

Both Sides of the Classroom Door: After 9-11, the Many Facets of Teaching

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The work of teachers takes place inside the classroom, on one side of the door, yet reaches outwards to the school, community, nation, and planet — beyond the other side of the door. On September 11, 2001 a hush fell on both sides of the classroom door. Teachers reached down, within themselves, and listened closely to what their professional training and life experience might have to say at that moment in history. Then they listened to the news, to colleagues and administrators, to parents, and to the needs and ideas of their students. After listening, America’s teachers began to respond.

In the last four months, we have seen the many roles that teachers in the United States play as they help to weave the fabric of America’s spirit. In addition to the obvious role of instructor, a social studies teacher is also a steward, moderator, citizen, and learner. A teacher constantly sees his or her reflection in these roles as the effort is made to educate one’s self and one’s fellow human beings. Thinking about these roles might help us understand the ways that teachers and their students are interacting and learning together since 9-11.

Each week, the authors meet as the “Social Studies Research Group” to discuss ongoing projects that investigate how social studies is taught and learned in the United States. Since 9-11, we have conversed with teachers and administrators around the country, asking about how America’s schools, teachers, students, and communities are responding. We have shared in the rich conversations and events that have taken place in teachers’ and students’ lives on both sides of the classroom door.

We have heard from many schools that have organized fund drives; collected socks, lip balm, and other items needed by rescue and recovery workers; written letters; and gathered together to memorialize victims and heroes. American students gathered stuffed animals to send to children in New York who were affected by the events of 9-11. Students and adults often used the arts as a means of response. We were told of murals of handprints, hearts, and flags stretching across the walls of schools. Teachers have described walking through a “sea of flags,” and a principal described

his elementary school as “emblazoned in red, white, and blue.” Through these and other responses, teachers have learned and changed alongside their students.

Teacher as Steward

A steward is a trusted caretaker. Environmental educators speak with their students about being stewards of the land. Many teachers have taken on this role as they have found ways to sponsor collaborative responses. Michelle Anderson, an art teacher at Cactus Ranch Elementary School in Round Rock, Texas, began an art project with her fifth grade students that soon touched everyone at the school. The idea was for students to create a collage that would honor the victims and workers. The project belonged to the students and grew from their ideas and input. Michelle stated, “I had no idea how this was going to come out.” The finished project is a 5X8-foot representation of the American flag, filled with hundreds of pictures cut from newspapers, brought into school by families in response to Michelle’s request for images. The flag, which hangs in the cafeteria, is filled with pictures of people working, mourning, celebrating, and sharing. It is accompanied by a statement by Michelle, “United We Stand,” about the school community’s involvement. Students stop to look at the flag every day.

Deborah Hauser, the school counselor and other staff members, worked with students to create a program, the “Tribute to America Assembly.” The program celebrated the many joys, rights, and freedoms that we have as Americans. Liz and Tommy, fifth graders, were the program’s MCs. All students were involved in this evening event honoring members of the community and nation who are heroes and leaders. Deborah spoke of the intensity of this experience, which informed the community of the ways staff and students had chosen to respond to the tragedy. “We were all humbled—we needed to treat this experience with respect. We became a community,” she said.

Teacher as Moderator

How teachers became informed teachers then worked with

their students and interacted with the community depended on several factors. In some states, school was in its first week on the morning of 9-11. In other states, school may have been in session for a month. Thus, some teachers and students were just getting acquainted, while some were already forming learning communities. In Indiana, many schools were administering standardized tests that morning. By noon, schools were receiving information from the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. Suellen Reed, that testing should stop. A sixth grade teacher from Indiana wrote:

I watched TV at noon and came back convinced that we needed to talk about what was going on. Reactions of the staff were mixed, but my principal told me to use my judgment. I told him that most of the students would go home to an empty house and turn on the TV without an adult present. I felt they needed to find out what was going on and see the plane crashes when they were in the company of an adult. So, I told the students what I knew about what was happening, and then we watched TV together for about half an hour. We then turned it off and talked some more. ... I then sent the parents an e-mail explaining what had transpired in our classroom in the p.m. I immediately got several e-mails back thanking me for taking care of this and talking to the students about it.

As we have talked to teachers and administrators from around the country, we realized that schools and teachers reacted differently and personally. Depending on geography and time zone, schools were in various stages of the day when the initial attacks took place. Many schools informed teachers of ongoing events via email or in person by a member of office staff. Other teachers received cell phone calls from spouses or family members. Some districts had time to organize their ideas about how teachers should respond in the classroom. No one was ready for the news.

Some principals directed teachers to turn off classroom televisions after students had watched the initial media coverage of the attacks. Other teachers turned the repeated images off without direction and chose instead to talk with their students. Others were told before students arrived that there should not be discussion, unless the topic was raised by the children.

