

9/11 and Social Studies Education: A Critique of Perpetual War and the Possibility of a More Peaceful Future

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author shares a personal reflection of his military and educational experiences in the aftermath of 9/11. He describes his concerns about the ongoing “War on Terror” and the *disengaged militarism* of the United States and how this has shaped his approach in the classroom. Expanding on his personal experiences, he calls for social studies educators to employ critical pedagogy and peace education to help students develop as thoughtfully and critically engaged citizens who are capable of creating a more peaceful world.

KEYWORDS

Democratic citizenship education; critical pedagogy; peace education

Introduction

Like most people who were alive on September 11, 2001, I have a 9/11 story. This story, which is now a memory that has also been shaped by my experiences since that day, is one that will provide context to this article as I share my personal and educational journey in relation to the attacks and the two decades since. It is these experiences that have shaped how I teach and contributed to the hopes that I have for social studies education being a possible catalyst to a more peaceful future.

My 9/11 Story

September 2001 marked the beginning of my final year of high school and, as I believe is common among students that age, I was both excited about my future and still trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to do with it. Those ambitions were temporarily suspended in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks—replaced with feelings of fear, confusion, and anger. But soon those ambitions and feelings combined in my young self as I tried to make sense of the events and find purpose in my future. Before the end of that eventful month, inspired by the tragedy of 9/11, my own sense of civic obligation, and my desire to do something purposeful with my future, I enlisted in the United States Army.

I served in the military part-time as I pursued a university degree in social studies education. I enjoyed history, geography, and politics throughout high school and was excited to begin a career teaching these subjects. This path was put on hold upon graduation in the spring of 2006 as I was called to active duty to prepare for a 13-month deployment to Iraq. In the build up to that war, the connection sold to the public between Iraq and 9/11 made sense to me. The climate of fear allowed me to feel that drastic measures were acceptable in the name of safety and, like many others, contributed to my belief that all perceived threats should be eliminated at any cost. By the time I arrived in Iraq in 2007, I was skeptical of any meaningful connection. When I returned home in 2008, I was convinced that the death and destruction unleashed on Iraq and the world by the United States—justified throughout the media as a necessary response to the horrors we felt at home on 9/11—were morally and strategically indefensible.

While I have been allowed and encouraged to share my story proudly, this permission has not been granted freely to all who experienced that day and its aftermath. As my story and stories like it have been elevated, Muslim Americans—and those who are perceived to be Muslim—have been unjustly labeled as terrorists, viewed with fear and suspicion, pressured into silence with their stories, and erased from our national narrative (Ghalaini, 2020). Each anniversary of 9/11 provides many other citizens with the space to process and share their feelings and emotions. This twentieth anniversary has given me an opportunity to write an article in a published journal. But while these commemorations are meaningful to many, they also provoke anxiety, including worries about increased discrimination (particularly for Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim) and feelings of sadness, fear, and anger that are not accepted in the mainstream public discourse (Rodriguez Mosquera, 2013).

Twenty Dangerous Years of “Forever War”

In the days immediately after 9/11, the United States Congress passed an Authorization for the Use of Military Force that was signed into law by then president George W. Bush and remains in effect to this day. As the resulting and ongoing “War on Terror” has evolved over the past two decades through multiple presidential administrations, using new technologies, and encompassing a growing number of countries, the interest of the U.S. public has waned. Collectively, many citizens of the United States have been shielded from the human costs while others have paid enormous prices. Servicemembers and their families have endured repeated deployments, often resulting in physical and psychological trauma. Muslim members of their own schools and communities have faced discrimination and marginalization at home (Mir & Sarroub, 2019; Sirin & Fine, 2008) as the U.S. military and government have destroyed countless lives abroad and deferred the

financial costs to future generations—indeed the very students we are teaching. Furthermore, discussions in the United States of 9/11 and the subsequent two decades of war are often centered on memorialization and the celebration of servicemembers in a way that avoids critical thinking. 9/11 has become a regular part of social studies curriculum in the United States, but just as it has been treated in the nation’s collective memory, commemoration has been emphasized and controversy avoided (Blight, 2011; Hess & Stoddard, 2011). Instead of an opportunity to learn deeply and with complexity about the causes and consequences of war, in order to ensure that the horror experienced on that day would not be endured by others, we have chosen to mindlessly continue the cycle of violence and inflict pain on others, globally and at home.

