The purposes of this research were (a) to understand the frequency with which K–5 teachers use informational text in their routine classroom instruction, (b) to understand the percentage of informational text in classroom libraries, and (c) to explore teachers’ attitudes about informational text. Survey data of 318 participants indicated that K–5 teachers used an average of 31.55 minutes (SD = 22.24) of informational text per day and that classroom libraries consisted of an average of 32.77% (SD = 14.16) of informational text. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the instructional value of informational text but also reported that a lack of time, a lack of resources, and curricular limitations restricted their use of informational text. Implications on how to increase the use of informational text in K–5 classrooms are provided.

In recent years, much attention has been given to the role of informational text in our elementary classrooms. Informational text engages the reader with aspects of the real world by conveying and communicating factual information. Informational text differs from narrative text in both the content and the structure of the text. Informational text typically has the following characteristics: (a) the communication of information about the natural or social world, (b) content that is both factual and durable, (c) timeless verb tenses and generic noun construction, (d) technical or content-specific vocabulary, (e) material to classify and define the topic of interest, (f) text structures including compare/contrast, problem/solution, cause/effect, and enumeration/description, and (g) embedded graphical features including diagrams, indices, charts, and maps (Duke, 2000; Duke & Kays, 1998; Pappas, 1986).
Related Literature

The Instructional Importance and Benefits of Informational Text

Our elementary school students must be prepared for frequent and purposeful use of informational text. By the time they enter secondary schools, students are expected to adeptly maneuver through informational text; in fact, 75% of texts used in sixth grade and beyond are nonnarrative (Moss, 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore, the majority of reading and writing done by adult readers is informational in nature (Venezky, 2000). Approximately 95% of the sites commonly visited on the Internet contain informational text (Kamil & Lane, 1998).

Informational text presents a wealth of instructional opportunities for teachers and students. Firstly, it exposes students to specialized vocabulary and topic-specific language (Duke & Kays, 1998). Informational text also builds the background knowledge that promotes text comprehension (Hirsch, 2003). An additional benefit of informational text lies in its diverse text structure; as students increase their exposure to text structure and features, they become more prepared to encounter similar features in the informational texts they will use later in secondary schooling and the workplace (Kamberelis, 1998; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002). The motivational aspects of informational text cannot be overlooked (Leal & Moss, 1999; Moss & Hendershot, 2002). In explaining the engaging nature of informational text, Doiron (1994) noted that “children are naturally curious, with a great thirst to know about the world around them” (p. 618). Furthermore, informational text appeals to both struggling readers and boys (Dreher, 2003; Kletzien & Szabo, 1998).

Because of its rich benefits, multiple researchers have advocated for the inclusion of informational text in elementary classrooms (Chall & Snow, 1988; Doiron, 1994; Dreher 1998–1999, 2003; Duke, 2003, 2004; Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). Additionally, the professional standards in English language arts call for the inclusion of multiple genres to increase young children’s familiarity with and preparation in a variety of genres (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996).
Despite the undeniable importance of informational text, research indicates that our elementary students may be missing out of vital exposure to it. In her year-long study of 20 first-grade classrooms, Duke (2000) pointed out an alarming dearth of informational text; during written language activities, students were exposed to only 3.6 minutes of informational text per day. Furthermore, informational text represented less than 10% of first-grade classroom libraries. Doiron (2003) found that when selecting books from the school library, children chose twice as many informational texts as novels, yet classroom libraries were severely limited in the availability of informational text. Yopp and Yopp (2000) reported that only 14% of primary-grade read-alouds during an average instructional day were informational text. In surveying 1,874 elementary teachers, researchers (Jacobs, Morrison, & Swinyard, 2000) found that teachers read aloud from informational book an average of only 3 of their last 10 days of instruction. Children are equally unlikely to be exposed to informational texts during parent read-alouds at home (Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Informational texts are also scarce in basal readers; Moss and Newton (1998) found that of the selections in six second-grade basal series, 16% were informational text.

