

Bank Street All College Meeting for Graduate School and School for Children Faculties
“Global Warming: Our Place in the World” Notes
by Ted Wells

Introduction

Thank you Nina and Farhad, Staff Council, and Dr. Kappner. Thank you Bank Street! You helped shape me into the teacher and person I am.

It's great to be back. It was fun catching up with several 8th graders this afternoon whom I taught as 2nd graders! Now, I've only been an alum a few months, but I hope I can make you proud! I'd like to start off with part of a Jeopardy video some of my students made last year after doing some “fact finds” on a few select websites I found for them.

Show middle part of ENN News 2 min.

I'll be showing a few video clips like this one to keep this talk lively, and to show you some examples of what my class has been up to. Mostly, we study recycling and the kids run a large program where they collect recyclables from around our large school, (*show 3 slides*) but we also create a video or two each year to educate our school community and others through the Internet.

This year catalogs are moving us from recycling, to reducing. (Explain 3 Rs.)

Questions

You're going to have to be brave now. I'm going to ask a question! **Raise your hand if you understand the basic science of global warming?**

Okay – those of you raising your hands, turn to a neighbor or two and explain the Greenhouse Effect, and how it's changed in the past 100 years. Take a few minutes. If you have time, discuss the negative impact this warming is having on our planet. (*Pause 2 minutes.*)

Okay, who's the brave soul out there who would like to share a brief description? Great thanks!

Perhaps others were talking about a “heat-trapping blanket” that surrounds the globe? I like the “car in the parking with windows up” comparison. We've all experienced that. (*Describe Greenhouse Effect more if necessary.*)

Climate Chaos

People call it “global warming” or “climate change,” but “Climate Chaos” would be the best descriptor of the state our planet is in. It's a more accurate name than global warming or climate change. Up in Boston it went from 6 degrees to 66 degrees in the past six days. Ominous numbers! Especially for January. Each year we keep breaking records. 10 of the hottest years on record for average global temperatures occurred in the last 12 years.

Last month, Southern California went from severe drought and wildfires to mudslides and massive blizzards – including 11 feet of snowfall in the Sierra Nevada range. And of course, last night's frightening news reports about June tornados devastating the Midwest in January. Yikes! This is depressing, sorry!

These recent events, along with intensified hurricanes like Katrina (because of warmer oceans), disappearing islands, thawing permafrost with the need to relocate coastal Alaskan communities, and extreme heat waves like the one that took 35,000 lives in southern Europe in 2004, are all part of the Earth's sickness – this global warming. And the effects of this are as significant as they are scary, and they will hamper attempts to promote peace, democracy, and social justice in our world.

And if I haven't finished depressing you yet, there's more bad news. Other huge issues are connected to this and are of concern: deforestation, warming oceans, habitat loss, exploding extinction rates and a loss of biodiversity, shifting climates and disease boundaries, and more ... it's quite a list and it's all connected to global warming and our spike in population.

~~2—Raise your hand if you feel the school you are working in is doing enough to address problems in or natural world.~~

~~Interesting. Most schools, including mine are not either. There are so many initiatives and priorities and so little time in our educational institutions. Yet many are just starting to listen. As more and more of us start to take this issue seriously, so will our schools. Environmental sustainability will and must become apart of what “excellence” means for schools.~~

~~3—Last question. Raise your hand if you'd like your school community to do more?~~

~~There's a long list of low hanging fruit to pick at in greening our schools. For those of you who raised your hand, I hope you leave here today with a few ideas. But you may not need my advice. You may simply need time, brainstorming, and some organization.~~

~~In about 15 minutes, after I take questions, we'll do an activity where together we try to brainstorm next steps we could take in our schools, as well as sharing effective ideas that are currently in place. We can think of this as “picking the low hanging fruit” or finding opportunity out there in our schools. We should also consider the “harder to reach branches.”~~

Sustainability? Or Regeneration?

~~In working to slow global warming, school communities are starting promote environmental sustainability and stewardship. This is and will become, I believe, a regular part of what all schools promote as good citizenship in our students.~~

~~Many consider sustainability the ultimate goal. But pushing even further, we should consider efforts to green our schools and educate students and communities as moving beyond sustainable. We all know the three Rs. Now consider these three new Rs: Our efforts should be regenerative, restorative, and resilient. Sustaining the status quo is not good enough—we must heal, and we must restore, then we should sustain.~~

Tone

Now tone is important. I just touched on some of the scary parts of all this, especially when thinking 50- to 100-years out. And I'm sorry if I'm depressing anyone! That is not my intent! I'm an optimistic person. We are an optimistic profession!

But this topic is frightening when we think of natural disaster, mass migrations of 100s of millions from, say Bangladesh when the oceans rise. There's drought, starvation, and even warfare to consider that can result from global warming. Yikes!

