Addressing Current Events in Age-Appropriate Ways: Learning about the Confederate Flag Controversy

Jeannette D. Alarcón, Pratigya Marhatt, and Emily Price

The purpose of this lesson is to engage young students in thinking about the complexity of socio-historical symbols in the present day. After careful preparation, we decided to teach about the decision by the state legislature in July 2015 to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse grounds. Presenting the Confederate flag as a persistently controversial symbol helps young students understand that, in a democracy, it is important to pay attention to how citizens reconcile differing ideals and values. The outcome of such a lesson should not be simply asking students to name whether the flag represents something “good” or “bad.” Rather, the emphasis should be on helping students to see that symbols carry complicated meanings that could spur civic disagreement. Further, in a democratic society, engaged and informed citizens can discuss a controversial issue and then use the democratic process to reach a resolution.

The Importance of Transformative Citizenship

In the delimited time that many elementary schools allow for social studies instruction, educators must continue to share lessons that engage students in meaningful and purposeful social studies learning. We can strive to re-imagine elementary social studies spaces that foster traits of citizenship with an orientation toward social betterment. Transformative citizenship education “is about helping students grow into citizens who tackle barriers to greater democracy.” Past articles in Social Studies and the Young Learner have described teachers engaging with students in “active” citizenship, in learning about different ways that citizens can take action, and in learning to value various perspectives. We hope to contribute to this effort by sharing our experiences working with first grade students toward understanding a contemporary social issue. As a country still embroiled in various forms of racial conflict, America can, we hope, see students as potential change agents who need opportunities to make sense of public debates, particularly when they spring forth from unresolved tensions rooted in our nation’s history.

Elementary school students find out about current social issues in myriad ways including family and friends and popular media messages (e.g., television, the Internet). Often, media stories contain polarizing accounts that describe differences of race, social class, gender, or religious affiliation. It is important for students to learn how to engage in civic dialogue about current social events and to work toward understanding differing points of view with the goal of social betterment. Further, engaging young children in honest and authentic dialogue about complex social topics encourages a sense of collectivity that promotes students’ sense of ownership in their communities.

The remainder of this article describes an integrated lesson for first grade. Because the participating teachers’ school district endorses the Close Reading Strategy, our lesson drew upon it for using text and images to build student background knowledge. While this strategy is helpful for presenting content information, it does not explicitly allow space for in-depth discussion. In order to create the space for students to practice meaningful speaking and listening skills, we used the Talking Circle as a strategy for sharing ideas, beliefs, understanding and learning. (Figure 1) Our aim was to provide an example for matching social studies content with literacy strategies in order to more purposefully integrate teaching about complex current events into elementary classrooms.

We used these two strategies to promote students’ thinking about the significance of the lowering of the Confederate Flag at the South Carolina State Capitol and to help them make connections between this event and community action to make a change. We used Close Reading to provide important information for students to consider when thinking about how citizens interact when they disagree, and how they use democratic pathways for making change (e.g., using the legislative system). We used the
Talking Circle in the activation phase of the lesson and again as a closing activity.

Creating Spaces for Purposefully Engaging Ideas

Students of all ages navigate social experiences both within and outside classrooms. Teaching young learners about civic life should include building an understanding about how current events are connected with historical moments and to students’ own experiences and the communities to which they belong. Further, when teachers draw upon current events that highlight the contemporary moment, they help students see relationships between themselves and the larger national landscape. Using current events as a springboard for classroom discussion enhances opportunities for students to learn from each other and learn how make sense of their own experiences alongside what they see represented in the popular media. Building active listening and speaking skills is crucial to teaching and learning that invites thought-provoking discussion as a step toward fostering transformative citizenship. Spaces for practicing listening and speaking, as well as reading and writing, in elementary classrooms bolster learning about advocacy by encouraging students to articulate ideas about particular topics.

Lesson Overview: Flags are Symbols

As our planning team met to discuss the possibilities for approaching this difficult topic in two first-grade classrooms, we turned to the social studies standards to help us articulate our social studies learning objectives. Additionally, we wanted to pay attention to developing the social studies skills needed to sustain and advance democratic governance. Ultimately, we drew upon the NCSS themes of **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, as well as **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**. We envisioned using the Talking Circle to help students practice social studies skills related to comparing and contrasting time periods, opinions, attitudes and beliefs as well as explaining why current events matter.

