

A Counter-Intuitive Strategy: Reduce Student Stress by Teaching Current Events

Jeff Passe

Should elementary school students be introduced to disturbing current events topics? A common response would be to protect the innocence of young children, allowing them to love their lives relatively free of the troubles that beset the world. But closer examination reveals that the study of current events actually helps to reduce fear and worry.

Consider the recent wild fires that raged through southern California in October, 2007. One can imagine eight year olds paralyzed by the fear that their own homes will be the next to go up in flames. Rather than add to that concern, teachers who provide well-designed current events lessons can reassure their students that they're safe.

Meeting that goal requires changing the age-old pattern of having students bring in news articles or having them report on their perceptions during "sharing time." Instead, the current events lessons should be carefully structured according to certain guidelines, including the use of a teacher-centered presentation, follow-up discussion, and some combination of affective and decision-making activities.¹

It would not be helpful, for instance, in a student-centered lesson, to begin by having children share what they know about the fires. The result will be a series of harrowing tales of destruction, possibly taken out of context, with misinformation, and abstract ref-



Three firefighters braced themselves against the heat and flames from a burning house in Rancho Bernardo in San Diego County.
Lenny Ignelzi/Associated Press

erences. The damage that would cause would require a concerted effort to restore the children's calm.

Asking children to find articles in the newspaper would also be problematic. Assuming that each student's family even receives a daily paper, which is less and less likely these days, exposure to the details of the California fires without adult explanation and clarification could lead to nightmares.

A Lesson on Wildfires

In a teacher-centered presentation, the students would learn about the such topics as 1) the location of the fires, 2) Southern California's unusual geographic elements, 3) the role of emergency personnel, 4) how fires are controlled, 5) how communities prepare for emergencies, 6) the assistance of emergency workers from other areas, and 7) the role of insurance companies. If the current events lessons were to

include these topics, reassurance and positive attitudes would result.

1. **LOCATION:** Youngsters watching the news on the east coast may reasonably expect their own communities to be engulfed in flames unless they learn where the fires are located. If they don't know where California is, they may imagine it to be the next town over. The children need to learn that California is a long distance from their homes, so they are in no danger. (The children in southern California, on the other hand, who are in danger, would need a different set of lessons. But the issue of whether to introduce the current event is moot. They would already know about the fires.)

2. **GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS:** Upon learning of the events in California, students may worry that the forests that surround their own communities



This Envisat image, acquired on October 22, 2007, captures fierce easterly desert winds blowing smoke from wildfires in Southern California. Gale-force winds fed more than a dozen fires from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border, forcing the evacuation of a quarter of a million people.

Photo courtesy ESA

are susceptible to wildfire. Thus, an introduction to southern California's unusual geography would be in order. Students could learn how the combination of mountain canyons combined with desert-like conditions made the afflicted area prone to wildfires. The teacher could effectively integrate science by showing how California's unique landforms result in the strong Santa Ana winds that blow through the canyons from the north.

Next, students could learn about the desert-like climate of the southwestern United States. They may not be aware that some areas of the country receive a small fraction of the rainfall that is experienced elsewhere. When presented with the concept of a desert, many youngsters may picture a huge sandy wilderness, like the Saharan or Arabian Deserts, not a residential community.

Yet another science-related topic concerns the elements of fire. Students could study how dry conditions increase the risk of fire. They could learn the concept of tinder, and its prevalence on the forest floor. This portion of the lesson would serve two purposes: First, it would convince the students that, if their own geographical areas do not include canyons and desert-like conditions, they are not in danger. Second, it would promote fire safety, especially for students who live in fire-prone regions.

3. THE ROLE OF EMERGENCY PERSONNEL: While the study of community helpers is a popular subject in elementary schools, students are unlikely to learn about specialized emergency personnel. They are probably unaware that there are specialists in fighting wildfires. As students are exposed to the system of training and mobilizing such firefighters, they gain a level of comfort. It's good to know that there are experts out there who are trying to protect us. That same thread can apply to the role of the police, Red Cross, and emergency medical technicians. Rather than worry about the danger of a fire in a distant



U.S. Navy Aviation Warfare Systems Operator 2nd Class Danny Vickers activates a release button to dump 420 gallons of water on a section of the Harris wildfire burning in San Diego County, California, on October 24, 2007.

Department of Defense photo by Seaman Jon Husman, U.S. Navy.

region, the students become appreciative of the emergency services in their own region.

4. HOW FIRES ARE CONTROLLED: As the class learns about experts in fighting wildfires, they could learn what it is they actually do. By studying the use of controlled burning, helicopter water drops, and forest breaks, the students will learn the reassuring news that effective fire-fighting strategies have been developed and practiced. While it would be inaccurate and unwise to convey the idea that humans have control

over nature, teachers can communicate the idea that some methods of controlling wildfires have been successful.

5. HOW COMMUNITIES PREPARE FOR EMERGENCIES: The San Diego wildfires demonstrated how community preparedness can promote safety. Students may not realize that their own cities and towns have emergency procedures to prepare for such natural disasters as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, in addition to fires. By learning about provisions for shelters, evacuation routes, reverse 911 systems, and traf-

fic control, students come to recognize that their local officials have plans in place, so that chaos will be unlikely to occur. Plus, it never hurts to reinforce the concept of preparedness, whether referring to natural disasters or simply getting one's school materials ready for the next day.

