

Citation

Collier, N.D. (2010). Book review. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 6(1), page 114-118.

Two for One: Authenticity and Standards Through Inquiry Circles

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Harvey, S. & Daniels, H. (2009). *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 322 pp. ISBN 13:978-0-325-01230-8, \$31.39 (paperback).

In the era of No Child Left Behind, students of all backgrounds and abilities must do well on standardized measures of achievement. They must also successfully navigate the myriad resources available in the Information Age, and tackle complex problems in their daily lives. Student achievement on standardized tests and authenticity in classrooms are often portrayed as an unlikely pairing, but meeting required curriculum standards and preparing learners for the 21st century using authentic literacy practices need not be rival goals. Teachers who share power, engage student interests, and push students to actively use knowledge can bridge this seeming divide. This is the promise in *Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action* (Harvey & Daniels, 2009).

Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels may be familiar to teachers who have read their previous publications about comprehension strategies that work (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), and literature circles (Daniels, 2002). Building on research about literacy and learning, as well as their years of work with teachers, the two pooled their areas of expertise to create the model of inquiry circles – small teams of students who conduct investigations about topics of interest. The progressive, inquiry-based pedagogy they describe pushes students to take responsibility for their own learning: “We hand kids the reins of responsibility, equip them for thoughtful investigation, and guide from the side” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 165).

Why small-group inquiry projects? The answer to this question is explored in the first section of this four-part guide. Importantly, the authors argue, kids are curious by nature; they want to know. Inquiry builds on the inherent desire to know and leverages it to develop learners who actively construct knowledge rather than simply memorize information (Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993). Also in the opening section, the authors summarize the research on comprehension, collaboration, and inquiry. Comprehension is “the evolution of thought that

occurs while reading, listening, or viewing” (p. 29), and it is a process we’re always learning to do. Throughout the book Harvey and Daniels quietly challenge the *learning to read vs. reading to learn* dichotomy, showing that such processes are never really separate and, in fact, support each other. Even the teacher, who is expected to both model and guide from the side, is publicly engaged in the process of learning to read and think about things differently, while simultaneously reading to learn and understand new or more nuanced ideas.

Collaboration is employed in meaningful ways during inquiry circles and the characteristic small-group work is important for many reasons. Among these reasons for small groups: teaming is expected in the world of work, individuals can leverage the thinking of group members, and teachers can better meet the needs of all students when classrooms are decentralized. Harvey and Daniels admit collaboration is not easy and some students despise group work, but “we cannot let the unwillingness or unreadiness of a few kids dictate what we do with everyone else in our classrooms” (p. 53).

Inquiry circles follow a four-stage model: Immerse, Investigate, Coalesce, and Go Public. The initial stage, “Immerse,” is a time to build wonderment and background knowledge. Stage two, “Investigate,” is the students’ opportunity to put a toe in the research water and learn a little bit more about their stated interest. According to the authors, students develop initial questions, search for information, and discover answers. This leads to the next stage, “Coalesce.” More streamlined and focused research occurs in this stage, along with summarizing and synthesizing information, as well as the construction of new knowledge. Lastly, students “Go Public,” or share their learning in some way. This may include presenting findings to classmates, schoolmates, or the community. Although these four stages appear linear, the authors urge teachers to view them as a spiral, because learners go back and forth between them throughout a given exploration.

Section two of the book moves into the physical requirements and other considerations necessary to implement inquiry circles successfully. Classroom layouts should maximize collaboration and research, and provide easy access to relevant supplies. For floaters – teachers without the luxury of a permanent space – they suggest a “Go-Bag” of essential materials such as index cards, learning logs, and more. Also in this section is a thorough chapter on the joys and perils of Internet research. This is a timely and important chapter, but a minor critique is warranted. In the book, Internet use is casually suggested as though access is equal in all schools and classrooms. Inquiry circles do not depend solely on Internet searches (nor do the authors imply they should), but it is important to point out that even with the widespread availability of the Internet in public schools, robust access is not universal (Wells & Lewis, 2006).

