The Declaration of Independence: A Document that Defined a Nation

By Eva-Marie Simon
SUBJECT AREA: SOCIAL STUDIES

GRADE LEVEL: SIXTH GRADE

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION: How did Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence affect the daily lives of both the original American colonists and today’s American citizens?

PA ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

8.1.6 A – Understand chronological thinking and distinguish between past, present and future time.
  ● People and events in time.

8.1.6 B – Explain and analyze historical sources.
  ● Literal meaning of a historical passage.

8.1.6 D – Describe and explain historical research.
  ● Primary sources.

R6.A.2.5.1 - Summarize the major points, processes, and/or events of a nonfictional text as a whole.

R6.A.1.4 - Identify and explain the main ideas and relevant details.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

● Students will understand how the Declaration of Independence improved the lives of the original colonists, as well as our lives today.
● Students will recognize Thomas Jefferson as the primary creator of the Declaration of Independence.
● Students will understand what prompted/motivated Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence.

DURATION: This lesson will be carried out in two 50 minute class periods.
MATERIALS & CITATION OF RESOURCES:

Computer, projector, screen, chart paper, markers paper, pencils, copies of the Declaration of Independence.

Declaration of Independence, Digital Collections: Library of Congress-Rare Books and Special Collections Division (LJ239).


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INQUIRY-BASED INSTRUCTION:

**Wonder:** Engage the students by asking them what their lives would be like if they did not have the freedom to speak and worship freely. Explain that this was the case for the original American colonists before they broke free from British rule.

**Connect:** Provide the students with examples of individuals who do not enjoy the freedoms that many Americans take for granted.

**Reflect:** Ask the students how they would feel/how their lives would be different if they were not able to enjoy the freedoms of speech and religion.

**Express:** Have students break into groups of 3-4 and discuss instances that they have witnessed in which individuals are not treated fairly or kindly simply because of their race, ethnicity or religious background.

**Construct:** The class, as a whole, will create a two-column poster highlighting ways that the original colonists were persecuted under British rule and the freedoms that they began to enjoy as a result of the Declaration of Independence. Students will also be asked to complete individual essays (2 typed double-spaced pages in length) detailing at least four major points that they learned throughout the lesson.

**Investigate:** Students will explore the actual Declaration of Independence via the Library of Congress website.
DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES:

THIS SECTION CONTAINS THE WONDER PORTION OF MY LESSON.

I will begin this lesson by explaining the various ways that the original colonists were persecuted by British rulers. Unlike the numerous Constitutional freedoms that we enjoy as Americans today, the original American colonists who were subject to British rule were not allowed to practice the religion of their choosing or speak freely or negatively about the government or its actions. Additionally, the original colonists/British citizens were forced to pay various taxes on everyday goods, making the cost of daily living very expensive for the average man. If British citizens attempted to complain about the taxes, saying that they were too high, too numerous or unfair, they were severely punished by the government officials who enacted the taxes. I will ask the students to indicate, by a show of hands, how many of them practice a certain religion. I will then explain to the students that we are very lucky to be able to follow and practice whatever religion we choose. The original American colonists who were forced to submit to the unjust laws created by British rulers did not have the luxury of religious freedom. They could only worship as British rulers and lawmakers saw fit. Those who chose to engage in foreign religious practices had to suffer severe consequences and punishments at the hand of the British government.
Similarly, I will explain to the students that speaking negatively about any government official or established rule/law was considered to be a serious crime. The original colonists longed for a less severe government that permitted them to have a say in how their country was run. I will also explain to the students that this was not only an issue hundreds of years ago for the original American colonists before this country was created, it continues to be an issue for numerous countries around the world (i.e. China and Korea) whose citizens are ruled via a Communist government.

