

When the world hands us a

Using the Tools of Inquiry to Help Students Manage Disturbing Events

By Harvey “Smokey” Daniels

When you live with thirty other human beings for 180 days a year, sad things and bad things can happen. Individual children or the whole group will encounter struggles, worries, losses, changes, or emergencies. It's not whether, but when.

Many of these happenings are predictable and expectable. A class pet dies. Someone breaks a bone. Someone moves away. Someone new arrives. Someone has a sick parent or grandparent. Someone's family is in a car crash. There's a bullying incident on the playground.

Other events are more shocking. A house fire breaks out across the street. A big storm rages through town. There's scary news on TV, and adults are agitated about it. A new president is elected who threatens many families.

What all these sudden events have in common is that they *preempt the curriculum*. You and the kids have to deal with them immediately. In the following story, Megan planned over a weekend. The issue, the problem, the worry is on everyone's mind, preoccupying their thoughts, *right now*. You can't play the expert because in these moments you usually don't have any better answers than the children. As my colleague Robert Probst has written: “All of our teaching is in some ways preparation for such events” (Heinemann, 2010).



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We would not normally think of such disruptions as *entry points for inquiry*, and certainly not as *teachable moments*. First and foremost, we need to show our human empathy and concern and partner with the children to manage their worries. But the tools and methods of inquiry—asking questions, gathering knowledge, listening to experts, considering alternatives, and working together to plan for action—are perfectly suited to this task. So what we can do is be an expert on helping kids think well under pressure. If you are running an inquiry-rich program, you have many assets already in place.

Let's look at an example of how the world can thrust an unavoidable curriculum into our classrooms. Last spring in Megan Dixon's second grade in Wisconsin, a student's mother died suddenly. Due to the circumstances of the death and the family living situation, Megan knew she and John's classmates would have to play a large role in the healing process. After the funeral, a visit with the family, and a discussion with the school guidance counselor,

Megan decided to share the news with John's classmates before he returned to school.

Because class meetings were a regular part of their classroom routines, Megan decided to bring up the subject during her next morning meeting.

After seventeen years as a classroom teacher, Megan has had the experience of working through the death of several classroom pets. "Standard protocol" includes reading *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst (Atheneum Books, 1987), acknowledging sadness and other feelings students have, and sharing memories and "good things" about Fluffy, or Humphrey, or Oreo—orally and in writing. John's loss was of a different order of magnitude—and there was no protocol for a teacher to follow.

Megan spent the weekend reading about the grief children experience when losing a parent, dealing with loss in the classroom, and thinking about how to facilitate a class meeting on this sensitive topic. At first, she thought she would encourage children to share their feelings with comments such as "I'm so sorry about the loss of your mom."



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But then she wondered, what if all the children share at once and John becomes overwhelmed and further reminded of his loss? Maybe, she thought, we shouldn't say anything at all. Feeling uncertain and nervous about saying everything or nothing, Megan questioned how she could remain strong for her students and help them through this experience.

As the students gathered for the class meeting, looking at her closely and sensing something very important was going to be shared, it became clear that Megan needed to trust her students more fully. She also needed to embrace her own sadness and be honest with her students that she did not have all the "right answers." She had to let kids talk, listen closely to their concerns, help them name their feelings, and guide them in creating personal or group action steps they could take when John returned.

She began the meeting by telling the students, "I have some very sad news and I've been struggling with how to tell you about it. Many of you have wondered why John hasn't been here the past few days. The reason is that John's mom died. I know some of you who live near John already know this and have been very respectful by keeping this information private. I am very sad. I've been doing some reading about some things we can do to help John when he returns to school. I know that I can trust you to help John and each other through this difficult time. You might be feeling sad, confused, or uncomfortable. That's OK. I have those feelings too. Let's share your thoughts and listen closely to each other with compassion."

Megan began by sharing what she learned from the resources she consulted over the weekend. She explained that other people who experienced a death like this wrote that teachers and students don't need to be experts. Instead, they can help most by being present and attentive to the grieving classmate and letting the student express his or her feelings. Megan also explained that sometimes even though John is sad, he might not want to talk, and that's OK. A student chimed in that after her grandma died, her mom didn't want to talk about it either.

