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## Cultivating Ecological Empathy: A Literary Journey Through the Seasons

**Abstract:** This article introduces a pedagogical project aimed at cultivating ecological consciousness and empathy in primary and middle school students. In response to the pressing climate crisis and the increasing human-nature disconnect, this initiative proposes a cultural shift in environmental understanding. It employs an interdisciplinary framework, integrating ecopedagogy, ecocriticism, and mindfulness to deepen students' environmental sensibility and underscore the inherent links between human and natural systems. Essentially, this teaching project comprises a series of educational activities and instructional practices designed to build environmental awareness in young learners. The study demonstrates how literature can enhance students' environmental appreciation and highlight the interconnectedness of natural and human populations.

Inspired by the four seasons, the project incorporates various literary forms, predominantly picture books, fairytales, and poems, to engage students. By engaging students in seasonally themed activities – such as investigating river ecosystems in autumn, reflecting on urban environments in winter, encouraging self-exploration in spring, and appreciating nature's wonders in summer – the project aims to cultivate key sustainability competencies.. It prioritizes creative engagement, critical thinking, and a profound appreciation for the planet's delicate equilibrium. Ultimately, this initiative seeks to empower the younger generation to envision and actively pursue a more sustainable and harmonious future by nurturing a deep, literature-informed connection with the natural world.

**Keywords:** Ecopedagogy, Environmental literacy, Empathy, Children's literature, Sustainability education, Mindfulness, Interdisciplinary teaching.

### INTRODUCTION: THE URGENCY OF ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

Our planet faces unprecedented environmental challenges, from escalating climate crises to widespread biodiversity loss. While technological innovations are crucial, a deeper shift in cultural perspective and human-nature

relationships is equally vital. This pedagogical endeavor explores how literature can serve as a powerful tool to nurture ecological consciousness and foster a profound connection between young learners and the natural world, drawing inspiration from the timeless rhythm of the four seasons (Mitsoula & Kalogirou, 2025; Orr, 1992).

For generations, the natural world, particularly the cyclical dance of the seasons, has been interwoven with human existence and cultural understanding. Traditional education is often synchronized with these natural rhythms, with seasonal narratives and outdoor activities playing a significant role in fostering a connection to the environment. Artists and composers, from the evocative symphonies of Vivaldi to Van Gogh's deep personal reflections on nature's shifting palette, have consistently celebrated this harmonious interplay.

However, in contemporary educational discourse, particularly within burgeoning fields like ecopedagogy and environmental mindfulness, the deliberate integration of literary studies into the environmental conversation has often been overlooked. Our project seeks to bridge this gap, proposing a framework where literary engagement becomes a catalyst for cultural transformation and the development of environmentally conscious practices within the classroom. With this study, we would like to start a dialogue regarding the opportunities and responsibilities presented in the literary field to re-orient everyday teaching practice in ways that drive cultural change and engender alternate environmental practices and metaphors within the classroom. regarding the opportunities and responsibilities presented in the literary field to re-orient everyday teaching practice in ways that drive cultural change and engender alternate environmental practices and metaphors within the classroom. We even collaborated with environmental scientists, to ensure our pedagogical strategies are grounded in current scientific understanding of climate change and other ecological shifts.

During the implementation of this project, we found inspiration from Rachel Carson's compelling prose in *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which stands as a seminal work in the history of environmentalism, widely recognized for its profound and lasting impact on public policy and ecological thought. This meticulously researched text functions as a critical exposé of the pervasive and deleterious effects of synthetic pesticides, particularly DDT, on ecosystems and human health. Carson systematically marshaled scientific evidence to demonstrate how these chemical compounds, introduced extensively after World War II, did not merely target specific pests but bio-accumulated through food chains, leading to widespread environmental contamination, declining bird populations, and significant health risks to other species, including humans. Her narrative vividly illustrated the interconnectedness of natural systems, challenging the prevailing anthropocentric view that nature existed solely for human exploitation and could be managed through technological

interventions without consequence. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is renowned for its evocative and urgent prose. One of the most representative excerpts, and arguably the most famous, is the opening "A Fable for Tomorrow" chapter, which sets the tone for the entire book:

*There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh. (Carson, 1962: 2)*

Academically and pedagogically, *Silent Spring* is significant for several reasons. It underscores the importance of interdisciplinary scientific inquiry, connecting toxicology, ecology, and public health by means of a compelling, and at times lyrical, narrative (Oliver & Jurdjevic, 2002). Furthermore, it serves as a foundational text for ecocriticism, prompting literary scholars to examine the representation of environmental issues in literature and the role of writing in shaping ecological consciousness. As Carson, the educators of today and tomorrow must effectively translate complex concepts into a persuasive narrative, demonstrating the power of literature and the arts in fostering ecological understanding and driving societal change concerning environmental stewardship.

#### A SHIFTING REALITY: FROM CLIMATE CHANGE TO CLIMATE CRISIS

The idyllic portrayal of nature often contrasts sharply with the stark realities of our current environmental predicament. As environmental author L. Davenport aptly notes,

*Nature is beautiful, powerful, delicate, fierce, mysterious, and awesome. But nature isn't just outside of us in the trees, fish, clouds, and lakes: We humans are part of nature. We share the same history and we're made from the same elements as everything else on the planet, like hydrogen, oxygen, and phosphorus. We all live in and share the biosphere (Davenport, 2021: 1).*

This inherent interconnectedness underscores the urgency of protecting our shared home.

The term "climate change" has largely been superseded by "climate crisis"; reflecting the intensifying severity of global environmental degradation. Biodiversity is collapsing at an alarming rate, and planetary temperatures are rising at an unprecedented pace. Data from leading scientific bodies like the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023) consistently highlight the gravity of the situation. For instance, the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2021) projects that global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least mid-century under all emissions scenarios. Human activities are undeniably the primary driver, leading to a global average temperature rise of 1.09°C (1.96°F) above pre-industrial levels in the decade 2011–2020. This is pushing us dangerously close to the 1.5°C (2.7°F) threshold, beyond which the risks of severe and irreversible impacts significantly escalate. (World Wildlife Fund & Zoological Society of London, 2024)

The planet's rising temperatures are showing up in undeniable ways, especially through more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Just look at what's been happening: We're seeing more brutal heat waves (Berkeley Earth, 2020). Take July 2021, for example: Kuwait City sizzled at an astounding 53°C (127.4°F). That same summer (2021) Greece baked in temperatures up to 47.1°C (116.8°F), sparking 84 major forest fires that scorched roughly 130,000 hectares (321,000 acres) of land. Then there's the flooding. In July 2021, Germany and other parts of Europe were hit by devastating floods that caused immense damage and tragic loss of life. And don't forget the phenomenon of "rain bombs" (The Economist, 2020). Cities like Phoenix, Arizona, have experienced these intense, sudden downpours, a clear sign of how precipitation patterns are shifting. Beyond headline-grabbing catastrophes, climate change is quietly reshaping our seasons. We're seeing earlier springs, shorter, milder winters, and longer, hotter summers. These changes carry serious weight for human health, crop yields, and the fragile harmony of ecosystems. While abstract scientific data can feel remote, the everyday shifts in weather and seasonal patterns truly hit home for people.

