That’s Not Fair! Fourth Graders’ Responses to Multicultural State History

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Elementary students are capable and enthusiastic learners when they are given opportunities to grapple with important ideas and issues. It took an experience of teaching state history with a classroom teacher during the fall semester of 1997 to convince me (a college professor) that social studies at the elementary level should be challenging. Students are ready for it and sometimes surprise you with their insights and learning. The classroom teacher and I developed a multicultural Wisconsin history curriculum, taught it together in the teacher’s fourth-grade classroom, and studied what the students learned through collaborative action research. Several questions guided our study: What do children learn from a social studies curriculum that integrates national (National Council for the Social Studies 1994) and local school district standards with multicultural, social reconstructionist (Sleeter and Grant 1999) concepts and themes? What do fourth graders learn from a unit on state government that focuses on different perspectives on life before statehood, the transition to statehood, who had political power after statehood, leaders who fought for political equality, and the significance of voting rights today?

Action research appealed to us because its main purpose is improving classroom teaching and learning. Using action research, we studied our own teaching so that we could document what the students learned, determine which teaching strategies promoted their learning, and modify those strategies that were less successful (Sagor 1992). With the help of a research assistant, we collected data by videotaping lessons and instructional activities, recording our observations of teaching/learning activities in field notes, copying students’ work samples, and interviewing students individually about what they learned from each unit. We analyzed the data for main themes of what students learned and which instructional activities were most effective in promoting learning (Sagor 1992).

Teaching State Government from a Multicultural, Social Reconstructionist Approach

Although we developed and taught five different Wisconsin history curriculum units, our focus in this article is a description of the main ideas students learned and the instructional strategies that supported their learning from the three-week unit on Wisconsin government. State history is frequently taught at the fourth grade level in many different states. The National Council for the Social Studies recommends a study of regions in fourth grade, and state legislatures may also require home-state studies as one of the political regions (Maxim 1999; Parker and Jarolimek 1997). State government is often a difficult topic to make interesting, relevant, and engaging for students. We chose to focus on issues common among many states: the role of immigrants and indigenous people in state government, different perspectives on becoming a state, and voting rights for various segments of the population after statehood. By bringing out diverse perspectives and conflicts over statehood and voting rights, we hoped to engage students in thinking more deeply about state government.

As a teacher of elementary social studies methods, I have emphasized Sleeter and Grant’s (1999) conception of a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach. That orientation affirms cultural diversity, fosters equal opportunities, and challenges social stratifica-
tion. It addresses such social issues as racism, sexism, and classism; integrates the experiences and perspectives of women and men from different cultural groups; includes the students' life experiences, especially around issues of oppression; and encourages students to think critically and analyze different perspectives. Although this approach is challenging for classroom teachers, it has goals similar to social studies education. Both focus on preparing students to create a more democratic society in which power and resources are shared equally among different groups. Multicultural, social reconstructionist education recognizes our failure to achieve a democratic society but encourages students to help create this democratic ideal. Social studies education concentrates on preparing students to sustain and improve our democracy, make decisions which benefit the common good, respect different perspectives, and take civic action (National Council for the Social Studies 1994). Good social studies teaching and a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach empower students not only to understand but also to question and change the world.

Teaching Wisconsin history from a multicultural, social reconstructionist orientation was my first opportunity to work with an elementary classroom teacher and her students and integrate these ideas with appropriate standards. The students' contributions during the lessons and our interviews with them verified their readiness to deal with and learn from most of the challenging ideas of this approach. According to the interviews, which also served as the final assessment of student learning, a majority of students demonstrated an understanding of most main ideas. For this article, I concentrate on how our unit on state government illustrated our framework, what students learned as documented through individual interviews, and effective instructional strategies as supported through field notes of summaries of videotaped lessons and observations of teaching activities.

The setting for this project was Oshkosh, Wisconsin, a rather conserva-

Multicultural, social reconstructionist education prepares students to create a more democratic society in which power and resources are shared more equally among different groups.

people fairly and when it was unjust. For the civic ideals and practices thematic strand, we provided opportunities for students to learn about the rights and responsibilities different groups had in the state, especially voting and other actions people can take to influence governmental decisions. We also addressed the local school district social studies curriculum objectives about the reasons for people forming governments, the differences between the territorial and state governments, the steps necessary for Wisconsin to move from being a territory to being a state, and the differences between a territory and a state.

