

Building Inner Preparedness in New York City Educators Post - 9/11

Linda Lantieri with Madhavi Nambiar and Michael Chavez-Reilly

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That Morning

At 8 a.m. on September 11, 2001, over 8,700 children and 400 teachers showed up for school in downtown Manhattan as they did every morning. Nobody could have predicted that within two hours, more than 5,000 students and nearly 200 teachers would be running for their lives; 9,000 more students would be evacuated in the following days; and 8,000 students would be asked to shelter other teachers and students as refugees from disaster. In the end, over 20,000 students would be directly impacted by the events of that day. Miraculously, due to quick thinking, deep caring and the inner resourcefulness of educators in the area, not a single student life was lost.

One interesting question remains: on that day, what skills and behaviors did school leaders, teachers, and students draw upon? Certainly in that moment it was less important to know the capital of France than it was to know how to establish a sense of safety in the midst of profound uncertainty. In that moment, a school's performance on standardized test scores became less important than its ability to reflect and regroup as a community. That day, facing the deepest test of life, the question of academic preparedness took a backseat to the question of inner preparedness – what were the skills and resources that each individual and school community had to access in order to connect to their deeper wisdom, and remain calm and balanced?

At P.S. 89, four blocks north of the World Trade Center, it was only the fourth day of school. At 8:40 a.m., when the first plane flew overhead, many parents were still in the schoolyard, saying goodbye to their children and mingling with teachers and the principal. Veronica Najjar, the principal of P.S. 89, vividly recalls the events of that morning. "We witnessed, at close range, the impact to the North Tower. Parents were shocked -- screaming and crying in the yard. Everyone was encouraged to come inside the school building until we could assess what was happening...The parents started arriving in a panic trying to get their kids out of school."

Teachers and administrators at P.S. 89 gathered the children into the auditorium and gymnasium -- windowless spaces in the middle of the building. Najjar and her staff understood intuitively that a sense of safety and calm was the first thing their students needed. From that moment on, Najjar and other school leaders in the area would have

to start making life and death decisions in a split-second. They had to make decisions about how to respond to on-the-spot questions, such as who would be allowed to pick up the children and whether older children could be dismissed on their own. Later that day other questions would arise, including whether teachers should be allowed to take children to their homes if parents could not be contacted. These are not the type of questions most educators are trained to answer at administration courses in schools of education.

Furthermore, the classrooms on the south side of P.S. 89 had a full view of the World Trade Center. Teachers on the south side of the building remember hearing a “kaboom.” In focus groups, they later recalled looking out the window and then suddenly thinking, “We shouldn’t be looking at this. The children shouldn’t be looking at this.” Some teachers drew their blinds and took the younger children to the activity rugs and reassured them that they and their parents were going to be safe.

As panicked adults were flooding the building, school leaders contacted the District Office to try and figure out what was going on. Marjorie Robbins, head of Pupil Personnel Services in Community School District 2 at the time, recalls desperately trying to coordinate escape routes for students and teachers. Despite their best efforts, she admits, “It was chaos...We were trying to get vans down there. We didn’t know if the trains were running...In the end, it was up to the principals themselves to make the most difficult decision of all -- when was the time to evacuate.”

For the students and faculty of the High School for Leadership and Public Service, located on the south side of, and two blocks away from the towers, the experience of evacuation was particularly terrifying. Principal Ada Dolch had to walk south with faculty and students, placing them on ferries leaving Manhattan Island, eventually organizing groups to walk to safety in other boroughs. In these moments, educators had to draw on an inner reserve of courage and unconditional service -- qualities that are seldom discussed within the context of professional development. In her focus group with teachers, Helene Jackson of the Columbia School of Social Work takes note of this special quality. “Some of them talk about when they realized what was happening, saying to themselves, ‘I’m a teacher, I’m responsible, I have to take care of these children.’” Unlike in many other professions, to be a teacher during and after an event such as 9/11 opened one’s personal thoughts, feelings and life to public scrutiny.

The Lingering Impact

Unfortunately, for many downtown teachers and students, the sense of crisis did not end with that terrifying day. In the wake of September 11th, over 5,200 students from seven different schools found themselves displaced and temporarily housed in other schools for several months. Not surprisingly, this situation created a tremendous strain on teachers and students throughout lower Manhattan.