Our project springs from this very disconnect: How can we effectively communicate the urgency and consequences of these environmental shifts to young people? Could literature be a strong way to share this knowledge? Can we use engaging stories to build environmental awareness and help children grasp the transformations happening on our planet and in our seasonal cycles? Ultimately, what impact do we hope children's literature will have on future generations?

#### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: ECOPEDAGOGY, ECOCRITICISM, AND MINDFULNESS

Our interdisciplinary project is rooted in the theoretical frameworks of ecopedagogy, ecocriticism, and mindfulness.

Ecopedagogy, drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire, teaches us that truly "reading the word" is deeply connected to "reading the world". Freire believed that reading isn't just about understanding; it's an active, critical process that

empowers us to act. In this view, nature is seen as inherently balanced, with human activities often being the main source of disruption. Therefore, ecopedagogy helps us understand the intricate links between human actions and both environmental and social harm. Greta Gaard (2009) emphasizes “cultural ecoliteracy”, urging us to critically examine unsustainable cultural practices and cultivate an ethical, balanced approach towards all forms of life. This field aims to help us see ourselves as vital parts of the planet, navigating complex environmental challenges and using various kinds of knowledge.

Meanwhile, ecocriticism delves into the relationship between humanity and nature as shown in literature. While stories have always celebrated nature’s beauty, ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s as a distinct field, shifting its focus to how humans impact the environment. It moves beyond simple appreciation to expose environmental destruction and human responsibility, recognizing that human culture is profoundly woven into the physical world. Unlike traditional literary theory where “world” often refers to society, ecocriticism expands this idea to include the entire ecosphere. This perspective challenges the perceived separation of humans from nature, a divide that has arguably grown wider with technological advancements, leading to nature being seen as something “other”.

By bringing these theoretical perspectives together, we can give teachers and students the essential tools they need to develop sustainability competencies (Goga & Pujol-Valls, 2020). Our goal is to foster a “green literacy” that brings children closer to their environment, recognizing that children’s literature is an especially powerful way to nurture eco-consciousness. We believe in inspiring change from within, focusing on the younger generation who have the natural ability to reshape their thinking and, by extension, the direction of our environmental future (Misiaszek, 2020; Louv, 2005).

Finally, the concept of mindfulness beautifully complements these approaches. Mindfulness is our natural ability to be fully present, and aware of our surroundings and actions without feeling overwhelmed. It’s not a skill you learn, but a state you can access, starting with an awareness of your own body. Our overall project integrates mindfulness practices and uses children’s picture books that embody this philosophy, exploring themes of spiritual disconnection in a world grappling with ecological devastation and a lack of empathy towards nature. Such stories encourage us to look inward and engage with our world in a slower, more intentional way (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, 2015).

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY: CULTIVATING ENGAGEMENT

Our project employs a diverse range of pedagogical methods and creative writing practices to facilitate active engagement with environmental themes. It’s almost impossible to refer to all the theoretical and epistemological assumptions that

academically ground this project within the academic field of Literature Teaching. For this reason, the table below provides an in-a-nutshell overview of the project's core epistemological principles, which we consider easily recognizable and widely accepted by academia. Broadly speaking, literary theory is balanced with didactic practice, guiding it. We begin with the concept of the open work (*opera aperta*), which directly refers to Umberto Eco's semiotics (Kalogirou, 2009) and continue by combining reader-response theories, reception aesthetics, hermeneutics, multiliteracies, digital literacy, soft skills (Douka, 2024), etc.

*Exploring the Poetics of the "Open Work"*: Encouraging multiple interpretations and personal connections to texts.

*Individual and Small Group Reading*: Fostering both personal reflection and collaborative discussion.

*Literature Circle Models*: Structuring engaging discussions around literary texts.

*Fostering Independent Reading*: Encouraging exploration of environmental literature beyond the classroom.

*Reading with "Eyes and Ears"*: Emphasizing sensory engagement with the text and its themes.

*Creative Writing and InterArt Poetics*: Integrating various art forms and creative expressions.

*Digital Tools and Culture*: Utilizing technology to enhance learning and research.

*Democratic, Creative, and Dialectic Eco-Pedagogical Spaces*: Creating inclusive environments where all voices and forms of knowledge are valued.

*Dialogical Equality*: Recognizing and integrating the knowledge and perspectives of both teachers and pupils.

## SEASONAL IMMERSION: ILLUSTRATIVE TEACHING APPROACHES

Our project is structured around the four seasons, recognizing their enduring influence on human life and providing a natural framework for exploring environmental themes. We begin with autumn, aligning with the start of the school year, and conclude with summer, marking its joyous end.

### 1. AUTUMN: THE RIVER'S EVER-CHANGING FLOW. AN ECOCRITICAL, AND MINDFULNESS-BASED ANALYSIS

**Reading:** The lesson begins with Heraclitus's famous adage, "No man can step in the same river twice". Through open-ended questions (e.g., "Is it literal or metaphorical?", "When does a river stop moving?"), pupils explore the concept of flux and the impact of human activity, urbanization, and climate change on river systems. Mary Oliver's poem, entitled *The leaf and the cloud*, then introduces a more emotional connection to the river, allowing pupils to consider its "unfinished story" and their place within it:

What can I say that I have not said before?  
So I'll say it again.  
The leaf has a song in it.  
Stone is the face of patience.  
Inside the river there is an unfinishable story  
and you are somewhere in it  
and it will never end until all ends.

