

Looking for Social Studies... and Finding a Democratic Community in the Classroom

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“Teacher, I’m done. What do I do now?”

Sound familiar? If so, you have company. For years, I dealt with this question by outfitting and organizing my first grade classroom with multiple activities and clearly defined steps to complete them. Through class meetings, I trained my children to go from one activity to the next, regulated how many students could be in an area and who would work together, and prided myself with keeping track of who completed what. Because I was able to establish a caring relationship with my students, they worked hard to meet my expectations. After my students learned the routine of where to go and what to do and how to do it, I could get about the business of small group reading instruction where the important learning took place. High achievers seeking to earn my approval would work through the activities and playfully come to me with the phrase, “Teacher, I’m done. What do I do now?” I would laugh and tease them that now I would have to stay late after school to come up with more things to keep them busy.

A Collegial Review

All was well until I began teaching first grade in an experimental school for the University of Northern Iowa under the guidance of professor Rheta DeVries. This school was located in East Waterloo, Iowa and served a minority population with nearly 90 percent qualifying for free lunch. After a few weeks of watching our first grade classroom in action, Dr. DeVries took me aside and asked me to explain what I was having the other children do during my small group reading. She listened as I described word work activities, silent reading, reading with a partner, work on writing; all typical activities done in a balanced literacy program. Then she asked a series of questions that made me swallow hard. “Are they doing these things because they understand how it benefits them and are curious and interested in doing them, or are they doing it just for you? Why are you asking them to do these things? Are they learning at a deep level, or are you merely keeping them busy? Furthermore, why is there only reading and writing in the morning? Where is science? Where



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is social studies? Where is art?”

Left alone in the empty classroom I wondered: As long as the children are working, what is wrong with my students working hard for me? Isn't it good that they respect me and want to please me? This is first grade. We are supposed to be focused on literacy. Besides, I'm not ignoring science and social studies—I'm reading books about science and different cultures and talking about social relationships. We also discuss the different materials and styles that artists use when they illustrate books.

The Larger Issue of Democracy

Rheta's questions forced me to closely examine my classroom and how I was thinking about teaching and learning. I realized I had been addressing science, social studies, and art in superficial ways and had become part of the trend in reducing science, social studies, and the arts in the primary grades. (See **SIDEBAR** on page 30) To bring more rigor and relevance to my students' experiences in social studies, I turned to the National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards, *Expectations of*

Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. The executive summary states, “In social studies, students develop a core of basic knowledge and ways of thinking drawn from many academic disciplines, learn how to analyze their own and others’ opinions on important issues, and become motivated to participate in civic and community life as active informed citizens.”¹ While I was training my students to rotate through my planned literacy activities independently, I was not helping them to analyze their own or others’ opinions outside of guided reading or the large group where I was in charge. I was not scaffolding them to participate in classroom life as active classroom members, but instead was expecting them to obey and comply with my terms. I was expecting them to be passive and compliant participants.

In order to make social studies relevant and rigorous, I had to look at the standards from the point of view of my first graders. The NCSS Standard 6, Power, Authority, & Governance, calls for classroom experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance. Students performing well within this standard understand their role and responsibilities within a group and recognize the need for government; that is, how government provides (or fails to provide) for the needs and wants of people, order and security in managing conflicts, and ways to deal with diversity to maintain unity. In addition, students meet the standard through problem-solving around social issues, developing an understanding of another’s perspective regarding those needs and wants.²

In my classroom, where students were performing to please me, little of this was happening. My students didn’t create and change structures of power, authority, and governance. I determined everything. I made sure students understood their role and responsibility was to comply with my rules to meet my needs and wants which I assured them were to help them learn. If they didn’t comply, I persuaded them that it was to their advantage to follow the rules because I cared about them and wanted them to succeed in school.

With the help of Rheta and my teaching assistant Shari McGhee, we worked to create a classroom where students could take on the expectations of this standard on a daily basis and with our support and encouragement. While I had always regularly held class meetings, I realized that I had manipulated the meetings to ensure the students were in agreement with my rules and guidelines. The children knew what they were expected to say, and I knew which children to call on to articulate what I wanted stated. To tear down this facade, Shari and I set out to let our students know that they had a voice that would be heard and respected in the classroom. We changed the design of our classroom meetings in the hope that they could help establish a democratic classroom community.³

