

# “We are Water Warriors”: Children Perform Chicago Global Water Dances

*Rebecca Woodard\*, Stephanie Batres Spezza\*, Maria Varelas\*, Amanda R. Diaz\*\*, Bridget Dougherty\*\*\*, Maria Rosario\*\*\*, Gustavo Soto\*\*\*, Alex Benito Rodriguez\*, Nathan Phillips\*, Rachelle Tsachor\*, Rebecca Kotler\*, and Ronan Rock\**

*\*University of Illinois Chicago*

*\*\*California State University Fullerton*

*\*\*\*Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, IL, USA*

## Abstract

Elementary-aged children with a team of science, theater, and literacy educators performed the Chicago Global Water Dances in 2023. Global Water Dances (GWD) is an international initiative to raise awareness about water issues, promote sustainability, and inspire action to protect water resources through dance performed by a local body of Water. Through the Chicago Global Water Dances, children articulated several messages about the necessity of, and right to, clean water and highlighted the collective responsibility to protect this precious resource.

## Keywords

Water Dance, science, theatre, dramatization, youth climate advocacy

The call for this special issue began with the following lines from Carole Lindstrom's (2023) most recent picturebook, *Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior*: "Speak for the water. Sing for the water. Dance for the water."

This is exactly what elementary-aged children with a team of science, theater, and literacy educators and researchers did as part of the Chicago Global Water Dances. Global Water Dances (GWD) is an international initiative to raise awareness about water issues, promote sustainability, and inspire action to protect water resources through dance performed by a local body of Water. The initiative coordinates

a biennial multinational, community-oriented event that takes place at different water-related sites around the world, to raise awareness about water issues and to celebrate water through movement... [they] connect and support a global community of choreographers and dancers to inspire action and international collaboration for water issues through the universal language of dance (Global Water Dances, 2024).

Global Water Dances was a generative opportunity for our team's long-term collaboration, Project STAGE (Science Theater for Advancing Generative Engagement), a university-school partnership in urban, public elementary schools. The project aims to build on and advance children's imagination, creativity, meaning making, agency, and ingenuity by supporting children to compose and share embodied performances of various sizes and scales. These performances dramatize and enact science ideas, processes, phenomena, and intersections of ideas in the natural and social worlds. For example, in some of our publications, we have shown how fifth graders in Project STAGE classrooms act out water pollution (Kotler et al., 2024); how first graders work in small groups to act out the parts of an ant (Woodard, Kotler et al., 2023); and how whole classes of sixth graders have created and performed plays about climate change (Varelas et al., 2021) and pollution (Varelas et al., 2024).

A teaching artist, co-author Rodriguez, worked with three Project STAGE classes (two 5<sup>th</sup> grade and one 3<sup>rd</sup> grade), taught by co-authors Dougherty, Rosario, and Soto, to prepare for and perform their very own Chicago Global Water Dance while studying climate change and water issues facing the earth as a global community, and

specifically the Chicago community. Classes performed near a body of local water for their classmates, families, and community members (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Global Water Dance*

Global Water Dances are performed near water to emphasize the connection between the performance and water sustainability. The third-grade bilingual class and fifth grade classes performed their dances in local parks with small bodies of water to highlight the impact of local water issues, such as pollution, and the importance of clean water.

There are four sections in a Global Water Dance: (a) an opening ritual that is specific to each site in the world, (b) a local dance that is created and performed around a local water issue, (c) the global dance that includes performing the same choreographed dance globally (see Global Water Dances, 2021), and (d) a participatory dance that engages the audience in a single sequence of movements (Figure 2). You can watch a 10-minute video overviewing the entire Chicago Global Water Dances on

YouTube (Global Water Dances, 2023). Below, we elaborate on parts of this production before sharing ideas on how such activities can be a part of the curriculum.

| Section 1: Opening Ritual   | Section 2: Local Dance  | Section 3: Global Dance   | Section 4: Participatory Dance  |
|---|---|---|---|
|   |    |   |    |
| <p>The fifth graders' opening ritual featured both a narration and a dance. Four students took turns narrating the impacts of plastic waste on the local water supply and the contamination from lead pipes, emphasizing the importance of not giving up despite the severity of these issues. Their classmates performed a dance that depicted people walking through, drinking, and getting affected by polluted water, then creatively removing the pollution by imagining filters playfully trapping and pulling it away.</p> | <p>The bilingual Spanish-English third-grade class wrote a poem called "Ode to Water / Oda al Agua" about the pollution in Lake Michigan. The poem's themes inspired the students to create movements that represented the concepts and emotions conveyed in the poem.</p> <p>In this image, they position their hands in the shape of a heart while reciting the lines "When we help to clean the Earth, we are truly yours. / Si le ayudamos estar limpia, Somos suyos por seguro."</p> | <p>"We were doing the ocean, in and out, and the first time, we were in dehydration, that we didn't have no water. [See top image.] And then, one dot of rain came, and then we started dancing and doing all our moves. [See bottom image.]"</p> <p>In the top image the student walks slowly, bending forward, and struggling to complete his steps as his body does not have the water it needs. In the bottom image, joy, happiness, smiles, and effortless arm movements symbolize the power of water and the energy it provides the body.</p> | <p>At the end of their GWDs, the students guided the audience in a movement sequence that connected both the performers and the audience. This interactive dance invited the audience to move beyond their role as observers and become active participants in the performance.</p> <p>The top image shows fifth graders performing the participatory dance, and the bottom image shows the audience completing the same moves.</p> |

Figure 2: Images from Chicago Global Water Dances



The whole production, including the vignettes summarized here, show how these young children were literally stepping up to “[s]peak for the water. Sing for the water. Dance for the water.” Their dances exhibited their beautiful sense making of science ideas (e.g., polluting the water, working hard to clean it up by removing the deposited toxins, being exhausted when dehydrated, being joyful when water is available—even a “dot of rain”). The Chicago Global Water Dance choreographies and performances gave children opportunities to engage with science that matters for their community, advocate for collective action, and show audiences of families, school staff, and park goers their science knowledge outside of the classroom. In this way, it gave children a space to express their scientific understandings and how environmental issues are relevant in local and global contexts beyond traditional science assessments.

