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## **An Elementary Student-Centered Investigation of the Three Branches of Government**

*Matthew C. McParker, Marissa Harnisch, and Kaycie Wagner*

**Abstract:** Civic education is a core element of social studies, as emphasized by researchers (Branson, 1999; Brown & Silvestri, 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Payne, 2020) and the National Council for the Social Studies (2023). In order for students to understand how to engage in civic life, they need a foundational understanding of the U.S. system of government (Brown & Silvestri, 2014; Butler, 1996; Graham & Weingarten, 2018; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008), including how power is balanced among the three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial). However, 1/3 of adults cannot name the three branches, let alone describe their functions (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023; Winthrop, 2020). In this paper, the authors describe how two preservice teachers in a 4th and 5th grade classroom utilized approaches supported by research to engage their students in learning about the three branches. The authors provide practical examples of three research-based approaches (an open classroom environment, classroom discussions, and relevance to students' lives) and discuss why these approaches work.

Civic education is central to students' school journeys; according to Branson (1999), the field of education carries, "no more important task than the development of an informed, effective, and responsible citizenry" (para. 4). In order to develop such a citizenry, Branson (1999) goes on to advocate for civic education, "promoting understanding of the ideals of democracy" (What is Civic Education? Section, para. 2). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) definition of social studies centers engagement in civic

life (NCSS, 2023) as the purpose of school. As an addendum to the definition, NCSS includes knowledge of the United States government as a key component of government and citizenship, which should be included in social studies education (NCSS, 2023). Research supports that knowledge of how the three branches of government function is necessary to be a civically engaged citizen in the United States, (Brown & Silvestri, 2014; Butler, 1996; Graham & Weingarten, 2018; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). It seems that civic

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education in general, and knowledge of the three branches of U.S. government more specifically, is a core aspect of school that students should master. Despite the importance of civic education, many adults cannot name the three branches, let alone describe their functions (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023; Winthrop, 2020).

If many adults lack basic knowledge of how their own government works, what can schools do to enact civic education more effectively? Although more research is needed regarding the relationship between teaching approaches and civic engagement, there is evidence that some teaching approaches can promote civic action (Campbell, 2019; Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Gainous & Martens, 2012). Early exposure is beneficial (Brown & Silvestri, 2014), indicating that civic education in elementary classrooms may be particularly powerful. Simple exposure to civic concepts, though, is not enough; teachers need to engage students in order for them to learn. Three approaches seem to have positive effects: open classroom environments, class discussion, and relevance to students' lives (Claes et al., 2017; Gainous & Martens, 2012; Martens & Gainous, 2012; Siegel-Stechler, 2021; Teegelbeckers et al., 2023; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022; Youniss, 2011). In this paper, the authors describe a mini-unit about the three branches of government which was planned and taught by Authors #2 and #3 in their fourth and fifth grade classroom placement. In their first semester of field experience during their licensure program, they developed a unit emphasizing an open classroom

environment, discussion, and relevance to students' lives to support students' understanding of and connections to the three branches of government in the U.S.

### **Civic Education**

According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center (2023), only 66% of adults can name the three branches of government. Of the other third, 10% can name two branches, 7% can name one, and 17% can not name any. Simply naming the branches, though, does not indicate an understanding of how they function. Beerman (2011) states that the three branches are some of the least understood parts of government in the U.S., indicating the survey results likely reflect a lack of depth of understanding, not simply an inability to use correct terminology. Facing a lack of understanding of the basic tenets of the U.S. system of government, it is imperative for teachers to support students' civic knowledge development (Winthrop, 2020). Gainous and Martens (2012) indicate that political competence is a requirement for fostering the internal motivation to become civically engaged, highlighting the importance of civic knowledge. Kahne & Middaugh (2008) state that civic education, "explicitly teaches the knowledge, skills and values believed necessary for democratic citizenship" (p. 34), emphasizing civic action as the ultimate goal. This aligns with a Deweyan approach of habit-building, or developing predispositions toward action, for which Stitzlein (2014) advocates. In short, people need a basis of civic knowledge to effectively engage in civic processes.