Take your busy heart to the art museum and the  
chamber of commerce  
but take it also to the forest.  
The song you heard singing in the leaf when you  
were a child  
is singing still.  
I am of years lived, so far, seventy-four,  
and the leaf is singing still.

(Oliver,2001)

The poem, a seemingly simple lyric, invites a sophisticated close reading that reveals its intricate formal qualities and profound thematic resonances, particularly when approached through the lenses of Ecocriticism and Mindfulness. The poem, functioning as an autonomous aesthetic object, crafts a powerful statement on perception, presence, and humanity's enduring connection to the natural world. The poem's effectiveness stems from its internal coherence and the skillful deployment of its constituent parts. The opening lines, "What can I say / that I have not said before? / So I'll say it / again," establish a rhetorical frame built on repetition and emphasis. This immediate reiteration signifies the poem's core message as an urgent, timeless truth, rather than a novel insight. This diction sets a tone of quiet insistence, inviting the reader to reconsider fundamental perceptions.

The poem employs vivid, yet unadorned, imagery. The "song" within the leaf and the "face of patience" on the stone are instances of personification and metaphor, imbuing inanimate natural elements with vital, enduring qualities. The "unfinishable story" inside the river functions as a central extended metaphor, representing life's continuous flow and the individual's embeddedness within a larger, perpetual narrative. The phrase "and it will / never end until all ends" introduces a cosmic scope, an apocalyptic undertone that situates the individual narrative within a universal, cyclical framework.

Oliver's use of caesura and enjambment contributes to the poem's rhythm and emphasis. The abrupt line breaks like "The leaf has a / song in it" or "Stone is the / face of patience" force a pause, drawing attention to each image as a discrete, significant entity. The short, declarative statements create a sense of directness and authority, amplifying the poem's exhortation. The parallel structure of "Take your busy / heart to the art museum and to the chamber of commerce / but take it / also to the forest" highlights a central antithesis, contrasting the artificiality

of human institutions with the essential truth of nature. The poem's ending, with the repetition of "and the leaf is / singing still," functions as a volta of affirmation, reinforcing the enduring presence of natural beauty despite the speaker's advanced age, thereby creating a sense of timelessness and continuity. The poem's autotelic nature allows its meaning to emerge from the interplay of these formal and linguistic elements.

Through an ecocritical lens, Oliver's poem actively challenges anthropocentric perspectives and re-centers human experience within the broader ecosphere. The opening question, "What can I say / that I have not said before?," can be read as a lament for humanity's historical failure to heed crucial environmental truths, a critique of ecological amnesia. The poem asserts the intrinsic value and agency of nature: "The leaf has a / song in it," suggesting an inherent vitality and voice independent of human perception. Similarly, "Stone is the / face of patience" portrays geological time and resilience, contrasting with the often frenzied pace of human activity.

The river, as an "unfinishable story" that the reader is "somewhere in," becomes a powerful ecological metaphor. It signifies the deep, often unacknowledged, interconnectedness between human existence and natural processes. The poem deconstructs the notion of humanity as separate from or dominant over nature, instead portraying us as inextricably "somewhere in" its ongoing narrative. The imperative "Take your busy / heart... to the forest" acts as an environmental imperative, a call for direct engagement with the wild, prioritizing it over the cultural and economic realms. This suggests a necessary re-evaluation of human priorities in the face of ecological alienation. The recurring image of the "singing leaf" from childhood to old age serves as a potent symbol of biophilia – the innate human connection to living systems – and the enduring presence of nature's wisdom, even when overlooked. The poem fosters ecological literacy by encouraging readers to "read" the natural world as a text imbued with meaning and agency.

The poem's exhortations are deeply aligned with principles of mindfulness, advocating for a profound shift in present-moment awareness and sensory engagement. The initial rhetorical question and its immediate answer – "So I'll say it / again" – can be interpreted as a mindful prompt: a call to return to the present moment and truly hear what has perhaps been previously overlooked.

The poem encourages a state of attentive presence. The "song" in the leaf and the "patience" of the stone are not merely poetic constructs but invitations to a deeper, more mindful perception of the natural world. It asks the reader to activate senses beyond the superficial. The line "Take your busy / heart... to the forest" is the poem's clearest mindfulness instruction. "Busy heart" symbolizes the distracted, over-stimulated state common in modern life. The antidote is not passive observation but an active relocation of one's core self – the "heart" – to a natural environment. This implies a release from the mental constructs and preoccupations of daily life (art museums, chambers of commerce) in favor of the sensory richness and grounding presence of the forest.

The speaker's reflection on the "song you / heard singing in the leaf when you were a child / is singing / still" speaks to the power of reconnecting with innate wisdom and childlike wonder. Mindfulness often involves shedding preconceived notions and returning to a fresh, immediate experience of reality. The poem suggests that the ability to perceive nature's subtle "song" is not lost but merely dormant, awaiting a mindful awakening. The final lines, acknowledging the speaker's age yet affirming the leaf's continued song, underscore the timelessness of mindful awareness and the perennial availability of nature's solace and truth for those willing to pay attention. This cultivates a sense of interbeing, where the individual consciousness merges with the broader fabric of existence through focused attention.

Mary Oliver's "What can I say" functions as a powerful testament to the enduring power of concise poetic language. Through a close examination of its formal elements, the poem reveals a carefully constructed internal logic emphasizing repetition, vivid imagery, and a compelling rhetorical structure. When these elements are further illuminated by ecocritical perspectives, the poem emerges as a vital call for humanity to re-establish its inherent connection with the natural world, recognizing nature's inherent agency and its embeddedness within the system. Finally, by integrating mindfulness notions, the poem transforms into an exhortation for present-moment awareness and sensory engagement, inviting readers to shed the distractions of modernity and rediscover the timeless truths and solace found in attentive communion with the ecological realm. The poem, therefore, transcends a simple observation, becoming a profound meditation on perception, belonging, and the urgent need for ecological consciousness.

Another interesting choice and resource that was used during our Project is *The River* by Alessandro Sanna (2014), translated by Michael Reynolds. (Image 1)<sup>1</sup>.

