Engaging 9/11 as a Learning Event: 
Teachers’ Perspectives Examined

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This study explored perspectives of secondary social studies teachers, who reported using live media broadcasts to engage students in an examination of terrorism on 9/11. Specifically, this study queried these teachers’ perceptions of preparedness on 9/11 to engage it as a learning event. Respondents (N=29) in one Mid-Atlantic state who were teaching in secondary social studies classrooms on September 11, 2001 (9/11), were asked to reflect on their level of preparedness to adapt and implement real-time teaching to address unfolding events. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for matched pairs revealed that respondents’ current perceptions of self-efficacy to teach about an unfolding terrorist act were positively modified by their experiences teaching about terrorism on 9/11 [Z = -4.507, p <.001 (two tailed)]. Respondents reported gains in confidence to teach about terrorism because of their teaching experiences on 9/11. Results add to the small knowledge base on the topic, even as they highlight the need for further research on the classroom response to 9/11.

Key words: 9/11, current events, media literacy, preparedness and response, secondary social studies teachers, terrorism-specific professional development

Introduction

The events of September 11th were unlike any event in United States history (Baer, Heron, Morton, & Ratliff, 2005; Stevens, 2002). Like many others, teachers were caught unprepared that day (Berson, 2002; Ingenito, 2004; Levesque, 2003; Ray, 2009). According to Ilene R. Berson and Michael J. Berson (2001), the enormity of the event, coupled with its timing early in the school day, magnified teachers’ lack of preparedness. Many educators rushed to turn on televisions only to later realize that students were becoming traumatized by images of the destruction (Burns & Schaefer, 2002; Ray, 2009). Others simply chose to continue with the day’s lesson (Berson & Berson, 2001; Ingenito, 2004). There were no terrorism curriculum manuals to tell teachers what to do or what to say to students (Ingenito, 2004). Nor were there readily available resources to refer to outlining how to effectively use the media as a teaching tool as the crisis unfolded. What teachers did, and what they learned that day, including their perceptions of preparedness using real-time media, can inform other social studies teachers, and those who mentor or prepare our nation’s teachers. Despite the passage of time, little is known about what occurred in United States classrooms on 9/11.

Literature Review

The 9/11 terror attacks had a significant effect on both children and educators (Apple, 2002; Berson & Berson, 2001; Moss & Nichols, 2002; Otto, Henin, Hirshfeld-Becker,
Pollack, Biederman, & Rosenbaum, 2007; Pfefferbaum, Fairbrother, Brandt, Robertson, Gurwitch, Stuber, & Pfefferbaum, 2004; Webeck, Black, Davis, & Field, 2002). Recently, Pang, Madueno, Atlas, Stratton, Olger, & Page, (2008) reported, “Teachers and students can become paralyzed by the overwhelming destruction and emotional trauma brought on by … disaster” (p. 18). While the authors’ observations focused on the 2008 California fire season, the findings were reflective of teachers and students’ responses to disasters in general (Berson & Berson, 2008). In fact, a small study examining teachers’ written self-reported responses to 9/11, revealed similar results for a number of examined entries (Ray, 2009). Mary Lee Webeck, Mary S. Black, O. J. Davis, and Sherry Field (2002) reported varied responses among teachers on 9/11, ranging from paralysis to active teaching.

