuerte (2020) describes racism as the idea that someone is less than because of the color of their skin or because they speak a different language. *The Big Red Umbrella* uses an anthropomorphized umbrella to challenge exclusionary practices, stating "Some people worry that there won't be enough room under the big umbrella. But the amazing thing is… there is" (Bates, 2018, pp. 23–26).

Across texts coded for diversity, parallel culture texts were predominantly realistic fiction (n = 48). Nonfiction social studies (n = 18) presented episodic events across time like in *The Undefeated* (Alexander, 2019) and emphasized experiences of individuals like in Bridges (2009). Experiences of historically underrepresented communities were also found in poetry (n = 1), mixed (n = 1), nonfiction math (n = 1), and human fantasy (n = 4) titles reported by teachers.

Discussion

This study explored early childhood teachers' response to the open-ended question "What is a title of a recent text you have used for a read aloud?" Data collected across February and March 2022 were analyzed to present a snapshot of read-aloud text selections by individual preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten teachers across the United States. The corpus of teacher-provided titles offers insights about the breadth of texts early childhood teachers integrated into their routine read-aloud practice. While we cannot make assumptions about factors influencing teacher choices or how teachers engaged children during read-alouds, we notice six key trends about the types of texts collected in this sample.

Fiction Remains Popular

Our findings corroborate and extend previous research regarding teachers' frequent use of fiction text over nonfiction and other genres such as poetry (Duke, 2000; Pentimonti et al., 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Within fiction subgenres, teachers' responses indicate a preference for fantasy texts over realistic or historical fiction texts. Over half of the modern fantasy texts were *anthropomorphic animal fantasy* (59%, $n = 151$), and *fantasy with human characters* (23%, $n = 58$). While this reflects longstanding trends within the field (e.g., Yopp & Yopp, 2006), it raises concerns for the types of characters and purposes for reading that children receive.

Social-Emotional Text

Early childhood curriculum and assessment practices focus on promoting young learners' social emotional development. Narrative texts with social-emotional themes are frequently used by teachers to engage young children in conversations related to feelings, friendship, belongingness, and identity (Chen & Adams, 2023). Within this sample 6% of texts included social-emotional themes of kindness, emotions, and well-being in fantasy and realistic fiction subgenres. Again, the use of fiction texts with anthropomorphized characters raises concern as children may not transfer thematic messages expressed by animals to their own interactions with others, instead perceiving that fantasy world problems belong to the book characters (Ganea et al., 2014; Li et al., 2015; Strouse et al., 2018).

Rhyme Scheme

Developing children's phonological sensitivity is recognized as an important instructional objective across early learning environments. Reading aloud books with discernible rhyme schemes can support children's developing phonological awareness, and most fiction texts published for young children include rhyme (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008; Pentimonti et al., 2011). Rhyming texts comprised 15% of sampled texts, which somewhat aligns with the 29% of rhyming text reported by Pentimonti et al. (2011). We propose that texts with rhyming structures are still regularly integrated, but teachers may be unduly influenced by the prevalence of rhyming texts published for young children (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008).

Nonfiction

Integrating informational texts into early childhood contexts invites children to experience different text types and exposes them to discipline-specific language and communication patterns (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). In this sample, titles are more balanced between science (40%) and social studies (57%) than has been previously documented (e.g., Yopp & Yopp, 2006, 2012). Although the titles reported here seem to suggest that social studies texts may be a prominent type of nonfiction read-alouds, it is important to underscore that data collection began in February, which includes President's Day and is celebrated as Black History Month. While the amount of nonfiction social studies texts is encouraging, especially since social studies is frequently marginalized as an instructional content area (Heaftner, 2018), we suspect that the timing of the survey influenced results.

Seasonal Influences

Titles are influenced by the calendar and the seasons. Calendar associations extended beyond biographies ($n = 20$) of presidents (Lincoln and Washington) and prominent African Americans (e.g., Trombone Shorty, Audrey Faye Hendricks). For example, read-aloud titles associated with St. Patrick's Day and Valentine's Day were noted, and 7% of titles ($n = 23$) were Dr. Seuss, suggesting teachers celebrated Read Across America Week in early March. Similarly, as shown by exemplar titles named throughout the findings section, seasonal/weather related themes surfaced across titles to include snow, snowmen, penguins, storms, wind, and hibernating bears. Similarly, spring related topics emerged in books focused on seeds, gardening, and bugs. Teachers' commentaries next to some read-aloud titles confirm perceived calendar and seasonal associations. For example, one teacher wrote, "Wacky Wednesday…for our Dr. Seuss unit" and a another explained, "It Looked Like Spilt Milk (to go along with our weather unit)".