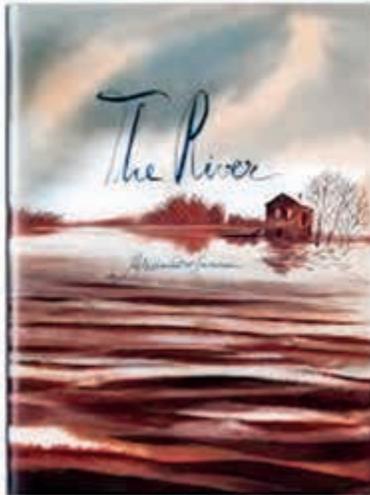


Image 1

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<sup>1</sup> All images featured in this paper are sourced from the respective books, with complete bibliographic references listed in the Bibliography section

Alessandro Sanna's *The River* (2014) represents a compelling case study of the sophisticated artistry and narrative capabilities of the contemporary picture-book as an aesthetic object and a powerful means of communication. It pays tribute to the river Po (in Northern Italy) and wordlessly conveys time, movement, and experience through minimalist watercolor imagery (Salih, 2016). Primarily a wordless narrative, or more accurately, a nearly wordless picture-book given its minimal textual interjections at the beginning of each seasonal chapter, *The River* relies overwhelmingly on its visual grammar to convey meaning, emotion, and temporal progression. This strategic choice positions the work as a rich subject for critical inquiry grounded in picturebook theory.

The book's structure is inherently cyclical, organized into four distinct chapters, each dedicated to a season along Italy's Po River. This seasonal cycle is not merely a backdrop but a central thematic element and a narrative device, mirroring the fluid passage of time and the continuous transformations within both the natural world and human experience. Sanna employs a distinctive visual style, characterized by hundreds of watercolor images presented as full-page spreads or panoramic panels. This consistent use of watercolor imbues the illustrations with a soft, luminous quality, allowing for nuanced color palettes that shift dramatically with each season – from the purples and russets of autumn floods to the blues and crisp whites of winter, and the vibrant golds of summer. The illustrations often feature vast, expressive skies, demonstrating Sanna's mastery of atmospheric perspective and establishing a profound connection between the sky, the river, and the emotional tenor of each section (Image 2).

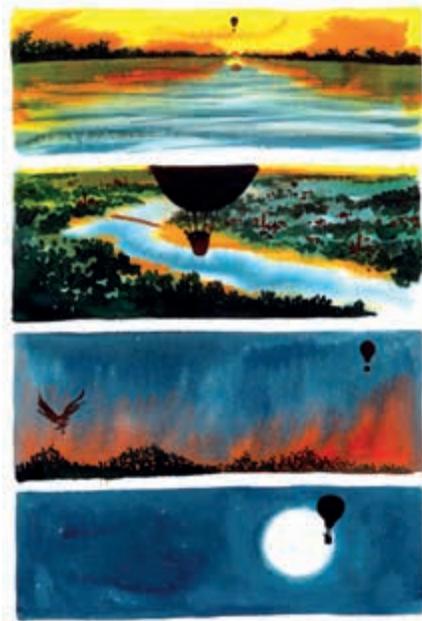


Image 2

A key aspect of Sanna's artistic achievement lies in his ability to create a visual narrative that is simultaneously sweeping in its scope and intimate in its detail. The book transcends simple illustration; it embodies the principle that pictures carry the weight of the narrative (Ramos & Ramos, 2011). The sequential arrangement of images, akin to photographic albums or cinematic frames, necessitates patient attention from the reader, rewarding close observation of the subtle changes in landscape, light, and the incidental vignettes of human and animal life (Image 3). This invites a reader-response engagement that is active and interpretive, as viewers must infer relationships, emotional states, and mini-narratives from the visual cues (Iordanaki & Kalogirou2020).



Image 3

*The River* also engages with the concept of interdependence between verbal and visual text. While minimal, the lyrical prose that prefaces each season provides conceptual anchors, offering clues and setting the emotional tone for the visual unfolding that follows. This creates a synergistic relationship where the sparse text amplifies the visual communication without dictating it, allowing for polyphony in interpretation.

From an ecocritical perspective, *The River* functions as a profound meditation on the human-nature relationship. The river itself acts as a dynamic character, a “pulsating entity” that embodies the resilience and vulnerability of the natural environment. While celebrating the beauty and constancy of nature's rhythms, the book subtly hints at the impact of human presence and the changing climate (e.g., warmer winters, hot summers). It fosters ecological literacy not through an authoritative text, but through immersive visual storytelling that encourages a sensory and empathetic connection to place.

In essence, Sanna's *The River* is a testament to the picturebooks' capacity as an aesthetic object and a potent medium for conveying complex themes of

time, place, and environmental consciousness. Its primarily visual narrative, coupled with strategic textual cues, creates a richly layered reading experience that invites reflection across age groups, positioning it as a significant contribution to both children's literature and the broader field of environmental humanities.

The poetic and visual texts, Mary Oliver's *The Leaf and the Cloud* and Alessandro Sanna's *The River*, offer a powerful gateway for cultivating empathy, awareness, and a deeper connection to the natural world. The following eco-literary activities – focused on primary and middle-level students – aim to bridge environmental literacy with aesthetic appreciation. By combining creative writing, visual storytelling, and reflective practices, these activities invite students to perceive nature as a living presence, understand their embeddedness within ecological systems, and reimagine their relationship with the Earth through imaginative and ethical engagement.

For primary school students, the integration of eco-consciousness begins with fostering a sense of wonder, empathy, and agency toward the natural world. After reading selected verses from Mary Oliver's *The Leaf and the Cloud*, such as "The leaf has a song in it" and "Stone is the face of patience," students are invited to consider nature as alive, expressive, and deserving of care. In a guided activity titled "Voices of the Earth," children choose a natural object – leaf, river, stone, or bird – and imagine what it might say about the world around it. They then write a short poem or letter from this object's perspective, highlighting its role in the ecosystem and any concerns it might have (e.g., pollution, deforestation, being ignored). This helps build biocentric thinking – the idea that nature has value beyond human use.

To deepen eco-consciousness, students engage in a mindful nature walk, where they are asked to "read" the landscape silently, paying attention to small shifts in texture, sound, light, and smell. Back in the classroom, they reflect on what the land might be teaching them. This culminates in a creative drawing or short descriptive paragraph titled "If the River Could Speak" inspired by Oliver's metaphor of the "unfinishable story" inside the river. This exercise helps students consider their place within ecological cycles and understand that environmental stories are ongoing – and they are participants, not bystanders.

