

The Face and Voice of the Democratic State: Elementary Teachers in a Time of Crisis

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Purpose of the Study: There are two objectives to this study. The first objective is to further the discussion of teachers as public servants who are essential to the maintenance of the democratic state (Blacker, 2002; Lipsky, 1980). This study demonstrates how teachers' actions on September 11, 2001 in New York City show the essential qualities of public service, including selflessness and placing the needs of others above their own needs. By focusing on the personal, emotional and professional responses of teachers to the attacks as compared to the same responses of individuals in the private sector, the study shows a specific contrast, particularly in the professional responses between teachers and student teachers in public service and individuals in occupations in the private sector. The second objective is to include the voices of women, primarily elementary teachers, but also women in the private sector, in the historical narrative of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. Hopefully, this inclusion will encourage the use of personal accounts and narratives in the study of historical events (M. White, 1965; H. White, 1980)

Perspective and Background: Tuesday September 11th was a work day and elementary school teachers throughout the New York City public schools were in school at the time of the attacks. The attack on the north tower occurred fifteen minutes after their work day began at 8:30. This study compares the stories of one group of elementary teachers and one group of student teachers to individuals outside of teaching on that day. The teachers and student teachers were primarily located in Queens, New York. The individuals outside of the classroom were located not only in Queens but on Long Island and in Manhattan, including lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center itself.

Teachers in the public schools are included among the public servants essential to the maintenance of a democratic society (Blacker, 2002; Lipsky, 1980). These essential public servants, including teachers, police, firefighters and others, are the face of the democratic state for most ordinary citizens. They are the public servants that citizens typically encounter as they go about their everyday lives. It is these essential occupations that make democratic societies possible. The police, firefighters and emergency health

workers guarantee the security of citizens in their persons and property, whereas teachers provide access to a public education from kindergarten through twelfth grade. These individuals are for the ordinary citizen the democratic state's "face and voice, its triumphs and failures, its heroes and villains" (Blacker, 2002, p.6).

Disasters are divided into three distinct categories: natural disasters, technological disasters and mass violence. The latter two are both caused by humans, but mass violence has the further element of intention (Norris et al, 2002; Norris, Friedman & Watson, 2002). The attacks on the World Trade Center fall into the last category. In a study of Queens and Long Island in which the personal threat of terrorism by individuals in the geographic area of the attack on the World Trade Center was compared to the national threat, it was found that personal threat was far more likely to illicit strong emotional reactions than national threat (Huddy et al, 2002). Mental health professionals have identified the reactions to this type of personal threat as: shock, anger, grief and fear. (Harvard Mental Health Letter, January,2002; Padgett, 2002). Each of the respondents in this study expressed one or more of these emotions as information about the attacks became available to them. The educational research about the effect of personal emotions of this type on teachers and their classroom decisions is limited, however (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

Data: This study is based on journals written by nineteen teachers, nineteen student teachers and twenty-three individuals in the private sector, either working or non-working. The pool of respondents reflects the following numbers, gender and location:

Gender					
Male	7	Female	54	Total	61
Profession					
Teacher	4	Teacher	15	Teacher	19
Student Teacher	0	Student Teacher	19	Student Teacher	19
Office Professional	2	Office Professional	2	Office Professional	4
Office Worker	1	Office Worker	6	Office Worker	7

Other	0	Other	12	Other	12
<i>Geographic Location on 9/11/01</i>					
Lower Manhattan	2	Lower Manhattan	2	Lower Manhattan	4
Manhattan (other)	1	Manhattan (other)	1	Manhattan (other)	2
Queens	3	Queens	43	Queens	46
Other	1	Other	15	Other	16

All of the respondents were attending a graduate program leading to a master's degree in elementary education. Each respondent was assigned a number and the anonymity of each individual was assured.

Methodology: The respondents were asked to follow a general time format in the journals that focuses on one or two hour blocks of time from when they got up on Tuesday, September 11 until they went to bed that night. They were to record their actions, thoughts and feelings. Most of the journals are from three to five pages long and contain varying degrees of detail. The journals were written in February 2002 and are therefore a retrospective account of the events of September 11, 2001. Although the ability to recall after this lapse of time is a concern in ordinary circumstances, events that are “highly vivid, widely reported in the news, involuntary, responsible for a large number of deaths and unusual”(Huddy et al, 2002) remain more available in memory (Lichtenstein et al, 1978; Thaler, 1983).

An evaluation of the response journals is based on the following questions:

- How did each individual learn about the attacks?
- How did each individual react to the knowledge of the attacks?
- How did each individual make professional decisions in the aftermath of the knowledge of the attacks?