Diversity in Children's Literature

Books offer children opportunities to see themselves, their family structures, their lived experiences, and the lived experiences of others in the world. When teachers integrate diverse texts into their literature repertoire, they are enacting equity practices valuing the dignity of each child and family and honoring the important role they play in nurturing children's positive social identities (NAEYC, 2019). Selecting texts that center the voices and experiences of historically marginalized communities, or parallel cultures, is an intentional practice (Crisp et al., 2016). When texts are culturally authentic, reading biographical picturebooks is recognized as a practice for promoting young learners' understanding of multiple perspectives and knowledge of the lived experiences of others, (Morgan, 2009). The prevalence of biographical texts for explicit descriptions of belonging to specific cultural groups alongside books that recount

historical events is encouraging and valuable for helping children understand systemic issues underlying racism and discrimination (Möller, 2016).

While most texts in this category were coded as either realistic fiction or modern fantasy and reflected parallel communities in relevant ways, two texts used anthropomorphized characters to address racist and discriminatory practices. These texts warrant further examination and critical consideration regarding the contributive power in supporting children's racial literacy or identity development. For example, in *The Big Red Umbrella,* the umbrella stretches to make room for everyone, but the underlying message is unclear and essential vocabulary for discussing racism is not articulated. Racist actions, equity and inclusion practices, and discrimination are more clearly revealed in texts like *Sulwe* (Nyong'o, 2019) and *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* (Ho, 2021). Anthropomorphic analogies cannot compare to the humanizing influence of authentically situated realistic fiction, historical fiction, and biographical narratives.

Implications

Read-alouds are recognized as a valuable practice in early childhood education contexts for supporting young learners' cognitive and social emotional development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Mol et al., 2009; Pentimonti et al., 2011). This study updates and extends knowledge in the field by adding to the results of previous studies seeking to understand the types of texts teachers select for classroom read-alouds. Our study focuses on a single response opportunity rather than previous research with a focus on documenting the experiences of a focused group of teachers over time (e.g., Pentimonti, et al., 2011) or efforts to comprehensively document the types of texts in classroom libraries (e.g., Crisp et al., 2016). This work must be sustained over time and expanded to encompass a deeper look at not only what teachers are reading aloud, but the factors that inform their choices and how they implement read-alouds with young children.

The overwhelming use of anthropomorphic fantasy must be carefully considered. The extant literature is mixed, with some support for anthropomorphic characters to soften difficult topics and the accepted notion of child preference (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004; Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020; Waxman et al., 2014). However, concerns for children's accurate conceptual development (Strouse et al., 2018), separation of fantasy and reality (Ganea et al., 2014; Li et al., 2015) and understanding of true cultural characteristics (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020) may supersede older notions. Accordingly, further integration and then research capturing teacher/child interactions is recommended for determining how best to engage children in critical conversations that support children's identity development and belonging.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future research should include extended observations of read-alouds in early childhood settings. Given that our survey spanned February and March, which includes Black History Month President's Day, Valentine's Day, Read Across America Day, and marks the beginning of spring, we noted likely connections between teachers' read-aloud choices and holidays and observances. We believe that observations over an extended period would address limitations of this study and advance the field in three ways. First, observers would more accurately collect data by recording the exact title and author of each book read aloud. Second, observers could collect read-aloud data over a longer period to better understand the types, topics, and diversity in texts read aloud. Third, observational data would extend our understanding of the purpose and quality of early childhood teachers' read-alouds. Additionally, it will be important to document and analyze how diversity is presented in children's text and to continue to advocate for the integration of diverse narratives that center the voices and experiences of people from parallel cultures in realistic and authentic ways. Pausing periodically to document and consider the array of texts surfacing in early childhood contexts is important as it sheds light on the literature trends permeating early literacy practices and reveals opportunities for extending the types of literature children experience.

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