Defining Roles in a Democratic Classroom

The next day, at our regular class meeting in a circle on the

carpet, Shari and I sat alongside students on the floor (rather than above them in a chair) to show that we were part of the group. Pulling out a large pad of paper and marker, I began by stating that, while in first grade, it was expected that students learn to read, write, and do math. However, there were many exciting ways to do that. Shari and I were interested to find out what they were curious about, so that we could begin to look for the materials and books that would assist them in their investigations of those topics. We worked to engage the children in conversation, probing and teasing out their contributions. We noticed the children seemed uncomfortable and even detached from making suggestions. In voices without emotion, they provided broad and predictable comments such as, “I want to read better,” or “I want to learn to do math.” Shari and I wondered if these lackluster responses were evidence that our students were resigned to being told what to do, how to do, it and were expected to passively go along with the prescribed curriculum. We probed by asking such things as, “I can see you want to learn to read, but what kinds of things do you want to read about? What kinds of things are you wanting to figure out?” Slowly, children became more articulate about what they were interested in and began to suggest things such as, “Sharks! I want to know more about sharks!” or “I’m wondering how airplanes fly.” These details were added to the list. We took note of who contributed by placing their initials after the contribution. The contributor would often sit up a bit straighter and become more verbal after posting his or her initials. More hands went up and more topics went on the list.

After posting the growing list on the wall (with a promise that they could continue to add to it), we commented on the scope of learning that the students wanted to take on during the year. “We have a lot to do this year. We’re going to have to figure out how we could work together so we can accomplish all of this.” Shari and I set a goal of somehow making use of each student’s idea within the year.

A Meeting of Minds

In this initial classroom meeting, we were able to establish a new role for children in the structure of the classroom. The students would be active, rather than passive, learners in the classroom community. The children had a voice in their learning. We said that our role would be facilitators of their learning; we were willing and eager “to share power with them.” Shari lived in the same community as the children. She warned me that many of our students were raised in authoritarian homes, so this shared sense of power could feel scary to some of our students. We prepared ourselves to help children transition into regulating their own behavior rather than depending on us to tell them how to behave. This would take time and patience.

We found that student interest and participation in this class meeting provided opportunities for oral language development and vocabulary expansion, a foundation for success in literacy. Writing children’s suggestions down provided a meaningful

opportunity for interactive writing—we modeled using print to represent speech, matching graphemes to phonemes. Reading back the contributions for clarification proved to be an example of shared reading that was relevant and meaningful.

Establishing the Framework for Governance

Later that day, at a second meeting, Shari and I challenged students to consider the necessity of classroom rules, what those rules could be, and the students' roles in maintaining them. After revisiting the list of topics to study throughout the year, we wondered aloud how we were going to study all of these topics. I began the conversation: "If we're going to have enough time to learn about all of these things, we're going to have to work together. That means we need to think about how we want our class to be. When you come to school, what do you want our classroom to be like?" I recorded their responses under the caption, "How We Want Our Class to Be." At first, students gave standard and predictable rules such as, "Be nice to each other," and "Listen to the teacher." I wrote these contributions down, but Rheta's earlier question echoed in my mind: "Are children doing these things because they understand how it benefits them and are curious and interested in doing them, or are they doing it just for you?"

Encouraging Discussion

Shari and I probed students by urging contributors to explain why they believed each item should be included or to clarify the contribution. For example, I asked if students only had to "listen to the teacher" and not each other. Furthermore, did the teachers have to listen to the students? These questions took the students by surprise, but, through discussion, they eventually articulated that everyone deserved to be heard, not only the teachers. We indicated that there would be times teachers would need to make a final decision, as it was our job to take care of them and make sure they were learning and safe; however, we wanted to listen to everyone to make sure we made the best decision possible.

Through discussion and decision making, our students were not only reading about or listening to stories on how government provides for the needs and wants of citizens – they could actually experience the importance of their participation in determining needs and wants within the governance of their classroom. By explaining their ideas and the reasoning behind them, our students began to analyze their own and others' opinions on issues that were important to them and to participate in the civic and community life as active, informed citizens of their classroom community.

