

September 11th in the Classroom

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Introduction

As time moves forward, past events become blurred in memory. People vary in the ways they choose to remember and honor our history. On September 11, 2001, the United States lost 2,977 civilian lives in a terrorist attack by Al Qaeda. Since 2001, the United States government has made many decisions aimed to protect those on United States soil. To prevent an attack like this happening again, historians evaluate how to remember and learn from September 11. Learning from the past prepares people for the future. To educate future generations, middle school and high school teachers must provide students with valuable lesson plans about September 11. In middle school and high school classrooms around the country, the process and content used to teach the terrorist attacks of September 11 has evolved over the past twenty years from relying mostly on personal accounts of the event to help students understand how and why September 11 happened the way it did.

Initial Reactions

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, began like any other school day. Students around the country gathered in their classrooms as they adjusted to the start of a new year. For schools mostly on the East Coast, students and teachers were getting settled in for the day, just as the first plane, American 11, hit the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46am.¹ News spread quickly, as some teachers flicked on the nearest television to watch what had happened. Initially, most people thought that the plane crash was some sort of accident. However, less than twenty minutes later, Flight 175 crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center.² Panic set in as teachers, administrators, and parents realized this might not be an accident but an attack. Schools are left with a decision: what do we

tell our students? This question remains even today, as teachers are tasked with teaching about this horrific day.

To discover how teachers handled September 11 on the day and in the weeks after, I interviewed a few teachers and administrators. During an interview with Amanda Love, who was teaching at The Chapin School for girls in the Upper East Side of Manhattan on September 11, she described the initial reactions of teachers and students.³ After learning the first plane hit the World Trade Center, the school gathered grade levels together for an assembly to inform their students. Because it was a sensitive subject, the upper grade levels and lower grade levels received different information about the attack.⁴ Because many students at Chapin had parents who worked in the World Trade Center or in the surrounding buildings, Love remembers the administration speaking carefully not to upset any students.⁵ Ann Klotz, also teaching and the head of the senior class at Chapin School on September 11, remembers that the administration explained to students there had been an “accident,” choosing not to use words like “terrorist” or “attack” in an effort to keep their students calm.⁶ However, Klotz remembers a handful of students jumping up in fear knowing relatives or friends who were working in the towers.⁷ For the sake of all the students, Klotz and Love both remember sending students back to class in an effort to go about the day normally.

Teachers and administrators did not know any more than anyone else about what was going on. Sarah Rutledge, teacher, and the 11th grade Dean at Chapin on September 11, remembers hearing news about the Twin Towers through panicked whispers from other teachers.⁸ When she learned the second plane hit the south tower of the World Trade Center, she realized it was an intentional attack.⁹ Love remembers reflecting

on the terrorist attack that had taken place at the World Trade Center in 1993, but this attack was on a much bigger scale.¹⁰ While concerned about their own friends and family members working in or around the World Trade Center, Love, Rutledge, and Klotz remember worrying about their students more than anything.

As the day continued, Love remembers many parents coming to pick up their children from Chapin school. However, because many parents had been working in downtown New York City, they came to retrieve their children covered in ashes. Chapin school needed staff members to retrieve children from their classrooms and bring them outside of the school to their parents, to protect the children from seeing their friends' parents covered in ashes. There was no school the next day as teachers, students, and parents attempted to recover. However, Love remembers her school trying to get back to normal as soon as possible. When school reopened, while some conversations centered around the attacks, Love remembers attempting to create an environment that served as an escape from the chaos of the world.¹¹ When reflecting on the days after September 11, Klotz recalls wanting to take care of her students more than anything.¹² Mental health was not as commonly discussed in 2001, but Klotz remembers being concerned with each of her individual student's needs, because each student was affected differently.¹³ Rutledge stated that her students all had vastly different experiences although they had sat next to each other in class.¹⁴ School was the only aspect of life that remained the same. Klotz, Rutledge, and Love strived to make The Chapin School a safe place.

