

Children's Literature

We Elect a President: Using Literature to Teach Decision-Making Skills

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The integration of social studies and literacy is often touted as a way to bring social studies back into the literacy- and math-dominated classroom of the high-stakes testing era.¹ Curricular integration done well is difficult; if done poorly, essential social studies content, concepts, and skills may be only superficially addressed.² We designed this four-day presidential election lesson to explicitly teach content, concepts, and skills in both social studies and literacy. We used children's literature as the vehicle to teach the social studies concept of voting and skills of decision-making, as well as the social studies and literacy skills of reading and interpreting various types of texts.

The overarching goal of this lesson is for students in the second and third grade to understand that choosing a president is an important decision made by citizens.³ Specific learning objectives include: 1) identifying the qualities of a good leader; 2) identifying the president as the leader of the United States; 3) establishing criteria to make a decision; 4) reading and identifying details from text; 5) comparing and contrasting information in various texts; and 6) writing and using information from texts.

Day One: What are the Things a President Does?

Remind students that American voters are getting ready to make a very important decision in November 2012 electing the president of the United States who will serve for the next four years. Ask students what they have seen or heard about the election so far. Use this discussion as a springboard to discuss the candidates' motives. Each wants Americans to know that he or she would be a better president than the other candidates, and that in order to judge which candidate would be better, citizens need to know the responsibilities of the job of president of the United States.

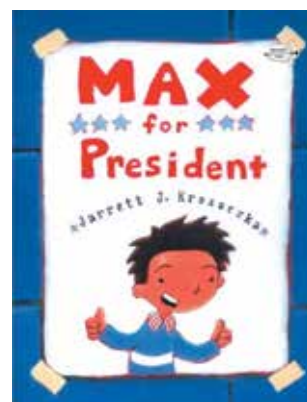
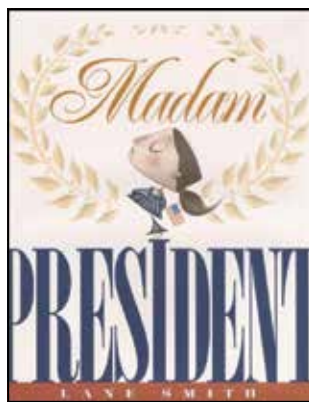
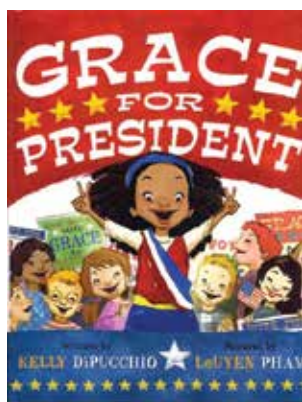
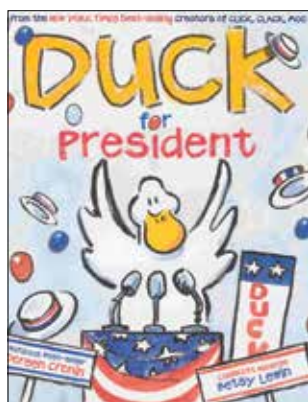
To help second and third graders consider some of these issues in a way to which they can relate, ask students to think about the different tasks and requirements of different class-

room jobs, such as door greeter, pet caretaker, hall marshal, or librarian. What are the talents and skills that a student needs to do each job well?

Once students recognize that different jobs are made up of different tasks and also require different talents and skills, ask students if they know what the responsibilities of the president are. As students offer ideas, compare their responses to those in the Constitution. Display Article II, Sections 2 and 3 of the U.S. Constitution. Because the Constitution description contains some challenging vocabulary, we need to help students connect their examples (e.g., the president makes speeches) to the Constitution language (e.g., The president will "give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient"), while also explaining what those big words mean (e.g., the president gives his opinion about how the nation is doing. He also suggests new laws that he would like to see Congress enact).

When students have a basic understanding of the responsibilities of the office of president, read aloud the book *Madam President* by Lane Smith, in which little girl imagines what her day would be like if she were president of the United States. Use the narrative to help students further understand what a president does (comparing the whimsical examples in this book with the real-life duties) and consider what individual qualities would help a person perform those duties well. Use a large display of excerpts from the Constitution to link to the examples and illustrations found in *Madam President* to actual duties and tasks of the chief executive.

