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Ec literacy and Sustainability in *Moana* (2016) and *We Are Water Protectors* (2020)

Abstract: The survival of humanity depends on understanding ecological systems and adjusting accordingly, to build a more sustainable world. To this end, we must recognize the significance of the cultivation of emotional, social, and ecological intelligence which would lead us to engaged ec literacy for the future of our planet. Thus, with the help of engaged ec literacy, children and young adults can develop strength, hope, and resilience in the face of ecological catastrophes and crises, instead of coping with fear, anger, and hopelessness Both the eponymous heroine in Walt Disney’s movie *Moana* (2016) and the young girl who fights to conserve the water of her community in Carole Lindstrom’s picturebook, *We are water protectors* (2020) are examples of eco-literate individuals who can inspire young minds to live in harmony with nature. Although these environmental texts belong to different genres, their shared emphasis on the significance of water is obvious and they not only promote an awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world but also instill a sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship. Therefore, this paper seeks to conduct a critical content analysis of the environmental themes portrayed in both the film *Moana* (2016) and the picturebook *We Are Water Protectors* (2020). Through this analysis, the study intends to raise awareness and promote potential ec literacy among child audiences and readers, to influence their perspectives on sustainability for the well-being and sovereignty of all communities worldwide.

Keywords: children’s activism, ec literacy, ecological intelligence, *Moana*, sustainability, *We Are Water Protectors*

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding and adapting ecological systems to create a more sustainable environment are essential to human life. Thus, we must realize how ec literacy – also referred to as ecological literacy and first coined by physicist and systems theorist Fritjof Capra in 1997 – plays a crucial role in our existence on this planet. As Capra famously puts it, the survival of humanity depends on “our ability to understand the basic principles of a connected Nature and how to live

accordingly” (2009). This calls for the development of ecoliteracy as a crucial skill for decision-makers in government, business, and other fields. In light of this notion, ecoliteracy must be stressed as the most important aspect of education at all levels, from elementary and secondary schools through colleges and universities, as well as continuing education and professional development. In the foreword to Michael K Stone and Zenobia Barlow’s *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World*, David W. Orr asserts that future generations must become “ecologically literate” and learn how to adapt natural systems to build a more sustainable world (2005, p. x). Stone and Barlow also highlight that “Implementing lasting change in schools can feel like turning around an ocean liner. Stopping the ship takes a long, long time. Then you need more time to turn it around and yet more time to develop momentum to go in the new direction” (2005, p.251). However, a slow but lasting change, to protect the Earth’s resources from environmental degradation and so maintain sustainability, is the only way.

Daniel Goleman, Lisa Bennett, and Zenobia Barlow in their work, *Ecoliterate: How Educators Are Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence* (2012), also foreground the necessity of teaching children to care deeply about the environment. Ecoliteracy aims to foster learning that genuinely prepares children and young adults for the ecological challenges presented by this entirely unprecedented time in human history. Therefore, raising eco-literate students requires a process in which they can expand “socially and emotionally engaged ecoliteracy” into “ecological intelligence” (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012). The definition of ecological intelligence derives from Goleman’s earlier research on social and emotional learning, which is the fusion of empathy, cooperation, and comprehension of others’ viewpoints with an appreciation for and respect for natural systems. Thus, with the cultivation of emotional, social, and ecological intelligence, children and young adults can deal with feelings of fear, anger, and hopelessness that can result from inaction. Instead, they can develop strength, hope, and resilience in the face of great ecological catastrophes and crises, just as do both the female protagonist, Moana, in Walt Disney’s movie *Moana* (2016) and the young unnamed girl in Carole Lindstrom’s picturebook, *We are water protectors* (2020) illustrated by Michaela Goade.