The children’s performances communicated essential ideas related to the significance of water problems faced globally and locally. In the fifth graders’ combined opening ritual and local dance, several powerful ideas were communicated:

#### *Idea 1*

We are water warriors...Not a lot of people are aware of what is happening to our water supply and how they are so polluted. There are also people who are aware but aren’t doing anything and are just leaving other people to fix it...Our water supply is being harmed and people just give up seeing how big the problem is and don't want to help fix it.

#### *Idea 2*

We used things [in our costumes] that we consume and throw away a lot. For example, plastic, cardboard and candy wrappers, and other recyclable materials. We used these materials to show how polluted our oceans are and to take a stand against creating so much waste. There are not just problems with our oceans, but also problems with our water supply in Chicago.

#### *Idea 3*

There are also problems with our drinking water. A lot of homes still have lead pipes, and people drink water from those pipes. Lead is especially dangerous for children,

and it's a devastating harm to last a lifetime. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention and other scientists agree that any amount of lead in the blood during childhood is harmful. Children are particularly vulnerable during the first six years of life, because their brains are in critical stages of development.

#### *Idea 4*

People need to step up and work with their communities to save our water supply. Even though the problems are too big, people need to learn not to give up when a problem becomes too difficult. If we don't start making changes and protect our planet, our future generations will be the ones who suffer.

The children articulated several messages about the necessity of, and right to, clean water and highlighted the collective responsibility to protect this precious resource. They addressed both the global issue of ocean pollution and the garbage accumulation in oceans, and the local issue of lead in water due to old lead water pipes in Chicago buildings including schools. They called out the harm that pollution produces, and they raised the alarm especially for children younger than them. They expressed their agency, claiming that they "are water warriors," creating a call to action. They acted in intentional ways by crafting sustainable costumes. They acknowledged the responsibility of current generations for the well-being of future generations.

As teachers look to create experiences like this in their classrooms, the Chicago Global Water Dances point to some useful possibilities:

- Move water studies beyond the classroom. Connect to local water issues and sites.
- Couple traditional water studies (e.g., observing water in class and studying water's properties), with explorations of water quality in the school's community and local histories with water including structural injustices often associated with particular communities (Kotler et al., 2024).

- Act, dance, and move for water. These can range from very small- to large-scale enactments. Our team has published a number of publications with examples of what this can look like.
- Read and write for water. Write arguments. Write poems. Make videos (Woodard, Diaz et al., 2023). Share writings with families, friends, and others.
- Explore Global Water Dances and consider how you can get involved.

Beyond the vibrant and joyful Global Water Dances we witnessed Chicago children perform, we are heartened, too, by their knowledge-building, identity-building, and developing agency. The world needs more scientists, more dancers, more poets, and more water warriors.

## References

- Chicago Global Water Dances. (2023, November 9). *Chicago, USA – Chicago Global Water Dances 2023*. [Video] YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psfbaDr2yY8>
- Global Water Dances. (2021, May 23). *Global Water Dances – 2023*. [Video] YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8E1hctpa7w>
- Global Water Dances. (2024). *Global water dances*. <https://globalwaterdances.org/>
- Kotler, R. T., Rosario, M., Varelas, M., Phillips, N. C., Tsachor, R., & Woodard, R. (2024). Latinx students embodying justice-centered science: Agency through imagining via the performing arts. *Science Education*, 108, 851-889.
- Varelas, M., Kotler, R., Natividad, H., Phillips, N., Rachelle Tsachor, Woodard, R., Gutierrez, M., Melchor, M., & Rosario, M. (2022). "Science theater makes you good at science": Affordances of embodied performances in urban elementary science classrooms. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 59, 493-528.
- Varelas, M., Diaz, A. R., Kotler, R., Woodard, R., Rock, R., Sabitt, Z., Phillips, N., Tsachor, R., Gutierrez, M., Natividad, H., Threewitt, D., & Ellison, J. (2024). Embodied, dramatizing performances in science class: Multimodal spaces and places of knowledge and identity construction. *Research in Science & Technological Education*, 42(1), 157-179. DOI: 10.1080/02635143.2024.2306307
- Woodard, R., Diaz, A. R., Phillips, N. C., Varelas, M., Kotler, R. T., Tsachor, R., Rock, R. M., & Melchor, M. A. (2023). "I. Am. a. Star.": Exploring moments of muchness in children's digital compositional play and embodied science learning. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 22(2), 163-176. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-08-2022-0101>
- Woodard, R., Kotler, R., Varelas, M., Tsachor, R., Phillips, N., & Guitierrez, M. (2023). Moving along with reading, writing, drawing, and talking: Dramatizing as a place for children's playful disciplinary learning. *Literacy Today*, 40(4), 28-30.

## Children's Literature

Lindstrom, C. (2023). *Autumn Peltier, Water*