

Inquiry and Discovery With 2nd-Graders

Cigarettes and Meaningful Learning

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During one of our neighborhood walks, past the restaurants, library, and playgrounds of our Washington, D.C., neighborhood, one of my students asked, “What are all these white things on the ground?” The rest of my class promptly joined him in an exploration of the “little white things.” The students surveyed the area, puzzling over what these objects could be until another classmate shouted out, “These are cigarettes!” Before I knew it, every child was captivated by the amount of cigarette butts littering the streets of our school community.

As a teacher, I was proud of my students’ curiosity about the world around them, yet I found myself hoping their interest would dissipate by the time we returned to our classroom, for fear of digging deeper into a potentially problematic topic of inquiry. Yet, my students continued to ask questions about cigarettes and share their own connections, thoughts, and ideas about smoking. One student, who was especially intrigued by the cigarettes, proposed a challenge to the group: “Let’s go see how many we can pick up!” At this point, my teacher’s heart was officially terrified, but after hearing the passion in my students’ voices, I

knew there was no turning back and that our next community investigation was going to push me way out of my comfort zone.

I, Grace Bogosian, have taught 1st and 2nd grade at Sacred Heart School for eight years. Sacred Heart School is a bilingual, Catholic school in Washington, D.C., that serves a community of learners that is both culturally and socio-economically diverse. I and our principal, Elise Heil, have been committed to transforming the educational experience for our traditionally marginalized

learners. We have sought out the latest professional development opportunities and have spent countless hours reflecting on how we can bring research into practice at our school. Elise and I have been long-standing thought partners, including as co-leaders on this project and now co-authors on this article.

In 2014, our school was approached by the Professional Development Collaborative at Washington International School to partner with Project Zero, a team of researchers from Harvard University’s Graduate



photos courtesy of author



School of Education, to launch a new project, Children Are Citizens (CAC). The project aimed to support early childhood teachers in amplifying the voices of our youngest learners. The ultimate mission was to empower our students as current—rather than just future—citizens capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities. Lead researchers Ben Mardell and Mara Krechevsky, who have collaborated for over two decades with educators from the renowned preschools and infant-toddler centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy, centered their vision on the idea that “when children begin their schooling with support for thinking, feeling, and acting in groups, they’re more likely

to participate in and practice democracy as informed and caring citizens.”¹

When our 2nd-graders were in pre-kindergarten, they were invited to be a part of the first CAC cohort. While I admired their ability to identify problems in our school community and find collaborative solutions, I often found myself wondering what these practices would look like when I inherited this particularly curious group of learners. It was exciting and intimidating to think of handing so much power over to my future learners; by the time they entered my classroom, I was ready to be a part of this innovative and novel experience and follow my students’ lines of inquiry with an open mind.

Over the course of that school year, my students and I, with the support of our principal, followed the line of inquiry that arose from that first sighting of the cigarette butts in the street. We took a deep dive into the world of cigarette litter. The students asked if we could pick up the cigarette butts. Reluctantly, we said yes. Armed with gloves and masks, we picked up over 5,000 cigarette butts from our neighborhood streets. Our students asked if we could learn more about smoking. Again, we reluctantly said yes. Storytime became an opportunity to read articles about both the effects of smoking and the impact of litter on our world. Math class became an opportunity to create bar graphs and practice adding large numbers (and counting up to 5,000!). The students asked if we could interview police officers about the laws. Again, we heard ourselves say yes. We spoke with experts from our community, including a few parents, who helped answer our questions.

Toward the end of the year, the children decided to create and publish a newspaper.² We tried to encourage students to think of a more current form of communication, but they insisted that a newspaper was the way to go. We gathered our biggest and most important ideas into our newsletter and handed it out to our neighbors and local businesses, who proudly displayed them in their storefront windows. The students felt a sense of pride in their ability to make an impact—educating our community about the issue of cigarette litter and providing solutions for how we could all work together to reduce the litter in our neighborhood.

This is when I began to see my role as a teacher in a new light. Rather than relying on previous methods that valued teacher-led learning, we began to see the value of creating a student-centered classroom. We have been pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones ever since.

Teachers often ask us how to get started on this inquiry and discovery work within their own classrooms and school contexts. We always go back to the ideas Ben and Mara shared during our CAC seminars. In the following, we provide tips on what helped us facilitate and sustain student-driven inquiry projects and make the learning happening in

our classroom and school more meaningful for ourselves and our students.

