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## Bridging the gap between fiction and nonfiction in the literature circle setting

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## Bridging the gap between fiction and nonfiction in the literature circle setting

### Abstract

Third grade students experienced literature circles as part of balance literacy program. First, students learned about literature circles and its importance. After several fiction literature circle cycles, the classroom teacher bridged the gap between fiction and nonfiction in a literature circle setting. This allowed students read nonfiction and learn about a topic connected to their previous fiction read. Students were excited to read nonfiction and began choosing this genre on their own. They realized the power of learning that was available to them in nonfiction text.

Bridging the Gap Between Fiction and Nonfiction  
in the Literature Circle Setting

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Reading and Language Arts

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Elementary Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Deborah L. Stien

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This Research Paper

Titled: Bridging the gap between fiction and nonfiction in a  
literature circle setting

has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the  
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November 29, 2001

Dr. Priscilla L. Griffith  
Dr. Carol Lynch-Brown  
Editors: The Reading Teacher  
800 Barksdale Road  
PO Box 8139  
Newark, DE 19714-8139

Dear Dr. Griffith and Dr. Lynch-Brown:

As a third grade elementary teacher, it's always a goal of mine to help my students develop a love of reading and help them to feel good about themselves as readers. Within my classroom, I provide my students a balanced literacy environment to meet their needs. One important component, that fosters my goal, is literature circles. For the past five years, literature circles have provided a setting for my students to engage in meaningful literacy conversations and it has turned many reluctant readers into excited, dynamic ones!

As part of my graduate studies, I wanted to know more about using nonfiction in a literature circle setting. I knew that my students loved to talk about the fiction books they read. Realizing that the majority of the reading my students would encounter for the rest of their lives would be informational texts, it just made sense for me to bridge the gap between literature circles and nonfiction. This became my quest and during the spring of 2000, these third graders were my first students to try nonfiction literature circles. The results were so much more than I expected; I had never witnessed such a desire to learn and to want to read! In fact, most preferred nonfiction to fiction!

Enclosed are my findings, written for possible submission in a future publication of The Reading Teacher. I hope that you will carefully read and consider my article. I believe that this information will motivate other teachers who are using literature circles to try nonfiction. It will encourage those teachers who know that their students need more nonfiction reading opportunities, and it will give hope for all teachers who struggle to motivate those reluctant readers that are part of our classroom every year.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



Debbie Stien  
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Running Head: FICTION TO NONFICTION TEXT IN A LITERATURE  
CIRCLE SETTING

Bridging the Gap between Fiction and Nonfiction  
in the Literature Circle Setting

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Summary: Third grade students experienced literature circles as part of balance literacy program. First, students learned about literature circles and its importance. After several fiction literature circle cycles, the classroom teacher bridged the gap between fiction and nonfiction in a literature circle setting. This allowed students read nonfiction and learn about a topic connected to their previous fiction read. Students were excited to read nonfiction and began choosing this genre on their own. They realized the power of learning that was available to them in nonfiction text.

Submitted for consideration for *The Reading Teacher*. December 2001

### Abstract

Using nonfiction texts in a literature circle setting was investigated.

After several fictional texts literature circle cycles, twenty-two, third graders made the transition from fictional texts literature circles to nonfiction circles. First, the literature circle groups read a fiction story. Then the same groups read a nonfiction text on a topic related to the previous fiction literature circle book.

Data collected included teacher observations, video and audio taping of literature circle meetings. A pre and post questionnaire about how the students felt about reading was given. Students also responded to a poll of 5 questions relating to the viability of nonfiction in literature circles.

The results were overwhelmingly in favor of nonfiction literature circles. The students extended this enthusiasm for informational texts by choosing to read it during Silent Sustained Reading.

### **Bridging the Gap between Fiction and Nonfiction in the Literature Circle Setting**

When I first became a teacher, I knew that I didn't want my students to have the same experiences in reading that I had as an elementary student. The purpose for which we read a story in school was to fill in answers to meaningless questions. As a professional, I believe that reading is a transactional process and that readers construct understanding by bringing meaning to as well as taking meaning from a text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Children should read fiction and nonfiction to learn about life, to make sense of their world, and most importantly, to enjoy reading and share that experience with others (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Fontas & Pinnell, 2001)!

