

Climate Justice Now

Rebecca Woodard and Kristine M. Schutz

About the Column

This column supports the development of urgent pedagogies about climate justice learning in elementary and middle school ELA classrooms. In each issue, we explore practical ways elementary teachers can engage young people to read, compose, learn about, and act on climate justice. This column is the second part of a three-part series where we share picturebooks that can support learning with children about central themes of climate education.

Picturebooks that Support Learning About Relationality as Part of Climate Education

This column is the second in a three-part series focusing on exploring children's picturebooks that support learning about anchoring themes of climate education with elementary-aged children (see Figure 1). We conceptualize the second anchoring theme as *relationality*. Relationality emphasizes that we have a responsibility to live in relationship to and in care for both other human beings and the natural world. We see this idea enacted as humans appreciate, take responsibility for, and care for the Earth and our communities, as opposed to simply extracting what we need from them.

Our conceptualization of relationality is informed by the concept of kinship. Kinship

is used in the natural sciences to define relationships and the degree of relatedness between individuals who are genetically related, and anthropologists have long studied kinship in the form of our webs of social relations. These understandings of kinship have also been resisted and expanded, particularly by Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) feminist scholars who frame kinship as a way of living in connection and relation (Ramnath, 2022). For example, we love the way Cree-Métis children's author Julie Flett (2021) talks about kinship in her book *We All Play*. She writes,

When I was growing up, my dad shared a lot about our relationship to animals and to each other, including the land, plants, beetles, the earth, wind, water, and sky. Whether we are running and hopping through the grass or rolling along the street or pondering creatures in the creek, we are all connected, living in relationship and in care to one another, in kinship. In Cree, that is called Wâhkôhtowin.

Figure 1. Anchoring Themes to Support Climate Education in Elementary Classrooms

Anchoring Themes to Support Climate Education with Elementary-Aged Children
Interconnectivity involves understanding that our social and natural worlds are deeply intertwined, and everything matters/has a role.
Relationality means that we have a responsibility to live in relationship to and in care for both our fellow human beings and the natural world.
Action emphasized that we must work together to create change, solve complex problems, and impact systems.

Neither of us identify as Indigenous, and we cannot fully understand and forward Wâhkôhtowin or related Indigenous conceptualizations of kinship. However, like others interested in ecological sustainability, we believe that it is necessary for humans to live in relationship to and in care for both our fellow human beings and the natural world. With honor and gratitude to more expansive Indigenous and feminist conceptualizations, we hope to embody this spirit of the idea as we teach children about living in relationality to both our social *and* natural worlds.

Picturebooks that Foster Conversations about Relationality

In this column, we share picturebooks that support understandings of relationality. In particular, we want children to understand that humans must live in reciprocity to/relationship with nature, the importance of ecological *and* communal care, and what ecological stewardship is. As in our last column, we will share a brief description of how we use books to explore particular themes, and then offer an abbreviated list of selected books that we really love with summaries.

Living in Reciprocity

Reciprocity, or living in mutual benefit, is an ethic in many Indigenous cultures, including human–nature reciprocity. To live in relation to nature, humans must accept responsibility for how our actions impact its well-being and strive to honor and care for it. One way to think of it is that humans have different kinds of ecological relationships such as seeing the natural world from a utilitarian/extraction perspective (i.e., behaving under the assumption that the natural world is something that can be used), from a sustainability/mitigation perspective (i.e., increased awareness of impact and greater consideration for mitigation), or from a relational/reciprocity perspective (i.e., understanding humans in relation to land and striving for reciprocity) (Forest Schooled, 2020).

This relational/reciprocal perspective involves thinking about our relation to humans and all aspects of the natural world, including our obligation to the future. Some of our favorite books on reciprocity share Indigenous perspectives on the topic, including *Be a Good Ancestor* by Leona Prince, Gabrielle Prince, and Carla Joseph (2022); *The First Blade of Sweetgrass* by Suzanne Greenlaw, Gabriel Frey, and Nancy Baker (2021); *Stand Like a Cedar* by Nicola Campbell and Carrielynn Victor (2021); and *All Around Us* by Xelena González and Adriana M. Garcia (2017).