P.S. 150, The Tribeca Learning Center, remained housed at P.S. 3 for four and a half months while the air was being tested and the buildings cleaned at and around Ground Zero. Students had minimal supplies, shared classrooms, or held class on the floor in the hallways. The entire administration and support services operated out of one room. Helene Jackson describes this experience for teachers as "a kind of re-traumatization."

In the weeks following September 11th, Marjorie Robbins visited many of the dislocated schools. Describing how teachers attempted to cope, she noted, "In the aftermath, teachers tried to re-establish who they were as a class and as a classroom. They got books, they found space, they took care of their own and their children's immediate needs first. They felt they had to establish a sense of safety and normalcy. It was only later that they could talk about their feelings."

In the quest to maintain normalcy, months elapsed before some teachers realized they had not spoken about these issues with their peers and colleagues. As Helene Jackson noted based on the focus group she led with P.S. 150 teachers, "They didn't talk about it...They didn't know that they needed that space until they had the focus group many months later. It was just mind-boggling to them and to us that they hadn't talked about it. They had no idea what each other's experiences had been." In fact, it was not uncommon to meet school personnel who had not shared their personal story of that day with anyone, even two years later.

While avoiding discussion of a traumatic event may be necessary to survive in the initial aftermath, this strategy can become counterproductive over the long term. As time passed, tensions between teachers, parents and students surfaced. Increased incidents of physically and verbally aggressive behavior between students were reported. Teachers began to voice their frustration about the way events were handled in the immediate aftermath. Tensions were visible as the anniversary of the attacks approached. Principals and the District Office did everything they could to help staff cope, but the frustration tolerance among teachers was very low.

When teachers, guidance counselors and administrators came together for various meetings and trainings, they described experiencing symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, including exhaustion and a loss of creativity. Some of them talked about having nightmares. When asked what they did to take care of themselves, many said, "Sleep and eat." It was clear that teachers and administrators paid a terribly high price for taking care of others that day. The effects of the caring were slow to surface in the midst of the great need of the young people in their charge. They were only just beginning to feel.

Within the schools around Ground Zero, there remains much debate among teachers, administrators and parents about how often and how openly to talk about the events of September 11th. Some parents request workshops on how to identify signs of stress and trauma in their children, while other parents actively resist them. "There remains a lot

of desire to get back to normal. A lot of these teachers feel they've lost time in their curriculum, and with the pressure of standardized tests upon them, some teachers feel that they do not have time to address these issues," Robbins reports.

Nonetheless, everyone acknowledges that the ongoing psychological effects of 9/11 will continue to be seen in the schools for years to come. Evidence of the long-lasting effects of 9/11 can be found throughout schools in lower Manhattan. Elementary schools report that they are treating "incoming students of Pre-K and Kindergarten who were two or three years old at the time of the attack and who suffer from residual unmet trauma-related difficulties." Ada Rosario-Dolch, former principal of the High School of Leadership and Public Service observes, "Though the blackout of 2003 occurred during the summer months, the many e-mails and phone calls we received from our students expressing their fears served as a reminder that time does heal, but healing is coming slowly."

Clearly, there is a need to address the long-term recovery of both youth and adults in lower Manhattan. However, it also seems clear that different people are healing at different rates, and in different ways. As a result, the challenge is to create long-term preventive programs of inner resilience. These efforts need to be flexible and inclusive enough to address differing needs in a subtle and respectful, yet profound, manner.

From Crisis to Opportunity - The Development of Project Renewal

Project Renewal was formed in direct response to the diverse needs of the teachers and students who had been affected by the September 11 attacks. Linda Lantieri, whose experience includes serving as director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program of Educators for Social Responsibility, became the director of the new program.

"Throughout my career, I have always felt that the education of young people involved not only their intellectual development, but their emotional, social and spiritual growth as well," says Lantieri, who has served as a teacher, school administrator, education activist and college faculty member.

In taking on her new role, Lantieri drew on her three-year experience as a senior scholar at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which she had completed just before September 11th. The Institute is a privately endowed foundation whose mission is to help people make a deeper connection between "their inner life of mind and spirit and their outer life of action and service."

