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The New Middle Class in the Gilded Age

Payton Pulkrabek
St. Cloud State University

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Title: The New Middle Class in the Gilded Age

Author: Payton Pulkrabek

Grade Levels: 9th-12th grade

Time: One class period of 50 minutes

Focus Statement: As the Carnegie's and Rockefeller's led the way for the wealthy and the struggling poor worked tirelessly, there was a rather large portion of individuals that did not quite fit within the two extremes of rich and poor. During the Gilded Age, many institutions were questioned for the first time in United States history, one of them being the class system. While many Americans were weary of actually placing a class system in society because of negative connotations with Europe, a class system already existed in society during the late nineteenth century, it just did not have an official title. The phrase "middle class" was officially inserted into society in 1889. The middle class consisted of professionals who were organized and had specific criteria, like education, for being a part of the group. The middle class changed the social aspects of the United States and also changed the geographic look since most middle class members began moving out of the larger cities to create suburbs. The Gilded Age gave a name to the middle class and its effects are still present today.

The National Council for History Education recommends that students develop several habits of mind as they study history and the one I will attempt to build in this lesson is the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions. Students will be looking at the group of people who were considered middle class during the Gilded Age and investigating how they got put into that category and who said they were middle class. What began as an informal institution became a formal one during this time period. Students will look deeper into how the institution/group of middle class citizens formed and what they are like today.

MN Standard:

MN Standard 9/12.4.4.20. As the United States shifted from its agrarian roots into an industrial and global power, the rise of big business, urbanization and immigration led to institutionalized racism, ethnic and class conflict and new efforts at reform. (Development of an Industrial United States: 1870-1920)

MN Standard Benchmark 9/12.4.4.20.3. Analyze how the shift to mechanized farming and industrial production changed patterns in social organization, consumption and popular culture, and domestic life, including the rapid growth of cities in diverse regions of the country. (Development of an Industrial United States: 1870-1920)

Learning Objectives:

- Students will define the middle class in their words.
- Students will recognize the difference between the people considered middle class during the Gilded Age and the people considered middle class today.
- Students will read and analyze a news article and relate it back to previous knowledge to create inferences about today.

Resources:

- Whiteboard and whiteboard marker or chalkboard and chalk
- Projector, Smartboard, or doc-cam
- Definition of middle class from the online Merriam Webster dictionary

Middle class. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster online*. Retrieved from

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/middle%20class>

- Information obtained from:

Oakes, J. (2011). *Of the People* (pp. 493-496). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Wiebe, Robert H. *The Search for Order*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

- *The Gilded Age Middle Class* worksheet, one copy for each student
- Business Insider online article *How much you have to earn to be considered middle class in every U.S. state*, one copy for each student

Kane, L. & Kiersz, A. (2015). How much you have to earn to be considered middle class in every U.S. state. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from

<http://www.businessinsider.com/middle-class-in-every-us-state-2015-4>

Methods/Procedures

Beginning (15 minutes):

- Begin the class by asking students what they think of when they hear the phrase “middle class?” (not rich, not poor) What kind of person comes to mind? (a typical/normal person, a teacher, their parents, people who work office jobs) What images or phrases have they heard associated with the middle class? (politicians talking about helping the middle class, people wearing suits, men with jobs versus women) Who do they know personally who they would consider to be a part of the middle class? (Parents, neighbors, aunts/uncles, friends parents, what jobs do they have?)
- Write students responses on the board. Once students have finished communicating their idea of the middle class, draw a person on the board who exemplifies the list of traits. The drawing can be as basic as a stick figure, however, try to include details in the drawing of what type of job they would have, house they would live in, etc. Either the instructor can draw this person or the instructor can call on students to take turns adding certain traits.
- Once the drawing is complete, take a moment to analyze it as a group. Ask students why they chose certain traits and how those traits are associated with the middle class.

Middle: Instructional Strategies / Learning Activities (25 minutes):

- Explain to the class that today's topic will be the emerging middle class during the Gilded Age.
- Show the class today's Merriam Webster dictionary definition of the phrase "middle class" which is: a class occupying a position between the upper class and the lower class; *especially* : a fluid heterogeneous socioeconomic grouping composed principally of business and professional people, bureaucrats, and some farmers and skilled workers sharing common social characteristics and values. Project the definition on the smartboard, projector, or doc-cam for all to see. Go through the definition aloud (underline/highlight words on projector if possible) and explain the meaning.
- Describe to the class that the term "middle class" was first introduced in the United States in 1889. This is crucial considering Americans did not want to have a class system in the United States like Europe had. The whole reason the United States was ever created was to avoid religious persecution and to escape the class system so this was a big deal that the term middle class was coming back.
- Describe who would be a part of this "new" middle class including professional managers, lawyers, educators, social workers, doctors, government employees, clerks, and cashiers.
- Describe what the family life would look like during this time period.
 - Cult of Domesticity: Women submissive to their husbands, strong religious morals, asexual humans, housework, heavy outfits full of material to prevent wandering minds of men, women were to be virgins, men were strong
 - Family Life: Only 5-10% of families were part of the middle class, not very many, these same men had better jobs now so women weren't forced to work as much.
 - Characteristics of middle class families: Fewer children since infant mortality rate decreased, more leisure time, higher education, more schooling opportunities for primary, secondary, and college education, lived outside the city more into what would eventually be the suburbs, could afford to move, had more privacy when not living so close to the city, more affluence.
- Have students think, pair, share the following questions to form a discussion. Ask the class:
 - Why was a class system officially introduced? (*In order to put some sort of divide for those in between the wealthy millionaires and the struggling poor*)
 - Who was in the middle class during the Gilded Age? (*Professionals, lawyers, doctors, managers of corporations, government employees, clerks, etc.*)
 - Was there a class system already in place during the Gilded Age? Or was the middle class simply invented overnight? (*A three class system was already visible in society during the Gilded Age. It was clear that as jobs began becoming professionalized that there was a new group of people that did not fit in with the extremely wealthy or the struggling poor.*)

- How did education play a role in influencing the middle class? High school and college? (*With more regulations on schools, more children were completing more high school. Colleges gave way to the professionalization of the middle class. When colleges started “normal schools” for teacher education, for example, the colleges only enhanced the level of prestige associated with the position and they legitimized the position.*)

End / Summary (10 minutes):

- Wrap up the lesson by briefly reviewing how the middle class was created, who was a part of the middle class during the Gilded Age, and how the middle class has changed since the Gilded Age. Either give a summary aloud or ask questions and call on students for responses.
- Hand out the assignment which consists of a worksheet, *The Gilded Age Middle Class*, and the Business Insider article that coincides with the worksheet (both are attached).
- Explain the assignment. Students are to read the article assigned and answer short answer questions on the worksheet about the article and information discussed in class today. The goal is for students to use their newly acquired knowledge about the origin of the middle class to investigate why there is much discussion still today about who is a part of the middle class.
- If extra time, students can begin working on the assignment individually in class.

Afterwards

Provisions for Individual Differences

- Have typed out notes of the lecture/discussion available as a handout for students.
- Students with cognitive disabilities can have a differentiated worksheet with questions derived only from the lesson and not the article.
- Strategically place certain students together during the think, pair, share activity in order to have enhance their discussion.

Self-Reflection

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