Disney’s *Moana* was inspired by the real heritage and history of Polynesian Islands such as Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, and Tahiti (Caldwell, 2017) and thus, it depicts the life of people who belonged to Polynesian culture in which the primary occupation of the people was seafaring, oriented towards the exploration of oceans. Moana, daughter of Tui, Motunui Island’s Polynesian Chief, displays some extraordinary courage and determination when she embarks on a journey with the legendary demigod Maui to save her island from an environmental disaster and restore ecological balance. In this sense, the movie can

be read as an allegory of Pacific Islanders' struggle against climate change and as a message to remind all of us that we must co-exist in harmony with nature since we are only a part of a bigger picture. Likewise, Lindstrom's *We are water protectors* sends a rallying call to protect the Earth's water from ecological degradation. With the use of straightforward language, the book conveys this crucial lesson in a lyrical, child-friendly approach, inviting the reader to take action. Although they are completely different mediums, the environmental narratives of both texts focus on the importance of water and contain similar messages: the urgent need for environmental stewardship. This paper aims to present a critical content analysis of the environmental narratives of the movie *Moana* (2016) as well as the picturebook *We Are Water Protectors* (2020). By doing so, this study hopes to create an awareness that helps to foster ecoliteracy in child audiences and readers thereby aiming to shape their attitude toward sustainability for the security and sovereignty of all communities in the world.

2. "IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ONLY OCEAN UNTIL THE MOTHER ISLAND EMERGED"

From the first scenes of the movie, *Moana*, the audience readily deduces that they are about to watch a tale of deep greed and exploitation of nature for human gain, leading to a story of environmental understanding, and connectivity. The plot opens with a tale told to Moana by her grandmother Tala, about the mother island and her people's long-standing tradition of seafaring. Grandma's story, as an oral narrative, foregrounds several Pacific Island traditions while also illustrating the connection between strong women and the environment (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018; Sebring, 2021). The island is the perfect idyllic representation of an Indigenous Pacific paradise characterized by its vibrant colors, smooth cinematography, and pristine textures, all of which are enhanced by its animated format (Taylor, 2022). For example, placid pans of semitranslucent waves present a vibrant aquatic ecosystem to the viewer, suggesting to the audience that Moana's ocean is unachievably idealistic and free of the dangers that can be associated with the real ocean. The exploitation of the female body as the embodiment of nature (Hernawati, 2021) and the commodification of Indigenous cultures and Pacific lifestyles (Dittmer, 2021) are highly debated themes in the movie. Yet the focus of my study is only to foreground the relationship between environmental degradation and human systems in the movie, which engages the cultivation of emotional, social, and ecological intelligence. This would hopefully create a degree of awareness as per the significance of environmental understanding and thus, provide an opportunity for the development of ecoliteracy in the child audience.

As in many indigenous cultures, creation myths concerning the origin of life on Earth pass down orally from one generation to the next, serving as

foundational stories that preserve the cultural identity and present the world-view of Indigenous communities (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). These myths provide explanations for both natural phenomena and human existence by incorporating elements of spirituality, nature, and the supernatural. They might include gods, spirits, animals, and other mythological creatures, all of whom are important to the world's formation and order. Accordingly, Grandma Tala recounts the creation myth in the opening scene of the movie when she relates that life begins with the ocean, which means that water is the source of life both for the islanders and the planet: "In the beginning, there was only ocean until the mother island emerged: Te Fiti. Her heart held the greatest power ever known. It could create life itself. And Te Fiti shared it with the world" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:00:57). Te Fiti is the heart of all the islands: there are lines that go across the ocean from her heart, a brighter green circle in her chest, to unite them all. She is also shown outstretching her arms as in an embrace, while the life flows out of her in a flurry of green and blue to the islands. Her sole purpose is to spread life across the ocean – she is a creator and provider for all. Te Fiti represents the source of life as a living organism that provides a home for not only humans but also all the other living species. This portrayal emphasizes the crucial function of water in maintaining life and emphasizes its significance for both the islanders' way of life and the planet's overall health.

However, when Te Fiti falls asleep, forming the shape of an island, the music intensifies and at this point, Grandma Tala's voice deepens ominously, explaining the evil motives of those who have desired the heart for their own interests: "But in time, some began to seek Te Fiti's heart. They believed if they could possess it the great powers of creation would be theirs" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:01:25). Instead of working in collaboration with Te Fiti, the nature goddess, those who began to seek Te Fiti's heart wish to "possess" her powers to create life. This wish is a direct result of the individuals' selfish interests that endanger environmental security and sovereignty. By presenting the greediness of humankind, the movie clearly refers to some real-life examples of how natural resources are overexploited and overconsumed for personal ambitions such as taking too many minerals from sea beds and removing excessive coal from the ground. Hence, the movie foregrounds the fact that although nature provides resources sufficient for everyone, the greed of humankind operates as a destructive threat not only to nature but to human society itself. By depicting the negative effects of human greed and overuse of natural resources, *Moana* is an effective means of bringing attention to environmental sustainability and the significance of responsible resource management for the survival of both humanity and the planet.