One goal of mine is for every student in my classroom to have ownership and responsibility for their own learning. Literature circles are one of the best practices that I have used to help my third and fourth grade students meet this goal (Daniel, 1994; Hill, Johnson, Schlick Noe, 1995; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999; Fontas and Pinnell, 2001). Over the years, my students have become more critical consumers of literature through conversations that exhibit their passion, empathy, beliefs, personal connections, and opinions about the books that they've read. Kathy Short (1997) confirms that through literature circles, readers are given opportunities to become literate. The discussions that evolve in these circles support readers in becoming analytical thinkers (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). They are empowered through literature circles, creating their destination in the reading comprehension process.

For the past four years I've included literature circles as part of my balanced literacy program (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; Short 1999; Spiegel, 1998; Fontas and Pinnell, 2001). There are many different versions of literature circles and the terminology



is just as varied. In my classroom, literature circles are small, heterogeneous groups of students who choose to read the same text. In the groups, members agree on the amount of reading to be completed for each conversational meeting. At the meeting, students discuss what's important to them. Finally, my role is that of a "floating facilitator." I'm not a member of any group, but I join in briefly if I see an opportunity to ask a question or make a comment that would challenge or redirect their thinking and expand their conversation (Daniels, 1994).

As a direct result of participation in these literature circles, my students have become more confident about their reading abilities, and parents report that their children are choosing reading more frequently as a free choice activity. This literature circle success has come through the use of a variety of fictional genres: fantasy, mystery, historical, realistic, and science fiction. Some of my literature circle themes have included fictional stories related to chocolate and studies of specific authors.

Last year I began to think about the viability of teaching students to discuss nonfiction texts. I knew that most of the reading my students would encounter in their remaining school years and for the rest of their lives would involve informational texts (Bamford & Kristo, 2000; Freeman & Goetz Person, 1998; Harvey, 1998; Zinsler, 1990). In the previous years, nonfiction was a genre that was available to my third-grade students during Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), and I used nonfiction texts regularly in guided reading. However, their interest level to read nonfiction on their own or to have a conversation about a topic wasn't extending beyond these instructional practices. Therefore, bridging the gap between nonfiction and literature circles became my goal. I set out to encourage my students to use nonfiction texts in a literature circle setting. I

wanted to see if the dynamic student conversations that had occurred when using fiction texts would continue with nonfiction texts in literature circles. I also wanted to see if the roles children used in discussion of fiction would lead to creating effective nonfiction roles to assist my students in grand conversations during nonfiction literature circles. My reflection led me to the following questions: "Is literature circle discussion an effective instructional practice in which to learn nonfiction?" "Will my students be as motivated to read nonfiction?" "Can their conversations be as lively with nonfiction?"

### Participants

The focus of my study was my third grade classroom, in a middle to upper middle class elementary school in a large, Midwest town. Twenty-two students (10 boys, 12 girls), predominately European American (1 African American and 1 India American), were all participants in this research. I chose to study the responses of all 22 students because I wanted everyone to be part of this learning opportunity using nonfiction texts during literature circles.

These students represented a variety of learners. Five students were identified as talented and gifted, (2 to 3 grade levels above in reading), three students were on Individual Education Plans for reading and language arts, (1 to 2 grade levels below in reading). Four other students were reading a half-year below grade level (based on fluency, accuracy, and comprehension).

### Literacy Approach

In my classroom, I use a balanced literacy approach. At the beginning of the year, my reading instructional methods included guided reading (Pinnell & Fontas, 1996 & 2001); basal series with whole group instruction, Reader's Workshop, Silent Sustained

Reading, and teacher read alouds. In January, I added literature circles to my literacy program. I felt that this was a great time to expand their reading experiences and to apply the strategies and skills, which they had been practicing. At this point, students were problem solving their own reading miscues and were eager to talk about what they had read. I started with fiction texts, with the idea that, after they became effective with literature circle discussions, we would adapt them to nonfiction texts.

### Getting Started with Literature Circles

I included a lot of modeling and discussion to teach my students about literature circles, because it is a new concept for all of them. First, I taught the students various ways that they could discuss literature. Teaching students how to discuss literature is something that I do daily during read alouds and guided reading. However, I wanted to extend my students' ways of thinking about text. I used six different roles adapted from Harvey Daniels (1994), and the students applied the roles by using role sheets. These roles allowed the students to think about a story using various cognitive abilities and perspectives. The purpose of the roles is short term; it's important that the students don't rely totally on the role sheet and just read from it. The purpose of the roles is to assist students temporarily by giving them a unique way to think about the book they are reading.