Though our students may not have adequate exposure to informational texts in their routine literacy instruction, they are asked to demonstrate proficiency with informational text in standardized reading tests; Flood and Lapp (1986) found that 38% of passages on standardized reading tests were expository. The consequences of overlooking informational text as an instructional tool can be severe. Some researchers (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Chall & Snow, 1988) argued that the lack of informational text may contribute to the decline in reading achievement after third grade.

There are several possible explanations for the scarcity of informational text in our elementary classrooms. The first is the belief that young children cannot handle the complex demands of
Informational text, with vocabulary often being a primary concern. Informational texts are often replete with technical, content-specific vocabulary words. Not only may students lack firm understandings of these unfamiliar terms, they may also struggle to derive the meanings of these words because of the lack of background knowledge to support their efforts (Hall & Sabey, 2007). The complex text structures embedded in informational text are an additional source of difficulty. Meyer (1985) pointed out several commonly occurring text structures, including description, sequence, problem/solution, cause/effect, and compare/contrast; a single text may contain several of these structures, demanding the reader transition fluently between these structures (Chambliss & Calfee, 1989). In addition to complex text structures, informational texts contain unique features including headings/subheadings, typography, and graphics which may be sources of difficulty. Hall and Sabey explained that children may not understand how captions, text boxes, graphics, and headings/subheadings contain essential information and help readers navigate through related topics. Furthermore, teachers themselves may be unsure of how to help students in using informational text. In surveying elementary educators, Davinroy and Hiebert (1984) found many participants who were more comfortable with and confident in using narrative text. These same teachers expressed uncertainty in how to support children’s comprehension of informational text and how to coach students through examining text structures.

Unsubstantiated Beliefs About Young Children and Informational Text

Informational text certainly may present instructional challenges, but it is imperative to examine the unsubstantiated nature of the belief that young children cannot successfully negotiate informational text; in fact, multiple studies have shown that young children can be successful with informational text. More specifically, young children can successfully explore written language (Richgels, 2002), can learn about information book language (Pappas, 1993), can retell informational text (Moss, 1997; Pappas), can learn content from informational text (Duke & Kays, 1998; Leal, 1994), can understand author’s craft (Farest, Miller, & Fewin, 1995), can participate in sophisticated discussions of
informational text (Heller, 2006), can draw intertextual connections in informational text (Oyler & Barry, 1996), can produce higher numbers of comprehension discourse moves from informational text read-alouds than storybook read-alouds (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002), can examine the purposes and features of informational text structures (Maloch, 2008), and can construct written responses to informational text (Moss & Leal, 1994). In sum, the reasons to support the use of informational text in elementary classrooms far outweigh any potential obstacles to impede its use.

**Purposes of the Study and Conceptual Framework**

I began this study to examine K–5 teachers’ use of and attitudes toward informational text. My overarching objective was to understand the frequency with which teachers use informational text during classroom instruction. I also hoped to understand why teachers choose either to use or not use informational text in their instructional practices. Research questions were as follows:

1. With what frequency do K–5 teachers include informational text in an average day of classroom instruction and in their classroom libraries? Are there differences in the use of informational text according to grade levels?
2. What are teachers’ attitudes toward the benefits and challenges of informational text?
3. Are there any obstacles preventing teachers from using informational text in their routine K–5 classroom instruction?

To answer the first research question, I decided to have teachers self-report their frequency of use of informational text. My intent here was to determine whether K–5 teachers prioritized informational text in classroom instruction and in classroom libraries.

More specifically, my hope was to understand whether the increased attention given to informational text in practitioner journals, online resources, and professional organizations was impacting teachers’ instructional choices. In other words, had anything changed Duke’s (2000) alarming report about the scarcity of informational text in elementary classrooms? In asking teachers about their inclusion of informational text in classroom libraries,
I hoped to explore whether Young and Moss’s (2006) cry for “classroom libraries overflowing with quality nonfiction titles” (p. 212) was a priority for K–5 teachers. I also asked about the inclusion of informational text in classroom libraries in order to understand whether students in K–5 classrooms might have these texts as options for use during independent reading. The second and third research questions intended to explore the reasons that teachers use or do not use informational text in classroom practice. Much of the literature suggests that informational text is not readily used in classroom practices; my hope was to give voice to the reasons behind this phenomenon.

