



“But All Your Walls Are Blank!”

Using the Classroom Environment to Promote Civics in the Primary Grades

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At a meet the teacher night during the first week of school, Anna stands in her classroom, anxiously waiting for the first family members to arrive. A parent peeks in the room, looks around, and asks if she is in the right place. Anna introduces herself, and the parent says, with surprise and concern, “But all your walls are blank! Are you ready?” Anna laughs and explains, “It’s not a classroom until the students are in it! Come back in a few weeks and see how much it has changed!”

As the weeks progress, those walls (and the ceiling too) become covered with drawings, writings, photographs, and other displays as students not only learn in but also shape their classroom environment. Their voices, interests, questions, new knowledge, and details about their identities are added and rotate as the weeks and months go on. As the classroom environment changes, students and teachers discuss and practice important civics skills.

Across the early childhood years, classrooms are key spaces for engaging in the “social” part of social studies, including civics. The study of civics is about learning to live in society together and includes skills and concepts such as deliberation, problem solving, advocacy, and care for one another. Dewey (1916) argued that classrooms should be microcosms of society—of what we *want* society to be. During a time when students may feel uncertainty, unease, and even fear about starting a new year with both new and familiar adults and peers, classrooms should be places of possibility. In such classrooms, we “invite young people to shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of ‘meaning makers’” (Apple & Beane 2007, 17). There students directly experience how to negotiate what kind of community they and their teachers want to live and learn in during their year together.

Building and maintaining a classroom community that reflects and promotes civics requires teachers to recognize and support children’s agency in the classroom. Agency in schooling is about “being able to influence and make decisions about what and how something is learned in order to expand capabilities” (Adair 2014, 219). The classroom environment offers many opportunities for discussing and demonstrating agency and for developing independence, building a sense of ownership, and taking responsive care.

We (Anna and Katie, the authors of this article) are two teacher educators who taught primary grades in Austin, Texas, and in New York City. During our 12 years of combined teaching experience, we sought ways to set up our classrooms to align with a democratic approach to education in which education contributes to efforts in the revisioning and remaking of society toward an ideal, justice-oriented democracy (Apple & Beane 2007). Now, as social studies teacher educators, we teach about and advocate for creating classroom environments that embody civics education.

In this article, we explain why it is important for teachers to pay attention to the “where” of citizenship. Then, we draw on research and our own classroom experiences to describe how teachers can foster primary students’ civics knowledge, skills, and dispositions by creating the classroom environment together, by making materials accessible, by promoting agency through classroom procedures, and by engaging in problem solving in the classroom environment.

Guiding Questions for Developing Agency in the Classroom Environment

There are three suggested questions to help create a democratic learning environment (O’Mahoney & Siegel 2008):

- What does the classroom convey to young children about who they are and where they are?
- How does the classroom reflect and invite student participation?
- How do the physical objects in, and the layout of, the classroom welcome and include children in the community?

We offer five additional questions for teacher reflection as you set up your classroom:

- How are classroom materials organized? Who has access to them?
- How are problems identified and resolved when conflicts arise over materials and other elements of the classroom environment?
- How do classroom procedures promote students’ independence and responsive care for self, others, and property?
- How does the classroom encourage and display students’ choices and voices in their learning?
- Whose work and knowledge are represented in the classroom?

Through these actions, children experience agency in their learning, see that their ideas and problems are essential to their communities, and understand that their voices can make a difference.

The “where” of citizenship and agency

As teachers, it is important for us to pay attention to the “where” of citizenship: “Citizenship is situated in places and students’ actions as citizens reinscribe the meaning of these places” (Schmidt 2011, 107). Students’ rights and learning opportunities are shaped by their environments—including in school—and they can play a role in shaping those environments too. For instance, different seating arrangements and



furniture both afford and limit certain movements and social interactions. Having rows of individual desks can encourage independence and responsibility for one's work and materials but may limit students' abilities to collaborate and ask one another questions. Clusters of desks or tables enable collective learning and responsibility for shared materials. In addition, students might rearrange materials and furnishings to make room for more participants or to create personal space. When students can influence their spaces in these ways, they engage in important civics skills such as problem solving, ownership, and agency.

