

## Let's Collaborate and Infuse Citizenship Education: Kids Voting in Primary Classrooms

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### **Abstract**

*Teachers comment that there is no time in the day to cover social studies as they struggle to implement new programs designed to increase the reading levels of the students in their classrooms. Successfully adapting the project called Kids Voting USA during the fall, 2004 election helped pre-service teachers learn how to infuse civic learning goals, social studies, and voting education into the primary classroom on a daily basis. Pre-service teachers taught lessons on the voting process to students in a public school district in grades kindergarten through second, during their internship course in the fall of 2004. Students learned how their vote made a difference and discussed the issues when presented with the facts. Pre-service teachers developed a list of children's literature to support the skills that were being taught. Data compiled at the end of the project confirmed that the students were able to use their skills across the curriculum while pre-service teachers not only increased their understanding of civic learning goal, but also increased their own knowledge of the voting process.*

In many states, teachers working in primary grade classrooms are under pressure to cover all of the content areas. Reading and language arts, mathematics, and science are usually covered through thematic units in a packaged curriculum. However, the social studies curriculum is often left out (Hutchens, 1993) because of the lack of time each day to cover everything; consequently, social studies has been eliminated from some state testing requirements. Of course, social studies *can be*, and many times *is*, covered within the children's literature. The dilemma of solely using children's literature to serve as the means to address the national standards and performance expectations for social studies is of major concern (Krey, 1998). Social studies educators have been questioning whether the usage of children's literature is enough to help young children develop into responsible citizens. Social studies educators are focusing on the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that young children need to develop in order to better understand the world around them.

A National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) statement supports the importance of laying a foundation of social studies education in primary grades (1989). The NCSS indicates that one of the most vital conclusions to be drawn from the available research on early learning social studies is the importance of building a solid foundation during the early school years in an effort to help them develop higher-order thinking skills and an understanding of civic engagement. There is reason to believe that teachers who miss these early opportunities to build interest by introducing concepts from history and the social sciences as well as developing social perspectives and civic understanding

are not enabling the development of responsible citizens for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (NCSS, 1989).

Among all of the NCSS standards, early childhood and primary grade learners should begin developing their competence in civic engagement, democratic process, cultural differences, and world views. If young children learn new insight into citizenship skills and civic mindedness at school, their lives outside of school will reflect the importance of social studies programs for the young minds (Parker, 2005). Using literature to cover these content areas of learning is one strategy (Clarke, Sears, Smyth, & Easley, 1993). Another strategy is using the democratic process to develop children's content competence (Marquez, 2002).

The number of people voting has declined by 25% since the 1960 election, and the largest decline is in the youngest group of voters (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). Teaching the democratic process to young learners has been advocated as a means through which democratic citizens can be formed (Ford & Coughlin, 1999). Yet, many scholars debate the apathy of young people today toward the responsibility of being a productive citizen (Lewis, 1991).

Kahne and Westheimer (2003) and others (Lewis, 1991) have postulated that making the democratic process and concepts of citizenship relevant to both children and teachers assures that they become part of the everyday curriculum. If so, the guiding question becomes "How do we engage young children to become competent and responsible citizens?" Primary teacher preparation programs are places to start working on this process. Such programs need to provide pre-service teachers with experience in developing a curriculum that includes topics of civic learning integrated into the lessons they prepare to deliver during their pre-service field experiences (Ahmad-Llewellyn, 2003; Wynne, 1986). Such integration requires combining social studies standards, civic learning standards, and field experiences. Combining these three areas provides for authentic learning opportunities not only for students in the classroom but also for pre-service teachers. As citizens, both groups connect responsibly by actively understanding and engaging in the political process that culminates in the voting process.

While integration of curriculum is a complex task, Kids Voting USA developed a comprehensive and integrated curriculum package called *Civics Alive!* which provides teachers with the following activities covering five key areas of the democratic process: (1) My Vote Gives Me Power; (2) I Have a Right and Responsibility to Vote; (3) I Study the Candidates and the Issues; (4) I Register and Vote, and (5) I Continue to Make a Difference (Kids Voting USA, 1999). Teacher education faculty at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) partnered with the Missouri Kids Voting USA coordinator in the 2004 fall semester to implement this curriculum during the internship that every pre-service teacher serves. Training in the curriculum included pre-service teachers being given opportunities to practice integrating civics learning into their lessons in the content areas of which they prepared to share with students in their internship setting.