Exposure at a young age to civic knowledge could support students' habit-building (Stitzlein, 2014) and overall understanding of the U.S. system of government (Brown & Silvestri, 2014), leading to engagement in civic life. Campbell (2019) states more evidence is needed on how "education prior to middle and high school affects young people's civic development" (p. 7), but that well-designed civic instruction has positive effects on civic engagement. What, precisely, constitutes effective civic instruction remains to be defined. Campbell (2019) advocates for researchers to examine a wide variety of approaches.

Among the wide variety of possible approaches, those with high levels of student engagement seem to have the highest benefits for future civic participation. In an investigation of the effects of a specific program, Holbein (2017) finds psychosocial attributes can be shifted through early exposure to civic education, leading to higher rates of voting in adulthood. In a review of civic education literature from 2009-2019, Fitzgerald et al. (2021) state that active, experiential, and relevant civic education is beneficial, and can increase later civic engagement.

As beneficial as future civic participation is, Payne et al. (2020) challenge researchers to go beyond thinking about civic education for students' later benefit and reframe students', "everyday actions as civic forces" (p. 42). In this way, civic knowledge is important both for students' futures and for their present lives. While Authors #2 and #3 intended for their

students to engage in civic action later in life, the goals they outlined in their lessons were more immediate; they set out to ensure their students could grasp the basic elements of the three branches of government, and (more importantly) to identify how each branch connected to their lives. The lessons Authors #2 and #3 designed relied heavily on three approaches, supported by research, which seem particularly effective in promoting civic knowledge in the classroom: an open classroom environment, classroom discussions, and relevance to students' lives.

### **Open Classroom Environment**

In examining the most effective approaches for civic education, Gainous and Martens (2012) find an open classroom environment is effective in helping students to develop civic knowledge and motivations to take civic action (p. 248). Campbell (2019) echoes the efficacy of open classroom environments in stating,

the most consistent theme is the significance of an open classroom climate, which is defined as a classroom in which students are exposed to the enlivening discussion of political and social issues, are encouraged to share their own opinions, and have their opinions respected by the teacher. (p. 6)

In an investigation of four broad teaching approaches, Martens and Gainous (2012) find maintaining an open classroom climate is the best way to promote

students' engagement in civic life. Deimel et al. (2020) claim that formal citizenship education can compensate for differences in civic participation by people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, an open classroom environment is beneficial for all students.

An open classroom environment includes other approaches supported by the literature, classroom discussion and relevance to students' lives (Siegel-Stechler, 2021); we include it here as a prerequisite for effective implementation of classroom discussions and activities in which students find relevance to their lives.

### **Classroom Discussion**

Several researchers highlight the effectiveness of discussion in building students' civic knowledge. Siegel-Stechler (2021) states that classroom discussion is central to an open classroom climate, which is highly correlated with positive civic outcomes. Youniss (2011) frames classroom discussion as a central aspect of students' development of civic knowledge and democratic discourse. White and Mistry (2019), in an investigation of how to build students' notions of social responsibility and civic values to, "help establish a foundation for both current and future civic engagement" (p. 184), identify civic discussion as an effective approach when used in combination with other approaches, specifically concrete learning activities. Teegelbeckers et al. (2023) state that approaches based on discussion, and co-regulated by the teacher, promote the broadest range of democratic

competencies among students.

Approaches with opportunities for discussion are central to students' civic development. Claes et al. (2017) identified gender, self-efficacy, and socioeconomic background as factors in how students experience classroom discussions. To facilitate effective discussions, they advocate for addressing individual student preferences. In other words, discussions are most effective when they are relevant to students.