To introduce literature circles, I decided to teach the six roles in four days during my whole group reading time. It was important to take the time to model my expectations of what a well-completed role sheet would look like and also, what a grand conversation sounded like (Roller and Beed, 1994; Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina, and Phommachanh, 1991). We read "Little House on the Prairie", (Ingalls Wilder, 1935, a

short story in our anthology). I chose this story because of the students' interest and the author's style of writing. It was also important for students to have their own copy for the story. I used this same story all four days to teach the roles. This way the students didn't have to get familiar with a new story; they just concentrated on learning the roles.

### Day 1

After reading, "Little House on the Prairie", I introduced the role Artful Artist. In this role, students draw a favorite, exciting, surprising, funny, sad, or scary part. They also write about the part they chose to draw and why they chose it.

### Day 2

I next introduced the role of Word Wizard. The Word Wizard is responsible for finding words that are difficult to pronounce, have an unknown definition, are funny, interesting, or help the author to better convey his or her message.

### Day 3

One of the most popular roles is that of Discussion Leader. I taught my students how to write "fat" and "skinny" questions and the importance of each type of question, ("fat" questions are open-ended and allow for individual interpretation; with "skinny" questions, there is a right or wrong answer). Students quickly realized that in order to have a grand conversation, the questions must be open-ended and arouse emotions, controversy, and critical thinking that will get all members talking! We also discussed the importance of "skinny" questions for a quick comprehension check on points of the book that the discussion leader thinks that everyone should know. The role of Discussion Leader is vital to getting to the heart of the literature circle conversation.

The role of Dramatic Reenactor was also introduced on Day 3. Students acted out

their favorite parts or read expressively a portion of the story that had significant meaning to them.

#### Day 4

On the final day of teaching roles, I taught the roles of Story Elements Correspondent and Personal Connector. Reporting on the story elements (character, setting, point of view, plot, problem, solution, and theme) was a good review for my students. We had been using story elements throughout our reading and writing, and I knew that they had exposure with some story elements in first and second grades. The role of Personal Connector allowed the students to connect their lives to some part of the story.

Throughout the four days of literature circle conversations, more active dialogue was taking place and their discussions were increasing in length. The students were excited to share their roles and to converse about the story. This excitement about learning is what Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theories state:

Children learn when they have the opportunity to engage with the new ideas and make their own. Learning is seen in terms of the interactions of the individuals with other people. Literacy begins as a social activity between people. Learning is the social support the child receives from adults and peers ( Au, Carroll, and Scheu, 1997, pp. 14 & 15).

There certainly was a lot of learning being brought to and taken away from these literature circle conversations.

#### Dress Rehearsal

After all of the roles were taught, we had a dress rehearsal. The students read a

common story and I formed groups and assigned roles. Students within their groups normally chose their roles, but in this case, I carefully chose roles for each student so all roles would be practiced (some students did more than one role). This way their "dress rehearsal" would have a greater chance of being as successful as possible.

### Fiction Literature Circles

The first cycle of literature circles focused on the picture books by Patricia Polacco. Students had six choices: Thunder Cake, (Polacco, 1990); My Ol' Man, (Polacco, 1995); Just Plain Fancy, (Polacco, 1990); Pink and Say, (Polacco, 1994); Chicken Sunday, (Polacco, 1992); and Thank You, Mr. Falker (Polacco, 1998). The students loved these books and commented on how many times they read them before feeling like they were ready for a conversation (I forewarned them about Polacco's style of writing and that several reads may be required). Their first literature circle conversations were fantastic for eight and nine year olds! These third graders asked questions that sparked spirited, thoughtful, and humorous conversations that involved all group members. The room was filled with a new excitement; students were laughing and oftentimes several students were trying to talk at once. The learning that was taking place was energizing! They expressed interest in reading Polacco's books again, so that's what we did. I used Polacco's books in one more literature circle cycle.

The next cycle of fiction literature circle books focused on a chocolate theme, using fantasy, mystery, and realistic fiction. The books included Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, (Dahl, 1964); The Chocolate Touch, (Catling, 1952); Chocolate Fever, (Smith, 1972); Chocolate-Covered Ants, (Manes, 1990); and Cam Jansen and the Chocolate Fudge Mystery, (Adler, 1993).

I monitored student conversations through audio taping and teacher observations. My biggest challenge was to get all students involved in active conversations, not just the sharing of their roles. We discussed this as a class. Modeling active conversations with my colleague was effective. Engagement was improved when group sizes were kept to four, with no more than five students.

