9/11 AND AFTER
HOW STUDENTS IN 12 COUNTRIES ARE TAUGHT ABOUT 9/11

Twelve teenagers born after 9/11 told us what they have learned about the event and its aftermath — and what has been left out.

BY DAMIEN CAVE AND YOUSUR AL-HLOU SEPT. 10, 2021

For those born after Sept. 11, 2001, there are no memories of that dark day to shape their views. There is only education — formal, and informal.

With the terrorist attack and the wars that followed having entered the realm of history, we sought to understand how these events are being taught. What is stressed? What is overlooked?

We examined textbooks from all over and talked with educators. But mostly we wanted to hear directly from young people, and so we interviewed students born after the attacks in 12 countries.

Their voices offered only a hint of the diversity of instruction on Sept. 11 worldwide, but their impressions and experiences were striking.

From Moscow to Manhattan, from Karachi to Caracas, from Berlin to Baghdad, students have come away with very different perspectives on terrorism, Islam, war and American power.

If there is a consensus, it can be found in what students told us their education has been missing: depth.

They want to know more.

What did you learn about 9/11 in school?

The lessons taught about 9/11 reflect national agendas — if it is taught at all.

Schools around the world vary widely in their approach to teaching 9/11, if they teach it at all.

Biz Herman, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, has collected 850 textbooks from 90 countries. We worked with Ms. Herman to examine many of the textbooks commonly used by middle and high school students and found that Iran, Venezuela, Egypt, Syria and Mozambique are a few of the countries that do not mention the attack.

In New York and elsewhere in the United States, the Sept. 11 curriculum has been overtly personal and emotional. Students have been asked by their teachers to explore the experiences of their own families.

But at a remove from the bloodshed, and with attitudes of varying warmth toward the U.S., other countries handle the subject with their own nationalistic tilt.

In England, descriptions of the attack appear in one popular textbook in a section titled “Terrorist Groups in Action,” which also explores how the British government handled the Irish Republican Army. Spanish, French and Russian textbooks discuss Sept. 11 alongside terrorist attacks that struck their own citizens.

But some countries teach students that the events of that day offer a lesson, or perhaps a warning, for the world’s powers.

South Korean and Indian students learn that the strikes on the World Trade Center in New York and on Washington were a consequence of globalization. A Pakistani textbook describes the attack, which left almost 3,000 dead, as an “incident,” and dwells on the risks that come from American hegemony.

Striking an even sharper note, a textbook of Modern and Contemporary World History from China includes a photo of the twin towers in flames near a section on geopolitics. “No one power can dominate the world on its own,” it says.

“What are textbooks and what are they for?” Ms. Herman asks. “It would seem simple: that it's for educating kids. But it’s actually for setting national agendas, for sharing a particular narrative. And sometimes it’s for educating kids.”

How did you first learn about 9/11?

Horrific images endure. But what came next is often poorly explained.

Many people born after Sept. 11 learn about that day at a young age, but how it happens varies. Some see documentaries about the attack, but others stumble

across it on YouTube or hear a chance remark that sets them on a path to learn more.

Many of the students we interviewed said they had first heard 9/11 referred to obliquely, as if the adults talking had forgotten that they were not alive when the attack happened. When asked, the adults would give them a basic rundown of the facts — the hijacked planes, the toppled buildings, the number killed — without much context.

What they remember are the images.

“When you see the archival images, you’re like: How is this possible?” said Noémi Grette, 18, a recent high school graduate from Bordeaux in France.

But the photos and video leave so much unanswered, say young people like Ariadna Clareth Sánchez Rojas, 16, a 10th grader in Ciudad Los Teques, Venezuela.

“The questions that I have are: First, why was it so easy for the Taliban to hijack four airplanes from the U.S.?” she said, mixing up the Taliban with their allies in Al Qaeda. “And the other question that I have is: Why did that war really start between the U.S. and Afghanistan?”