## Procedure

All early childhood (K-3) students at UMSL need to complete an Early Childhood Primary Internship course that places them in a K-2 classroom one day per week for 14 weeks. Planning for the collaboration between the Early Childhood Program and the Missouri Kids Voting USA Program began in May, 2004 when the Kids Voting USA Coordinator met with university education faculty to discuss the use of the curriculum in schools as preparation for the 2004 Presidential election. In fall 2004, the internship course adopted the Kids Voting USA curriculum as their course materials.

The coordinator trained 12 pre-service teachers to use the curriculum and covered the five topics outlined in Table 1 and listed above. The training session also included a pre-test with 20 questions about the pre-service teachers' own knowledge of civics education and of the national civics standards (MCREL, 2005). The Missouri coordinator for Kids Voting USA developed the test using questions from an eighth grade civics curriculum and from the test given to people applying for United States citizenship (US Immigration and Citizenship Services, 2006). Following the test, the pre-service teachers revisited the items they answered incorrectly, reviewed details of the lessons, participated in some of the activities as the elementary students would, and explored several websites that covered both standards in civics learning and ideas for lessons on citizenship education (Kids Voting USA, 1999). They were scheduled to report to their internship the following week.

When pre-service teachers began their field experiences, university faculty were committed to supporting them in their efforts to implement the curriculum. The pre-service teachers were expected to prepare a lesson for a 45 minute presentation to the students during each of the 14 weeks of their internship.

Using the Kids Voting USA curriculum as the foundation for what they would teach helped the pre-service teachers focus on bringing the democratic process into their elementary classrooms and allowed them to develop skills in the integration of a variety of content area skills into one lesson. The processes of helping the pre-service teachers integrate *Civics Alive!* into the activities they planned for the students provided the faculty with opportunities to study how teachers learn to integrate curriculum. Pre-service teachers worked together to plan lessons that would incorporate reading and language arts by developing a list of children's literature to use when activating the Kids Voting lesson for the day. They also asked students to respond in writing to the question: What are the characteristics of a leader?

Mathematics was integrated into the activities by asking the students to vote on everyday activities and preferences, and then discussing how each person has a vote. The results of the vote were tallied and graphed, and comparisons were made between the choices. Students were also asked to predict the outcome of the voting activity, using inference skills that are important in subjects like reading and social studies. Finally, with social studies at the heart of the integration of the curriculum, pre-service teachers discussed how the voting process works, how the polls operate, and how the outcome of voting impacts our lives.

The five lessons selected by the coordinator and the faculty from the Kids Voting USA *Civics Alive!* K-2 curriculum were as follows: (1) My Vote Gives Me Power; (2) I Have a Right and Responsibility to Vote; (3) I Study the Candidates and the Issues; (4) I

Register and Vote, and (5) I Continue to Make a Difference. These particular lessons covered civic learning goals, i.e., civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions (Kids Voting USA, 1999). For example, the first concept, My Vote Gives Me Power, met the civic learning goal connected to teaching civic skills which illustrate voicing opinions through the electoral and non-electoral means such as voting. The second concept, I Have a Right and Responsibility to Vote, is aligned with a civil leaning goal of disposition that covers the concern with the rights and welfare of others. The third concept, I Study the Candidates and the Issues, meets a civic learning goal of civic knowledge that explains structures, processes, and functions of the US legal system. The fourth concept, I Register and Vote, is aligned with civic skills, and the fifth one, I Continue to Make a Difference, explores civic dispositions (Kids Voting USA, 1999). The five concepts found in these lessons are connected to three Civic Learning Goals and one NCSS Standard VI, Power, Authority, and Government (see Table 1). These concepts are especially well connected to the two performance expectations of NCSS VI, Power, Authority, and Governance: (1) the children can examine the rights and responsibilities of the individual, and (2) the children can give examples of how government does or does not provide for needs and wants of people (Parker & Jarolimek, 2001).

**Table 1**

**Objectives, NCSS Standards, & Description of 5 Concepts: Kids Voting USA**

**Curriculum**

Concept	Objective	*NCSS Standards	Civic Learning Goals	Lesson Description
My vote gives me power.	Students vote and tally the vote.	VI. Power, Authority, & Governance	Civic Skills	<i>YES or NO Game:</i> Brainstorm a list of questions that can be decided with a yes or no vote (e.g., Do you like chocolate? Do you like to play ball?) Children make YES and NO signs with paper or craft sticks and hold them up to indicate their choice when the questions are read; tally and discuss results.