The study contains both quantitative and anecdotal evaluation of the questions.

Findings and Significance:

Learning about the Attacks: The respondents with the most limited knowledge of the attacks were in the World Trade Center itself or in schools, which have little or no classroom access to televisions, radios or telephones. The individuals who knew immediately of the attacks were in their own homes watching television or in offices that had access to television.

Reactions to the Attacks: All individuals reacted with one or more of the emotions of shock, anger, grief and fear. Those in lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center itself focused on their own survival first as they moved away from the area. The emotions of those in other locations were not focused on themselves but on friends and relatives in lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center.

Professional Decisions: The greatest difference between the respondents who were teachers and student teachers and the respondents who were in the private sector were in their professional decisions. No teacher or student teacher considered leaving their schools to find friends or relatives. Only one student teacher thought of leaving, because she had school age children of her own. She did not leave, however. The student teachers did not stay in classrooms, but were asked to bring students down to their parents as more and more arrived to take their children from school. The classroom teachers had to make decisions whether to discuss the attacks or not, often with limited knowledge and no directions from principals. The individuals in private sector positions left and went home, even if they were asked not to by their superiors. It is in this area of professional responsibility in particular that the roles and responsibilities of public servants differentiate clearly from those of private sector employees.

Response journals similar to the ones used in this study are one way to establish the historical record. The voices in these journals are primarily those of women. They are an underrepresented perspective in the ongoing story of the public servants, including firefighters and police, and individuals in the private sector, who were in New York City on September 11, 2001.

Using teachers as a comparative group in the story of September 11 in New York City goes beyond a general selection of individuals, both men and women, who experienced the event at close range. Teachers are a particular group of public servants. Their perspectives and commitments set them

apart from the many other individuals in a variety of occupations who were in metropolitan New York on September 11th. Similar to firefighters, police officers, emergency workers and others; their profession involves a commitment that transcends their own individual emotions and needs. Teaching as a profession charges them with the care and development of students whose needs they are asked to put above their own needs. That commitment was evident in the selfless actions of the teachers in this study on September 11th. Teachers in schools in the area adjacent to the World Trade Center led their students to safety as the World Trade Center burned above them (Lehmuller & Switzer, 2002). The teachers in Queens did not physically lead their students to safety, but they assured the children that they were safe even as some watched the burning towers from their classroom windows.

Response journals are a particularly effective method of demonstrating the emotional reaction to an event such as the attacks on the World Trade Center. Whereas a questionnaire or survey is useful in quantifying each individual's reaction, a journal allows each individual to express those reactions in a fuller and more detailed manner through the power of their own words. Although they were extremely concerned about their own families, even distraught, none of the journals indicated that a teacher considered leaving their students and going home. All stayed until the end of the school day or until all of their students were safely on their way home. Then they went to their own children and families. Through these actions they demonstrated under extraordinary conditions the nature of the teaching profession, which caused them to put aside their personal feelings in order to fulfill their responsibilities. The journals show that they took these actions automatically with no conscious decision to stay with their students or leave to go to their own friends and family.

Although some of the respondents expressed concern for what was happening to the nation, their strongest emotions were personal and concerned themselves, their family and friends located in Manhattan during the attacks. Most individuals in the greater metropolitan area of New York City had some connection with at least one of the thousands of people working in the World Trade Center on September 11th. They either personally knew someone or knew someone through another person. Thousands of people escaped from the World Trade Center unharmed. Others did not. This personal

connection to people working in the World Trade Center and its surrounding area was evident in the journals. All respondents reacted in some degree with shock, grief, anger and fear. However, the teachers in particular speak in their journals of controlling themselves and staying calm for the sake of the children. As one teacher said, "What will they do if I lose it?"

On September 11, teachers were one of the groups of civil servants who exemplified the face of our democratic society to others, including their students and their students' parents. The teachers in this study who explained the attacks to their students did so calmly and tried not to place blame or pass judgment. Even those teachers who were instructed by principals not to say anything to students still tried to maintain calm, although when confronted by student questions they felt conflicted and torn.

Nel Noddings (1992) speaks of a challenge to care in the teaching profession. Reflecting this challenge, the face of the democratic state that teachers presented on September 11 was one of caring and calm, as they reached out to their students to comfort them and assure them of their safety. Inherent in the nature and traditions of public service occupations is what Blacker calls "a moral nobility" (Blacker, 2002, p 6) that came to the forefront on September 11th.

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