She also shared that John would probably have a difficult time concentrating and learning for a while. She encouraged the students to "show patience and kindness and know that John may not participate in our activities the same way when he comes back." As expected with seven- and eight-year-olds, students began sharing stories of loss in their own lives. Perceiving that students needed a few

moments to share these personal stories, Megan had students talk with their thinking partners about their own loss experiences. Some students talked about the death of pets, grandparents, and other relatives. After sharing some of these stories, Megan asked the second graders to think about what they might say to John when he returned.

The students knew they could probably say, "I'm sorry about your mom," but this didn't seem strong enough to convey the sadness they felt. They shared Megan's worry that if they all said the same words to John, it wouldn't be meaningful enough or they would overwhelm him. One student even remarked, "If we all say we are sorry about your mom, that might remind John more of his mom and that could make him more sad." As students shared their feelings, they began problem solving and brainstorming. As they did this, Savannah suggested making a T-chart (a typical format for other instructional activities in this classroom) for what they could say and do. Students shared that they could say things like "I'm sorry," "You are a good friend," "I know how much you'll miss your mom." On the other side they shared things they could do: give John a hug, smile at him, or make him pictures and cards.

As they continued the conversation, Megan found that some kids were worried that when John came back, they would be afraid to interact with him or might unconsciously shun him, and then he would feel isolated. So she started another round of brainstorming



ReACT to a **Crisis** first from your **Heart** 



his growing artistic expertise—to the class. Drawing seemed to be a way he dealt with much of his grief and how he shared his gratitude for his friends. He would often sneak dinosaur pictures he drew into other students’ mailboxes, which were cherished by his classmates.

A month later, we were deeply saddened when John suddenly moved away to live with relatives in another town.

It was emotionally hard for Megan to share this story for publication, just a few months after the events. I’m grateful for her courage, both in the classroom and on the page. She is an extraordinary human being and a master teacher. I also think we can see in Megan’s actions how she used the tools of inquiry to face this fraught situation. She:

- did her own research on the topic
- was authentic about her own thinking and feeling
- modeled her own ways of coping
- didn’t assume an expert role
- acted as the lead learner in the room
- gathered kids as a community
- built upon previously established friendship and support
- created lessons based on kids’ wonderings and worries
- let students speak and ask questions
- scribed students’ thinking on charts
- helped children identify and plan possible actions
- supported kids to implement their plans over many days.

When crises come to our classrooms, whether a scary world news or a grieving struggling child, we rely first on our hearts. But if we have already established a community of inquiry with our kids, we have ready at hand the structures we need to cope together and press on in hope.

Adapted from: *The Curious Classroom: 10 Structures for Teaching with Student-Directed Inquiry* (Heinemann, 2017).



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When he is not researching and writing, Smokey serves as a guest teacher and coach in classrooms around North America. To support schools and teachers, he offers workshops, long-term consultancies, multi-day national institutes, conference sessions, classroom demonstration lessons, webinars, literacy coach training, and administrator events.

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and listed “things we could do to be sure John doesn’t feel alone tomorrow and throughout the week.” These are some of the ideas kids came up with:

- walk with him to recess
- sit with him at lunch
- put dinosaur pictures in his mailbox
- fill his book bag with books he loves
- ask to be his partner during math.

Megan finished the story:

By the end of this process, all the second graders had something unique and personal they could say to John and a specific action they could take in welcoming him back the next day and in the days that followed. Although no one felt expert at how to handle this, my students knew that they needed to be observers, exercise patience, and demonstrate empathy and understanding. For the next few weeks, that’s exactly what happened. Students did respond with kindness and compassion in their words and actions. They were careful not to overwhelm John, but weren’t scared to share their feelings.

John’s mailbox overflowed with pictures and cards, and he was often seen reading and looking at them. At first, he would eat and have recess only in the classroom, but day by day he invited other students to join him as he worked his way back to more “normal” participation in everyday activities. He spent recesses and choice times drawing a variety of dinosaurs that adorned our classroom walls. He would carefully explain them—and