In addition to the Internet, the authors advocate the use of diverse resources for investigations. This is accomplished, more often than not, through resource carts for both younger and older students alike. The authors seem to separate the ability of students to learn to search the Internet effectively from their ability to learn to use the library effectively. In various chapters, featured teachers visited the library and teamed effectively with the librarian to pull materials for students to use in their investigations, but there is no serious treatment of teaching kids to do this for themselves, which is embedded in the notion of information literacy (American Association of School Librarians, 2007) the authors promote. One wonders, why the omission? Is it to conserve time, the precious resource that it is, undoubtedly made more scarce by inquiry work? But if students are truly learning to investigate, shouldn’t they also be learning to find their own resources? Perhaps in future editions the authors could address library searches just as thoroughly as they did Internet searches. Library fundamentals could easily fit in the collection of key lessons featured in this section.

Readers are later introduced to the scaffolded process known as the Gradual Release of Responsibility (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). This five-step process of modeling, guided practice, collaborative practice, independent practice, and application, should be used throughout the year to explicitly teach, then coach students through a variety of collaboration, comprehension, and inquiry skills. Rather than front-loading everything students might need to know, Harvey and Daniels advocate teachers start small and teach as needed.

The third section features four ways inquiry groups might be organized: mini-inquiries (small, introductory projects that may only last a few minutes to a few hours), curricular inquires (inquiries stemming from the mandated standards), literature circle inquires (inquiries which begin as traditional literature circles but branch into explorations of topics of interest), and open inquiries (inquiries into self-selected topics). One of the book's biggest strengths becomes most apparent in this section – this is real work done with real teachers; their voices and experiences are showcased. Readers will connect with teachers who welcome them into their classrooms and provide a guided tour of inquiry circles in action. Although practicing educators are the primary audience for this book, researchers, teacher educators, and preservice teachers will also find this beneficial.

Missing from many of these teacher narratives are detailed descriptions of the student populations and school settings. Is a given class made up of mostly English language learners? Are any of the students receiving special education services? Is the featured school in a rural, urban, or suburban area? Readers are left to surmise quite a bit when those kinds of data might be confidence boosters for reluctant teachers. Some teachers of diverse populations feel pressured to rely on basic drills as their standard of teaching (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008) but may be willing to try more engaging and culturally relevant methods (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2002) if they are seen as a viable option.

Classroom management topics such as scheduling concerns as well as assessment and evaluation are outlined in the final section. Teachers are guided in considering how many circles to try in a year, how long should they take, and what comprises daily lessons. Harvey and Daniels answer the popular question, “what are the other students doing?” with one of their many bulleted lists of ideas. Throughout the book the authors praise teachers for the good work they already do, push them to do more in different ways, and suggest solutions for the problems they may encounter with this approach. There are also many samples of student work, tables that summarize key points, and resource lists teachers can easily reference.

Where do standards fit in? Once inquiry-based investigations are underway it's possible to link student work to the standards in a process Harvey and Daniels refer to as “backmapping” (p. 261). The skills included on Harvey and Daniels's sample list can, in all likelihood, be found in many states' standards for reading and language arts. No examples are given for backmapping to content areas such as social studies or science, although the featured lessons generally fit within those content areas. Also missing are any examples of inquiry circles with mathematics topics. Such examples would prove useful in future editions, especially given the nods to whole-school inquiry mentioned near the end of the book.

Even with these shortcomings, Harvey and Daniels present a highly readable and engaging text. The book contains abundant guidance and practical suggestions, as well as the clear voices of teachers who share their challenging, yet successful experiences. The authors situate their work in a long line of progressive educators, calling for methods that authentically connect learning and life. In their words, “It's time for another, stronger, more intentional era of progressive education,” (p. xi). More than simply fun or interesting, progressive, student-

centered pedagogies prepare today's students to be engaged and thoughtful citizens. Teachers looking to push students to read and think in new and important ways, yet adhere to mandated standards, would do well to try inquiry circles.

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