As her story continues, Grandma Tala further informs the audience about a very unfortunate event jeopardizing the future of these Pacific Islands: "And one day, the most daring of them all voyaged across the vast ocean to take it

(ie Te Fiti's heart). He was a Demigod of the wind and sea. He was a warrior. A trickster. A shapeshifter who could change form with the power of his magical fish hook. And his name was Maui" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:02:09). When Maui steals the heart of Te Fiti, it is a gesture to please the humans who had once rejected him. This means that physical destruction, although it comes from the actions of a demigod, is undertaken to meet the needs of humans. In this sense, it is humans, then, who cause the violence against Te Fiti and nature, and it is humans who will ultimately face the "darkness," due to the environmental destruction. The narrative continues, "But without her heart, Te Fiti began to crumble, giving birth to a terrible darkness" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:02:25). Natural balance is disturbed, and the nature goddess Te Fiti, who possesses the power to create life and bring other islands into existence, turns into the destructive Te Kā: "Maui tried to escape, but was confronted by another who sought the heart: Te Kā, a demon of earth and fire" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:02:56). In this confrontation, Te Kā strikes Maui, who projects the superior attitude of human beings over Nature and all other non-living beings, thereby resulting in the disappearance of the demigod with his magical fish hook and the heart of Te Fiti forever. This depiction of ecological collapse threatening the security and sovereignty of communities in the movie directly warns the child audience of the drastic impact of environmental degradation.

At the end of her tale, the grandma in a way prophesies Moana's voyage to save not only her people but also the entire planet. She concludes their collective story by hoping that: "...but one day, the heart will be found by someone who would journey beyond the reef, find Maui, deliver him across the great ocean to restore Te Fiti's heart and save us all" (*Moana*, 2016, 0:03:55). In their article, Jennifer R. Marlon, et al. argue that hope is essential for environmental effectiveness because it offers a realistic path to progress in addressing environmental challenges (2019, pp. 2–3). Accordingly, as the story unfolds, Moana's journey becomes inevitable, when her people find themselves in a grave ecological struggle wherein their food security is seriously compromised. Their crops are failing and the coconuts are turning black because of the overuse of the land. The soil is no longer producing food and the villagers have overfished the waters between the reef and their island, which results in mass starvation, and exhaustion of their food sources (*Moana*, 2016). Metaphorically and microcosmically, all this reflects the global ecological crisis, where oceans are getting warmer, fish stocks are declining due to overfishing, and crops grow irregularly due to the intrusion of saltwater into the soil. The change in climate and rising sea levels are also impacting the state of the land. Through this description, the child audience is invited to understand how food systems and our changing climate interact and how this understanding must lead to embracing sustainability to save our planet from ecological collapse.

Teaching ecological knowledge and systems is advocated by Capra, who believes in recognizing the relationships, connections, and context in a bigger picture (Stone & Barlow, 2005). The prologue of the movie emphasizes the fact that nature and humans are interconnected, thereby inviting the audience to understand and respect this connectivity, interdependence, and interaction of all life. While the people of the island fear the ocean because they perceive it as dangerous and threatening, Grandma Tala and Moana act like mediators between the village people and the ocean, recognizing this interconnectedness. For example, in the opening scene, while listening to the story of Maui, the rest of the children are alarmed, scared, and even faint, but Moana is enthusiastically engaged in the narrative. Right after Grandma Tala's prophetic tale, we are shown that even as a toddler, Moana prioritizes nature over her own desires, thus discovering a connection to the ocean. To illustrate, when a baby sea turtle struggles against seagulls while trying to leave its nest, Moana helps the creature and guides it with a palm leaf. This results in the ocean interacting with Moana, who rediscovers the heart of Te Fiti, only to lose it again when her father – representing human intervention – appears and takes her back to the village. Goleman, Bennett, and Barlow argue that one way of developing empathy for all forms of life is to study Indigenous cultures, most of which “share a profound reverence for all living creatures, especially for those that co-exist with them in and around where they live” (2012, p. 13). Likewise, Grandma Tala and Moana see the ocean as the only hope for salvation, so to restore the ecological balance, Moana must sail to the distant island of Te Fiti and return the heart to its owner.