Another part of our framework included a multicultural, social reconstructionist (Sleeter and Grant 1999) and anti-racist (Howard 1999; Tatum 1994) approach. We introduced the students to the experiences and perspectives of different cultural groups as Wisconsin changed from a territory to a state, encouraged them to question who had voting rights, the fairness of the criteria for voting rights, and the sexism, racism, and classism inherent in those criteria. We hoped to make white dominance and privilege explicit in emphasizing who had the right to vote and become governmental leaders, whose land was being taken while other cultural groups were encouraged to move into the area, and the denial of voting rights to Native people, the first residents of the area, unless they became "civilized" or gave up their cultural identity and assimilated into European American culture. We introduced the students to state activists who fought to end slavery and the denial of voting rights for women and African Americans during the nineteenth century.

Critical literacy was also part of our framework, so we introduced original texts that overtly addressed issues of inequality, especially political inequality, and leaders who fought against the unequal rights of women and African Americans (Edelsky 1999). We encouraged students to analyze readings for the fairness of who should have the right to vote after Wisconsin became a state, who actually enjoyed that right, and the reasons why some people fought for
racial and gender equality and others opposed granting equal rights to women and African Americans. Through discussions and writing, the students began to make personal connections with the abolitionists and suffragists in our readings and to empathize with their experiences (Creighton 1997).

A final part of our framework was culturally relevant, social constructivist pedagogy (Brophy and Alleman 1996; Pang and Barba 1995; Scheurman 1998). We organized students into small groups and assigned each group a family identity. Using that identity, each group analyzed their views on life when Wisconsin was part of the Northwest Territory, a separate territory, and after it became a state. The students worked in their classroom family groups to construct knowledge about how the governmental changes affected their family and their rights. The small, cooperative groups built on the Hmong and Mexican American values of cooperation and group success over individual achievement (Rothenstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Trumbull 1999). We also encouraged the students to make personal connections to today’s voting rights by interviewing an adult at home. Most of the fourth graders interviewed one of their parents to find out if they could vote, why they were eligible, why they thought voting was important, and how they would feel if they could not vote. As the students shared the results of their interviews, they spoke about their parents’ views on voting, which, for the students, made the topic more personal and gave it more meaning.

Exploring Different Views on Life in Wisconsin before Statehood

Class Activities: Reading, Discussing, Writing, Illustrating, and Dramatizing Territorial Life

To encourage students to understand life in Wisconsin before it became a state, we created brief descriptions of life in the Northwest Territory and the Wisconsin Territory. We then divided the fourth graders into six small groups, each with a distinct family identity, to read and discuss the summaries and decide what they liked and disliked about being part of the Northwest Territory and the Wisconsin Territory. The Menominee family, one of the indigenous nations, wanted to remain in Wisconsin, their homeland, despite efforts by the U.S. government to move them to Minnesota. Another indigenous nation, the Ho-Chunk family, also desired to remain in their homeland of Wisconsin, but the U.S. government pressured them to move to a reservation in Iowa. The English mining family was very poor, lived with relatives until they could build their own cabin, and was supported by the father’s work at the lead mine and the older children’s work for neighboring families. The wealthy German American family owned 500 acres of farmland and employed several hired girls and hired hands. The young German couple that had recently emigrated from Germany lived with and worked for a German American farmer until they earned enough money to send for their children who had remained in Germany, to buy farmland, and to build their own cabin. The Yankee family had come from New York and owned 150 acres of land.

After the students assigned to each family had a group discussion about what they liked and disliked about being part of the Northwest Territory and the Wisconsin Territory, we summarized each family’s ideas during a whole class discussion. The students wrote individual journal entries, giving their views on how their family felt about being part of each territory and worked with their family members to dramatize or illustrate in drawings their family’s lifestyle during the Wisconsin Territory era.