My tone and the content of my remarks this afternoon are not what I would use in my 4th grade classroom or a 12th grade classroom. But you hear this kind of talk when environmentalists try to stress the urgency

of this issue. Our planet is serious trouble. We are in serious trouble. But this doom-and-gloom communication is not appropriate in our classrooms for obvious reasons.

We don't want to scare people into helping the world, but rather, we want to inspire hope! Because there is time to fix this problem. And as we do, it will bring us closer and make us stronger.

And remember that Paulo Freire said, hope is something one does as much as it is a feeling. So we don't talk or study death tolls, we learn about and we change light bulbs! We don't talk of drowning polar bears, we talk of making reused plastic bottle piggy banks! Not drought and flood, but canceling unwanted sales catalogues.

We don't need to hide from global warming, we need to confront it with positive energy. In terms of a solution to this greatest of challenges, it will come when we all come together. And that is what we are doing today in line with John Dewey and Bank Street's mission of making the world a better place. As our credo says, "Our work is based on the faith that human beings can improve the society they have created."

Chicken Soup Quote

Speaking of hope! At the end of a guest parent lesson on global warming last year, one of my 10-year-old students raised his hand and commented with a twinkle:

"Earth is like a human. When the human gets a fever we get chicken soup and get to watch TV. Then we get all better. When Earth gets a fever, it has no TV or chicken soup. So it doesn't get better as quickly. We need to do everything we can to give something like a TV or something like chicken soup to Earth right now."

A clever kid! He gets it. (And the fever comparison is perfect. Global warming is more than a steady rise in the average atmospheric temperature. Our planet is having hot sweats, and cold chills. Snow/rain and drought. Kind of like a fever.)

Picture Books + Discussions

Many students can understand the gist of our climate problems after reading them simple and age-appropriate picture books on the topic. Then positive, forward-looking discussions are necessary to clarify any misunderstanding. If these discussions can include asking the kids what they can do to help the environment, that is best of all. Follow up with later discussion asking kids what they're doing at home. Organize school projects with water conservation, recycling, reduced paper consumption, grow plants or trees, start a club, make a movie. There are lots of ideas.

Here is a video from last year of one student explaining why it is important to recycle and it's connection to global warming. (*Show video. 1 min 45 sec.*)

4th grade is probably the right time for it to start these conversations. Through the lens of recycling, might work best. Any younger might be too early for global warming, but not too early to talk trees, animals, and water.

Catalogs

Not all of my students (or adults, for that matter) can make these connections between recycling – energy conservation – and global warming, as this clever boy in the video did, but some can.

And it depends. This year my class is very young. They aren't bringing up global warming in our Wednesday recycling talks the way my class did last year. Last year, they wanted to know everything about global warming! We made a whole movie about it. And we got into the details.

This year...they aren't as ready or interested in the climate, so we're talking catalogs and saving trees, along with our usual recycling work around the building.

Let's take a peek at our current project. Perhaps the Bank Street School for Children here would like to join in?

Show half of video of Catalog Canceling Challenge. 2 min.

You see, when we start to talk with kids and create projects that help the environment, the "chicken soup" that our planet needs right now is us, our students, and our schools! Projects like this are good remedies.

Our society needs to be educated about what is happening so that a major shift of consciousness comes quickly. With this shift of societal consciousness, the politicians will follow suit. Corporations and industry have reluctantly started. They can see this one coming. But once this triangle between our citizenry, businesses, and government is complete, then bold, lasting change will come.

We are a part of this mix. Schools are the leaders of ideas. Especially places like Bank Street. And we have before us an idea that needs to get out there fast.

Get Outside!

I find much inspiration in this student's chicken soup quote as I do in all of my students. I also find strength and an important idea that E.B. White gets me thinking about. He once wrote:

"I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

I sure need to listen to this quote more and find some balance. I've been spending more time with my computer here than my canoe...or hiking boots....

Perhaps the most important part of environmental education isn't fun movies, recycling programs, low carbon diets, or solar panels – although these are great ideas – but in getting kids outside, freely enjoying themselves while exploring and connecting to nature more often. This is especially hard, but necessary here in urban areas like New York City.

For our children, we must instill a love of the land and its plants and animals. Having them feel a sense of wonder is crucial and was one of Rachel Carson's main messages. This happens through experience in the outdoors, and also through literature and English classes.

If not? If these connections aren't made? Then there won't be a heartfelt reason for saving the planet. I strongly encourage you to read Richard Louv's 2005 book Last Child in the Woods for more on this topic.

Recycling Boy

Let's go back to my classroom. Three years ago, I told my kids there was a problem in our school – it didn't recycle any of its trash. I asked them what we could do about it and they suggested starting a recycling program. I wrote all this on a chart and jotted down the kids' ideas for how it might work. This

was the first lesson. Give students the control to make positive change. They did, and have been doing so for three years now collecting over 25,000 pounds of paper per year along with thousands of bottles and cans.