This study was meant to fill a gap in our understanding of recent trends in classroom use of instructional text; the related research relies on teacher questionnaires that are growing increasingly outdated, are restricted to a select number of grade levels (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996), or pertain largely to teachers’ use of informational text in read-alouds rather than in general literacy instruction (Jacobs et al., 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

This work is guided by Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of literature, defining reading as an interactive transaction between the reader and the text. This theory distinguishes between the aesthetic and the efferent points of view. The aesthetic stance looks at the readers’ personal reactions, including feelings and emotions, to text, whereas the efferent focuses on the reader’s quest for information. In creating literacy experiences focusing on the inclusion of informational text, teachers can create opportunities for readers to learn about themselves and the content of texts. My work is also influenced by the importance of informational literacy or the ability to access, evaluate, comprehend, and use information from a variety of sources. In today’s Information Age, students encounter a myriad of facts and information through textbooks, newspapers, and the Internet. The ability to use and comprehend informational text is “central to success, and even survival, in advanced schooling, the workplace, and the community” (Duke, 2000, p. 202). Logically, our public schools and nation’s teachers hold the enormous responsibility of preparing students who are information literate. To aid their students in becoming information literate, teachers must encourage students to become “intellectually curious observers, creators, and users of information” (Lenox & Walker, 1993, p. 324). Thus, informational
text becomes an important resource in the effort to promote information literacy among young students.

**Methodology**

The objectives of the study were addressed through a descriptive study conducted among 318 K–5 teachers. This study occurred over an 8-month period and involved teachers from six states.

**Data Sources**

Data for this study consisted of written responses to an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix A). I developed the questionnaire in three phases: drafting, piloting, and finalizing (Dillon, 1999). After drafting, I shared the questionnaire items with two reading researchers and modified items based on their feedback. Then, I piloted the draft questionnaire with 33 elementary school teachers in New York and Maine. The purpose of the pilot was to evaluate and assess the reliability of the questions. Analyzing the data from the pilot study helped to design the format of the questionnaire used for the present study. As a result of the pilot, I added and dropped items and clarified the wording and format of particular items.

To inform teachers about the focus of the questionnaire and to clarify any potential confusion about the usage of the terminology *informational text*, the questionnaire provided participants with a basic definition of informational text (see Appendix A). In the questionnaire, participants reported the amount of instructional time allotted for informational text during an average day of instruction. Next, teachers approximated the percentage of informational text in their classroom libraries.

In short-answer paragraphs, teachers provided (a) their beliefs about the instructional benefits of informational text, (b) any possible reasons why students might struggle with informational text, and (c) any potential obstacles preventing them from using informational text in their classroom. The questionnaire also included a number of demographic items. Teachers reported minimal biographic information including gender, age, years of teaching experience, and current grade(s) taught.
Participants

Participants in this study were 318 full-time elementary school teachers in Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Virginia public schools. The sample of 318 teachers included 45 kindergarten teachers, 55 first-grade teachers, 52 second-grade teachers, 64 third-grade teachers, 40 fourth-grade teachers, and 62 fifth-grade teachers. All participants were general classroom teachers, responsible for teaching all areas of the curriculum. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 54, with an average age of 35.25 (SD = 5.48). Participants ranged in teaching experiences from 3 to 34 years, with an average length of 16.75 years of classroom experience (SD = 7.34). The vast majority of the 318 participants were female (89%), whereas only 11% were men; this proportion is typical of elementary school teachers nationwide (National Education Association, 2003). Sixty-six percent of teachers identified their schools as Title I schools.

Participants in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York were affiliated with a graduate school of education in a major metropolitan area; these participants were either current graduate students or alumni. Participants from Maine, Texas, and Virginia attended district-wide mandatory professional development workshops, focused on vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction, which I delivered.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection occurred over an 8-month period in the 2007–2008 academic year. I employed a mixed-mode strategy of both written questionnaires and online questionnaires; this approach allowed me to capitalize on the advantages of Web questionnaires and to minimize nonresponse (Dillon, 1999; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004; Schaefer & Dillman 1998). The content of the questionnaire was identical across both forms. I initially invited 271 K–5 teachers in Maine, Texas, and Virginia to complete the survey on hard copy at the conclusion of professional development workshops; I secured 200 participants, yielding a response rate of 73%. I also invited 321 teachers in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York to complete the survey through an online data collection site; I secured 119 participants, for a response
rate of 37%. In evaluating response rates for the Web-based survey, Archer (2008) reported that response rates of approximately 40% provide a great deal of information.

