



The Power of *Listening*

When **Not Talking** Is Your Best Teaching Move

BY SARA AHMED

You sit white-knuckled on the way into school. In your mind are your students' faces—students who need some reassuring, but you don't know what to say to them. You scramble and scour, putting your faith in Google to produce any age-appropriate facts, images, resources, or tips on how to address this tragedy with students. With faculty. With parents. How can you make them feel safe? What words will reassure them that nothing like this will ever happen to them? How can you talk to them about a tragedy when some of the kids in the room may identify with the victims and some with the perpetrators?

As educators, we are on the front lines the morning after a tragedy shakes the world.

It took a few of these mornings for me to realize it actually isn't about what *I* say at all.

It is about how *I listen*.

News of tragedy is becoming almost commonplace.

A school shooting at Sandy Hook. An attack on Paris. A bombing in Brussels. Another unarmed civilian of color shot by a police officer. A park filled with children decimated in Lahore. Parents publicly fasting to fight for their kids to keep their neighborhood school. Another mass shooting, this time our nation's bloodiest, in Orlando, where people gathered to dance, sing, and celebrate love. We are conditioned to associate horrific events just by hearing names of cities: Baltimore, Ferguson, Newtown, Paris, Chicago, New Orleans. We become tense with hashtags: #blacklivesmatter #alllivesmatter #lovewins #Prayfor(insertaplace) #inmymuslimneighborhood #plannedparenthood #NRA. We are on a slippery slope to being desensitized in a 24-7 reporting world. The tweets fly in, the images are haphazardly released; adults responsible for children are often scrambling to find ways to either protect, inform, or comfort them in more than 140 characters or memes.

As educators, we are on the front lines the morning after a tragedy shakes the world. It ripples into our classrooms from homes, the hallways, and handheld devices. Sitting back and listening isn't easy to do and it doesn't feel comfortable at first. It takes a great deal of patience and an even greater amount of practice, with many mistakes along the way. Sometimes we speak without considering how kids hear our message, but kids actually respond better to how we *hear them*.

So how do we listen?

In responding to tragedy, we can open the conversation with questions for emerging discourse around sensitive topics. We can have some questions lined up that will allow students to do more of the talking and us to be more mindfully present. You may find some similarities to how we monitor for understanding in literacy; these questions are just a shift from textual to cultural and social comprehension.

1. "How are you feeling about _____?"

This always gives me a quick qualitative assessment of what background knowledge kids have without making it about the quantity of facts (or misconceptions) they may have.

2. "Do you see any areas of tension (between people or places)?"

Now is also a good time to define terms, places, people, or groups so that there is clear understanding of who the main actors are and what their roles represent in the greater story.

You also may need to define *tension* for students; one way is to define it by a shared reading experience you have had together, such as noting character tension or tension in setting. A follow-up question may be: "Does that tension cause emotions for you? Why do you think this is happening?" Or try question 3.

3. "Have any of you heard any stories of hope, of upstanders—people who helped others in this time of need?"

We always want to humanize these events. Find and tell the stories of people who were lost, who helped, and who stood up in the face of fear. This changes the conversation to a positive note and shifts the narrative for kids. As Fred Rogers used to say, if you feel scared "always look for the helpers."

As your students (and you) become more comfortable having these difficult conversations in class, you can take more of an inquiry approach. Let them build the agenda through their wonders.

4. "With everything that is happening, what do your heart and mind wonder about?"

This question opens a compelling window into how the kids are trying to make sense of the world around them.

With all optimism and hope, let's transition from leaning in with our voice—to leaning in to listen theirs. Let's send kids the message that they have an ally in us. It is in the white-knuckled moments, muddled with uncertainty, fear, and lately more often than not xenophobia, that we will have to extend our reach across desks, rows, aisles, fences, and walls to make eye contact, shake hands, and listen.



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Minds with Inquiry. Her classrooms are designed to help her young adolescent students to consider their own identities and to take action in the world in socially responsible ways. Sara is a member of the teacher leadership team for Facing History and Ourselves, an international organization devoted to developing critical thinking and empathy for others. Sara is a Heinemann PD Consulting Author and is available to do On-Site PD. She also presents at national conferences and alongside Harvey "Smokey" Daniels and others at Heinemann Multi-Day Institutes.