Hurricanes and Tsunamis: Teaching about Natural Disasters and Civic Responsibility in Elementary Classrooms

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Social studies teachers are constantly seeking ways to connect the past with the present, the near with the far, the familiar with the esoteric. One of the most powerful ways to create such connections is through the integration of current events into social studies lessons (Silverman 2003; Turner 1995). Current events promote students’ oral and written expression skills, facilitate their critical thinking, and increase their reasoning skills (Passe 1988). The immediacy and relevance of current events in social studies classrooms is profound because they “bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world and can provide students with information that they can use in their daily lives” (Weinberg, Neumann, and White 2000, 142). More than facilitating an awareness of local, national, or international affairs, current events stimulate students to engage in board conversations concerning roles, rights, and responsibilities. In this article, I present ways in which elementary teachers can promote geographic, economic, political, and historical concepts through the use of current events, specifically the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina. Although horrific in nature, such events can provide powerful and useful educational opportunities for students to understand not only the disciplines inherent in social studies but also their civic roles and responsibilities as participants in a global society.

Social Studies and Natural Disasters

Geography

Elementary teachers can link geography with the Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in several ways. First, they can begin by defining the terms tsunami and hurricane and explain why they occur. The students can locate on a map where the 2004 tsunami and Katrina originated and then plot the directions the concurrent tsunami waves traveled and Katrina’s course through the Atlantic and ultimately up the Gulf of Mexico. Students can name the most impacted countries and states and find them on a map. Using cardinal directions, the students can determine the directions in which the tsunami and the hurricane traveled.

Primary teachers can personalize the lesson by having students discuss their feelings toward such natural disasters. “How did it make you feel?” “How do you think children who lost their homes feel?” For upper elementary grades, teachers can ask “How did these natural disasters change where people work, live, and go to school?” Last, the students can speculate about how the affected areas may look ten years from now. “What infrastructural (transportation, communication, commercial, settlement) changes may result from these disasters?” These are simple yet important ways by which elementary teachers can reinforce basic geographic skills and link the lives and experiences of their students to the lives and experiences of others.

Economics

Providing elementary students with opportunities to make monetary choices is an excellent way to teach simple, yet important, economic concepts. After allotting each student five thousand dollars, the teacher provides them with a

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list of goods and services and attaches a monetary value to each, for example, two hundred and fifty dollars for food, one hundred and sixty dollars for clothes, eighty dollars for medicine, and forty-five dollars for school supplies. The students then make economic choices based on their perception of the importance of the expenditure. The students then explain to the class why they made such choices.

Upper elementary teachers can also discuss the role of supply and demand and pose the question, "How have these disasters influenced supply and demand in affected areas?" The students need to consider what goods or services are in the greatest demand after a natural disaster and discuss the changes in supply and demand over time in the areas damaged by the tsunami and the hurricane.

**Government**

Establishing and following rules and accepting responsibility are important social studies concepts in the primary grades. Teachers can ask students to list the roles of firefighters and police officers during and after a natural disaster and describe the role of the average citizen. The teacher can ask the following questions:

- Whom should citizens listen to?
- Why is it important to listen to authorities after a natural disaster?
- What would happen if we didn’t have rules or didn’t follow them?"

The teacher can provide upper elementary students with a scenario and divide them into groups, assigning them to roles in a particular branch of the local, state, or federal government (for example, mayor, and police chief, governor, president, aid relief administrator). In the role play, the students learn that there is a disaster, to which they have to respond. They have to decide on their primary job or role and determine their first response. The success of this lesson depends on the level of reality created. Teachers need to provide real-life situations and add appropriate "curve balls" that students can problem solve in such a collaborative exercise, setting priorities and making decisions illustrate the complexities of decision making.

**History**

Elementary students can use a timeline to plot the date and place of the origin of tsunamis or hurricanes occurring over the past two hundred and fifty years. Students can then deduce if any historical patterns of activity exist and, if so, speculate on why. They should consider whether some countries are more prone to such disasters than others. They can also conduct an in-depth research project on a single tsunami or hurricane, citing date and place, physical and economic impact, and any resultant changes that were made. The students can then present their research to the class. Through the use of newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, students can seek first-person narratives of a disaster's effects from the different perspectives of survivors, aid workers, media representatives, and government representatives. This activity is a powerful way to personalize human reactions to natural disasters.

**Natural Disasters and the Promotion of Civic Responsibility**

From the time of Thomas Jefferson to Horace Mann, when American educational theory was being developed, civic participation has been a cornerstone of teaching civic responsibility. The premise of civic education is to create a literate, well-informed, and participatory citizenry for the purpose of contributing to and perpetuating democratic ideals (Otten 2000). Moral and character education sprang from this ideological root. Although an important construct in its own right, civic education is limited, by definition, to understanding one's role in and responsibility to the democratic process. Given this, civic education, in the form of ideological constructs and pedagogical practices, rarely branches from its government and political science roots within social studies curriculums. What needs to be included in discussions concerning civic education are the roles, rights, and responsibilities that students have, not only to the American democratic process but also to the world at large. Hence, social studies teachers need to redefine the concept of civic education to include a working definition of civic responsibility.

So, what, exactly, is civic responsibility? Dengelman (2000) and Quigley (1995) offer definitions, yet both are couched with the familiar democratic descriptors as "citizenship for democracy" and "participatory democracy." I believe that they miss the mark. Civic responsibility promotes the interconnectedness of global affairs through the understanding of and respect for cultural values and practices. At its core, civic responsibility recognizes an interdependence on and an ethical allegiance to others. This expands the limited definition of civic education by placing a deliberate and continual emphasis on international relationships and international responsibilities. By promoting civic responsibility in social studies classrooms, students increase their "awareness of cultural, political, and economic interdependence in the world of the past, present, and future" (Swift 1999, 46). The seminal question for students becomes, What is my civic responsibility to other human beings?

