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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study followed 41 fourth- and fifth-grade students from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 through December of that year, in an attempt to understand how these students were affected by the attacks and subsequent government actions. Class assignments and teachers' anecdotal journals were analyzed. Through their work and play, students indicated that they were knowledgeable about the terrorist attacks. Themes noted initially were sadness, anger, and pride in their country. Although they retained those emotions, the additional theme of fear-of war, additional attacks, and anthrax-grew as the weeks passed. Three months later, students expressed the same four themes through references in their play, class discussions, and drawings spontaneously added to unrelated assignments. (Author)

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A View of Terrorism from the Classroom:

Reactions of Elementary Students to the Events of September 11

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### Abstract

This qualitative study follows 41 fourth and fifth grade students from the September 11 terrorist attacks through December in an attempt to understand how these students were affected by the attacks and subsequent government actions. Class assignments and teachers' anecdotal journals were analyzed. Through their work and play, students indicated that they were knowledgeable about the terrorist attacks. Themes noted initially were sadness, anger, and pride in their country. Although they retained those emotions, the additional theme of fear - of war, additional attacks, and anthrax - grew as the weeks passed. Three months later, students expressed the same 4 themes through references in their play, class discussions, and drawings spontaneously added to unrelated assignments.

A View of Terrorism from the Classroom:

Reactions of Elementary Students to the Events of September 11

“I feel very angry, sad, and discouraged about this. It has been very nerve-racking.

“I feel afraid that they will attack again very close to home . . . If they strike back, they might strike back here.”

“I am proud to be an American because we are the strongest nation in the world.”

The terrorist attacks of September 11 were traumatic events for people worldwide. For the first time in history, people all over the world were able to witness terrorism as it happened. It has been said that this event has changed the United States, as a nation, forever. If that is so, how has it affected the children, many of whom were watching in their classrooms as the second airplane struck the World Trade Center, as those massive towers came tumbling down, or as news of the attack on the Pentagon or the Pennsylvania crash were reported?

Vogel (1995) points out that children are thought to live in a world that is carefree, distant from the pressures and problems of the adult world, and when children do suffer emotional or psychological stress it is often thought of as a temporary phrase. DeBord (2001), however, emphasizes that children are the most vulnerable population and that times of disaster and trauma increase their vulnerability. Falasca and Caulfield (1999) indicate that it can be assumed that if violence or the threat of violence were directed at a child, the child's sense of safety and trust would be influenced. Macosko (2000) suggests that there is a need for more extensive research to reduce the long-term effects of children's stress due to exposure to violent situations.

Macosko (2000) also says that teachers may carry a particularly heavy responsibility and that school may become the only stable environment left in some children's lives. Groves (1995)

suggests that parents who are chronically fearful or who have themselves been exposed to trauma may find it difficult to remain sensitive to their child's feelings. They may be able to do little to satisfy the child's increased need for comfort, reassurance, and protection. Osofsky (1999) points out that children can benefit from having a "safe place" and that school often serves this function. Since most children spend as much waking time at school as at home, schools and teachers have an enormous potential for providing emotional support and nurturing for children exposed to violence.

Although most children did not experience direct loss from the September 11 terrorist acts, many children did witness the acts on television either as they occurred or as they were replayed repeatedly in the weeks following the attacks. Macosko (2000) reports that psychological trauma can be even more devastating to a society than physical damage because the effects last longer and are often poorly addressed. This psychological trauma can lead to stress, autistic behavior, shock, aggression, a sense of emptiness, and a loss of self-esteem. Exposure to such incidents in early childhood has been correlated to later maladaptive or problem adolescent behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, violent aggressive behavior, adjustment and interpersonal problems in school, and poor academic performance (Johnson, 1989; Wolfe, Zak, & Wilson, 1986).

Groves (1995) suggests that those adults working with children who have been exposed to trauma should encourage activities that counter the sense of helplessness the child may feel and this may come in the form of allowing the child to play and replay the traumatic event. Clark (1995) also reports that reenacting traumatic events is an essential part of the healing process for young children.

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial effects of the September 11 terrorist

attacks on a group of elementary school children. In addition, we wanted to see if those feelings changed over time and if the children returned to those events in play or through reenactment, as Clark (1995) and Groves (1995) suggest. This is significant because an awareness of children's reactions to such events can help teachers to understand how children are affected and better prepare teachers to deal with students' concerns.