Because of their close relationship with students, teachers and other education professionals are on the frontlines when dealing with profound events, such as the 9/11 attacks (Burns & Schaefer, 2002; Levesque, 2003; Pang, et al., 2008; Pfefferbaum, et al., 2004). Teachers, “Not only dispense information and develop student skills, but they also create safe and caring environments that support learning” (Pang, et. al., 2008, p. 20) even in times of local or national trauma. Teachers can help reduce the depth of trauma experienced by a child by modeling appropriate coping strategies, even as they create a safe classroom environment where students can express their feelings and examine issues shaping the world around them (Berson & Berson, 2008; Otto, et al, 2007). Ilene R. Berson and Michael J. Berson (2008) went on to argue, “Preparedness and response [to traumatic events] are an integral part of an educator’s role in advocating for students’ well-being and protection (p. 28). Yet, Pfefferbaum, et. al. (2004) reported both a scarcity of information relating to “teachers reactions, perceptions…, and understanding of children’s issues following large-scale…traumas” (p. 251), and a lack of information about how terrorist events challenge teachers' ability to handle these kind of events. Echoing these concerns, Michael W. Apple (2002) asserted that, “we must pay close attention to the very personal ways in which 9/11 was experienced phenomenologically by teachers …” (p. 1760). Beverly B. Ray (2009) agreed, arguing that teachers must think about and plan for how they will respond to future acts of terrorism. Teachers were responsible, on 9/11, as they are every school day, for maintaining and establishing a sense of order and security for their charges, even as a large-scale terror attack unfolded during the academic day (Moss & Nichols, 2002; Webeck, et. al., 2002). While teachers are expected to maintain the classroom environment, assuage students’ fears, and keep students informed using age appropriate strategies (Berson & Berson, 2008; Burns & Schaefer, 2002; Ingenito, 2004), many learned these skills on their own and in the moment on 9/11 (Ray, in press).

Because research has associated teachers’ reactions to traumatic events to the emergence of post-traumatic disorders in children, these issues are of particular importance for educators to consider (Hoven, 2002; Pfefferbaum, et al., 2004; Otto, et al., 2007). This assertion is further supported by nearly 50 years of media research demonstrating that violence viewed via the media can promote behavior problems, fearful or pessimistic attitudes, and feelings of desensitization in children and teens (Collins, 1973; C. M. Hinks Institute, 1993; Crick, Ostrove, & Werner, 2006; Otto, et. al., 2007). Without the necessary knowledge, skills, and commitments, teachers are less likely to be effective when dealing with these types of events (Kennedy Manzo, 2006; Moss & Nichols, 2002; Otto, et al., 2007).

“Despite the passage of time, little is known about what occurred in United States classrooms on 9/11.”
Efficacy of the Media Broadcasts as Learning Tools

The efficacy of the media as a learning tool in K-12 settings is established in the literature (Brown, 2001; Levin, 2003; Potter, 2004; Troseth & DeLoache, 1998; Tyner, 1998). While not the “Carefully chosen body of media” (p. 524) recommended by Victor C. Strasburger, Barbara J. Wilson, and Amy B. Jordan (2009), the violent images broadcast to classrooms on 9/11 provided a teachable moment for some teachers who lead their students in a critical examination of media delivered messages (Ray, in press). If media, including television, is to be used in the classroom, both students and educators need to hone their media literacy skills (Brown, 2001; Potter, 2004).

Defining media literacy

Media literacy as defined by Strasburger, Wilson, and Jordan (2009) is the “Ability to analyze, access, and produce media in a variety of forms and contexts and a desire to act upon such abilities in a manner that benefits a healthy and democratic citizenship” (p. 523). The ability to distinguish between fact and opinion, and to discern both reality and truth are central to any examination of current, or past, events (Dorr, 1983). James A. Brown (2001) and W. James Potter (2004) elaborated the role of media literacy as that of teaching students how to read image-based texts, such as those found on the Internet, television, and in the movies. Media literacy helps children make sense of the world around them, even as it equips them with the citizenship skills that they will need as responsible adults in a democratic society (Hobbes, 2004b; Hobbes, 2005). Media literacy is a citizenship skill involving the use of critical-thinking and decision-making. Research conducted by Diane E. Levin (2003) suggests that children and teens need interactions with adults in order to successfully clarify and process media messages. In fact, more learning occurs when students co-view with adults who share the experience with them, than when the students view or interact with the media without any discussion or analysis taking place (Abelman, 1984; Anderson & Collins, 1988; Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, Feshback, Katz, Murray, Rubenstein, Wilcox, & Zukerman, 1992). While the research base regarding media literacy is somewhat sparse, recent research suggests that it can support acquisition of critical media skills in children and teens (Fox, 2005; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Hobbs, 2004a; Livingston & Helsper, 2006; Quinn & McMahon, 1995).

Media literacy is an emerging field of inquiry and most published studies, “Tend to treat small samples … are frequently survey-based, simple in design, non randomized and short term” (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009, p. 525). As an emerging field, replication of results for most studies remains to be done (Strasburger, et. al, 2009).

