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AREA OF INQUIRY: ISSUES IN GROUPS

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WHY WRITE ABOUT ISSUES?

The title of this text promises to help you use writing not only to inquire into important aspects of your life, but also to act upon and change your world. Effectively acting upon your world usually involves group identities. Let's take an example. Suppose your student financial aid is affected by legislation in Congress, and you find it necessary to increase your hours in a part-time job to make up for the reduction in aid. The extra work begins to affect your grades, and you almost forget what it was like to participate in campus activities and spend time with friends. You can take action for change. You can write as a member of a campus political organization, seeking to organize a group of students to address your senators. In this case, you are writing from the position of a college student depending on financial aid, a person who is part of a very large group.

We are all parts of many different kinds of groups. We are born into some groups—familial, racial, and ethnic, for example. Some groups we join in a formal way, like clubs, sororities, fraternities, religious groups, and political organizations. Sometimes we are members of groups simply because of certain choices or activities. You may not have thought about enrolling in Midwestern University as joining a certain group, but by going to school, you became a member of that college community. You may also be a part of a smaller group within a large group, like returning students, part-time students, and international students. You may be surprised at the number of groups of which you are a member. Almost every role you play in your life can be related to a group affiliation.

EXAMPLES OF WRITING FOR INQUIRY AND ACTION

- As a former staff member and football announcer at his hometown radio station, Scott investigates the lack of broadcasting of football games.
- As a member of an ROTC Unit, Michael inquires about the apparent inequity in the policy of issuing ribbons.

- Vita studies an issue in two groups: Americans of East Indian descent, and Christians from India (AIC). Her Indian heritage was important to her; and she was an officer in the student branch of AIC. After marrying a white American, she heard members discuss the issue of marrying non-Indians and noticed that they didn't treat her quite the same.
- Laura, a graduate of a rural high school, found she had to work twice as hard in college as her new friends just to catch up with what they had been doing as juniors and seniors in high school. She made inquiries into her hometown's plans to consolidate high schools to make more resources, courses, and teachers available to students in this rural area.

READINGS FOR INQUIRY AND ACTION

"LETTER," *Birmingham News* by Ora Lee Gaines

Letter to Birmingham News reprinted in C.A.R.E. newsletter (Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education)

Dear Editor,

God has blessed me to live over seven decades. During the years, I have witnessed children devalued and programmed to fail. We moved from no schools for black children to separate and unequal schools. Now the State Board of Education has adopted "new" graduation requirements that will cause separate and unequal classes for black, poor, and working class children of all races for another one hundred years. The new requirements mandate academic requirements but no similar advance requirements. Therefore, the children at the bottom level will be ill prepared professionally. Furthermore, the new recommendations have mandated a third Disability Act against disabled children which is humanely separate and unequal.

Last Thursday I sat in the Gordon Persons Building at the State Capitol and prayed that the black and white Board members would seize the opportunity to mandate a quality education for "all" children. I was filled with hope when Stephanie Bell, a white woman (who is said to be conservative) gave an incredible statement against the proposed system that would create three completely separate tracks. I was moved almost to tears when she spoke of the harm that tracking causes to children. She surprisingly understood the anguish and defeat of being placed in low levels and being told or treated like you're not as smart as the children at the top. She spoke eloquently but emphatically against the creation of dual classes in the base core curriculum. She amended Senator Hank Sanders' dynamic argument against having two ninth grade English, Math, and Social Studies classes. "These are not advanced subjects, but advanced classes of the same subjects," she argued. We support advanced courses, especially AP classes, but separating kids in grades 7, 8, 9 and beyond to take English, Math and Social Studies from the same book is