Next, I will engage the students in brief small group discussions encouraging them to describe how they would feel if they had to submit to British rule and could not enjoy the many freedoms that so many Americans take for granted today. I will circulate around the room, stopping at each group to ask a discussion provoking question (i.e. “How would you feel if some of the members of the football team physically beat you and called you names because you aren’t strong enough or coordinated enough to play on the team?”) After obtain various student responses, I will ask the students to come up with several examples of unfair treatment that they have witnessed in their lives (i.e. students who are ridiculed because of their religious affiliation, race or sexual orientation). After a brief period, I will ask one
student from each small group to record one injustice that they have witnessed in their daily lives on chart paper at the front of the room.

**THIS SECTION CONTAINS THE CONSTRUCT PORTION OF MY LESSON.**

Next, I will engage the class, as a whole, in a group activity. I will tape a large piece of poster paper to the front board. The sheet will be divided into two columns: “Ways the Original Colonists Were Persecuted Under British Rule” and “Freedoms the Colonists Enjoyed Under the Declaration of Independence.” Once the columns are established, I will lead a class-wide discussion, asking individual students to place items (one at a time, minimum of five per column) in the columns, outlining and describing what they have learned.

Finally, as an individual assessment, each student will be provided with oral instructions and required to complete a two page double spaced journal entry detailing at least four major points that he/she learned throughout this two-day lesson. The journal entries must include at least three specific examples of repressed individuals or events that were discussed during the lesson. In addition to listing the events, the students must provide their individual opinions, documenting how they would feel if the instance had happened to them. Finally, the student must recognize (within their essay) which section of the Declaration of Independence protects them from suffering an injustice that is similar in nature to the one they chose to write about.
THIS SECTION CONTAINS THE INVESTIGATE PORTION OF MY LESSON.

As a concluding activity, the students will visit the Library of Congress website to view the various drafts and photographs depicting the Declaration of Independence and its creation. To conclude, we will discuss the various drafts and summarize the significance of the final copy as it relates to our freedom today.
ESSAY RUBRIC: Sixth Grade Social Studies – Declaration of Independence Project

Proper use of grammar and punctuation and sentence/paragraph structure.
4 All of my paragraphs have a topic and concluding sentence and are free of spelling/grammatical errors.
3 The essay contains fewer than five spelling/grammatical errors and sentence structures are somewhat varied and mostly correct.
2 Paragraphs do not contain clear topic/supporting sentences. More than 8 spelling/grammatical errors are present.
1 No clear topic sentence is distinguishable. Supporting sentences do not adhere to the curriculum discussed. More than 10 spelling/grammar errors are distinguishable.

My essay has a clearly stated main idea, containing at least three paragraphs, each of which has at least three sentences supporting the essay’s main idea and the paragraph’s topic sentence.
4 Writing is clear, concise and contains all of the required elements.
3 Writing/content is fairly easy to read/follow and contains at least two main points per paragraph that support the subject material.
2 Writing does not contain a clearly stated main idea or sufficient (minimum 3-4) supporting sentences details.
1 No main recognizable main idea is stated at the beginning of the paper or at the beginning of the paragraphs. Main ideas are not presented or supported by the material that was discussed/read throughout the lesson.

Ability to identify required elements and make connections between these elements and personal life experiences.
4 My essay makes clear connections between the injustices that the subjects in my essay faced and injustices that I, myself have suffered or witnessed.
3 Connections between the injustices suffered by the subjects I have written about and me are present but not completely clearly stated and connected.
2 Injustices suffered by subjects that were discussed throughout the lesson are stated but not in a clear manner that shows that I understand how they relate to injustices that I have suffered.
1 The required elements and connections required in the essay are difficult to recognize and not well connected to one another.

Sentence structures and word choices show creativity, originality and individual thought.
4 Sentence structures are varied and ideas are presented creatively.
3 Sentence structures are somewhat varied and presented in a way that shows some creativity.
2 Sentence structures contain fewer than three errors but are not varied. Ideas are not clear or creative.
1 Sentence structures contain more than three errors and are not varied. No original thought is evident. Ideas appear to be copied from previously presented material.