To understand teachers’ self-reported inclusion of informational text in daily classroom instruction and in classroom libraries, I used statistical analysis software to examine the means, ranges, and standard deviations for the data across all 318 participants. To examine any possible trends about teachers’ use of instructional text according to grade level, data were disaggregated according to grade level. I used an analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure to determine whether grade-level differences in teachers’ use of informational text existed.

To guide my examination of short-answer responses, I categorized data using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Through inductive analysis (Patton, 1990), I allowed patterns and categories of analysis to “emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 390). To begin data analysis, I read and reread the data coding emerging patterns and phases, writing analytical and methodological memos to form initial categories (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I then named each of these categories and identified direct quotes that typified the category. For instance, participants wrote that informational text does “not have enough built-in hooks to make texts relevant.” Subsequently, I created a code to note responses about disengaged readers as an obstacle to the inclusion of informational text. In the final stage of data analysis, I reread data to confirm categories and noted confirming and disconfirming evidence (Erickson, 1986).

Findings

Both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that informational text played an important role in the classrooms of the 318 participants. Several findings and related themes, including the following, are presented in further detail: (a) the inclusion of informational text in K–5 daily classroom instruction and classroom libraries, (b) teachers’ beliefs about the benefits of informational text, (c) teachers’ beliefs about the challenges of informational
The Inclusion of Informational Text in K–5 Daily Classroom Instruction and Classroom Libraries

Quantitative findings indicated that K–5 teachers regularly incorporated informational text into their daily classroom instruction and their classroom libraries. As displayed in Table 1, the mean use of informational text for K–5 teachers was 31.55 minutes per day ($SD = 22.24$).

Not only do K–5 teachers use informational text during routine instruction, it also appeared to hold an important place in classroom libraries. On average, informational text comprised 32.77% of classroom libraries ($SD = 14.16$). Data presented in Table 1 suggest an increase of informational text as grade level increase; these increases were particularly sharp when looking at teachers’ use of informational text in routine classroom instruction. It is important to note the large increase in teachers’ use of informational text in daily classroom instruction from fourth grade to fifth grade. Another interesting trend is that the percentage of informational texts in teachers’ libraries jumped in second grade and then levels out. Surprisingly, though fifth-grade teachers seemed to use informational text with much more frequency in their classroom instruction, the percentage of informational text included in their libraries was relatively similar to that of second, third, and fourth grades.

Because an additional intent of the study was to understand the use of informational text according to grade level, I conducted an ANOVA on the daily minutes of informational text use with grade level as the independent variable. When investigating teachers’ use of informational text in daily classroom instruction, results from ANOVA analyses indicated grade-level differences at a $p < .05$ level of statistical significance, $F(5, 313) = 26.10$. As presented in Table 2, results from Tukey testing for post hoc analysis of informational text used in daily instruction showed the significant grade-level differences for the use of informational text in classroom instruction.

Results from ANOVA analyses indicated differences in informational class in classroom libraries according to grade level,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Mean Number of Minutes of Informational Text Used in Daily Classroom Instruction</th>
<th>Minimum Number of Minutes of Informational Text Used in Daily Classroom Instruction</th>
<th>Maximum Number of Minutes of Informational Text Used in Daily Classroom Instruction</th>
<th>Mean Percentage of Informational Text in Classroom Libraries</th>
<th>Minimum Percentage of Informational Text in Classroom Libraries</th>
<th>Maximum Percentage of Informational Text in Classroom Libraries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>31.55 (SD = 22.24)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>32.77 (SD = 14.16)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15.54 (SD = 9.44)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23.92 (SD = 10.43)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18.36 (SD = 7.20)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27.81 (SD = 14.49)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27.51 (SD = 20.06)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>36.44 (SD = 12.58)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>35.31 (SD = 14.85)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>35.39 (SD = 9.05)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38.13 (SD = 23.74)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>36.88 (SD = 20.71)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50.40 (SD = 27.85)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>35.32 (SD = 13.08)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was also interested to see whether patterns among teachers’ inclusion of informational text emerged when comparing primary grades to upper elementary grades. In considering this pattern, I included kindergarten, first, and second grades in the primary grades, with third, fourth, and fifth grades being upper elementary grades (Jacobs et al., 2000). Results of ANOVA tests indicated that teachers in upper elementary grades included informational text in their daily classroom instruction and in their classroom libraries more frequently than primary grade teachers ($F = 91.074, df = 1, 317, p < .000$).