During her time at the Institute, Lantieri was part of a group of 18 individuals from all walks of life who had been brought together to reflect with each other about how to bring a more holistic perspective to their various fields of work. Lantieri also used her time at the Institute to edit the book *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers*, which hit bookstores in August 2001.

“As I reflect back now, I realize that this new work of sustaining the soul that serves was given to me as part of a greater plan,” she says. “The years before September 11, 2001, were filled with experiences that put me in a position to take on this task, as well as to provide me with those fellow travellers on the journey who held a similar vision.”

As Lantieri visited schools in the aftermath of the September 11 attack, she saw educators struggling to cope with their own sense of helplessness and feelings of despair without any personal support. As a result of the attack, countless educators were transformed overnight into grief counselors, recovery coordinators, and crisis intervention experts for their students. “I saw how much listening they had to do -- to experts, to students, to parents and to administrators. But who was listening to their stories?” Lantieri asks. “Many displayed the classic signs of ‘compassion fatigue.’ In all the listening, they had not yet had the chance to check in with their own feelings and tell their own stories. It was clear to me that teachers were running out of the personal and emotional support they needed to sustain those they were serving.”

Research confirms that the prolonged psychological stress these educators were experiencing could lead to burnout, which in turn leads to a wide range of physical disorders. Unfortunately, “giving one’s all” is sometimes seen as a status symbol in our society, proof that we are capable of overwhelming workloads. New York City’s educators needed help in gaining control over their circumstances, strengthening their inner resources, and supporting one another in contexts where they would be able to formally debrief their experiences. How could these educators be protected from the possibility of what author Wayne Muller describes in his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, as “doing good badly”? Who was taking care of the caregivers? Where would they get the time and space to renew, rejuvenate and rekindle their own spirits and resiliency?

To help answer these questions, The September 11th Fund provided a seed grant for Lantieri to establish Project Renewal, which was initially sponsored by Educators for Social Responsibility National. Soon after, Project Renewal became a project of the Tides Center whose mission is to enable people to create and sustain a healthy, just and vibrant world. The Center accomplishes this by providing organizations like Project Renewal with the needed infrastructure to support their many activities. “It was clear that the need for action was immediate, and if I wanted to create this program, I’d have to start now and hit the ground running,” she remembers.

Project Renewal’s philosophy of focusing on addressing the inner lives of students and educators grew out of the work that Lantieri had done at the Fetzer Institute and in editing *Schools with Spirit*. “When I speak about inner lives, I do not just mean our emotional lives, but that which gives our life meaning, direction and purpose,” she explains. “Trauma experts will tell you that experiencing trauma ‘rends the fabric of meaning’ in our lives, and that to recover from trauma, you have to build that sense of meaning back up again.”

Whenever someone experiences either a catastrophic event or chronic adversity, it is rarely the presence of this single event or circumstance that determines whether a person will break down or break through. The research on resiliency shows that the outcome is actually a balancing act between risk factors and protective opportunities.

Breakdowns occur when several harmful risk factors build up without being counteracted by an equal number of inner and outer resources, or protective opportunities. This is true for both young people and the adults who serve them. Individuals' own internal resources and external assets can and do make all the difference in how they are able to cope with traumatic circumstances. Although they may have little control over the adversity that comes their way, people can increase their protective opportunities. They can prevent their coping capacity from being overwhelmed; they can bounce back and avoid long-term negative effects from traumatic circumstances. That is the concept that Project Renewal was created to explore.

"During that spring I met with many close friends and advisors inside and outside of Community School District 2 (the District that encompasses Ground Zero) to discuss what was most needed," Lantieri recalls. "It struck us that as the first summer after September 11th approached, and teachers finally got a chance to reflect on the most intense year of their professional lives, many suppressed feelings would emerge. We again asked ourselves the question, 'So during the summer, who will nurture the caregivers who have so faithfully served?'"