I have a right and responsibility to vote.	Students experience responsibility and articulate their responsibility to vote.	VI. Power, Authority, & Governance	Civic Dispositions	<i>Car-Car-One:</i> One child is the car, and one is the driver. The car shuts his/her eyes, and the driver steers the car around the room, telling the driver to go when you say “green light” and stop when you say “red light.” Discuss the idea of responsibility with the children.
I study the candidates and issues.	Students identify those leaders who direct or guide us.	VI. Power, Authority, & Governance V. Individuals, Groups, & Institutions	Civic Knowledge	<i>Find the Leader:</i> One child leaves the room; another child is appointed leader and chooses an act for the class to perform on his/her direction (e.g., follow-the-leader, wave hands, stand on one foot, etc.). The child outside the room returns and tries to figure out who is the leader by observing the actions of other children. Discuss the concept of a leader.
I register and vote.	Students register to vote and practice voting.	VI. Power, Authority, & Governance	Civic Skills	<i>Voting Simulation:</i> Children fill out voter registration cards; identify something to be voted on (e.g., a snack, a book to be read, an activity, etc.). Children set up polls, sign in, and cast their ballot. Poll workers assist while someone else tallies and reports the result of the vote.

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I continue to make a difference.	Students make wishes for their country to clarify what changes they can make.	VI. Power, Authority, & Governance V. Individuals, Groups, & Institutions	Civic Dispositions	<i>Wishing Tree</i> : Place a branch of a tree (real or artificial) in the classroom. Have children write a wish (e.g., something to improve the country, city, his/her life, etc.) on a piece of paper and hang it on the tree. Discuss how we can make wishes come true.
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\*NCSS stands for National Council for the Social Studies.

### Results and Discussion

The citizenship education project provided an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to equip students in primary classrooms with authentic knowledge in the democratic process. The project also presented the pre-service teachers with a review of civics education. For example, using the 2004 election, primary classroom students learned to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information about making choices, taking responsibility for their actions, and determining the qualities of a leader (Paul & Elder, 2000). These actions involve higher-level, critical thinking skills (Bloom, 1956). In addition to the study's main goal of providing the children with authentic knowledge in the democratic process, the project supported pre-service teachers in developing their own critical thinking skills because it required them to prepare the activities, e.g., debating on candidates' issues, for the children to make decisions about choosing a President.

As a result, not only did the K-2 students demonstrate the democratic process of voting through the use of the Kids Voting USA curriculum, but the pre-service teachers also expanded their own knowledge of the democratic process.

#### *Preparing Kids for Voting on Election Day*

Activities from the *Kids Voting USA, Civics Alive!* curriculum were selected from the first five civics concepts covered by the curriculum. The primary pre-service teachers selected the activities that were developmentally appropriate for the age of the students (see Table 1). The pre-service teachers included children's literature to read to the students prior to teaching the lessons (McGowan, 1987). The pre-service teachers were responsible for teaching social studies lessons in the classroom on the day prior to the voting lessons. The pre-service teachers all contributed to a list of literature books that supported the concepts in the *Civics Alive!* Curriculum (Kids Voting USA, 1999) (see Table 2).

**Table 2****Books to Supplement Lessons on Citizenship, Civic Engagement, and Political****Process**

Title	Author	Grade or Age
<i>A is for America</i>	Devin Scillian	Grades 3-5
<i>America Votes: How Our President Is Elected</i>	Linda Granfield	Grades 3-5
<i>Class President</i>	Johanna Hurwitz	Grades 2-5
<i>D is for Democracy: A Citizen's Alphabet</i>	Elissa Grodin	Grades 3-5
<i>The Day Go Went to Vote</i>	Eleanor Batezat Sisula	Ages 4-8
<i>Duck for President</i>	Betsy Cronin	Grades 2-5
<i>Election Connection: The Official Nick Guide to Electing the President</i>	Susan Ring	Grades 2-5
<i>Max for President</i>	Jarrett J. Krosuczka	Ages 7-10
<i>My Teacher for President</i>	Kay Winters	Ages 4-8
<i>One Nation: America By Numbers</i>	Devin Scillian	Grades 3-5
<i>Papa's Mark</i>	Gwendolyn Battle- Lavert	Grades 2-5
<i>Running for Public Office</i>	Sara De Capua	Grades 2-5
<i>So You Want to be President</i>	Judith St. George	Grade 1-4
<i>The Story of the White House</i>	Kate Waters	Grades K-3
<i>Vote!</i>	Eileen Christelow	Ages 4-8
<i>Voting</i>	Sara De Capua	Grades 2-5
<i>Voting Rights Day</i>	Ellen Weiss	Ages 4-8
<i>Woodrow for President: A Tail of Voting, Campaigning, and Elections</i>	Peter W. Barnes	Grades 2-5
<i>Would You Rather....</i>	John Burningham	Ages 4-8