The conversations were in-depth and the students discussed issues that I wouldn't have considered important to them. My students discussed issues from the story that related to other books, movies, characters or real people's lives. Vocabulary learning was important to them. Students helped one another create meaning by referring to dictionaries and thesauruses. They also asked their parents and teacher. These "student teachers" were better able to help their peers because they completely understood the specialized vocabulary. My students looked forward to their twice-a-week literature circle conversations and everyone always came prepared! They were talking more about books and they said that their parents were even reading the books either with them or after they went to bed. It seemed that everyone was getting hooked on reading and talking about the stories they had read!

### Connecting Nonfiction to Fiction

After about two months of fiction literature circle cycles, I felt that my students were ready to try nonfiction literature circles. I decided to connect fiction and nonfiction, hoping to ensure a new appreciation for informational texts.

As a transition, I chose to use Hannah, (Whelan, 1991), a historical fiction story. The main characters are Hannah, who is a blind girl (about the age of my 3rd graders), and the schoolteacher, who believes that Hannah should go to school. For this, everyone read

the same book, and literature circle groups met twice a week like usual.

After reading Hannah, I used whole group instruction to teach biographies. We went to the library and found where the biographies were located. Each student chose a biography, and read it for about 20 minutes. Then they shared two new facts they learned about this person. We discussed characteristics of a biography and the type of information that is typically found in this genre.

Then I explained that we were going to read different biographies for literature circles. They were so excited and eager to get started. However, I first asked the students to think about our fiction discussion roles and to decide which ones would still work with biographies and whether we should create some new roles. I wanted my students to understand that their conversations on biographies (and nonfiction in general) would probably be different from their fiction conversations.

#### Roles for Nonfiction - Biographies

The students brainstormed a list of biography characteristics and from there three new roles emerged. Richard suggested the role of Fantastic Fact Finder. Richard explained that for this role, the students would find interesting or unique facts about the main character. These facts wouldn't be just common facts that could be about most people. Instantly, the rest of the students agreed and we had our first new role.

The next conversation focused on dates that were important in the life of the person in the biography. Pam suggested that we create a role of Time Line Traveler. She thought that for this role, the students could make a time line and record the important dates in the person's life. Again, everyone thought that this was relevant to biographies, so we agreed on our second nonfiction role.



The last role that was added was that of Vital Statistics Verifier. Debbie said that in this role, the students would report on personal information such as birth date, family members, schooling, important discoveries, and contributions.

Next, we discussed which roles to keep from our fictional literature circles and which ones to discontinue. My class was unanimous in their choices! They wanted to keep Personal Connector, Word Wizard, and Discussion Leader (those were my picks, too). See Figure 1 for a complete list of the nonfiction roles

### Nonfiction Discussions

To make the fiction/nonfiction connection after reading the book Hannah, my students had several choices of biographies about Anne Sullivan, Louis Braille, and Helen Keller. The students were eager to get started reading and discussing their biographies. I could hear side conversations throughout the day about the new information they had learned about these people. Finally, it was time for the literature circle conversations. I scheduled 20 minutes, with an extra 10 minutes set aside in case they needed more time.

As I circulated and observed the five different groups, I could tell there was much to talk about! Everyone was focused and on task. They really were doing well with the three new roles and most students were putting themselves in the main character's "shoes," trying to understand what it must have been like to have been blind (and deaf and mute in Helen's case).

### A Nonfiction Conversation

In this section, I included a conversation that was typical of those that occurred in the first round of nonfiction discussions. This conversation shows the way students helped one another in creating understanding, how they used their imaginations to discuss

what Helen Keller's life could have been like, and the cross-textual connections that were made. This group of two boys and two girls were average to above average readers. Tom, Tami, and Richard had made improvements in their abilities to have a conversation about what they've read as they gained more experience with literature circles. They chose to read Helen Keller, A Scholastic Biography (Davidson, 1969). Nancy was the discussion leader and she asked, "How do you think Helen would be if she hadn't learned anything yet?"

Tom: I think she would still be cranky, and mad, and throw stuff.

Richard: She would be so wild and they would probably have to send her away to somewhere they could keep her locked up so she wouldn't destroy anything.

Nancy: But remember, they said they didn't want to do that.

Tom: Mrs. Keller said that she didn't want Helen to go away to school, she wanted Helen to stay at home.

