

Sue Mayo: Civics in Kindergarten

Kindergarten is quite possibly the first time a student enters the school system. I believe it is in this formative year that a child first learns to trust in the safety of the classroom, learns about the importance of community, and about being part of a group that is outside the family. It is only after this, that “rules” can be made and followed, and consequences can be understood.

In my classroom, I spend several weeks establishing routines. In kindergarten, EVERYTHING is a guided discovery lesson. Teachers need to teach students how and when to enter the room, how to unpack their backpacks, where their snacks go, how to wash their hands, and how to ask to use the bathroom—all in the first hour of school! All of these concepts are modeled, then practiced. It is a bit daunting, but well worth the effort to build independence. Spending time teaching and practicing routines frees up teaching time later on!

One of the ways I build a sense of trust is with the morning meeting. I have been following a modified version of Responsive Classroom Morning Meeting. (In almost every district I have taught kindergarten, it has been a 2.5 hour day...not a lot of time to get anything done! (I have left the Sharing component for writing time, to free up time at meeting.) I do a different greeting each week. Some are based on themes, or skills, but ALL must include eye contact, a greeting, and a name. I don't want to assume you need greeting ideas, but if you want some, I am happy to share. We read the morning message after this, which is almost the same each day. “Date, Good morning, Friends. Today is _____. We will _____ today. Have a _____ day!” Love, Mrs. Mayo and Mrs. Welcome.”

There are 2 purposes for this format. One is a sense of routine—our day is the same, except for the date and activity. The other is that later in the year, I can leave off initial sounds, final sounds, sight words, etc., and have the kids fill in the blanks. After this comes an activity, and the first few weeks is all about building community. We play, “Just Like Me”, where we stand up if we agree with a statement, (ex: “I have a cat”....those with cats stand up and say, “Just Like Me!!!”) These activities spur discussion, how many friends liked the same activity you did, have a sister, etc. It builds community and trust with low risk. Again, there are many activities and games we play to build community in the first few weeks. If you want any ideas, e-mail me! There are plenty online, on Pinterest or Google!

After several weeks go by, we have a Hopes and Dreams/Goals discussion. We talk about ways we want to grow this year. I will have already met with parents for a brief “Getting to Know You” conference, where parents can tell me any strengths and struggles they think their child may have this year. This way, I can direct a child to focus on academics or social concerns, instead of “non-school” dreams. Until routines and trust are established in the room, I cannot have a real discussion of their goals. Once we chart the goals in some way, THEN we talk about rules that will help us achieve these goals.

Classroom Rules

I start our discussion of rules by asking the kids what rules we should have in order for us to be able to work together to meet our Hopes and Dreams/Goals. I write down what everyone says on a chart paper, and put their initials after it. Most of the kids say something that starts with “no”-for example: “No hitting, no pushing, no punching.” The first day, I just write down their words until they reach the end of their attention span. The next day, we review what we already have, and I usually guide them...”These rules sound like they are meant to keep us from getting hurt or hurting others. Do you think we need some rules about the classroom materials? How should we use them?” Then, I continue the chart by adding whatever the kids say. Again, this only lasts a few minutes. I may ask guiding questions if there is time; “How about showing that we are ready to learn? What rules should we have here?” Or, “Do you think we need rules about how to be a good friend?” But often, this discussion happens on the next day. On day 4, (yes-it takes a whole week to do this!) we get out three sorting hoops. I cut each of the rules we have charted so that they are individual strips. I tell them that we have _____ (number) of rules, and that is just too many to remember. Then, I talk about the hoops-that we can sort all the rules into like categories, and that will narrow down the rules we need to remember. The first person has it easy-s/he can choose any hoop. After that, we have to decide as a group, if the stated rule fits into the same category or needs a new hoop. When we are done, I reread all the rules in the first hoop, which are generally the “no hitting, no kicking” rules. I ask them what these rules have in common. “These rules help keep us....” (Hopefully someone says “safe”). Then we agree as a group, that “Be safe” is our first rule. Typically, our rules sound like this: “Be safe. Be a good friend. Be ready to learn.” There was a time when my rules had the word “respect” in them-as in,

Respect Myself, Respect Others, Respect Our Materials. I often find that kindergarteners do not understand the word “respect” or what it means in our actions, so these are the rules I have had most often in recent years. *

After we rewrite the rules in the positive on new chart paper, I have the kids help me pack the individual rules into a baggie, and I write the category on it. “These are all the ways we can “Be Safe.” I tell them we will save these bags, in case we need to revisit the rules sometime this year. And I show them where I will keep them. Then, we break up into centers, and one center is to stamp our handprint around the new chart of rules and sign our name to our class chart, saying that we agree to follow these 3 rules. This chart will hang in our classroom for the rest of the year.

*Every once in a while, I find I have a class who struggles in a certain area, so that rule becomes number one, or gets added to the typical 3. The beauty of waiting for several weeks to discuss the rules, is that we all know each other already, so I know what we really need to work on.

Consequences

Finally, we will discuss consequences after we have made the rules. I talk to the kids about how “real life” has consequences for not following rules. I always use the same examples...”What would happen if I was speeding on the highway to get to school?” The kids laugh and say I would get a ticket, the police would put me in jail, etc. I tell them it is the same in our classroom-that there will be consequences for breaking the rules. For example, “What should we do if someone breaks the crayons we want to use for a project ON PURPOSE.” (ON PURPOSE is an important distinction to a kindergartener!) The kids tell me all kinds of punishments...go to the principal, leave the room...” Then I say, “Would it help someone learn to use crayons if I sent them out of the room? Should I call the police? Should I yell and scream? Or should that person not use crayons for a while? Which punishment would fit better, and teach someone how to use crayons the right way?” This leads into “logical consequences” and we talk about that for a long time.

The next day, we will talk about a “Rest Stop”. Sometimes, students need a short break from the rest of the group. I ask the kids if they have ever been in a car on a long car trip, and gotten hungry, grumpy, had to go to the bathroom. Then your parents stop at a rest stop, and you can get out, have a snack, and feel better. Our classroom “Rest Stop” works much the same

way. I usually start out by telling the kids I am going to annoy someone at meeting time and my assistant tells me to go take a “rest stop.” I then have her begin the regular meeting time, and I start to poke a student, or giggle and whisper to a student, or get in someone’s space...much like students might do at meeting time! My assistant should say, “Mrs. Mayo, rest stop.” I will then model for them what they should do, (making sure they know to watch me)...get up immediately, walk quietly to a chair away from the group, make a point of thinking and doing some deep breathing, then return quietly to meeting time, where I am more focused. We go over all the things they noticed me doing, and I talk about the things I didn’t do-I didn’t stomp over there, I didn’t cry, I didn’t talk to anyone in the classroom. At this point, I have a student model the rest stop, and then I tell them that EVERYONE will be practicing taking a rest stop this week. It won’t mean they needed one, just that they will practice. NEXT week, if anyone is asked to take a rest stop, it will be because they needed time to regroup.

The point of the Rest Stop in my classroom is to have a space in the room where a child can regroup, calm down, get ready to learn, in a space away from others. Therefore, students are able to choose any spot in the room to take a rest stop. I do not have a designated space. You may want to have one, but chairs are precious in my room, and I cannot designate one just for the occasional rest stop! Because the rest stop is used as a spot to calm down, I teach the kids many strategies for calming down. I actually have a real toolbox in my room full of things they can use to calm themselves when needed. I have fidget tools, squishy balls, yoga cards, deep breathing pictures, etc. in there.

Again, if you need any ideas, just e-mail me.

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