While not as explicitly focused on reciprocity, there are many books about humans' particular relationships with and obligations to plants (e.g., *Tree Full of Wonder* by Anna Smithers & Martyna Nejman [2021]), animals (e.g., *Begin with a Bee* by Liza Ketchum, Jacqueline Briggs Martin, Phyllis Root, & Claudia McGehee [2021]), water (e.g., *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom & Michaela Goade [2020]), and the air (e.g., *Every Breath We Take: A Book About Air* by Maya Ajmera & Dominique Browning [2016]; *Iqbal and His Ingenious Idea: How a Science Project Helps One Family and the Planet* by Elizabeth Suneby & Rebecca Green [2018]). These books can also encourage an understanding of the importance of living in relation with the earth.

Ecological and Communal Care

Another thematic focus that supports understanding relationality is highlighting intersections of ecological and communal care. With young children, we love exploring books about intergenerational/natural relationships, like *Birdsong* by Julie Flett (2019), *Grandpa's Garden* by Stella Fry and Sheila Moxley (2012), and *Where Wonder Grows* by Xelena González and Adriana M. Garcia (2022).

Many picturebooks with an environmental focus highlight intergenerational connections among neighbors, guided by a strong sense of communal care for each other and for the places where we live. There are a number of books about community gardening on this topic such as

Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood by Tony Hillery and Jessie Hartland (2020), *Jayden's Impossible Garden* by Mélina Mangal and Ken Daley (2021), *Zora's Zucchini* by Katherine Pryor and Anna Raff (2017), and *Our School Garden* by Rick Swann and Christy Hale (2018).

Climate activists have long suggested that intergenerational efforts are necessary to both prevent and respond to the climate crisis. As climate disasters become more common, neighbors engaging in mutual aid—exchanging resources and services for mutual benefit—will become increasingly important. Two books we like about this topic are *The Coquíes Still Sing: A Story of Home, Hope, and Rebuilding* by Karina Nicole González and Krystal Quiles (2022) and *A Place Where Hurricanes Happens* by Renée Watson and Shadra Strickland (2014).

Stewardship

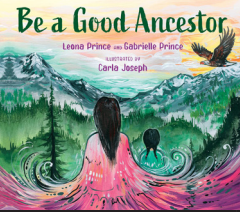
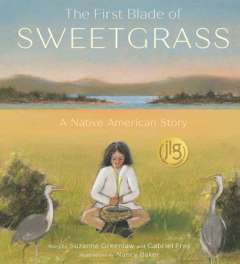
Stewardship is a concept used to describe conserving natural resources over long periods of time; it is another theme that can be used to understand relationality. Many environmentalists believe Indigenous stewardship, which has gone on for thousands of years and includes a variety of methods (e.g., prescribed burning of grasslands; subsistence-focused

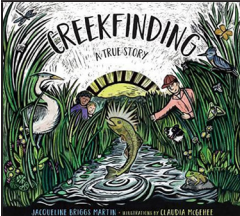
agriculture), provides models of how humans can better live in relation with the land. A great picturebook on this topic is *Who Needs a Forest Fire?* by Paula Henson, Sue Todd, and Emily Underwood (2021).

Other books about stewardship focus on topics such as ecological restoration (e.g., *Creekfinding: A True Story* by Jacqueline Briggs Martin & Claudia McGehee [2017]), sustainable gardening/farming/harvesting (e.g., *Moth and Wasp, Soil & Ocean: Remembering Chinese Scientist Pu Zhelong's Work for Sustainable Farming* by Sigrid Schmalzer & Melanie Linden Chan [2020]; *Secrets of the Mutis Honey Hunters* by Johanna Ernawati, Ani Adiwana Nawir, Yeni F. Nomeni, Budy Kristanty, Deanna Ramsay, Larasputri Setyawati, & Erna Yulia Rahmah [2017]), and land advocacy (e.g., *Ajijaak-Crane* by Cecilia LaPointe, Dolly Peltier, & Margaret Noodin [2018]).