### **Relevance to Students' Lives**

To build their knowledge, skills and values, Brown and Silvestri (2014) call for early exposure to civics concepts in such a way that students can see the relevance to their own lives, including examples of how to apply the ideas in the real world. Winthrop (2020) explicitly calls for experiential learning activities to increase civic participation. Experiential activities are relevant to students, in that they directly engage in an action; Willeck and Mendelberg (2022) acknowledge that such approaches show promise in promoting civic engagement, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups. Gainous and Martens (2012), in exploring the effectiveness of civic education as it relates to the variety of approaches teachers utilize, find approaches which are too varied can be detrimental to student learning. Instead, tailoring the approaches to the needs of the students in the classroom, ensuring they find relevance to the material, is very effective. In a review of civic education literature from 2009-2019, Fitzgerald et al. (2021) state active,

experiential, and relevant civic education is beneficial and can increase later civic engagement. Tailoring an open classroom environment with regular discussion to the needs and interests of the students in the class seems to be an effective approach. Authors #2 and #3 designed and implemented a three-lesson mini-unit about the three branches of government in the U.S. in their mixed-grade (4th and 5th) classroom which exemplified how such a classroom orientation serves students well.

### **Context**

Authors #2 and #3 were preservice teachers in their first field experiences as a part of their undergraduate teacher licensure program at a public university in the upper Midwest. In these field experiences, preservice teachers spend approximately 10 hours each week in their placements, designing and teaching lessons, leading small groups, and supporting students where needed. Their semester of elementary field experience is followed by a middle school field experience for a semester, then 18 weeks of student teaching. During their elementary field experience, preservice teachers also take methods courses in literacy and social studies.

McParker served as the professional development school liaison where Authors #2 and #3 were placed for their elementary field experiences in spring 2023. In this role, McParker conducted several observations as well as teaching both a field seminar course and social studies methods for Authors #2 and #3. Both Authors #2 and #3 were placed with the

same cooperating teacher in a mixed-grade fourth and fifth-grade classroom. Their classroom was part of a public charter school, housed in the same building as a neighborhood community school. Their cooperating teacher had a reputation for implementing a student-centered approach and supporting a very open classroom environment. As a cooperating teacher, he allowed and encouraged the field students to take over as many parts of the classroom as they felt comfortable with. Within the context of their cooperating teacher allowed them to lead many aspects of the classroom, Authors #2 and #3 worked together to design a three-lesson mini-unit about the three branches of the U.S. government.

### **Methods & Analysis**

Authors #2 and #3 designed and taught these lessons as required elements of their social studies methods course, which was taken concurrently with their elementary field experience. McParker served as their professor for both courses, and formally observed two of the three lessons in this sequence.

Employing a case study approach, McParker collected data in the form of direct observations, observation notes, and artifacts from each lesson (including the slides, worksheets, and students' leaves with their takeaways) in which students were learning about the three branches of government (the case). As the teachers of the lessons, Authors #2 and #3 gauged the effectiveness of their lessons through two assessments: (1) accurate completion of their guiding worksheets, which were

returned to students, and (2) completion of leaves with students' individual takeaways from each day of the lesson, which were photographed for analysis (Figures 1, 2, & 3).

McParker employed a holistic analytical approach (Creswell, 2013), in which all data across the entire case (4th and 5th-grade students learning about the three branches of government in their classroom) was analyzed to capture the relevant themes. McParker developed initial themes by examining data (observation notes, recalling portions of the actual observations, reading the guiding slides and other materials for each day along with the student worksheets and the leaves they completed for assessment purposes) and looking for repeated instances of things that stood out. Initial themes included "group work", "discussion/debate", "outside sources", "exploration", and "efficient".

After developing initial themes, McParker reviewed relevant literature, resulting in the identification of three approaches that seem particularly effective in promoting civic knowledge in the classroom: an open classroom environment, classroom discussions, and relevance to students' lives. The initial themes aligned with the effective approaches such that they became the overall themes of the study.

## **Lessons**

The primary purpose of this sequence of lessons was to help students build a foundation of knowledge about the three branches, upon which they can build later

in their school journeys. Therefore, the objectives were kept relatively vague. The first lesson addressed the legislative branch, the second addressed the executive branch, and the third addressed the judicial branch. Across the three lessons, stated and unstated objectives were addressed and assessed. The stated objectives were that students will be able to:

- identify the basic knowledge of the legislative branch and correctly answer questions on a worksheet with guided questions,
- identify key aspects and individuals within the Executive Branch, and
- identify key aspects, decisions, and individuals from the Judicial Branch.