Our collective decision to use military force in perpetuity while remaining disconnected from the actions and consequences of that decision has led the United States to a condition that I refer to as *disengaged militarism*—one in which, despite the open-ended expansion of armed conflict and surveillance, enough citizens are adequately comfortable and therefore remain apathetic or casually supportive of a national commitment that should warrant deep and sustained attention. While the United States has been a nation at war for the past twenty years, it has behaved as though it is as at peace, demanding little noticeable sacrifice and attention from the many citizens who find comfort and take pride in belonging to a nation that exercises its military might abroad (Bacevich, 2013a, 2013b). My concern is that while we are preparing our students for democratic citizenship—soon they will make decisions related to our continued waging of war—too many of them are largely protected from the consequences, or worse, possibly even made to feel good about being at war.

As I offer national and collective generalizations, it is important to clarify that while those descriptions very likely include a majority of people in the United States, many—including Muslim Americans, servicemembers, anti-war activists, and members of Congress who have spoken out against U.S. foreign policy even as it was unpopular to do so—have carried enormous burdens for the actions and inactions of their fellow citizens. I focus much of my attention on the larger group not to minimize the experiences of all, but rather to emphasize that until widespread changes are made in relation to how students learn about the causes and consequences of 9/11 and the War on Terror, until more are able to understand the pain felt by others at home and abroad, the likelihood of change seems slim.

A History of Empire

What has been labeled as the “Forever War” (Filkins, 2008) is just the latest edition of a much longer story. The history of the United States is a history of empire (Vine, 2020). This is a history that is not commonly taught as such in the United States and the result is a public with an inability to place 9/11 into a meaningful context. Blowback is a term used to describe the unintended consequences of empire and actions taken in retaliation for the foreign policy of the United States (Johnson, 2004). To think about 9/11 in this context is not to justify the violence that took place that day, but rather to understand that it did not happen in a vacuum. Instead of asking “Why do they hate us?” a thoughtfully and critically engaged citizenry might consider more uncomfortable questions about the costs and consequences of empire. To ask difficult questions about a date considered sacrosanct by many in the United States is controversial, but allowing a generation of students to believe that war is normal and without consequence is truly dangerous.

The Next Twenty Years: Can We Educate Towards a More Peaceful Future?

Each anniversary of 9/11 provokes interest in how it is (not) taught in our schools, but we know that when students learn about it, if they do at all, it is usually a learning experience without context—one that is focused on remembrance (Westervelt, 2017; Duckworth, 2015). While the events of 9/11 quickly became a part of social studies curriculum in the United States, the treatment is often superficial, avoids controversy, and neglects complexity, leaving little opportunity for genuine understanding of a topic considered to be of utmost importance (Hess & Stoddard, 2011). Learning about 9/11 in this way undoubtedly perpetuates feelings of victimhood and the subsequent fear and hatred of others. Remembrance alone allows students to uncritically

understand it as an event that happened to us and one that justifies our wide-ranging response of military force that continues to this day in the name of keeping us safe.

My experiences have motivated me to become a social studies teacher who is able to utilize my background and my position to make a difference. I have learned a lot in the twenty years since 9/11 and, in the next twenty years, I want to work with other social studies educators to facilitate curricular and pedagogical changes in our field that emphasize a democratic citizenship that is critical of war, militarism, and empire, and is committed to the creation of a more peaceful world. I am often uncomfortable employing my positionality because of the attention that I feel it draws to myself, but I have learned in the years after my military experience that my background creates an opportunity to get students, members of my own school community, and other social studies educators to start listening to new perspectives. And once they are listening, they can be introduced to narratives that disrupt the one that has dominated and to voices that have been marginalized and silenced in the past two decades. By leveraging interest in my experience, and because I cannot be accused of being “unpatriotic” when I criticize militarism as a former soldier, I am able to challenge conventional wisdom and give others the confidence or permission they might feel they need to question the military actions and government policies of the United States as they relate to the unquestionable topic of 9/11. Furthermore, it is important for me to use my privilege and voice to make space for and elevate the voices of others.

Navigating the complexities of 9/11 and war have been a relatively easy task for me in the classroom. I can lean on my experience and I rarely worry about someone questioning my love of country—this is perhaps the only situation in which I am comfortable using my service to my advantage in a country that places its military veterans on pedestals. But I realize that for my work to be effective, it needs a stronger foundation. And for it to translate into other contexts and potentially influence wider change, it needs a framework that can bring more educators and students into it. Through my graduate studies, I was introduced to different theoretical and conceptual frameworks. I was drawn to the idea that critical pedagogy fosters an education against empire (Kincheloe, 2008). A more critical interrogation of 9/11 in relation to our history of war and empire is one that will help educators and students understand the prevailing “common sense militarism” (Moore, 2017) as a hegemonic way of thinking that needs to be disrupted (Apple, 2019). Placing 9/11 into a meaningful context and critically examining its causes and consequences is the only way that our students will recognize the danger of future blowback and the continued harm that our country perpetuates on the rest of the world and within its own borders.