The Power of a Provocation

In order to find a shared line of inquiry that excites and engages all learners, we begin by providing a shared learning experience—or provocation—to see where the interest of the group lies. For the 2nd-grade class, the provocation was a simple walk around the neighborhood to identify community issues. Provocations come in many forms; looking closely at a piece of art, reading a favorite book, or examining current events all can be powerful entry points

for our learners. We also have posed complex questions to our students, such as, “Who are the most important people in our city?” or “Who do you want to get to know better?” Anything that sparks student intrigue and open-ended exploration can be called a provocation and sometimes we need to try a few before discovering the one that really excites our students.

Just Say Yes

As my students engage in the provocations we pose to them, we listen carefully to their responses and document their thinking by writing down direct student quotes, recording peer-to-peer

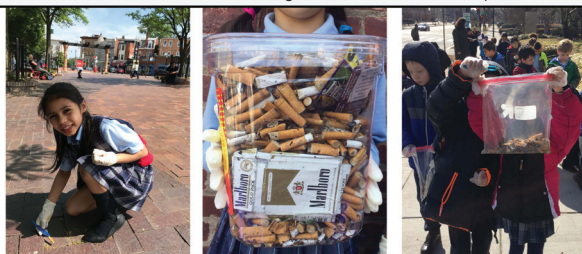
Children Are Citizens Chronicle

“We Can Make Our Own News!”

Sacred Heart School

Washington, DC

May 2019



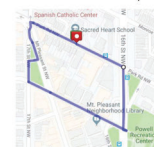
As second grade citizens, we really care about our community! We want all of the things that make our Mount Pleasant neighborhood so special – the plants to the animals to the people [you!] – to be happy and safe. We love to take walks around our wonderful neighborhood. During one of our walks, a few of us noticed a lot of “white things” on the ground. On another walk, we noticed someone holding one and we realized it was a cigarette. We had so many questions about cigarettes. We knew this was something we could help with! This is a newspaper about everything we have learned and how we can all work together to keep Mount Pleasant the amazing place it is to live and learn!

We Need to Stop Hiding and Do Something!

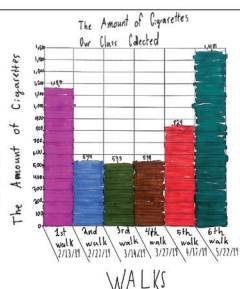
All About Our Walks

By: James, Kassie, Lucero, Charlie, and Fernando

It started out with us realizing that people were throwing cigarettes on the ground. As a class, we decided to clean up as many cigarettes as we could! From February until May, we went on six walks



around the same four blocks. We wore gloves and used tweezers to pick up as many cigarettes as we could! You can check out our bar graph that we made about how many cigarettes we collected on each walk. Sasha says, “This is going to be slow and take some time. We have to keep going until our community is clean!”



It blew our minds out of our heads that we cleaned up **5,108** cigarettes in total!!

We Care About You!

All About Our Research

By: Abraham, Isabella, Noel, JC, and Henry

Some people smoke because it might make their minds smooth. We read an article about how some homeless people sometimes will buy cigarettes instead of buying food because it stops them from feeling hungry. Other people may smoke because they are addicted. Addicted means when you try something, like candy, you like it a lot and want it most of the time! The big problem is cigarettes can harm you! They are made of really bad things that are also used in nail polish remover, rat poison, hair dye and rubber! They can give you brain or lung cancer! Second hand smoke is harmful too! Smoking is also really bad for your teeth. We want you to know how bad cigarettes are so that you can all stay healthy!



How we think a smoker's lungs and brain looks like



“It’s for the Cherry Blossoms! We have to protect them!” - Darwin

Save Our Environment! All About Our Earth

By: Darwin, Remy, Lucas, and Ezana

Cigarettes can harm the earth. They hurt our plants and trees. Sometimes people drop cigarettes on the ground and they go through the storm drains that lead into the ocean! We are worried that all the ocean life cycles could stop. When you blow cigarettes, the smoke pollutes the air. We think the birds might get sick. Smoke makes a bad environment.



Will You Help Us?

All About Our Hopes

By: Diego, Raquel, Sammy and Sasha

After our last walk, Isabella said, “My heart feels sad. We need more help!” We hope you can help us! We want people not to throw cigarettes in the plants, gutters, streets or sidewalks. You may not know it, but there are special trash cans just for cigarettes! We like to call them “skinny trash cans.” Firefighters told us that if you use a usual trash can for a cigarette, it might light on fire. We hope that people use more cigarette trash cans.