suspect and terribly unfair. Even the Superintendent publicly admitted that blacks and poor whites would dominate the lower classes because of past race and class discrimination. He also acknowledged that these children are not likely to choose the high levels because of low expectations, low self-esteem, lack of self-fulfillment, and failure. Yet, the Superintendent nor the majority of the Board members were willing to take measures to get these children off the bottom who were there, not because they were inferior but because they and their parents have been subjected to an inferior public education generation after generation. At first I didn't understand. The Superintendent said the new requirements were raising the standards. Yet, these children would still be behind their more fortunate peers. In our legal system, people are compensated when they are injured through the fault of others. However, five adults voted to increase graduation standards without compensating victimized children with "catch up" resources and assistance. With the proper compensatory measures, most of these children could compete with their more fortunate peers in basic and core curriculum courses. Without additional help, many will not be able to meet the new requirements that are higher than the past, but far below what will be taught and expected of students who seek the advanced degree. When some fail, the failure will be used to justify and keep them at the bottom. The result is that the cycle of poverty and crime will continue.

I did not go to the State School Board meeting alone. I took forty children from McRae Learning Center, a school I direct in Selma, Alabama. A four year old read a first grade reader for the Board. Six year old students recited their twelve time tables. One student, Andrew Hill, told the Board how he was treated like he was dumb and, therefore, stopped trying to learn in public school. "I'm an A-B student at McRae," he proudly told the Board. At McRae, all children are expected to learn at high levels, and they do: the black ones, the brown ones, the white ones, and the poor ones. McRae has no dual system of education. If we can do it on a shoe string budget, why can't the public schools do it with million dollar budgets.

I was moved to tears by the children, and so were some of the Board members. David Byers, a white board member from Birmingham, Alabama, insightfully echoed the sentiments of Stephanie Bell, Senator Hank Sanders, Ronald Jackson, Dr. Carol Zippert, Rose Sanders and others who spoke against the dual system. I was also proud to see Rev. Abraham Woods, Rev. John Nettles of SCLC, a NAACP representative, and Malika Sanders of 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement in the audience. These people and organizations are members of C.A.R.E. (Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education), which has lead the fight for true education reform in Alabama. To my surprise, Dr. Ethel Hall, Vice-Chair of the Board, voted for this dual system of education that would perpetuate separate and unequal education for the majority children in the State for the next one hundred years. How ironic!

On the eve of the 100th Anniversary of the Plessy decision, a black woman voted to keep black and poor children separate and unequal. I

thought of Clarence Thomas and a few other blacks who have used their power and position to maintain the white status quo. Again, I was moved to tears.

I decided not to concentrate on the negative. I thought of Dr. Willie Paul, David Byers, and Stephanie Bell. No white official in the state spoke out against segregation thirty years ago when everyone knew that schools were terribly separate and unequal. Yet, a white conservative republican had spoken out loud and clear. I feel hopeful because I now believe that there are white officials in this state that will put aside race, politics, and class to serve the best interest of all children. The white board members who stood up for all children were not flaming white liberals who often act condescending and maternal when it comes to black people. Two white and one black bold visionary board members realized that you can't move Alabama forward and leave a majority of children of color and poverty behind. It was an exciting moment in history that the printed media failed to reveal. Thus this letter. The Greene County Democrat was the only newspaper present to capture and document it.

Hopefully, this letter will help alert the media and the public to the most historic moment for education in my seventh plus decade of living.

—Ms. Ora Lee Gaines' letter to the Birmingham News . . .
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Questions for Analysis

1. How clear is the persuasive response the writer is seeking? Do you think she is trying to create awareness, change an attitude, or provoke action? Is she seeking some combination of these responses?
2. One way to think of a writer's credibility is to see it as the picture the writer creates of herself in the text. What kind of person is depicted in this text? Do you think the writer created an honest or accurate picture of herself?
3. What emotions, if any, did the letter provoke in you? What examples do you find of emotional appeals?
4. Late in the second paragraph, the writer offers a very clear example of the appeal of contrast when she observes that our legal system has ways of compensating people for injuries, while our educational system has no similar responsibility or liability. What other logical appeals do you find in the text?
5. What group or groups do you think this writer was addressing? How would you describe her "writer position" in relation to these readers?
6. A political theorist named Iris Marion Young has made the case that people should look at social and racial difference in a far more flexible way. For example, you may find yourself in social situations where, for a time, you have great deal in common with people who

may be very different from you in other ways. How does the situation described by this writer illustrate looking at difference in a more flexible way? In other words, have the problems with tracking created alliances between groups that the writer seems to suggest are frequently alienated from each other?

