Moving from Theory to Practice

Emily Hoyler

Emily Hoyler teaches upper elementary grades in Cornwall, Vermont. She moonlights as the curriculum specialist at Shelburne Farms where she works with many of its educational and professional development programs, including the Sustainable Schools Project, and she has served as a visiting lecturer in education at Middlebury College.
.

Flooded with sunlight, my first classroom was on the second floor of an old Catholic school. I arrived in August to join the young faculty at a public charter school in Providence, Rhode Island, ready to change the world, one student at a time. By October, my confidence was eroded but my connection to my students was firm. I fervently attempted to infuse my curriculum with sustainability, though I didn't yet have the word for it. My students wrote essays on climate change. We took our "city kids" out to an apple orchard for a day of community building, then returned to the classroom with a slow cooker to make apple sauce. That was the day I discovered the disconnection between my students and the source of their food. One student said to me, "Mrs. Hoyler, this is just like the real applesauce we buy at the store!" I knew that I wanted to help students know the world, know the earth, and know each other, but I wasn't sure where to begin.

I was fortunate to take what I consider to be somewhat of a sabbatical from the classroom when I was hired to become the Curriculum Specialist at Shelburne Farms. It was there that I was formally introduced to Education for Sustainability. I found that the thing that I was trying to do was a Thing. There, I learned about the EFS framework that girds the work of Shelburne Farms and others, and how to articulate this work to others. I also learned about effective strategies to bring this theory to life, such as using place-based education as the context for learning, and project-based learning and service-learning as key pedagogical strategies. After spending several years working in professional development, I was ready to return to the classroom to explore the place where theory meets practice.

I now teach at a small, rural elementary school in the Champlain Valley of Vermont. We serve approximately 75 students in grades K-6, with six, full-time classroom teachers and many other amazing specialists and staff. Most, but not all, students come from fairly affluent families. Our building is an old, cinderblock and brick construction with a roof freshly painted to hide the rust. Technology is decidedly lacking, and the new comput-

Students harvest the annual black bean crop in preparation to make soup for the Harvest Festival.

er-based standardized assessments try the capacity of our bandwidth as well as everyone's patience. The campus is bordered by farmers' fields to the north and west, and tree-lined meadows to the south and east. The school garden lies on the southern edge of campus, with four raised beds for things such as pizza gardens, and additional beds for black beans, potatoes, popcorn, and sunflowers. Beyond the garden, a path winds down to the outdoor classroom, a rustic circle of child-sized boulders and a firepit. In the winter, the place where the parking lot meets the grass erupts into snowbanks that quickly evolve into a world of ice castles and territories, and intricate trade systems develop along with territorial disputes that must be negotiated. One of the things that drew me to this school initially is its thriving farm to school program, which I see as a natural opportunity for EFS. Each fall the entire community comes together for a Harvest Festival featuring a delectable menu of local, student-prepared dishes, many showcasing produce from the school garden. Parents and community members rally to host a variety of activities, from cider pressing to making scarecrows, flower crowns, pumpkin painting, and tractor rides. However, this is just the first rite of passage in a cyclical school year that culminates in the planting of another season's crop.

Our school food service director provides from-scratch meals that highlight a variety of local products whenever possible, and brings students into the kitchen to help with prepare and serve the food. We also have a three-bin hot compost system to collect organic waste.

The food system is also making its way into our classrooms in an ever-growing number of ways. Understanding the complex and crucial connections between humans and the land that provides our food helps students develop an understanding of systems and interconnectedness. These systems provide a rich context for helping students grasp the Big Ideas and Enduring Understandings of EFS. And it can be delicious!

Other practices that embody EFS abound. Our school embraces the Responsive Classroom approach, which not only seeks to build students' academic skills, but highlights the importance of building their social-emotional skill set as well. Each day begins with a Morning Meeting in each classroom,

Students explore the relationship between angle and production of solar energy.

and other Responsive Classroom practices are peppered throughout the day. At the beginning of the year, students articulate their hopes and dreams, and from those students derive our school rules, called agreements. These practices support democratic classroom management, help students develop a voice, and hone their reflection skills.

I have also brought mindfulness to my classroom for several years. After a particularly stressful year teaching middle school, I took a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course as part of my professional development. Experiencing the benefits of responding rather than reacting to the world, I soon sought more training so that I could share this approach with students. For the past couple of years, I have used resources created by the Hawn Foundation. The MindUP curriculum, which is rooted in brain-based science, provides an array of experiences and practices to help students cultivate mindful attention. My students love learning about their brains and practicing "paying attention" — a skill we constantly ask of them, but rarely dedicate time to learning and practicing. I believe this practice helps students know themselves, and grow in their ability to be compassionate and empathetic people. Knowing who we are and what is important to us is essential to doing good work in the world.

EFS is also infused into the core curriculum as well. This year, with the support of our principal, my intermediate grades colleagues and I created and launched a new learning structure for students in grades three through six. We've designed an interdisciplinary, multi-age "Integrated Studies Program," nicknamed "I.S.", that brings students together for learning in a place-based context. Our focus is weaving together knowledge, skills, and understandings from science, social studies, and literacy, with room for the other disciplines when they naturally emerge, into land- and community-based experiences.