In the days following the attacks, the American people only had some information about who caused the terrorist attacks. Love remembers trying to answer her students' questions in the best way possible, without creating panic.¹⁵ In 2001, it was more difficult to receive constant news updates than it is now. People received the majority of their news from television news channels, word of mouth, or what they saw or experienced with their own eyes. Koltz's students had lots of difficult questions, and she remembers working to make sure they were not jumping to assumptions about the Muslim community because Islamophobia was at a high.¹⁶ When asked about parental concerns, she remembers not having to deal with any difficult parents requesting their students not discuss the

terrorist attacks.¹⁷ However, Rutledge remembers that in 2001, the American people were not as polarized in their views as they are today.¹⁸ After September 11, even in New York City, Koltz remembers it being eerily quiet, and people ached for a sense of community.¹⁹ In an effort to stick together with the rest of New York City, the staff at The Chapin School did the best they could to help.

In the weeks after the terrorist attacks, The Chapin students and staff helped the community, by raising money for the local fire station to thank them for their bravery. Love recalls the fire crew coming to the Chapin school for fire drills and often interacting with the students. On September 11, members of the fire crew were called to help at the World Trade Center, and unfortunately, many members of the fire crew lost their lives saving others. Love remembered this being most difficult for her staff members, who would often see the firemen and women in their school. Staff and students created a T-shirt campaign to raise money for the fire station, helping to cope with their own loss as well as the loss to the community.²⁰ Rutledge remembers inviting the surviving members from the firehouse to the Chapin School, so students and teachers could applaud them.²¹ While Love, Koltz, and Rutledge struggled to explain the reasons behind the terrorist attacks, they were able to find a way for their students at The Chapin School to give back to the community.

In the first few years after September 11, teachers and students recovered from the emotional trauma they experienced on September 11. On the anniversary in 2004, Koltz remembers feeling as though September 11 was still too fresh to discuss in detail.²² Because of the emotional impact September 11 had on the American people, teachers struggled to discuss it with their students. As the years passed since September 11, conversation for some became easier. With more resources available that tell the story of September 11, schools and teachers begin to pass on their knowledge about the day to young students. The question remains the same, how do we explain the history of September 11 and what happened after?

Ten Years After

On the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, schools across the United States attempted to teach their students about the terrorist attacks that occurred in the previous decade. For the past ten

years, teachers have discussed the events of the day and their own personal experience of September 11. However, because the events of September 11 and the ensuing War on Terror have largely not been introduced into the formal social studies curriculum, students still do not know much about those events.²³ Most students have limited knowledge of September 11 because they were too young at the time to have much memory of the day. In a study by Aaron Ettinger, he concludes, “these students do not have the benefit of an accumulated knowledge of post-September 11 politics in the same way that their instructors do.”²⁴ While their teachers may have experienced September 11 first-hand, their students did not. However, these students have grown up in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and have seen their effects in the world, leading to student interest. Joe Corsaro, an AP World History, Government, and Economics teacher at Laurel School, states, “there’s been a noticeable decline in knowledge regarding this event over the past few years, but students are really curious about it.”²⁵ As students grow, they may be more curious about recent history. Teachers should work to fill the gaps in students’ knowledge of September 11 to help them understand events of the day and the aftermath.

As more information arises assessing the causes and effects of September 11, teachers are equipped with more resources to use in the classroom. Haas and Waterson discuss the challenges of teaching 9/11 ten years after the terrorist attacks.²⁶ They state, “the teaching of 9/11 has been left to the efforts of individual teachers who are short on time and under pressure to meet many curricula demands.”²⁷ Because September 11 may not be included in the curriculum, teachers may devote time to other topics over September 11 and the War on Terror. Westervelt explains, “only about 20 states include anything in depth about the events of that fateful day in their high school social studies curriculum.”²⁸ Because schools may choose to cover the basics, they do not analyze September 11 in a deeper way. Even when teachers do include September 11, “too often teachers don’t want to tackle the complex, often ugly aftermath at home and globally: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Patriot Act and civil liberties; radical Islam and Islamophobia.”²⁹ However, September 11 is part of a complex history that must be understood by future generations. Without proper knowledge, “stereotypes and misinformation will continue on both sides.”³⁰

Generations to come cannot learn from the past if they do not understand its entirety.