For example, *Madam President* includes an illustration of the "president" choosing members of her Cabinet. Article II, Section 2, Clause 2 of the Constitution describes the president's power to appoint officers of the United States. (Although the creation of a Cabinet is not specifically described in the Constitution, it



evolved logically from the appointments clause). Pause throughout the book to encourage students to think about the qualities necessary for a person to perform these leadership duties well. For example, what individual qualities would be important in negotiating treaties? (Students mentioned being kind, a good reader, not having favorites, and being fair.) Being a diplomat? (Students mentioned being nice and having lots of friends.) Leading the nation in a crisis? (Students mentioned being calm and not crying, but having a loud voice.) The teacher can suggest additional personal qualities, such as being a careful listener, considering the points of view of all people affected by a decision, and not being swayed by the bullying behavior of others.

These ideas can be used to introduce the next day's lesson, during which students will each read a book that includes a character who wants to be president.

Day Two: Literature Discussion

The next day, assign each student one of three books, *Grace for President*, *Duck for President*, or *Max for President*. Each of these stories has two characters (a title character and one other) with different leadership qualities, both of whom want to be a president—Grace is running for student president of the student council; Duck wants to be U.S. president; and Max wants to be class president. The job responsibilities and personal characteristics for these leadership positions are consistent with much of what the students have already discussed.

Divide the class into three groups for initial exploration of the books: the first group comprises all students who are reading *Grace for President*, the second group is reading *Duck for President*, etc. (We distribute the books so that each group has some expert readers and some struggling readers. We've found it useful to group students heterogeneously with regard to reading level, allowing them time to browse through the books' pictures, discuss the illustrations, and read the books together.) This first reading allows all of the students to become familiar with the content of the books prior to more in-depth discussion. To help students focus on the lesson's objectives, we distribute **HANDOUT A**: "Presidential Literature Discussion" for each student to complete as his or her group explores its book.

Post on the wall a list of personal characteristics and job

requirements (gleaned from the previous day's lesson) for students to review. We provide the following prompts for the small group discussion, and encourage students to record their group's responses on chart paper (they can use both drawings and text):

- Which presidential duties would the title character of your book perform well?*
- What decisions does the title character make that are similar to decisions that a president might make?*
- What are the best personal qualities of the title character?*
- Are these personal qualities also good qualities for a president to have?*

In a whole-class discussion, ask students to share their charts and explain why some characters in the books voted for the main character, while others chose to vote for the opponent. Guide students toward an understanding that people value different qualities in a leader, which leads to making different decisions in the voting booth. We are free to vote for our favorite candidate.

Distribute a second chart (**HANDOUT B**: "Who Should Be President?") to allow students to compare the leadership qualities of characters in the various books that they have read. The handout may require teacher modeling. Ask students, What do you believe are the most important qualities for a president to have? Then have students list the names of the two main characters in their book in the two boxes across the top row. Along the left side of the worksheet (in the first column) are four boxes in which each student can list the qualities he or she believes a good president should have. The contents written onto the remaining open cells of the chart will vary by student and by book, but the teacher may want to brainstorm one or two ideas. In our classes, students have included the following characteristics: smart, good reader, good speaker, good listener, keeps promises, fair, strong, and nice to people and animals.

After students work independently to list their choice of the four most important qualities, ask several students to share the qualities they recorded along the left side of the worksheet.

The qualities that the students list will and should differ; it is important to acknowledge these differences, which reinforces the idea that people value different qualities and therefore make different decisions when they vote.

In small groups or pairs, have students complete the worksheet, evaluating each of the book's main characters against each of the qualities that the students have determined as important. Drawing a star in a cell means that the character has that personal quality; a zero means that the character lacks that quality. For students who are emergent readers and writers, this activity might need to be conducted in pairs. If students are capable, they can write a supporting statement based on evidence from the book describing how the character did (or did not) exhibit this important presidential quality or characteristic. For example, one student, who read *Grace for President*, listed "good speaker" as an important quality, put a star in the appropriate cell, and wrote below it, "Grace made a speech to the school."

