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Story as Seed: A Conceptual Framework for Using Picturebooks to Teach Climate Justice with Young Children

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ABSTRACT

In a time of ecological crisis and educational constraint, this conceptual article reimagines early childhood climate education as a site of relational, justice-centered learning, led through story, grounded in place, and co-constructed with children. Drawing on critical literacy, justice-oriented place-based education, this article explores how picturebooks serve as anchors to support early climate justice learning grounded in ecological belonging, civic responsibility, and relational care. We present four thematic lenses - *reciprocity and kinship*, *ecological identity and observation*, s*ystems thinking and collective action*, and *environmental grief and repair* - as invitations and practical tools for educators. We share text selections and text analyses of eight picturebooks, classroom strategies, and inquiry prompts that position stories as a literacy practice and an ecological engagement. Applying frameworks to include land, place, and more-than-human relationships, we argue that justice in children's literature must include relational responsibility. This article offers readers an approach to climate justice education that begins with wonder, centers relationships, and affirms young children as participants in imagining and enacting more just and sustainable worlds.

Keywords: children's literature, environmental education, early childhood, conceptual framework, environmental justice

In a time of ecological crisis, cultural division, and escalating pressure to make classrooms apolitical, early childhood educators are asking urgent and hopeful questions: How can we follow children's questions about the world? How can we nurture their sense of wonder, justice, and responsibility? And how do we create learning spaces where all children see themselves as valued members of a shared and sustainable world? This article explores questions such as these through stories. We explore the notion of stories as inquiry, as pedagogy, and as acts of justice, arguing that engaging young learners with stories, particularly those in picturebooks[1], can nurture curiosity, empathy, and a sense of agency in ways that honor children's questions and affirm their place in our shared world.

Children's picture books, when explored and shared with intention, become invitations to wonder, grief, reciprocity, and participation. Through story, young children encounter more-than-human worlds, complex relationships, and possibilities for collective care. Stories help children notice their surroundings, name their questions, and imagine futures shaped by justice (Bishop, 1990). Stories also offer opportunities to be entry points for children's lived stories

[1] We use the compound form *picturebook* (following Sipe, 2002) to underscore the interdependent relationship between words and images as a unified art form, rather than *picture book*, which suggest simply a book that contains pictures.

in and with the environment and more-than-human world and in building understanding of how the world works (Freire, 1970). Increasingly, early childhood educators anchor their teaching in literature to support conversations about climate change and environmental care that are rooted in hope, belonging, and relationship (Tagg & Jafry, 2018; Warden, 2022; Fletcher & Holyoke, 2025a).

This article examines how picturebooks support early climate justice learning in developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and emotionally resonant ways. When storytelling is paired with observation, inquiry, and action, children see themselves as participants rather than passive observers in shared worlds, capable of noticing, caring, and acting with others (Freire, 1970; Lysaker, 2018). Children's literature becomes a site of civic learning and ecological attunement, where children engage ethically and imaginatively with people, place, and planet.

In this conceptual paper, we situate our work through a relational and justice-oriented perspective. Theories that inform our work include justice-focused place-based education (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) and frameworks of diverse children's literature, including an expanded application of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1992). We consider how climate storytelling helps young children locate themselves within a story and in place. We extend frameworks of picturebooks focused on diverse representation (i.e., Bishop, 1990) to include representations of land, more-than-human life, and relational belonging, arguing that justice in children's literature must account not only for who is seen but for what relationships are made visible and valued. Further, we approach this through a lens of critical literacy in recognizing how children engage print and explore and read the world around them (Freire, 1970).

This conceptual, practice-based article presents four thematic lenses, *reciprocity and kinship*, *ecological identity and observation*, s*ystems thinking and collective action*, and *environmental grief and repair*, through which educators approach climate justice learning with young children. Across each theme, we share examples from picturebooks, paired with classroom strategies and inquiry questions. Our aim is to offer a framework for integrating story, care, and justice into everyday teaching. In doing so, we invite early childhood educators to see children as future stewards and as present participants in imagining and enacting more just and sustainable worlds.

Literacy and Story as Foundations for Climate Justice Learning

Literacy learning and storytelling are powerful foundations for interdisciplinary, justice-oriented climate education in early childhood (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2025b). Storytelling as a vehicle for interdisciplinary learning is grounded in how young children make sense of their worlds and the world at large, as well as in how they play, wonder, and form relationships. Picturebooks about animals, weather, seasons, and communities often echo the questions children are asking, offering purposeful entry points into complex and abstract ideas. When educators connect stories to nature and empathy, they invite children into real and imagined worlds to make sense of concepts like shared responsibility.

