
KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN ACTION

JUNIOR (4-6)



Explorations in Social Justice: Knowledge Building in Grade 6

Written by Darlene Martin

Bringing IDEAS to life!

2.3 EXPLORATIONS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE: KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN GRADE 6

Written by Darlene Martin, Grade 6 Teacher, HCDSB

INTRODUCTION

Darlene Martin teaches Grade 6 at St. Anne School in Burlington. St. Anne is a Catholic school that promotes integrating Catholic faith in various subjects. The Focus on Faith theme for the Grade 6 curriculum is “Human Rights and Responsibility” and “Living According to God’s Will.” Darlene’s goal was to integrate this faith-based theme in the Language program pathway. During the Term 2 language pathway, she performed many read-alouds of various mentor texts on courageous heroes who fought for their human rights during the Civil Rights Movements. Students had the opportunity to develop their own inquisitive questions, triggered by their own natural curiosity. To promote student voice, this was followed by students working on improvable questions, which led to students sharing their new knowledge in Knowledge Building Circles.

Before the culminating reading and writing assessment (near the end of the term), students engaged in KB Circles using the KB Scaffolds (prompts). The students developed inquiry questions using the questioning grid as well as the Inquiry Process Anchor Chart that were posted on the classroom walls.



Knowledge Building Wall focused on the questions: What are some solutions to ensure human rights for everybody? What are our responsibilities?

START WITH THE KB PRINCIPLES

Democratizing Knowledge — All students have the right and are welcome to participate and share their ideas in Knowledge Building Circles. Darlene’s goal was to get everyone involved in conversation, especially those who were shy and/or unsure of their ideas. Some students felt empowered in taking the lead and contributed with confidence while others remained quiet even though they may have had valuable comments and ideas. In order to achieve equality for all, the teacher makes it clear that all students are to signal cues to a quiet student so that they have an equal chance to contribute their productive thoughts/evidence.

Idea Diversity — During Knowledge Building Circles, students shared the new knowledge they gained from the various mentor texts. They provided and built a classroom community that supported diverse ideas as well as respectful listening skills. Darlene’s goal was for her students to realize that there is more than one possible way to view ideas. Many explained that they never thought of some of these shared ideas before when it came to Human Rights and Responsibility.

Rise Above — During KB Circles, students shared and provided countless evidence on how inequality existed before the Civil Rights Movement. There was competition among ideas and the teacher’s goal was for students to rise above and develop higher levels of thinking and deeper ideas/comments that focused on how people in the present day could work toward rectifying inequality and ensuring that

Human Rights exist for everybody in our world. Students were to take this conversation to a whole new level by moving beyond their present thinking towards generating ideas about solutions and strategies for achieving social justice.

KB PROVOCATION:

Darlene's goal was for her students to engage the Big Ideas of Social Justice on "Human Rights and Responsibility" through the following Big Question: Explain how the figures from the various mentor texts showed courage during the Civil Rights Movements. She formulated this question so that students could relate to the Grade 6 faith-based theme on "Human Rights and Responsibility". The following is an outline of the teacher and student moves that ignited the KB Circle discussion.

1. The teacher posted the Big Question on the white board and displayed all the mentor texts that were read aloud previously to students along the ledge of the whiteboard. Also posted on the classroom walls were Knowledge Building Prompts, Thinking Charts, Inquiry Grid, Inquiry Process Anchor Chart, and a Word Wall. These classroom anchor charts were used as effective visuals that would stimulate ideas that the class would build conversations from. The teacher started to lead a 40-minute KB Circle discussion. The students shared a detailed discussion, comparing how the figures (e.g., Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, etc.) from the various mentor texts showed courage while fighting for their rights during the Civil Rights Movements.
2. The students discussed a number of social justice issues that took place in these mentor texts. These themed issues discussed by students were recorded and grouped/categorized on a Thinking Chart with example characteristics and non-example characteristics. This chart was then posted on classroom walls.
3. Students were then assigned to use the Questioning Grid while coming up with their own inquiry questions which elicited students' further personal wonderings and higher level of thinking questions on this theme. These questions were written either on cue cards or post-it notes, and then they were taped onto the large laminated Inquiry Grid posted on the bulletin board in the classroom. One example of a higher level critical question was: "How do we ensure Human Rights and Equality for all people in our World?"
4. Each student answered their personal inquiry questions based on their background knowledge from the mentor texts as well as any new information they had researched and gathered by following the Inquiry Process Anchor Chart posted on the bulletin board. Some students made real life connections to current events as well as National Aboriginal History Month. This triggered rise above questions, answers and comments.