Someone using a skinny trash can instead of catching a normal one on fire

If you cannot buy a skinny trash can, here are step-by-step instructions for how to make one:

1. Get a plant pot and a scooper
2. Fill half of the pot with sand
3. Put the pot 25 feet away from door [We learned this from a police officer!]
4. When it gets full, scoop out cigarette butts in the trash
5. Fill pot with more sand



Don Juan's homemade skinny trash can!

We think you can enjoy making your own skinny trash can!

Our hope is that our community works together to have a safe and clean neighborhood!

Illustrated by: Sasha, Kennedy, Jaqueline, Oto & Stella

Questions or comments? Email us at CACchronicle@gmail.com



“What next?” As the group explores their thinking surrounding these questions, the class inevitably forms an authentic learning community—one where all questions, ideas, and suggestions push the learning of the group forward. As their teachers, we are a member of our learning community and a big part of that role is learning alongside our students.

The Value of a Thought Partner

As we have written this article, we have reflected on the importance of doing this work alongside one another. Teachers often have questions about their own practice. In these moments of uncertainty, we found it critical to rely on the input of our trusted colleagues, or “thought partners.” As a teacher, Grace was worried that talking with 2nd-graders about cigarettes would

conversations with video, snapping photos of meaningful learning moments, and analyzing student work as well as drawings. This ensures that the project is truly student-driven. A crucial part of this project is saying yes to the students’ ideas. Even during the many moments when we were hesitant to encourage our students to explore cigarettes, we continued to listen to the voice in my head that reminded me to just say yes. If we want students to internalize that they are current, capable citizens, we need to show them that their voices are heard, valued, and important.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

One of the key questions at the very core of CAC’s mission is one that we ask ourselves frequently: “How can we create a community of learners where all children feel a sense of belonging and accomplishment?” When we are looking for the right inquiry question to guide our work, we listen closely for an idea that

excites the majority of the group. If the project only excites me or a small group of students, it will often lose momentum and peter out. When we sense that student interest is waning, we ask the children another crucial question:





be considered inappropriate by some of our community members, including our students' parents. Elise, the school principal, worried about going too far off the beaten path and finding ways to stay connected to our curriculum and content goals. In these moments, we leaned on each other to think through some of the trickier elements of our students' inquiry. We highly recommend finding a "thought partner"—another adult who can help examine the thinking of the group, specifically by looking closely at the documentation of student thinking, helping us to stay true to student thinking, and providing guidance about where to take the journey.

Sharing Out

As with all things, our inquiry projects must come to an end. We concluded our project by posing the questions, "How should we share our learning with the community?" and "Who should we share our learning with?" This is when the students suggested writing a newspaper. There are many different ways to share

with a relevant, larger audience, including blogs, videos, performances, and artistic displays. An exciting element of this work is that students often have ideas that I never considered.

In preparation for this article, we asked a few of the students, now current 5th-graders at our school, what problems they'd like to work on as adults—a twist on the traditional "What do you want to be when you grow up?" question. Remy, a student who participated with CAC since he was 3 years old, said, "I want to work on problems affecting people with disabilities or people who are sick. I'm thinking of becoming a mechanical engineer so I can design new wheelchairs or medical equipment that will help people live longer." James said he hopes to "continue to be able to use his voice to inspire others." He shared that he's considering being an author, since he already has experience writing a newspaper. Sammy said he wants to help people "be better communicators." He wants to create more spaces where people can come together to share their

ideas around complex issues, including mental health struggles.

If our goal in schools is to prepare students for the world they are going to inherit, we must transform our classrooms into spaces where our learners can identify problems, engage in meaningful discourse with fellow citizens and experts, propose thoughtful solutions, and share new ideas with their community. They must be able to listen to others critically and voice their own ideas boldly. By creating classroom spaces where student voices are valued, opportunities for collaboration are plentiful, and responsible research and communication is modeled, we are creating a miniature version of the world we envision for our students.

Notes:

¹ <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/children-are-citizens>.

² Link to students' newspaper article: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ceA06xY0N10VsHG_91x8ynBSxeeEx8s/view?usp=sharing

Washington International School
Professional Development Collaborative
(PDC): <https://www.pdcollaborative.org/>