Getting Started: Summaries of Selected Picturebooks that Foster Discussions of Relationality

Just as we did in the first column of this series, we highlight in the boxed text some of the titles we have discussed in the previous section. Be sure to read the sections above for even more recommendations.

Title/Cover	Author & Illustrator	Summary
	Leona Prince (author), Gabrielle Prince (author), and Carla Joseph (illustrator)	Be a Good Ancestor This gorgeous picturebook helps readers understand their responsibility to the Earth and future generations. The lyrical words and detailed illustrations introduce Indigenous perspectives on caring for water, land, and future generations and welcomes conversation about the idea of reciprocity.
	Suzanne Greenlaw (author), Gabriel Frey (author), and Nancy Baker (illustrator)	The First Blade of Sweetgrass Musquon, a young Wabanaki girl, acquires the patience, knowledge, and respect for the land of her ancestors as she harvests sweetgrass for basket making for the first time with her grandmother. Greenlaw (Houton Band of Maliseet), Frey (Passamaquoddy), and Baker evoke tranquility and peace in this beautiful picturebook as they speak to our reciprocal relationship with the land and the importance of conservation.

	Anna Smithers (author) and Martyna Nejman (illustrator)	<i>Tree Full of Wonder</i> This rhyming book helps readers understand the many important roles that trees play in our world—from protecting the land in storms to bearing fruit in the summer. It is a great text to talk about reciprocity as it highlights the bond between people and trees, and it shows young readers the importance of slowing down to notice and honor the magnificence of trees. To us, this book feels like everything we wish <i>The Giving Tree</i> was!
	Liza Ketchum (author), Jacqueline Briggs Martin (author), Phyllis Root (author), and Claudia McGehee (illustrator)	<i>Begin with a Bee</i> Bees are fascinating creatures that can serve as an entry point to talking about issues of climate with children. This informational picturebook tells the story of the life cycle of a queen bee and helps us to understand the many contributions bees make to our world and how integral they are to the ecosystem. It is a wonderful text for talking about reciprocity as it also highlights humans' responsibility to the natural world as well.
	Julie Flett (author & illustrator)	<i>Birdsong</i> Humans' connection to the land is visible on multiple levels in Flett's gorgeous picturebook where the landscapes speak to us just as much as the storyline. The richness of intergenerational friendship between Katherena and her artist neighbor, Agnes, and their relationship with the land and seasons, makes this picturebook perfect for discussing communal care and the intersection of social and natural relationships. It also serves as a beautiful model for translanguaging as Flett includes Cree words in the text, as well as a glossary to support readers.
	Tony Hillery (author) and Jessie Hartland (illustrator)	<i>Harlem Grown</i> This beautifully told and illustrated picturebook tells the story of how Tony Hillery engaged students at their local elementary school to transform a vacant lot into a local garden and how that garden has continued to thrive. Add this text to your collection of community garden books, many of which are highlighted in this column, to support children in talking about how to engage in communal care.
	Karina Nicole González (author) and Krystal Quiles (illustrator)	<i>The Coquíes Still Sing: A Story of Home, Hope, and Rebuilding</i> Luna, a young girl in Puerto Rico, loves her mango tree and listening to the peaceful sound of the coquí frogs every night. However, when Hurricane María destroys her town, it takes the sweet sounds of the coquíes with it. A beautiful story of communal care as Luna, her family, and her community respond to the impact of extreme weather and climate change.
	Paula Henson (author), Sue Todd (illustrator), and Emily Underwood (illustrator)	<i>Who Needs a Forest Fire?</i> This captivating book teaches us about stewardship of the land by way of controlled burning practices historically used by Indigenous people. It helps young people understand how fire can be used to support the land instead of destroying it, and it emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between humans, trees, and the broader natural world.
	Jacqueline Briggs Martin (author) and Claudia McGehee (illustrator)	<i>Creekfinding: A True Story</i> Caldecott award-winning author Jacqueline Briggs Martin teams with illustrator Claudia McGehee to tell the inspiring story of how one man worked with the land to bring back a creek that had been buried decades ago by a farmer wanting more land. This fact-filled story shows how a creek is not just a creek but, rather, every living and non-living thing that inhabits it. It is a beautiful story of stewardship of the land and ecological restoration!