Students' essays, art work, and class assignments as well as anecdotal records kept by teachers and researchers were collected for a period of three months. These were studied for themes that would give indications of students' reactions and feelings. The focus is on students' feelings about the events of September 11 and how those feelings influence students.

### **Gathering Students' Impressions**

Data were gathered in a variety of ways. Two days after the attacks, on September 13, students were asked to write an essay about what happened on September 11 and how they felt about the events. Six weeks later, on October 25, students were asked to write an essay about how they felt at the present time and what they thought would happen. In addition to the essays, as they studied, drew, had class discussions, and played during free time the students were observed by teachers and researchers who recorded those observations. After analyzing essays and anecdotal records, teachers held a class discussion to determine if students agreed with the findings.

The participants were a total of forty-one fourth and fifth grade students (18 males and 23 females) ranging in age from eight to ten. These students are part of two multi-age classes with two teachers and a teaching intern. They attend a public elementary school located in a relatively small, southeastern town located at least 150 miles away from any large city or military target. The children in this study come from middle to lower middle-class families. Parents signed an

informed consent form to allow their children to participate in this study.

On September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks occurred, one of the researchers, working in a teacher education program, was in attendance in this combination fourth/fifth grade classroom of forty-one students. She worked with these students and their teachers every day throughout the fall semester. Thus, she was present and had the opportunity to observe students and school personnel as the events of the day unfolded and throughout the following weeks.

Each of the two sets of essays, those from September 13 and those from October 25 were analyzed separately. In addition, students' drawings and teachers' anecdotal records were examined to determine if any consistent themes were present. Only 27 students wrote essays for the assignment on September 11. On October 25, there were 33 students present who wrote essays about their current feelings.

To ensure that a true depiction of the students' attitudes emerged, both the researcher-observer and a second researcher reviewed the all of the essays, artwork and notes from observations. Data analysis was inductive. Both researchers read, reread, and marked separate copies of all of the essays and notes. Initial interpretations were discussed by the researchers. Then the classroom teachers were asked to assess the researchers' interpretations in light of their observations and knowledge of the students. Finally, a general analysis of the information was presented to the students in order to ascertain their reactions and to determine if the narrative had captured their thoughts accurately.

### **Students' Immediate Reactions to Terrorists Attacks**

How did students react to the terrorists attacks? Whenever a tragedy of this magnitude occurs, educators wonder how the events affect children. Several questions were raised about the students' perceptions and the effect of the events of September 11 on their lives. The first

question was how much do the children understand about the terrorist attacks? Do they know what actually happened? The next question was how were they affected by the attacks? What were their feelings? Were they frightened? Do they perceive it as something happening far away or as something close to their lives?

Three major themes emerged in the days immediately following the attack: thirteen students expressed sadness, eight expressed anger, and ten expressed feelings of patriotism in their essays following the attacks.

### **Students were aware of the events**

On September 13, two days after the attacks, students were asked to write essays expressing their feelings about the attacks on the World Trade Center. The first question the researchers hoped to answer with these essays was how much the children knew about the terrorist attacks. Television sets were turned on in the classroom after the initial attack and turned off after the second plane flew into the World Trade Center; therefore, most of the children watched it with their classmates. Students also mentioned watching the news coverage at home with their families. They had seen it on television, but did the students understand the details?

In answer to the question “What happened on September 11, 2001?” the essays indicated that all of the children knew the basic details of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. One student wrote, “Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the twin towers fell down.” Although one student confused some facts with the Oklahoma City bombing, referring to a nursery in the building. Most students also mentioned the attack on the Pentagon, “They took a little bit of are (*sic*) U.S. Navy, Marines, the Army. The building is called the Pentagon. The place it is located in Washington D.C.”



Fewer students made the connection between these two acts and the airplane that crashed in Pennsylvania, but some understood that the crash was a failed terrorist attempt. One student wrote, “It took bravery to crash the fourth plane into Pittsburgh.” While they grasped the details of the attacks, most students were unclear on the numbers of people killed. One child talked about the “millions” who were injured and another talked about the “hundreds.”

Most knew the name Osama bin Laden and several used the word “mean” to describe him or the terrorists. One student said, “They should drop a bomb on his head and throw him off the earth.”