As the year progressed, new situations presented themselves that required class meetings to further analyze the list of how the students wanted their class to be. This allowed Shari and me to introduce the idea of amendments. Addressing classroom problems through thorough discussion of the effects of those problems upon the rest of the group often resulted in amend-



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After solving a conflict on their own, four students ask for a photo.

ing an item on the list, or adding a new item. One year, the list included such items as:

1. We listen to people when they talk.
2. No hurting anybody with hitting, or kicking, or with words.
3. No calling names. After several children were upset with nicknames, we added this amendment: "We call each other our real names." Then, after several other children said they didn't mind their nickname, this amendment was amended to read: "No nicknames unless the person says it is okay."
4. No swear words. After several children were using words that were not considered swear words at home, students added this amendment: No using words that make others feel uncomfortable. When a student figured a way around swearing out loud (by spelling offensive words), the class added this amendment: No spelling of swear words. After a student saw a way to swear by reporting on other's swearing by restating it at class meetings, the class added this amendment: No repeating anyone else's swearing when we talk about it in group time.
5. We raise our hand and wait our turn before talking so everyone gets a chance to talk.
6. No blurting.
7. If we need to use the bathroom, we will just quietly get up and walk there. After some children were losing out on instruction by overusing the bathroom rights, the class added this amendment: If we are in group time learning, we'll try to wait unless it is absolutely necessary to go.
8. We don't bring any stuff to class meetings unless it's needed for the meeting.

In this manner, our first graders created their own living “classroom constitution.” While not all students may have been in full agreement with each addition or adjustment of classroom guidelines, the first graders came to consensus by agreeing to abide by the rule or amendment until someone else came up with a better wording or idea of how to handle a situation. Throughout this process, first graders experienced the meaning of 6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE, as well as 10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.⁴ By considering their needs and the needs of others in composing their list of how they wanted their class to be, students began to identify rights and responsibilities of classroom members. While listening to each other explain why some items needed to be added to or amended on the list, students began to consider multiple points of view. Working together to compose how they wanted their class to be, they began to see how the common good of the classroom community could be strengthened through their contributions to discussions and subsequent actions.

Managing Conflicts as an Aspect of Civil Society

Because the first graders had a voice in creating the list of how they wanted the class to be, they held themselves accountable to the enactment of the list. However, because they were practicing citizens, they needed support when they, or other members, failed to live up to the expectations of the list.

NCSS Standard 5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS, calls for classroom experiences that provide for the study of human interactions so the learner can give examples of and explain group influences such as peer pressure and cooperating while working to meet individual needs as well as the common good.⁵ Standard 7 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY, calls upon learners to analyze a particular event to identify reasons individuals might respond to it in different ways.⁶ Shari and I supported children’s development and understanding of their peers through conflict resolution. Dealing with conflict can be viewed as a source of progress in social skills and cognitive development,⁷ as well as a basic aspect of functioning in a multicultural democracy, in civil society.

Through conflict resolution, students learn to look at situations from other points of view, to understand how others perceive a situation differently. Instead of punishing students who are

embroiled in a conflict, we supported them in resolving those conflicts. When angry feelings flared in the classroom or on the playground, we first took responsibility for children’s safety, and then acknowledged the feelings of all the students who were involved in the situation:

Darion, I can tell you are very upset with Tehrea right now. Tehrea, you seem confused about how Darion is acting. Darion, let me help you talk with Tehrea, but first let’s get ourselves ready to talk. Let me know when you feel calm enough, so we can both go talk with Tehrea.

We listened to everyone involved, restating how they were feeling so every student knew we were listening to them:

So tell me if I have this right. Darion, you were working with the whiteboard, and just set it down to run to get a drink. You came back to find Tehrea using the whiteboard and got angry when she wouldn’t give it to you.

Tehrea, you saw the whiteboard on the floor, thought no one was using it, and picked it up to use it. Is that right?

We worked to help children verbalize their feelings to each other, listen to each other and ultimately clarify the problem:

Tehrea, tell Darion how you felt when he started yelling at you. Is it okay for him to yell at you? If he’s upset with you and wants to have the whiteboard, how do you want him to talk to you?

Darion, Tehrea says she didn’t know you were working with the whiteboard and it hurt her feelings when you started yelling at her. Now that you know she didn’t mean to take it from you, how could you talk to her about the whiteboard?

We asked the children for suggestions for solutions to the problem:

Darion wants the whiteboard back. Are you willing to give it up Tehrea?

Tehrea says she wants to work with it too. What do you think we could do?

The Dominance of Literacy and Mathematics in Primary Grades

Literacy and mathematics have long reigned supreme in the kindergarten through second grade (K-2), or early childhood classrooms. In 2000, a survey reported 57 percent of instructional time was spent on literacy, 24 percent on mathematics, 10 percent on science, and 9 percent on social studies in K-2 classrooms.^A In the last ten years, No Child Left Behind federal legislation and mandates have placed an even heavier emphasis on literacy and mathematics in K-2 classrooms. A survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reported that since 2001, literacy has taken an additional 140 minutes of instructional time per week and mathematics an additional 87 minutes per week.^B

Thus, many districts are sweeping aside science and social studies from the elementary schedule. The economic crisis and concerns about climate change have led to increasing attention on the domains of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in PreK-12 education. Might not social studies disciplines (e.g., economics, geography, civics, government, and public policy) also be important to solving these problems?