For the final activity of each lesson, students were required to write an important takeaway on a leaf, which was an additional stated objective each day.

In addition to the written objectives, students were assessed on two unwritten objectives addressing their ability to:

- identify elected officials from the state where they live, and
- relate elements of each branch to their lives.

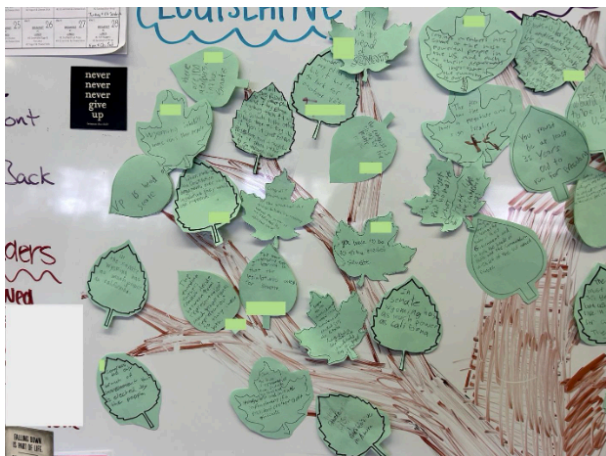
## ***Lesson One***

In lesson one, Wagner led students through a slideshow with background information about the legislative branch, tailored for the students and guided with a worksheet. Wagner began with a definition of the legislative branch, so

students had a shared understanding, then distinguished the House of Representatives from the Senate. Wagner named and included pictures of the two elected Senators from our state and included geographic fluency during the introduction of the House of Representatives by showing a map with the number of Representatives from each state and asking students how many came from theirs. Students followed along with a guided worksheet, on which they wrote a combination of key information and their own takeaways. Last, students watched a video with more background information about the legislative branch. While watching the video, students completed the guiding worksheet for the day. To complete the lesson, Wagner asked students to share surprising things about the legislative branch as well as a fact that stood out from the video, with an explanation of why it stood out. Students' culminating assessment was to write important facts about the legislative branch applicable to their lives onto leaf cut-outs and add them to a tree outline on the wall (Figure 1).

### **Figure 1**

*Leaves with Key Takeaways about the Legislative Branch*



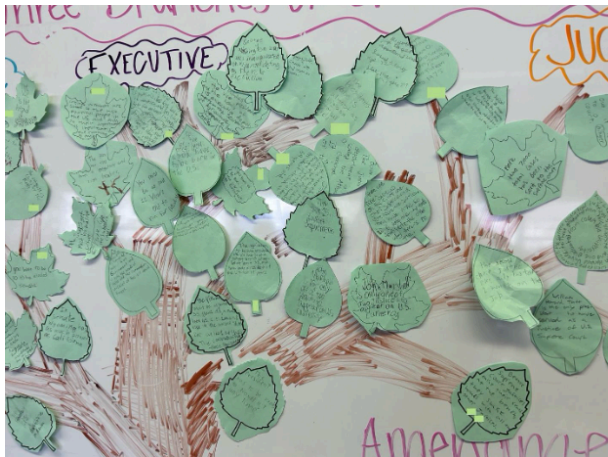
### **Lesson Two**

In lesson two, Harnisch began by reminding students about the previous lesson, then introduced the current heads of the executive branch, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Students again followed along using a guide on which they noted facts, such as the heads of the executive branch, and later would continue with other facts and their takeaways. Before moving any further, students set their worksheets aside when Harnisch elicited their understanding of the word executive. Harnisch asked students to use drawings and short phrases on poster paper to convey what they know about the term. Students then looked up synonyms for executive and made explicit connections to their lives (i.e. they related executive to school, home, sports, clubs, etc.), which they added to their posters and worksheets. Students hung their posters and participated in a gallery walk to view their classmates' work. After this activity, Harnisch transitioned students to their seats and displayed a definition of Executive Branch. One student read the definition while the rest of the class noted it on their worksheets. Students continued noting aspects of the executive branch, such as different roles (e.g., cabinet members) and responsibilities (e.g., the President is responsible for conducting foreign affairs). To finish the instruction portion of the lesson, Harnisch discussed the concept of checks and balances with students. For their independent work, students explored several curated sources to find information they found important about the executive branch. Like the first

lesson, students wrote important facts about the executive branch applicable to their lives onto leaf cut-outs and added them to the tree outline (Figure 2).