Out of these conversations, Cheri Lovre, of the Crisis Management Institute, and Lantieri developed "*A Summer of Renewal - A Guide for Reflection for New York City School Personnel - Integrating the Events of September 11th.*" The guide provided educators with a self-guided set of activities to enable them to reflect weekly throughout the summer on the events of the past year and what it meant for them. The activities were designed to help them find ways to restore a positive sense of meaning and vitality to their lives and their careers. The guide reflected the goal articulated by Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach*, of "learning as many ways as we can of talking to ourselves." As Parker says, "We need to find every possible way to listen to that voice and take its counsel seriously, not only for the sake of our work, but for the sake of our own health."

In June and July 2002, 3,000 print copies of the guide were distributed to New York City educators. Project Renewal followed up the publication of the guide by coordinating and assisting with training sessions for administrators, guidance counselors, school psychologists and social workers in the affected schools to help them create individual school plans to commemorate the anniversary of September 11th. In addition, site visits to specific schools were conducted in preparation for the anniversary.

As the first anniversary passed, it was clear that the effects of September 11th were going to be long-lasting. An advisory team for Project Renewal was formed, including Yeou-Cheng Ma, Carlos Monteagudo, Robin Stern, Lynne Hurdle-Price, Martha Eddy, Carmella B'Hahn, Lindamichellebaron and many others. With the help of an initial grant from the Surdna Foundation, the group worked together to begin to develop a wide range of renewal activities for school personnel.

“At that point, what I refer to as ‘divine synchronicity’ seemed to play a role, when I connected with Madhavi Nambiar, a young woman who had gravitated back to New York City in the wake of September 11th,” Lantieri says. “Madhavi's experience as a teacher whose own inner reservoir was running out and who was well-versed in holistic modes of healing and renewal created a sense of purpose that met and matched my vision. She was really the last piece of the puzzle I needed to launch the program.”

Lantieri and Nambiar joined together with the advisory team to begin to work toward the vision of creating a safe and loving community as well as a body of knowledge and skills to help educators stay the course and build their inner resilience during uncertain and fearful times. “From my experience at the Fetzer Institute, I knew one of the most important ways to recover from ‘compassion fatigue’ was to physically distance one's self from the workplace,” Lantieri notes. “This distance allows for a greater sense of safety and a deeper degree of perspective that ultimately allows a person to reflect on their work in a deeper way. I realized that many of the ceremonies and rituals I had experienced at the Fetzer Institute could now be shared with a larger community of educators. I wanted to offer this type of an off-site experience to teachers who needed a deeper level of calm.” Out of this idea, the Seasonal Retreat for Educators for Renewal and Restoration was born.

The first retreat was held an hour outside of New York City at Stony Point Center, one of three national retreat centers owned and operated by the Presbyterian Church USA. The retreat took place over a weekend in mid-December 2002. A group of twenty educators who were previously strangers gathered and, through the course of the retreat, formed a network of support for each other.

One participant, a teacher from the High School of Leadership and Public Service (the high school closest to Ground Zero), described her experience on the retreat in these words:

"I learned more about myself in that weekend than what I had known my entire life. For the first time in my life, I saw qualities within me that others had always observed, but I was unaware of. I felt comfortable enough to open myself up to a room of total strangers and left knowing that I had gained a new family. I was able to let go and be free. This was truly one of the best experiences of my life, and I will treasure it always."

Soon thereafter, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) gave Project Renewal a \$145,000 grant to help teachers and counselors build personal reserves during ongoing retreats at Stony Point Center. PDA has since renewed the grant to continue these retreats.

Since the first retreat, Project Renewal has conducted 14 more residential retreats at Stony Point Center and has scheduled many more for the future. To date, over 3,000 school personnel have benefited from Project Renewal's various offerings.

"We were nurtured, attended to, and now we can do the same with our children," one teacher wrote after a retreat in April 2003. Another participant, writing after a retreat in October 2004, declared, "I can't wait to teach again! Courage. Love. Faith. These are values that *are* our curriculum, however we may teach. I want to strengthen my conviction, take the challenge on of really keeping those things at the forefront of my work."

As a result of the success of the seasonal retreats, Project Renewal began to explore other modes and venues that could be used to offer restorative services to teachers. The idea of holding after-school workshops in the schools seemed a natural one, because that was the quickest way to get to busy teachers.