This inaugural year, our year-long focus is "How do we shape the land? How does the land shape us?" We launched the year with a study of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. We explored states of matter, and read and wrote folktales centered on these elements. In October, we hiked up a local mountain, and were greeted at the

Students practice mindfulness in the outdoor classroom.

Atop a local peak students become inspired by Andy Goldsworthy's art prior to creating their own masterpieces.

top by an expansive view of the Champlain Valley, patchworked with forests, farms, and other development. In the distance, Lake Champlain meets the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. From this vantage point, we taught students about plate tectonics, thrust faults, geologic time, and the once-upon-a-time Champlain Sea. We looked at land use patterns and how they intersected with water sources, and we ventured into the woods for an Andy Goldsworthy–inspired art class.

This experience launched our first major unit, titled "Earth." From here, we returned to school, where students cycled through a series of two-week mini-units in their grade-level groups. This allowed us to differentiate learning, while exposing students to similar content knowledge. My colleagues led students in learning about the agricultural and geologic history of our community, our climate, and how to use GoogleSlides, while I taught a text-based science unit focusing on natural resources and writing. These mini-units gave students the background knowledge they would need for the final project.

For the final project, we partnered with a local organization, the Vermont Folklife Center (VFC). Students were placed in multi-age groups and matched with a local farm. Their task was to apply their learning to understand "how the farm shapes the land and how the land shapes the farmer." VFC worked with our students to teach them how to take photographs and record audio, and loaned us a set of iPods for students to use on their farm visits. We provided students with an outline of what their presentation should include, then set them loose to drive their own learning (though we did drive them to the farm sites!). As we progressed through the project, we discovered that a big part of the students' learning was figuring out how to

collaborate, both online and in person. We used project-based learning resources, including checklists, group agreement planning sheets, and collaboration rubrics from the Buck Institute for Education to help guide this process. The Farm Project culminated with group presentations to an audience of parents, classmates, and community members. Every student participated in their groups' presentation Afterwards, farmers and families joined us to celebrate the students' work and sample some of the farms' products.

Crucial to the success of this program was the common planning time our principal carved out for us. It began with a day over the summer, and continues throughout the year in twice weekly lunchtime meetings. These meetings are typically filled with logistics and last minute adjustments, so we were fortunate to get a day of release time this winter for a curriculum retreat so that we could plan the rest of our year. There is never enough time, but we make use of what we have, and as my colleague described it, "we're building the plane as we're flying it."

While there have been many lessons learned this year through trial and error, overall the Integrated Studies program has been a great success. One parent shared her feedback with us:

The 2015-2016 EFS Leadership Academy cohort met seasonally at Shelburne Farms for reflection and inspiration.

The Crucial Role of Professional Development

Because I straddle two worlds, spending the school year in the classroom and summers participating in and facilitating professional development, I've come to understand the essential role that professional development fulfills in sustaining my practice. The school year provides little time for big picture planning and reflection, yet the right summer professional development creates space for professional and personal growth. This past year, I had the opportunity to participate in Shelburne Farms' first EFS Leadership Academy. This residential program met five times over the course of the year, building strong community among our cohort and allowing us to inspire and encourage each other in our work. My advice to others would be to find your summer people: connect with a professional learning community outside your immediate cirlce that will allow you to meet others who share your particular passion.

"The Integrated Studies program at Cornwall School has been a wonderful addition to our traditional curriculum this year. My children, in third and fifth grades, have only positive things to say about the experience. They have very different learning styles and yet both love the afternoon integrated studies time. The multiage aspect of the program allows the children to support one-another — to be mentors and role-models, and learn from each other, as well as interact with many students, which in a small school is critical. Additionally, the hands-on learning facilitated by this program is invaluable. The students make connections with the greater community and world. Their minds, bodies and hearts are all engaged through this type of learning, and it is a highlight in both of my children's school day. I am 100% thrilled with this opportunity for my children's learning. The culminating project for the first semester's work was unbelievable; every student was engaged, focused, excited and able to show their learning. Thank you for the work involved in bringing this to Cornwall School!"

Moving from theory to practice has been challenging, but I'm glad I chose this path (and these colleagues and this school). I knew it wouldn't be easy to bring all that I've learned about EFS into my practice, and I was right. And I still haven't figured it all out yet — I may never! In those rare moments when I do have time to reflect, sometimes I find myself plagued by thoughts of, "Is this what it looks like?" and "Am I doing it right?" But when I connect with others doing this work and we share our stories, I realize that we are doing it. This is what is looks like. We can do this, together.

RESOURCES

The Buck Institute for Education
www.bie.org

Mind UP
thehawnfoundation.org/mindup/

Responsive Classroom
www.responsiveclassroom.org/

Emily's ASCD blog posts:
inservice.ascd.org/learning-to-pay-attention/

inservice.ascd.org/education-for-sustainability-making-the-world-whole/

inservice.ascd.org/nurturing-the-whole-teacher/

Contact the Author:
Emily Hoyler
hoyler.emily@gmail.com