

“Boss of the United States” Kindergarteners’ Concept of Voting: Five Scaffolded Lessons that Build Understanding

Betty C. Mulrey, Ann T. Ackerman, and Patricia H. Howson

I [Betty Mulrey] happily called my kindergarten children to our morning meeting to launch a lesson on voting and how the voting process leads to the selection of our president. Young children have their own understandings of the world, based on real connections to personal experience. I, therefore, felt that it would be best for me to first assess their current understanding of our lesson topic. I was fascinated to hear the following responses from the children to my opening question: What does the word “president” mean?

- Boss of the United States
- Someone very far away
- Someone who was dead in 1964
- Abraham Lincoln
- He has “an America flag”
- He tells the war people if there is a war or not
- He has a statue of him in a book

These responses were concise and direct—clearly a part of each child’s personal perception of the world. The last comment reflected a child’s prior experience from a math lesson on money. She’d brought in a book with a picture of the famous statue of Lincoln seated in the memorial in Washington, D.C. She connected my question to something she already knew. Successful teaching strategies incorporate age-appropriate and uncomplicated connections of new knowledge to children’s prior experience.¹ It is, therefore, important to assess children’s current understanding before teaching something new.

I continued to explore the concepts by asking the children if they knew the name of our president today. There was only one response, “Abraham Lincoln.” Remembering that, in the prior answers, Abraham Lincoln was mentioned, this was an understandable response. Without dwelling on the error, I introduced President Barack Obama’s name, and it became clear that the children recognized it. When asked how Obama became president, they responded:

- People chose him, all the people.
- He took the job from the guys who wanted him to be president.
- Lots of people come from around the world to choose.
- Because he’s the best one. I rephrased my question to ask, “What do people do to make their choice for president?” This time I received one response:
 - Voting! They choose and go and vote.

I was thrilled to hear the answer come from one of the children instead of directly from me. The manner in which I phrased my questions had a direct impact on the types of responses I received. This helped in my quest to assess what the children understood and how I should plan for follow-up lessons.

Every Four Years

In any U.S. presidential election year, classroom teachers integrate lessons into their curriculum that help students understand their privileges, responsibilities, and rights as good citizens. Teaching about the electoral process and voting in primary classrooms is one way to build a foundation that promotes civic engagement. Abstract concepts like voting, elections, civility, civic engagement, informed vote, and majority decision can be constructed through meaningful inquiry and experiences. Conceptual application in the classroom prepares children for understanding the complexities of voting and presidential elections.

In this article, we provide a glimpse into the thoughts of primary age children as they began to conceptualize the concept of voting. We selected two essential questions for the lessons: “Why vote? How are voting and elections connected?” Important pedagogical questions include: “How can I promote my young students’ understanding of voting and election concepts? What concepts should be taught at this grade level? How should curriculum be structured for success?”

For children in the early primary grades, the scaffolding of

experiences is critical for cognitive understanding of the value, meaning, and importance of voting. Teachers create meaningful experiences that draw on children’s prior knowledge to build connections to new knowledge. Scaffolding supports the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to facilitate growth in understanding.²

The experience of voting can take the form of five scaffolding levels. Each level overlaps the next, yet maintains its own particular focus in the hierarchy of increasing complexity for the child’s understanding of voting.

Scaffolding Level 1: Different People have Different Ideas

At this initial scaffolding level, teachers provide a variety of non-political choices to give each child the opportunity to vote and to reinforce the concept that votes produce results. Those concepts are not taught overtly, but are embedded in the learning experience.

My plan was to have children vote on their favorite of three shapes: a circle, square, and triangle. I chose these items because they were simple objects that did not have strong emotions or feelings attached to them. If we had voted on, for example, Who should be line leader for the day?, then concerns about social acceptance and issues of self-esteem could have skewed the lesson’s purpose, which was simply to have the children experience a classroom vote.