Nancy: I think that she would be wild and that her mom and dad would get another teacher. But I don't think they'd find another teacher like the first one she had.

Tami: Whenever I read this, it reminds me about ... Did anyone see that movie about Helen Keller, with that little girl in it . . .

Tom: Yes!

Tami: This book always reminds me of that movie.

Tom: Yeah, with that little girl kicking and screaming. I can also make a connection to another book we read about a girl who was blind, but not deaf...

Nancy: Hannah.

Tom: Yeah. Every time I read a chapter in this book, I remember about Hannah and try to make out things that are similar and stuff that's different.

Richard: There's much more that's different.

Nancy: Why is that?

Richard: Because it's so much easier to learn if you're only blind, than being blind and deaf...

(April 27, 2001)

During this conversation, the students were able to show understanding of what they had read by using prior knowledge, information from the biography, and by making logical predictions of what they thought Helen's life might have been like. Everyone contributed and their comprehension was strong!

I was so impressed at my students' abilities to discuss nonfiction. Everyone was engaged and the time went quickly. The students had no trouble using all 20 minutes, plus the extra 10 minutes that I had set aside. In fact, two groups were not ready to finish when I told them that it was time to stop, so those groups were given time to finish their discussion during the following day's SSR.

Throughout this biography literature circle cycle, my students continued to compare information (about Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, & Louis Braille) with group members and those outside of their group. They would talk about these famous people from the time they first walked into the classroom until the end of the day. I had never seen this much interest or enthusiasm continue with fiction reading! The students were meeting the goals I had set for nonfiction literature circles. There were exciting and lively conversations and my students were hungry to learn all they could about their text's main character.

## Second Connection to Nonfiction

I had been observing the book choices of my students all year and, for some reason, this group of third graders was especially enjoying The Magic Tree House series, by Mary Pope Osborne. Osborne had just begun to write a nonfiction partner to some of her fiction titles (ex. fiction: Knights Before Dawn, (Osborne, 1993); nonfiction: Knights and Castles (Osborne, 2000). So I decided to build on their interest and began collecting multiple copies of four Magic Tree House titles and nonfiction partner books. I used Magic Tree House fiction and nonfiction books, as well as other nonfiction texts. (Figure 2).

## Role Sheets vs. Post-its

Before starting this new literature circle cycle, I asked my students if they would like to try tabbing (using Post-it notes) instead of role sheets (Tabbing is something that everyone was familiar with because they do this during guided reading). As I said earlier, the purpose of the role sheets is temporary, and at times, students struggle with letting the role sheets control the conversation. Harvey Daniels (1994), explains,

The purpose of the role sheets is a temporary, transitional helping tool. ... they (roles) are temporary support devices that help kids to "harvest" their own responses, ideas, and questions during reading - and bring them along. ... the roles provide a kind of surrogate adult help in the child's zone of proximal development: as Vygotsky (1978) says, what children can do with our help today; they can do on their own tomorrow. (Daniels, p.39)

I explained to my students that with tabbing they would each have more freedom to apply all the roles if they wanted. They could tab words, important dates, fantastic facts, vital

statistics, write questions, and make connections. All of my students were eager to do this and they took their Post-it notes and started reading. One student came back the next day with 23 tabs! I was certain that he would not have prepared half as thoroughly for a role sheet!

The conversations with tabbing were dynamic and there was even more natural book conversation (Peterson & Eeds, 1990)! I was so excited about the way everyone stayed engaged for such a longer period of time. The conversations were even livelier and they were definitely more interactive. There was an ease about who would share and at times only a few tabs from each person could be shared because the conversations were much more in-depth and time ran out. I decided to increase my time for literature circle conversations to 30-40 minutes, and there was always one or two groups who still needed their SSR time to finish the following day. I even had students who wanted to meet during their recess time!

The excitement and comprehension continued to flourish during literature circle conversations. For example, in the following conversation, students make various comprehension moves as they tried to understand cultural rituals in a different time and a different place. Their emotional response was high as they discussed the fate of some children in ancient Egyptian times. They expressed shock, anger, and confusion. They referred back to the text to confirm and justify what actually happened. Everyone was involved and eagerly shared their interpretations and offered dynamic comments. The conversation ended with a cross-textual connection. The book they read was Eyewitness Readers: Secrets of the Mummies (Griffey, 1998).

Brian:

That's just gross! I can't believe that they would just toss them into a

grave. They're children, just pure children!

Lisa: Yeah! I had no idea they would sacrifice such a good, almost perfect child for the hope of getting some rain.