Two members of the Ho-Chunk family created a drawing to illustrate a meeting they had with the U.S. president, asking if they could have freedom and vote. The president refused their request. Two girls assigned to the Ho-Chunk family dramatized life before and after contact with Europeans, depicting how the immigrants and U.S. government pressured the Ho-Chunk to give up their land and move and refused to allow them to vote or become leaders in the territory. The girls declared, “That’s not fair!” as they portrayed those changes for the Ho-Chunk. The wealthy German American family dramatized the father’s right to vote because they owned 500 acres of land. However, the mother proclaimed, “I wish I could vote, but they won’t let me. I don’t know why. I don’t think it’s fair that the father can vote but I can’t” (Field Notes, 12/11/97). Forming students into family groups and providing them with different avenues for learning and then sharing their information were effective methods to teach students about everyday life before statehood.

What Students Learned: Struggles over Land and the Creation of Government

From our interviews with the students, we gathered that most students learned one main idea about what their family’s life might have been like when Wisconsin was part of the Northwest Territory. The Menominee family members did not like the government’s efforts to take their land and were upset about the movement of European Americans onto their lands. In contrast, the Ho-Chunk family members liked having the land more to themselves, which allowed them to meet their needs and practice their traditions. The English mining family lamented how hard everyone in the family had to work, whereas the young German immigrant couple, although happy with the low taxes, complained about having to live with someone else and not having their own land. The wealthy German American family appreciated having a great deal of land but was concerned about keeping Native Americans off “their” land. The Yankee family liked the religious freedom and availability of land for farming but worried about crowded conditions as more people moved into the territory.

At their interviews, most students were able to explain adequately the significant aspects of their classroom family’s situation when Wisconsin became a separate territory. The Menominee family continued to complain about government efforts to take their land for
Europeans and lamented their lack of voting rights and opportunities to be governmental leaders, despite owning the land necessary for both rights. As one child, part of the Menominee family, explained.

More and more Europeans kept on coming over and taking more of our land. We couldn’t vote when there was an election. The only way we could vote was to be civilized. They were trying to force us off the land because they needed the land for Europeans. (Interview 1/15/98)

The Ho-Chunk family also lamented the European movement onto their lands and efforts to move the Ho-Chunk to a different state when they preferred to remain in the Wisconsin Territory. One boy, a Ho-Chunk family member, elaborated.

We didn’t want Wisconsin to become a state because then we might lose some of our land. We need all the land. If we lose some land, we could lose some people too because we wouldn’t have much land. (Interview 1/14/98)

The English mining family complained about the taxes they had to pay while living in the Wisconsin Territory and their lack of voting rights because they did not own land. A member of that family explained.

We liked that they let us go mining, but disliked that everybody in the family has to go to work. We couldn’t vote. If it became a state, we would have to pay taxes and we don’t have enough money. Women couldn’t vote. (Interview 1/20/98)

Similarly, the young German immigrant couple protested the taxes because of their limited income and their need to use their money to build a house.

Although not every member of the wealthy German American family understood that they could afford to pay the taxes and were eligible to become a government leader, one member clarified the family’s situation.

My family liked it better because we could afford the taxes. We could become government leaders. (Interview 1/7/98)

Only one member of the Yankee family knew that they acquired large farms because more land was available in the Wisconsin Territory than in New York state. That Yankee child explained.

It felt weird because we were the only ones who could vote. We thought that usually everyone could vote. We liked that there was lots of territory that you could buy. We could build lots of farms. It was better than where we were before. There was more land to buy. (Interview 1/7/98)

Considering Conflicting Views on Wisconsin Becoming a State

Class Activities: Reading, Discussing, and Deciding on Statehood

Because we could not find appropriate reading materials for the fourth graders, we developed summaries of the conditions necessary for Wisconsin to become a state and presented views for and against Wisconsin’s transition to statehood. Students remained in their same classroom family groups to read and discuss their perspectives on Wisconsin’s becoming a state. After considering within their families their assorted views on Wisconsin’s changing to a state, the students individually recorded their decision. By observing the small group discussions, we noticed that within their own families, the students offered very diverse perspectives about statehood and could not reach a consensus on the final decision. Not only did examining the process of becoming a state from a specific perspective enliven a potentially dry topic, the strategy enabled most students to provide defensible explanations of their classroom family’s perspective on the transition to statehood.