### Figure 2

*Leaves with Key Takeaways about the Executive Branch*



### Lesson Three

**Harnisch** also taught the third lesson, which began with students repeating the word judicial and recapping the information from the prior two lessons. To illustrate the judicial branch, Harnisch displayed a picture of Justice Ruth Bader-Ginsberg and shared a memory clue (judicial=judge) to help students remember what the judicial branch does. Harnisch introduced how the judicial branch serves as a check and balance to the other two branches by presenting a scenario based on *Terry v Ohio*, 1968, in which two men were searched and guns were found, even though they were not the perpetrators of a reported crime. Harnisch asked students whether the search was a violation of the men's rights, when they committed no crimes. Students wrote their

opinions on whether the search was fair before engaging in a class discussion. Harnisch reminded students of the class norms, and they engaged in a spirited, respectful discussion. Several students shared thoughtful, well-reasoned rationales addressing the sides of the issue. When surveyed, their opinions were roughly evenly split, with a slight majority of the opinion that the search violated the men's rights. As the discussion waned, students learned the result of the case (8-1 that it was not a violation) and discussed the effects of that decision (e.g., police can search people if they have a reasonable suspicion, even if they do not have probable cause for an arrest). After the discussion, Harnisch overviewed the functions of the judicial branch and the structures of district, appellate, and other courts with short videos and a slideshow, while students took notes on basic facts and their takeaways. To finish the lesson, students wrote important facts about the judicial branch applicable to their lives onto leaf cut-outs and added them to the tree outline (Figure 3).

### Figure 3

*Leaves with Key Takeaways about the Judicial Branch*





## Assessments

To assess students' understanding of the learning objectives, Authors #2 and #3 examined the daily worksheets and graphic organizers as well as the leaves added to the tree outline. During each lesson, the authors circulated while students explored various sources, noting what aspects of each branch drew their interest. All students were able to identify basic facts about each branch and contribute at least one leaf each day with important facts applicable to them (Figures 1-3). Responses ranged from identification of the duties of each branch (e.g. "The president has the power to negotiate and sign treaties.", "The judicial branch is in charge of deciding the meaning of laws, how to apply them to real situations, and when a law breaks the rules of the constitution."), to casual summaries (e.g. "If a small case isn't figured out, it is moved to a higher court."), to random facts and things students found interesting (e.g. "John Marshall is only one of two justices to appear on U.S. currency." Before Supreme Court Justices take their seats at the bench, they shake hands with all the other Justices.").

Authors #2 and #3 set out to familiarize students with the three branches of government in the U.S. Although they did not collect detailed data about students' growth in knowledge about U.S. government, it was clear that students came away with some; perhaps more than many adults (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023; Winthrop, 2020). Authors #2 and #3 returned student work to them,

so it was not available for analysis. However, they recorded that all students were able to complete their guiding, indicating a basic level of knowledge about each branch. In addition to their guiding worksheets, students completed leaves at the end of each lesson on which they wrote key takeaways. In describing the legislative branch, students wrote such things as (edited for clarity), "VP is head of senate," "The founding fathers couldn't decide between 'equal representation' and 'proportional representation' so they chose both," and "Congress is the only branch of government that is elected by the people." In describing the executive branch, students wrote such things as (edited for clarity), "You must be at least 35 years old to run for president," "includes the vice president and the heads of the executive departments," and "The president has the power to negotiate and sign treaties." In describing the judicial branch, students wrote such things as (edited for clarity), "If a small case isn't figured out it is moved to a higher court," "More than 7,000 total cases have been sent to the supreme court," and "The judicial branch is in charge of deciding the meaning of laws, how to apply them to real situations, and whether the law breaks the rules of the constitution."