Picturebooks play a pivotal role in bridging children's lived experiences with environmental learning. As one nature-based preschool teacher shared, "picturebooks are chosen to support what students are noticing and discovering in the outdoors…when children can relate to the characters in the story, they are more likely to engage in conversations about their own experiences." Educators foster agency and empowerment by anchoring literacy learning in what children are already observing. Picturebooks become sources of knowledge and invitations to take action, bridging children's understanding of the natural world with civic and ecological responsibility.

Multicultural and culturally responsive stories further deepen this work by affirming children's identities and expanding their views of environmental appreciation, gratitude, and reciprocity. When young learners see environmental stewards and activists in stories who look, sound, and live like them, they are offered mirrors (Bishop, 1992). These mirrors foster self-affirmation and ensure children see themselves as part of communal stories and solutions (Holyoke & Fletcher, 2024). Stories reflecting cultural relationships with land, plants, water, and climate broaden children's imaginations around care, repair, and sustainability. Diverse picturebooks around environmentalism amplify a local-global approach to environmental understanding.

When children read and hear stories featuring characters from diverse racial, cultural, and geographic backgrounds who navigate climate challenges, they develop empathy and a critical awareness that climate change is both a local and global concern. These stories surface multiple solutions and ways of knowing, nurturing critique, possibility, and action. Culturally relevant books also challenge the dominance of white protagonists and colonial perspectives in traditional environmental literature, opening up space for more inclusive, relational, and justice-centered environmental engagement (Johnson, 2020). Our previous work (Holyoke & Fletcher, 2024) presents a framework using Bishop's model to help educators select a wide range of multicultural picturebooks that center on environmental justice, community care, and sustainable futures. Building on that foundation, the current paper expands to present a framework that encompasses both ecological and civic dimensions of representation, highlighting not only who is represented in environmental stories but also how land, place, and more-than-human relationships are made visible, valued, and taught in early childhood classrooms.

Conceptual Framework: Story, Place, and Justice-With Children Story as Relational and Civic Practice

In early childhood classrooms, stories serve as literacy tools and invitations into meaning-making and identity. Storytelling offers young learners an emotionally resonant way to engage with complex ideas, including environmental change, systems of power, and collective care. Story supports comprehension and language development, while also fostering perspective-taking and civic awareness (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Vascellaro & Genishi, 1994). Freire (1970) reminds us that literacy is a form of power in that reading the word and the world are central to justice.

When climate education is grounded in stories, children are invited to notice, feel, and respond. Stories foster ecological thinking in that texts simultaneously present facts about weather or pollution, and nurture wonder, emotional literacy, and relational responsibility (Walan & Enochsson, 2019; Lysaker, 2018). In our work with educators, we have seen how picturebooks become sites of observation, connection, and inquiry, where readers of all ages ask critical questions about care, fairness, and belonging in the natural world (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2025; Holyoke & Fletcher, in press). Literature becomes a practice of civic participation and ecological attunement, preparing children not only to understand systems but also to live well within them.

Rethinking Representation: Extending Toward Relational Justice

When considering the teaching and introduction of climate justice in early childhood education, we require frameworks that support diverse perspectives, experiences, and understandings. One way to approach this is to build upon and expand the tremendous and critically important frameworks of diverse representation in children's literature that reflect diverse racial and cultural identities in affirming and inclusive narratives, to also include a more relational and ecological understanding of justice. While previous models, such as Bishop's (1992) exploration of multicultural children's literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, have offered powerful tools for affirming identity and inclusion in children's literature, they are not designed to explore the specific entanglements of people, place, and more-than-human life central to climate justice. This manuscript builds upon frameworks such as these to develop a framework for children's literature grounded in interdisciplinary theory, centered on ecological interdependence, culturally and community-rooted care, and civic responsibility.

This approach draws from several intersecting frameworks. Critical place-based education (Tuck et al., 2014) understands place not only as a locale and setting, but as politically and relationally charged, calling educators to consider histories of land, power, and belonging. Common worlding (Taylor & Giugni, 2012) invites young children into inquiry alongside animals, plants, weather, and materials as entangled participants. Culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) remind us to honor the home languages, stories, and knowledges children carry with them. Finally, critical literacy provides an understanding of how readers explore texts through lenses of power and positioning (Jones, 2012). Together, these perspectives position early childhood learners as both shaped by and shaping the ecologies they inhabit.

