

The Power of Access to Clean Water . . . and the Power of Information

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Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.
—W. H. Auden (1907–1973)¹

Many elementary teachers have used David J. Smith’s *If the World were a Village: A Book about the World’s People*² to help students think about fractions and proportions and to make sense of global population statistics: the number of people that speak various languages; belong to various religions; and have telephones, food security, and access to clean drinking water. A common classroom activity is to have pairs of students represent one of the categories visually (with a graph, artwork, cartoon, or poster) for their classmates; thus, students learn a little about a lot of different topics, many of which relate to standard of living.

If there is value in thinking about these summaries and “snapshots” of the human condition, there is also value in an in-depth examination of one of the key indices of standards of living around the world. Such an examination is premised on the idea that multiple sources of data will provide a greater variety of perspectives, more thorough understanding, and, possibly, increased empathy and interest in taking action, based on these new understandings.

Thus, rather than being just another shocking piece of information, the statistic that only about one-third of the world’s population has access to clean drinking water, can be the beginning of an exploration about water in multiple communities around the globe.³ Often, the most fruitful places to find in-depth, compelling information about standards of living are on the websites of non-profit organizations that focus on one aspect of the standard of living. Blue Planet Network⁴ is one such organization, dedicated to raising awareness about the need for clean, safe water and working with funders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to exponentially increase the positive impact of water and sanitation projects around the world.

The multiplier effects of the projects of Blue Planet Network are clear, as clean, safe drinking water can change the lives of women and girls, improve the health of many members of the community, contribute to children being able to stay in school,

and support economic development. These effects are made concrete for students in the activities in the **Pullout** that follows this article.

In the first activity, students are asked to consider why clean water is so important:

1. Unsafe water is the leading cause of sickness and death
2. Water has an impact on everything
3. Nearly a billion people are in need of clean water
4. Creating access to safe water for everyone is measurable and achievable
5. The return on investment in water and sanitation is enormous

In **Handouts A and B**, students are presented with multiple pieces of compelling data to classify under each of the five reasons why water is so important to human life; e.g., “In just one day, 200 million work hours are consumed by women collecting water for their families.” **Handout C** invites students to create a graphic representation of one of those pieces of compelling data (three examples are provided as models).

Handout D challenges students to examine the lives of people before and after a project to provide potable water to their community. Students use the evidence in the photos and captions to discuss how access to clean water changes people’s lives.

Elementary teachers and students can take action in many ways. They may undertake a targeted fundraising campaign for Heifer⁵ after reading Beatrice’s book *Goat*.⁶ Or they may explore information at the Blue Planet Network website, and then choose to raise awareness about global water issues by creating their own with brochures or PSAs. They might even hold a fundraiser and contribute to a particular project in a specific village. Hunger activist and singer Harry Chapin said, “To know is to care, to care is to act, to act is to make a difference.”⁷ The cycle of environmental activism depends on knowledge. Having elementary students gather in-depth information about water, a vital resource, is good place to start. 🌍

*Blue Planet Network*⁸ would love to feature on their website and Facebook page examples of work you do with students that's inspired by this article. Please contact co-author Lisa Diaz Nash at lisadnash@yahoo.com

Notes

1. W. H. Auden, "First Things First," posted at *The Poetic Quotidian* thepoeticquotidian.blogspot.com/2007/02/w-h-auden-first-things-first-evan.html.
2. David J Smith, *If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World's People* (Toronto, Ontario: CitizenKid/Kids Can Press, Ltd., 2011).
3. Smith, 18.
4. Blue Planet Network, "Why Water?" (2015), blueplanetnetwork.org/water.
5. "Heifer International," www.heifer.org.
6. Page McBrier, *Beatrice's Goat* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2001).
7. Harry Chapin Foodbank of Southwest Florida, www.harrychapinfoodbank.org/Tags/Hunger%20Walk.
8. Blue Planet Network, blueplanetnetwork.org.

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Teacher Answer Key

(with sources):

What Makes Clean Water So Important?

(See the Pullout following this article)

1. Unsafe water is the leading cause of sickness and death.

- Unsafe water kills 200 children every hour, filling half of the hospital beds in the world.
- 3.41 million people die from water, sanitation and hygiene-related causes each year.
- Half of the world's hospital beds are filled with people suffering from water related illnesses.
- It is estimated that nearly 10% of the global disease burden could be reduced through improved water supply, sanitation, hygiene, and water resource management.

2. Water has an impact on everything.

- Safe drinking water sends children (especially girls) back to school, empowers women, improves community health and fosters economic development.
- In just one day on Earth, women spend 200 million work hours collecting water for their families. This lost productivity is greater than the combined number of hours worked in a week by employees at Walmart, United Parcel Service, McDonald's, IBM, Target, and Kroger. (**water.org**)
- Without clean water and sanitation, it is impossible to address poverty, hunger, or AIDS.

3. Nearly a billion people are in need of clean water.

- 780 million people lack access to an improved water source. That's approximately three times the population of the United States. (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme)
- One third of the people on earth lack adequate sanitation.

4. Creating access to safe water for everyone is measurable and achievable.

Lack of access to safe water is not a technical problem—it is a human, logistics, funding and efficiency issue.

- The world has the money to make it happen. In fact it would take 1/3 what the world spends on bottled water in one year to pay for projects providing water to everyone in need. (CBS News, *FLOW* the movie)
- It is estimated that lack of community involvement causes 50% of water improvement projects to fail.

5. The return on investment in water and sanitation is enormous.

- For every \$1 invested in water and sanitation, the United Nations Development Programme estimates a return of up to \$8, depending on the region and technology.
- "Getting clean water to rural villages is the most effective strategy to help the poor." (Christianity Today Report)

Main source of information: Blue Planet Network, www.blueplanetnetwork.org.

Also, visit the Facebook page, www.facebook.com/blueplanetnetwork.