Significance & Purpose of the Study

This study sought to learn from the experiences of secondary social studies teachers who were not only teaching on 9/11, but also attempted to engage the unfolding media delivered event as a meaningful learning experience for their students. In particular, this paper explores perspectives of secondary social studies teachers, who reported using live media broadcasts to engage students in an examination of terrorism on 9/11. The results of this study may provide insight into the efficacy of widespread media use in secondary classrooms during times of national trauma. Findings may, also, indicate the usefulness of specific recommendations made by various organizations, such as the National Association of School Psychologist (NASP, 2002), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d.), and the
National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.) among others.

This study was guided by two research questions. These were: (a) “What were secondary social studies teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach about terrorism on 9/11?” and (b) “To what extent did their perceptions change as a result of their experiences teaching about terrorism on 9/11?” The study also sought to identify issues of continuing concern among respondents.

Methodology

This was a descriptive study. Survey research was used to query respondents’ perspectives, along with possible changes in perspectives.

Sampling

As a part of a larger study examining teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to teach about terrorism and about 9/11, an examination of school and district web sites was used to generate a mailing roster of 144 secondary social studies teachers identified in secondary public schools in one small mid-Atlantic state. Eighteen surveys were returned as undeliverable, resulting in an estimated actual research sample of 126 teachers (N = 126). It is possible that some surveys neither reached their address target nor were returned as undeliverable – therefore, the actual sample number was considered an estimate. Forty surveys were completed and returned, resulting in a 32% response rate for the larger study sample. Of that group, 29 respondents (72.5%) reported using live media broadcasts to engage their students in an examination of terrorism on 9/11. The results for those 29 respondents are the focus of this paper. Response rate as a limitation of the study is discussed below.

Instrumentation

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used for data collection. Instrument items were developed based on recommendations made by learning organizations in the field of trauma awareness, including NAERYC (n. d.), NCTSN (n. d.), and NASP (2002). Once drafted, the legitimacy of the instrument and the link between survey items and the research questions were confirmed by creating a content alignment matrix between the research questions and survey items (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). In an effort to further enhance instrument validity and reliability, the draft instrument was then reviewed by two experts within the teacher education and instructional media fields. Both experts taught core teacher education courses for pre-service and in-service teachers, with one teaching social studies methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and the other teaching technology integration courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Next, the instrument was piloted in a social studies methods course using a group of elementary and middle school level pre-service teachers. The review and piloting generated feedback used to clarify survey items and revise/finalize the instrument.

The questionnaire was comprised of four parts. The first part addressed a holistic pre- and post-assessment of terrorism teaching preparedness, with the pre-instrument inquiry assessing respondents’ perceptions of preparedness on 9/11, and the post-instrument inquiry assessing their current perceptions of preparedness. The ordinal scale ranged from (1) “not prepared,” to (2) “somewhat prepared,” to (3) “prepared,” to (4) “well prepared.” Pre- and post-assessment results from this section were used to determine change in perception among respondents, and to determine whether that change was statistically significant.

The next part included questions regarding respondents’ perceptions about their cur-
rent (a) knowledge and understanding of terrorism as an academic topic, (b) preparedness to teach about terrorism using the media during an unfolding/ongoing terror event, and (c) preparedness to address the emotional needs of students. This section required respondents to indicate their level of agreement (Likert scale range: 1 strongly disagree to 4 strongly agree) with a set of declarative statements.

The third part explored respondent perceptions regarding issues of continuing concern or need, including whether or not they had received, and/or perceived a need for, professional development specific to teaching and learning preparedness and terrorism. While some questions reflected the same Likert like scale noted above, several professional development responses were recorded as simple declarative yes or no statements. Finally, the fourth section queried respondent demographic information (see Appendix A).

Design and Analysis

Data were primarily quantitative, with some qualitative data derived from one open-ended question. Data were analyzed descriptively (response frequencies and corresponding percentages) to address the first research question, and comparatively to address the second research question. Respondents’ perceptions were assessed pre (perception of preparedness on 9/11) and post (current perception of preparedness). A Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Signed Rank Test was used to analyze the sum of the ranks before and after treatment (treatment in this case, meaning the actual teaching on 9/11) is reported in the results section. Descriptive statistics are reported for the remaining quantitative items. Qualitative data were read and reread, noting emergent themes (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2007). Narrative data were limited, but used to explicate the quantitative data and are reported in the results section.