Roughly 10 months after Authors #2 and #3 taught their lessons, McParker was in a classroom with nine of the students who had engaged in these lessons the prior school year. McParker handed out note cards and asked the students (with no advance warning) to write or draw anything they remember from those lessons. Five of the nine students could

name more than one branch, four named and/or described all three, and two described all three branches in detail. Although this evidence is anecdotal, it illustrates how students can retain quite a bit of information from lessons rooted in an open environment, involving discussion, and related to their lives.

### **Why This Worked**

With a nationwide lack of knowledge regarding the basics of government in the U.S. (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023; Beerman, 2011; Winthrop, 2020), supporting young learners' civic knowledge is essential if we want them to engage in civic life (Brown & Silvestri, 2014; Stitzlein, 2014). Authors #2 and #3 achieved their goals of familiarizing their students with some of the basics of U.S. government, as evidenced by students' completion of their guiding worksheets and leaves. Many factors likely contributed to students' success in making connections to the three branches of government in the U.S. Three aspects of the lessons that stand out, and are supported by prior research, are (a) the open classroom environment, (b) inclusion of discussion, and (c) relation to students' lives.

#### ***Open Classroom Environment***

Campbell (2019) defines an open classroom environment as one in which, "students are exposed to the enlivening discussion of political and social issues, are encouraged to share their own opinions, and have their opinions respected by the teacher" (p.6). The

classroom environment where Authors #2 and #3 taught their lessons was very open. Their cooperating teacher emphasized student autonomy and responsibility, frequently positioning the 5th grade students as leaders and the 4th grade students as future leaders. Students shared their opinions and regularly had input into how various aspects of the class were run. Their cooperating teacher respected the opinions of every student, modeling how to listen and honor everyone, even if there is disagreement. Martens and Gainous (2012) as well as Campbell (2019) found such an environment to be the most effective approach in promoting students' engagement in civic life.

Authors #2 and #3 designed their lessons with the open classroom environment in mind. Knowing that the students were used to a higher level of autonomy, Authors #2 and #3 tried to minimize the amount of time students passively listened. In order to increase students' active engagement, they incorporated guided worksheets with a slideshow during each lesson to lay a basic groundwork of information, which would allow students to better understand what they independently explore. Once the groundwork was laid, students were free to explore (using vetted sources) aspects of each branch they found personally interesting. As they were exploring, students were allowed (and encouraged) to share their findings with each other, which resulted in an energetic environment, even though most students were independently using their iPads.

The open classroom environment that was

established before these lessons and utilized effectively throughout allowed for very effective discussions, the second aspect that led to student success.

### ***Classroom Discussions***

A foundational piece in Campbell's definition of an open classroom environment (2019, p. 6), and supported by Siegel-Stechler (2021), is that students engage in discussion. Researchers have found many benefits of discussion outside of promoting an open classroom environment, from supporting students' civic knowledge and competency (Teegelbeckers et al., 2023; Youniss, 2011) to building their notions of social responsibility and civic values (White & Mistry, 2019).

Because they knew how important discussions are to students' development, Authors #2 and #3 ensured students engaged in formal and informal discussions throughout the mini-unit. It was clear students were adept at engaging in discussions respectfully and had practice with both structured and unstructured approaches. Because they were already used to discussion as a regular part of the classroom, Authors #2 and #3 included opportunities for students to talk to each other as integral parts of their lessons. In lesson one, after building a base of knowledge about the legislative branch, students discussed surprising and interesting aspects of the legislative branch. In lesson two, students engaged in discussion during a gallery walk, then again when Harnisch introduced the concept of checks and balances. Students

began lesson three by discussing and debating their reactions to *Terry v Ohio*, 1968.

During all three lessons, students discussed aspects of each branch they found interesting and relevant to them. Authors #2 and #3 encouraged students to talk about what they were finding, share with each other, and write the pieces that resonated with them onto the leaves they added to the tree outline.

