

Crisis = Opportunity: Civic Literacy in the Wake of a Hurricane

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It was December, and the students in my sixth grade English language arts class were busy gathering and packaging toys, sorting through gift cards, and separating greeting cards. They looked like elves in Santa's workshop, as many had chosen to don Santa hats for the occasion, and all were chatting excitedly about collecting the toys and cards. They were marveling at the collection we were amassing and commenting on how excited the children would be when they received our donations. This event marked the culmination of almost two months of work to assist their fellow Long Islanders in their recovery from Hurricane Sandy, the most destructive storm to hit the United States during 2012.

Current Events

Two years ago, I decided to incorporate current events into both my English Language Arts (ELA) class and my science classes as a way to bolster the presence of non-fiction pieces,

a major component of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I hoped to increase my students' awareness of science topics in the world and how all of the subject areas that they study are interrelated. Simply being aware of what is happening in the world around them helps build valuable background knowledge, which, in turn, provides students with opportunities to make inferences in content areas that had not been on their radar.

The directions for the current events assignment, in which students selected a news article related to science, discussed it with their families, and wrote and reported back to the class about it, included questions, such as: Why did you choose this article? What is your opinion of what happened? How does this affect you and/or our society? How is this related to science?

These questions were designed to assist students in making connections between their topics and our world. In doing so,



literacy served as a bridge to conversations about numerous subject areas, including local issues that had an impact on my students' lives. Prior to Sandy, which hit the New York area in October 2012, many students had focused on the impact of new technologies and experiments, space exploration, and discoveries.

Here It Comes

During the week of October 22, several students reported on Hurricane Sandy, a storm then located near Florida, but predicted to travel north to New York later in the week. Classroom discussion centered on the ways in which hurricanes form and travel, and how they affect the human and natural landscape.¹

During the days our school was closed, a time my colleagues dubbed the “hurrication,” I e-mailed my friends (once we had power, a week later) to inform them of the devastation Long Island had faced. I shared stories of how children had to throw away their water- and sewage-logged toys, and detailed the loss of cherished places. The Long Beach Boardwalk, a place we had spent many evenings in our college years (hanging out, discussing life, and gazing at meteor showers) now resembled a game of pick-up sticks. The ocean had devoured the South Shore beaches; the vast areas that we had traversed in order to get to the water's edge in the past were now small strips of sand. Caumsett State Park, Coney Island, and the Jersey Shore sustained damage that would permanently alter their makeup and landscapes. It was a shock to witness these things firsthand; the television coverage didn't seem to truly convey the magnitude of the destruction.

Adopt-a-School

But there was also a hopeful aspect to these events: the incredible feedback I received from friends. Everyone wanted to help. When one friend asked if her school could help, an idea struck me: What if I connected schools from devastated areas with teachers and students who wished to assist them? Adopt-a-School was born. Schools that wished to provide assistance would be matched with a grade, school, or district in devastated areas. Teachers and administrators in the devastated schools shared what they needed: supplies, recess equipment, gift cards, etc. Once matched, the schools would develop ways to fundraise and gather the necessary supplies. The students in the “adopted” schools provided information about their school's colors, mascot, motto, etc. to provide a personal connection, as the second part of the program was to send cards and letters to accompany donations. These cards were a way to send words of encouragement and support from fellow students.

I sent emails to colleagues in other schools, and, within 36 hours, a dozen schools were involved. Within another week, word had spread, and over 30 schools and organizations were involved to help more than a dozen schools and districts.

Back at School After the Storm

On November 12, 2012, we returned to school, having missing two weeks because of the devastation caused by what was by then named “Superstorm Sandy.” Our school emerged unscathed, but the towns where my students and I live had been virtually inaccessible; countless trees had been felled by winds as high as 94 mph. Many students' families had no power or heat for two weeks.

Suggested Reading For Grades 5-8

Rhodes, Jewel Parker. *Ninth Ward*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2012.

Furgang, Kathy. *National Geographic Kids Everything Weather: Facts, Photos, and Fun that Will Blow You Away*. Washington D.C.: National Geographic Children's Books, 2012.

Uhlberg, Myron. *A Storm Called Katrina*. New York: Peachtree, 2011.

For Grades 1-5

Simon, Seymour. *Hurricanes*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

_____. *Storms*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

Wiesner, David. *Hurricane*. New York: HMH Books for Young Readers, 1992.



photo by Monica Zenyuh

It was a relief to come together at school again that Monday morning. As my students and I gathered, we discussed our two-week ordeals with Sandy and the aftermath from the storm, including the freak snowstorm, which only added insult to injury. The students described trees falling on their houses, the changing landscape of their blocks and towns, and the fears they had when they heard the howling winds and cracking trees and branches. They lamented over the lack of electricity for computers and phones, but also talked about the fun they had playing board games, sitting around fireplaces chatting, and having adventures outdoors, including some fun in the snow.

After students shared memories, several asked what I had done. I described the Adopt-a-School program that I had initiated. As soon as I finished, they enthusiastically asked if they could help and “adopt” someone; and thus began our class involvement in the program.