What impact did 9/11 have on your world?

For some teenagers, the American response to 9/11 matters as much as the attacks

When the post-9/11 generation assesses the impact of the attack on their lives, they often point to what they can see: the long waits to get through airport security, the concrete bollards at the front of public squares to block a potential truck bomb.

But for many students, the lines between that day and the wars that followed are something of a blur, like a thunderstorm with clouds that have merged.

The ramifications can be deeply personal.

Faisal Rehman, 18, said that America’s invasion of Afghanistan led Taliban fighters to safe houses in the border region of Pakistan where his family lived, forcing them to leave for Karachi. Mujtaba Ali al-Saadi, an 18-year-old high school

senior in Baghdad, said that if not for the events of Sept. 11, “Saddam Hussein would have still been among us.”

“Regime change” ended dictatorship, he noted, but it also produced more terrorism inside Iraq. His father was shot and killed in 2005 when Mujtaba was just a toddler.

“He was washing his car, which was a big car,” he said. “I was standing next to him.”

For others, like Dorea Nengese, 18, who recently graduated from an East London high school filled with students whose families migrated from Afghanistan, Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, Sept. 11 will be forever remembered as a spark for anti-Islamic prejudice and intense debates about whose narratives should be given prominence.

Why, she asked, are students “expected to know everything about America” without learning about how global affairs are viewed by people from other countries?

What did these events teach you about America?

Students aware of 9/11 and what followed are often deeply skeptical of American motives.

For many Americans, remembering Sept. 11 means grappling with the legacy of trauma. With a more international perspective, young people elsewhere often find themselves asking how such a powerful country could be so vulnerable — and what lay at the root of its response at home and around the world.

Some students said American power should still be seen as a force for good. Xolisa Nohenda, 17, a 12th grader in Johannesburg, South Africa, said most of her peers believed that the U.S. “plays a big role in defending people.”

But for many, it has become common to question American motives.

In almost any lesson that touches on the United States, textbooks from many countries emphasize American military might. Some also suggest that the U.S. attacked Afghanistan and Iraq to obtain oil or other natural resources.

Even teenagers who were not taught from those texts seem to have absorbed a sense of deep skepticism.

“I don't know a lot about the war between Iraq and the U.S. but I do know that they, I think, fought about oil, and there was a lot of money involved,” said Jelena Marie Bielke, 16, a high school junior in Berlin. “And the U.S. wanted to get the oil.”

The American response to Sept. 11, she said, showed that the Americans “kind of want justice, but in a really weird way — because it’s not really justice to bomb a country.”

What’s gone wrong with 9/11 education?

Students blame outdated curricula, fear and political agendas for ignoring 9/11 in schools.

Many of the students we interviewed offered sharp insights on why their elders do not teach about Sept. 11 with more context and rigor. Some said schools are always slow to adapt, sticking with outdated textbooks that can take years to update.

“I think it’s time for us to change this educational system and, I don't know, try to focus on something more forward looking,” said Lucas Villar, 18, a high school senior in Rio de Janeiro.

Other students blamed politics and discomfort with trauma.

“I think sometimes some things are not talked about, because maybe the government failed to control it,” said Polina, 19, a university student in Russia, who asked that her surname not be used to protect her privacy and avoid trouble with the authorities.

“Like, I don’t want to get political, but I really do think that some things are not included just because it might sabotage the general picture of the country. Maybe kids would not feel safe in their country, or it might trigger some sort of thought, some negative thinking about their safety, and what they have to go through. Maybe some phobias.”

Felix Tonkin, 17, a 12th grader in Sydney, said some countries (including Australia) may be hindered by a sense of shame about mistakes they made in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“That's a hard thing to teach, absolutely,” he said. “But I think it’s an important thing to teach as well.”

In Karachi, Mr. Rehman said he had once asked his teacher to explain and got this reply: “Son, these wars are political. We don’t learn such things in school. You can learn about them later in life.”