Results

As stated, this descriptive study queried secondary social studies teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to adapt and implement real-time teaching to address events unfolding on 9/11. The study’s assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are examined, followed by respondent demographics. A report of the study’s findings regarding overall preparedness perceptions (pre- and post- 9/11), and current teaching preparedness perceptions and expressed needed professional development are presented as well.

Assumptions

As noted above, the 29 respondents were derived from a larger study examining teachers’ perspectives of preparedness to teach about terrorism. These 29 respondents were extracted based on their self-reported experience teaching, inclusive of media broadcasts, on 9/11. As such, an underlying assumption of the study was that their responses were inclusive of that experience. The depth and quality of respondents’ media use on 9/11 was not queried. While we know that “Americans turned to television as their primary source of information in the hours after the [9/11] attacks were first reported” (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2002, p. 49); and that teachers in Janet Z. Burns and Karen Schaefer’s 2002 study reported extensive television viewership in their classrooms on 9/11. We only know that...
the 29 teachers in this study “[taught] about events using the media on September 11, 2001.” Data related to the exact type(s) of media used, how much class time was devoted to media consumption and teaching, the methods of teaching employed (i.e., discussion, question/answer), and the extent to which the media was used throughout the school day, were not collected.

“[T]eaching on and through the 9/11 terrorism experience positively impacted respondents’ perceptions regarding their preparedness to teach about terrorism.”

**Limitations**

There were three main areas of limitations associated with this study. Those were response rate (number of respondents), respondent interest in the topic, and time lapse between the study focus event (9/11) and the survey inquiry. Limitations, as noted by Donald Ary, Lucy Chester Jacob, Asghar Razavieh, and Christine K. Sorensen (2006), can impact study findings and associated conclusions in terms of accurate representation of the phenomenon being studied.

The response rate for the larger study, from which the respondent data used in this paper were derived, was 32%. Of that 32%, 29 respondents (72.5%) supplied data used to address the research questions identified above. The limited overall response rate may be reflective of a global trend of declining response rates for surveys first noted by Edith de Leeuw and Wim de Heer in 2002. Following up on this phenomenon, Timothy Johnson and Linda Owen (2003) cited privacy and confidentiality concerns, general cynicism, and a marked decline in civic participation as external factors leading to declining response rates for survey research in all disciplines, including education.

Additionally, it should be noted that response rates are “… often higher among the more intelligent, better educated, more conscientious, and those more interested in or generally more favorable to the issue involved in the questionnaire” (Ary, Jacob, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p. 414). As a result, those who responded may not be fully representative of the population and may reflect a disproportionate number of “… those more interested …” (p. 414) in the topic. While the demographic profile of teachers in any state is somewhat elusive and subject to near constant change (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2008), a comparison of respondent demographics to that of non-respondents is offered in Appendix B to enhance the reader’s assessment of the external validity of the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008; Miller & Smith, 1983). Furthermore, for some respondents, the time lapse since 9/11 may have contributed to the forgetting of feelings and/or the muting of memories.

**Delimitations**

Because current events, terrorism, and war, are appropriate topics for the secondary social studies curriculum (Martorella, Beal, & Mason Bolick, 2005; Webeck, Black, Davis, & Field, 2002), secondary social studies teachers’ perspectives were sought. And, because of their geographic proximity to New York City, Western Pennsylvania, and the Northern Virginia/Washington D.C. area, the study sample was delimited to secondary social studies teachers in one small mid-Atlantic state. While the environment likely varied in schools across the state on 9/11, teachers faced many of the same issues due to their geographic proximity to all three terror sites.
Respondent Demographics

As noted above, respondents were derived from a larger study examining teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to teach about terrorism and about 9/11. Within this larger group of respondents, 29 (72.5%) reported using live media broadcasts to engage their students in an examination of terrorism on 9/11. Among these 29 respondents numerous demographic groups were represented. Fifteen respondents were male (1 = African American, 1 = Hispanic, 12 = White/Non-Hispanic, and 1 = unknown) and 14 female (1 = African American, 1 = Native American, 11 = White/Non-Hispanic, and 1 = unknown). Years teaching ranged from 5 to 40, with an average of 16.5 years for all respondents. Courses taught included United States History (13), Economics (14), Civics (14), Geography (10), World History/World Cultures (10), and Sociology (1), with the teaching assignment for one respondent noted as unknown. As is common in secondary schools in the United States, a majority of respondents reported teaching more than one subject. Because all respondents were practicing teachers, no personal or district-specific information was collected.