Drawing on a larger content analysis of over 200 environmental picturebooks (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2024), including a focused study of 76 texts addressing water (Holyoke et al., in progress), we present a conceptual framework for

justice-oriented climate storytelling in early childhood. This framework is organized around four overlapping themes: *reciprocity and relational belonging*, *systems thinking and collective action*, *ecological identity and observation*, and *environmental grief and repair.* Each theme provides an invitation for practice grounded in justice and care.

We present this framework in Table 1 as a tool to support text selection, inquiry design, and reflection on the deeper values embedded in environmental education. The guiding questions are intended to support educators in adapting stories to their community contexts while staying grounded in the possibilities of joy, responsibility, and relational learning. In the following sections, we apply the framework to two focal picturebooks in each category, sharing strategies for interdisciplinary teaching and inquiry that nurture young children's ecological identities and civic imagination.

Table 1.
Justice-Oriented Climate Storytelling in Early Childhood: Four Conceptual Invitations for Practice

Theme	Conceptual Invitation	Pedagogical Practice	Guiding Question
Reciprocity & Kinship	Frame care for the environment as a relational, cultural, and community-rooted act.	Invite family to share food stories, go on nature gratitude walks, and explore cultural plant mapping.	What do we give to the land, and what does it give to us?
Ecological Identity & Observation	Nurture children's sense of self as part of the more-than-human world through noticing and naming.	Use nature journals, metaphor walks, or sound mapping of schoolyards.	What do we notice when we slow down? What is our place asking us to see?
Systems Thinking & Collective Action	Support children in noticing interconnectedness and working together to address shared problems.	Create classroom "cause and effect" webs or community care projects.	How are we connected, and what can we do together?
Environmental Grief & Repair	Make space for emotional responses to change and support children in imagining shared acts of renewal.	Use storytelling circles, hope jars, or collaborative dream gardens.	What do we miss or mourn—and what can we care for next?

Reciprocity and Kinship

> *"Grandma tells me, 'we take care of the land'... 'as the land takes care of us. Gunalchéesh,' I say giving thanks." (Goade, 2022, pp. 16-17)*

We, along with other scholars, argue that the concept of reciprocity and kinship with the land is a key facet in integrating climate justice across the curriculum (e.g., Meissner, 2022; Whyte, 2020; Widrig, 2025). The opening quote from the beautifully illustrated picturebook *Berry Song,* written and illustrated by Indigenous author and illustrator Michaela Goade, gets at the heart of this theme. To be in a relationship with all living beings, we must recognize that kinship extends beyond Western understandings often limited to human connections, but also

includes plants, animals, and all of the natural world. We draw on Indigenous scholars and writers and authors identified with texts as Own Stories, Own Voices, as we explore this theme, whose culture and way of being constantly invite us to embrace our interconnectedness with the earth.

Kimmerer (from Kimmerer and Smith, 2022), an Indigenous writer and scholar, defines reciprocity as "a mutual exchange of dependence that benefits both, each, and all but also includes mutual responsibility" (p. 10). She encourages us and children alike to position the natural world as the "real teacher" and to engage in mindfulness as we interact with the living world around us. While stories cannot replace direct interactions with the land, they can serve as prompts, models, and invitations. They encourage children to see the land not merely as a setting or a resource to extract, but as a living presence in their lives; a friend who deserves attention, gratitude, and shared responsibility. These books prepare children to engage with the world and invite inquiry about how we live well with others, both humans and more-than-humans, and how the land can teach us through listening, noticing, and co-caring.

In what follows, we describe two books that foster reciprocity and a sense of kinship with the earth. These books demonstrate our interconnectedness with the natural world while also inviting children to understand their unique abilities and consider how to share them so as to contribute to the well-being of our world, from berry picking, noticing the earth as a friend, to growing a garden.