It's also possible that the book does not contain evidence about a particular character trait. In this case, have students put a question mark in the cell. (The question mark opens the opportunity for a discussion about looking for evidence in multiple sources in preparation for making an informed decision. While there are no additional sources to examine for these three fictional books, such a discussion informs students that they can look elsewhere in other decision-making situations.) Once the cells in the chart are filled in, each student determines who has the most stars and reviews supporting statements to determine who he or she believes would be the better president. After they have returned to their literature discussion groups, ask students to compare their individual decisions. **HANDOUT B**, which is a graphic organizer for decision making, provides a scaffold for thinking about how to make an informed decision. It requires students to think through what is most important to them and to weigh the available evidence before making their decisions.

Day Three: What is Most Important in a President?

The rest of the lesson shifts the focus from the election of characters in a book to the actual candidates in the upcoming U.S. election. By spending time and attention exploring job responsibilities, determining what qualities are necessary for doing that job, and understanding that people make different decisions as they cast their ballot, students should be able to approach the political campaign season with more reason and understanding.

Begin day three of the lesson by reading aloud *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, which presents everyday objects and invites the reader to think about essential characteristics of that object. (The most important thing about a shoe? You put your foot in it.). Demonstrate how students can adapt the rhetorical pattern in the book to people in their own lives, creating sentences such as, "The important thing about my sister is [blank]."

When students understand the pattern of the book, begin a whole group discussion about the important things about the president. This requires students to use information from the first two days of this lesson. Students work in pairs to compose one-page fliers (with writing and drawing) on the most important thing about being president. Each page will follow the rhetorical pattern used in the book. When completed, have students share their pages with the class. For example, one student wrote,

The important thing about being the President is that you have to be a leader.

It's like being the line leader

You have to know where you are going

You have to do your homework

And you have to follow the rules

But the important thing about being the President is that you have to be a leader.

Use the students' ideas to evaluate student understanding of important qualities in a president and to prepare them to write on their own. For an independent writing activity, have students respond in writing to the following prompt:

What are the most important qualities that you want the President of the United States to have?

This synthesizing activity allows students to bring all of their ideas together. One second grader wrote the following,

If you are the President, you should be nice. You should not yell and lose your cool. You should know important rules. You should be able to read and think hard. You need to be fair to everybody. You can't be too bossy because you have to follow the rules even though you are a grown up. The President is very important and people watch you do your job and they will not vote for you if you mess up the rules.

Day Four: Who Do I Want to be President?

Begin the final day of the lesson by asking students to review some of the qualities that were personally important to them. Point out similarities and differences across students, asking students to explain why certain qualities may be more or less important. When this discussion is completed, students can research and gather information on the current candidates, in order to make an informed decision about who should be president.

Ask students where they believe they should look to find information about each of the candidates. Briefly showing video clips, commercials, or sharing newspaper headlines regarding the upcoming election is a good attention-getter, as well as an opportunity to let students see how many places they can go to

continued on page 21

Handout A

Presidential Literature Discussion

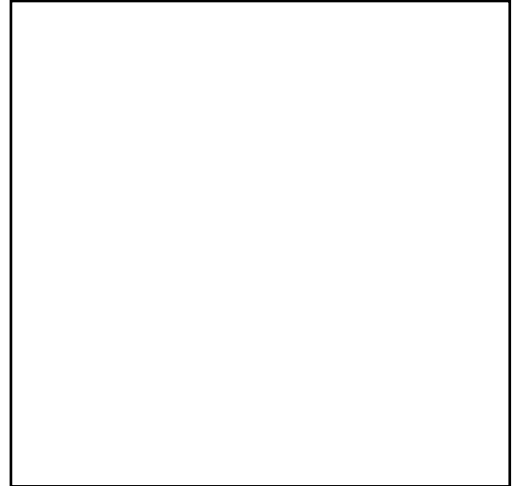
Describe and draw a picture of the main character.

Decisions and Elections: List at least three things the main character did.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Did the main character help anyone? If so, how?