The Indigenous knowledge of conserving nature has been bestowed on Moana by her grandmother Tala, who orally transmitted their cultural heritage. Accordingly, throughout the movie, she constantly strives to complete her mission to save her people and her island by restoring the biodiversity of the planet Earth. However, as the chosen one to restore balance and harmony to her island and its surrounding waters, Moana has to confront Te Kā, the fierce fiery creature threatening her home and all the other islands. Unknown to the audience at this point, Te Kā, whose heat and flames seem to represent global warming and ecological destruction, is the villain of the story, and Moana has to defeat her. To this end, she needs to find Maui, who at first views Moana as passive and feeble since she is a woman, and thus, he declines to assist her in reviving Te Fiti's heart. In one scene, despite Maui's refusal to support her in her mission, she makes an effort to recover the heart of Te Fiti when it is stolen by the pirates Kakamora (*Moana*, 2016, 0:48:48). In another scene deep in the ocean, Moana helps Maui to get his magical hook from the giant crab Tamatoa, by tricking the monstrous crustacean with the heart of Te Fiti, the most desirable object for all (*Moana*, 2016, 1:05:29). In both cases, she proves to be strong, determined, and resilient, reflecting what Goleman, Bennett, and

Barlow argue in the following statement: “When we turn to nature, we find that healthy communities of living organisms are diverse, have a strong network of relationships and are resilient” since “Life in nature does not survive in isolation” (2012, p. 13). In other words, belonging to the same ecosystem, Maui needs Moana’s help as much as she needs his magical hook, which indicates that the only way to save not only themselves but also to stop environmental degradation is to act together, in other words, to cooperate.

Understanding the principles of ecology and the interconnectedness of all living systems is best exemplified when Te Kā is finally revealed as Te Fiti herself. This revelation indicates that Te Kā is always present in Te Fiti, but is not empowered to destroy until Te Fiti, mother nature, is harmed by the interests of humans. In other words, nature does not remain indifferent to the harmful interactions of humans. As Moana realizes Te Kā is Te Fiti and is trapped in this violent body, she sings these words: “I have crossed the horizon to find you. I know your name. They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you. This is not who you are. You know who you are. Who you truly are” (*Moana*, 2016, 1:29:35). Upon hearing her song, Te Kā’s expression relaxes as her eyes open up wider, to a more innocent state and her hand, instead of reaching to take Moana, freezes, thereby signaling her hesitation to harm. After Moana returns the heart to Te Fiti/Te Kā, Te Kā is replicated by Te Fiti, who is restored to her original form, signaling the close bond between Moana and deified nature. Moana can empathize with Te Kā: by touching Te Kā’s forehead, she asks for forgiveness for mankind’s disgraceful attempt to exploit nature. This scene also draws attention to Moana’s innate understanding of ecology (ecoliteracy), which has enabled her to soothe the enraged Te Kā and revive Te Fiti. As a result, the islands become green again, and luscious flora covers her body like a blanket; her head and shoulders graze the sky. With the return to Motunui, Moana places a conch shell upon the tower of past chief rocks, elevating the island to include the ocean. It is a story of salvation: of course, we cannot magically fix the environment in which we live, by simply returning a stone. However, *Moana* highlights the significance of ecoliteracy for the hope of restoring our destroyed ecosystems and encourages children’s agency and activism for environmental stewardship.