Teachers' decisions also depended on the ages of their students. Among the teachers we talked to, there was disagreement on how schools and individual teachers could best handle events of this serious and historical dimension. Teachers have since listened to the needs of their students and responded using their professional expertise. Often, they have felt great conflict. We asked teachers about their responsibility to teach about the events of 9-11 or other current events. Did they feel an ethical responsibility

to address such topics? Comments reflect their consternation. A social studies expert with over fifteen years experience told us:

It is my responsibility to teach about current events—it's part of the state standards, so of course, I'll teach it. But, I feel this is so essential to the very purpose of public schools in the first place and that I'd be totally remiss if I didn't stress citizenship and current events. I'm also shocked that other teachers didn't share my feelings. I couldn't believe that some teachers chose not to talk about what happened that day, or have covered it very much on the surface. I know that this interrupted their lesson plans, but I am amazed that they can't see the bigger scheme of things.

Another teacher told us: "Some teachers I know didn't want to get into this." Jeanne Wray from Abilene, Texas wrote:

I wanted to put a slant on it that I thought the students needed. I teach gifted third graders; they are totally aware of the circumstances. To ignore it, to appear to be keeping them in the dark, would have made them more frightened. On September 12, it couldn't be ignored. My third graders made a class book. We brainstormed ways in which the country was still strong. They mentioned the military, police, firefighters, schools, belief in God, government, medical professionals, and "our American spirit." They each chose one of these ideas to illustrate, and we put their work together as a class book entitled, "We're Mighty, We're Strong." I made copies for everyone to take home. (See Jeanne's Perspective on page 26.)

A fifth grade teacher in another school wrote, I've been struggling with this, because I feel a responsibility to help my students understand what is happening in their world, and yet I have been directed by the office to avoid discussing it. Quite a conflict! These kids are pretty savvy; they know what's going on, and



not discussing it in school isn't going to make it go away. So I answer their questions as honestly as I can, do a lot of map and geography activities and choose read-aloud books that promote discussion of citizenship issues.

Teacher as Citizen

On and after 9-11, educators and citizens of all ages have been thrust into a compelling examination of what it means to be an American and what it means to be a citizen. On September, 17, 2001 Diane Neal, a teacher from New Jersey with a strong background in civic education, continued to work on a class constitution with her third grade students. "Remember," the students wrote, "the United States is a strong nation. We can continue to keep it strong by being good citizens or students at Woodrow Wilson School." Diane told us: "I use an interdisciplinary approach to teach citizenship. Basically, I strive to nurture a community of learners, emphasize the democratic values in literature and current events, and encourage students to give service to the community."

It is likely that these students will remember the ways in which their class and school responded in this time of need. Benjamin Barber observed, "Democracy is not a natural form of association, it is an extraordinary and rare contrivance of the cultivated imagination."¹ Long before him John Dewey wrote, "the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life."² Some students across the country have joined in the public reflection, writing searingly wishful texts, such as these messages posted by the young viewers of the PBS television program *ZOOM*.³ One viewer, Jason, wrote, "I wish we could all come together as one nation," and Sheilly, who is ten years old and lives in New York posted this message, "Just wanted to say that I feel really bad about what happened on Sept.11. I feel bad for my uncle because although I'm Dominican, he's from Pakistan and a lot of people are looking at him in a bad way. I wish this 'war' was over." Children have sent cards through the Red Cross to rescue workers and victim's families. Some acts of citizenship reached across the country, while others touched local community members.

Nadine Roush, a National Board Certified Teacher in Lafayette, Indiana, wrote about her classroom:

I've always done a great deal with citizenship education in my class. We talk everyday about the core democratic principles. . . and continue to do so. We search for examples of these values in practice in our

classroom, in the world around us, and in the books we read. I think we are finding more examples than usual to discuss . . . Citizenship has always been the heart and soul in my classroom!

Like students all around the country, Nadine's students sent contributions (one dollar earned by each student) to America's Fund for Afghan Children, sponsored by the White House.⁴ Closer to home, they are collecting food for a local food bank in desperate need of resources because so many had been diverted in the wake of 9-11. Their food drive was called, "Help Begins at Home."

In New York City Public School 126, an inner-city school located four blocks from "Ground Zero," the world of staff and students has changed: the events of 9-11 have chal-

lenged students and teachers to ask more questions about the world outside their urban neighborhood. Heidi Fernandez, a third grade teacher told us, "Out of the tragedy of the attacks has come a world newly-opened to the students." In Heidi's classroom, lessons include discussions of tolerance, hostility, conflict, and heroes. Students have been asked to think if any good things at all might come from the crisis. Heidi's students displayed "sentence strips" on which they had written the names of people who have helped them during or since 9-11. Heidi told us her students have become more aware, more compassionate, and more interested in their role as citizens. "Our school has

received a plethora of emails and letters," Heidi said. Communications from other nations such as Iceland and Australia, and from many states in the U.S. have arrived.

