Research Brief No. 15

Kindergarten Students’ Prior Knowledge of Patriotism

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The prior knowledge students have before entering kindergarten is important in the formation of permanent ideas and concepts. Kindergarten is the beginning of formal education. The kindergarten curriculum is responsible for developing or enhancing the connections that children may or may not have concerning difficult social studies topics. Patriotism is a concept presented as a subtopic of character education and is relevant to developing knowledgeable, democratic citizens. Defining the prior knowledge students have about concepts such as patriotism is beneficial in improving the gaps in social studies curriculum education found in elementary schooling.

The focus of this action research study is on observing and determining what prior knowledge kindergarten students have about patriotism. It is interesting to discuss broad topics and content such as patriotism in class because kindergarteners have a unique way of describing their world. The responses observed and gathered in this study will be used to supplement and improve teaching methods that are supportive of student achievement in the content areas. The problem in this investigation is centered on kindergarten students’ knowledge of patriotism prior to teaching about patriotic symbols, such as the Pledge of Allegiance and the American flag, common topics in the curriculum. This action research study examines the question of how do kindergarten students use prior knowledge about patriotism to depict and write about this concept?
Because determining how kindergarten students process essential information could be useful in narrowing the achievement gap in social studies education there is a need for classroom action research. Teachers of kindergarten children should improve instructional methods by enriching classroom instruction according to the needs of the students. In order to prepare students for social studies learning teachers could investigate using strategies implemented in this study to focus on student success based on prior knowledge.

**Literature Review**

The research conducted on primary students’ prior knowledge includes many different aspects that are important to understanding how children at this age level interpret and learn difficult concepts, such as patriotism. Teachers and researchers have reported that the ability to enrich student knowledge in the content areas is dependent on students’ prior knowledge (Fingeret, 2008). The understanding and interpretation of the process for assessing students’ prior knowledge and building upon it into permanent knowledge is an approach that researchers often consider. If an assessment reports low prior knowledge, then the analysis for data clearly represents low performance in conceptualizing knowledge forms (Schneider, Rittle-Johnson, & Star, 2011).

The quality of information presented to learners often plays a vital role in the retention of such information. Research conducted by Carmiol and Vinden (2013) indicates that conversations about what preschool children have seen and heard is indicative of retention of information. Sunal, Kelley, and Sunal (2012), report that the link that children make between what is heard in media and from adults influences making connections with prior knowledge.

It is important to understand that young children form perceptions of patriotism from sources in their immediate environment. This development of knowledge is dependent on how these topics are perceived. The role of asking questions is also significant in understanding how kindergarten students develop prior knowledge (Kelley, 2006). The perceptions and ideals of teachers are among the sources students use in developing prior knowledge. A study conducted by Slekar (2009) of a pre-service teacher’s preconceived knowledge of patriotism in a democratic society revealed that even though this teacher had no recollection of the methodology through which she learned, she was prepared to make social studies “fun” for her students. Slekar also noted that traditional methods deny students experiences with the democratic process needed for participation as active citizen. A research study conducted by Chan and Tardif (2013) follows Slekar’s model, reporting that children replicate their own thinking after events encountered, and are less willing to change their minds once other ideas are presented. As teachers of social studies, we should insist that effective means are utilized in order to improve student’s knowledge of patriotism.
Method

The setting of this research study was a kindergarten classroom in a small, Title I school with 86% free/reduced lunch students. The gender makeup of the class included nine girls and seven boys with no identified disabilities or exceptionalities. This specific class was chosen to participate in the study because of familiarity with the teacher researcher, as typically occurs in action research studies.

The investigation used a series of three meetings conducted over the course of two weeks, during which a thematic unit on Patriotic Symbols was taught. The first meeting with students was organized individually to record student responses to a pretest regarding prior knowledge of patriotism. The second meeting used a whole group format after three mini-lessons to discuss patriotic symbols, such as the American flag and Pledge of Allegiance. While the Pledge of Allegiance is more than a symbol, for such young children, the curriculum generally approaches it as a symbol. Teacher-developed lessons and the following picture books were utilized to implement ideas and spark discussion with students: *Flags Everywhere!* (Gilson, 2005), *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* (Scholastic, 2004), *Patriotism* (Johnson, 1993), *Red, White, and Blue: The Story of the American Flag* (Herman, 1998), *What is the Story of Our Flag?* (Behrens, 2009), and *The Flag of the United States* (Fradin, 1988). Specific attention focused on the connection to symbols and what they stand for and how this applies to patriotism. The final follow-up meeting was completed in a heterogeneous small-group format, with four students in each of four groups. The selection of students for the groups was based on their reading ability level. Group one included the intensive students, groups two and three consisted of the strategic students, and group four was the on-level students. Students were asked to depict what patriotism means to them by writing a sentence and drawing a picture.