3. “WATER IS THE FIRST MEDICINE”

Carole Lindstrom’s picturebook, *We are water protectors*, the winner of the 2021 Caldecott Medal, also explores the topic of the environmental call to protect the water and the land on planet Earth. The first lines of this picturebook provide the first description of the water: “Water is the first medicine/ We come from water” (Lindstrom, 2020) as Nokomis – in the Ojibwe language, the name Nokomis means Grandmother – tells the girl in the opening spread. The two

of them are drawn standing in water up to their waists, with the grandmother's tender hand resting gently on the girl's back as the layers of water seep up into the shapes of trees and leaves. Promoting literary engagement by appealing to the visual senses of the reader is one of the common characteristics of the picturebook genre (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Nodelman, 2005). Readers come across codifications of the real and imagined world through illustrations, which helps them comprehend both verbal/narrative language and the language of the physical world (Johnson, 2019). Thus, the environmental theme of the entire book is strengthened by Michaela Goade's drawings, which further immerse readers in the physical and emotional reality of our interconnectedness and dependency on water. Goade brilliantly manages this medium to produce swaths of different saturations, clear lines, and intricate patterns that are a visual feast for the reader. The drawings on each page that go with it depict scenes from nature that show how people interact with one another, animals, water, and the cosmos, as well as patterns of stars and flowers in shades of deep blue, turquoise, indigo, and purple.

The visual in picturebooks creates the context for the verbal, which then extends the discourse of the visual in an "eternal circle" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Accordingly, in *We are water protectors*, when the girl is shown alone on the following page, we understand that she is never completely alone since her long hair cascades into waves of water filled with fish and plants. Likewise, the narrator relates, "We stand/ With our songs/ And our drums/ We are still here/ The river's rhythm runs through my veins/ Runs through my people's veins" (Lindstrom, 2020). At this point, the reader is invited to comprehend two fundamental messages by the words of the narrator as well as the accompanying images on the pages: water is life, and we are all connected. Hence, the connectivity, interdependence, and interaction of all life are foregrounded in the first pages of the book, thereby preparing the reader for a prophecy very different from that of Grandma Tala in Disney's *Moana*. While Grandma Tala prophesies that one day a villager will repair Te Fiti's heart and prevent their island from being destroyed, which encourages Moana to set out on her quest to fulfill her destiny and save her people, a Lakota prophecy foretells a black snake, which will destroy the land: "My people talk of a black snake that will destroy the land/ Spoil the water/Poison plants and animals/Wreck everything in its path" (Lindstrom, 2020). As is clear from these lines, the reader hears an urgent warning to safeguard the Earth's water from possible destruction as a result of harmful human activities. The ironic juxtaposition of these prophecies serves as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of all life and our shared responsibility to preserve the planet for future generations.

The connection between the oil pipeline and the blacksnake is obvious, as the oil pipeline transports oil and petroleum over long distances, risking enormous environmental damage to land and water from leaks. This snake is,

therefore, a metaphor for the controversial construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, which faced massive resistance from North Dakota's Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, as well as members of hundreds of other tribes from across the U.S., Canada, and Latin America. As the narrative relates, even though they would not expect the prophecy to come true shortly, when it does, it brings ecological destruction poisoning their land and water supplies: "Now the black snake is here/ Its venom burns the land/ Curses through the water/ I must rally my people together" (Lindstrom, 2020). Sarah James, as a spokesperson for the Gwich'in people, raises awareness about the impacts of oil development on their traditional way of life and the environment. Inhabiting the region known as the Gwich'in Settlement Area, which spans parts of Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories in Canada, the Gwich'in people have decided against pursuing oil development despite the possible economic rewards because of the potential harm it could cause to their land, water, and wildlife. They believe that "everything is connected to everything else" and the environment is "perfectly designed to support human survival – if we understand, respect, and relate to it based on need, not greed" (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012, p. 45). Hence, when we fail to recognize this, not only nature but also people suffer from the severe impacts of climate change. The picturebook seems to invite the reader to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life, thereby protecting both the natural world and the well-being of future generations through sustainable practices.