Using Alessandro Sanna's *The River*, primary students explore how visual narratives can convey ecological ideas without words. In a collaborative project titled "Seasons of the Earth," students work in small groups to illustrate a four-part story of their local environment changing across the seasons, paying attention to how human activity affects this change (e.g., litter in spring, drought in summer). The project emphasizes interconnectedness, systems thinking, and the idea that human choices shape the living world.

For middle school students, the emphasis shifts toward *critical ecological literacy* and *reflective action*. After analyzing Mary Oliver's poem in depth,

students discuss what she means by “Take your busy heart... to the forest” and reflect on how human routines (school, work, commerce) may distract us from engaging with the Earth’s rhythms. In an activity titled “Eco-Reconnection Journals,” students track their interactions with nature over a week – moments of seeing birds, walking on soil, hearing wind – and reflect on how such encounters affect their mental state. They then compose a reflective essay or poem addressing the question: “*What does it mean to live with ecological awareness today?*”

Inspired by Sanna’s *The River*, middle schoolers explore visual storytelling as eco-activism. After examining how water, time, and seasonal cycles are depicted, students create visual narratives addressing environmental concerns in their own communities – plastic pollution in a local stream, vanishing insects, tree loss, etc. This project, “River Stories, Earth Stories,” teaches them to communicate environmental urgency and beauty through image, tone, and sequence, rather than exposition. Students learn that art, like science, is a powerful vehicle for ecological truth.

In another activity titled “The River as a Living Being,” students draw on the philosophical and ecological implications of Heraclitus’s quote “No man can step in the same river twice.” They write a short story or monologue from the point of view of the river – charting its encounters with industry, wildlife, seasons, children playing, floods, and climate change. This fosters *ecocentric narrative thinking*, encouraging students to imagine the world through non-human perspectives and challenge the human-nature divide.

A final cross-curricular activity, “Environmental Testimonies,” invites students to conduct interviews with older community members about how local rivers, forests, or coasts have changed. They use these testimonies to create a multimedia presentation or eco-poem titled *What the River Remembers*. This promotes intergenerational environmental consciousness, linking personal memory with ecological history and asking: How do we learn from the past to care for the future?

## 2. WINTER: BELONGING TO A LIVING HOME

This winter module explores the concept of “polis” (city) and the often-lost connection between urban living and nature, drawing on ecopedagogy and the New Urbanism movement. New Urbanism represents a vital shift towards more sustainable and community-oriented urban development. Its principles offer a framework for addressing many contemporary urban challenges, particularly those related to environmental impact and social fragmentation. (Congress for the New Urbanism, 2013; Kalogirou, Chourdaki, & Mitsoula, 2025).

Jeannie Baker’s *Belonging* (2004) is a visually compelling wordless picture book that explores the intimate relationship between humans and their natural environment. The narrative follows a young girl as she grows up in a vibrant,

biodiverse urban neighborhood that gradually undergoes significant environmental transformation. Through detailed collage illustrations, Baker contrasts the girl's personal development with the simultaneous loss of natural habitats and green spaces due to urban expansion and environmental degradation (Image 4).



Image 4

The story highlights key ecological themes such as habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and the human impact on ecosystems. It sensitively portrays the tension between development and conservation, emphasizing the importance of ecological stewardship. By inviting readers to witness these changes from a child's perspective, *Belonging* fosters eco-consciousness by encouraging reflection on how everyday life and urban planning choices affect the health of local and global environments.

It serves as a profound visual narrative that complements the theoretical foundations of ecopedagogy and New Urbanism by depicting the evolving relationship between urban spaces and their natural environments. This wordless picture book chronicles the transformation of a city neighborhood over several decades, illustrating the gradual re-emergence of endemic flora and fauna alongside human habitation. Through its detailed and textured artwork, *Belonging* embodies the principles of New Urbanism by emphasizing the integration of natural elements within urban design and fostering a sense of community grounded in ecological awareness.

The book's narrative wordless structure invites readers to engage actively with the visual progression, encouraging close observation and interpretation, which aligns with ecopedagogical goals of fostering critical environmental

literacy and experiential learning (Gruenewald, 2003). By juxtaposing stark urban development with burgeoning greenery, Baker highlights the tensions and potential harmonies between concrete infrastructure and natural ecosystems. This contrast not only underscores the environmental degradation historically associated with urban expansion but also illustrates the possibility of regeneration and coexistence through mindful urban planning (Image 4). As the creator herself indicates<sup>2</sup>:

*In the past, “home” meant not only the building in which a person lived. One’s ‘Home’ also included the street, the landmarks and the special places in the neighbourhood. But now our street spaces are usually so full of cars and their noise and their dangers, people no longer use their streets in the ways they used to. Often people have never even seen or met some of the other people also living in their street. In evolving my ideas for ‘Belonging’ I became conscious of the worldwide movement ‘Reclaim the street’ in which street residents collectively decide they want to stop or dramatically reduce their street traffic so that their street can once again become a place for social interaction, for children, community and plants.*

Moreover, *Belonging* addresses the socio-ecological dimensions of urban living by portraying how natural restoration contributes to social wellbeing and community identity. The presence of native species reclaiming space within the cityscape symbolizes resilience and continuity, reinforcing New Urbanism’s advocacy for human-scaled, diverse, and interconnected neighborhoods that promote both ecological sustainability and social cohesion (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2000). The book’s imagery suggests that urban dwellers can cultivate a renewed “polis,” where environmental stewardship and cultural belonging are intertwined.

In educational contexts, *Belonging* offers a powerful multimodal resource for engaging primary and middle school students in discussions about urban ecology, biodiversity, and the role of individuals and communities in shaping sustainable cities. Its accessible yet layered visual storytelling can inspire activities that encourage observation, reflection, and creativity, fostering an embodied understanding of the complex dynamics between people and place.

Conclusively, Jeannie Baker’s *Belonging* embodies a visual ecocritical narrative that resonates with the core tenets of New Urbanism and ecopedagogy. It not only documents ecological change but also envisions a future urban landscape where nature and society coexist in mutually reinforcing ways, offering a hopeful and instructive model for reimagining the city as a living, evolving organism. It illustrates the gradual return of endemic species to urban neighborhoods over decades, showcasing the interconnectedness of people, their communities, and the evolving landscape. The book subtly highlights contrasts

<sup>2</sup> This is part of an extended review of *Belonging* in *Magpies Magazine*, vol. 9, no 3 July 2004.

between concrete and greenery, light and shadow, and the changing sentiments they evoke.