Many educators and researchers argue for purposefully constructing child-oriented spaces with natural and open-ended materials as well as displays of children's identities, creativity and thinking, and growth over time (Ellis 2004; Tarr 2004; Read 2007; Strong-Wilson & Ellis 2007). For instance, the use of commercially produced posters and decorations could lead to "walls that silence" (Tarr 2004, 89); if used exclusively, children's influence will likely be missing from the visual elements of the room. To promote ownership, agency, and the emotional components of citizenship, the classroom environment should reflect its citizens (O'Mahony & Siegel 2008). Through its materials, images, and artifacts, the environment can send the message that all children are valued citizens of the classroom community.

As noted earlier, social interactions are influenced by the physical setup of the classroom environment. Students often define school spaces by the way they interact with peers and teachers within them (Langhout 2003; Lodge 2007). With varied formats (small group, partner, whole group), discussion and deliberation, collaboration, and shared meaning-making can occur (Angell 1991; Faulk & Evanshen 2013). In Katie's classroom, children worked at tables spread throughout the room. They often chose where to sit based on whose expertise they might have needed. For example, during writers' workshop, children sitting together would share ideas with each other. In turn, listeners would often ask questions or add a detail they remembered about an event.

Children also define spaces differently than adults, and they find ways to construct their own spaces (Rasmussen 2004) or to adapt spaces when they need places to be away from adults or when they feel the environment doesn't meet their needs (Lodge 2007; Lash 2008). For instance, one teacher (Lash 2008) helped students make an official "save" space for their LEGO creations. However, students gradually (and collectively) stopped using the officially designated space, instead beginning to place their creations in a play barn. In this way, students used the environment to develop ownership and agency, independent even of the one structured by the adult.

Creating the classroom environment together

Within the “where,” teachers can develop civics skills and ways of thinking from the beginning of the year by having students decide together what kind of community they want to create. In our classrooms, students and teachers collaboratively made signs such as schedule cards, posted classroom rules they wrote together (see the section “Promoting agency through classroom procedures” for more), and celebrated community members with pictures of themselves. For example, in Katie’s first-grade classroom, students drew on their prior knowledge to make alphabet letter cards for the word wall and labels for the book baskets. Bradley knew a lot about snakes, so he excitedly volunteered for the letter *s* so he could draw a snake.

Co-constructing the class aesthetic with children is a form of culturally sustaining pedagogy. For example, when students have the opportunity to choose color palettes, designs, styles, and content, it reflects their cultural knowledge (Apps & MacDonald 2012). In one of Anna’s classes, children opted for subdued colors—rather than bright primary colors—on bulletin boards. They also drew pictures of their classmates, friends, and families to place around the border.

When students are empowered and are active citizens, their choices and voices will fill the walls and spaces in the classroom.

As the school year progresses, the classroom environment can be enriched as students use visual products to represent their learning. Charts, posters, clotheslines, and bulletin boards can be co-constructed by students and teachers. This process helps promote their sense of belonging and participation in the class (O’Mahony & Siegel 2008). When students create their own visual products, they are often more motivated

to refer back to them, which helps to scaffold future learning and connecting to broader themes. For example, after students posted a timeline in Anna’s classroom, we noticed that they continued to reference it throughout the year, making connections between historical events discussed during different units. Our experience confirms that students develop key civics capabilities and attitudes when teachers allow them to make decisions about what and how knowledge is represented in their classroom environment.

Making materials accessible

From the start of the school year, teachers promote students’ independence, responsible actions, problem solving, and ownership through the setup and distribution of materials. Accessibility to shared materials includes art and writing supplies, science and math manipulatives, and electronic and print materials. When students have easy access to the tools and resources they need, they can make purposeful choices as they learn and as they represent their knowledge, and they can practice taking care of their own as well as shared materials. For example, in Katie’s special education inclusion classroom, she and her coteachers encouraged independence and responsible actions by placing hooks on work trays and by labeling





manipulative buckets on shelving units at children’s level. This was especially helpful for students who were working on fine motor skills, as they could easily access materials that were tucked away. In another example, having rulers, compasses, colored pencils, and a variety of paper available in Anna’s classroom encouraged students to independently add maps to their reader’s notebooks during a historical fiction unit. Furthermore, students learned that missing or damaged materials meant fewer choices and more frustrations as they completed activities and shared their knowledge with others. Their responsible use of materials and classroom space built a disposition of civic concern in which students act for and on behalf of their community (Adair et al. 2017).

