

Climate Justice Now

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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 will explore practical ways elementary teachers can engage young people to read, compose, learn about, and act on climate justice. The emphasis in this first issue, “Layering Texts About the Urgent Topic of Water Justice” will be on the importance of text selection, and layering a variety of multimodal and interdisciplinary texts to support meaningful and inquiry-oriented learning.

Layering Texts About the Urgent Topic of Water Justice

We live in a period where there's no time for "urgent-free pedagogy." Our instructional pursuits must be honest, bold, raw, unapologetic, and responsive to the social times. (Muhammad, 2020, p. 54)

The most recent report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021) revealed that the Earth is warming more rapidly than scientists previously anticipated, and irreversible changes to our planet have already started to occur. Now, more than ever, there is a moral imperative that educators incorporate a focus on climate justice in our work in schools with youth as they have proven to be compelling advocates for raising public awareness and igniting action toward climate justice. This cannot be only the domain of science teachers:

Addressing climate change demands the involvement of English language arts teachers. . . . Students need to explore images, texts, ideas, perspectives, and issues; need to empathize with victims of climate change;

need to imagine consequences and possibilities, and take action individually, locally, and nationally. They need our guidance in learning how to read and communicate about these vital and troubling issues. (National Council of Teachers of English, 2019)

Beyond addressing climate change in ELA classrooms, though, we must engage in climate justice work that acknowledges the adverse effects of global warming are not felt equitably among people. Thus, considerations of climate change must include attention to histories of racism, sexism, and classism. Building on a column we recently wrote about engaging in project-based learning about environmental sustainability in elementary classrooms, we are excited to extend our exploration on this topic through our new column focus: “Climate Justice Now.” In each issue, we will explore practical ways elementary teachers can engage young people to develop critical literacies (Beach et al., 2020) as they read, compose, learn about, and act on the issue of climate justice.

The emphasis in this first issue, “Layering Texts About the Urgent Topic of Water Justice” will be on the importance of text selection, and layering a variety of multimodal and interdisciplinary texts to explore meaningful learning about urgent topics. While we situate our examples in work we have done with preservice

teachers in an elementary education program, there are a variety of practical applications for teachers in K-8 classrooms.

The Importance of Text Selection

In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, our colleague, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020), discussed the importance of moving beyond textbooks to texts that enable educators to teach culturally and historically responsive curriculum, noting that “textbooks are not typically written to help with expanded goals for learning. We have to ask what texts can help our students accomplish” (p. 145).

We are particularly inspired by the first question she recommends for teachers to ask as we consider texts to use in our classrooms: “What is worthwhile for learning in my content area?” (p. 145). We believe that worthwhile learning in schools—and beyond—must involve children reading “meaningful texts that connect to their own lives” (Elish-Piper et al., 2014, p. 566) and to contemporary “social times” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 54). While we model how to layer texts with the urgent topic of climate change, there are a multitude of urgent topics that are worthwhile to pursue in our curriculum and instruction, which can be supported by layering or linking texts in our pedagogical designs.

Layering Texts

The concepts of *layering texts* (Muhammad, 2020) and creating *linked text sets* (Elish-Piper et al., 2014) have been useful to us as we select texts to use with children as part of urgent pedagogies. Muhammad (2020) describes how

educators “layer texts” when they teach and learn from multiple powerful and multimodal texts. These texts are print and non-print and are intellectually compelling. Such texts can support the mandated curriculum, basal

reader, or textbook. . . . Layered texts should help students understand the local, national, and global communities and incite social critique. (p. 146)

Elish-Piper et al. (2014) describe a similar concept of linked text sets, which can include “a range of print and media, from music lyrics and movie clips to poetry, short stories, picture books, informational texts, adolescent literature, and canonical texts” (p. 567). They offer a pedagogical framework of “engaging, exploring and expanding” linked text sets in classrooms to build on students’ cultures and interests while also providing scaffolded opportunities to examine complex texts. We utilize their suggestion to “organize texts around essential questions that provoke discussions of ideas relevant to adolescents [or children]” (p. 567) as a guiding principle in our own layering of texts. We elaborate on that principle next, and then describe four additional principles that may support educators in layering texts as well. We weave an example from our own work with pre-service elementary educators throughout.