In 2011, middle and high school students have largely been taught through the firsthand experiences of others about September 11, due to lack of educational resources and time because of required curriculum. Haas and Waterman state, “Memories, although an important aspect of personal history, may in unexpected ways also distort, shift, and remodel events.”³¹ As personal memories begin to slip away, social studies teachers must begin to use other resources to create meaningful lesson plans for students. Hess and Stoddard conducted research to figure out the best way to teach 9/11. They state, “while there was a strong agreement that 9/11 deserved inclusion in the curriculum, precisely what students should learn about 9/11 and its aftermath was a point of contention.”³² Because schools provide students with the opportunity to analyze the content presented to them and explore their own thoughts and feelings about the United States, there is a worry that September 11 could be misconstrued in education.

Hess and Stoddard examine curriculum materials used to teach September 11 released by various organizations and their contents.³³ Overall, Hess and Stoddard found that, “there is an “American Tale” of 9/11 presented in everything we examined—both in what is given attention and what is left out.”³⁴ This “American Tale” is told from the American perspective and presents a patriotic view of 9/11. Hess and Stoddard discovered that some materials ask students to question the definition of terrorism and how the United States should handle it, while some curricula do not.³⁵ To Hess and Stoddard, “that is a difference that matters when creating materials designed to help young citizens in our democracy understand, reflect on, and respond to ‘the unteachable moment.’”³⁶ As social studies teachers attempt to build lesson plans surrounding 9/11, they should ask students to analyze the cause and effects of the terrorist attacks. The goal of social studies teachers is to provide students with enough information and context so they can dive deeper into the information. As the lesson moves away from personal accounts and provides more facts and historical context, students can explore more details of September 11.

As more recent curricula require September 11 to be taught in the classroom, teachers must decide what resources they should use and include in their

lessons. Ettinger notes that, “the recent past may not be taught at the introductory levels with the same depth as other key moments.”³⁷ While high school students may be taught history from the twentieth century, more recent events in the twenty-first century may be touched upon only briefly, without the in-depth analysis provided for other historical content. Teachers are left to decide how to integrate September 11 into the curriculum. Ettinger decided to try four techniques, chronology, film, maps and newspapers, and news briefings to properly teach September 11 to the post-September 11 generation.³⁸ Through tracking his students’ responses to the lessons, he concluded, “to teach the politics of the post-September 11 wars, instructors need to convey context and be aware of the students’ limited historical foreknowledge.”³⁹ Although students have grown up during the post-September 11 wars, there is no guaranteed that they pay attention to, much less understand, current events or politics. To properly teach September 11, teachers must include as much context as possible.

Ten years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, many students have a limited knowledge of September 11, its causes, and aftermath. Students had grown up in the post-September 11 era and had been exposed to the effects of September 11. Yet, they primarily been educated through personal accounts and memory. As educators developed resources to help aid in teaching September 11, Corsaro reminds us that many students are eager to understand September 11 and the War on Terror in all its complexity.⁴⁰ As memories fade, schools must include September 11 in the required curriculum for the future generation to learn from the past.

Twenty Years After

The generation of students twenty years after September 11, 2001 were not alive during the attacks themselves. Because students do not share a firsthand memory of September 11 like their educators do, they may have faced a difficult time understanding the emotional toll September 11 took upon the American public. Educators must use various resources, including photos, videos, and interactive museums, to explain to students the full effect of September 11 and the War on Terror. Educators can tell much more of the story of September 11 to their students, including the causes and effects. A plethora of resources aid teachers as they plan lessons to teach September 11. The September

11th Memorial and Museum, National Education Association, Scholastic Articles, and a variety of US History textbooks provide context to help teachers educate their students.

The September 11 Memorial and Museum offers twenty interactive lesson plans for students in grades 3–12, covering the September 11 attack, repercussions, and the history of the World Trade Center.⁴¹ One lesson plan is labelled for students grades 6–12, where the essential question is, “What happened on 9/11?”⁴² In the beginning of the lesson, students separated information they already knew about September 11 and questions they had about September 11. By establishing what students already know, teachers can cater the lesson to their students’ needs. Students then watch a short film, “which outlines the key events of the morning of 9/11” and interact with a timeline of all the events of September 11.⁴³ In the next half of the lesson, students split up into groups and explore first-person accounts from first responders, high school students, World Trade Center survivors, and government officials. First person accounts help students to better understand how personally the terrorist attacks of September 11th affected the American public. Students are then prompted to discuss if the first-hand accounts changed how students thought about September 11.⁴⁴ Provided by the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, this lesson serves as a basis for educators to build upon.

