

Elementary School Lesson

Stitching Together a Community

Rationale

This lesson encourages students, through a variety of reflective and interactive processes, to think about community on both a local and national level. The lesson helps children consider the many communities of which they are members and the ways in which their diverse communities provide support, strength and pride to them in different and similar ways.

Objectives

- Students will develop an understanding of the various communities of which they are a part, including the United States of America.
- Students will develop an appreciation of the support, especially in difficult times, that communities provide.
- Students will gain an understanding of and respect for their own and others' communities.
- Students will practice listening and empathy skills as they share their own and learn about others' perspectives about diverse communities.

Age Range

Grades 3–5

Time

45–60 minutes for each part of the lesson

Requirements

- Chart paper, index cards or *Post-it® Notes*
- Markers, bulletin board or wall space
- Pictures of quilts
- Construction paper in different colors and cut into squares roughly 6" x 6" or squares of cloth or felt of the same size
- Assorted art supplies
- Masking tape
- Resource books on quilts

Key Words

Community
Geography
Interests
Quilt
Religion
Support
Symbol
Underground Railroad

Procedures

Part I: What communities do we belong to? How do communities support their members in difficult times?

1. Write the word COMMUNITY in the middle of a piece of chart paper. Ask students to help you generate a list of the different kinds of communities they belong to. Record their responses in a web format around the word. Begin the lesson by telling students that communities often develop because they are unified by certain common elements: language, geography, family relationships, religion, and interests such as sports teams or hobbies. Ask the students to think about communities they are a part of, for example this classroom. Point out that most people can belong to more than one community although some communities might feel more special to a person than others at different times in his or her life. Begin this discussion with some examples.
2. Distribute three index cards or *Post-it® Notes* to each child. Ask students to write on each card the name of one of the communities to which they belong. Model this for the students first. [You might name your family, your school colleagues, your church, synagogue or mosque, people who speak Spanish, your soccer league teammates or the neighbors in your apartment building.]

3. After students have completed the task, ask them to pick one of the communities and make some notes on the card about the ways in which they feel connected to this community. If the students are struggling with this idea, suggest that they can write examples of ways in which this community has supported other community members in need. Again, you might want to model this with one of your own examples. [For your neighbors you might list: knocking on a neighbor's door if we haven't seen each other in a while to make sure he or she is okay, taking in the mail or doing simple errands for a sick neighbor, etc.] After the students have had a few minutes to complete this list, generate a group list (or have students post their *Post-it® Notes*) on a new piece of chart paper entitled SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES.
4. Allow a few minutes for students to review the new list and discuss the following questions with the class:
 - a. What are some of the similarities in the ways in which communities support each other?
 - b. What are some of the differences?
 - c. Is there any community listed here that you would like to know more about?
 - d. What do you as an individual contribute to your community?
 - e. What makes for a "good" community?
 - f. Is our classroom a community? Why or why not?

As you have this discussion with the class, listen for times when children name feelings associated with their communities. Stop periodically and ask the group if they understand the feeling that has just been expressed or if they have ever had a similar experience. Encourage them to reference each other's names, communities and ideas as a way of actively building empathic connections among the children.

5. At the end of the discussion, collect the index cards or *Post-it® Notes* and display them on a bulletin board or wall in your classroom along with the web on COMMUNITY and the SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES list.

Part II: How can we share what is important about our own communities?