Principle 1: Begin with an Essential Question About an Urgent Topic

As we have already noted, essential questions must matter to children’s lives and be responsive to social times. They should be “intentionally provocative because we expect students to think deeply as they read texts with an inquiry stance to . . . understand challenging issues and make discoveries about the human condition and themselves” (Elish-Piper et al., 2014, p. 567). Ideally, these questions feel consequential to children (Everett, 2018) and invite opportunities for authentic inquiry (Woodard & Schutz, 2021) and social action (Woodard, 2021). One example of an essential question on climate justice that we have used in our work with preservice teachers is *Why is it important to protect water, and how can water be protected?*

Principle 2: Center a Touchstone Text and Children's Literature

The development of our essential question was directly inspired by the picture book *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom (author) and Michaela Goade (illustrator) (2020). This beautiful and award-winning book is inspired by indigenous-led movements across the country to protect water (see Figure 1). This book became a *touchstone text* in our inquiry—one that we used to launch our unit and returned to multiple times as we explored the essential question. Particularly if you are designing a longer/extended inquiry, touchstone texts can be a foundational component of your curriculum design.

Once we had a touchstone text, we knew we wanted to support book clubs using novels and chapter books appropriate for 3rd- through 6th-grade children which had connections to water. While it was easy to locate informational texts about this topic, it was a bit more difficult to find children's literature—including picture books, chapter books, and young adult literature—that connected to these themes. Here are some of our favorite online sites to locate

high-quality children's literature; these are ones that we turned to as we began to identify children's literature related to our essential question:

- *Penn GSE Best Books for Young Readers* lists for each year: <https://www.gse.upenn.edu/news/educators-playbook/best-books-young-readers-2020>
- *American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL)*: <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>
- *American Library Association Notable Children's Books* for each year: <https://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb>
- *The Conscious Kid* website and Instagram: <https://www.theconsciouskid.org>
- *Baby Librarians* Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/babylibrarians/?hl=en>

We compiled multiple novels and graphic informational texts with connections to water and have been collecting more options over time as we come across them (see Figure 2). As we launched our water study, each preservice teacher opted into a book club of their choice, exploring one of these topically connected texts.

Principle 3: Consider a Large Variety of Multimodal and Multidisciplinary Texts

Next, we were intentional in our efforts to look beyond children's literature to consider a large variety of multimodal texts, including audio (e.g., podcasts, songs), video (e.g., news clips, documentaries), informational texts, poetry, maps, images (e.g., photographs, art, infographics), and primary source documents. At a professional development session we attended, Cheney Munson from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project shared *The Climascope Project*, a website with free resources for teachers and children to support a "climate classroom" (<https://theclimascopeproject.org>). We love the ways this website is action-oriented: it first prompts children to consider

Figure 1. Our Touchstone Text in the Water Study Layered Text Set: *We Are Water Protectors*