Chris: I can't believe the girl's parents let the chief priests do this.

Dean: Remember, the book said that the girl and the family considered this an honor, but they were still a little scared.

Lisa: This is my "Kids Discover" Magazine. It tells some of the same information, about mummies, but there's lots of new stuff too. Look here on this page ...

(May 10, 2001)

This group consisted of three struggling and one average reader! But, with the choice of choosing books that appeal to their senses and motivate them to read, look at what they accomplished and gained through their conversations!

These fiction and nonfiction partner books were used for several literature circle cycles. First, the groups read a fictional Magic Tree House book and then they read two different nonfiction partner books. We finished the school year with the students reading another fictional Magic Tree House book and then they read a nonfiction partner book. My students couldn't get enough! I noticed that they were moving through the fiction books more quickly than usual. When I questioned them about this, they said that they wanted to get to the nonfiction books. For most students, learning new, real life information was important to them. Nonfiction reading gave them a new purpose for reading.

### Children's Responses to the Experience

For the purpose of this research, I decided to use a pre and post interview with all

22 students. My former student teacher conducted the interviews and taped each student's responses. This allowed for consistency, and my students were at ease. They probably answered more honestly than if I had done the interviewing. My second method of data collection was to use a tape recorder during literature circle conversations. This allowed me to be part of their group without being there. I could listen to their conversations and work with groups or individuals to help them improve. I would also be able to compare the quality of fiction versus nonfiction literature circle conversations.

### Successful Outcomes

With the previous success of fiction literature circle conversations, it seemed highly likely that my students would also be enthusiastic about nonfiction literature circles. Prior to my research, my students were asked a series of questions and those same questions were asked again, at the end of the year, to see if their views had changed throughout their literature circle conversations. The answers to four main questions were compared:

Question 1. Do you consider yourself to be a good reader? Prior to literature circles, 17 out of 22 students said they felt they were good readers. I was pleased that even more of my students, 21 of 22, felt better about themselves as readers after three and a half months of literature circles.

Question 2. Do you like to read? Before literature circles began, 16 students said that they enjoy reading. After literature circles, that improved to almost all (20 of 22) students saying they like to read.

Question 3. Explain the difference between fiction and nonfiction; give an example of each.

When I first introduced literature circles, 14 could clearly explain the difference. In June,

at the end, 21 students understood the difference.

Question 4. Do you choose to read nonfiction books on your own? Only 7 of the students replied that they read nonfiction before our literature circles began. After experiencing nonfiction literature circles, this number increased dramatically to 18 students choosing nonfiction on their own.

It was true; my tubs of nonfiction books were being consumed! Biographies were popular, as well as information books on topics of interest to my students.

Other questions were asked after completing literature circle conversations at the end of the year. These questions related directly to literature circles and their responses have assisted me in ways to improve this experience and in knowing what things should continue. Five questions were asked and often students gave more than one response (Figure 3).

Bamford and Kristo (2000) state that nonfiction texts fascinate children and that they are eager to discover information that increases their learning. They are pleased that more teachers are considering nonfiction for the inquiry process, as well as a focus for literature circles. I discovered that, indeed, third graders were interested and capable of having lively, in-depth, interesting, and engaging conversations with nonfiction literature.

It was obvious to me that my students welcomed the change of reading between fiction and nonfiction literature. They would ask me what kinds of nonfiction books we would be reading next. I wouldn't tell them so they would try and guess what nonfiction topics I might have them read based on their current fictional reading. The majority of my students were excited to read, learn, question, and discuss the lives of real people and other informational topics.



It was so gratifying to listen to their conversations and watch how this carried over into other aspects of their classroom life! My students were using their literature circle conversational skills to discuss topics and problem solving situations across all curricular areas. They were listening to one another and valuing each other's ideas.

There was a purpose for reading; beyond "I have to" or for individual enjoyment. These students were making connections between fiction and nonfiction, learning about people, different places and times, and topics that motivated them to a new level of learning. Connections were also being made to the students' life and to other texts they had read or heard, television, and movies. I wanted my students to know that I trusted them, that I valued what they thought was important, and that they were part of a community of learners (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). My students were truly in charge of their own learning and they were empowered (Samway Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina, & Phommachanh, 1991). That's an incredible feeling, especially when you're eight or nine years old.