7. What personal knowledge of or experience with tracking do you have?
8. What do you see as the advantage of tracking?
9. At what points do you agree with the writer's assessment of the problems with tracking? At what points do you disagree? What do you think about the principle of separate but equal?
10. What further actions for change do you think people in this situation, including the writer, will need to take?

A Case DAVID'S INQUIRY

On the radio this morning as I was driving to class, I heard about what was being called an alleged robbery attempt. A car owner had seen a teenager near the passenger-side door, and the car alarm had been set off. The owner of the car happened to be a karate student; he attacked the young man, leaving him with an injury that could paralyze him for life. The young man was arrested, but the prosecutor was investigating the possibility of issuing charges against the owner of the car as well.

The story bothered me for several reasons. As a 40 year-old returning student, with a teen-aged son, I was concerned about the rise of violence in my community. I am also an Isshinryu karate instructor, and later in the day, I learned that the owner of the car is a student of one of my friends. I was troubled by the karate student's response. Karate is supposed to be an art of self-defense, and I wondered just how much danger the teenager had posed to the young man. Learning self-discipline is supposed to be just as important to karate students as learning the karate forms. The car had not been entered or tampered with. Was there any justification for the car owner's use of the potentially deadly force of karate? I decided to investigate this issue for my second assignment.

David started by identifying the group to whom this issue would matter. He knew that the community was concerned about rising violence, but he was specifically troubled about the role karate had played in this violent incident. As a way of investigating the relationship between karate and violence, David recorded another incident in which karate had played a role in violent confrontation. He decided to focus his inquiry on the values within the community of Isshinryu karate experts and teachers. Using a Questioning Strategy, David settled on three questions as he explored how these incidents had challenged his karate community's values.

David's Questions

| <u>My Possible Groups</u> | <u>My Possible Issues</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Isshinryu karate experts/teachers | Karate should be for self-defense only |
| Parent | Community is getting more violent. My son does karate. Could this make him a danger to himself and others? |

| <u>My Experiences</u> | <u>My Values</u> | <u>Source of My Values</u> |
|---|---|---|
| Hearing about karate student crippling high school student over the possibility of breaking into his car | Karate for self-defense | Karate philosophy Isshinryu philosophy Family |
| Hearing about another blackbelt who witnessed an armed robbery in a record store. Blackbelt who ran after thief was shot and killed. Article in Isshinryu newsletter praised the blackbelt's bravery. | Avoid violence Getting killed over material possessions is stupid. | My common-sense |

Writing context possibilities

Class: People in class were interested in subject when I discussed it. Most people are concerned about violence.

Class wouldn't have any way to act on the karate dimension of the problem. And that is most important to me

Isshinryu teachers and students: Would know subject, should care about violence problem. I have written short articles for the newsletter published by the International Isshinryu Karate Association (IIKA).

Letter to my son Jarrod: He would probably be turned off.

Context I will write in: Isshinryu teachers and students. If I want to see some change, this community makes the most sense. My kid reads the newsletter and is more likely to pay attention to something I say in print than in person.

Issues to investigate:

- increased violence in culture
- Isshinryu philosophy on violence, self-defense, protection of property
- the way Isshinryu philosophy is taught in local dojos

Questions:

What is making young people so violent?

To what extent in local karate schools is the Isshinryu philosophy of self-discipline and non-aggression being taught together with the karate forms?

To what extent is the Isshinryu perspective on violence, self-defense, and the protection of property a useful guide for behavior?