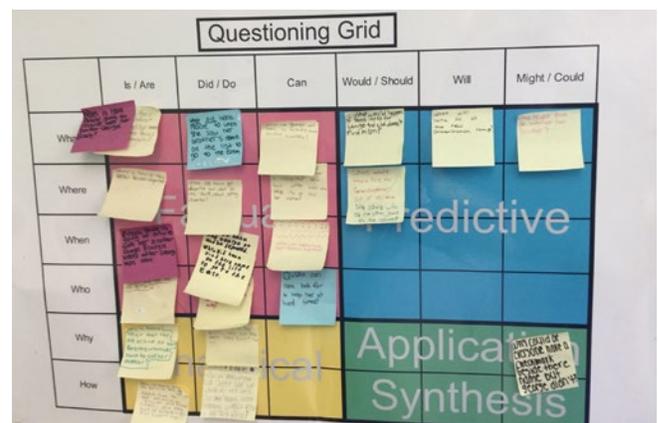
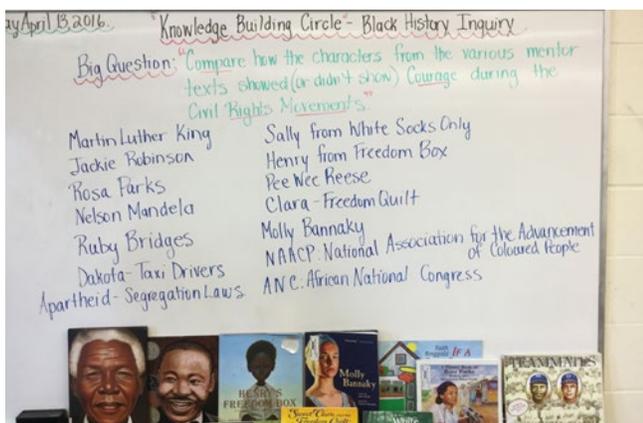
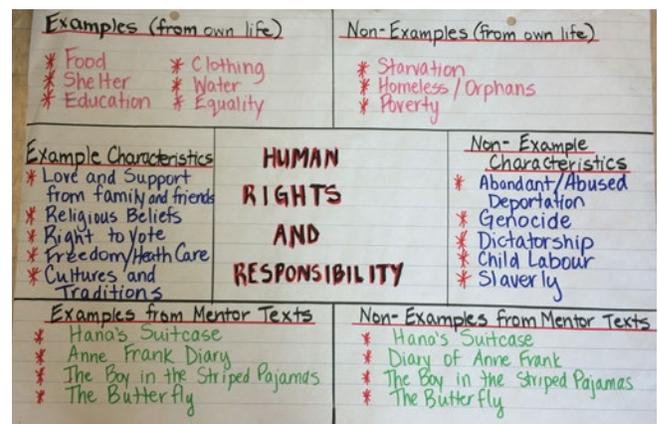
What was your greatest challenge?

My greatest challenge was having to step back and let go of my students and act as facilitator in my classroom. I had to pull myself away from being the traditional direct and explicit instructor to a teacher that created a classroom community based on collaborative learning where my students can freely share and negotiate their thoughts and ideas.

- As a culminating assignment, the students were to write an explanation essay on these issues, wonderings, and newfound research. Support/proof and evidence was expected by all students.

What surprised you?

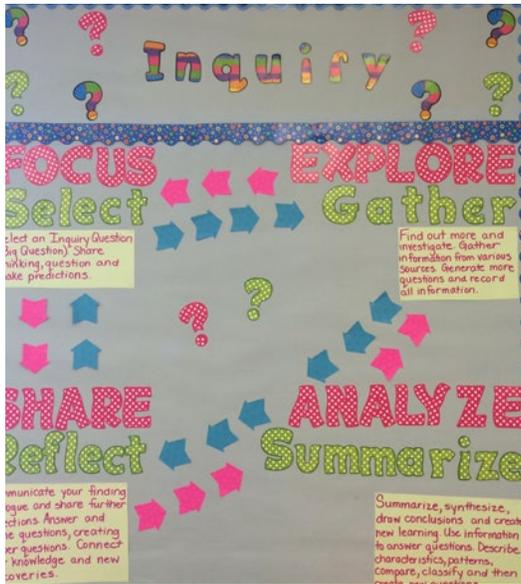
What surprised me the most is how much I learned from my students! The conclusions and analysis my students drew from their researched inquiry questions were incredible. Their attempt to answer real world Human Rights problems and finding solutions to these issues made it purposeful for them. My students realized that this social justice issue is an ongoing problem. The students learned to respectfully build onto each other's ideas and challenge one another's theories. They loved to learn together collectively.



Classroom visuals supporting Knowledge Building work exploring the theme of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING IDEA IMPROVEMENT

The teacher provided many assistive visuals posted on classroom walls and bulletin boards. These included: A list of Knowledge Building Prompts, Expectations/Learning Goals, a large laminated Inquiry Grid, Inquiry Process Anchor Charts, and Thinking/Concept Charts showing students' ideas. Students would often refer back to these visuals if they felt the need to backtrack, find meanings, before reaching the next improved idea/question.



The Inquiry Process Anchor Chart

What was your “Aha!” moment?

My deepest learning moment is that I now have learned how to assess my students' progress through the higher level of critical thinking inquiry questions they formulate and comment on. As a teacher, I previously assessed how my students answered GIVEN critical thinking questions, and now it's fabulous evaluating the different types of inquiry questions they come up with, research, analyze and draw conclusions from.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

- **Observation** — The extent to which students participated in and contributed to KB Circle Discussions.
- **Written Responses** — Students were to develop their own set of inquiry questions and answer them accordingly by using background knowledge from previously read mentor texts or any new researched information (e.g., current events).
- **Culminating Assignment** — Students were to write an explanation essay on these categorized issues, wonderings, connections, and newfound research. Support/proof and evidence was expected by all students.

What did you learn about yourself in the process? What are your next steps?

I learned that I actually now prefer implementing this inquiry-based teaching process in my classroom. In the process, I learned that I do not have all the answers. I learn along with my students. This is the part I love the most. My students now have the opportunity to provide answers to their own inquiry questions. ALL of my students are more focused, engaged, interested, and eager to learn since they are given the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning. My next steps are to continue to guide and facilitate the process by modeling and asking open-ended questions.