### Future Considerations

Remembering that a classroom is made up of individuals with their own life experiences and interests, oftentimes it's difficult for teachers to meet the needs and interests of all of their students. To build upon my students' interests, I need to continue to work on collecting books with curricular ties that will motivate my students. We read mostly biographies and nonfiction related to historical places and times. I need to expand this collection of nonfiction materials, and include whole group instruction on how to read these nonfiction books. There's so much to teach with the different layouts of nonfiction text, glossaries, indexes, table of contents, reading captions of charts, pictures, and graphs

(Bamford & Kristo, 2000; Freeman & Goetz Person, 1998; Harvey, 1998). These are all important characteristics of nonfiction literature that students need to understand and practice, in order to read it successfully on their own.

I will continue to use audiotapes and videotapes during literature circle conversations. This really helped me to be able to "be there" when I couldn't be there all the time. However, I need to listen to the tapes in a timely fashion. If necessary, I should provide more rapid feedback and have regular literature circle group debriefings or whole group discussions if a concern is present throughout several groups. I held some meetings with groups over lunch or during whole group reading, but I need to allow for more time on a regular basis.

Another change I would make is to spend more time with the teaching of those three nonfiction roles (Time Line Traveler, Vital Statistics Verifier, and Fantastic Fact Finder). The students knew how to complete the role sheet, but some of their discussions could have been even stronger with more modeling through mini-lessons and through acting as a participant in various literature circle groups (Eeds & Peterson, 1991).

Finally, where there's reading, there should also be a strong writing component. My students did some nonfiction writing for a state or country they were researching for a geography unit, and they wrote bio-poems on a famous person of their choice. However, I would like to incorporate more technical nonfiction writing while the students are reading nonfiction text. It's important that students understand the strong connection between reading and writing which can enable them to achieve a deeper understanding (Duthie, 1994; Freeman & Goetz Person, 1998; Graves, 1989; Harvey, 1998).

It has been an exciting journey, watching my students become active participants in

their literature circle conversations. They have developed a new love and appreciation for reading. It is even more gratifying to have my students help me to learn more about an appropriate setting to use nonfiction literature in the best way possible. These third graders were also researchers throughout this process. They became observant of their needs, sharing what things worked well during conversations, what areas of literature circles needed improvement, and whether nonfiction literature circles were interesting and a good use of their time. Nonfiction is important in the lives of young readers, and it will continue to be throughout the rest of their lives. These students were pioneers in helping their teacher bridge the gap between nonfiction and literature circles, and my future students will be the beneficiaries of new and improved nonfiction literature circle conversations.

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## Figure Captions

Figure 1. Nonfiction roles used in nonfiction literature circle conversations.

Figure 2. Fiction and nonfiction book titles used to bridge the gap between these genres.

Figure 3. Student responses to a literature circle questionnaire.

Literature Circle Role  
**Discussion Leader**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: ch. /p. \_\_\_\_\_ to ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_

**You are the discussion leader. It is your job to write down some "meaty & juicy" questions that you think your group would want to talk about. Write mostly "fat" questions, along with a few "skinny" ones.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Why \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. How \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. If \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Literature Circle Role  
**Personal Connector**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_ to ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_

**You are the personal connector. It is your job to report ways in which the reading relates to your own life. The reading might remind you of something that you've done or heard of before. A character might remind you of someone you know or maybe even yourself. It can even be a connection to another book you've read, a TV show you've watched, or song that you've sung. Some questions to think about:**

1. How do the story elements (setting, point of view, characters, plot, problems, solution, and theme) relate to your own life? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. How are the characters alike or different from your own family or friends? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. If you were one of the characters, what would you have done in their place? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Other connections: \_\_\_\_\_

Literature Circle Role  
**Word Wizard**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: Ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_ to Ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_

**You are the word wizard. It is your job to look for special words in the story that you think would be interesting to talk about with your group. These words might be:**

- |                          |                 |                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| _____ new                | _____ strange   | _____ interesting |
| _____ hard to say        | _____ important | _____ funny       |
| _____ don't know meaning |                 |                   |

**When you find a word to talk about, mark it with a sticky note, or write it down here. Tell why you chose it. Use the dictionary to help with the definition and pronunciation.**

<u>Word</u>	<u>Page</u>	<u>Why I picked it</u>
1 _____	_____	_____
2 _____	_____	_____
3 _____	_____	_____
4 _____	_____	_____
5 _____	_____	_____

**\* When your group meets, help your friends with talk about these words you have chosen. Things you can discuss:**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ___ How does this word fit in the story in dictionary) | _____ Does anyone know what it means? (if no, then look |
| ___ How does this word make you feel                   | _____ What does this word remind you of?                |
| ___ (OTHER)  |   |

Literature Circle Role  
**Fantastic Fact Finder**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: Ch./P \_\_\_\_\_ to Ch./P \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Fantastic Fact Finder. It is your job to share interesting facts about the person you are reading about. Share those facts that make this particular person interesting or extra special compared to most people. (This role does not include family facts). Example: Sitting Bull wasn't his given name, it was Slow, because he was never in a hurry.