***Berry Song* (Goade, 2022)**

Michaela Goade, an Indigenous author and illustrator, tells the story of a Tlingit girl and her grandmother harvesting berries on ancestral land. In the author's note, Goade explains that her own upbringing inspires the narrative and reflects on her deep kinship with the earth. She shares that berry picking was more than just gathering food; it was a practice rooted in gratitude, a way to stay connected to the land, and a means of passing ancestral knowledge to future generations. The story begins with the girl berry picking with her grandmother, in which they name the berries, sing with the berries and the forest, and explore their relationship with the earth, from speaking to, taking care of, and being a part of the land and vice versa. Goade's illustrations blend the human world with the natural world, in which the girl's arms become branches and her hair a berry bush. The story concludes with the girl, now grown, continuing the tradition with her younger sister.

This book supports sensory engagement, relational storytelling, and identity affirmation for early childhood learners and stewards. It situates environmental care within everyday acts of noticing and thanking, which are concepts highly accessible to young children. Additionally, through poetic imagery and cultural specificity, the book makes reciprocity tangible, framing nature as a living relative rather than a resource. Such stories open space for children to recognize their cultural traditions of gratitude and food, while learning that caring for the land is not separate from caring for each other. The text supports justice not through solutions, but through modeling relational stewardship that affirms children's place within a web of reciprocity.

Wild Greens, Beautiful Girl (Schlaikjer, 2024)

This vibrant multilingual story follows a young girl and her mother, members of the Amis community in Taiwan, as they gather wild greens and recall ancestral knowledge. Told in English and Chinese with Amis cultural references, the text offers a sensory-rich exploration of reciprocity, where ecological care is enacted through cooking, walking, touching, and storytelling. It is particularly resonant in early childhood because it centers embodied learning and familial memory, which are two ways young children naturally come to understand themselves in place.

The story affirms that children are not only observers of nature but participants in inherited and evolving ecological practices. Teachers who have shared this book describe how it opens space for joyful conversations about food, family, language, and migration. It also disrupts dominant narratives of environmentalism by centering a narrative of Indigenous and Asian cultural traditions of foraging and food sovereignty. For early learners, it offers a model of belonging that is sensory and intergenerational.

Summary

These example texts affirm that reciprocity is accessible to young children through culture, family, and sensory experience. Rather than framing climate education as an external issue or individual task, they position care as something shared, enacted through gratitude, memory, and ongoing relationships. Both stories highlight different pathways into environmental justice: one through seasonal harvesting and ancestral song, and the other through bilingual storytelling and foraging as a cultural practice. Together, they offer young children models of what it means to belong, to be with land, with others, and within more-than-human world.

In line with critical literacy, the theme of reciprocity invites readers to question dominant narratives of how we interact with the world (Starr, 2019). Many stories on climate justice position humans as taking from or saving the land rather than living in harmony with it. However, this theme and these texts also diverge from critical literacy in decentering humans and focusing on an integrated and critical view of place, humans, and world (Tuck et al., 2014; Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

Ecological Identity and Observation

"I have a lot to learn from bees." (Larkin, 2019, p. 29).

This simple reflection from Larkin (2019) in *The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter* captures a central truth of climate justice education: we are students of the world around us. In this picturebook, author Shabazz Larkin moves through his fear of bees to admiration, seeing them not as pests but as teachers, models of care, persistence, and cooperation. In doing so, he invites children to view themselves as part of the intricate web of life, not separate from it.

Where the theme of reciprocity and kinship emphasizes mutual care and ethical relationships with the more-than-human world, the theme of ecological identity and observation centers on how children come to understand themselves *within* nature. Developing an ecological identity means seeing oneself as a participant in living systems, a process shaped by sensory experiences, stories, memories, and an attention to place.

Ecological identity is cultivated through repeated observation, storytelling, and sensory engagement with the natural world. These themes are deeply intertwined. Reciprocal relationships with nature shape one's ecological identity, just as a well-formed ecological identity deepens care and responsibility for sustaining those relationships.

Observation and looking slowly play a crucial role here. Often seen as a scientific method, in early childhood, it is also a relational practice, a way of coming to know the world through listening, wondering, and noticing with care. When children are invited to slow down and engage with the natural world through storytelling and sensory experiences, they begin to develop a sense of ecological belonging. Picturebooks support this process by modeling ways of seeing, feeling, and responding to the more-than-human world.

In the following, we highlight two texts that nurture ecological identity through observation and emotional attunement: *Can You Hear the Plants Speak?* by Nicholas Hummingbird, and *The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter* by Shabazz Larkin. These stories encourage young readers to ask questions, listen closely, and form meaningful connections with the world around them, practices essential to cultivating ecological care and responsibility.

