Curriculum Project:

The Role of Citizens in a Democracy

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Introduction

Edward Everett, an American educator and politician once said, “Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army.” To protect the rights that are provided for them in the Constitution and to fully benefit from them, the citizens of the United States ought to be knowledgeable about both how the government operates and what their role is as citizens living in a democratic nation. Having an educated citizenry is crucial to having a true democracy in which the people are able to govern themselves through elected officials based on the principles of respect for all individuals and social equality for all. To ensure that the majority of citizens can participate in a democracy, schools need to go beyond simply teaching the ‘facts’ in subjects like History and Government and instead teach students how to view historical and current events through a critical lens and apply their knowledge. The rising generation of youth needs to be educated on what it means to live in a democratic country, how it is relevant to their lives and communities, and how to effectively participate in the political process.

Objectives and Context

The aim of our curriculum is to introduce 6th grade students in a Social Studies class to the roles and responsibilities of citizens under a democratic government. In five superblocks (an hour and fifteen minute classes) over the course of two weeks, we will concentrate on the democratic institutions of the United States and Brazil.

In designing our curriculum we followed the standards set by the CT State Department of Education (2011) for the 6th grade. Our modified version has content that focuses on knowledge that promotes understanding of our nation and our world. It focuses on competency in literacy, inquiry and research skills necessary to analyze, evaluate and present information in a clear and
concise manner. The last standard set by the CT State Department of Education focuses on Civic Engagement. Our curriculum will provide students opportunities to fulfill their civic duty.

In addition to understanding and analyzing how their government is structured, we hope to guide our students to gain an awareness of their position within the political structure that will enable them to uphold their social responsibilities and exercise their rights as citizens. Our objectives are that the students 1) learn about the organizational structure of a democratic government and the duties and rights of citizens within the structure, 2) are able to compare and contrast two different democratic governments and gain a global perspective of the functions of citizens, 3) understand their social responsibilities as citizens of a democratic nation and how they can impact their immediate community, and 4) can apply their knowledge by engaging in their community to fulfill their civic responsibility.

Curriculum Breakdown

In the first class (Monday), the teacher will begin by holding a brief discussion about government and citizenship in the United States to come up with working definitions and help students recognize the importance of these terms. The teacher will write down the students’ ideas and make a KWL chart (Know, What We Want to Know, and What We Have Learned) to which they can return later as a class. While the “K” section of the chart enables the teacher to identify what the students learn, the “W” section will allow the students to think about the information that they want to learn and help the teacher to see where the concerns of the students lay.

Next, the students will watch “I’m Just a Bill” (Resource 1), a five minute music video in which a cartoon bill sings about the process of going to Capitol Hill and becoming a law. After watching the clip, students will participate in a role-play game (Resource 2) in which the
students will act out the process to help. Acting out the process and learning through play should enable the students visualize and fully grasp how the process works.

Finally, the teacher will give the students a brief and basic overview of how a democracy is structured and functions. Students will then be divided into four groups consisting of 4-5 members and be assigned their first project. Two of the four groups will focus on the democratic government of the United States while the other two groups will focus on the democratic government of Brazil, one of the largest and most diverse Latin American countries a point of comparison. The groups will be given guidelines (Resource 3) for the type of information that is to be displayed on their poster board project. The will also be forewarned that they are being evaluated not only by their teacher but by their peers. For the remaining last half hour of class, the students will be taken to the library and given a short tour by the librarian who will explain the basic methods of research they can use and the resources that are available to them for their project.

In the second class (Wednesday), the students will work in their groups to read a simplified version of the Bill of Rights in order to gain an understanding of the rights of citizens (Resource 4). It is vital for students to be exposed to and have some foundational knowledge of the Bill of Rights which outlines their rights as citizens. Students will discuss the implications of the Bill of Rights in their group and highlight the points that they feel are most relevant or important to them. By having them talk with each other, we hope that they will be able to comprehend key concepts about the importance of the Bill of Rights.

The majority of the remaining class time will be given to students to continue working on their poster boards. The teacher will walk around to make sure students are engaged in productive discussions and work and to answer any questions that students have. A few minutes
before the end of the class period, students will have time to prepare questions for the representative from the Mayor of Hartford’s office. For homework students will write a one-page reflection about what they understand from the Bill of Rights.

In the third class (Friday), a representative from the Hartford Mayor’s office will be brought in to speak about government and citizenship, especially the importance of local government in Hartford and how Connecticut residents can participate in the political process to improve their communities. Afterwards, students will be permitted to ask questions or raise points they want to discuss or know more about. Students will then present their own findings within 10 minute time slots. They will be graded collectively based on their presentation and individually based on peer and self-evaluations (Resource 10). The last 15 minutes of class will be set aside for a teacher led discussion comparing the two different democracies. Students’ observations and comments will be recorded on to a Venn diagram.

In the fourth class (Monday), we will shift our focus to the social awareness and community action portion of our curriculum. We will regroup the students and give them a worksheet (Resource 5) for them to work together to discuss how the knowledge they have learned applies in real life situations. Next we will give the students two articles of local importance each of them reflecting two sides of a social issue. By giving them two different sides of the debate on the issue, we hope students can see the full picture and be able to argue for their viewpoint on the issue. In groups, we will have students propose an action plan to help solve the issue (Resource 6 & 7). This assignment (Resource 8) will be due on Friday, and students will be given the creative license to present their action plan in any way they see fit, as long as their proposed plan is clear.
In the fifth and final class (Friday), the students will be asked to present their action plan before the class in 5 minute slots. After their presentations, students will be given 10 minutes of reflective free-writing time so that they can reframe and think about the issues discussed in terms of their own personal values and beliefs. Following the reflection, students will change gears and be asked to write a formal letter to Hartford’s Mayor Segarra (Resource 9) in which they share their proposed action plan. We want them to understand how they can apply and utilize their knowledge in a real world situation that is relevant to them. We hope that this activity will help the students feel empowered and motivated to be involved in political process to call for positive social changes.