How can teachers use the Indonesian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina to promote civic responsibility? For young learners, teachers can ask the following simple questions:

- How would it feel to lose your home?
- Would you want someone to help you?
- What kind of help would you want?
- What would be the first thing you would need?

Discussions can shift to the role of friendship, trust, allegiance, honesty, and integrity. These heady concepts are not exclusive to higher grades. Primary teachers can easily broach these concepts, and young learners can easily grasp them because these are fundamental constructs of early childhood social studies education.

Elementary teachers can also spur students into action. In response to both natural disasters, schools around the world
undertook service projects aimed at raising money for disaster relief. Service projects can be as simple as bake sales, car washes, or raffles. The complexity of the project is irrelevant. What is most important is that students create their own way of assistance by recognizing their civic responsibility to others. The most direct and applicable way for students to learn civic responsibility is by practicing it (Demmon, Rice, and Warble 1996; Gecan and Mulholland-Glaze 1993; Levine 2003; Likona 1997; Peters 1999). Teachers can facilitate the service-learning process by allotting ample classroom time for students to discuss and develop ways to help others. There may be nothing more rewarding, for both student and teacher, than practicing care.

Research-based projects are also effective ways to understand one’s civic responsibility to victims of natural disasters. Students can choose an aid agency that regularly assists in disaster relief efforts, such as the American Red Cross, USAID, the Salvation Army, UNICEF, Children’s Relief Fund, or Doctors Without Boarders, and research their chosen agency. They can address questions such as: What is the mission statement of the agency? When was it founded? Where is the country of origin for the agency? What kind of relief does it provide? How much money has it raised that is directly benefiting disaster relief? Is the agency’s money earmarked for a particular country, state, or purpose? If possible, students can plot on a map the flow of money from its country of origin to the relief area. Students can also, if accessible, chart the flow of money within particular countries or specific geographic areas. Last, the students can assume the role of the directorate of their chosen agency and determine whether they are satisfied with the amount of money raised, where the money is going, or how it is being spent. They can produce a three-minute speech in which, as the director, they address the questions asked previously and present their speeches to the class. This exercise combines critical-thinking and problem-solving skills through oral and written communication.

Conclusion

The use of current events, particularly the 2004 Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, is a powerful way for elementary teachers to spur historical, geographic, economic, and political discussions. Natural disasters can also promote conversations about civic responsibility. By addressing such topics, teachers help students grasp the historical, geographic, economic, and political ramifications of domestic and global events. What may be more important is that students begin to recognize their role as contributing, caring members of an interconnected global society; a society based on respect for others and one’s responsiveness to others. Accomplishing that is a tall task but one worth promoting.

Key words: civic education, current events and civic education, economics and natural disasters, geography

APPENDIX

Teacher Resources on the World Wide Web

Current Events Web Sites

http://www.nytimes.com/learning

This site is geared for grades three through twelve and is supported by the New York Times. It provides a series of lesson plans and several links to current and historical events.

http://www.cnn.com

Maintained by CNN, this site offers a menu bar that allows access to current events and other national and international affairs. This is a thorough and easily accessible site for both teachers and students.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/education/kidspost

This Washington Post site is geared primarily for elementary students and is full of engaging and interactive material. It also offers a menu by which students can access day-old editions of the Post.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/index.html

This simple yet useful site supported by the Public Broadcasting System has several links available that target current events. There are also supporting links for both students and teachers.

http://www.firstheadlines.com

An easy-to-use site, the main page is chock full of links that lead to both domestic and international current events.

http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages

This site archives the front pages of 463 newspapers in forty-four countries. Although limited to front pages, it does provide a sweeping exposé of how news is covered around the world.

Natural Disaster-Related Web Sites


This is a thorough and illustrative site concerning the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and the resulting tsunami. It is the most comprehensive site for researching the tsunami.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

Following in the same format as the link referenced above, this site contains a wealth of information regarding Katrina and is an excellent starting point for teacher and student reference.

http://www.homepage.mac.com/demark/tsunami/2.html

This site provides before and after pictures of a particular section of Bandar Aceh. The pictures illustrate the destructive nature of the tsunami.


This National Public Radio site contains rich information regarding the tsunami.

http://www.ess.washington.edu/tsunami/index.html

Run by the University of Washington, this site is geared for students and uses several illustrative examples in both describing what a tsunami is and the resultant destructive power it carries.

http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/

Sponsored by the National Weather Service, this site, titled the National Hurricane Center, offers up-to-date storm tracking, predictions, and other valuable information.

http://www.nrdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/

The Natural Disaster Reference Database, run by NASA, offers an easy to use guide to understanding natural disasters. This is a useful site for both student and teacher research.

http://www.library.thinkquest.org/16132/frames.html

Created by students, this interactive and highly informative site offers links to several natural disasters. It is a wonderful site for student research.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/hot
topics/naturaldisasters/

Sponsored by the British Broadcasting
Company, this text-rich site offers students
and teachers a wealth of information con-
cerning natural disasters.

http://www.fema.gov/kids/dizarea.htm

This interactive and student-centered site,
spONSORED BY THE FEDERAL EMERGENCY MAN-
AGEMENT ADMINISTRATION, provides historical
facts about natural disasters and offers prac-
tical advice should one strike.

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