1. Show students pictures of quilts. (See related resources for books and websites.) Explain that there are at least two elements, which can characterize quilt making. The first is that quilts often tell stories, personal stories or stories of a community, through the use of symbols, images and colors particular to that community. The second is that quilts are often made by groups of people in a community and quilt making helps tie neighbors together to pass on traditions or stories that are important to that community. You might tell students that quilts were used in the Underground Railroad as a way of signaling messages to runaway slaves to help them to safety. Ask students if they have ever seen a quilt and ask them to describe where they saw the quilt and what they saw.
2. Explain to the class that they will each have an opportunity to design and create quilt squares to represent what is important to them about at least two of the communities to which they belong. (see Part 1) Once the quilt squares are completed they will be joined together (stitched or taped or tied with strings depending on the material used) to make a classroom community quilt which will serve as a way for students to share with each other their own stories or traditions about their communities.
3. In order to help students think about how to visually depict what is important to them about their own communities pick one or two examples from the list of SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES and brainstorm possible images and symbols to represent the ideas described. For example, if spending time together was a way in which community members supported each other, ask students to volunteer different ways of depicting that, magazine pictures or drawings of people together; perhaps one particular activity is central to a community's culture and that can be depicted. Alternatively, your students might want to write a short paragraph telling about an important time in their community's history when community members came together to support one another or to support someone outside their community. Consider inviting a guest to your classroom, such as a local quilt maker or quilt owner, to talk about quilts and quilt making. Provide students time to plan their design in class or assign as work to do at home.
4. Provide each student with 2–3 squares of paper or cloth and a variety of art supplies using glue or staples to adhere the design to the quilt square.

Part III: What have I learned about my own community? What can I learn about yours?

1. Have students sit in a large circle and lay the quilt squares out in the middle. Suggest that everyone take a few minutes to look, again, at all the quilt squares and marvel at their colorful diversity and unique designs.
2. Explain to the class that now that their quilt squares are complete, they will have an opportunity to hear each other explain the meaning of their designs.
3. Give each student an opportunity to pick one of his or her squares and talk about what it represents.

NOTE: If you have students who are shy or have difficulty speaking or putting their thoughts into words, you might choose to give the option of not sharing or perhaps you might want to help these students prepare for this in advance. Also, depending on the size of your class you may want to do this in two different sittings. Alternatively, rather than asking everyone to participate you might simply ask “Is there anyone who would like to tell us about his or her square?”] If necessary, talk about listening skills and strategies students could use to help them focus on what is being shared by their fellow classmates. Remind them that each child is sharing something that is very important to him or her. Remind students to think about ways that they can show respect for what is being said.

4. Write the following questions on the board and let the children know that they will be discussing these questions after all students have had an opportunity to share. After the sharing, use the following questions for discussion:
 - What are some new things that you learned about your own community as you worked on your design?
 - What are some new things that you learned about communities by listening to your classmates?
 - What questions do you still have about communities?
 - What does our new quilt show about what we think is important in communities?
5. End this lesson by collecting all the squares and putting them all together. If the squares are made of paper, lay the squares down on a large flat surface and carefully tape the seams vertically and horizontally until all squares are attached. If the squares are made of cloth, sew, staple or tie the squares together. Display the quilt in the classroom where all can see it.

Assessment Recommendations:

This lesson has been designed so that each component—the web, the index cards, the lists, the brainstorming session on symbolizing ways in which communities support each other, as well as the final discussion, can offer opportunities for you, as the teacher, to figure out how your learners are making sense of the concepts in an informal way. Here are some other suggestions for assessment:

- ➔ Ask students to create a sign to accompany the displayed quilt (much as one would find in a museum) describing the origin and purpose of the quilt; the meaning contained within it and perhaps, a title for the quilt.
- ➔ Create a class newsletter describing all phases of this mini-unit. Assign components of the process to pairs of children and ask them to write an article describing what happened and what was learned.
- ➔ Invite another class to view the quilt and prepare a class presentation explaining the meaning of the quilt squares.

Extended Activities

- ➔ Have students interview parents or other adults in the community asking them how they define community and answering the question of what is important to them about their own community.
- ➔ Have students write an essay on the question: “What does my community need from me?”
- ➔ Read and discuss *The Secret to Freedom* by Marcia Vaughan illustrated by Larry Johnson (New York, NY: Lee and Low Books, 2002). In this book, great Aunt Lucy tells a story of her slave days when she and her brother learned the Underground Railroad quilt code.