The children gathered in the circle area, and I told them that we were going to vote today. Defining terms right at the start of a lesson is vital. (After a lesson on habitats featuring marshes, our end-of-lesson cognitive closure discussion turned up the fact that one child thought we were talking about “marshmallows” the whole time, not marshes.) So as I started to lay out the items for the vote, I asked the children if they know what “vote” means. What I heard was—silence. Normally, the students would be waving their hands. None of the children could describe in words what vote meant. Children might understand what the term means, and be able to re-enact a vote as they play, but not have the verbal ability and vocabulary to put it into words.

I decided to remind them of an example. “How many of you would like to have snack outside today? Raise your hands.” This example from kindergarteners’ own lives clarified the meaning of the term. (First or second graders might be developmentally ready to recite a general definition: “When we vote, we all show what we want to do as a group, and the most votes wins.”)

Visualizing the Vote

On an easel, I displayed a paper circle, square, and triangle. I asked students to think about which shape was their personal favorite. I assigned to each shape a Unifix color cube: yellow (circle), blue (square), or green (triangle). Each student then voted for his or her favorite shape by placing a colored Unifix cube (at first) in front of the appropriate shape, and (subsequently) atop similarly colored cubes. Three vertical Unifix cube

towers grew, creating a visual, concrete display of the outcome of the vote—a bar graph! (See photo.) This enabled the class to watch the votes accumulating and to compare the final counts.



Some silent peer pressure appeared to come into play. When the column designated for the rectangle shape became the frontrunner, some children chose to get on that bandwagon (I suspected), voting as their friends had. However, my main objective had been accomplished: The children saw in a concrete fashion how each of them had a chance to cast one vote.

I kept this first voting experience very simple. There was no issue to discuss or analyze, and no logical reason to choose one shape over the others. At Scaffolding Level 1, the goal is for students to understand the most fundamental meaning of “voting” by practicing it with their own hands. Everyone has a choice from a selection of items, and everyone’s choice can be made in a respectful environment. That’s a very important setting for any voting place. (The vote was not conducted by secret ballot, so it was not actually “secure.” Why the moment of voting is private is, of course, a lesson for higher grades—as is the term “ballot,” which requires writing and literacy.) No child commented inappropriately on the vote of another; in fact, they seemed to be awed by the process. They realized that other people sometimes have different ideas than they have! This is important—to realize that we all do not think the same way and to respect each person’s right to individual choice.

Reflecting on What Happened

The yellow, blue, and green Unifix “bar graph” opened the opportunity for questions such as, “Which tower is the tallest? Which is the shortest? Which shape had the most votes? Which shape had the least votes?” These types of questions generated the understanding that votes are counted, and that the words “most” and “least” have significance in determining an outcome.

I found that these kindergarteners could answer the question about which shape had won the most votes, but could not determine which shape had garnished the least votes. I was stopped in my tracks, realizing that the children apparently did

not know what the word “least” meant. We took time to define the term as meaning the “fewest” and “the smallest number,” as illustrated by the shortest stack of Unifix cubes. Next year, I’ll teach a lesson on the concept of “least” before children engage in these voting activities.

Further Examples

I conducted another vote with some small plastic objects from the classroom: a figure of Little Boy Blue, a bear from a counting game, and a lamb from the farm set. I told the children we were voting for one of these items to be “class leader.” The children thought this was very funny and could not wait to place their votes. (The lamb won!) Thus, I created an experience, demonstrating that voting can be used to elect leaders. By having the voting choices safe and non-personal, the concept was presented without anyone feeling that personal standing was at stake.

Scaffolding Level 2: My Choice Might Not Be the One Selected by the Group, but I Abide by the Outcome

The goal for the next activity was for children to realize that the choice that wins the most votes may not be the choice that they, themselves, wanted. At Scaffolding Level 2, the outcome of the vote should be something that directly affects the children.

I mentioned the titles of three familiar songs, stating that we would all sing the song that won the most votes. I indicated each song with both words and symbols. For example, I illustrated the song “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with a star. The pictorial form allowed all children to recognize the name of the song for which they would vote. This ensured that non-readers would be included in the voting, and understand what was shown.

Each child voted with a Unifix cube, indicating his or her song of choice. This time, we recorded votes in horizontal columns, which demonstrated that graphs may be displayed in different ways.