The students learned the voting process concepts in the 5 weeks leading up to Election Day. Each week prior to the election, the pre-service teachers presented one of the *Civics Alive!* lessons. Part of the Election Day experience included the following activities: (1) the voter registration of the students; (2) operation of the polls for the students to vote, and (3) participation in all the aspects of Election Day. The students voted in proximity to where adults were voting which gave them the opportunity to participate in Election Day while they were observing what adults do when they go to the

polls. Through various sponsors' donations, students were provided voter registration cards; cardboard voting booths were assembled, and students were taught how to sign-in at the polling place at the school.

The students were introduced to concept of the voting process prior to Election Day which helped them learn about making choices in everyday life. Not only did they take responsibility for their choices in the classroom, but they also discussed how these choices would impact other people in their lives, e.g., parents, friends, teachers, and neighbors. One pre-service teacher in a second grade classroom kept the cardboard voting booth set-up in the classroom and had the students go through a formal voting process for each of the five weeks before the election. She covered the voting lesson first (see Table 1) and allowed the students to continue to practice voting each week. She said that the students really enjoyed participating in the different jobs at the poll. Some students signed people in and checked signatures on their voter registration cards. Others handed out the ballots, guided voters to the carrels, directed voters to the ballot box, and tallied the votes. During a scheduled observation by the faculty, one pre-service teacher described how much the students enjoyed the voting process and asked to do it every week; she related how the student began suggesting issues on which they could vote after she introduced the process. The cooperating teacher also commented that the students suggested that they vote on things that were causing controversy in the classroom rather than arguing about it; she further explained that she planned to continue to use the voting process after the pre-service teacher was no longer part of her classroom.

Another pre-service teacher offered students a choice of two books that could be read during group meeting time, for example, *Duck for President* (Cronin, 2004 ) or *My Teacher for President* (Winter, 2004) . Two students selected from volunteers who raised their hands to review each of the books, presented a case for why their book should be the one selected to read, and the class then voted on which one should be read. Two of the other students would tally and graph the votes. The winner was announced, and the book to be read by the class was, in this case, *Duck for President*. The whole class discussed how it felt to be able to vote; how it felt to have the book for which they campaigned and voted not to be chosen to read, and how important it was to have a choice even if your choice was not the winner. During the discussion when *Duck for President* won the vote, one of the students who had voted for that book reassured the students who had voted for the other book that they would vote again tomorrow. In another election, perhaps *My Teacher for President* would win. Another child suggested that they vote right away to agree to read that book tomorrow. Another vote was taken, and it was unanimous; *My Teacher for President* would be read the next day. In the *Civics Alive!* Curriculum, this activity covered the first three concepts: (1) My Vote Gives Me Power, (2) I Have a Right and Responsibility to Vote, and (3) I Study the Candidates and the Issues. This activity also covered three Civics Standards, i.e., Standards 25, 27, and 29, (MCREL, 2005) and two NCSS Standards, i.e., NCSS V and VI (Parker & Jarolimek, 2001) (see Table 1, Photo 2).

The books listed in Table 2 were identified by students throughout the semester and were used during read-alouds to engage the students in the democratic process and further the discussion of the lessons. For example, *Would You Rather...*, (Burningham, 2003) (see Table 2) supported the lesson on My Vote Gives Me Power (see Table 1). After reading the book, students participated in a classroom activity that allowed them to