Can You Hear the Plants Speak? (Hummingbird, 2024)

Can You Hear the Plants Speak? (2024) by Indigenous plantsman Nicholas Hummingbird is a powerful narrative that fosters ecological identity through observation, intergenerational knowledge, and relational listening. Blending memoir, Indigenous knowledge, and science, the story follows Nicholas from childhood to parenthood, illustrating how he learns to hear and respond to the voices of plants. Taught by his grandparents to observe what plants give and need, Nicholas later finds himself in an urban environment where the natural world feels distant. Yet he discovers that nature persists, in sidewalk cracks, apartment balconies, and city parks, and learns to reconnect

through mindful observation and acts of care, like planting milkweed for butterflies or sowing wildflowers in empty spaces. By illustrating these everyday practices, the book demonstrates how ecological identity is cultivated through reciprocal relationships with place. Hummingbird's invitation, "Can you hear it?" encourages children to listen deeply to their surroundings, affirming that observation is not a passive act but a participatory one. Especially relevant in urban and culturally diverse early childhood contexts, this story reframes nature as ever-present and knowable, urging children to develop a sense of self that includes, and is shaped by, their relationship with the more-than-human world.

The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter (Larkin, 2019)

With lyrical metaphor and vibrant visuals, this book explores the interdependence between humans and bees through the lens of parental love. Larkin compares his two sons to bees, loud, wiggly, and essential, blending science with emotion to help children move from fear to care. It teaches about pollination and biodiversity not just through facts, but through relational thinking.

This text offers a meaningful entry point for discussing fear, connection, and biodiversity with young children. Its warm tone and figurative language support exploration of ecological relationships that are both scientific and emotional. In classrooms, it has sparked metaphor writing, pollinator observations, and conversations about what it means to be brave or to love something we once feared. The book affirms that ecological identity is rooted in feeling as much as knowing, and that through story, young children can see themselves as already entangled with the more-than-human world.

Summary

The two example picturebooks in this theme offer children a way of being in the world that is curious, connected, and caring. The narratives also support intergenerational knowledge and building of ancestral and cultural knowledge in shared practices and experiences. Affirming that an ecological identity begins not with urgency or advocacy, but with noticing, with a question, with a quiet moment, these stories model observation as a relationship over time. They amplify the perspective that children are integrated with nature and part of it. Children's and adults' identities are shaped by where they are, what they love, and how they choose to care for others and the world. Through story, children come to know themselves in relation to land, language, and life.

Again, this theme invites critical literacy through encouraging readers to disrupt the commonplace and examine multiple viewpoints (Lewison et al., 2002). As readers slow down to consider the stories of the living world, they are invited to adopt its, plants, bees, etc., point of view and, in doing so, gain new perspectives. We argue this encourages readers not to take for granted their initial reaction to nature and the more-than-human world, but to closely observe, notice, and name.

Systems Thinking and Collective Action

> *"This is the landfill, growing each day, that spills the plastic thrown away, that traps the turtle green and gray… that swim in the mess that we made." (Lord, 2020, p. 14)*

In this refrain from "*The Mess That We Made*," author Michelle Lord employs cumulative verse to illustrate how everyday choices ripple outward, entangling marine life in a growing web of pollution. The text functions as a mirror and a call to action, revealing the consequences of human behavior while urging readers to see themselves as part of a larger system, capable of both harm and healing.

Building on the themes of reciprocity and ecological identity, which emphasize relational care and a deep sense of belonging within the natural world, this third theme extends that awareness into an understanding of interconnected systems and collective responsibility. Young people deserve rich opportunities to engage in learning that supports climate justice. This includes nurturing care for the world, encouraging curiosity about how it works,

and helping children understand how people, places, and species are interconnected. It also involves recognizing how actions ripple through ecological systems, shaping the health of our communities and the planet.

At the heart of this approach is systems thinking, which involves noticing patterns, relationships, and interdependencies within and across systems, and understanding how changes in one part of a system can affect the whole. In the context of environmental justice, systems thinking helps children understand that environmental issues are deeply interconnected with social systems, including housing, health, labor, and education. It lays the groundwork for understanding that addressing these challenges requires collective, interconnected solutions.