Another lesson from the September 11 Memorial and Museum labeled for students grades 9–12, examines counterterrorism after 9/11.⁴⁵ This lesson relies on a basic understanding of the events on September 11, so it would be beneficial to clarify whether students have had a lesson on September 11 before. This lesson’s essential question is, “how was the decision made to authorize a raid on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan?”, addressing the US decision to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden.⁴⁶ After watching a video about how the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan was discovered and a video about the various options presented to President Obama, students are asked to analyze President Obama’s decision to combat terrorism. With the information presented in this lesson, students can form their own opinions, by ranking President Obama’s options and weighing the pros and cons. Based on the questions posed, students gain a better understanding of the aftermath of September 11 and President Obama’s response.

Overall, the counterterrorism lesson plan helps high school students explore counterterrorism actions taken by President Obama's administration ten years after September 11.⁴⁷

Scholastic Articles are another resource that teachers commonly use to aid their lessons. One titled, "From Terror to Hope," by Kristen Lewis, provides an inspiring story of one girl's escape from her school in New York City on September 11 and her thoughts on the attack in the days following.⁴⁸ Because the girl, Helaina, in the article is around the same age as the students reading, students should be able to envision themselves on September 11. After learning about Helaina's experience, Lewis states, "A group of terrorists called Al Qaeda had hijacked four planes. Al Qaeda followed a hate-filled form of the religion Islam"⁴⁹ Lewis goes on to clarify that, "Most Muslims- people who follow Islam- do not agree with Al Qaeda's beliefs."⁵⁰ She provides context on the beliefs of Al Qaeda and clarifies that not all Muslims believe in the same ideals, which is important for middle school students to understand. Lewis provides sections on how the aftermath and rebuilding of New York City after September 11 as well, where thought questions were posed to students, like, "how did the events of September 11th change our country?"⁵¹ Catering to middle school students, Lewis's article encompasses a personal story, basic information about the cause of September 11, and allows students to recognize the changes after the terrorist attacks on September 11.

The National Education Association provides teachers with a resource page to explore and create lessons on September 11. Links to lesson collections, background resources, approaches to teaching, memorials, and images, all give teachers a basis to create their own lessons on September 11.⁵² Included among these resources are images such as, "Falling Man," a photo taken by Richard Drew (see figure 1).⁵³ Many photos of 9/11 display collapsed buildings; the "Falling Man" is different and "is less about who its subject was and more about what he became: a makeshift Unknown Soldier in an often unknown and uncertain war, suspended forever in history"⁵⁴ The "Falling Man" would be appropriate for the high-school classroom. To understand the political aftermath of September 11, students need to understand how deeply these attacks affected the American public. The Falling Man poses ethical and disturbing questions for students and is emotional enough to help convey the feelings after

September 11.

While photos, videos, and websites can be used to teach September 11 successfully, some schools rely on textbooks to aid in student learning. Peter Wood analyzes five different American history textbooks to discover what they say about September 11 and the War on Terror.⁵⁵ American history textbook authors, Colon, Appleby, Warner, Edwards, and Brinkley wrote sections on September 11, with varying degrees of detail. Colon, author of *American History*, 2018 edition, HMH Social Studies, fails to mention, "any hint of the motives of the 'terrorists'"⁵⁶ Appleby, author of *United States History and Geography*, 2018 edition, McGraw Hill, "gets points for at least trying to establish a context that bears on what the 9/11 attack was about," however, the context provided an obscure motive. Appleby states that, "Muslims feared their traditional values were weakening as the oil industrialisms also brought Western ideals into the region," as the motive to the terrorist attacks on September 11.⁵⁷ Warner, author of *United States History*, 2016 edition, Pearson, provides more details and explanation for what caused September 11, he also, "captures the sudden outpouring of patriot feeling that followed the attacks, which Colon and Appleby simply ignore."⁵⁸ Edwards, author of *America's History*, Ninth Edition, Bedford St Martin's, "offers literally nothing on why the US was attacked or what it meant to Americans."⁵⁹ Finally, Brinkley, author of *The Unfinished Nation*, Ninth Edition, McGraw Hill, "is providing data, not telling a story, and nothing in this account of the events hints at motives or meaning," and "attributes the attack, at some deep level, to Middle Eastern 'poverty.'"⁶⁰ Authors, Colon, Appleby, Warner, Edwards, and Brinkley could improve their sections on September 11 in some way.

