

Leaders, Community, and Citizens

Lesson Video: Grades K-2

Overview

Teacher: Cynthia Vaughn
Grade: 1
School: Rooftop Alternative Elementary School
Location: San Francisco, California

NCSS Standards-Based Themes: Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideals and Practices

Content Standards: History, Civics

Video Summary

How do you teach young students abstract concepts like the different levels and functions of government? First-grade teacher Cynthia Vaughn focuses on the connection between citizens, community issues, and civic leaders.

Working as a class, students name the different elected positions in local, state, and national government (for example, mayor, governor, president), and record them on a wall-mounted graphic organizer. Next, Ms. Vaughn identifies the individuals who currently hold these positions and describes the role and responsibilities of each one. Students then locate the office of each leader on a map of the United States (for example, the president’s “office” is in the White House, located in Washington, D.C.). Finally, students work in pairs to create charts of their own.

After they have completed their charts, students place models of commercial and residential buildings on a floor map of Rooftop Town, a fictitious community they’ve built together as a class. They discuss some of the issues facing the town, then break into small groups, each headed by a “mayor,” to address community concerns. The lesson ends with each mayor reporting to the class about the issues discussed—homelessness, the environment, cigarette smoking, and violent movies—and how they might be resolved.

Standards

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for elementary school students:

VI. Power, Authority, and Governance

Give examples of how government does or does not provide for needs and wants of people, establish order and security, and manage conflict; distinguish among local, state, and national government and identify representative leaders at these levels such as mayor, governor, and president; identify and describe factors that contribute to cooperation and cause dispute within and among groups and nations.

Standards, cont'd.

X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Identify examples of rights and responsibilities of citizens; identify and practice selected forms of civic discussion and participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic; explain actions citizens can take to influence public policy decisions.

Content Standards: History, Civics

About the Class

Classroom Profile

“Social studies allows students to see how they can be citizens, starting in their classroom. Then, maybe they’ll expand that to their home life, community, and the world. I want them to learn how to address their own concerns, but to also realize that being a good citizen means looking out for the concerns of others, too.”
—Cynthia Vaughn

Cynthia Vaughn teaches first-grade social studies at Rooftop Alternative K-8 School in the Twin Peaks neighborhood of San Francisco. The school was founded in the early 1980s by a small group of parents who wanted a public school option with an emphasis on the visual and performing arts. In its first year, the school rented the top floor of a San Francisco office building; the playground was on the walled rooftop. Parent involvement remains high at the school, whose ethnic population is evenly divided among Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and other minorities. Some students live in the surrounding residential neighborhood, while many others are bused to school from all over the San Francisco area, representing a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ms. Vaughn began the year with a unit on conflict management and decision making. Students learned to identify different kinds of problems and the range of emotional responses they evoke, and discussed how best to solve problems among peers. This unit segued into the unit on community and provided a foundation for understanding the complex and sometimes competing issues that people in communities face.

The lesson shown in the video “Leaders, Community, and Citizens” was part of the unit on the community. At the beginning of the unit, Ms. Vaughn walked her class through different parts of the city, identifying the stores, businesses, residential and government buildings that make up their community. Then they created a fictional community in the classroom, called Rooftop Town. Students taped a map to the floor and placed on it boxes they had decorated to represent the government, residential, and commercial buildings that make up a town. Rooftop Town gave the class a hands-on model of a community, and Ms. Vaughn used this model to teach mapping skills, introduce students to the urban planning process, and provide them with examples of controversial community issues like the proposed location of a gas station.

Using a graphic organizer, the class also studied the different functions of government at each community level, as a means of understanding and personalizing the process of conflict resolution in a democratic society. The lesson helped students make connections among citizens, leaders, and their community in subsequent units during the year.

Year at a Glance
Decision Making
Who We Are
The Community
People at Work
The Environment
Holidays Around the World

About the Class, cont'd.

Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

Content: Civic Ideals and Practices

Whether building a model town, as Cynthia Vaughn's students did, or establishing a set of rules for classroom behavior, young children can actively engage in the democratic process. In fact, learning how to be a responsible citizen in a democratic republic is as basic to a child's education as learning how to read and calculate. The National Council for the Social Studies lists the civic ideals and practices that all students should be taught in school. They include the following:

- Ideals of a democratic form of government, such as individual human dignity, liberty, justice, equality, and the rule of law
- Rights and responsibilities of citizens
- Civic discussion
- Citizen action to influence public policy
- Public opinion as it influences personal decision-making and government policies
- Public policies that address public concern
- Citizen action to strengthen the "common good"

However, abstract concepts like democracy and civic responsibility need to be taught using hands-on, experiential activities that allow children to come to an understanding by hearing and using the language of civic practice and by building on their prior knowledge.

Teaching Strategy: Using Graphic Organizers

For young students, understanding different levels of community (city, state and country) and the different government functions at each level can be difficult. The graphic organizer Ms. Vaughn used gave students a concrete, hands-on activity in which to identify and compare otherwise abstract concepts. In this activity, students:

- located squares on the grid to place pictures (mayor, governor, and president),
- read the grid across or down to gather information, and
- repeated the activity in pairs at their desks.

Graphic organizers encourage students to think aloud about the attributes of concepts, how they fit into appropriate categories, and how the concepts relate to each other. This activity lays the foundation for students to organize data into appropriate categories for themselves.

Watching the Video

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- What are some visual and hands-on activities you use to teach abstract concepts to young students?
- How do you prepare young students to work successfully in groups? How do you guide them during group work?
- How do you prepare young students for successful role-playing?

