

Water in Balance with Mind and Body: Reflections of Expanding a Water Unit to the Community

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Abstract

This article offers reflections of a [thematic unit centered on water](#), which was part of an earlier issue of *Climate Literacy in Education* 1(1) This discussion emphasizes the significance of community involvement, the role of project-based learning in enhancing student engagement, and the integration of social-emotional learning within the broader context of climate literacy.

Key Words

youth climate activism, ecosystem services, sustainability

Acknowledgments

Marek Oziewicz and Nick Kleese for sharing enthusiastic passion for climate literacy

Water is life. Our bodies are composed of mostly water, as is our planet, reflecting a deep connection between us and the world around us. The water within us is linked to the water all around us. Water is fundamental to everything, maintaining balance on our planet. With this authentic connection, I became passionate about using water as a

[theme for my 8th-grade English Language Arts classroom](#). Little did I know that this theme would introduce an organic and evolving dynamic to my curriculum.

The thematic unit I presented to my students was closely tied to resources shared during the first Climate Literacy Summer Institute in 2022, at The University of Minnesota. This unit is also referenced in the February 2023 issue of *Climate Literacy in Education* (Braucht, 2023). While this serves as a starting point, there is great potential to develop this work further.

The "Seeing Through Water" unit proved to be a solid introduction to concepts that engaged students and fostered critical thinking. My three key takeaways from this unit were the importance of community input, project-based student engagement, and social-emotional learning considering the environment. Like many teachers, I continually seek ways to integrate the real world into my classroom. During a visit to the local Great Outdoor Store, I learned about summer events, including a river cleanup, and connected with Friends of the Big Sioux River, an organization based in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Through Friends' education outreach, my students participated in a river experiment focusing on runoff, learned about their impact on the watershed in their community, and applied the life science and chemistry they had previously learned as they analyzed water quality results. The students gained a general sense of the healthy ecosystem services in community ecosystems. This place-based learning resonated with my students far more than simply telling them to be mindful of water usage—they could see firsthand the impact they have on their community.

Student engagement was high as we integrated activities such as sewing, drawing, and expressing our voices through actions. I invited a community member, Grandma Karen, to share her quilting expertise with my students. They practiced constructing and sewing a quilt that was later donated to a local charity auction. Students used fabric markers to draw pictures on fabric squares representing their theme of caring for the earth, resulting in collaborative beautiful earth care quilts. Youth climate activism can take many forms, and my students proudly presented their earth care themes to family members and community groups through these quilts. After the project, many students requested to borrow their class quilts for graduation, reflecting their pride in the work they had done.

Perhaps the most notable outcome of the water unit was the social-emotional learning that took place. Students developed a sense of water as a sentient being and practiced framing perspectives as if they were the water itself. This approach made it easier for them to express and define feelings, leading to meaningful discussions about how to create positive action steps to protect the water. We also engaged in mindfulness journaling for sustainable consumption, often writing outside to connect with our environment (Fritzsche et al., 2018) Students embraced the freedom of being outdoors, which led to richer content and vocabulary in their writing. They also reported feeling calmer, which ultimately inspired us to create a school garden space to more formally learn outdoors.

Water can flow gently, or it can hit with immense power. We have the opportunity to continue integrating environmental themes across all areas of our students' curricula. By fostering cross-curricular partnerships and connections in literacy, we can harness this power to educate our students about sustainability, helping them develop a strong sense of voice and embrace opportunities to create a sustainable world. As we balance student experiences of mind and body, we can draw deeper connections to water. Water is life.

References

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