### **Students reacted with sorrow**

The second question was how were the students affected by the attacks. What were their feelings? Were they frightened? Did they perceive it as something happening far away or as something close to their lives?

Most children did feel a connection with the events. A feeling of sadness was expressed by 13 of the 27 students responding. Three students mentioned feeling sorry for the children whose parents were killed. “Moms and dads were in there to (*sic*). Leaveing children behide (*sic*) with no one to live with and love.” Students expressed their feelings in a variety of ways. “I feel very angry, sad, and discouraged about this. It has been very nerve-racking.” “I want to cry.” “It is verry (*sic*) sad, at least that is what I think.” Eight children knew someone either in New York or Washington or someone who was supposed to fly to one of those cities near the time of the attack. And many recognized the historic importance as well. It is the “Most important thing in my life, I’ll remember it forever.” “This moment will be remembered for as long as I live.”

### **Students reacted with patriotism**

Instead of anxiety, ten children expressed their pride in being an American citizen. Most

students recognized the attacks as being against the country. Fear was not a major theme in these essays, although several expressed thankfulness that they live in a rural area, far away from any important buildings or military sites. Children said, “I am a little scared . . . but I know I’ve got people that will protect me.” “If we try, we can do anything.” “American will live on in history forever and ever.” “I will pray for America.” “. . . are (*sic*) country is to (*sic*) strong.” “I am proud to be an American because we are the strongest nation in the world.” “I think whoever done (*sic*) that must be really stupid because they are jellyos (*sic*) of us.

In addition, the children were very aware of the separation of church and state to the extent that one child was “very surprised that in school assembly, the teachers sang, ‘God Bless America’.”

### **Students reacted with anger**

Eight students also reacted with anger. As they expressed their anger at the terrorists, students used words like mean, cruel, selfish, and rude to describe them.

Although most students did not look beyond the events of the day, some recognized the possibility of future consequences. Those who spoke about the possibility of war were equally divided in their attitudes in favor of going to war or against going to war. One child against going to war said, “I don’t think we should do anything back to them. If we do, we just keep going back and forth between each other.” Another child said, “. . . we don’t have any reason why to declare it. All they did was wreck two buildings.” But not all children foresaw a peaceful end to the attacks. A child in favor of striking back said, “I hope we fight back with enough power to be strong.” One little girl proclaimed, “I think that the person who did this should die.” She went on to suggest that “. . . they should be put in jell (*sic*) first for 20 years and then be kelled (*sic*).”

### **Students' Reactions a Week Later**

Pride, anger, and sadness were still major themes ten days after the attacks, but, in a class discussion, a new theme began to emerge. Students admitted at that time that they were more scared then, a week after the attacks, than they had been a few days after. One student said, "My mom said more is coming." Part of the fear was the belief that there would be a war. A boy said, "I'm more scared now because there will be a war."

They also confessed to being confused. Students asked, "Why did they kill themselves and their own people who live in the trade center?" One girl declared, "They are just trying to make us scared and do what they want." However, the students were overwhelmingly in agreement that the attacks have united Americans, and students expressed pride in their nation.

### **Students' Reactions After Six Weeks**

Additional questions dealt with students' reactions after some time had passed. What were their feelings after the initial attacks were over and imminent attacks seemed unlikely? How did they respond to the news of the United States declaring war with Afghanistan? If they had been frightened initially, were they still scared?

Six weeks after the attacks, students were asked to write an essay about how they currently felt. At this point, war with Afghanistan had begun and researchers also wanted to know how students were responding to this news. These essays generally expressed three major themes: patriotism, and sadness for both the victims of the attack and for the people of Afghanistan were repeated from the initial essays, but fear also became an important theme in these essays.

### **Students felt fear**

The dominant theme of over half (17) of these papers was feeling scared. Students realized that a war had been declared and this seemed somehow closer to home than the terrorist strikes. “I’m scared of war,” was a common sentiment. One student worried that it might become World War III. Another student said, “I feel afraid that they will attack again very close to home . . . If they strike back, they might strike back here.” And, even though they live in a small town, they repeated the urban rumor that the local shopping mall would be bombed on Halloween.