Designed for both primary and middle school students, the activities presented, based on Jeannie Baker's *Belonging* (2004), encourage learners to critically engage with themes of urban ecology, community, and environmental change. Grounded in ecopedagogical theory and informed by principles of the New Urbanism movement, this approach fosters awareness of sustainable urban development. It cultivates empathy for the natural world within built environments. By adapting prompts and tasks to the developmental stages of younger and older students, the module supports differentiated learning while promoting environmental literacy and active citizenship from early childhood through adolescence.

For the introductory activity, students will be shown carefully chosen photographs of diverse urban environments, prompting open-ended questions. A picture, for instance, might capture a busy city street teeming with cars, bicycles, and pedestrians, or a local park boasting green spaces and playgrounds. Questions to accompany these images could include:

- "What kinds of transportation do you see here?"
- "How do you think people's choices in travel affect the environment?"
- "What do you notice about the green spaces in this area?"
- "How might this place change if more people walked or biked?"

This activity invites learners to consider how everyday choices related to food, energy consumption, transportation, and urban design impact local and global ecosystems. For primary students, questions are simplified and focus on concrete examples from their immediate surroundings, while middle school students engage with more complex, systemic reflections. This approach grounds the exploration of the current climate crisis in familiar, relatable contexts.

In the main activity, students engage with the wordless narrative of Jeannie Baker's *Belonging* to create their own original stories, either individually or collaboratively. Multiple copies of the book are made available to enable close examination of the rich visual detail across its evolving.

For primary students, guided prompts support imaginative and sensory engagement. For example: "Imagine you are 6-year-old Tracy looking out your window. What do you see, hear, or feel? What is changing outside?" This kind of prompt helps children step into the world of the book through personal, sensory-rich experience.

For middle school students, more complex, critical perspectives are encouraged, such as:

- "Imagine you are the building itself. What do you observe about the changes over time in the street and community?"

- “Write a letter to the mayor expressing your hopes or concerns about how your neighborhood is changing”.

These tasks promote empathy, spatial awareness, and ecological thinking by inviting students to consider different viewpoints and environmental transformations.

For younger or less confident writers, a collaborative “story chain” method can be used. In this structure, each student contributes a sentence or idea in turn, gradually building a shared narrative. For example, one student begins with “Tracy opened the curtains”, the next continues “and saw a new tree planted where the old fence used to be”, and so on. This method fosters inclusivity, supports emergent literacy, and encourages cooperative creativity.

During the whole-class plenary, groups or individuals present their completed narratives to their peers. This structured discussion session allows students to reflect on the storytelling process and share key moments from their texts. Teachers may guide the conversation with prompts such as:

- “What surprised you about the changes in the neighborhood?”
- “What message does your story send about the relationship between people and nature?”
- “How did the pictures help you imagine the story?”

This collective reflection promotes critical thinking about the intersections between urban life and the natural environment and highlights the power of visual storytelling in shaping ecological awareness and values.

The reflection phase is designed to support ongoing consideration of how literature and imagery influence perceptions of urban nature. Teachers facilitate age-appropriate discussions, encouraging students to identify personal and community actions that support sustainable urban living. For younger students, reflections may focus on simple daily actions, while middle school students are guided toward deeper ecological and civic engagement. This process helps build a supportive classroom community committed to environmental stewardship.

Overall, these activities provide a flexible and scaffolded pedagogical framework that integrates multimodal literacy, empathy, and social responsibility. They empower students across primary and middle school levels to critically engage with the dynamics of urban ecosystems and their role within them.

### 3. SPRING: A SEASON OF SPELLS AND SPEAKING FOR THE WILD

Robert Macfarlane’s *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* (2017) (Image 5), magnificently illustrated by Jackie Morris, transcends the conventional boundaries of a children’s picturebook to become a profound cultural intervention.

Born from the controversial removal of nature-related words from the Oxford Junior Dictionary, the book functions as both a lament for a diminishing connection to the natural world and a powerful act of literary reclamation. This

analysis will explore the book’s multimodal engagement, its ecocritical underpinnings, its pedagogical implications, and its subversive approach to language and knowledge.

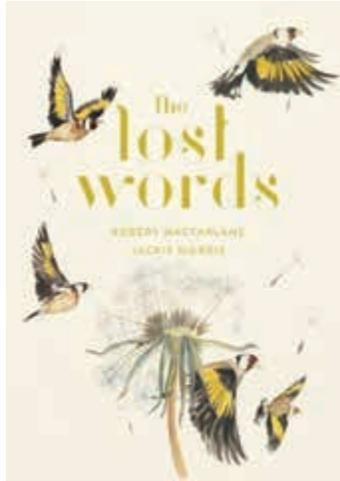


Image 5

*The Lost Words* is a masterclass in multimodal storytelling, where text and image are inextricably linked to create a holistic sensory experience. Macfarlane’s “spells” – deliberately chosen over “poems” – are acrostic verses for twenty “lost” nature words (e.g., acorn, adder, bluebell, dandelion, otter, wren) (Walsh, 2018) (Image 6).



Image 6

These lyrical incantations are designed to be read aloud, emphasizing the oral tradition and the power of pronunciation in “conjuring” the absent entities

back into being. The language is rich with alliteration, assonance, and evocative imagery, mirroring the sensory richness of the natural world it seeks to represent. Here is an example of Macfarlane’s “spells”: Wild-song, briar-song, thorn-song,/ Rapid wren is needle, rapid wren is pin – / Each wren etches, stitches, switches, glitches, yes – /Now you think you see wren, now you know you don’t. (Macfarlane, 2017:1)

What makes this “spell” so effective is:

*Acrostic structure:* The first letter of each line spells out the word, making the word itself integral to the “spell” of conjuring it back.

*Onomatopoeia and alliteration:* Macfarlane uses sounds and repetitive initial sounds to evoke the creature’s characteristics and movements.

*Sensory language:* The words aim to make the reader feel, hear, and almost see the creature in their mind’s eye.

*Emphasis on disappearance/re-conjuring:* The ending often plays on the idea of the word and the creature being elusive, hinting at their lost status and the magic of bringing them back.

Morris’s accompanying illustrations are not mere decorations but active participants in the book’s meaning-making. Each “spell” is accompanied by a triptych of art: a depiction of the creature or plant’s absence (often subtle, a mere outline or negative space), followed by a vibrant, gold-leaf-infused “icon-escape” portrait, and finally, the creature or plant in its natural habitat (Image 7).