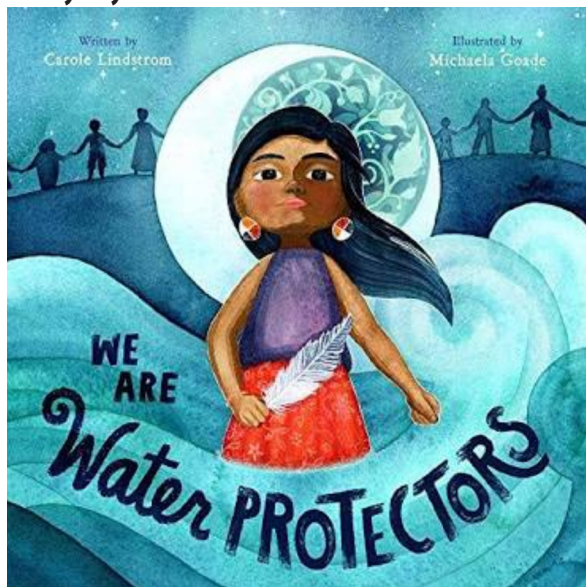
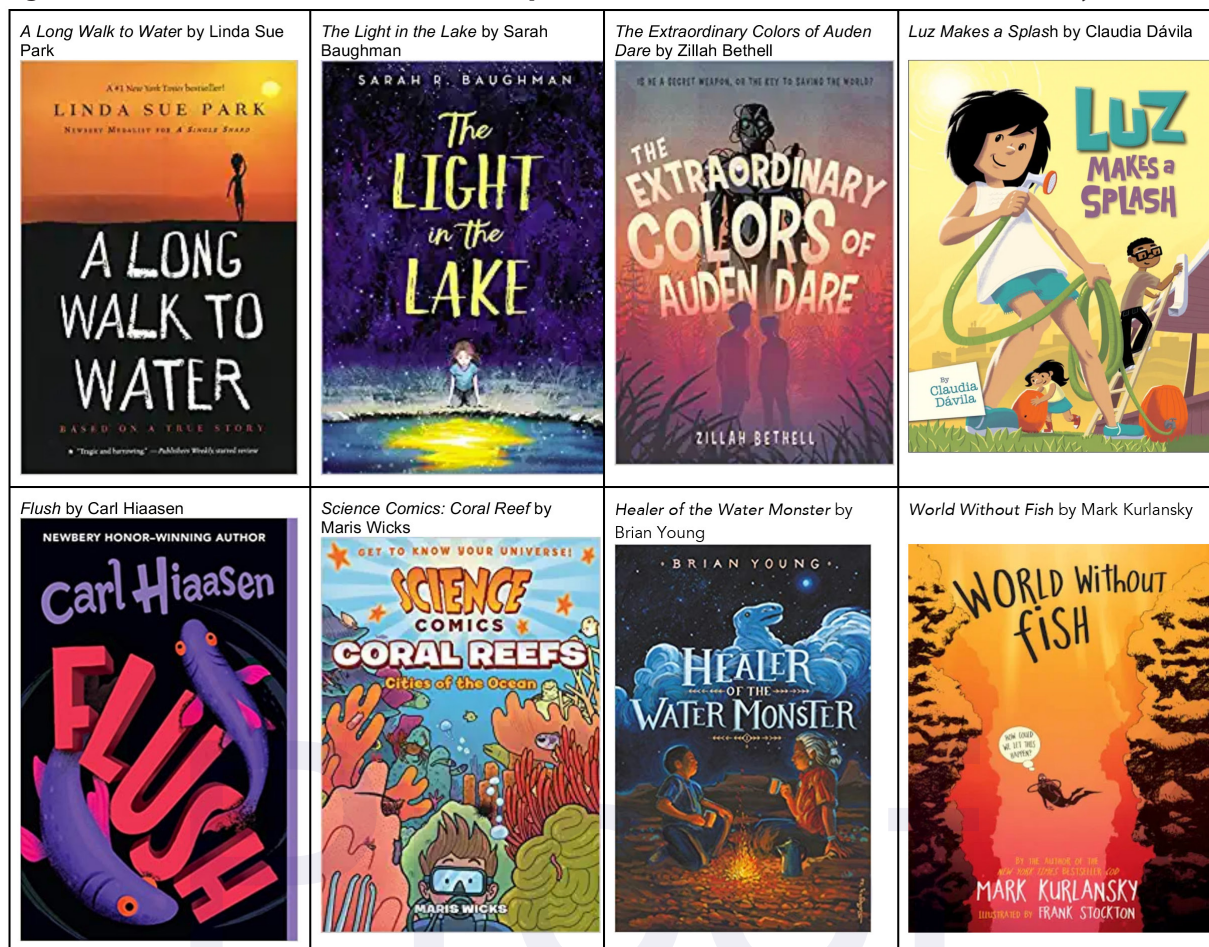