What Students Learned: Most Wisconsin Residents Will Not Benefit from Statehood

At the interviews, all students listed the following as some of the main conditions necessary for Wisconsin to move from a territory to a state:

- the presence of 60,000 voters or free men who were at least twenty-one years old, owned land, and lived in the area two years
- voters’ agreement that the Wisconsin Territory should become a state
- a new constitution approved by voters
- action by U.S. Congress to make Wisconsin a state

Most students accurately described their classroom family’s perspective on Wisconsin’s becoming a state. The Menominee and Ho-Chunk families opposed statehood because more Europeans might come into the state and move Native people off their land onto reservations. The students explained that Native people could not vote, could not participate in the government, and did not want to pay taxes. One boy explained.

We didn’t like it because we didn’t even get to say anything about it. We didn’t want it to become a state. As soon as it became a state, Europeans would notice it more. They also would have kicked us out and put us on these little reservations. (Interview 1/14/98)

Only two-thirds of the students of the English mining family understood that they did not want Wisconsin to become a state because they would have to pay taxes. Because they needed money to buy land and build a house, the young German immigrant couple was also not in favor of Wisconsin statehood because of the greater taxes. As one member of that family explained.

We really didn’t want Wisconsin to become a state. We needed the money to build houses and to build farms and maybe to buy land to plant stuff. (Interview 1/21/98)

Two-thirds of the wealthy German American family recognized they wanted Wisconsin to become a state because they could afford the taxes, become government leaders, and move Native Americans off their land more easily. One girl in that family elaborated.

Our family thought it should become a state because we could pay taxes and become a government leader. Not to be rude or anything, but we could kick Native Americans off our land easily. More people would own land closer together so it would be a little safer. They could also speak English. (Interview 1/7/98)

Two-thirds of the students in the Yankee family understood that they favored statehood because then they could purchase more land to grow additional crops for income and food and would be
eligible to vote. One girl from the Yan-
kee family, who did not want Wisconsin
to become a state, offered these reasons
from her opposing view,

Most of our group thought Wisconsin
should become a state, and I thought it
should not. I thought it would be too
crowded and then we wouldn’t have as
much trees left because of chopping them
down. You would have to pay lots of taxes
and there would be lots of regulations.
(Interview 1/8/98)

Political Power after Wisconsin
Became a State: Not Everyone
Had a Voice

Class Activities: Reading, Discussing,
and Writing about Voting Rights

Our continual challenge to find
appropriate reading materials led us to
create additional expository text for stu-
dents to read within their family groups
about the events that led to Wisconsin
becoming a state and who had the right
to vote after statehood. We listed the cri-
tera for voting rights, including: males;
European American, Oneida, or “civi-
lized” Native American cultural back-
grounds; and at least twenty-one years
of age. We challenged the students to
analyze the justice of those criteria. We
encouraged students to consider differ-
ent perspectives on who had the right
to vote in Wisconsin and include the
women’s and men’s views from the
classroom families. After they com-
pleted the reading, the students discussed
within their families who should have
the right to vote after Wisconsin became
a state and the fairness of granting those
voting rights.

During their small group discussion,
most members of the Menominee fam-
ily complained about their lack of voting
rights, but not all disagreed with limit-
ing suffrage to civilized Menominee.
One child began, “We would have to
live away from our tribe to vote, that
wouldn’t be fair.” A boy added, “We
should be able to vote without leaving
our tribe. I think it’s not fair.” Then
another child joined in with a different
view about the opportunity to vote, even
if it meant becoming civilized, “because
Native people could vote then, instead
of sitting there and watching more and
more Europeans coming. They could
have part of it too. It’s fair. They can
vote instead of just letting European
American men vote, so they can take
part in it” (Field Notes, 12/11/97). The
activities seemed to support the stu-
dents’ understanding of who could vote
and promoted their different perspec-
tives on that right.

What the Students Learned: Only
a Few Could Vote

During the interviews, over half the
students communicated a clear under-
standing of who had the right to vote in
Wisconsin after it became a state. They
realized that certain groups of men over
twenty-one years of age could vote,
including European American men,
Oneida men (given voting rights when
they moved to a reservation in Wiscon-
sin in the 1820s), and Native American
men considered civilized. Several stu-
dents accurately explained civilized as
meaning those Native men who had
given up traditional ways of life, no
longer lived with their tribe, and had
adopted a European American lifestyle.
One girl, who had assumed the role of a
Ho-Chunk family member during the
unit, voiced the following complaint
about the need for native people to be
considered civilized enough to vote.

