

Tackling Tough Issues Through Inquiry Circles

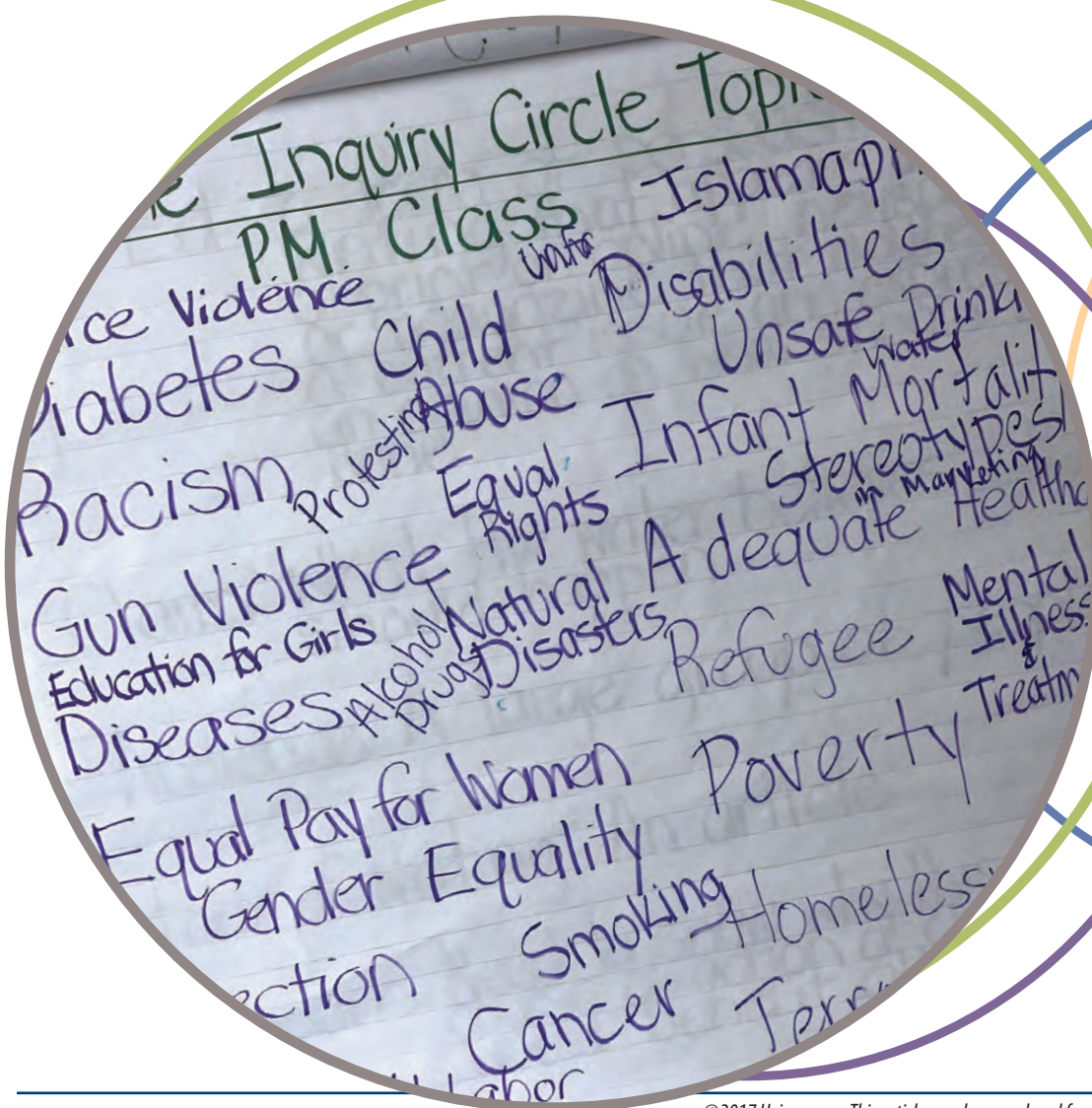
by Jessica Lifshitz

One of the most dangerous aspects of our society is our tendency to maintain silence on difficult issues. I believe that by not talking about the things that make us uncomfortable, we are allowing the very worst parts of our society to continue unchanged. I believe that it is not hyperbole to state that this prolonged silence is killing us. And nowhere do I believe that is more evident than in our classrooms.