In his writing group, Vita and Laura reviewed David's questions and pointed out that the first one would be difficult to deal with in the two weeks they had to work on the project. David decided to focus on the last two questions. The question regarding how much Isshinryu philosophy was being taught in local schools would require some research—phone calls and discussions with students and teachers whom he knew. The last question, however, was one he could investigate using the resources he already had: experiences, knowledge, and understanding. The Three Perspectives Guide helped him recall what he already knew and believed; it also let him make new connections and re-evaluate his experiences and values.

David's Exploration

Three Perspectives Guide

Question and writing context

To what extent is the Isshinryu perspective on violence and self-defense a useful guide for behavior?

Writing genre: IKA newsletter

Describing and distinguishing

- *Important elements:* martial artists, martial artist wanna-be's, teenagers and adult karate teachers, local karate schools, local martial arts schools—some do not stress philosophy, they encourage violence. Various weapons normally associated with self defense. "Karate" means "empty hands"—my weapons are my empty hands. Crime and violence in the neighborhood and the schools. The way karate is depicted in movies and on TV—Bruce Lee. Jarrod's karate teacher Samuel is a very gentle person who stresses self-discipline and concentration.
- *Images and Experiences:* I saw a young boy die from falling face first onto a sharp stub of a wild bush after being hit in a "boyish" after-school fight. I know what damage fists, feet, and weapons can inflict upon a human body; many people don't. Television and movies show a couple of big guys who slug it out for five minutes but shed no blood, lose no teeth, suffer no broken noses or jaws, etc. That ain't how it works
- *Perspectives within group:* Many karate instructors think that you should not show cowardice (they see discretion as cowardice) and promote violence as the solution to most problems. Others think you should be able to take a small amount of non-physical abuse, but not much
- *Perspectives outside the group:* There are many opinions about self-defense, ranging from total pacifism to outright violence. Texas just passed a law allowing anyone to carry a concealed weapon. Self-defense was the rationale behind the law. The law's opponents predicted that a minor traffic accident could result in murder if one or both of the persons involved had a gun. Their prediction came to pass shortly after the law was passed. One motorist shot the other follow-

ing an argument and a brief fight. The proponents of the law still argue that the killing was justified. I say that if the man hadn't been carrying a gun both parties would be alive.

- *My Perspective:* Avoid conflict whenever possible. There may come a time when force is necessary, but the circumstances must be extreme.

Map networks and relationships

Categories/classifications:

Mine: personal well-being; self-defense

Others: Some see self-defense strictly as a physical act.

Comparisons/Contrasts:

avoidance/confrontation

safety/danger

health/injury

peace of mind/paranoia

Cultural stereotypes:

A blackbelt is always a tough guy

Self defense must be physical and violent

I have given many self defense seminars and demonstrations. Most people expect to see physical action. When I talk about avoidance, about running away from an assailant, leaving a situation, and facing possible embarrassment, I seem to lose their interest.

Trace moves and changes

- *My experience:* I used to think that self-defense always involved physical contact in a confrontational situation. Then, in the mid-1970s, I started studying Isshinryu karate. There was a lot of physical training and fighting techniques, but there was also the philosophy of Master Tatsuo Shimabuku. Some of his sayings were strange at first, but I put a lot of thought into them and came to realize that he promoted a peaceful existence through knowledge of power.
- *My attitudes:* I used to have a quick temper and be very willing to fight. Now, I believe I have a much more peaceful demeanor. I will fight only for a very good reason.
- *Changes in issue:* People are scared; many are just plain paranoid. Newspapers and TV reports are filled with violent images. Many have the perception, real or imagined, that violence is everywhere.
- *Effects:* More people are carrying weapons because of this fear. I believe that people with weapons have some "instant bravery" and are less likely to avoid confrontation. That leads to a greater chance of someone being killed or injured. It is redundant to say that your chances of being hurt are less if you avoid trouble.

David, Vita, and Laura read each other's explorations in class, highlighting material relevant to their questions and noting new values and attitudes that were emerging. Both Vita and Laura pointed out to David that his question [To what