



Letters

Teaching About Tragedy

On September 11, we've been told, "everything changed." Yet so far, *Social Education* has shown little awareness of this. I refer to the October issue's special section on September 11. In reading the section, I was reminded of those cartoons when a character hurtles over a cliff and hovers in mid-air. Only when he looks down does vertigo set in. So far, apparently, NCSS has not yet looked down.

What would it see if it did? For one thing, a nation united around the fact that Americans were attacked as Americans and threatened with annihilation as Americans. For most Americans, in other words, the question of our multicultural identity was rather rudely set aside. Also, on display now is a nation newly aware that not all values and viewpoints are equally valid (that some are not merely inadequate but downright evil, and that some are true and worth dying for).

For most of us, that is, it's a time for our country to fight and win. Yet *Social Education's* overall message is one that would effectively undermine the nation's resolve to fight and win.

One teacher quoted in the issue sums up its perspective best. After acknowledging a need to stop the terrorists from terrorizing us, she says, "I think what is *even more crucial* (emphasis added) for us as educators is to fight against the impending anti-Arab and anti-Muslim propaganda that is bound to follow this tragedy." In this statement, as in so much else in this October issue, we see the multicultural and therapeutic approaches to education that so dominate the profession. The issue's handling of the terrorist assault reflects dramatically the baleful influence of both tendencies.

Two articles in the special section deal with helping children "cope" with the "trauma" of it all. The other two deal with intolerance directed at the Muslim community in America.

The choice of topics is astounding. No articles such as, "The Terrorist Network," "Debating the Concept of Just War," "Pearl Harbor and Sept. 11: The Uses and Abuses of Historical Analogies," "Soldiering and the Warrior Code: Then and Now," the "Saudi-Taliban Connection," "Anti-Semitic Intolerance in the Middle East" or (heaven forbid) "Islamic Fundamentalism: What Kids Need to Know." The November/December issue of *Social Education* only marginally improves on this situation. But the overall focus is the same: on America's misdeeds, not those of the enemy.

In the two "tolerance," articles, Karima Alavi and Zeina Azzam Seikaly assert that Islam is widely mischaracterized in the West as a violent religion, that the West and its colonial heritage are largely to blame for the anger in the Middle East today, and that Arab and Muslim Americans are under dire threat from those who do not understand this.

Bigoted acts have indeed been directed at

American Muslims since September 11. Alavi refers to "numerous" incidents. Yet even she acknowledges, "The tendency to join together in the face of a national tragedy has enabled most Americans to look beyond the race, nationality, and faith of the person who is holding their hands during prayers." In fact, the remarkable story is how few anti-Muslim incidents there have been, and how universally they have been condemned.

So why did *Social Education* devote two of its four October articles on September 11 to a threat effectively checked by the vast majority of Americans? It's not clear. What is clear is how this focus helps discredit America's justifiable anger at Islamofascist terror and its desire to take the war to the enemy with confidence.

This results from the way both articles segue into a litany of complaints about U.S. foreign policy—our siding with Israel, UN sanctions against Iraq, our support for dictatorships in the Middle East today. The complaints are boilerplate leftist charges, and they are presented without reference to opposing views (of, for example, Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Steven Schwartz, Fouad Ajami, or Iranian author Amir Taheri, who recently wrote of the need for Muslims to become much more critical of their own societies instead of looking to the West for an explanation of their sorrows). Few commentators to the right of Edward Said get even a footnote in these articles. Odd for a profession that stresses the need for open debate of controversial issues.

What is most dishonest about this "blame America" perspective is that it is presented as part of a discussion about tolerance, not in a separate article on teaching about the U.S. and the Middle East. The clear implication is that support for U.S. Mideast policy is itself evidence of bigotry. It's hard to imagine a more powerful example of the anti-intellectual potential of multiculturalism in the schools.

At one point, Ms. Seikaly tells us, "Teachers and school administrators have a responsibility to protect [Arab American] students and assure them that they are safe from verbal, physical, and psychological harm." In "The Trauma of Terrorism: Helping Children Cope," Ilene and Michael Berson seek to help "vulnerable" children who "require careful intervention to restore their sense of safety and security." Some of the advice here is sensible. Yet these articles also illustrate how the therapeutic and multicultural perspectives feed one another at the expense of learning. Embedded in both of them are the same political assumptions as in the tolerance articles, and with the same likely result—the undermining of American resolve. The authors ignore the idea that a sense of justified anger might give students some psychological relief. And forget about any support for students who want to aid a full-throated patriotic defense of America.

Instead, the Bersons ask teachers to oppose such views as unwholesome vengefulness, even if this pits them against their communities. They tell us, "Competing values and ethics may cre-

ate stress as students wrestle with anti-violent sentiments, which have been promoted in schools, and revenge-oriented ideology, which provides a simplistic mechanism for coping." Policy issues open to debate are here absorbed into a psychological realm. Americans favoring a strong military response to terrorism are not simply taking a political stand. They are contributing to "stress," undercutting therapeutic nonviolence and resorting to revenge as a "simplistic" coping mechanism. Here leftist politics are disguised as compassionate therapy, just as they are disguised in the other articles as a call for multicultural tolerance.

In the fourth article, Joan Schur tells us of a sing-a-long in her New York City school shortly after September 11. What did they sing? "This Land is Your Land," "If I Had a Hammer," "We Shall Overcome" and "He Has the Whole World in His Hands." Was there no "God Bless America"? Or was it just not worth mentioning?

There is one bright moment amidst all this coping, singing and handholding. At one point, Schur tells us what the students themselves said they wanted to do in the wake of September 11. "The eighth graders wanted discussions of politics; some sixth graders talked about the impending war. Many elementary age children chose to hear a story rather than participate in discussions of events. Very few students opted to go for counseling."