Image 7

This visual progression reinforces the narrative of loss and rediscovery, allowing young readers (and adults) to visually grasp the concept of absence and

then celebrate the vibrant presence that the “spell” re-instates. The scale of the book itself, often described as “oversized,” further enhances this immersive experience, inviting readers to physically engage with its contents, much like one might pore over a natural history guide.

At its core, *The Lost Words* is a profoundly ecocritical work that engages with two crucial concepts in environmental psychology: environmental generational amnesia and shifting baseline syndrome. These terms describe how ecological knowledge and memory are progressively lost over generations. As environmental conditions deteriorate, each successive generation regards the increasingly degraded state of nature as “normal”, failing to recognize what has been lost (Kahn, 2002; Pauly, 1995).

Environmental generational amnesia, a term coined by Peter Kahn (2002), refers to the phenomenon where each generation perceives the environment of their childhood as the benchmark of ecological normalcy, regardless of how degraded it may be. As a result, awareness of biodiversity loss, pollution, and ecosystem decline weakens across time. In *The Lost Words*, Macfarlane and Morris confront this directly by illustrating how the removal of nature-related words such as “acorn,” “otter,” and “kingfisher” from a children’s dictionary is not merely a lexical change – it is emblematic of this amnesia. When language fails to include the natural world, it accelerates our psychological and cultural detachment from it.

Closely related is the concept of shifting baseline syndrome, introduced by Daniel Pauly (1995) in the context of fisheries science, which describes how perceptions of environmental health shift over time due to a lack of historical knowledge. Each generation resets the “baseline” for what they perceive as a healthy or abundant natural environment. In the context of *The Lost Words*, this syndrome is made visible through the poetic and artistic reclamation of lost language. The absence of these words from children’s vocabularies reflects how normalized the absence of nature has become in everyday life.

By reinstating these words through poetic “spells” and vivid illustrations, *The Lost Words* attempts to reverse these psychological phenomena. It fosters intergenerational dialogue and ecological literacy, encouraging young readers to recognize, name, and thus care for the natural world around them. In doing so, Macfarlane and Morris challenge the linguistic and conceptual shifts that both reflect and reinforce ecological decline, offering a form of cultural resistance rooted in language and imagination.

The book acts as a counter-narrative to this cultural forgetting. It argues that losing the words for nature means losing the capacity to truly see, understand, and therefore care for it. As Macfarlane himself has stated, “We find it hard to love what we cannot give a name to. And what we do not love we will not save” (Macfarlane, 2015). The “spells” are not simply exercises in vocabulary; they are acts of resistance against ecological illiteracy, designed to re-wild

children's language and, by extension, their imaginations and lived experiences of the outdoors. It challenges the anthropocentric bias that often places human concerns above the natural world's intrinsic value, subtly advocating for a more balanced, interconnected worldview.

*The Lost Words* has a significant impact on educational practices, fostering what can be termed "green literacy" or "nature literacy". Its design encourages active engagement: the scattered letters at the beginning of each "spell" invite children to identify the "lost word", transforming reading into a playful activity. The emphasis on reading aloud, combined with evocative imagery, stimulates sensory perception and emotional connection to natural subjects.

Beyond simple vocabulary acquisition, the book promotes critical thinking about the relationship between language, culture, and environment. It implicitly asks why these words were lost and what the implications of such loss are. This book can be utilized to inspire nature walks, observational drawing, creative writing, and discussions. Its widespread adoption in schools and libraries across various regions underscores its effectiveness in cultivating eco-consciousness and sustainability competencies in young learners. The book encourages a shift from passive consumption of information to active participation in understanding and protecting the environment.

Crucially, *The Lost Words* subverts traditional modes of knowledge transmission. By framing the entries as "spells" rather than dictionary definitions, the authors imbue the words and their subjects with a sense of magic, wonder, and agency. This playful approach contrasts sharply with the often dry, utilitarian nature of dictionary entries, making the learning process enchanting and memorable. The book doesn't just present information; it invites children to participate in an act of "conjuring", transforming them from passive recipients of knowledge into active agents in its retrieval and revitalization.

Furthermore, the book operates as an artifact of cultural preservation. In its physical form – a large, exquisitely produced volume – it becomes an object to be cherished, handled, and returned to, mirroring the value it places on the natural world it depicts. This aesthetic and tactile quality reinforces its message of valuing and preserving what is precious.

*The Lost Words* stands as a landmark picturebook that seamlessly integrates artistic beauty with urgent ecological messaging. Through its multimodal brilliance, its profound ecocritical stance, and its innovative pedagogical approach, it serves as a powerful call to action, urging a re-engagement with the natural world through the re-enchantment of language. It reminds us that words are not merely labels but vital conduits for understanding, connection, and ultimately, care for the planet we inhabit. As such, it is not just a book about lost words, but a potent tool for ensuring they are found and celebrated by future generations.

To extend the transformative potential of *The Lost Words* into educational practice, the following classroom activities are designed for primary and

middle school learners. These exercises align with the book's ecocritical stance, multimodal structure, and literary innovations, offering opportunities for students to rewild their language, imagination, and relationship with the natural world. Rooted in creative pedagogy and critical environmental education, the activities promote linguistic exploration, sensory engagement, and ecological awareness.

A foundational activity involves students compiling their own "lost words" list. In collaborative sessions, students brainstorm nature-related terms they rarely encounter in everyday speech – such as local flora, fauna, landscape features, or weather phenomena. Examples might include words like "dandelion", "histle", or "gale". This process encourages reflection on why such terms are rarely used nowadays, prompting discussions around urbanization, digital lifestyles, and declining outdoor experiences. The act of identifying "lost words" positions students as active participants in the preservation of linguistic biodiversity. The resulting class chart, prominently displayed, becomes a living artifact of the class's growing eco-vocabulary and serves as a resource for subsequent activities. You can see an example below.