Promoting agency through classroom procedures

During the first weeks and months of school, primary grade teachers can promote student agency through the teaching of classroom rules, routines, and procedures. Working together to develop and practice procedures helps students feel responsible for and invested in community norms.

In Katie’s first-grade classrooms, student hopes and dreams were integral to the discussions of classroom and school procedures at the beginning of the year (Charney 2015). For example, Kallie, a 6-year-old, really wanted to “skip” on the monkey bars. Teachers used this hope to frame a conversation about community and taking responsive care. In the first week of school, before heading out to recess, the teachers discussed with the whole class Kallie’s hope of skipping on the monkey bars. One teacher asked Kallie and the rest of the class what they needed so that this could happen. This led to conversations about taking care of each other at recess, turn-taking, and general playground safety. Instead of giving the students a list of playground rules, the teachers rooted the conversation in students’ capabilities to show collective responsibility for one another and to make choices in how they spent their time. That year, Kallie did learn to “skip” on the monkey bars. But even more importantly, her hope for the year enabled other students to think about how they could support their community members.

Primary grade students develop problem-solving capabilities when they have ownership and agency in the classroom environment.

In another example from Anna’s classroom, the teachers asked students to independently move a magnet from “class” to “bathroom” on a magnetic board to indicate a change in location. In Katie’s classroom, students also moved their name magnets when they went to work with another teacher for services such as occupational therapy. The first-graders also had the responsibility of setting up snack at the snack table each day, including making a card that stated what to take (e.g., one cheese stick and eight carrots). Students then indicated when they needed snack by moving their name on a chart. Though simple, these and other

similar strategies empowered students to meet their basic needs without asking for adult approval each time and to develop agency and responsive care.

Other practices, such as encouraging respectful movement through the hallways, helped students to be responsible for supporting others' learning without enforcing strict limitations on students' bodies (e.g., "Hands behind your back and bubble in your mouth"). We have observed students singing together as they walked down the hallway, lowering the volume of their voices when they knew students inside the classrooms were napping. We have seen sensory boards and shelves full of books at places where students stopped (e.g., hallway corners or outside of bathrooms). Allowing for hallways to be spaces where choice and responsible actions are paired together communicates to students that they are valued and trusted school community members. This gives students many opportunities to apply civics skills across the day (and beyond one classroom).

Engaging in problem solving in the classroom environment

Primary grade students develop problem-solving capabilities when they have ownership and agency in the classroom environment. As teachers who wanted to infuse civics in our classrooms, we learned to be flexible and to embrace the conflicts and problems that arose throughout the school year. If materials were inequitably distributed, students learned to advocate for themselves and others, to negotiate use of a limited resource, to deliberate with others to come up with a solution, and to make a plan to prevent future problems. For instance, Anna's classroom had a low, comfortable couch and pillows in the library area. Every year, students would advocate for their turn on the couch until eventually someone would appeal to a person with authority, asking the teacher to intervene. Anna used this situation to introduce student-led problem solving in the morning meeting. Students proposed solutions, debated the merits of each proposal, and then, through consensus, took action. For

the next few weeks, the class reevaluated and made changes to the plan as needed. Each year, students settled on different rules for the couch, including sign-up sheets, assigned rotations, and an agreement to negotiate verbally for a spot on the couch. By being open to deliberating and working together through the conflict related to property, the class grew as a responsive community and practiced key civics-related skills and ways of thinking.

Conclusion

With purposeful planning and teaching, primary grades teachers can encourage authentic opportunities for students to learn and to demonstrate civics skills, knowledge, and dispositions. More specifically, students can develop a sense of ownership, responsibility, and independence through co-construction of and meaning-making in their classroom environment. When students are empowered and are active citizens, their choices and voices will fill the walls and spaces in the classroom, and teachers can recognize and support the development of young students' agency, both individually and collectively.

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