Overall Perceptions of Preparedness

Pre- and Post-

Respondents’ perceptions of overall preparedness, pre- and post-, were assessed using a four-point Likert-like scale. The scale ranged from (1) “not prepared,” to (2) “somewhat prepared,” to (3) “prepared,” to (4) “well prepared.”

The mean preparedness rating on 9/11 (pre-event) was 1.8 (less than somewhat prepared), with a standard deviation of 0.8. The mean current preparedness rating (post-9/11) was 3.0 (prepared), with a standard deviation of 1.0. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for matched pairs was used to assess whether the change in N=29 respondents perceptions’ of preparedness, as a result of their teaching experience on 9/11, was statistically significant. The results revealed a statistically significant change in respondents’ perceptions of their teaching as a result of having taught about terrorism on 9/11, Z = -4.13, p <.001 (two tailed). That is, respondents in this study perceived they were significantly more prepared to teach about, and/or during a terrorist event as a result of having done so on 9/11. The sum of the ranked increases totaled 210 and the sum of the ranked decreases totaled zero. Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions of preparedness.

Current Perceptions of Preparedness

Respondents rated their level of agreement with statements regarding their current perceptions of preparedness. The statements were categorized into three broad domains. These were: (a) knowledge and understanding of terrorism as an academic topic, (b) preparedness to teach about terrorism using the media, and (c) preparedness to address the emotional needs of students. Respondents also provided information related to areas of continued needs.

Knowledge/Understanding of Terrorism

Table 1 displays the findings specific to respondents’ perceptions about their knowledge and understanding of terrorism as an academic subject. These data reveal that while a strong majority believed they were knowledgeable about (a) terrorism (86.2% agreed or strongly agreed), and (b) how to explain and facilitate a class discussion about terrorism (96.5% agreed or strongly agreed); respondents did not perceive they were knowledgeable about how to identify age-appropriate strategies for teaching about terrorism (79.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed); respondents did not perceive they were knowledgeable about how to address terrorism-related ethical issues (75.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
Table 2 displays findings specific to respondents’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach about terrorism using the media. These data reveal that almost all (96.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were knowledgeable about how to explain what was occurring on TV and/or the radio; and, over 80% (agreed or strongly agreed) perceived that they were confident about what information to share with students and the amount of class time to spend.

Similarly, nearly 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident about their ability to judge the accuracy of information and make decisions about what information to share with students, as well as what images to share and how to manage their classroom environment, including how much time to spend talking to students about a terrorist event. In contrast, just over two-thirds of respondents were confident in their knowledge about how to implement school policy as it relates to terrorism.

“[T]eaching on and through the 9/11 terrorism experience positively impacted respondents’ perceptions regarding their preparedness to teach about terrorism.”
Table 2  Preparedness to Teach using the Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I know/am knowledgeable about …</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>… what kind of info to share with students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(17.2%)</td>
<td>(51.7%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… what images to share with students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20.7%)</td>
<td>(51.7%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how to make decisions about what information to share with students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(24.1%)</td>
<td>(51.7%)</td>
<td>(24.1%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how to judge the accuracy of information presented in the media</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20.7%)</td>
<td>(51.7%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how to explain what is going on on TV and/or the radio</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.4%)</td>
<td>(55.2%)</td>
<td>(41.4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how to implement school policy as it relates to terrorism</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.9%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td>(34.5%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how to manage the classroom environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.9%)</td>
<td>(13.8%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td>(51.7%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how much class time to devote to talking with students about the event</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.9%)</td>
<td>(13.8%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td>(48.3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… how much time to devote to an examination of the event</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.9%)</td>
<td>(10.3%)</td>
<td>(48.3%)</td>
<td>(34.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ emotional needs. Table 3 displays data regarding respondents’ perceptions about their preparedness to address the emotional needs of their students. Consistent with the above, respondents’ indicated they were confident in their ability to address students’ emotional needs as they relate to information-based terrorism issues. Ninety percent agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to address students’ needs regarding worries about local acts of terror, and nearly 80% were confident in their ability to address general fears about what was/is going on. Respondents were less confident in their knowledge about addressing emotional needs specific to student fears concerning parents/relatives (65.5% agreed or strongly agreed), and their ability to address parental concerns about their child's safety (65.5% agreed or strongly agreed). Just over half felt confident in their ability to address student grief associated with terrorist acts or events (55.1% agreed or strongly agreed). And, a majority (72.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed) indicated they were not confident in
terms of their ability to address possible increases in student behavior problems, anger among students (72.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed), or avoid desensitizing students in relation to terrorist events/acts (nearly 80% disagreed or strongly disagreed).