Civilized means they were doing the ways
of the Europeans. Instead of wearing the
deerskins they wore, they would wear
cloth. They would adjust to the ways
of the Europeans. That wasn’t fair. Any In-
dian that lived in Wisconsin should be able
to vote that is over twenty-one. They
should have the same rules as the White
men. (Interview 1/8/98)

A majority of students also spoke of
the unfairness of the eligibility rules and
thought everyone who was twenty-one
years old and a citizen should be able to
vote. A child who assumed the role of a
Yankee land-owning family member
agreed that more than European Ameri-
can men were qualified to vote.

I thought it wasn’t fair because women
and African Americans are as smart as
men and Oneida. I think they should have
the right to vote. (Interview 1/7/98)

Class Activities: Reading and
Illustrating State Voting Rights Efforts

We wanted students to learn that
some citizens of Wisconsin wanted vot-
ing rights for women and African Amer-
icans and that others did not want to
extend voting rights to those groups. We
found interesting information written
for adults (Brown 1975; Clark 1956;
Fishe1 1963) on the suffrage movement
in Wisconsin during the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries but found nothing
for fourth graders, so I created an exas-
pository text, Voting Rights for Women and
African Americans in Wisconsin, for
students to read and illustrate. It
described the many people, organiza-
tions, and strategies used to gain politi-
cal equality for women and African
Americans and different views in favor
of and opposed to women’s sufragge.
We gave one paragraph to each student
to read and illustrate for a class book of
the students’ work. We also encouraged
students to study photographs illustrat-
ing the different activities people
engaged in as they worked for voting
rights for women. As the students
worked, several asked for help in pro-
nouncing and understanding the mean-
ings of words. After the students fin-
ished illustrating their pages, they read
aloud that part of the class book and
explained the illustration. The remain-
ing class members asked questions
about the illustrations, and we elaborat-
ed on the meaning of the text (Field
Notes, 12/18/97). Translating the text’s
ideas into illustrations was the activity’s
most important component for support-

ing student learning.

What Students Learned: State
Struggles for Voting Rights

Despite the difficulty level of some
ideas and language, most students could
explain the main purpose of Voting
Rights for Women and African Ameri-
cans in Wisconsin. They realized that
some people pressed to gain voting
rights for women and African Ameri-
cans and that some groups opposed that
change. A majority of students reported
they learned the most from creating
their illustration for the text. One girl believed European American men did not want African Americans and any women to vote because “they would vote for the wrong things” (Interview 1/8/98). A boy commented that if women voted, marriages might be jeopardized. “Men thought if women voted it was going to ruin marriages. They [women] might vote for someone that they [men] don’t want to vote for and they might get into a fight” (Interview 1/21/98). Another child mentioned that not all women were eager to vote. “Some women didn’t want to vote, they weren’t interested” (Interview 1/20/98).

During their interviews, half the students described at least one tactic that people used to gain voting rights for women and African Americans. Those included creating organizations to discuss voting rights; holding meetings, parades, rallies, and conventions; riding in cars or boats to inform others about the importance of voting for women; giving speeches; publishing pamphlets explaining why women should vote; and discussing the value of voting rights with people at their homes. A girl summarized some strategies used to gain voting rights and reasons for opposing them.

A lot of people fought for the women’s right to vote after it was proved to them that women can be just as good as men. A lot of women went in cars and on the streets; they marched with signs. They made speeches [to] let people recognize that they needed a chance to vote too. They go down the river in boats and hold up signs and shout to get the people’s attention. They wouldn’t let women vote because they thought they might shut down some of the different things that men enjoy doing, like maybe closing down liquor stores. They were afraid of that. They were worried too that if they let women vote, they would vote for the wrong people. If a woman ran for leader, then they might vote for the woman. (Interview 1/8/98)

Class Activities: Interviewing Family Members about Voting Rights Today

One strategy that encouraged students to make personal connections with the importance of voting today was the interview with an adult in their family. We began by sending a letter to the children’s families, explaining the interview assignment and listing the questions.