For years, I kept who I was a secret because I was afraid that telling my students I am a lesbian would cause too many waves. I might make someone uncomfortable. I sacrificed my own well-being and wholeness as a human being because I was afraid of upsetting someone else. Perhaps the fact that my very existence makes others uncomfortable gives me a perspective that makes me more willing than others to bring difficult conversations into my classroom.

I know the arguments, I know the fear, I know the discomfort as well as anyone else. And yet, I also know that this discomfort cannot stop us from doing what we should do. We must find a way to bring these conversations into our classrooms even when there are so many factors convincing us not to.

The Power



For me, one of the greatest solutions is inquiry.

My students and I use inquiry circles in the way they are outlined in the book *Comprehension and Collaboration* by Harvey “Smokey” Daniels and Stephanie Harvey (Heinemann, 2015). Our inquiry circles focus on issues of social justice. We study problems that exist in our world so that we can learn more and then allow our learning to lead to action.

This year, we began our work with inquiry circles just as a new president took office. We began our work when my students had been exposed to months of debate and discourse and disagreement

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of Inquiry



on a wide range of topics. The air around us was ripe with potential topics to dig into, and our first task was to work together to select topics we wanted to study.

To help my students think of topics that they might want to learn more about, I put together a slide show of video clips, images, infographics, and photo essays all dealing with difficult social issues that had been discussed throughout the country. I knew that if I wanted to spark topics that drive passion and inquiry, I needed to provide students with access to those topics.

I needed to take the opportunity to bring the world into my classroom to help my students learn to better deal with it. By the time we were finished

discussing and brainstorming, we had two charts filled with lists of topics that the students wanted to know more about. These topics included the refugee crisis, immigration, racism, police brutality, transgender rights, equal pay, terrorism, child labor, suicide, child abuse, and several others.

One might be tempted to look at this list and say, “No way! Some of those topics are way too intense for kids to learn about.”

But that is the beauty of inquiry. These topics are coming from the kids themselves. This is what they want to know. And because inquiry is student-led, they will learn about these issues in a way that is appropriate for them.

For four days, I watched as my students immersed themselves in the issues of the world around us. I watched as they discussed and debated what they thought they knew and what they wanted to know more about. I did not once need to ask them to refocus or to get back to work because the work itself was keeping their attention. If I needed any kind of proof that this work was worthwhile, their engagement provided all the evidence I needed.

When people tell me that fifth graders are too young to have difficult conversations, too young to tackle the problems of the grown-up world, I will point them to the list of topics my students created. And when parents ask questions about the topics we are covering (and parents will and should ask questions), I take great comfort in knowing that every child dove into a topic and explored

it only to the extent that she or he was comfortable. As adults, we have a choice. We can either continue to pretend that our kids are not ready to meet these issues head-on or we can help them learn about these topics in a supportive classroom environment where they can understand the issues from multiple perspectives.

The kids are showing us they are ready. It is up to us to follow them into the work. So as a new school year begins, do not let the thought of bringing complicated social issues into our classrooms frighten you. Instead, be encouraged by the power of inquiry to allow us to join together with our students in learning how to make this world a better place.



Jessica Lifshitz is a fifth-grade literacy teacher in Northbrook, Illinois and was a member of the inaugural cohort of Heinemann Fellows. Jessica’s action research project focused on how to craft

student-driven, authentic, and purposeful learning experiences for young readers and writers. Jessica continues to build on this research as she and her students work within the school district’s curriculum, but inquire into matters of great consequence in the world. Students immerse themselves in complex and compelling topics about the world beyond the walls of their classroom. Jessica reports regularly on her students’ inquiry projects and learning results as well as her own teaching discoveries in her blog *Crawling Out of the Classroom*.

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