Tips for Leading Interactive Read-Alouds

In our last column, we suggested that picture-books are powerful to use across disciplines and ages, and that they can be read in small sections and multiple times. Now, we want to highlight some tips for leading interactive read-alouds.

Remember WHY We Read

Most importantly, teachers need to remember that when people read texts, we are always involved in a process of constructing understandings. Even when we design interactive read-alouds focused on supporting children in using particular reading strategies and skills, we must not lose sight of the big ideas in the text. What a shame it would be to focus so intently on making inferences while reading *Be a Good Ancestor* by Leona Prince, Gabrielle Prince, and Carla Joseph (2022) that we fail to take time to engage in conversation about how our actions in the social and natural worlds impact future generations. This is not to say that we cannot focus on supporting strategic reading through the interactive read-aloud, but we must not lose sight of the ultimate goal of reading any text.

Introduce the Text and Set a Purpose for Reading

Have you ever started watching a movie without any understanding of what it might be about? If you have, you know that it takes a considerable amount of time to get into the movie because you are expending so much energy trying to figure out what is going on. It is so much easier when someone has shared a synopsis (without spoiling the ending, of course!) or you have watched the trailer. We can support children's meaning-making by providing quick but intentional text introductions that (1) prime background knowledge to support conceptual understandings, (2) frame the text through a quick overview and

introduction to ideas and plot elements that will support children, and (3) establish a purpose for reading that is related to the ideas in the text. For example, instead of saying, "As we read, we'll practice drawing conclusions," try, "As we read, let's think about what the author is telling us about our responsibility to the land and natural world around us."

Plan for Interactions Focused on the Ideas in the Text

Edtech responded quickly to many of the challenges we faced in quickly shifting to remote teaching and learning in 2020, and suddenly we found ourselves with access to a plethora of videos of read-alouds. While helpful at the time, we worry that showing these videos to children do not allow for the kind of intentional interactions that teachers plan for and facilitate *while* reading texts in their learning communities. Because talk and interaction are what build understanding, teachers must be intentional about planning for moments of talk that build throughout an interactive read-aloud—from turn-and-talks where we listen in a feature the thinking of multiple students to whole class discussions where we support children in connecting their ideas to others to build a collective understanding.

Ask "Curious" Questions that Relate to the Theme

Playing a game of "guess how the teacher wants me to respond" is not enjoyable for children and fails to use the interactive read-aloud as a rich context for thinking and reasoning as a collective. Yet, when we pose questions of which we are genuinely curious, we find ourselves quickly becoming part of the conversation with children, thinking together as opposed to evaluating their responses and closing opportunities for talk. "Curious" questions like "How do you see this idea of relationality in this particular moment or text?" and "Does this remind you of

anything from your own life or culture?” provide us with the opportunity to learn *with* children, which can also support our own developing understandings about anchoring themes in climate education.

Synthesize Across Texts

New (to us) concepts like relationality can be difficult to grasp when first introduced. Interactive read-alouds provide a space in which we can expand our understandings as we explore and discuss multiple texts that address the same anchoring theme. For example, after reading a text set focused on relationality, we might ask students to think about how the texts collectively shift our thinking from one in which we *use* the land to one in which we live *with* the land. We could imagine extending this by working with texts, media, and even policies that adopt these different orientations and speaking back to them.

Conclusion

We believe that cultivating understandings of relationality—the important idea that humans must live in relationship to and in care for fellow humans *and* the natural world—has an important role in climate education with children. Using picturebooks, like those we have featured in this column, to plan for and facilitate rich, interactive read-alouds is one relatively simple way to launch your exploration of climate justice with children.

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