As I write about this, I recognize that I do so in a way that emphasizes collective responsibility. I do this intentionally, but also imprecisely. Ultimately, in a democratic society, the actions of a government at home and abroad are a collective reflection and responsibility of its citizens. In the language of critical pedagogy, the citizenry of the United States operates as the oppressor and it is important to understand the power that it wields globally. Even if it were this simple, it is worthwhile to educate the powerful through a lens of critical pedagogy in a hope that people become more understanding of the harm they and their governments cause (Bacon, 2015). But, obviously, it is more complicated than this.

When considering the dangers of a public that is insulated from the consequences of war, it is worth asking: Who benefits from the military actions that unfold under the guise of protection? Within the population of the United States are groups of people—those who are Muslim and/or Arab (or perceived to be)—who have been deemed the “enemy” and have paid an enormous price in the treatment that they receive in our schools and society and with loss of their civil liberties and even their lives (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Niyozov, 2010; Qureshi & Sells, 2003; Said, 2003). Beyond the borders of the United States, millions have experienced death and destruction as a result of U.S. foreign policy in reaction to 9/11. Finally, even the majority of citizens who on the surface seem to be insulated are actually only protected in a very superficial manner—eventually, our students will need to reckon with the moral and financial debts they have accrued unwillingly by being born into a war that they did not choose. A major reason that our militaristic stance continues to be unquestioned and our forever war perpetuates is because the actual burdens of service are carried by a smaller percentage of the population while the majority is allowed to celebrate the sacrifice of the few (Bacevich, 2013a).

Social studies educators in the United States who teach critically of the causes and consequences of 9/11 are likely to be attacked as unpatriotic. Although I teach in a politically conservative community that takes great pride in visual displays of patriotism, I have found that their already high interest in the topic provides opportunities to elevate the humanity and complexity required for a more thoughtful examination. How my students interact with the topics of war, militarism, and empire—especially in their context—gives me great hope for the future. I also recognize that my background allows me to explore these topics from a position of relative comfort in comparison with other educators. This work will require other social studies teachers to operate outside of their comfort zones, but it will also require all of us to make the case that critique of one's country is the ultimate act of patriotism, and that our willingness to criticize our history and our policies is a reflection of our national and global commitment (Apple, 2002).

Finally, a robust critical education must also be one that includes possibilities and hope (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1997). My hope is that this can be achieved by infusing critical pedagogy with peace education—an education that provides students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to create a more peaceful world (Harris & Morrison, 2013). Beyond teaching students different ways of responding to our violent past and present, we can also help them to eradicate the conditions that lead to violence in the first place. In the United States, those who remember 9/11 can remember the horror of that day and many see themselves as victims of violence that appeared out of nowhere. As is the case in many conflicts, those victims become killers (Bajaj, 2008) and this has become the largely unquestioned truth as the United States has perpetuated death and destruction in the decades following the attacks. In sum, an education centered on peace would provide our students with a framework to understand and critique our historical and ongoing actions and collective response to the attacks of 9/11.

Towards Teaching for Critical and Hopeful Citizenship

As social studies teachers, when we think about how students should learn about 9/11, we must consider the types of citizens we want them to become. Regardless of the type—personally responsible, participatory, or justice-oriented (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)—the causes and consequences of 9/11 provide rich opportunities for students to engage in learning in relation to democratic citizenship. But we have choices to make to foster learning beyond developing citizens who simply know about 9/11. A better understanding of our emotional histories and the cultivation of affective citizenship in a multicultural society could lead to a better understanding of 9/11 and its impact on all of our students (Zembylas, 2013). Additionally, we can build on critical citizenship and teach about 9/11 with the explicit purpose of making meaning of the events in a way that allows students to understand our capacities for both violence and peace and the possibility to choose one over the other (Shapiro, 2010).

Remembrance is important and patriotism feels good, but an education that leads students to become thoughtfully and critically engaged citizens, who are committed to a more peaceful future, requires that we do more. Two decades later, their lives are impacted by the events of that day, which did not occur out of the blue. Students deserve opportunities to wrestle with the complexity and discomfort that would allow them to understand this—something that the United States has yet to do. Learning about 9/11 without discussing context, uncovering causes and consequences, or reckoning with our own moral failures of perpetual war and Islamophobia is not actually learning about 9/11. A collective memory developed solely from yearly tributes is a dangerous weapon. It will be both challenging and controversial to treat 9/11 as more than the commemoration we have found comfort in throughout the past twenty years. But, if we want to provide the next generation with the tools they need to create a better future, critical pedagogy and peace education provide frameworks we can use, and we will figure out a way to make it happen.

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