The after-school workshops focus on the connection between the mind and the body and the individual as part of the community. Research shows that the more modalities people work in, the more opportunities and ways they get to heal. Talk therapy was being offered free of charge for those deeply affected by this tragedy, but many educators come from cultures where individual talk therapy may not be the most effective way to access emotions. Project Renewal's programs were designed to introduce teachers to as many different ways to heal as possible, including indigenous, alternative and complementary ways to integrate mind, body and spirit.

In studying many indigenous cultures of the world, anthropologist Angeles Arrien notices that there are four "healing salves" present in all cultures that nurture the inner life -- silence, music, dance/movement and storytelling. The work at Project Renewal began to reflect this awareness. Participants had many experiences of silence and contemplation and were provided with some concrete tools to control their physiology and to identify and manage intrusive emotions. They learned various ways to relax both the body and the mind through progressive muscle relaxation exercises, simple meditation practices and guided imagery.

Educators were also invited to collectively explore the "healing salves" through workshops covering topics such as: Using Poetry for Inner Reflection; Energizing Ourselves Through Creative Dramatics; Emotional Intelligence: Using the Emotional Competence Inventory; Gentle Stretching/Movement for Peace; and The Role of Music in Nurturing Our Inner Lives. Project Renewal's initial plan was to pay teachers per

session for attending these workshops, but it soon became clear that there was no need for this, because the teachers were grateful for workshops that helped them explore their own possibilities around self care and renewal.

Having witnessed the powerful effects of massage and healing touch on firefighters and rescue workers in Ground Zero, Lantieri contacted Martha Eddy, who at the time was the coordinator of the Wellness Program at Riverside Church, to discuss the possibility of offering similar services to teachers and school personnel. Eddy agreed to use part of a small grant she had received to offer body-work and healing-touch services to educators in a few schools near Ground Zero.

The 20- to 30-minute bodywork sessions were easily incorporated into the school day during teachers' free periods. Typically, during one of its "stress-reduction days," Project Renewal arranges for one to three bodywork practitioners to work within the school setting during the school day. Depending on the circumstances and the clients' preference, bodywork may occur seated on a chair or lying on a table or mat fully clothed.

Project Renewal has delivered over 2,000 such sessions to school personnel in more than 30 different schools in New York City since 2002, and hopes to find funding to do more. Teachers, security guards and administrative personnel have all participated, learning about where they store stress and how they can reduce that stress. "I felt empowered and was treated with the utmost gentleness and care," one participant wrote after an October 2004 stress-reduction session. Another participant described the work as an "extremely healing, generative" experience.

In addition, Project Renewal has addressed the mind-body connection to releasing trauma and stress through weekly yoga classes. Attention to the body and somatic therapies brings heightened awareness to traumatized individuals and allows them to reconnect with themselves, their community and the world at large. These approaches can facilitate integration of the traumatic experience, which allows the individual to move beyond the past and embrace the present.

Another important aspect of the group's work was the need to address bias and discrimination, which was heightened after September 11th and which continues to persist throughout society. As world issues became more complex, educators were faced with the challenge of presenting avenues for meaningful dialogue that allowed diverse viewpoints to surface. Educators needed concrete strategies to be able to help young people develop skills for understanding and discussing complex world issues in an informed way.

Project Renewal offered selected trainings for educators that approached a range of world issues with the objective of broadening their knowledge base and encouraging dialogue. One such offering was a Teacher Institute in collaboration with the Asia

Society and Educators for Social Responsibility Metro in October 2003, which was entitled *Teaching about Contemporary World Conflicts: Case Studies and Classroom Strategies to Promote International Understanding*. In being able to look deeply and honestly at various issues, educators experienced profoundly meaningful dialogue about different values and experiences.

Project Renewal also began to realize the importance of working with youth leaders in high schools around some of these concepts. The group designed workshops that took the young people away to cultivate their resiliency and coping skills and prepare them to go back to their schools, empowered to create a positive peer climate for learning. Since then, this has become a powerful and significant part of Project Renewal's work as well. Project Renewal also hosted 14 day-long retreats for graduating seniors who began their high school careers on September 11, 2001. These retreats gave students an opportunity to fully integrate this tragedy into their psyche. They were able to acknowledge their pain, identify the lessons learned, and look optimistically towards the future.