\[ F(5, 313) = 7.61, \ p < .05. \]  
Results from Tukey testing for post hoc analysis of informational text in classroom libraries are presented in Table 3.

**TABLE 3** Post Hoc Tukey Testing for Differences Among Grade Levels in Teachers’ Self-Reported Percentage of Informational Text in Classroom Libraries  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.010*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level.
Teachers’ Beliefs About the Benefits of Informational Text

Subsequent to self-reporting their inclusion of information text in classroom instruction and libraries, participants answered questions about their attitudes toward the genre. The vast majority of participants pointed out the cognitive, linguistic, and motivational benefits of informational text. More specifically, teachers explained that informational text benefited K–5 students by building (a) new knowledge, (b) literacy skills and preparation for content-specific state tests, and (c) motivation.

Building New Knowledge

In arguing that informational text was highly beneficial for their students, participants explained that “informational text provides students with facts, information, and insight on topics that may be largely unfamiliar to them.” A second-grade teacher explained that the informational texts in her classroom library have enabled students to research unfamiliar topics and satisfy their own intellectual curiosity.

Every day, my kids ask me questions that I can’t or don’t always answer. While I might want to put down whatever we’re doing and answer a student’s seemingly off-topic question about the adaptations of snakes, I can’t do it. By increasing informational text that’s available to my students, they now have a place to go to answer their own questions or learn more about whatever topic intrigues them.

Because many of the participants were teachers in schools eligible for Title I funding, several teachers indicated that information texts were particularly useful in expanding knowledge for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who may have “limited understandings of the world outside of their neighborhoods.”

Building Literacy Skills and Readiness for Content-Specific Tests

Participants lauded informational text for preparing students to gain information from text, a practical literacy skill commonly used by older readers in secondary schools, higher education, and
the workplace. In particular, several upper elementary teachers used informational text to prepare their students for the demands of middle school, where, as explained by a fifth-grade teacher, “students better come in knowing how to read for information in their content classes.” Other teachers reported that informational text opened up new opportunities to teach reading comprehension strategies. Specifically, teachers cited that informational text was a tool to teach compare/contrast, text-to-world connections, graphic organizers, and summarization. A second-grade teacher noted, “Informational texts help me teach a wide range of skills and strategies. It’s important for my kids to look compare and contrast, but I can’t always find picture books that lend themselves to that skill.” A fifth-grade teacher explained that informational text allowed her to use reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) as a comprehension strategy:

I’ve always liked reciprocal teaching as a comprehension strategy—that students collaboratively construct the meaning of a text. For whatever reason, I never had much success doing it with narrative texts. But my students are quite skilled in using it with informational text. They can always ask questions about informational text, and then they often find that someone in their group knows the answer to those questions. Or, even more exciting, sometimes we turn to another informational text to answer our lingering questions.

Other benefits of informational text included preparing students for content-specific state tests, which challenge students to read for information. A fourth-grade teacher posed, “How would I get my students ready for content-area state tests without informational text? Students have to be able to know how to read the informational passages that they’ll see on those tests.” Data suggested that K–5 teachers approached informational text as an essential tool that prepares students for the academic demands of schooling in an era of accountability.

Building Motivation

Teachers also reported that the motivating and engaging format of informational text tapped into the natural curiosity displayed by young children. Participants stated that the abundant topics of
informational text enabled both struggling readers and reluctant readers to find “the right book for them.” A second-grade teacher explained that her male students “routinely squabbled over books about sports, trucks, and ‘gross stuff.’ It’s exciting to see my reluctant readers be so eager to dive into a book.”