Finally, the class will return to the KWL chart to fill out the “L” section. Having the teacher write down the collective knowledge of the class will consolidate the lessons learned and also act as a review of the curriculum.

**Curriculum Strategies**

To achieve these objectives, we will use cooperative learning strategies; specifically project based learning strategies, espoused by American psychologist Robert Slavin (1995). While teacher instruction is still vital, using cooperative learning strategies will allow for individual seatwork and study to be replaced by group work in which students can help each other learn the material (Slavin 2).

There are many benefits of using cooperative learning strategies over the traditional method that encourages individual work and competiveness. Research shows that cooperative learning can be used effectively at every grade level to “increase student achievement, as well as other outcomes as improved intergroup relations, acceptance of academically handicapped classmates, and increased self-esteem” (Slavin 2). According to Slavin, the work of
psychologists Vogotsky and Piaget also support that students interacting with peers who are within each other’s proximal zones of development will improve student achievement (17). Discussions enable cognitive conflicts to surface, expose inadequate reasoning, and allow for students to develop “higher-quality understandings” (Slavin 18). By using cooperative learning strategies in which students must work together to learn academic content through discussion with group members, we also hope to prepare students for real world experiences in which the ability to work collaboratively with others is a critical skill.

Another benefit derived from using cooperative learning strategies is that it encourages every student to be an active agent in pursuing their education rather than being passive vessels under the authority of the teacher. Rather than memorizing and regurgitating knowledge, we want the students to come to their own conclusions based on the knowledge that they have collected for themselves through both formal education and their real life experiences. In other words, the student should be given the space to think critically to find meaning in the material being taught that is relevant to them personally.

The groups required by our curriculum project should be formed beforehand by the teacher who should know about the academic abilities and personal needs of each student. All groups should also meet the three criterion outlined by Slavin (5). First, team rewards should be given out to encourage team success rather than individual success and these rewards should be attainable by all groups without depriving another team of the reward. Second, there should be individual accountability to ensure that every member of the group is learning and that group members will make sure to help everyone learn the required material. Third, equal opportunities for success must be present and each student must be able to help their team move forward by demonstrating an improvement on their past performance. To ascertain that all groups that are
formed meet these three criteria, teachers should group students heterogeneously based on their performance level as well as ethnicity and gender.

For our curriculum design, we will be using two specific cooperative learning strategies, both of which are tweaked slightly to be project-based learning methods. The first group project assigned on the first day (Monday of Week 1) will be modeled after the Student Teams-Achievement Divisions method (STAD) (Slavin 5). After presenting the lesson, the teacher will split students into mixed groups of 4 or 5 students and assign them a project which they will complete with their group. Rather than giving them quizzes to evaluate their work and understanding, we will simply compile the peer evaluations and the self-evaluation of each student with the grade they receive on the presentation of their project.

However, as two groups are assigned to teach about one country while the other two are required to teach about the other country, there is a possibility that using the STAD method may result in students being “experts” on the country they were assigned to do while failing to learn the same amount about the other country. To tackle this issue, we propose that the second method used be modeled after the Jigsaw cooperative learning method.

For the second group project, the STAD groups will be broken down and reconfigured so that the new groups formed will consist of at least one member from each who can pass their knowledge to their group. The Jigsaw method will be reversed in that instead of having each group member become an expert, they come into the group already being “experts” on the information accrued in the first group project specific to their country assignment. Their final project provides them with the opportunity to combine their knowledge and creatively present what they have learned in terms of what their social power and responsibility are as citizens.
They will be graded based on self and peer evaluations and the depth of understanding they display in the presentation of their project.

In order to avoid problems associated with group work such as the “free rider” effect, social loafing and diffusion of responsibility, the teacher must take the time to carefully structure groups in a way that will be of benefit for all the group members. In addition to the heterogeneous grouping of students, a selection of roles should be assigned to the group so that each member may take on and contribute to a specific part of the project. For example, in the first project, while all students divide the job of “investigator” and do research together, student can choose to contribute to the making of the poster board by being the director, the presenter, the artist/designer, the recorder/writer, etc. All “jobs” will require the same effort and amount of work with little variance in levels of difficulty. Students will be allowed to help each other and they will want to ascertain that everyone in the group understands the material as a large part of their final grade will depend on the success of their group as a whole and on peer assessments.

By the end of the curriculum, we also hope to reach Banks’ (2004) “social action approach” in that we want students to be able to “make decisions and take actions related to the issue…studied in the unit” and help them “acquire political efficacy” (253). Students should develop a sense of social criticism rather than unquestioningly accepting the conditions in the environment and communities as a given. Through our curriculum, we want students to be become aware of the power they possess and take steps to become “skilled participants in social change” (Banks 253).

**Evaluation**

Students will be judged based on how clearly they can demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired, how cooperatively they worked with their group members, and by their
participation and contribution to the projects. Rather than test or quizzes, we want our students to work on projects that will allow them to creatively express their understanding of the curriculum in a variety of ways and that encourages them to work collaboratively with different people, think critically about key points, and draw on available resources.

Our method of evaluation is based on self-evaluations, peer evaluations, and teacher evaluation of the final project. Peer and self-assessments remove the power from the hands of the authoritarian classroom teacher and disrupts the traditional hierarchy by empowering students to determine their own grade. While their presentations will be graded by the teacher, their self and peer evaluations will also be factored into the final grade they receive. The only assignment in which they will get a grade that is solely up to the teacher is the letter to the mayor. They will be graded on the persuasiveness, depth of understanding, and reflectiveness displayed in the letter.

References