“Media literacy is a citizenship skill involving the use of critical-thinking and decision-making.”

**Table 3 Students’ Emotional Needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I know how to …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address students worried about acts of terrorism in the local area</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.3%)</td>
<td>(58.6%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address students’ fears about what is occurring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.45%)</td>
<td>(17.2%)</td>
<td>(58.6%)</td>
<td>(20.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address students’ feelings of grief</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.45%)</td>
<td>(41.4%)</td>
<td>(34.5%)</td>
<td>(20.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address students’ fears/concerns for their parents/relatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.45%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td>(48.3%)</td>
<td>(17.24%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address parental concerns regarding their children’s safety</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.89%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td>(37.9%)</td>
<td>(27.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… address a possible increase in student behavioral problems</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
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<td>… address feelings of anger among students</td>
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<td>… address the need to avoid desensitizing students about the event</td>
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**Continuing concerns/needs and professional development.** Despite perceived gains in preparedness for a majority of those teaching on 9/11, respondents also identified areas of continued concern and/or need, specifically in terms of teaching/teacher support and professional development. While, at the time of this survey, only 6 (20.7%) of the respondents indicated they had received professional development training on issues surrounding terrorism-related teaching and learning since 9/11, 79.4% agreed or strongly agreed that they needed support from their school administration to deal with a large-scale terrorist event during
the school day. Also, 75.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they would benefit from discussing these issues with other teachers in a professional development setting. In particular, given the findings reported in Table 3, administrator support, teacher-to-teacher discussions, and professional development in terms of addressing student emotional needs, were high-lighted as areas of continued concern/need. One teacher’s written comments were illustrative of this need:

My class and I watched as the World Trade Center tower collapsed. As the building fell, one of my students turned to me and said that her Aunt worked in that building. What she couldn’t bring herself to say was that her Father worked there as well. Nothing in my background ever prepared me for the eventuality that one of my students would witness the death of [her] parent, while sitting in my class. Fortunately, both survived although we did not find out until much later.

**Discussion**

*Overall Perceptions of Preparedness Pre- and Post-

The findings specific to research question 1, suggest that teaching on and through the 9/11 terrorism experience positively impacted respondents’ perceptions regarding their preparedness to teach about terrorism, and thereby, their teaching efficacy, as it relates to teaching about terrorism. On 9/11, teachers found themselves forced into a real-time, crisis-driven experiential learning event that required them to go beyond their previous training, preparation, and subject matter knowledge. While it is likely that previous experience played a role in giving these teachers the confidence to engage the 9/11 events as a teaching and learning opportunity; it is evident from the findings in this study, that respondents perceived the expertise gained from their 9/11 teaching experience enhanced their professional confidence as it relates to teaching in situations both “unpredictable and non-routine” (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 25).