Future Plans

As Project Renewal moves into its fourth year, the program is at an exciting juncture in its young history. Project Renewal continues to be engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the schools in and around Ground Zero about how to make a lasting impact on the educators, students and parents affected by the events of September 11th. Based on these conversations, the group is exploring ways to continue to expand and deepen its core program, and in so doing, test and refine a long-term holistic approach to strengthening inner resilience in schools in New York City and eventually nationwide.

"Our biggest realization has been that this work has broader implications for the field of education," Lantieri says. "It is not about waiting for another disaster to take place. Teachers are leaving the teaching profession in record numbers, mostly because of compassion fatigue and burnout. This is work that needs to be introduced into the very fabric of professional development for teachers. "

As a result, Project Renewal has received funding to develop a project to recruit and select a cohort of 15 K-12 schools (eight elementary and three middle schools in which the group has already been working) that are willing to serve as demonstration sites over a two-year project period and become models of deepening and sustaining this work in "inner-preparedness." Over the next two years, Project Renewal hopes to develop a series of curriculum modules for students in grades K-12, provide workshops to equip parents and caregivers with the knowledge and skills needed to increase their own resiliency, and develop materials to enable school leaders to facilitate the work at a "whole school" level.

Another important step is to find concrete ways to determine whether Project Renewal's work is producing positive outcomes that are measurable. The group is in

the process of engaging in a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation of its work to assess its impact on both adult and youth participants in a more systematic way, as well as replicate those aspects that educators have found especially valuable.

One major challenge faced by Project Renewal is how to sustain its work as the institutional memories and services attached to September 11th begin to fade. The group first aims to secure enough resources through June 2007 to leave school communities in lower Manhattan with the know-how to continue the work on their own as September 11th monies cease. At the same time, Project Renewal hopes to make inroads in both the foundation and education communities to advocate for this heart-to-heart resuscitation to be integral to what we offer school staff before we lose them.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

“People often tell me they are surprised that we are able to do this kind of work in New York City public schools. We have actually found teachers and school leaders in the Ground Zero area incredibly open to trying new activities that are not on the traditional list of professional-development topics,” Lantieri says. “We have made many allies among people who were former skeptics of this approach. Initially, in some schools, there may have been such a desperate need that they were willing to try anything, if it came from a person they knew and trusted. But as they tried our offerings, the vast majority of school leaders found that helping their staff and colleagues reconnect to what gives their lives and jobs true meaning and purpose was about as important a topic as they could address.”

For example, one participant in a recent teacher retreat admitted that his signed letter of resignation was sitting on his desk at home. After the retreat, he decided to rip it up because the retreat helped him remember why he was in this profession in the first place.

To introduce new and different offerings to the school system, a program must be both efficient and effective. Organizers must understand the needs of those they are serving. “At Project Renewal we know that if we want to get New York City school teachers to a retreat outside the city, we have to hire a bus to take them there, since most of our teachers don't have cars,” Lantieri notes. “We also know that if we want to conduct a training with teachers off-site, we may have to pay for the substitutes in their classroom, to make sure it can happen.” Only by running an effective and efficient program can organizers gain the necessary trust that both gets them in the door and gets them invited back to develop and sustain a relationship over years.

Of course, implementing innovative programs in traditional institutions is never without its challenges. Some guidelines around mental health services continue to be narrowly culturally defined. Some people are more open to new ideas than others. However, what is most important is to develop reciprocal, respectful relationships with the people in large, mainstream institutions who are open to new ideas and approaches.

If you cultivate these relationships, and respect the limits and pace of what people can do when, they will be able to help you move things forward when the time for change arrives.

As the world continues to be chaotic and uncertain, we will need more and more educators who are ready to make schools places where children are prepared for life's tests. The recent focus on academic competence must not let us lose sight of the skills, understanding and awareness both teachers and children will need to be prepared to live a life that matters. Project Renewal and other organizations must continue to work to create safe spaces and nurture trusting relationships where honesty and healing can occur for students, as well as for the teachers, administrators and school staff who work so hard to serve them.

Endnotes

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