Teachers’ Beliefs About the Challenges of Informational Text

Though highly favorable of informational text, participants also pointed out its instructional challenges. Teachers cited (a) vocabulary, (b) background knowledge, and (c) text structure.

THE CHALLENGES OF VOCABULARY

Across participants’ responses, vocabulary emerged as the most prevalent challenge for students. A first-grade teacher said that the demanding vocabulary of informational text “almost ensures that my students wouldn’t comprehend.” Similarly, many teachers cited that the language demands of informational text were a significant obstacle to beginning readers and English-language learners. Many teachers explained that the vocabulary demands of informational text resulted in reading levels higher than those of their students.

THE CHALLENGES OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

According to participants, students’ lack of background knowledge or exposure to the topic posed an additional challenge. A fourth-grade teacher elaborated as below:

My students lack the prior knowledge to be successful in connecting to the topic at hand. Because many of the informational texts assume the reader brings knowledge to the page, I have to do an enormous amount of frontloading, including preteaching vocabulary, providing an overview of the topic, or finding pictures, photos, or Internet resources to introduce the topic.

Thus, teachers were acutely aware that their students’ limited background knowledge may impede their comprehension of informational text.
THE CHALLENGES OF TEXT STRUCTURE

Participants also cited informational text structure, including captions, typography, and sequencing, as challenging for young readers. A common sentiment, as voiced by several participants and explained here by a first-grade teacher, was that “my students get overwhelmed by so much going on one page. They don’t know where to begin, how to begin, or how to navigate through these texts.” Other respondents cited the length and amount of information as troublesome.

Obstacles Preventing the Inclusion of Informational Text in K–5 Classrooms

In their open-ended responses, many participants reported that they would like to include more information in routine instruction. These participants provided multiple barriers that impeded their use of informational text, including the following: (a) instructional time constraints, (b) lack of resources, (c) curricular limitations, and (d) disengaged readers.

INSTRUCTIONAL TIME CONSTRAINTS AS AN OBSTACLE

The most prevalent obstacle was the lack of instructional time. Nearly half of participants cited the lack of instructional time as an impediment to the inclusion of informational text. A third-grade teacher, who cited using 10 minutes of informational text per day, explained the following:

In our classrooms today, there’s so much pressure to prepare students for the state tests. As test preparation becomes a top priority, everything else seems to get pushed to the periphery. At this point, my students get only about 30 minutes of science and 50 minutes of social studies per week. Those content areas provide the best opportunity for informational text, but there’s often just not enough time to get there.

Similarly, a fourth-grade teacher explained that “it can be so time-consuming to wade through the complexities of informational text, that I often summarize the content just to save time.” As their instructional time dwindles, teachers may see informational text
as both time consuming and pertinent only for content-specific instruction.

LACK OF QUALITY RESOURCES AS AN OBSTACLE

Another common obstacle pertained to either the lack of resources or limited funding to buy informational texts. One second-grade participant explained, “I need more leveled informational text in order to better use it during reading and writing workshops. I’d also like a variety of big books so that I may better teach the various features of informational text in a shared reading format.” Many participants pointed out the lack of leveled informational texts appropriate to students’ levels. In particular, participants who taught in schools with high populations of English-language learners indicated a lack of suitably differentiated informational texts. Others pointed to the “poor choices” and “limited availability of quality texts” as preventing further inclusion in their instruction. A third-grade teacher explained the following:

I am frustrated by the lack of quality informational texts that are available for my students with limited background knowledge, low comprehension levels, or unsophisticated vocabulary. I’ve struggled to find informational texts that aren’t wordy, that match students’ “just right” reading levels, and that relay curriculum-related topics in an engaging format.

Thus, teachers demanded not just an increased quantity of informational text but increased quality of informational texts to serve specific instructional purposes and to meet the needs of diverse students.