*Current Perceptions of Preparedness*  

**Knowledge/Understanding of terrorism.** Learning about events such as terrorism helps students make connections between the social studies curriculum and the world around them (Lee, 2008). Social studies content comes from the world around us and from lived experiences. Social studies teachers are expected to integrate life experiences, including acts of terrorism, when age appropriate, into the subject matter they teach (Dewey, 1991; Lee, 2008). September 11th served as an occasion for teachers to do just that. Reflective of John Lee’s assertions, a majority of respondents reported feeling confident enough in their understanding of terrorism to lead a future classroom discussion about terrorism as such an event unfolds live in the media. These findings are supported by the work of Lee S. Shulman (1987) and Suzanne M. Wilson, Robert E. Floden, and Joan Ferrini-Mundy (2001) who argued that depth of subject-matter knowledge is critical for teaching success. This depth of knowledge includes the skills necessary to “anticipate and respond to [events], and the ability to create multiple examples and representations of challenging topics that make the content accessible to a wide range of learners” (Grossman & Schoenfield, 2005, p. 201).

Interestingly, while respondents’ perceptions of their terrorism-related subject-matter knowledge reflected confidence, they reported feeling less confident about their ability to discern age-appropriate teaching and learning strategies; and were not confident in their ability to address terrorism-associated ethical issues. Arthur K. Ellis (2007) posits that
teachers should use “troublesome events” to draw-out and develop ethical thinking, and to lead students to “deeper insights into human behavior” (p. 277). While most educators agree that ethical issues have a place in the social studies curriculum, uncertainty remains regarding how these issues should be addressed (Wynne, 1997). Responses here may be reflective of that lack of consensus, and the dearth of attention given to ethical issues in many teacher preparation programs in the United States (Kauchak & Eggen, 2003; Wise, 2006).

Results affirmed teachers’ subject-matter knowledge confidence, and spotlight the need for professional development, particularly in terms of assisting teachers to select age-appropriate strategies. Results also affirm the need to teach about terrorism-associated ethical issues – and how these issues are and are not, should or should not be addressed in the classroom. Results indicated that respondents perceived they were knowledgeable about terrorism, but were less confident in terms of their skills and dispositions when teaching about this topic. With this in mind, these findings are instructive regarding the importance, not only of subject-matter knowledge development, but also of educator pedagogical skills and dispositions as they relate to the moral and ethical development of learners (Kauchak & Eggen, 2003; Martorella, Beal, & Mason Bolick, 2005; Parker, 2009; Stockard, 2006; Wynne, 1997). Teacher education and ongoing professional development programs need to acknowledge their dependence on strategies grounded in the knowledge-base even as they identify and develop subject-matter specific strategies for teaching.

Preparedness to teach using the media. As with the findings reported above relative to knowledge and understanding of terrorism, respondents indicated they were confident in their subject-matter knowledge and abilities in terms of judging the accuracy of media information, how to explain a terrorist event, what information to share, and how much class time to allocate. In essence, respondents were confident in their media literacy knowledge and skills, with a majority expressing confidence in their ability to know what live images to share with their students during an unfolding terror event. Furthermore, a majority expressed confidence in their ability to discern what verbal or written information to share with students, even as they viewed real-time media reports with their students. These findings are reflective of common agreement within the social studies education field, and with Robert Kubey’s (2004) assertion that social studies teachers have a significant obligation to prepare their students to be critical consumers of media images and messages. It is common practice in secondary social studies methods courses for educators to learn about and have opportunities to teach using primary source materials, including newspapers, video, and audio sources, to teach not only about the past, but also to educate students about current events (Lee, 2008; Martorella, Beal, & Mason Bolick, 2005; Parker, 2009; Stockard, 2006; Wyman, 2005). Research from the field of educational media literacy supports this assertion as well. Purposeful classroom media use has been found to support academic learning (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001). It is likely that many of these teachers not only applied these pedagogical skills on 9/11, but that they also felt confident because of their previous expertise teaching about and using historical reasoning and current events to repurpose that knowledge-base to an examination of that day’s unfolding events.