Some very special packages from Indiana have made students aware of new dimensions of their worlds. Indiana teachers Janet Tipton and Trudy Stone were Heidi's supervising teachers during her pre-service teaching. They have stayed in touch. Janet and Trudy organized a "care package" drive. Janet told us, "When I told my students about where Heidi's school was, they wanted to do something to help. Kids brought things from home for the care packages such as stuffed animals, books, games, candy, and school supplies. They packed the boxes and we shipped them UPS to New York city. In all we sent 38 boxes weighing over 1000 pounds." Students in these two schools continue to communicate with each other, as a new awareness of our lives together as Americans emerges.

Teacher as Learner

Part of the work of a teacher is to model the process of learning. Because the terrorist attacks and bio-terrorism are new realities for our nation, teaching about these events and responding to students' needs was, and continues to be, a learning experience. Jeanne Wray shared another episode from her classroom showing that children are very aware of



Flag at Cactus Ranch Elementary School.

the ongoing national events and they are trying to make sense of what they see. On a day when classroom life had seemingly returned to normal, Jeanne and her class were doing a brainstorming activity and students were asked to think of many suggestions for “How the Giraffe Lost His Spots.” Among the responses the third graders shared, two were glaringly related to current events. Jeanne stated, “I was surprised and saddened by the child who came up to my desk and asked how to spell anthrax and the girl who wrote, “He [the giraffe] was in the World Trade Center when a plane crashed into it.”

Although many excellent resources have been made available in the days since 9-11, it is clear that teachers will continue to face new challenges. For example, we have few guidelines for helping children understand why anthrax or smallpox would be used as weapons. Instead, teachers and administrators are relying on and building upon their experience, intuition, and their desire to keep students safe and healthy.

We asked teachers to explain what they had learned. Kathleen Lange, a teacher for twenty-two years, shared with us that she and her students have followed the news very closely. They are located near a military base in Tennessee, and Kathleen has several students with parents in the military. Her own son is an Army doctor, and this experience taught her, “that as history unfolds around me, the need to be a calming presence was of utmost importance.” A veteran teacher told us that she returned to the principles that shape her teaching career:

I learned that I need to become better prepared to deal with situations like this! I feel as if I need an understanding of developmental and child psychology as it relates to traumatic world events. I don't think I know enough about the “right” ways to handle this. I also learned that I'm capable of going on with life and modeling for my students the democratic principles that we discuss: respecting diversity, working for the common good, practicing tolerance.

Another teacher said, I began the school year teaching about the core democratic principles. [. . .] I use every opportunity I can to refer back to any of the principles. I learned that I care deeply for my students and the kinds of understandings of these core concepts that they take away from



Cactus Ranch flag, detail.

my classroom.

Several teachers explored their experiences in professional development settings. Shellee O'Brien, a middle school teacher from Texas, told us:

When I was trying to figure out what kind of a message I wanted to leave my students with the Wednesday after the event, I turned to my civic education materials: We the People, Foundations of Democracy, and Law Related Education. These resources inspired me to make sure that students understood our American democracy and the roots of all the words that were being used in the media, like, ‘attack on freedom’ and so on.

Our university research group learned that many students had the chance to discuss their reactions to the events with caring and knowledgeable adults who felt their way through discussions that centered on students’ need to understand. We have also thought more about the roles that teachers fill, and we have reflected upon the growth that has taken place for these teachers in such a short time. Learning and teaching can be painful processes, but they can also be revealing and life-changing.

Gary Fenstermacher describes the synergistic nature of teaching.⁵ It is work that not only helps us to instruct, but also to grow as stewards, moderators, citizens, and learners. This is one positive thing

that what we feel has emerged since 9-11, in the context of teachers living and learning on both sides of the classroom door. ☼

Notes

1. Benjamin Barber, *An Aristocracy for Everyone* (New York: Ballantine, 1995).
2. John Dewey, *Moral Principles of Education* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1909).
3. The PBS website (pbs.org/wgbh/responds/zmail.html) is a forum for children to post messages. It is managed by the editors of the program Zoom.
4. America's Fund for Afghan Children. c/o The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, DC 20509-1600. Online at www.whitehouse.gov/afac/.
5. G. Fenstermacher, “Teaching on Both Sides of the Classroom Door,” in K. Sirotnik and R. Soder, eds., *The Beat of a Different Drummer: Essays on Educational Renewal in Honor of John I. Goodlad* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 185-196; J. M. Goodlad, Frances Klein, et al., *Behind the Classroom Door* (Worthington, OH: Charles A. Jones, 1970).

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