When all the votes were registered, I indicated to the children that each person had one vote and that each person had voted. This one-to-one correspondence is the essence of fair voting. One child questioned whether all had, indeed, voted. We resolved this question together by counting the children in the circle and comparing this number with the quantity of Unifix cubes on the chart. This double-check reinforced the idea of one child, one vote.

Song (A) received one vote; song (B), four votes; and song (C), seven votes. We discussed which song had the most votes, least (or fewest) votes, and which vote count was in-between; thus we reviewed the whole election results.

When the child who had cast the sole vote for song (A) realized that his song had the least votes, he became unhappy. This was an excellent opportunity for me to explain that his choice was a valid and good choice in its own right. His choice was actually a song we had enjoyed singing many times. With that explanation, the child was okay with his choice and the

outcome of the vote. We all sang the winning song and then went off to snack.

Scaffolding Level 3: Deliberation Provides Knowledge Before We Make a Choice

Once children understand what a vote is, teachers need to expand students’ understanding that a vote represents a choice that we make after gathering information and comparing options. In the earlier levels, children were considering their choices based on what they personally wanted without regard to why they were making the choice. At Scaffolding Level 3, the students use cognitive reflection and deliberation to consider which of the choices is best. We should take the time to examine the merits of each choice and to make an informed vote. As an example appropriate to kindergarteners, if we plan to build a tower with blocks, what block shapes should we use and why? Our vote will need to be based on the design of the tower, i.e. an informed vote.

We began class by voting on what shape we liked best: rectangular solid, cylinder, or triangular solid. The votes were spread out evenly among the three options. Children’s reasoning for their choices included:

- Cylinder: “Because it is round. Because it is shaped like a wand.”
- Rectangular solid: “It kinda looks like the shape of a tree. See the lines on the wood.”
- Triangular solid: “I like it because it has three sides. It looks like a slide.”



Evaluating Options

I announced that there would be a second vote on the same three block shapes, but this time the children could vote on which block shape was best for building a tower up to the ceiling. Each tower would consist of only one block shape. Children were invited, individually, to test how easy it was to stack various block shapes: triangular solids atop other triangular solids, etc. This exercise produced some very interesting results.

I assumed that the rectangular solid would prove to be the sturdiest shape for stacking, but one child placed triangular



solid blocks sideways on top of each other, thus creating a fairly sturdy base for succeeding blocks. These “test towers” devised by the children gave information critical to the vote for utility of the various block shapes for building a vertical structure. Children offered various comments and rationales in answering the question, “Which shape is best for building a tower to the ceiling?”

- Rectangular solid: “It’s big and you can stack it flat. It’s larger and bigger.” “If anybody doesn’t have a house, they should build with this one.” “You could use it for stairs.”
- Triangular solid: “You can lay them on their sides and go up.”

“You can turn each one a different way to make a design.”

The children witnessed the lack of stability with the cylinder, as this building crashed with the placement of the third piece, “Ohhhhhh!”

Reflecting on the Result

This election was won by the rectangular solid, with a few votes cast for the triangular solid, and none for the cylinder. It was clear that building test towers and discussing the attributes of each had influenced the children’s choices and helped to decide

how to vote. In order to have them reflect on their thinking, I asked, “How did you make your choice? What kinds of things did you think about?” A child responded, “We looked at the towers and saw which one went tallest.” This led to my explaining, “Votes are a kind of choice. Sometimes we need to know more about something in order to make a good choice.” The children began to understand that the more information they have, the better the decision they will make. The concept of informed decision-making was developing in their minds.

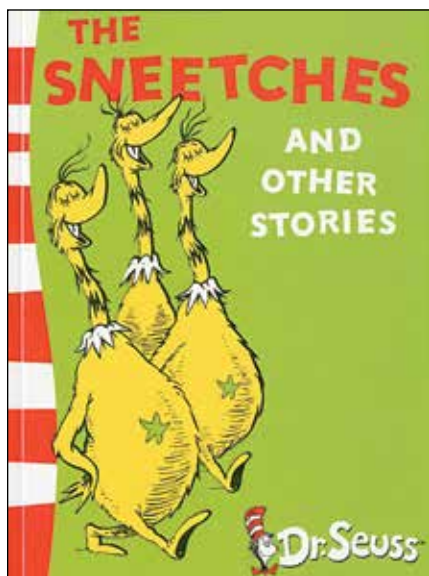
Scaffolding Level 4: Using Persuasion to Influence Voting

How do we understand the perspectives of other people and listen to other viewpoints? How does a child articulate what he/she thinks? Convincing other people “to see it your way” is using persuasion. “Here is why you should vote my way.”