1. Are you eligible to vote? Why?
2. Why do you think voting is important?
3. How would you feel if you could not vote?

We modeled the interview process with the children. Through this assignment, we hoped students would understand the current criteria for voting eligibility in Wisconsin and who in their family met the requirements. We also wanted the students to comprehend the importance of voting by discovering how an adult family member viewed the significance of voting and hearing the person’s reaction to being denied the right to vote. After allowing a week for the students to complete the assignment, we asked them to share the results of their interviews. We created a large chart, on which we summarized the main ideas put forth during our whole class discussion.

When we discussed who was eligible to vote and the reasons for this privilege, we discovered that several students had adult family members who were not yet U.S. citizens and therefore could not vote. A boy’s family had recently emigrated from India; the mother was a U.S. citizen and could vote, but not the father. Three Hmong students had family members who could not vote. Nonetheless, all students spoke about their family’s sense of the importance of voting. They cited a desire to choose the leaders they wanted to make decisions and create laws that represented their best interests. Voting was a means for making their voices heard, representing their ideas, expressing their concerns for the country, and exerting a little control over the government (Field Notes, 12/18/97). For the six students who did not complete the family interview, the class discussion reinforced their knowledge about voting eligibility requirements and the importance of voting.

What Students Learned: Voting Is Important

Most students completed the interview about voting rights today with someone in their family and learned much from the exercise. During the individual end-of-unit interviews, the fourth-graders described their parents’ ideas very well, perhaps because they were more personally connected to these ideas. The majority of students listed at least two of the criteria for being eligible to vote today in Wisconsin. They explained that voters must be eighteen years old or older, a U.S. citizen, registered to vote, and not convicted of a felony. They also described at least one reason why voting is important. Students offered such reasons as wanting to express how they feel and making their ideas known, doing something important for the community, showing they counted as U.S. citizens, giving their opinion on who should be leaders, and making sure the leaders were competent.

For example, one boy, reporting that his mother emphasized the importance of choosing the leaders through voting, said,

She thought voting was important because if you couldn’t give your opinion on who should be governor or president, you might get a president that you wouldn’t want. (Interview 1/7/98)

Even though one mother, a Hmong refugee originally from Laos, was not a U.S. citizen and eligible to vote, she understood the importance of voting to select leaders who would represent her own interests and “not send all the people back to the states or country” (Interview 1/15/98). Another mother believed voting was a way to contribute to the broader community, and her child said,

She is doing something important for the community. It is like your freedom. She is being recognized as a citizen. She helps make decisions for the future. (Interview 1/13/98)

Conclusion

We were especially gratified to find that the fourth graders considered the issue of voting rights from a strong sense of justice. According to the students, all Wisconsin citizens over eighteen years of age should have the right to vote, have a voice in government, and
choose government leaders to represent them. A few surprised us with their view that children should also be able to vote because they could read and understand the ideas that the candidates discussed. Overall, we discovered that a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach was effective in helping students to view government changes through different perspectives and to consider the fairness of voting rights.

After presenting this unit, we identified needed changes in our teaching methods to reach the quieter or less attentive students during class discussions. After analyzing the videotaped lessons and our field notes, we decided to limit whole class discussions and increase small group discussions so that we could engage more students. For those students who were quiet during discussions and activities, we tried to draw them into the lessons by giving advanced notice to the quiet students to report on behalf of their small family group for whole class discussions, talked with them individually about what they were learning during activities, and encouraged them to share their ideas with the entire class.

For classroom teachers considering teaching a similar state government unit, I encourage them to invite students to examine similar issues related to statehood, state government, and voting rights from diverse perspectives. Having the students assume different family identities is an effective strategy by which elementary children can think about different views about the rights of diverse families to participate in state government through voting. Students become much more engaged and thoughtful when they are encouraged to think deeply about decisions voters must make. For students who struggle with more complex ideas and abstract thought, I suggest classroom teachers spend additional time talking with them individually or in small groups about what they are learning and helping them connect their current knowledge to new ideas introduced in the unit. Such rich learning opportunities must be offered to all elementary students, not just the most academically talented.

Key words: state history, teaching strategies, Wisconsin history

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