They started a campaign to set out bins, to start up collection routines and teams at recess, and they marketed this with posters and eventually some movies. One boy had a poster with the idea of a recycling superhero! A mascot of sorts for us to rally around. Eventually when we made some commercials to educate our community about our new program, he became the now famous – Recycling Boy! (*Show photo.*)

Show Video of Recycling Boy 1 min 46 sec.

Connections and Work

Trying to connect recycling or any other small school projects – such as composting, a rainforest study, a class garden - to global warming is important to consider. Why should we do this? Can kids help with such huge global problems? Why don't we leave this up to adults?

Why? Because every little bit helps and we have an army of millions of kids who'd be happy to do more. And this work empowers students to be a part of the solution! Not only can they help, but there is opportunity for interdisciplinary learning, creative solutions, service learning, and a progressive hands-on approach that Bank Street promotes.

Dewey would love the “work” the 4th graders do two recesses a week at my school. It's amazing how much they enjoy the work. But perhaps it's more than this – it's physical labor, hauling paper, bottles, and cans, but also, it's play to them, and it's a solution to a real problem. What a combination! And physical work is something missing from too many classrooms. Recycling, or caring for a garden, a “living machine” waste water treatment system, or a solar array, is real work that helps solve a real problem, which chips away at any trepidation and replaces it with confidence. I think kids appreciate the respect they get when they are given such responsibilities. Especially when they are the ones coming up with the ideas.

Skits and Video

I could go on and on about service learning, or Green Building, or the use of technology with video and websites, but I won't. I will just say that when you let kids study a topic, then spontaneously act out skits to rehearse for plays that share their knowledge – magic happens.

I learned this as an associate teacher at the School for Children here with their end of unit plays. I continue doing this, but with video. Kids work hard for the video camera. It's glamorous! They love the attention of being on a screen like this on behind me. It allows them to internalize, ponder, then externalize. This is very Bank Street.

Ripples

Small steps count. Let's not undervalue kids. Let's not undervalue schools. What these kids are doing is part of the solution. Last year two parents in my class started recycling initiatives in companies they owned or worked in. All of the families in my classes are quickly set straight in the ways of recycling! and are started down a greener path. There is a ripple effect through creative, kid energy.

Maybe – just maybe - kid energy is the renewable resource everyone is out there looking for?

Solution Mosaic

The solution to global warming lies in what often called a “mosaic” of actions mostly with energy conservation and alternative energy production, but also with education. Our country and our world need to rapidly embrace three ideas: (*Show slides*) 1) some sort of mandated tax on carbon dioxide, or a cap-and-trade program cutting carbon dioxide emissions 80% below 1990 levels by 2050, 2) a huge new system of clean energy production getting us away from coal and oil, and 3) a reeducation of our society to consume, pollute, and waste LESS.

This is where we come in. If we are to educate and shift a whole society to live cleaner and greener, we need more than Al Gore’s documentary (although it’s an amazing part of all this), we need science and social studies curricula with “environmental strands,” state science standardized testing must include climate change and oceanography, and our school buildings must tighten up their operations, and much more.

David Orr

As we work to get away from the “Banking Model” of education, let’s continue to work hard on process, learning by doing, service learning, celebrating diversity, and fighting for social justice. Let’s also consider teaching for the sake of an environment we all need...There is a “poverty underlying much of the philosophy of education out there today, especially in regards to how we treat the water, land, and air.

I was reading and reflecting on a book by David Orr of Oberlin College recently. He got me thinking about how it’s hard to teach our young to love the land and community when our society urges them to worship consumption and individualism. And it’s hard to teach democracy in a country that’s becoming a plutocracy. It’s hard to save our environment when some ruling corporations profit from treating it like an asset there to be either liquidated or treated like a public landfill...or skyfill.

Conclusion

We need a re-education of humankind, and we need it to happen fast. Climatologists, such as James Hansen of NASA, say we have ten years before we reach a tipping point on no return. We will meet this challenge.

For those of us in the teaching community, now is the time to engage our schools in doing more to promote environmental awareness as one measure to restore and create a resilient, sustainable future. Not only will this help the Earth, it is also a great opportunity to make our schools more progressive minded and to promote many Bank Street ideas.

The challenge is us. And solution is us. As Rachel Carson said in 1964 shortly before her death:

“[We are] challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.”

It’s time to listen to Rachel Carson. It is time for actions, large and small, from top and bottom to gain this mastery and to clean up our atmosphere. A clean environment should be a basic human right, and something we pass on to our children and their children and beyond.

To close, please consider the American Indian proverb that says, “*We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.*” In 2008 we are beginning to appreciate the dependence humanity has on nature, and that future hope and potential depend on solving the climate crisis. Thank you.