Believing that we are approaching a critical turning point in the history of the planet Earth, as human actions deliberately threaten many of the natural systems, the Gwich'in focus on the necessity of education for providing solutions to environmental issues. To this end, as the representative for the Gwich'in community for more than twenty years, James travels all around the world to raise awareness and educate people about the conflict between oil drilling and the traditional way of life. "Education is central," as James states, emphasizing the fact that through education, it is possible to strengthen children's innate love of nature and, from there, to develop a strong ability for emotional, social, and ecological intelligence (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012, p. 54). Accordingly, in *We Are Water Protectors*, the young girl with images of flowers and sea animals such as fish and sea turtles on her long wavy hair calls for action by outcrying and inviting children's agency and activism as clear in these words: "TAKE COURAGE!" (Lindstrom, 2020). Leading the way with a feather in her hand to protect the land and water, she declares herself as the steward of the earth: "I must keep the snake away/From my village's water/ I must rally my people together" (Lindstrom, 2020). In other words, as the water protector, this young girl steps up to safeguard Earth's most treasured resource when a black serpent threatens to destroy the planet and contaminate her people's water. The young protagonist of the picturebook demonstrates

eco-intelligence by understanding how ecosystems are interconnected and therefore, actively organizing her community to defend the land and water from environmental harm caused by the oil pipeline.

The picturebook helps young readers become eco-literate by not only promoting an awareness of the interdependence of humans and the natural world but also instilling a sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship. Marlon et al., assert that “Communicating that awareness is increasing, and highlighting efforts being made to address the problem ... may reinforce existing sources of hope among the public and support motivation to engage in climate issues. Hope, however, is not enough – action is essential” (2019, p. 2). Likewise, the need for action is obvious when the narrative of the picturebook continues with these lines: “To stand for the water/To stand for land/ To stand as ONE/Against the black snake” (Lindstrom, 2020) while we see the young child standing on the grass in the middle of a group holding hands and at the same time, pointing the feather in her hand to the sky as if to signaling a better future. Although the girl accepts the fact that it is not going to be easy to stand against the black snake, they will be there, hand in hand, acting together, and looking at the ugly face of the snake with its forked tongue sticking out like a blaze of fire. On the next page, we see various plants, flowers, and animals such as a bird butterfly, a snail, a grasshopper, and a spider accompanied by these lines: “We fight for those/Who cannot fight for themselves/ The winged ones/ The crawling ones” (Lindstrom, 2020). Therefore, inviting the child reader to recognize the relationships between all living and nonliving objects on our planet, the story engages eco-literacy by increasing the environmental responsibility and sensibility for the ones who cannot protect themselves. Thus, “The four-legged/The two-legged/The plants, trees, rivers, lakes... The earth/ We are all related (Lindstrom, 2020) is deliberately mentioned in this call for action.

As Stone and Barlow also inform us, for the Okanagan people, the “idea of community, as understood by [their] ancestors, encompassed a complex holistic view of interconnectedness that demands our responsibility to everything we are connected to” (2005, p. 13). By presenting children and young adults with environmental issues, it is possible to empower them to volunteer together for action. Therefore, by fostering ecological awareness and responsibility in children from a young age, we can cultivate eco-literate learning in our communities and thus contribute to the creation of a sustainable future. Having gained the skills of socially and emotionally engaged literacy, people can learn to control their emotions including fear, anxiety, and anger, relate effectively to others – particularly, to those with whom they disagree – and share their lifelong knowledge of connection to the land and water (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012, p. 52). As textual evidence of this idea, in *We are water protectors* the young child gathers her people and displays strength, hope, and resilience,

asking even the reader to be a steward of the land and water: “We stand/With our songs/And our drums/We are still here/We are stewards of the Earth/Our spirits have not been broken” (Lindstrom, 2020). Acting together in the face of environmental degradation seems to be a common strategy of ecological literacy, as exemplified throughout this picturebook. Thus, developing a sense of group responsibility and action in children not only helps them become more environmentally conscious but also gives them the ability to take an active role in environmental stewardship projects, which in turn helps our communities develop resilient and sustainable cultures.

Lindstrom’s picturebook ends with the black snake fighting for its life, and the water protectors refusing to stand back even though their tears are streaming down like waterfalls, all of which evokes the concept of “solastalgia” as articulated by Glenn Albrecht “to give greater meaning and clarity to environmentally induced distress” (2007, p. 95). Solastalgia is defined as “the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. 96). In other words, environmental destruction can cause people to feel distressed, especially in the context of “open-cut coal mining and power station fallout, and severe drought” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. 96). Upon the devastation of their home/country in their daily travels, one Indigenous interviewee describes the level of solastalgia he and many of his people felt in these words:

It is very depressing, it brings you down . . . Even (Indigenous) people that don’t have the traditional ties to the area . . . it still brings them down. It is pathetic just to drive along, they cannot stand that drive. We take different routes to travel down south just so we don’t have to see all the holes, all the dirt . . . because it makes you wild.