Notes

- A. Sherri Fulp, “The Status of Elementary Science Teaching: National Survey of Science and Mathematics Education,” (Horizon Research, Inc., 2002), 2000survey.horizon-research.com/reports/elem_science.php.
- B. Jennifer McMurrer, “Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects” (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2008).

If no solutions were apparent to the students, we proposed some possible solutions and asked which might work for them.⁸ On other occasions, I've suggested that students take turns working with a problem apart from the scene where it occurred. One student would have 5 minutes to imagine a possible solution, and then it would be the other's turn. Or, students could work on a solution together, or one student could work on it before recess, and the other could have a go at it after recess. Conflict resolution takes time, and it involves give and take.

Reflecting on the Process

As children came near to a mutual agreement concerning how to solve the problem, we asked how they would describe this agreement to someone who had just walked into the room. Answering this question requires the students to mentally rehearse their changed behavior and communicate to each other how they were going to act. Once this agreement was made, children went back to work, many times side by side.

While conflict resolution initially took a great deal of time to facilitate, we were able to gradually release the responsibility of resolving conflicts to the students. We provided a specific area of the classroom, called the Peace Bench, where we could keep an eye on things, but still give the students privacy and responsibility in resolving their own conflicts. A copy of the list of how they wanted the class to be was kept nearby for referral, or was posted on the wall. Many times, a fellow student would step in and help mediate the conflict. In this way, students learned to listen to "fellow citizens," considering their point of view, and then come to a mutual agreement. To allow them to continue to work together within the classroom community. These experiences further strengthened the idea that all students were responsible for the conduct of the class.

A Democratic Classroom Supports Other Curricular Activities

Once these democratic practices became part of our classroom culture, I was stunned to find how they activated rigor and relevance in all of the academic domains. Because we listened to what our students were interested in figuring out, we were able to configure our classroom to allow students to get out of their seats and visit areas with materials for in-depth investigations into STEM. In this way, we were able to promote children's inquiry through science investigations in life science and physical science. For example, physical science inquiries resulted in students designing and building marble runs and rudimentary wind tunnels. The Committee on K-12 Engineering Education calls for the promotion of engineering habits of mind. These 21st century skills include systems thinking, creativity, optimism, collaboration, communication, and attention to ethical considerations.⁹ This kind of learning and freedom of motion is attainable only in a classroom where the teacher has enabled students to be active citizens who enjoy making choices and regulating their own learning.

Examining NCSS standards from the perspective of my students not only helped us to engage our first graders in social studies content in meaningful ways, it allowed us to create an environment where our students felt safe to take academic risks, pushing themselves to learn in all domains. Students respectfully communicated their frustrations and interests, and we cooperated by adjusting the curriculum and materials to meet those needs and desires more closely. Interest in literacy and mathematics piqued as materials were presented within meaningful contexts for the learners. An adult observer would have noticed that I directed classroom activity much less, and facilitated it much more, watching for appropriate moments for me to offer support, ask a probing question, or suggest an overlooked resource. I reflected each day on how Shari and I could adjust our materials and challenges to stimulate thinking and learning. Our students were so engaged and in control of their learning that we could step outside the classroom for a couple of minutes and be assured that the children's attention would not wander.

Bringing It Together

Instead of ignoring social studies and allowing literacy and mathematics to drive the curriculum, embracing social studies content within classroom life facilitates honest communication and collaboration. Children develop their own reasons for wanting to investigate how the world works. They learn to read and write and reason within a process that empowers them. Most important, the experience of actively participating in a classroom community that embodies human dignity, liberty, and justice develops children's agency in becoming active and productive citizens of our country.

The next year, when I was asked to mentor another first grade teacher, I wasn't in her classroom long when I heard a voice pipe up, "Ms. Smith, I'm done. What do I do next?" Looking over at the wall, I saw a large list of teacher-made rules for the children to follow. I knew where we would start. 📖

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994.) vii.
2. NCSS, 63.
3. The Developmental Studies Center. *Ways We Want Our Class To Be: Class Meetings That Build Commitment to Kindness and Learning* (Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center, 1996).
4. NCSS, 73.
5. NCSS, 60.
6. NCSS, 54.
7. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
8. Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan, *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).
9. Linda Katehi, Greg Pearson, and Michael Feder, *Engineering in K-12 Education: Understanding the Status and Improving the Prospects* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2009), 152.

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