CURRICULAR LIMITATIONS AS AN OBSTACLE

Curricular limitations and school-adopted basal readers also served as an impediment to informational text in K–5 classrooms. Several respondents in Grades K, 1, and 2 taught in Reading First schools, in which basal readers determined the type of text used in classrooms. A common sentiment, as stated here by a first-grade teacher, was “If only my basal reader had it, I’d incorporate more informational text.” These teachers appeared to have felt
restricted to their basal readers and struggled to bring in informational text as additional reading material.

DISENGAGED READERS AS AN OBSTACLE

A final obstacle preventing the inclusion of more informational text came from a relatively small number of teachers, who found that informational texts failed to entertain or engage their students, particularly young girls. More specifically, participants explained that informational text didn’t lend itself to the opportunity “to curl up with a favorite book” in the way that narrative text does. Other teachers explained that their disengaged readers found informational text “boring.” These teachers expressed that students’ lack of background knowledge and limited world knowledge did not motivate them to read about “dry topics presented in informational text.”

Implications and Conclusions

Before examining the implications of this data, we must consider the possible limitations of this study. Because the results were derived from analyses of self-reported data, teachers may have provided answers that they thought were the “correct” ones. Teachers may have overinflated their responses and findings may have been quite different if an observational component were an additional data source. Furthermore, as with almost any survey research, nonresponder bias is a possible limitation. This study reports the results of 318 participants, but it is impossible to predict how other teachers, who opted not to respond to the survey, may have responded. As explained by Jacobs et al. (2000), the results may or may not represent the instructional practices and opinions of a larger portion of K–5 teachers.

These findings suggest positive implications about teachers’ use of and attitudes toward informational text in K–5 classroom instruction. It seems that K–5 teachers incorporate informational text into both their daily instruction and their classroom libraries. Looking across all data, it appears that teachers include more informational text in their classroom instruction and classroom libraries in the upper grades than in primary grades. Whereas Duke (2000) pointed out the shortage of informational text in classroom instruction, teachers in this study reported using it for an
average of 31 minutes per day and estimated that informational text makes up 32% of their classroom libraries. Thus, it seems that progress is being made in reaching Moss’s (2003) recommendation that about half of classroom libraries consist of informational text. These classroom libraries seem to include much more than the 10% of informational text found in Duke’s study.

In examining trends across grade levels, it is important to note that as grade levels increase, so too does teachers’ reliance upon and inclusion of informational text. This trend may be traced back to Chall’s (1983) phases of literacy instruction; in the primary grades, teachers devote more time to explicit instruction in learning to read, whereas teachers in upper elementary grades may incorporate informational text to encourage reading to learn. It is possible that the primary teachers in this study see narrative texts as a platform for teaching students to read and that upper elementary grade teachers utilize informational text to teach both content and reading comprehension strategies.

There are several possibilities to explain what appears to be an increasing reliance on informational text. It is possible that teachers are receiving messages about the importance of informational text from a variety of sources. Duke (2000) posited that researchers’ calls for “substantial attention to informational text in the early grades” (p. 221) had not yet impacted instructional practices; perhaps this message, which has recently been reflected in more practitioner-oriented journals, is finally reaching larger numbers and varied audiences. These findings may also reflect an increase not only in the amount of informational texts from publishing companies but also in the quality of texts, as revealed by Leal, Cunningham, and Mowrer (2006), who explained that “Informational books have made major advances in providing interesting topics in an appealing manner” (p. 1). As teachers and librarians have demanded more engaging and appropriate selections for young readers, the call has been answered with “an influx of informational text . . . covering almost any subject” (p. 2).