Watch the Video

As you watch “Leaders, Community, and Citizens,” take notes on Ms. Vaughn’s instructional strategies, particularly how she helps students stay focused on understanding elements of citizenship. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- How did Ms. Vaughn use students’ prior knowledge to build new concepts in this lesson?
- Based on what you saw in the video, how do young learners benefit from working with a partner or in small groups?
- What made it possible for these young students to succeed in the role-playing activity?
- How does Ms. Vaughn help students learn how to work together?
- Which strategies were most effective in reaching the goals of the lesson?
- How is this class different from yours? How would you introduce your own students to the different levels and functions of government?

Watching the Video, cont'd.

Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Vaughn's lesson.



Seizing the Teachable Moment: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately four minutes into the video. Watch for about two minutes.

Ms. Vaughn and her students are discussing local, state, and national offices and officials. As the discussion turns to the office of the president, a student asks if President George W. Bush is still alive.

- How does Ms. Vaughn address this student's question?
- How do you decide when to stray from the topic at hand in order to clarify content or address students' misconceptions?
- How does Ms. Vaughn get the discussion back on track after the diversion?



Discussing Diversity: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately six minutes into the video. Watch for about two minutes.

Ms. Vaughn begins to explore the question of who can become a mayor. She asks whether a woman can hold the office of mayor and whether it is a good idea for the mayor to be able to speak more than one language. The discussion moves to the concept of "fairness" and a famous example of someone who believed in fairness, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Why do you think Ms. Vaughn is pursuing this line of questioning with students? How do the questions relate to her goals for the unit?
- Why does Ms. Vaughn raise questions about gender, language, and race while students are discussing the qualities needed to hold the office of mayor?
- What problem does one student have in trying to explain Dr. King's contribution, and how does Ms. Vaughn help?

Connecting to Your Teaching

Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What are some abstract concepts in your social studies curriculum? How do you plan for, introduce, and build on these concepts to help students understand them more clearly?
- What do you do to prepare young students for paired and group activities? How do you convey your expectations to them? What have been the most effective ways of providing your students with feedback on these activities?
- How do you keep students on track when they are working in groups? How do you make sure all group members participate?
- How do you make abstract concepts visual or more concrete for students?
- Why is it important for students to put the civic ideals they learn in the classroom into practice outside of school? What are some strategies you use to do this?

Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- After studying local, state, and national government, ask students to collect newspaper and magazine articles about various office holders and the work they do as engaged citizens.
- Use literature to help illustrate what it means to be a responsible citizen. For example, in Leo Lionni's book *Frederick*, a mouse family prepares for the winter, but Frederick doesn't help in the usual way. Ask your students to decide whether he is a good citizen and what the qualities of citizenship are.
- Have students use a coat hanger to construct a mobile of local, state, and national offices. Tell them to use one color construction paper for the office titles, another for the name of the officeholders, and another for the location of the offices.
- Have students build a model of a fictitious community and then set up a system of government to run it.
- Plan a field trip with your students to the neighborhood around your school. Have students take notes on the main streets and some of the buildings they see. Then have students use their notes to create a floor map in the classroom.
- Invite the mayor or another elected official to visit your class. In advance, have children write down questions they want to ask and give them time to practice their interviewing skills.
- Ask students to think about the qualities that make a good leader. Then have the class list those qualities (for example, patient, caring, fair, strong, and so on). Later, post a "Leadership Word of the Week" taken from students' own lists. Encourage students to point out examples of the leadership qualities and behaviors they see in other students during the week at school.

Resources

Print Resources for Students

Barber, James. G. *Eyewitness: Presidents*. Eyewitness. New York: DK Publishing, 2000.

Lucas, Jerry. *States & Capitals and the Presidents: A Fun and Easy Way to Learn Through Pictures!* Templeton, Calif.: Lucas Educational Systems, 2000.

Marsh, Carole. *California Government for Kids*. Carole Marsh California Books. Bath, N.C.: Gallopade Publishing Group, 1999.

Van Wie, Nancy. *Travels With MAX to Washington D.C.* N.p.: Max's Publications, 1998.

Print Resources for Teachers

Dodge, Diane Trister, and Laura J. Colker. *Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*. 3d ed. Washington D.C.: Teaching Strategies, 1992.

Hyerle, David. *Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.

Web Resources for Students

Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids: <http://bensguide.gpo.gov>

Ben's Guide provides learning tools and basic facts about the United States government, for students K–12.

Kids Next Door: <http://www.hud.gov/kids>

The Department of Housing and Urban Development site shows kids how to volunteer in their communities and become better citizens.

White House Kids: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/kids/>

This introduction to the White House offers interesting facts on past presidents, their families, their pets, and more.

Web Resources for Teachers

The Responsive Classroom: <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>

This site introduces an interactive approach to teaching developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, and presents articles on critical thinking in the K–12 classroom.

Social Studies Center for Educator Development: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/resources/ssced/instass/13.htm>

The SSCED Instruction and Assessment section on this site offers teaching strategies, such as role-playing and simulations.

The Social Studies Web: Role-Playing: <http://ss.uno.edu/SS/New/RolePlay.html>

The Social Studies Web explores the goals of role-playing in classrooms and offers suggestions for using this teaching technique.

Teaching Concepts and Vocabulary: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/ConceptsTch.htm>

This site offers basic definitions and helpful suggestions for early childhood teachers, including planning inventories and contextual vocabulary aids.