Although systems thinking is sometimes considered too complex for young learners (Sobel, 1996), early childhood is already rich with relational noticing. Children naturally explore cause and effect, observe changes over time, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. When these innate capacities are nurtured through storytelling, they become powerful foundations for ecological literacy and civic imagination.

This theme highlights how picturebooks invite young children into systems thinking as both an intellectual and ethical practice. Rather than presenting isolated problems and individual heroes, these stories frame children as part of dynamic systems: social, ecological, and civic. Through narrative structure, visual patterning, and communal language, they affirm that children's questions and decisions matter in a shared world. We highlight two picturebooks that exemplify this theme: *The Mess We Made* by Michelle Lord, and *A Place for Rain* by Michelle Schaub.

The Mess We Made (Lord, 2020)

This cumulative, lyrical narrative traces the path of plastic waste from everyday use to its devastating impact on marine life, gradually building a web of consequences that affect fish, oceans, and food chains. In communicating possibility and hope, the story shifts toward collective response, emphasizing that "we" can change what happens next. Through vivid illustrations and a cumulative story with rhyme structure, children are introduced to ecological systems in ways that are both accessible and emotionally resonant. The cumulative story component also indicates to readers the compounding efforts, both of destruction and repair in ecosystems and the world.

This text can foster opportunities for learners to visualize cause-and-effect and to explore human impact. Importantly, the text offers space for imagination and shared responsibility. The text encourages ownership and engagement, centering on the plural pronoun "we" and asking, "What part do we play?" and "What can we do together?" The text's repetition and rhythm reinforce systems thinking through both form and content, making complexity feel knowable and action feel possible.

A Place for Rain (Schaub, 2023)

Rooted in a conceptualized classroom project, this story follows a group of young children who respond to flooding and pollution caused by runoff. Together, they design and create a rain garden. The text centers on the process of collaborative inquiry, which involves observing water patterns, identifying needs, proposing solutions, and working with community partners to bring them to life. Through clear, child-friendly language, the book demonstrates how environmental issues are local, material, and within children's spheres of influence.

This picturebook offers an authentic model of systems thinking by highlighting how weather, soil, plants, and built environments interact, and how young learners can intervene in those systems with care and creativity. It affirms the importance of noticing patterns, testing ideas, and designing with place in mind. Within early childhood contexts, the story validates that young children can engage in design-based stewardship when supported through place-responsive learning.

Summary

These texts illustrate that systems thinking in early childhood is not abstract theory; it is grounded in how children notice, respond, and imagine together. Through metaphor, real-world action, and collective language, the books make visible the complexity of our ecological and social worlds while affirming children's place within them. Justice, in this context, becomes a practice of recognizing connection, tracing impact, and creating space for children to act with others in building something better. Drawing on Grace Lee Boggs' notion of 'solutionaries, ' the young people in these texts are positioned as envisioning more sustainable futures in response to the ecological destruction and despair observed. Rather than instilling a feeling of doom, by positioning children as changemakers, the stories promote hope and possibility.

These stories remind us that systems are not static and that they are shaped by those who care enough to notice, question, and act together. Applying a critical literacy lens, these narratives invite readers to focus on the sociopolitical issues associated with environmentalism and to take action to promote a more just and sustainable world (Lewison et al., 2002).

Environmental Grief and Repair

> *"Look at it. Wounded, worn, twisted, torn. One day this tree will fall and this story will end."* (Booth, 2024, p. 5)

In *One Day This Tree Will Fall*, Barnard Booth offers young readers a quiet and powerful meditation on environmental loss. Her words, paired with powerful illustrations, draw our attention to a tree that has carried the weight of time and human impact. The image of a single tree, weathered and fallen on the forest floor, becomes a metaphor for broader ecological grief: a sense of sadness, disorientation, or even mourning in the face of environmental harm.

As young children build relationships with place, they inevitably notice when something changes; when a tree falls, insects disappear, or weather patterns shift. These early experiences of ecological loss often surface in quiet moments of confusion, silence, or sorrow. While children may not always name these feelings as grief, they are attuned to the absence of what they love.

This theme explores how picturebooks support children in recognizing and moving through environmental grief, while modeling possibilities for resilience, renewal, and shared care. In early childhood education, environmental grief need not be avoided. Instead, it can be gently named and transformed through story and relationship. When books introduce loss or harm while also maintaining attention to agency and imagination, they offer children a pathway toward hope and healing. These texts affirm that grief and hope are often entwined. Through story, children are invited not only to mourn what has been lost, but also to imagine what can be restored. We highlight two books that exemplify this theme: *A Flicker of Hope* by Cynthia Harmony and *One Day This Tree Will Fall* by Leslie Barnard Booth.