The goals of the lesson were to teach students to understand flags as important symbols in our society, and that citizens can voice their opinions to make change. Further, we aimed to facilitate students’ realization that flags carry meanings that are not always agreed upon by all citizens and that sometimes citizens disagree about whether or not a symbol from the past is still relevant today. We hoped to engage the students’ thinking about how to advocate and take action for change. We purposefully created space for students to articulate connections between a prevalent current event and engaged citizenship. To move toward these goals, we crafted an integrated lesson drawing upon English Language Arts Common Core Standards (ELACCS).
Our geographic location in the Southeastern United States made the topic of lowering the Confederate Flag in South Carolina pertinent to our classroom. We understood that leading young children in discussions of controversial topics can be quite challenging. Figure 2 provides background for the teacher. It’s a historical overview of the debate over the Confederate flag since the flag’s first use during the 1800s. While this material provided could be adapted for use with elementary students, this figure is meant to provide a brief socio-historical context for teachers. A longer article providing background is available from the Institute for Southern Studies.13

Close Reading: Using Text to Build Background Knowledge
Once we completed our first Talking Circle, (see Figure 3) we engaged in a Close Reading activity to help build background around the current event, lowering the Confederate flag at the South Carolina State House which took place in July 2015. We read aloud short pro and con statements about that event. (Handout for students, p. 25). The Close Reading strategy requires the teacher to read aloud text that is above the reading level of the students, which was the case here. During each reading we used think-aloud comments and questions to guide the students to deeper understanding of the content presented in the article. This was an important step in scaffolding students toward understanding how to use what they learn from text to support a particular stance. Our final reading honed in on the notion that the people engaging in the debate are citizens who know how to use their voices to make a change.

In this lesson, we knew a second Talking Circle would follow the Close Reading, so we recorded what students said when responding to our questions. (For example: students stated that they recognized the Confederate flag; they mentioned seeing this flag in their own communities; and they described hearing their parents talk about this flag). Because disagreement can be an uncomfortable experience, we wanted students to see an example of the ways in which citizens reconcile differing perspectives.

Figure 2. Key Events in the History of the Confederate Battle Flag

Civil War Era:
- Confederate states use a variety of battle flags
- General Robert E. Lee’s Army in 1861 used the Confederate Army Battle Flag (later this would become the most common symbol of the Confederacy)
- After the Civil War, the Confederate flag is mainly used in memorials

World War II Era
- The Confederate flag begins to be linked with Southern identity as many troops from Southern states fly it over their quarters.
- The Flag becomes recognized internationally

Civil Rights Era
- President Truman proposes civil rights legislation that would eliminate poll taxes and make lynching a federal offense
- Mississippians take up the Confederate flag as symbol of protest against such civil rights policies
- Delegates from other Southern states follow Mississippi’s lead in adopting the Confederate flag as a symbol for protesting the national Democratic Party’s civil rights platform
- The Southern states’ delegates wave the Flag as they walk out of the Democratic National Convention in 1948
- “Dixiecrats” hold their own State’s Rights Convention and fly the Confederate Flag in Alabama
- After the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 and through 1960s, the Confederate battle flag was recognized as a symbol of resistance to the dismantling of Jim Crow structures in the South. Several Southern states elect to display the Confederate battle flag on State House grounds and other state buildings
- Segregationist, Gov. George Wallace raises the Confederate battle flag over the Alabama State Capitol just prior to Robert Kennedy’s visit
- Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the late 1990s, students, civil rights’ groups and many others begin a series of protests to remove the Confederate flag from state grounds (including South Carolina beginning in 1977)

Late 20th and early 21st centuries
- Neo-confederate groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens adopt the Confederate flag as an organizational symbol
- Black South Carolinians continue to call for the removal of the flag from the State House and organize a tourism boycott. Finally, in 2000 the flag is relocated to a less prominent area on the State House grounds
- During the early 2000s, several Southern states remove the Confederate battle flag from state grounds and other state sanctioned property like license plates (e.g., Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina)
- A Massacre at Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church killing nine people during a prayer service, adds energy to the debate over the flag in South Carolina
- In July 2015, the Confederate battle flag is removed from the South Carolina State House


and the North Carolina Social Studies Standards for first grade.12

Figure 3. Talking Circle: Lowering the Confederate Flag in South Carolina

Handout for students, p. 25. The Close Reading strategy requires the teacher to read aloud text that is above the reading level of the students, which was the case here. During each reading we used think-aloud comments and questions to guide the students to deeper understanding of the content presented in the article. This was an important step in scaffolding students toward understanding how to use what they learn from text to support a particular stance. Our final reading honed in on the notion that the people engaging in the debate are citizens who know how to use their voices to make a change.

In this lesson, we knew a second Talking Circle would follow the Close Reading, so we recorded what students said when responding to our questions. (For example: students stated that they recognized the Confederate flag; they mentioned seeing this flag in their own communities; and they described hearing their parents talk about this flag). Because disagreement can be an uncomfortable experience, we wanted students to see an example of the ways in which citizens reconcile differing perspectives.
We felt that Close Reading gave our students the exposure to enactments of civic life they needed to discuss this topic from an intellectual rather than emotional standpoint. This worked because the students had become familiar enough with the text, via the multiple reads, to be prompted to identify supporting evidence for the ideas they shared.

A Talking Circle: Promoting Student-Centered Learning

After engaging with the text three times, we held a second Talking Circle, where we grappled with the conflicting points of view in a respectful way. During the process we emphasized building upon one another’s ideas without valuing one over another or citing one as correct. Students’ initial thinking was supported while we simultaneously asked them to consider perspectives other than their own. We talked through what people were saying about the Confederate flag and how that led to its removal from the South Carolina State House grounds even though not all people agreed with this choice. The Talking Circle provided a mode for listening and speaking that emphasized including every voice to work toward understanding and solving community issues.