Figure 2. Children's Literature We Used to Explore Our Essential Question in the Water Study Unit



what they want to *do* (“get smarter” or “make something” or “take action”). If children choose “get smarter,” they have a variety of options for topics to explore (e.g., “extreme weather” or “disease” or “fashion”). Once they pick a topic, texts are organized as follows: “read,” “watch,” “look,” “learn,” “listen,” “books,” “act,” “crunch the numbers,” “history,” and “research.” This is such a great way to organize multimodal texts for children and helps us—as teachers—to consider a wide variety of text types that can support inquiry into an essential question. Notably, it includes multidisciplinary texts that draw from science, history, math, literature, art, and music.

We decided to organize multiple themes related to our essential question to support our students in pursuit of their own interests (Figure 3). They could self-select into one of these

topical “interest groups” to collaboratively engage with a variety of layered texts about the topic and ultimately teach their classmates more about it.

To begin the inquiry, we created a variety of layered texts as a springboard for each interest group, and later we asked the preservice teachers to add their own texts to their text set. Figure 4 is an example for the interest group Indigenous Cultures & Water Protection.

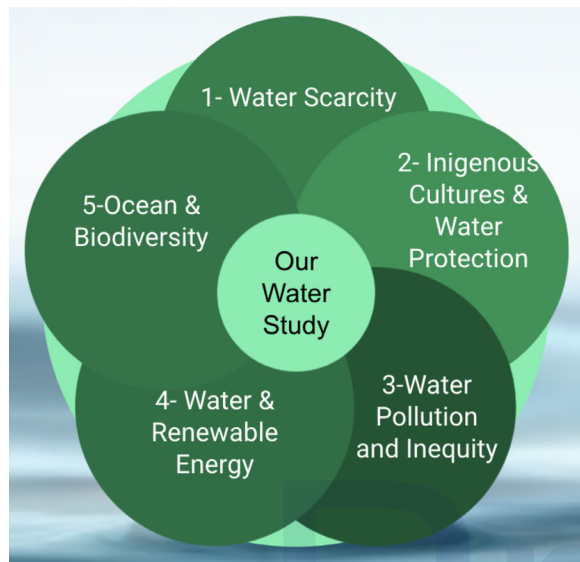
Principle 4: Make Local Connections

As we explore complex multidisciplinary topics like climate justice, we have noted the power and potential of intentionally selecting some texts with local connections to the places where our students live. For example, as we explored water justice, we looked for texts with connections to

our local context, Chicago. Examples of texts with local connections included articles describing the indigenous water protectors of the Great Lakes, a lack of access to clean water in some Chicago schools, and how some Illinois schools

are supporting renewable energy efforts. Students had choices about which topics and text they explored in-depth across the unit, and some students were particularly motivated to read about what water justice looks like close to home. As we explored these topics, we even learned about the environmental justice advocacy efforts of some of our students in their communities!


Figure 3. Topics for Self-Selected Interest Groups



Principle 5: Invite Student to Contribute to the Selection of Texts

Finally, it is important for students to contribute to layering texts as they explore essential questions. Preservice teachers in our course selected a number of texts to pursue in their inquiry that we intend to add to our layered text sets in future iterations of the course (see Figure 4). These texts included songs, works of art, TED talks, and photographs. When students engage in the layering process, they expanded their own ideas about what “counts” as texts, selecting

Figure 4. Teacher and Student-Selected Layered Texts for the Interest Group Focused on Indigenous Cultures & Water Protection