A Flicker of Hope (Harmony, 2024)

A Flicker of Hope follows a young girl waiting for her father's return from migratory labor. The story is told in parallel with monarch butterflies' journey across North America. Set in and around the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in México, the story grounds children in ecological observation, seasonal rhythms, and an awareness of longing and cyclical returns. Through cultural references, the book invites children to consider environmental and familial migration as relational processes. The author's note and glossary further contextualize the ecological and economic realities of the region, reinforcing the story's connection to land and livelihood.

This narrative is a thoughtful resource for exploring environmental grief and repair. The girl's experience of waiting mirrors the vulnerability of human and more-than-human lives, asking children to reflect on what it means to care for something that cannot always be seen or immediately returned. The story affirms children's capacity to engage with emotional complexity in family life and their observation and interaction with the natural world and migration patterns. In the classroom, educators might use the text to map monarch and family journeys side-by-side, explore

sustainable practices through art, or co-create stories of return and care. In doing so, children are invited to see their lives, and the lives of butterflies, families, and ecosystems, as connected by migration, memory, and hope.

One Day This Tree Will Fall (Barnard Booth, 2024)

This informational text traces the life of a single tree, from its strength and fortitude in the forest to its decay, revealing how, as the tree falls, it sustains a web of new life. Through poetic prose and engaging illustrations, the story invites children to witness ecological cycles of decomposition and regeneration. It suggests that endings are not final, but generative, offering insight into the interconnectedness of living things.

For young children, *One Day This Tree Will Fall* introduces transformation not as something to fear, but as a natural and necessary part of life. The story blends poetic language with ecological insight, offering an entry point into cycles of change, decay, and renewal. It invites children to reflect on what it means for something to end—and what forms of life or possibility might grow in its place. The book supports both emotional literacy and scientific exploration, encouraging close observation, memory-making, and relational thinking about the more-than-human world. It affirms that noticing and naming change is itself a form of care.

Summary

These texts help children recognize and hold space for environmental grief while offering pathways toward hope and repair. They validate children's emotional responses to loss without overwhelming them, and model that restoration begins with attention, imagination, and shared effort. In doing so, these stories affirm that justice is about naming harm and co-creating healing.

For early childhood educators, these books offer accessible ways to support children in navigating the complexities of change, stewardship, and resilience. The texts in this theme reinforce that small gestures and natural cycles can be seeds of transformation. In a world facing ecological uncertainty, helping children walk through grief with creativity and relationship is an act of justice. Related to critical place-based studies and critical literacy, this theme invites children to notice how loss and renewal are connected to land, community, and story. They show that repair is not about erasing pain, but about tending to it collectively, whether through planting seeds, telling stories, or caring for one another. In this way, grief becomes an opening for hope, and repair becomes a practice of belonging, reminding children that even the smallest hands can help weave resilience into the fabric of our shared world.

Suggestions for Interdisciplinary Learning with Texts as Anchor

To support educators in applying the themes and texts discussed above, Table 2 provides an at-a-glance synthesis of the eight picturebooks highlighted in this article, presented in order as they are mentioned in the text above. Each row aligns the featured book with developmentally appropriate, interdisciplinary practices across literacy, science, math, and social studies. These invitations are not exhaustive but illustrate how picturebooks can become powerful anchors for place-responsive, justice-oriented learning in early childhood settings.

These interdisciplinary invitations illustrate how picturebooks can function as catalysts for ecological inquiry, civic imagination, and relational learning across early childhood domains. Rather than isolating environmental education into discrete units, the examples in this table illustrate how climate justice can be integrated into daily classroom life through observation walks, collective storytelling, family interviews, and small acts of place-based care. By pairing literacy with science, social studies, and mathematics in meaningful ways, educators can support children in developing critical understandings of systems, relationships, and responsibilities, rooted in their lived experiences and local environments.