After analyzing each textbook, Wood concludes the strongest history textbooks provide information about the motives of the terrorist attacks and context.⁶¹ He concludes that the texts, "are factually accurate but estranged from the meaning of what happened- the meaning for the terrorists but even more so the meaning for Americans."⁶² Instead of telling the whole story of September 11, four out of the five history textbooks just state facts, without providing much detail or giving much context.⁶³ For students to know the whole story behind September 11, they must understand terrorist motives and the increased American patriotism after the terrorist attacks, and some history books do not give students this information.

Even with an abundance of resources for teachers, educators are still requesting help to teach September 11 twenty years later. Schools and teachers need to clarify how to go about teaching September 11 because, “some teachers engage students in only the anniversary as a form of memorial, while others want students to understand how the US and world response to 9/11 has impacted their lives.”⁶⁴ Although September 11 and the War on Terror is a complicated area to study, it must be covered in the curriculum. Without it, “this new generations’ lack of knowledge of 9/11 and the WoT [War on Terror] and belief in misinformation or even conspiracies was identified as a major constraint.”⁶⁵ Educators should use the resources from the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum, Scholastic Articles, and the National Education Association to tell the whole story of September 11. By including the events on September 11, the motives for the attack, American patriotism, involvement in the middle east, the Bush Administration, and the Patriot Act, students have more context to understand September 11.

Conclusion

Over time, schools have changed the way September 11 is taught in the classroom, no longer relying only on personal memory but by incorporating other resources. Because students in today’s middle school and high school history classrooms have no memory of September 11, teachers must rely on resources to convey a more comprehensive story of September 11. Beginning with the key points of September 11, students first must understand the events of the day. Then, teachers need to take a step back in time, and explain to students what led up to the attacks on September 11. After students understand the motives of the terrorist attacks and the events of the day, teachers can move forward in time, and explain the effects of September 11. Through teaching September 11, students can then begin to analyze exactly why the United States was involved in a war in the middle east and why the Patriot Act was passed. While twenty years have passed since September 11, the United States is still experiencing effects today. The best way for students to understand the present is by understanding the past, including September 11.

Appendix

Figure 1. “The Falling Man” photo taken by Richard Drew.

Endnotes

- ¹ Norton & Co. The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. Norton & Co, 2004. P. 20
- ² Norton. The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States P.21.
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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Klotz, Ann. Personal Interview by Alexis Opdycke. December 10, 2021.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Rutledge, Sarah. Personal interview by Alexis Opdycke. December 9, 2021.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Love, Personal Interview by Alexis Opdycke. 2021.
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- ³² Hess, D., Stoddard, J., "9/11 and Terrorism: 'The Ultimate Teachable Moment' in Textbooks and Supplemental Curricula." *Democracy Education* 2007.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ettinger, "Teaching the Post-September 11 Wars to the Post-September 11 Generation." 2016.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
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- ⁴¹ National September 11 Memorial & Museum. "Lesson Plans." Accessed on October 17, 2021
- ⁴² National September 11 Memorial & Museum. "What Happened on 9/11? Part I." Accessed on October 17, 2021
- ⁴³ National September 11 Memorial & Museum. "What Happened on 9/11? Part I." Accessed on October 17, 2021
- ⁴⁴ National September 11 Memorial & Museum. "What Happened on 9/11? Part II" Accessed October 17, 2021
- ⁴⁵ National September 11 Memorial & Museum, "The President Decides: Authorizing a Raid." Accessed October 17, 2021.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ National September 11 Memorial & Museum, "The President Decides: Authorizing a Raid." Accessed October 17, 2021.
- ⁴⁸ Lewis, Kristen. "From Terror to Hope" Scholastic Action. September 2018.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Nast, Phil. "Teaching About 9/11." National Education Association. September 23, 2020.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
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