Sounds like a good curriculum strategy for an America under attack. Perhaps the profession should take note.

Jonathan Burack
Fort Atkinson, WI

Karima Alavi responds:

I stand by my article even more, having read Mr. Burack's angry comments. His incendiary rhetoric, using terms like "Islamofascist terror," is exactly the kind of response that all of our articles warn against. Burack knows that the actions of the September 11 terrorists go against the very faith these men professed to follow. Linking Islam with fascism and terror is offensive. Timothy McVeigh was very involved with the Christian Identity Movement, but I would never refer to his actions as being an example of "Christofascist terror." Teachers don't allow that kind of rhetoric in the classroom. Why should NCSS be expected to do so in its publications?

Burack also seems to imply that any young child who feels the need for counseling in these tragic times is somehow an un-American wimp. Perhaps his most telling statement is the one in which he claims: "Yet these articles also illustrate how the *therapeutic and multicultural perspectives feed one another at the expense of learning*" (italics added).

That comment makes it obvious that Burack isn't an educator. If he were, he would know that children feel a very real sense of fear in our society, and that fear rose up a notch on September 11. Students are afraid of gang

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violence, of broken homes, of being victims of another Columbine-type shooting, and now, they're afraid an airplane may come crashing into their schools. Experience has shown us that none of these fears is completely unreasonable. Recent research on the brain tells us that prolonged distress negatively impacts a child's ability to learn. Our body releases stress hormones under these conditions called glucocorticoids. If emotional stress isn't dealt with quickly and on a long-term basis, the result is a toxic effect on the brain's neurons that leads to impaired memory and a reduction in learning skills. Burack's accusation that providing therapy to students is done at the expense of learning is the complete opposite of the truth.

It's a shame that Burack refuses to tolerate people who try to look at world events from both sides (at the same time as he accuses contributors to *Social Education* of being one-sided). Since World War II, the United States has attacked, bombarded, or been involved in war in at least twenty countries in addition to Afghanistan: China, Korea, Guatemala, Indonesia, Cuba, the Congo, Peru, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Grenada, Libya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia, and Yugoslavia. To understand U.S. relations with other countries and the reason for these recurrent military interventions, we need to do more than just state "It's a time for our country to fight and win."

By devoting time to talking about their concerns and to multicultural studies, American students can gain a better sense of their roles as citizens of the Planet Earth, rather than just one nation. The hope is that this will turn them into better world citizens who can comprehend the joys and the sorrows of those other people with whom we share this sometimes beautiful, and sometimes frightening world. That doesn't seem like such a bad idea to me.

Zeina Azzam Seikaly responds:

The articles in the October issue of *Social Education* were written in September, when teachers and students were indeed coping with the trauma of the terrorist attacks. Foremost on the minds of educators was how to help students deal with the tragedies. The backlash against Arab Americans and Muslim Americans was at its zenith; there were hundreds of attacks against individuals, even some murders; and numerous mosques were vandalized, some very seriously. That the magazine chose to focus on providing information for teachers to help students cope with the tragedies, and on increasing awareness of the Arab world and Islam, was timely and laudable.

Embracing a multicultural perspective and an attitude of tolerance does not preclude discussion of politics and war in the classroom; on the contrary, it promotes respect for all opinions. And why not question UN sanctions against Iraq, or American policy in the Middle East, such as U.S. support for Israel or Saudi Arabia? These are important issues that should be examined from all sides. The "opposing views"

that Mr. Burack mentions are ubiquitous and easily accessible, held by many U.S. policy makers and articulated by much of the mainstream American media.

Of course we need to study the West's colonial history in the region, and its unfortunate legacy, and we also must examine domestic and regional political forces, including political Islam, and economic instability and underdevelopment within the Middle East. I don't think any of the authors in this issue was "blaming America" for the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, or for all the ills of the Middle East.

In my article about Arabs and Arab Americans, I attempted to bring in some objectivity for understanding and teaching about these communities, and pointed to the need to humanize the Palestinians when studying their history and struggle, explain conflict in the Arab world in historical and cultural contexts rather than in stark black-and-white, us-vs.-them formulations, and educate about Arabs as diverse peoples rather than as a monolithic group that can be easily—and negatively—stereotyped. I would hope that at this important time in our national history, social studies teachers do not enter the classroom with the view that multiculturalism and tolerance undermine American resolve, or with a chauvinistic and militaristic agenda. It is incumbent on educators to introduce opinions from many sides, stimulate discussion that is respectful and humane, and encourage critical thinking and deep understanding.

Editor's Note

As Editor, I am responsible for the selection of the contents of the October issue. The articles published in that issue were prepared in the days immediately after the September 11 attacks, and dealt with three subjects that were of direct importance and interest to schools at that time: the experiences of a New York City social studies teacher; the issue of how to talk about traumatic events like terrorist attacks with students; and the possible manifestation of prejudice and circulation of stereotypes against Muslim Americans and Arab Americans.

Social Education did not publish two articles in the issue dealing "with intolerance directed at the Muslim community," as Jonathan Burack maintains, but one on each of the Muslim American and Arab American communities. The reason for having separate articles on these communities under the heading "At Risk of Prejudice" was that the two communities are distinct, even though they are sometimes mistakenly lumped together. Most Muslim Americans are not of Arab origin, and the majority of the Arab-American population is Christian.

Apart from the topics covered in the October issue, many other subjects of importance and interest to our members arise from the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan. *Social Education* has continued and will continue to cover major developments and related issues. I encourage responses from our readers about this coverage. —M.S. 📧