Though the findings of this study suggest progress, there certainly is room to grow in the possibilities of informational text. The fact remains that informational text is still a relatively overlooked genre. To resolve this issue, it is not enough merely to fill classroom libraries with a slew of informational text; rather, these texts must be selected with much thought and care. Moss,
Leone, and DiPillo (1997) suggested that teachers and librarians consider five criteria when selecting informational text: (a) the authority of the author; (b) that accuracy of the text content; (c) the appropriateness of the book for its audience; (d) the literary artistry, including engaging information and devices to hook readers; and (e) the appearance and attractiveness of the book. When selecting quality titles on a wide range of topics, teachers can take advantage of multiple resources, including book reviews from the American Library Association and awards for nonfiction titles such as the National Council of Teachers of English’s Orbis Pictus Award and the American Library Association’s Robert F. Siebert Awards. It is also crucial that the informational texts selected represent a range of reading levels; teachers and schools must also make concerted efforts to find informational text to meet the diverse needs of English-language learners and struggling readers. Additionally, as requested by several participants in this study and recommended by Duke (2000), schools must continue to increase budgets and allot funding for the purchase of informational text. Finally, I urge publishing houses to continue to increase the amount of informational text in basal readers: a possible solution to the participants in this study whose tightly scripted curriculum impeded their ability to rely upon more informational text.

In addition to increasing the number of quality informational texts used in classroom instruction and included in classroom libraries, we must help teachers see informational texts as a teaching and learning tool. Through professional development efforts and graduate coursework, we must encourage teachers to step outside of the comfort zones of teachers’ manuals. We must help teachers adopt creative approaches to including informational text, particularly in schools with strictly adopted curricula. Instructional opportunities with informational text abound; teachers can incorporate informational text into read alouds (Duke & Kays, 1998), into guided and independent reading (Duke, 2004), into lessons on decoding and phonemic awareness (Duke, Martineau, Frank, & Bennett-Armistead, 2003), and into reading comprehension and writing instruction (Duke; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003).

Furthermore, we must continue to support teachers in their efforts to use these texts in their classrooms. The majority of teachers in this study understood the instructional value of
informational texts, but participants were also cognizant of the instructional challenges which they present. Hall and Sabey (2007) suggested that many teachers lack the methods and strategies that enable young children to successfully use informational text; teacher training should prepare teachers with the instructional practices that equip young readers to navigate the vocabulary, text structure, and general comprehension difficulties posed by informational text. Teachers need a practical and theoretical understanding of how to use informational texts in their routine literacy activities to promote students’ fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. With knowledge in these instructional strategies, teachers may be better prepared and more confident in providing explicit instruction in informational text. Additionally, as teachers better understand the rich instructional opportunities in informational text, they may come to see it as an essential component in literacy, rather than an add-on; perhaps this may alleviate teachers citing a lack of instructional time as an obstacle to informational text.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ inclusion of informational text, as well as their attitudes that influence these instructional decisions. It is my hope that this study will pave the way for substantial follow-up work. It would be logical to further examine grade-level differences in informational text. It would also be prudent to follow up with case studies of individual teachers who span a range of use of informational text; for example, it would be interesting to compare and contrast the a fifth-grade teacher who used only 15 minutes a day of instructional text and another fifth-grade teacher who used 100 minutes a day.

Though teachers appear to be receiving the message about the instructional importance of and increased need for informational text, our work is far from done. If the goal is for our elementary school students to be fluent and proficient in reading for information, to perform well on content-based tests, and to be engaged and literate members of the information age, we must further increase the informational text our young readers encounter on a daily basis. We also must ensure that teachers continue to
grow in their professional knowledge regarding how best to use these texts to promote cognitive and literacy development.

References


Duke, N., Martineau, J., Frank, K., & Bennett-Armistead, V. (2003). *33.6 Minutes per day: What happens when we include more informational text in first grade*
classrooms? Unpublished manuscript, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.


Appendix A—Questionnaire

Thank you for your willingness to participate. The following questionnaire will ask you several questions about how you use informational text in your K–5 classroom. Informational text is a type of nonfiction that conveys information about the natural or social world (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

Fill in the following information.

State where you currently teach _________
Number of years you’ve been teaching _________
Type of certification you hold _________
State where you received certification _____________
Your current teaching placement (grade level, etc. _________________
Your age ______________
Gender ______________
Does your current school receive Title I funding? Yes/No
1. In a typical day of classroom instruction, how frequently do you use informational text/nonfiction text? Fill an approximate number of minutes. ______________

2. Estimate the percentage of your classroom library that is informational text. _______%

3. In what ways is informational text beneficial for your students?

4. List some reasons why your students might struggle with informational text.

5. Are there any factors that currently limit your ability to use informational text in your classroom? If so, please explain these factors.