“[R]espondents perceived they were knowledgeable about terrorism, but were less confident in terms of their skills and dispositions when teaching about this topic.”
Students’ emotional needs. Findings relative to respondents’ perceptions of their ability to meet students’ emotional needs reflected and reinforced the emergent theme that while teachers felt confident in terms of subject-matter terrorism-related teaching and learning content-knowledge, they were less confident in terms of their dispositional abilities and ability to effectively address student fears, parental concerns, grief, student behavior problems, anger, and desensitization. According to John Lee (2008), “when students are confused or bothered by events in the world, the social studies classroom is where they seek refuge and answers” (p. 2). We also know, from an examination of research in the field of educational media, that children and adolescents engage the media differently than do adults (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). While today’s children and teens demonstrate increasing levels of media sophistication and savvy (Livingstone, 2002), they continue to bring “less real-world knowledge and experience” to the medium (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009, p.10). Such inexperience makes it more likely that children, and even teens, will respond emotionally to the messages and images they experience via the media. In fact, the more violent the images, the more emotional the response for the young viewer (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009; Nathanson, & Cantor, 2000, Otto, et al., 2007). Co-viewing with responsible adults has been found to temper this effect, and co-viewing with an adult who gives the child “information before, during, and after they experience media [messages] may temper it even more (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). With this and the above information in mind, and considering the impact of the 9/11 attacks on society at large, it is not surprising that the teachers would consider carefully these issues and see professional development as a viable option for addressing them.

Continuing concerns/needs and professional development. The three main areas of concern or need noted by respondents were the need for school administrative support, benefits associated with teacher-to-teacher discussions, and professional development targeting dispositional elements and strategies to address students’ emotional needs. Certainly, professional development for in-service teachers and the inclusion of these concerns within teacher preparation courses, would be useful ways to support teachers’ efficacy when teaching about and during traumatic events, including acts of terrorism. The purpose of a professional development program, furthermore, is the growth of effective teachers who understand how learning occurs (Bransford, et. al, 2005; Molebash, 2004; Owens, 1997). Effective professional development programs result in changes in teacher behavior. The findings of this study are reflective of research that demonstrates the importance of professional development in introducing and exposing teachers, not only to teaching and learning knowledge and skills, but also to dispositional elements and strategies (Cohen & Hill, 2000). These findings specifically spotlight the importance of preparing teachers to reflect on their learners in terms of prior knowledge about terrorism, the skills they possess to analyze and process emotionally charged media messages, their dispositions to learn about terrorism in a real-time settings as an event occurs, and the social and media created context that exists in the local and national community during and immediately after a terror event.

Conclusions

Successful teachers have professional knowledge about their learners, the content in which they teach, and the world in which learning occurs (Lee, 2008: Cohen & Hill, 2000). The findings of this study indicated that these respondents (a) perceived they were more prepared to teach about and during a terrorist event as a result of having done so on 9/11; (b) were confident in their subject-matter
knowledge and pedagogical skills, in terms of teaching about and during a terrorist event; and (c) perceived and expressed concern and need, in terms of dispositional professional development to better equip them to deal with and address student emotional needs.

How these teachers perceive the efficacy of their previous experiences teaching on 9/11 will likely impact whether they will integrate other unfolding terror events as meaningful learning experiences for their students, and then if integrated, how effectively their instruction will be. Other factors, including knowledge of terrorism, media literacy, and an understanding of the emotional needs of their students, will likely impact this decision as well.

The results of this study give insight into the teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to address, educate about, and handle terrorism within their classrooms. While terror attacks are “low-probability” events, meaning they do not occur with any degree of regularity, they are also “high impact events” that disrupt the normal course of events for days and, even, weeks at a time (Baer, et. al, 2005).

Teachers at all grade levels would benefit from professional development in this area. Teachers’ trauma-related professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions must be developed. The welfare of their students requires that teachers be able to educationally address and handle large-scale national (or community) traumas. This is particularly true for secondary social studies teachers who commonly engage their students in an examination of current events and terrorism as a part of their curricular obligations (Singleton, 2002).

Results of this study send a clear message and directive for professional development. Teachers and administrators must think about and plan for how they will respond if another 9/11-like event were to occur during the school day. Without the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions for preparedness, teaching and learning mistakes made on 9/11 will likely be repeated, particularly by inexperienced teachers. Teachers need to reflect on, talk about, and process with each other, what they did that day, and draw conclusions about what aspects of their personal and professional actions were appropriate, and what aspects may have been inappropriate. From this self-reflective foundation, dispositionally-focused, terrorism-specific professional development must be provided and engaged. Absent such targeted professional development, teachers are, at the very least, likely to be less effective when dealing with these types of events (Moss & Nichols, 2002).

References


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