Do you think the main character would be a good president? Why, or why not?



Handout B

Who Should Be President?

Directions:

1. In the shaded cells (A and B) across the top of the chart, list characters in the book who want to be president.
2. On lines 1–4, list the qualities and characteristics that you believe a good president should have.
3. For each quality, determine if each character has that quality, based on what you read in the book. Use these symbols:
 - ★ If the character does have that quality, draw a star in the cell, and write a supporting statement, using information from the book.
 - 0 If the individual does not have the quality, draw a zero in the cell, and write a supporting statement using information from the book.
 - ? If the book does not show whether the character has that quality, write a question mark in the cell.

Who has the most stars? Do you believe that character would be the best president in this imaginary story? Based on the qualities you believe are important, who should be the president in this story?

What qualities does a good president have?	Who wants to be president?	
	A.	B.
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

do their research. Focusing on one or two relevant campaign issues works well with early elementary students. Find out what issues interest them, whether it is the environment, education, jobs, military families, or something else.

In teaching this lesson in 2008, we focused just on the two major candidates' education policies as noted on their websites because that is what the students were interested in. We chose four position statements from each candidate from their websites that could be compared and rewrote them in developmentally appropriate language. The challenge came in finding the balance between information and positions that were too complex for young children, and campaign slogans that were too broad to be of use. (One source is the website ProCon.org, which strives to summarize substantial candidate positions in a nonpartisan way.)

After a brief class discussion (during which you clarify points and, as needed, look for additional information), have students write the names of the candidates for the two major political parties (third parties may be added as relevant) across the top of a sheet of lined paper. Then ask students to list four qualities a president should have along the left side of the page. As they did in the literature discussion activity, students can draw a star, a zero, or a question mark in various cells of the chart they've now created. Teachers may wish to have students write a supporting statement (based on evidence) for how the candidate does or does not exhibit each important presidential quality or characteristic. If there is no evidence (there's a question mark in the cell), students can look to additional sources of information, depending upon the time and support available. After the cells of the chart are filled in, students can count the number of stars and review the supporting statements to determine whom they believe would be the better president.

Finally, after all of their hard work learning what a president does, determining the qualities a good president should have, and researching the presidential candidates, it is time for students to vote! Assure students that their decision is private, and their vote is secret, as is true for the U.S. presidential election. Have students fold their ballots and deposit them in a ballot box. Count the votes, announce the winner, and invite the supporters of the losing candidates to not despair, but to work with other Americans on issues that they care about. After a brief celebration, it is important to conduct a debriefing with the students to reinforce the purpose of the lesson. Prompts that we have used include:

- a. *What do you believe is the most important thing a president does?*
- b. *What do you believe is the most important quality for a president to have?*
- c. *Why do you think that people choose different important qualities?*

d. *When you compare your lists of important qualities for a president from your first decision-making sheet to the second decision-making sheet, what differences do you find and how do you account for the differences?*

Conclusion

This autumn's bombardment of campaign signs, emails, debates, ads, television news discussions, and talk shows can result in sensory overload for voters who are considering whom to vote for as president. It is important to teach students the fundamentals of how to process and weigh accurate and reliable information so they can exercise their important right and responsibility of casting an informed vote. Helping young children understand the importance of their vote and providing them with a process for making that decision is important to educating a new generation of citizens. Our democracy depends upon it. 🌐

Notes

1. Elizabeth Hinde, "Revisiting Curriculum Integration: A Fresh Look at an Old Idea," *Social Studies* 96 no. 3 (2005): 105-111.
2. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, "Early Elementary Social Studies," In Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson, eds., *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 33-49.
3. Of course, U.S. citizens do not directly elect their president; the Electoral College may contradict the popular vote count, as happened in 2000. But that is a lesson for later grades.

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Margaret Wise Brown, *The Important Book* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

Doreen Cronin, *Duck for President* (New York: Atheneum Books, 2004).

Kelly S. DiPucchio, *Grace for President* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2008).

Jarrett J. Krosoczka, *Max for President* (New York: Dragonfly Books, 2004).

Lane Smith, *Madam President* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2008).