make choices between two items that were offered. A pre-service teacher offered her students the following choices: *Would You Rather...* eat broccoli or pudding? ride a bike or do homework? A majority of the children chose to eat pudding and ride a bike rather than eat broccoli and do homework. Then, the pre-service teacher offered items that were harder for young children to choose between because they usually wanted both items. *Would you rather...* eat *Oreos* or *M & M's*, *Would You Rather* go to the park or a movie? In these examples, the children had a harder time making the choice because they wanted both items. After each choice, the students discussed how difficult it was, at times, to make choices between two things they liked. They were asked to share the reasons why they made choices like *Oreos* over *M & M's*. The discussions led to identifying more subtle differences between the items and to recognizing why people made different decisions. The students ended each session connected to choices with a discussion and consensus that whether you agree or not when a choice is made, everyone should have the right to make his or her own decision about the choice (Paul & Elder, 2000). Respect for those with differing opinions and making different choices supports the development of a broad worldview within the children (Marquez, 2002). The students also were asked to predict which option would be selected by the majority of the group and why. Developing prediction skills and reflecting on why certain choices were selected forced the students to use higher-level critical thinking skills as described in the Synthesis Level of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Sherman & Wright, 1996). The pre-service teacher asked the students to describe and defend their position. She would not allow them to simply make a choice; they had to describe why they made the choice and determine how it would impact the choices made by the other students. The students predicted the winner, made their choice, added up the selections, and discussed why they made their personal selections.

One of the *Kids Voting USA* lessons discussed leadership, so students participated in a discussion concerning what kind of person was a leader, the characteristics and skills of leadership, and the development of leadership skills. Students were then asked to identify someone in their life upon whom they relied for help and guidance. Many of the students identified family members such as their parents and grandparents, and some named their teacher (Schulman, 1995). Some pointed to students within their classroom which was not expected. The students discussed some of the characteristics of a leader like experience and helpfulness and someone who is nice to all of the class and who makes sure everyone is nice to each other. The discussion of leadership traits helped support the school's character education program and supported the social studies standards, e.g., NCSS IV Individual Development and Identity (Parker & Jarolimek, 2001).

### ***Who Did the Kids Choose on Election Day?***

Prior to Election Day, the students discussed the issues and the candidates with the pre-service teacher. Using newspaper articles, the pre-service teacher pointed out the issues and the ideas that the candidates were presenting. Most of the students recognized the Democratic and Republican candidates running for President. Students were able to vote for President as well as make a selection in some of the local political campaigns such as mayor, state representatives, and congressmen. On Election Day, with

registration cards in hand, students lined up at the polls with adults, including their parents who were coming to the school to vote. A poll captain had been selected for the *Kids Voting USA* activity from the fifth grade students. Students signed in at a table where the poll workers were seated which included other students from the same elementary school, parent volunteers, and pre-service teachers. Although the students who were the focus of this study involved kindergarten through second grade classes, all of the students in the school had been participating in the *Civics Alive!* curriculum activities. The students took their ballots, entered the cardboard voting carrels, marked their ballots, and then put the completed ballot in the ballot box. Ballot boxes were taken to UMSL for electronic scanning. Although it did not reflect the result of the national election for President, the results from the students' election were announced a few days later and reflected the vote of the adults in the St. Louis City Area. The students' choice of electing John Kerry as President provided the pre-service teachers an opportunity to discuss how every vote matters, whether or not their candidate wins.

At the end of the semester, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences over the course of the internship and the influence of their work as a classroom teacher. All 15 interns explained how the opportunity to use the *Civics Alive!* curriculum had helped them develop an understanding of integrating curriculum across the content areas. They also noted their intention to use the voting, graphing, and discussion of leadership skills with students they would have in their future classrooms. 12 of the 15 students acknowledged that they would use the *Civics Alive!* curriculum in their classroom. All 15 students pointed out that they had increased their own knowledge of the democratic process by participating in this project.

### Conclusion

Integration of social studies content material, specifically the democratic process and concepts in citizenship education, can easily be done in the primary classroom. In order to support teachers using the concepts found in the National Standards for Civics Education and in the National Social Studies Standards, teacher preparation programs must scaffold pre-service teachers' review of their own civics knowledge and involve them in experiences that enable them to integrate civic education activities into the required curriculum for young children (National Council for the Social Studies, 1989; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). The civic learning activities used in this project indicated that children could learn the democratic process when they had opportunities to make and justify choices, identify leadership traits, and recognize the fact that everyone had different opinions. All three concepts are equally important in understanding the democratic process (*Kids Voting USA*, 1999). At the end of the project, the preservice teachers confirmed that the children had learned these three concepts through their participation of the voting process. Using the *Kids Voting USA Civics Alive!* curriculum provided these pre-service primary teachers with a citizenship education framework to use in their own future classrooms. Through this project, pre-service teachers learned how to civic learning goals, social studies, and voting education into the elementary classroom on a daily basis when they become the classroom teacher.

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