On-the-Scene Reporting

Students’ next batch of current event reports were due at just the time that our school was getting back up to speed following the “hurrication.” Students’ reports centered on the impact of the storm on coastal areas, on birds and the ways they survived, on our shorelines that had eroded, and on the wetlands that, if not properly managed, would harbor escalating mosquito populations. Brooke wrote, “I chose this article because I thought it was interesting how debris from a storm could cause a mosquito infestation. I never knew that debris stuck in wetlands could affect the health of the wetlands and people.” Sarah’s reflections included, “Natural disasters play a big role

in science because they are opportunities for scientists to learn more about animals and their survival instincts. If scientists keep studying birds, hopefully we will learn new ways to protect ourselves from future natural disasters.” We lamented on the loss of tens of thousands of trees and how that would impact Long Island both immediately (lack of privacy, less shelter for birds, less shade in summer) and long term (possible increase in CO₂ in the air, impacts on pollution and global warming, etc.).

Students explored social issues, such as the displacement of students and families, homelessness, financial deficits, and the discrepancies in laws and regulations that were affecting people. Nicole wrote, “I chose this article because we recently experienced the hurricane, and everyone at the moment is focusing on helping the people who lost their homes, cars, and towns.” Danielle’s opinion included that, “The storm had positive and negative effects on people’s lives. For example, a negative effect was that many families lost everything. However, a positive effect is that Sandy brought many people together. A power company came all the way from Canada to help residents in my town.” As a class, we discussed what FEMA was and how this agency, along with countless good Samaritans, was trying to help those who were displaced.

Each day, the newspaper was filled with articles about the storm and its effects, and students got a firsthand look at how complicated this issue really was. There was so much more involved than cleaning up and repairing infrastructure. We looked at maps of Long Island and discussed how its geographic features made us vulnerable to this kind of storm. Students realized how much greater the devastation could have been if the

storm had taken a slightly different path. It was clear that this was a history-making event for Long Island that would profoundly affect our future. Sophia focused on the big picture when she wrote, “The storms we have will become larger and worse if we do not change our ways. I think we should all start taking better care of our planet to preserve it for future generations.”

From Awareness to Action

My science students were invested in this issue, and knew that my ELA class was participating in Adopt-a-School; they asked if they could participate, as well. Word spread quickly; soon, the entire grade, and, later, the entire district was involved in the program, and we were busy collecting various items needed by four affected schools. When the drive was completed, my district had donated over \$5,000 in toys, recess equipment, gift cards, and cash donations. Other clubs, schools, and organizations participating have collected more than \$40,000 worth of similar items to date, and more continue to volunteer to assist this cause.

Once students were able to come to terms with what they had faced (mainly, the loss of electrical power), they were able to see how others had been affected by the same storm and had far greater obstacles to overcome.

After our collection was completed, I asked my students to write about their experiences from Hurricane Sandy, describe the storm’s impact on them, and relate how they felt when they saw how others were affected. I also asked them to share their reasons for wanting to participate in “Adopt a School” and to tell how they felt afterward. Students’ comments reflect their increased understanding of the storm’s devastation and the importance of their response to that devastation:

“I lost electricity and it was upsetting to see and hear the winds beating down on trees and houses. All I could do afterwards was help my neighbors pick up branches and watch some children while their parents cleaned up. I wanted to participate because helping others feel better about their situations was a good thing to do.”
(Nyomi, age 11).

“It felt great to participate because I knew all of the toys and money would go to families that really needed it. That’s all that matters. There was so much destruction and devastation, and it made me even more grateful for my life and home.”
(Matt, age 11).

“Once I had power, water, and the Internet, I was happy, and I wanted others to be able to be happy too. I was really excited and amazed at how much our class collected and it made me feel proud.” (Rochelle, age 11).

“I thought that things would get better quickly, but they didn’t. It [Adopt a School] made me feel like a dead phone charging up to full power.” (Ben, age 11).

Consciousness Raised

I think Bella, age 11, summarized the experience for many of them when she wrote, “I felt like I changed their lives and the way they think of us. Now they can tell this story and it will be passed on.”

This story will be passed down as students in the damaged schools recount how fellow students pitched in to make their lives a bit brighter during a very dark and difficult time. Our students received letters from students in the schools they adopted recounting how appreciative they were, and how receiving the needed materials provided some light during a very bleak time. While my class did not pursue a pen pal connection, some others did continue to correspond.

Aftermath

There is still work to be done, as many are still suffering. Today, nearly 70 schools and organizations have participated in Adopt-a-School, and the program continues to assist schools and families in need. My students have asked what they can do next, and we are weighing our options as we see how we can best make a difference.

The time taken by testing, plus the weeks that we missed due to Hurricane Sandy, could have been an argument against devoting time to this project. However, this civic action project (which grew out of a science and current events assignment) turned out to be time well spent. This project satisfied several Common Core State Standards (CCSS) categories: Reading: Informational Text and Foundational Skills, Speaking & Listening, Writing, Language, and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects. The CCSS were “designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.”² My students were engaged in interdisciplinary instruction with real-world applications, which made an immediate, positive impact on them and on their world. 🌍

Notes

1. Donna Kay Mau, “Tracking a Hurricane” A Mapping Exercise in Real Time,” *Middle Level Learning* no. 11 (May/June 2001), www.socialstudies.org/publicationsarchive.
2. Common Core State Standards, (2010) www.corestandards.org. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers

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