Implementing the Talking Circle proved valuable for teacher decision-making as well. The space provided information to guide decisions about when and how to teach about difficult social issues. Since we heard the types of social issues students are grappling with directly from them, we facilitated each round of the Talking Circle to focus on the themes the student felt were

---

Figure 3. Lesson: Controversy over a Flag (Abbreviated)
by Pratigya Marhatta, First Grade Teacher, Gibsonville, North Carolina (p_marhat@uncg.edu)

(Day One) Begin with a Talking Circle aimed at finding out what students already know about flags. The teacher asks students to identify flags in the room. Next, ask what the flags mean. Finally, ask students to list the different types of flags (given our geographic location and recent news events, we anticipate the students naming the Confederate flag). After posing each question, facilitate the talking circle so that each student is given the opportunity to share her/his thoughts.

Read the two I CAN statements aloud at beginning of lesson.

- “I can understand that a flag is a symbol that carries meaning and that the meaning can be different for different community members.”
- “I can have a voice in my community and help make decisions.”

The teacher says, “So far we have talked about what flags mean to different people. Each of you has helped me list the flags we know about. We have also talked about the fact that some flags are new to us and some have different meanings for different people. (Repeat the first I CAN statement above.) Now, as a member of this community, you have a voice. Your voice is a way to make your opinion heard. That means that what you think matters and you should have the chance to say what you think. This is important for citizens to do even when their voices do not make a change right away. Everybody needs to be heard. (Repeat the second I CAN statement above.)

Instructional Presentation/Sequence: (30 minutes):
Read aloud a Time for Kids article about the Confederate flag.** First, students will only listen to the text and circle any unknown words. Ask students to identify unknown words, and help them with the meanings.

Before the second read, state the purpose by letting students know that this article contains opinions about the flag from two different perspectives. During the second reading, ask students to mark places when they notice a difference of opinion expressed. After reading, the teacher connects the text to the I CAN statements.

(Day Two) Teacher and students read the text for the third time. When reading, teacher will stop and address the key details and ask text-dependent questions. Students “turn and talk” with a partner about the key details and text-dependent questions. Students “turn and talk” with a partner about the key details and text-dependent questions.

1. What did the lawmakers in South Carolina decide to do about the Confederate flag?
2. What did Confederate flag defenders see it as a symbol of?
3. What did opponents of the Confederate flag see it as a symbol of?

After the third reading, teacher will have students join her in a Talking Circle. Review Talking Circle procedures, and use the handout (Figure 4) containing images and brief summary to remind students of the main points and theme for the discussion. Guiding questions include: What happens when community members disagree? How might the meaning of a flag or other symbol change over time? Or what might make people change their minds about a flag or symbol? Now students can share their thoughts with the whole class.

Closure/Evaluation: (10 minutes)
Observe how well students are able to stay on topic and use concepts like “symbol,” “controversy,” and “decision making” when describing their thoughts and ideas.

Note
A Controversy over a Historical Flag

In the summer of 2015, people in South Carolina were talking about a flag. Some people like this flag, and want to fly it on the statehouse grounds. Some people do not like this flag and want to take it down.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporters Say</th>
<th>Opponents Say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The Confederate flag is a symbol of the South and a part of their history.</td>
<td>• The Confederate flag is a symbol of the racism and slavery that happened in the South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People want to honor their family members, ancestors who fought under that flag a long time ago.</td>
<td>• The flag has been used—over many years—at times when the rights of African Americans were not respected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley and the state legislators decided not to fly this flag on the statehouse grounds any more. Anybody can fly it in their own yard if they want to.

important. In other words, our students’ questions (about why the Confederate flag is still a problem if it has been taken down) spurred our thinking about creating a historical inquiry project that would explain when and how the flag came into use. While a Talking Circle does take time to enact, if used purposefully, it can be valuable for building toward mutual understanding and student-centered planning.

Conclusion
Hashing out differing perspectives, particularly those centering on difficult or controversial topics, can be challenging given the time pressures of classroom life. When student voices are centered, teachers have an opportunity to make authentic instructional choices based upon student interest and position active listening as a useful democratic skill. We frame this lesson as a step toward transformative citizenship because it promotes listening carefully to the needs of immediate and larger communities while potentially increasing the spaces for students to practice speaking up to advocate for their ideas and ways of knowing. We, teachers and students, gained important experience engaging with the principles of democratic citizenship. These principles included reaching an understanding of what others were saying and thinking about the ways in which community are able to raise awareness of an issue and enact change.

Notes
11. English Language Arts Common Core Standards (ELACCS), www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/1/.

Jeannette D. Alarcón is an Assistant Professor in Elementary Education in the Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Pratigya Marhatta is a First Grade Teacher at Gibsonville Elementary School in Gibsonville, North Carolina. To request a copy of her lesson plan, email p_marhat@uncg.edu

Emily Price is a First Grade Teacher at Hampton Elementary School in Greensboro, North Carolina