Table 2.
8 Picturebooks and Interdisciplinary Invitations for Early Childhood Climate Justice Learning

Picturebook (Citation)	Literacy Invitations	Science / Math Explorations	Social Studies Connections
Berry Song (Goade, 2022)	Write gratitude poems, co-create a class Berry Book in multiple languages	Observe and sort berries, measure plant growth over time	Map family foods, discuss intergenerational knowledge and Indigenous stewardship
Wild Greens, Beautiful Girl (Schlaikjer, 2024)	Describe sensory memories, write or draw plant stories	Identify plants in the neighborhood, compare uses	Discuss urban foraging and community foodways
Can You Hear the Plants Speak? (Hummingbird, 2024)	Interview plants, create field guide entries	Chart plant changes over time, compare water needs	Explore family stories about plants and nature
The Thing About Bees (Larkin, 2019)	Write a metaphor "love letters" to animals or insects	Diagram pollination cycles, track local bee sightings	Connect fear and care through personal stories
The Mess We Made (Lord, 2020)	Write "solution webs" or eco-poems	Sort classroom trash, graph waste types	Discuss pollution impact and shared responsibility
A Place for Rain (Schaub 2023)	Create class storybooks about water or flooding	Design model rain gardens, map schoolyard runoff	Explore civic design and shared outdoor spaces
A Flicker of Hope (Harmony, 2024)	Create "hope jars" or emotion drawings	Design a pollinator habitat, track seasonal changes	Discuss climate change feelings and community care
One Day This Tree Will Fall (Barnard Booth, 2024)	Create memory maps or lifecycle murals	Observe trees and decomposition, compare over time	Reflect on change, legacy, and ecological renewal

From Story to Justice: Conclusion and Implications

This framework responds to the broad wondering of what it means to teach climate justice through story in early childhood. By bringing together the four strands of the framework, we offer a conceptual and practical approach that offers a layered, interdisciplinary framework positioning children as relational, capable participants in their communities and ecosystems. We have argued that climate education in early learning is not only developmentally appropriate, but it is essential. To make this work meaningful, we must move beyond thematic booklists or content alignment and toward a pedagogical vision that reimagines the very aims of early childhood education.

The framework we propose invites educators to view environmental literacy as a civic and relational practice. Through the four conceptual invitations, reciprocity and kinship, ecological identity and observation, systems

thinking and collective action, and environmental grief and repair, we outline an intentional justice-oriented approach to climate storytelling that is rooted in story, place, and relationships. These themes challenge individualistic or performative approaches to environmentalism and instead foreground connection, interdependence, and cultural ways of knowing. By doing so, they reframe climate justice as a lens that reshapes how we engage in literacy, science, and social studies.

Educators already use stories across diverse classrooms and contexts to help young children notice, wonder, critique, and act. The strategies shared in this article, from cultivating observation and data storytelling to using books as mentor texts and planning responsively within constrained settings, expand on everyday practices of early childhood educators in purposeful ways that center climate and environmental justice. In many ways, early childhood educators are doing this work in spite of systems that attempt to depoliticize curricula or constrain teacher agency, and yet, working collaboratively, we have the opportunity to imagine possibilities in interdisciplinary early childhood learning that fosters children's inquiries, realities and imagine a more just and sustainable future together.

This framework and approach we offer carries important implications. For teacher preparation, it calls for programs that equip future educators to extend from implementing climate-themed lessons to facilitating justice-centered, culturally sustaining, and place-based inquiry. Environmental learning in early childhood must go beyond facts and awareness to include critical reflection, storytelling, and sustained engagement with students' lived experiences. For curriculum and policy, this work demonstrates how interdisciplinary, justice-focused teaching can meet academic standards while also responding to urgent planetary challenges. In contrast to narrow, skills-driven mandates, climate storytelling offers a generative, joyful, and pedagogically sound pathway to integrated learning.

We need research that follows children over time to understand how they make meaning from environmental stories and how they carry these understandings into their relationships with place and community. We need studies that explore the transformative potential of collective inquiry, especially in multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms. We also need to better understand how educators navigate the practical and political realities of doing this work, particularly as state-level mandates, book bans, and reductive discourses attempt to limit what can be taught and read.

At the heart of this manuscript is a belief that young children are already attuned to fairness, beauty, and care. They notice what is changing, what is broken, and what deserves protection. They ask profound questions and tell powerful stories. And when educators take those questions seriously, when they read and reimagine stories together, they nurture a kind of hope that is rooted not in denial, but in relational possibility. In a world marked by ecological loss and uncertainty, that hope is not naïve. Early childhood is not too early to begin. It is, in fact, the most powerful place to start.

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