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EDITORS' NOTES

Cultivating Civic Life through Studying Current Events

by Kathryn M. Obenchain and Julie L. Pennington
Guest Editors

A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to Farce or Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

—James Madison, 1822

“Knowledge will forever govern ignorance.” That is a powerful statement and one that supports our broad mission as educators.¹ But there is more to Madison’s statement. In democratic nations, such as the United States, citizens need access to a wide variety of information in order to make informed and reasoned decisions. Access to, or the “means of acquiring” information, means more than the ability to click on a news website, open a newspaper, or read a blog. Access also means having the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to know how to find and evaluate information, ways of thinking about that information, and knowing what to do with our new understandings about the world we live in.

How do our students understand the intersection of their lives with the lives of others in their local, national, and global communities? One strategy that social studies teachers use to help students understand those intersections, and to connect the classroom to the broader communities, is through the use of current events. Current events may be addressed in a variety of ways in the elementary classroom, including a daily news portion of the school day, or as content for teaching students how to engage in civil discourse.² In this special issue of *Social Studies and Young Learner*, we asked authors to share ideas for explicitly connecting civic life in and out of the classroom through the study of current events. We offered a guiding question to authors: How do we help elementary students explore current events, whether they be local, national, or global, in ways that support their development as informed and engaged democratic citizens? This question, situated within the goals of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* provided the framework for this issue. Further, most, if not all of us are familiar with the NCSS definition of social studies, including its clear statement, “The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally

diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”³ The authors writing for this issue of *SSYL* offer unique and powerful ways to include current events in the elementary social studies classroom, with explicit attention to the role that learning about current events can play in supporting the development of an informed and engaged citizenry.

Carolyn O’Mahony’s opening article, “A Guide to Selecting Powerful Current Events for Study,” provides a wonderful framework for teachers in choosing the types of current events to examine. Specifically, she situates this framework within important social studies concepts such as authority, and offers related questions such as “Who has authority in this situation?” This framework is useful for both teacher and student in determining what types of current events to study and what sorts of questions about an event can enhance social studies learning and promote civic life.

In their article “Hunger in Our Midst: Civic Learning in the Context of Difficult Issues,” **Jennifer Hauver** and **Glennnda Shealey-Griffiths** provide a great example of engaged citizenship as they detail an elementary unit of study in which students explored the issue of hunger in their local community. Students not only learned about hunger as an issue facing their community (including some of their classmates), they learned how to use community resources and how to take action to address immediate and long term needs.

Nancy P. Gallavan and **Shannon R. Maiden** walk us through the process of teaching students to navigate the technology (whether it be a map or an online interactive resource) for the purpose of exploring current events. Their article, “When Natural Disasters Strike: How Can We Help? Participatory Citizenship and Internet Resources,” describes how students can put their new understandings to use in ways that will help their fellow citizens. These authors also provide classroom handouts that comprise the Pullout in this issue of *SSYL*.

Karon LeCompte, **Brooke Blevins**, and **Brandi Ray** share classroom experiences in their article “Teaching Current Events and Media Literacy: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, and Active Citizenship.” Upper elementary students used a variety of research skills to identify and explore current events and issues within their own community. Using an action civics approach, students also developed and enacted a plan to address the issues that their exploration of local current events highlighted

The article “Addressing Current Events in Age-Appropriate Ways: Learning about the Confederate Flag Controversy” by **Jeannette D. Alarcón**, **Pratigya Marhatta**, and **Emily Price** is a powerful example of the importance of teaching students how to engage in an informed discussion about controversial current events. Through activities focused on the need to be an informed participant in a discussion, the value of listening to

differing opinions, and a citizen’s responsibility to take action, the first graders in this lesson had the opportunity to engage in powerful and purposeful social studies.

In the concluding article, “‘Now Let’s Decide’: Using Current Events to Practice Democracy,” authors **Terence A. Beck** and **Walter C. Parker** provide thoughtful guidance on both choosing an appropriate current event, as well as the implementation of a specific decision-making framework. Working from their goal of focusing on current events that require a solution, the authors detail how they chose the topic of homelessness and how the topic was explored using the decision-making framework. Each of these dimensions provide life-long lessons for engaging in community and civic life.

We believe there is something for every elementary teacher in this issue. We hope that you find this diverse set of articles useful as you consider using current events as a way to cultivate civic life. 🌍

Notes

1. James Madison writing to W. T. Barry (August 4, 1822), press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html.
2. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education* (14th ed.) (Boston: Pearson, 2012); Jeff Passe, “A Counter-Intuitive Strategy: Reduce Student Stress by Teaching Current Events,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no 3 (2008): 27–31.
3. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD, 2010): 3.
4. Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education* (14th ed.) (Boston: Pearson, 2012).



Flat Stanley and Flat Stella help FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) teach children about preparing for disasters. (Fairfax County, Virginia, Fire Station #40 in 2012)

Photo courtesy of Fairfax County available through Flickr.com