### ***Relevance to Students' Lives***

A variety of factors impact how students experience classroom discussions (Claes et al., 2017), indicating the importance of tailoring discussions to the individual students in a classroom. Making content relevant to students is central to any approach to civics education, not only discussions (Brown & Silvestri, 2014; Gainous & Martens, 2012). Experiential approaches (in which students directly engage in activities relevant to themselves and the content) seem to be especially effective in promoting civic engagement (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022; Winthrop, 2020).

In nearly every portion of each lesson, Authors #2 and #3 ensured students could relate information they were learning about the three branches to their lives. In the first lesson, Wagner tailored the information to the students when describing the legislative branch. She used their actual representatives as examples, oriented students to their own state, and included prompts in the guide for students to make personal connections.

To introduce the second lesson, Harnisch elicited students' understanding of the word *executive* which included explicit examples of connections to their lives. Throughout the rest of the lesson, students shared how the branch connected to their lives as they completed their graphic organizer. The third lesson started with students judging a real-life scenario based on a supreme court case. Harnisch encouraged them to base their decisions on their own experiences before learning about the actual decision. Like the previous two lessons, the guide students used to gather information about the judicial branch included prompts with relations to their lives.

Students completed each lesson by writing information about each branch on leaves, which were attached to a whiteboard (Figures 1-3). They were free to write whatever they wanted, as long as it conveyed factual information about each branch. Examples included basic key facts, such as (edited for clarity), "The congress is elected by the people," "The V.P. is the head of the senate," "You have to be born in the U.S. to be president," and "The judicial branch is in charge of deciding the meaning of laws, how to apply them to real situations, and whether the law breaks the rules of the constitution." Students also included facts that they found interesting, even if they were not particularly important. Some examples include (edited for clarity), "In the senate, Wyoming has as much power as California," "The president has to be ready to travel at any time," "There are 15 cabinet departments," and, "The highest floor of the supreme court building houses

a gym, including a basketball court called 'the highest court in the land'."

### **Challenges**

As successful as these lessons were, they were not without challenges. Given that both preservice teachers (Authors #2 and #3) were in their first semester of experience in the role of teachers. As such, they did not have a deep well of strategies and experiences to draw from. In the observations conducted by McParker, not all transitions were smooth, some of the students needed regular redirection, and some students participated more in discussions than others. Especially in the third lesson, which began with a discussion about *Terry v Ohio*, 1968, it might have been beneficial for students to follow a discussion protocol. The students in the class were used to sharing their opinions and talking with each other, but they did not often engage in more structured discussions. McParker noted that, though the discussion went relatively well, several students minimally participated, and two students did a significant amount of talking.

Another challenge throughout the lessons had to do with the nature of the learning goals. In these three lessons, Authors #2 and #3 set out to expose students to basic knowledge about the three branches. They provided a range of sources for students to interact with, allowing for a wide variety of takeaways. Students generally identified key aspects of each branch, as described above, but also included facts that are not particularly important and some that were essentially copied from a

source.

We do not have a realistic mechanism for assessing students' long-term retention of what they learned, so it is unclear whether these lessons will contribute to students' future civic engagement. That said, most students who were surveyed 10 months after these lessons, with no time to review, were able to recall at least some key facts about the three branches of government in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

By utilizing an open classroom environment, incorporating discussion, and explicitly connecting each topic to students' lives, Authors #2 and #3 supported their students in gaining the knowledge necessary for civic engagement in the future (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021) and in the present (Payne et al., 2020). In lessons about the three branches of the U.S. government, students engaged in discussions and explored aspects of each branch relevant to them. The classroom environment was open, such that students were free to share their thoughts and opinions without judgment, including on their final tasks in each lesson: writing aspects of each branch relevant to their lives on a leaf to post on a tree representing the U.S. system of government.

Through these lessons, Authors #2 and #3 highlighted examples of how teachers can engage students in civic concepts, such as the three branches of government in the U.S., using approaches supported by research (Claes et al., 2017; Gainous &

Martens, 2012; Martens & Gainous, 2012; Siegel-Stechler, 2021; Teegelbeckers et al., 2023; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022; Youniss, 2011). It remains to be seen how civically engaged these students will be in the future, but after experiencing these three lessons, they have a foundation of understanding they can build upon.

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