Most students expressed some doubt about the war. One child said, “I am afraid that we will loose (*sic*). I’m afraid it will go on for a long time.” “I scared because if we lose they will come over here and destroy American and kill all of us and use us as slaves.” Some students realized that a war might mean death for children as well as their parents. One student said, “People on both sides will die.”

Ambivalence was evident, as one child said, “I feel bad and happy because they are bombing Afghanistan.” One student said she felt, “bad, because they had no reason to do that [the terrorists attacks]. Good. Because they will get payback. Sad, for all the children that lost their parents.”

Only five students said that they were not afraid. Two felt confident that their parents and God would protect them. One student indicated that he feels safe, “because my dad has a lot of guns, and he will protect me.” Two reasoned that no one would attack a small rural town in the South.

### **Students felt patriotism**

In spite of the fear, there was still a sense of pride in America expressed in ten of the papers. “I feel good that we are defending and we are not just letting them get away with it.”

One wrote in bold letters, “Attack back, attack back.” One child felt the inevitability of war “I feel sad because of (*sic*) we have to fight and we have to, because if we don’t they’ll just keep on fighting until the Americans are dead and gone.” Some students indicated confidence in winning a war with Afghanistan. “I also feel safe because the U.S. has the strongest army that I know of.”

### **Students felt compassion**

Many students were able to separate the terrorists’ acts from the Afghan people, saying about President Bush, “he has made some really great choices like giving money to the Afghan children,” and “I feel bad for the people in Afghanistan.” “I’m scared for the Afghanistan children.” “The familys (*sic*) have to sufer (*sic*) with no food, clouthes, (*sic*) shelter.” And students expressed hope that “someday maybe the Afghans would be our friends,” adding, “Why can’t we get-along.”

### **Students expressed additional concerns**

Several minor themes were also apparent in these student essays. Although it still consumed a great deal of their thoughts, many children were trying to put the terrorist attacks out of their minds, a few still asked questions and some were now concerned about anthrax.

“I will never forget” still echoed in most papers, but, several students wrote that they were trying not to think about it or that they didn’t want to hear any more about September 11. “I’m not going to worry about the war going on cause I would rather get on with my life.” “I’m tired of hearing about it. . .every news channel I watch I always hear about it. . .it’s sad, . . .but it does get a little over carried.” Students were still mad at Osama Ben Laden. One student expressed the hope that Ben Laden would be found. She described how she would punish him. “I would say, ‘Look at your self, and you’ve done a very bad thing’.”

Only three children made any reference to the anthrax scare. While they weren't sure exactly what it was, they knew that it was bad. One student said, "I'm extremely worried that I'm going to get it. I don't know exactly what it is besides a disease (or something) but it can't be good if everyone on the news is saying how they panicked (*sic*) when they got it or whatever."

The questions remained, "Why? Why did they did (*sic*) it? That's just cruel." "I'm disappointed because people can't get along with each other. It's silly, people kill themselves to kill others." And students recognize that the world has changed. "I find differences between the way things use to be and from Sept. 11 to now."

### **Students' Reactions Through Art Work, Play**

The drawings many children spontaneously included with their essays indicate that the children understood what had happened and support the themes of experiencing patriotism and feeling sadness and anger. Seven pictures included with their essays were fairly accurate representations of towers or the pentagon being struck by airplanes with smoke billowing out of them; six students drew American flags; one child drew flowers, and another drew sad faces with tear drops falling from the eyes.

The students demonstrated that they still considered the events of September 11, that it was not forgotten. Over three months later children were still impulsively drawing pictures representing the terrorist act. On the back of an assignment to draw a Viking ship, one student added a picture of the World Trade Center towers being struck by airplanes and smoke and fire billowing up. In response to an assignment to create a machine that would be a labor saving device, one girl drew a machine to "Keep Ben Laden from coming to the United States" complete with an umbrella over a tall building and a cannon shooting a figure in a robe and turban.

Evidence of patriotism and sadness appeared in student's work through the end of the term. During a poetry unit in November, students were assigned to write a cinquain as a class. They wrote, "World Trade Center/ Tall, demolished/ Building, breaking, falling./ They used to trade/ Twin Towers." Even though it was not part of the assignment, students drew a vivid picture of towers, airplanes, and flames with a frowning sun in the background. Later that week, working individually, a student wrote the following poem inside a picture of a burning tower: "Are the Towers/ up yet? I surely/ don't know. Towers/ falling down because of/ Bin Laden! But we/ bombed them back they/ got really mad. Now watch/ America strike back." Another student, assigned to write an "unpacking story" wrote about the war in Afghanistan and illustrated it with a figure surrounded by flames.