(As cited in Albrecht et al., 2007, p. 97).

The community of the girl in *We Are Water Protectors* seems to suffer from similar environmental distress when the black snake poisons their water and thus, they are illustrated as shedding tears that flow into the water as if to attempt to clean it with their tears. This striking imagery highlights the detrimental effects of environmental degradation on communities and their sense of belonging, underscoring the deep emotional connection that exists between humans and their surroundings. Therefore, young readers are invited to develop an understanding of their connection with nature and cultivate empathy toward others and the environment.

In picturebooks, as Shelby A. Wolf in her work called *Interpreting Literature With Children* states, “The images do not decorate the text, and the words do not caption the illustrations. Instead, they work hand-in-hand and sometimes in opposition to deliver two kinds of information that together make up a unique message” (2004, p. 228). Accordingly, the use of kid-friendly language

and drawings in *We are water protectors* fosters ecological imagination, thereby enhancing their comprehension of nature, as well as their obligations and relationships to it. The readers also get a deeper grasp of Native American culture and ideas, including the idea that the earth, creatures, and plants should be shared and preserved. In this sense, while Dakota Access Pipeline protesters seem to be presented as the “water protectors,” the character Moana – whose name can be translated as “the ocean” – in Disney’s movie represents the fight of the Pacific Islanders against climate change and the collapse of the food systems (Rampell, 2016). Both stories bring a deep sensibility and understanding of nature, particularly water, which sustains life and thereby demonstrates one of the practices of socially and emotionally engaged literacy.

4. CONCLUSION

The environmental crisis already affecting every element of life on the planet is worsening. At the intersection of the environment and society, sustainability themes such as food systems, demand for energy and waste and resource use come forward addressing global concerns. Water is one example of an environmental sustainability theme that spans all areas and allows children and young adults to delve further into a specific field of significance and interest. Over a billion people worldwide are impacted by the global challenge of inadequate water supply (Ashcraft & Mayer, 2017). Sustainability challenges associated with population growth, climate change, land use, energy choices, and global poverty are some of the issues to be addressed to increase water quantity, availability, and quality around the world. When children are exposed to more environmental situations, they can develop an early sense of responsibility and sensibility for the planet and make an impact to tackle these global challenges. To this end, it is of significance to promote a capacity for eco-intelligence as well as social and emotional intelligence from elementary and secondary schools through colleges and universities, as well as continuing education and professional development. In this sense, the need for environmental narratives, including popular art media accessible to people of all ages, to empathize with the interconnectedness of humanity with nature is crucial. According to Lawrence Buell (2001), environmental narratives can serve as a platform for educating people about ecosystems and encouraging them to actively protect them.

Through the stories of *Moana* and *We are water protectors*, we see examples of putting engaged ecoliteracy into practice. Devoted to safeguarding the environment, Walt Disney perfectly encapsulates the mission of eco-literature exploring the connection between humans and the environment. Thus, one can conclude that the movie helps audiences understand environmental issues and encourages environmental advocacy as well as an appreciation for sustainability. We can easily identify similarities between the movie *Moana* and the

picturebook *We are water protectors*, which can make a critical contribution to rethinking how we teach our children about their place in nature. Ecological literacy brings hope as nature can provide “the guidance and inspiration that we need to design and maintain healthy, sustainable communities,” as Stone puts it (2017, p. 47). Hence, there is hope for the future of environmentalism as long as we can find models for a renewed educational emphasis on the study of human interaction with natural systems. Following the principle of *need, not greed* in our consumption and reconsidering our economic systems would lead us to change our lifestyle. Younger generations must rethink what gives their lives purpose because they will be carrying the weight of climate change (Gallay et al., 2020). To conclude, they should be aware of the fact that protecting the planet Earth must be our top priority like the Indigenous ideology and people have been reflecting an ecological sensibility and responsibility throughout human history.

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