Moving from Scaffolding Level 3 to Level 4 shifts the children from decisions based on objective observations to ones that are subjective and personally analytical. At this level, the children become aware that they have power to influence people and events. I support and monitor student choices, civility, and interpersonal and group communications.

At Scaffolding Level 4, the teacher selects a problem with a solution that will require knowledge about situations, conditions, and possibilities. Multiple questions may be investigated

through discussion that allows children to offer their opinions and listen to the opinions of others. The deliberation may induce a change of opinion or reinforce the original choice.



I read aloud “The Zax,” a story in Dr. Seuss’ book, *The Sneetches and Other Stories*.³ A North-Going Zax runs into a South-Going Zax, and neither will budge to let the other pass. To me, each Zax looked exactly like the other. I asked the children to vote on which Zax they preferred, curious to see what they would do when given a choice

between two very similar candidates. Twice as many children said that they liked the North-Going Zax better. I then asked the children to tell us the reason that they voted the way they did. Rationales were given to convince us to see it their way.

“The South-Going Zax is poking the North-Going one.”

“The South-Going Zax is yelling at the North-Going one.”

When you look closely at the illustration, it is so! The two Zaxes were seemingly the same until we were presented with arguments regarding a lack of civility on the part of the South-Going Zax. The children analyzed the fine distinctions between the two figures in the illustration. This was particularly interesting, as we had discussed all week how to “use your words” and “do not hit, touch, or poke each other.” We also had practiced, “Tell, not yell.” Based on comments from the children, a second vote was almost unanimous for the North-Going Zax. The statements regarding civility were persuasive, causing some classmates to change their original votes.

Scaffolding Level 5: Living with the Outcome, but Working for Change

Perhaps the most difficult part of voting comes after the votes are counted. There will always be some voters who are unhappy with the result. How do they accept or live with the outcome? Can the outcome be modified in the future? At Scaffolding Level 5, civility is developed by indicating how we and the community benefit from abiding by the winning outcome. Children experience how we live and act together for the good of the whole.

Now children see that the act of voting has real consequences. Winning candidates will take office. Plans that were approved by the majority of voters will go forward. And yet, opponents of a new law are not expected to drop their civic participation.

As a new law is implemented, modifications to plans and even new decisions can be made. Leaders will have to decide how to fund and enforce the new law. If problems arise, citizens can openly protest a law that is not working or that has unjust effects. In the United States, a law can be openly criticized, amended, revoked, or even reversed through the courts or through future elections. Examples of laws that were reversed during the course of U.S. history include prohibitions against women voting and poll taxes that prevented the poor from voting – events that students will learn about in the higher grades.

Deciding How to Use Public Funds

To begin the lesson, I presented an oversized mock paper check. I told the children to imagine that the check would be written for a large sum of money that we could spend on playground equipment. I wanted the children to see how a check was written, so I taped the check to the wall and wrote it out in the amount of \$500.00.

Which items of playground equipment should we buy? I asked each child to name the most fabulous thing they could think of to add to our playground. Children offered ideas both real and fanciful, describing equipment in detail, and explained how they would play with it. Their paraphrased comments appear below:

- A little rug under my swing set—This would be there to catch me when I come off the swing.
- A Lady Bug Merry-Go-Round—It would be cool to have a giant bug that we could sit on, and it could go round and round.
- An elephant and three swimming pools—We can ride on the elephants and go to each of the pools.
- A Monster-Truck Merry-Go-Round—We could go fast, round and round, like a blur.
- A waterfall—I want to sit on the ledge and watch the water falling. We should add plants, fish, and fish food. (She described how the fish would be in the pool at the bottom and she would plant bushes around the pool. There would be two levels of falling water.)
- A big horse—I want to be a cowboy. (“Shouldn’t she be a cowgirl?” the other children asked. Her response, “I’ll be a lady cowboy.”)
- A roller coaster—I just want to go super, super fast! The slope would make me go fast.
- More wagons and bikes—We need more wagons and bikes so that we will have more to ride and more people to pull us.