Teachers reported that, a few days after the attacks, the boys in this class began to play "war." During recess these boys gave themselves military titles, designated leaders, and practiced "maneuvers." This form of play lasted for several weeks. The girls also formed "military units," but they played in this manner for only a few days before returning to their usual activities.

### **Class Discussion**

In January, researchers talked with students to determine the accuracy of the researchers' conclusions drawn from observations and interpretations of students' essays. All 41 students were present during the discussion. Students all agreed that they felt sad both on the day of the attacks as well as at the present time. All 41 also agreed with the researchers' interpretation that they felt pride in being Americans.

Most of the students (39) expressed anger over the events and several added that they were originally sad, but became angry. Slightly over half of the students, (21) admitted that they were still worried, and 37 said that they still think about it frequently.

### **Discussion**

The children in this fourth/fifth grade classroom did understand what happened in the terrorist attacks of September 11. Whether they gained most of their information from watching the television news either in the class or at home or through discussing it with their class or their families, students were very aware of both the sequence of events and the magnitude of the actions. They recognized the attacks as planned, coordinated attacks on their country instead of against specific places or people.

Although immediately after the attacks students were both sad and angry, they were able to separate their feelings about the terrorists and their actions from feelings about the people of Afghanistan. The overwhelming emotion expressed in their initial essays was that of sadness. Pride was also an emotion felt by many students, but fear was not.

The children's emotions changed in the six weeks between the first and second essays. While feelings of sadness and pride were still evident after six weeks, fear became the prevalent emotion. Students were now afraid of the war, of additional terrorist strikes, and of getting anthrax. They had more questions and, even though most changes did not affect them directly, they were aware of the changes in American life as a result of the attacks. It was also clear from their spontaneous references to the attacks that the students had not forgotten about them, that they were something that students thought about months later even while working on assignments unconnected to the attacks.



While some students would prefer to deny any concern and “would rather get on with my life,” it seems that most children in this classroom have not been able to do that. Even at this young age, these children understood what happened during the attacks and the aftermath.

It appears that students would benefit from continued explanations of events as well as the opportunity to discuss the events and ask questions. Reassurance about their own safety is also important to help these children deal with such events.

In the past, many people have overlooked children, assuming that they are too young to understand events such as these. However, this research indicates that the terrorist attack and war with Afghanistan have affected children. Feelings of fear and sadness increased rather than decreased in the months after the attacks. Violence has indeed affected even students far away from the actual events..

The responses of these students demonstrates that the terrorists attacks were seen as more than a violent event on television; it was seen as a threat to the country and to the students themselves. Macosko (2000) indicates that children who experience such feelings of shock often grow up accepting violence as a fact of life rather than a problem to be corrected. In a world where children are vulnerable with little power, it is important to take their thoughts and feelings seriously.

### **Applications for Educators**

During the school year, children spend almost as much waking time at school as they do at home. Therefore, educators need to be aware of the effects of traumatic events on children. As these essays and discussions demonstrate, school-age children have a great understanding of what they see and hear in the media, but this realization also means that they are more able to

comprehend the fact that the adults in their lives cannot always protect them. Thus, children perceive the world as a more dangerous place.

Some children choose to block out thoughts about such traumatic events, but trying to block out those thoughts doesn't necessarily stop anxiety and fearfulness from occurring. Those fears often manifest themselves in children's play or artwork.

Brooks and Siegel (1996) suggest that adults should give children the skills to deal with their feelings. It is important to understand that children's feelings do not just disappear. Educators need to provide opportunities for children to discuss their feelings and learn to deal with them. Discussion with adults and other students will help children to see that they are not alone in experiencing their reactions.

Talking about the heroism involved and the way people helped each other allows children to focus on more positive aspects of such a traumatic event. Giving children ways to be of service or letting them suggest things that they can do to feel more safe gives them more of a sense of security and enables them to feel less helpless.

These findings suggest that students should be given opportunities to express their concerns and fears through writing or through class discussions. Educators can serve an important role both by providing those opportunities and by helping students to work through their fears.

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