Fantastic Facts

Page

- |    |       |       |
|----|-------|-------|
| 1. | _____ | _____ |
|    | _____ |       |
| 2. | _____ | _____ |
|    | _____ |       |
| 3. | _____ | _____ |
|    | _____ |       |
| 4. | _____ | _____ |
|    | _____ |       |
| 5. | _____ | _____ |
|    | _____ |       |

Literature Circle Role  
**Time Line Traveler**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_ to ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Time Line Traveler. It is your job to complete the time line of major events that happened to this person during their life. Some things to include are birth date, major life events, date of marriage, birth dates of children, dates of major accomplishments, date of death, and any other dates you feel are important to place on the time line. To make your line neat and easy to read, write one event above the line, then the next below the line. Continue this pattern throughout the entire time line.

---

Literature Circle Role  
**Vital Statistics Verifier**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Book Title \_\_\_\_\_  
Reading Assignment: ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_ to ch./p. \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Vital Statistics Verifier. It is your job to share the personal information about this man or woman you're reading about.

1. Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
2. Childhood home town, state, country \_\_\_\_\_
3. Family includes \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Other important people \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Hobbies/interests \_\_\_\_\_
6. Marriage and children \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Historical events they were part of or that happened during their life \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Jobs or careers \_\_\_\_\_
9. Why is this person famous? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Date and cause of death \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Fiction Title

Civil War on Sunday (Osborne, 2000)

Nonfiction Title

A Picture book of Robert E. Lee

(Adler, 1994)

Aunt Clara Brown Official Pioneer

(Lowery, 1999)

Fredrick Douglas Fights for Freedom

(Davidson, 1968)

Go Free or Die - A Story about

Harriet Tubman (Ferris,

1988)

Harriet Tubman (Sullivan, 2001)

Martin Luther King Jr (Bains, 1985)

Martin Luther King Jr. (Jackson,

2001)

Meet Abraham Lincoln (Cary, 1994)

Rosa Parks: From the Back of the

Bus to the Front of a

Movement (Wilson, 2001)

Walking the Rode to Freedom - A

Story about Sojourner Truth

(Ferris, 1988)

Mummies in the Morning (Osborne, 1993)

Mummies and Pyramids (Osborne,  
2001)

Secrets of the Mummies (Griffey,  
1998)

Revolutionary War on Wednesday  
(Osborne, 2000)

George Washington , Soldier, Hero,  
President (Fontes, 2001)

If You Lived ... Time of the  
American Revolutionary War  
(Moore, 1997)

If You Lived... Williamsburg Colonial  
Days (Brenner, 2000)

If You Were There When They  
Signed the Constitution  
(Levy, 1987)

Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride  
(Amstel, 2000)

The History News: Revolution  
(Maynard, 1999)

The Knights at Dawn (Osborne, 1993)

If You Lived ... time of the Knights  
(McGovern, 2001)

Knights and Castles (Osborne, 2000)

Question 1: What do you like about literature circles?

Everyone talks:	9	No hand raising:	1
Discuss what we want	16	Tabbing	6
Learn about people/life	10	Hear everyone's ideas	8
Fun sharing/talking	18	Like the books read	14

Question 2: How could literature circles be even better?

Change Nothing	4	More on task behavior	11
Filling out role sheets	3	Less Arguing	1
Amount of assigned reading	1	Friends being together	1
People in same group too often	1		

Question 3: How do you feel about role sheets vs. tabbing?

Preferred tabbing	18	Preferred role sheets	1
Preferred both	3		

Question 4: Is literature circles a good time to use nonfiction books?

Yes	22	No	0
-----	----	----	---

Question 5: What were some different aspects of nonfiction literature circle conversations?

Deeper conversations	9	Date and Years of events	2
Learn about real people		Less off-task behavior	6
& topics	22	Better reader with	
Livelier conversations	3	nonfiction books	4