In the ensuing discussions, children provided different perspectives on the issue. Individuals weighed the options and determined how they would vote.

I announced the results of the voting: The roller coaster received the most votes, with the waterfall and wagons and

bikes tying for second. There was a three-way tie for the other selections. Children were used to voting by now, and the “issue at stake” was imaginary, so no one seemed overly upset that his or her choice did not win. However, I did ask the children how they felt after the vote, and several replied that they were sad that their item didn’t win. I took a moment to describe the playground items that had not been selected; then I asked, “What could we do about this?” Through their discussion about ways to acquire additional equipment, children realized that further change was still possible—even after the election was over. They offered some suggestions:

- We could work to get more money.
- We can get 100 monies with 100 jobs.
- We could go to Market Basket, DeMoulas and Walmart because they give out toys. My mom could buy them.
- If someone had a horse, we could borrow it. If we couldn’t find a horse, we could get two cows from our farmhouse.
- We could sew a rug for under the swing set.
- We could build a Merry-Go-Round ourselves. People could help us paint it.
- We could get some water—I mean 100 or 130 jugs of water at the grocery store—and pour it over rocks to make a waterfall and lake. We could decorate it with plants and fish and then get fish food.
- We could get a roller coaster from the circus. It would be from the circus man who opens the gates. He would give it to us.

This simple experience with voting on the playground equipment introduced the idea that voting occurs in a democracy to address many issues of collective interest, like selecting a president. Some children were pleased with the results; others were unhappy and wanted a different outcome. By generating of a list of possible new actions and alternatives, students demonstrated how civic participation does not end for the losing parties after the votes are counted.

During the next several days, we continued to vote on different matters in the classroom. After these votes, I observed that children with “a minority vote” often spontaneously offered alternative ideas after results were announced. Some of these suggestions could be enacted immediately, some would require a compromise, and some would require another round of voting. All of these developments, over time, helped the children to accept the results of the vote.

Voting as a Part of Students’ Lives

Through their social studies lessons, teachers are major con-

tributors to young children’s development of civic engagement. However, before addressing the essential questions (Why vote? How are voting and elections connected?), I discovered that I needed to prepare my primary students with vocabulary in order to scaffold the concepts of elections and voting. The key words that students learned in the activities described above included “vote,” “choice,” “most,” “least,” “president,” and “election.” I was able to facilitate the development of vocabulary through play, exploration, and involving students in voting activities on matters that were important to them. Only after these experiences were the children able to understand the meaning of voting and the interrelationship between the personal act of casting a vote and an election—the event that’s talked about so much in the adult world.

Learning did not end with these activities. Subsequently, we made many classroom decisions by voting. Students initiated voting sessions on their own and became more aware of activities in town in preparation for an upcoming presidential primary.

Many students excitedly shared their experiences of going to the town hall “to help their parents vote” in the recent New Hampshire presidential primary. One mother said, “My son was so excited to go vote with me. He said he had learned all about it in class and that he knew how to vote!” And it was true. 🗳️

Notes

1. All learning involves transfer from previous experiences. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, eds. *How People Learn* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1995), 236.
2. Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Stein, S. Scribner, and E. Souberman, eds. and trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross, “The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines* 17(1976): 89-100; L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar, eds. and trans. (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2012).
3. Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1989), p.33.

BETTY MULREY is lead faculty at Granite State College in New Hampshire and a kindergarten teacher.

ANN T. ACKERMAN is an associate professor of education specializing in social studies education at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire.

PATRICIA H. HOWSON, is a professor emeritus, Rivier University, and an educational consultant, specializing in early childhood and mathematics education.