6. THE ASSISTANCE OF EMERGENCY WORKERS FROM OTHER AREAS: One of the regular bright spots in dismal news about natural disasters is reports about emergency workers leaving their own communities to help stricken areas. In the case of San Diego, assistance came from cities across the United States, but also from Mexico. By focusing on the self-sacrifice of these modern heroes, students are exposed to some of the virtues that are stressed in character education programs. In this case, however, the presentation is natural, not forced, and is tied to social studies content.

7. THE ROLE OF INSURANCE COMPANIES: While young children have likely heard the word, insurance, possibly as part of a discussion about paying bills, they may not know what insurance companies actually do. Placed in the context of California's wildfires, students can receive a concrete lesson on the benefits of buying insur-



Donated tents line the interior hallways of Qualcomm Stadium to house the thousands of evacuees from the firestorms of San Diego County.

Photo by Roman via Google Picasa.

ance, both in a financial and emotional sense. It may be a comfort to learn that homeowner's insurance is required when taking a mortgage. This educational experience should reduce some of the children's worries, as it alerts them to the ongoing national debate over health insurance.

Controversial Issues

The premise of this article is that the study of current events serves as a palliative measure, which runs contrary to the beliefs of those who seek to delay consideration of bad news during elementary school. Yet, there are aspects to the study of the wildfires that are upsetting. Teachers who wish to pro-

vide a more balanced, but less soothing orientation may choose to include some of the following elements:

- **OVERBUILDING.** Some experts link the devastation of wildfires to the spread of residential communities into what was once pristine forest. It is not that the recent fires are bigger than in the past, we are told, but that those older fires only burned trees, not people's homes. The trend of sprawling development in once-rural areas is likely to continue. Thus, we can expect more dangerous fires in the future. Because this prediction could be upsetting, teachers may choose to introduce it at a later date, when the students are less emotionally involved. Or they may prefer that it be taught at a different grade level, when the students are more mature. Either way, it is an important part of the equation and should not be ignored.
- **GLOBAL WARMING.** Climatologists expect to see more wildfires due to global warming. Because higher temperatures increase evaporation, forests are expected to become drier.² This is disturbing news, but it can also serve as impetus to study the issue of global



Kendra Jeffcoat, left, talks about her home with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Congressman Brian Bilbray, President George W. Bush, and her husband Jay Jeffcoat.

Photo by Roman via Google Picasa.

It is not that the recent fires are bigger than in the past, we are told, but that those **older fires only burned trees**, not people's homes. The trend of sprawling development in once-rural areas is likely to continue. Thus, we can expect more dangerous fires in the future.

warming, and take steps to combat it.

- **EFFECTS ON EMERGENCY**

PERSONNEL. As students study the heroism of emergency personnel, they may also become aware of the terrible side effects of their jobs. It is sad to hear that firefighters have died in carrying out their duties, but less obvious health problems are also a concern. Emergency workers are more likely than the general public to suffer from a variety of serious diseases, exemplified by the rescue workers who assisted at the World Trade Towers. While many teachers may choose to avoid such discussions, an examination of the problem can promote greater appreciation and support for community employees.

- **EFFECTS ON ANIMALS.**

Coverage of natural disasters usually includes heart-warming stories about pets being reunited with their owners. Unfortunately, many domestic animals are lost or killed when their owners are unable to evacuate them. In the meantime, forest fires create havoc for the wild animals whose already-shrinking habitats are now destroyed. Students should be reminded that fire has always been an influential part of nature, but that the repercussions are greater as forests shrink. Studying this disturbing

issue may ultimately encourage children to pay more attention to protecting the environment.

- **POOR DECISION-MAKING.** One cannot avoid comparing the California wildfire saga to that of the floods of New Orleans in 2005. Even the most casual observer of that earlier horrific event is aware that poor decisions can lead to death and destruction. We need to remind our students that governments make mistakes, often serious ones, and that it is up to the citizenry to hold leaders accountable. Teachers may not want to address this topic, but doing so may promote greater participation in civic affairs.
- **INSURANCE ISSUES.** The vast majority of homeowners have insurance, yet their coverage may not be sufficient. Many Californians have discovered that they were underinsured, or that their coverage was limited. Sometimes we hear about delays in reimbursement due to bureaucratic complications. This aspect of the role of insurance should be studied, though it may be best to postpone it until middle or high school.

Conclusion

This article is about the California wildfires, but could really be about any current event that captures children's attention. If teachers choose to exclude current events from their classrooms,

they may think that they are protecting their students. Yet, because students are likely to hear snippets of news on television, the Internet, or in conversation, it makes more sense to reduce their fears by presenting carefully structured lessons. At the proper time, additional nuances can be explored to provide a more accurate, well-rounded picture of the event.

Teaching current events is usually a good thing. As it promotes knowledge of particular stories, it can also lead to greater interest in the news, and ultimately, to improved citizenship attitudes and participation. Because elementary school teachers may provide children's first comprehensive study of current events, they have a special responsibility to provide sensitive, yet honest lessons. It is a responsibility that should be cherished by all educators, as well as the general public. 🌍

Notes

1. Jeff Passe, "Developing Current Events Awareness in Children," *Social Education* 52, no. (September, 1986): 531-533.
2. Natural Resources Defense Council, "Consequences of Global Warming," (2007), www.nrdc.org/global-warming/fcons.asp.
3. Michael J. Berson and Ilene R. Berson, "Coming to Terms with Mother Nature: Using the Web to Educate Children about Natural Disasters," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 12, no. 1 (September/October 1999): 19-21.

JEFF PASSE is a professor in the Department of Reading and Elementary Education at the University of North Carolina—Charlotte in Charlotte, North Carolina.