The data gathering instruments included a student pretest, student drawings and sentences, and a rubric with which to evaluate student work. The pretest was administered using the following guided directions: (1) Explain what you know about a symbol, (2) Explain what you know about the word “patriotism” and (3) Explain why we say the pledge each morning. A rubric for assessing student sentences and drawings of patriotism included criteria for the description and analysis of student drawings and sentences. Observational anecdotal records of student reactions and participation in class discussions were utilized to complete the rubric.
Explain what you know about a symbol.  Explain what you know about the word “patriotism.”  Explain why we say the pledge each morning.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
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Figure 1. *Student Record Sheet*

The analysis procedure included analyzing the collected research and determining if there were common themes in students’ prior knowledge and how they depicted patriotism. The first meeting with individual students assessed prior knowledge of the concept of patriotism with an explanation of the aforementioned guided directions that were recorded on the record sheet in Figure 1. The commonality in the statement “Explain why we say the pledge each morning,” was that each child connected the American flag with that of a presumable authority. Answers included, “because it will make God happy,” and “we say the pledge to pray for God.” No student could relate any rational/appropriate idea or explanation to the word “patriotism”, and only one student could give an understandable answer for what a symbol is, “a picture that stands for something with no words.” This provides examples of the limited knowledge of the concept of patriotism that students had before the lesson.

The whole-group meeting was held following an introductory lesson on symbols, the American flag, and the Pledge of Allegiance. After many question and answer discussions, I read several picture books and continued to inquire and explain the three model questions. I observed that the on-level students were making connections about the word “patriotism” and how symbols represent this concept. This observation was recorded after on-level students began to explain that the American flag must represent the United States.

In the last meeting, students were asked the three guided directions again and allowed to discuss in organized small-group settings. When asked what a symbol was, the first group, the intensive students, managed to answer that symbols were pictures, but couldn’t give examples. The second and third group, the strategic students, and fourth group, on-level students had additional thoughts on symbols and provided numerous examples. The fourth group described the flag as a symbol of the United States.
The groups struggled with an explanation of patriotism. The fourth group, on-level students, eventually concluded that the flag and pledge had something to do with patriotism, but could not describe them as symbols. The first, second, and third groups, which included the intensive and strategic students, never made this connection. Drawing paper with lines for writing was given to each child and students were instructed to draw a picture about “patriotism” and write a sentence about it. After analyzing the results gathered from the rubric in Figure 2, most sentences from the students in groups one, two, and three, in the intensive and strategic groups, included “I like...” or “I love...”. Five out of the 16 students wrote thoughtful sentences that represented their feelings about “patriotism”. The on-level students included the idea that the pledge was “for the United States” or “we say the pledge to the flag for America”. The theme included in this portion of the project appeared to revolve around the connections made during whole group instruction. Students who showed a greater interest were able to create more complex depictions. The use of the data gathering instruments to determine links in the results and the review of literature could be used in this kindergarten classroom to increase student understanding in social studies.

Figure 2. Analysis Rubric
Conclusions

The analysis of the research data enabled me to conclude that student depictions of patriotism are related to prior knowledge about the concept. I was expecting the fourth group of on-level students to make connections with symbolism and the American flag and the Pledge of Allegiance much sooner and more adequately than the other groups. The hypothesis for this research project was adequate for the classroom research. This classroom action research provides information about the information and misconceptions that students have when entering the classroom. In the beginning, very few students could thoroughly explain answers to the questions. I was expecting more students outside of group four’s on-level children to describe a connection with patriotism and symbols. The data show that this was not the case in this project. Limitations to the study include the amount of time spent on the topic and the availability of resources that could be used in the implementation of information.

References