Interest Group Topic: Indigenous Cultures & Water Protection	
Teacher-Selected Layered Texts	Student-Selected Layered Texts
<p><i>Children’s literature:</i> <i>The Water Walker</i> by Joanne Robertson</p> <p><i>Nonfiction article:</i> “Water More Valuable than Gold” by www.kairoscanada.org</p> <p><i>Documentary:</i> <i>Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock</i> by/featuring Josh Fox, James Spione, Myron Dewey, Floris White Bull, Doug Good Feather, and the Bold Alliance</p> <p><i>Nonfiction article/biography:</i> “We Are All of Water’: Meet Josephine Mandamin, Water Walker” by Carolyn Pogue</p> <p><i>Nonfiction article:</i> “Native American Protests Help Stall North Dakota Pipeline Construction” by the <i>Los Angeles Times</i>, adapted by Newsela staff</p> <p><i>Audio clip:</i> “Ojibwe Elder Sharon Day and the Mother Earth Water Walkers,” produced by Dixie Treichel</p>	<p><i>Artwork:</i> “Untitled” by PH Walsh (appeared in “To Kill the Black Snake,” <i>Inlander</i>)</p>  <p><i>Children’s literature:</i> <i>Nibi’s Water Song</i> by Sunshine Tenasco</p> <p><i>Opinion column:</i> “The Warm Springs Reservation Water Crisis Is Reminiscent of Flint, Michigan” by Levi Rickert, <i>Native News Online</i></p> <p><i>Music video:</i> “Sing the Water Song” by Sing the Water Song</p> <p><i>Article:</i> “Why Is Water So Sacred to Native Americans” by Rosalyn R. LaPier, <i>Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place, and Community</i></p> <p><i>Website:</i> <i>Assembly of First Nations: Honouring Water</i></p> <p><i>TED/Women Talk:</i> “Why Lakes and Rivers Should Have the Same Rights as Humans” by Kelsey Leonard</p> <p><i>TikTok song:</i> “This Land Is Native Land,” a rewrite of “This Land Is My Land” by kat_jefferson</p> <p><i>Website:</i> “Treaties Still Matter, Dakota Access Pipeline” website by <i>Native Knowledge 360°</i></p> <p><i>Song:</i> “Black Snakes” by Prolific The Rapper x A Tribe Called Red</p> <p><i>Nonfiction article:</i> “One Tribe’s Fight to Protect the Great Lakes” by Jessica A. Knoblauch</p>

texts that are local to them—both in the sense of physical location (in our case, Chicago) and in terms of the textual spaces where they situate themselves (e.g., social media like TikTok and Instagram, places like art museums and parks, other spaces of youth culture).

Conclusion

We agree with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) when she says “there’s no time for ‘urgent free’ pedagogy” (p. 54). Designing instruction that empowers young people to be informed activists for climate justice must be seen as urgent work by educators. As part of this work, principled text layering has the potential to both increase engagement and access to complex concepts and texts. And although the topics related to climate justice are undoubtedly heavy and troubling, there is still joy to be found. As teacher educators, the process of designing a unit for our preservice teachers that focused on the essential question about water justice was joyful, and our preservice teachers’ engagement levels were high. After the course, many of them reflected that the water study was an informative, energizing, and meaningful inquiry. We attribute much of this to coupling the inquiry’s consequential projects and activities with principled text selection. We hope that this column inspires some readers to consider incorporating more urgent pedagogies, like a focus on climate justice, in your classrooms, and that it provides helpful scaffolds for all of us to think about more intentionally layering texts in our pedagogical designs.

More to Explore

For more water justice texts, check out The Climascope Project texts (grades 3-5 text sets for “clean water” (https://padlet.com/theclimascope/Water_35), “coral reefs” (https://padlet.com/theclimascope/CoralReefs_35), and “energy” (https://padlet.com/theclimascope/Energy_35).

Another helpful resource is Amanda Hartman’s Water Protectors Padlet (<https://padlet.com/amandahartman/waterprotectors>).

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"Gray and Red Vessel with Spiral," Felted fibers



"Spring Ferns," Felted fibers