Word	Category	Description/Meaning	Why might it be "lost"?
Dandelion	Plant (Flora)	A yellow wildflower common in fields	Often called a weed; less noticed in cities due to lawns and paving
Thistle	Plant (Flora)	A prickly wildflower with purple blooms	Seen as a nuisance, so removed from parks and gardens
Gale	Weather	A very strong wind	Rarely discussed in everyday conversation; more common in literature or weather reports
Hedgehog	Animal (Fauna)	A small spiny mammal that rolls into a ball	Less visible due to habitat loss and urbanization
Bramble	Plant (Flora)	A thorny shrub that produces blackberries	Less known as children play less outdoors
Brook	Landscape	A small stream	"Brook" is an old-fashioned word, replaced by "stream" or "creek"
Heather	Plant (Flora)	A purple-flowering shrub common in moorlands	Less common in urban areas and in daily speech
Moth	Animal (Fauna)	A nocturnal insect attracted to light	Often overshadowed by butterflies in conversation

Building upon their curated word lists, students are then invited to craft original "spells" in the style of Robert Macfarlane's acrostic poems from *The Lost Words*. It is crucial that these creations follow the acrostic form – where each line begins with a successive letter of the chosen word – since this structure is essential to Macfarlane's poetic style and symbolic of bringing "lost" language visibly back into the world. Omitting the acrostic format would undermine the pedagogical and poetic goals of the exercise.

**N A T U R E**

Nestled in the quiet earth,  
Air filled with whispers of leaves,  
Twinkling stars above the woods,  
Underneath, the soft moss grows,  
Rivers sing their endless songs,  
Every creature plays its part.

These “new spells” writing workshops encourage children to infuse their words with sensory richness, emotional depth, and metaphorical power – mirroring the re-enchantment of language seen in *The Lost Words*. The sharing of these spells aloud, whether in small groups or classroom performances, reinforces the oral tradition highlighted in the original work and cultivates a communal atmosphere of storytelling, creativity, and respect for nature.

Finally, students’ completed poems can be compiled into a class anthology – Our Own Spell Book – which serves as a lasting testament to their imaginative engagement with language, poetry, and the environment.

To support this, teachers should provide clear models and scaffolding appropriate to the students’ age. Primary students, for example, may benefit from sentence starters and word banks focused on the five senses – touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste – while middle and upper-grade students can be encouraged to incorporate more sophisticated literary techniques such as metaphor, personification, and alliteration. Emphasis should also be placed on the ecological or emotional resonance of the word being explored, helping students reconnect with the natural world through language.

To deepen this engagement, students keep ongoing Nature Observation Journals. Each child selects a specific plant, animal, or natural feature – such as a schoolyard tree, a common bird, or a changing patch of sky – and records detailed observations over time. Prompts might include sensory reflections (“*What do you smell?*”), emotional responses (“*How does this make you feel?*”), or descriptive challenges (“*What changes have you noticed since last week?*”). These journals foster a quiet attentiveness and a habit of mindful noticing that is essential for ecological literacy. Moreover, they serve as a wellspring for later creative writing or visual representation, reinforcing the interdisciplinary links between science, art, and language.

Narrative creativity is further encouraged through “Lost Words” Story Starters. Teachers offer prompts based on selected words from the book or student-generated lists, such as “*What would happen if ‘acorns’ were truly lost?*” or “*What would a ‘wren’ say if it could speak about its vanishing habitat?*”. These scenarios stimulate speculative and empathetic thinking, asking students to imagine ecological futures or speak from the perspective of

nonhuman life. Such exercises integrate fiction writing with environmental ethics, reinforcing the central premise of *The Lost Words*: that the erasure of words can signal the erasure of worlds.

Visual arts activities provide another dimension to this multimodal pedagogy. One key exercise involves illustrating students' original spells in the triptych format used by Jackie Morris. The left panel depicts the absence or fading of the subject – perhaps through faint outlines, silhouettes, or negative space. The center offers a vibrant, gold-accented portrait, invoking Morris's "icon-esque" aesthetic. The right panel places the subject in a flourishing, detailed natural habitat. This format not only mimics the book's visual structure but also reinforces the narrative of loss and re-emergence through a deeply sensory, symbolic process. Artistic materials such as watercolors, gold markers, and textured paper elevate the creative experience, allowing students to express ecological emotion through form and color.

Complementing this are nature-based craft activities such as mandala-making and collage. Students collect small natural items – twigs, stones, dried leaves – during supervised outdoor walks and arrange them into symbolic patterns that reflect a selected "lost word." This tactile engagement with natural materials fosters a sense of respect and intimacy with the more-than-human world. Teachers are encouraged to frame these activities within sustainability practices, discussing responsible gathering and the ecological significance of each material. Such artmaking extends the book's ethic of attentiveness into material form, promoting both environmental appreciation and artistic expression.

For more three-dimensional engagement, students create dioramas or sculptures using recycled materials to depict their chosen lost word in context. Primary students may build simple habitats using cardboard and paper, while middle school students can be encouraged to construct more intricate ecological scenes, incorporating research into the food webs and ecosystems that support their subject. This hands-on activity encourages systems thinking and a concrete understanding of ecological interdependence while reinforcing principles of reuse and sustainability.

Auditory engagement is foregrounded through the creation of "nature soundscapes." Students listen to curated audio recordings of birdsong, rustling leaves, water flow, and other natural sounds. They then create abstract or representational artworks inspired by these auditory cues. This activity invites a shift from the visual to the sonic, emphasizing the often-overlooked acoustic richness of natural environments. In doing so, it raises awareness of ecological silencing – what Rachel Carson famously called the "silent spring" – and offers an opportunity to reflect on the fragility of soundscapes in an age of ecological disruption.

Field-based and interdisciplinary activities help bring these ideas into the world. A “Lost Words” Scavenger Hunt takes students outdoors – whether to the school grounds or a local park – to search for real-life examples of their chosen words. Equipped with clipboards or field notebooks, students compare their observations with the original illustrations in *The Lost Words*, bridging textual imagination with experiential learning. Conversations may follow on biodiversity, species decline, and the differences between urban and rural ecologies. This exercise grounds abstract discussions in tangible experience and fosters curiosity and care.

Finally, students are invited to take action through the “Bring Back a Word” Campaign. Each child selects one lost word and creates a small advocacy project to reintroduce it into the classroom or community. This may take the form of posters, persuasive letters, mock social media posts, or oral presentations. Schools might even host a “Lost Words Awareness Day,” inviting families and other classes to engage with students’ work. Such initiatives not only reinforce vocabulary acquisition but also empower students to become ambassadors for ecological and linguistic renewal.

Through these interdisciplinary, sensory-rich, and ecologically grounded activities, students become not only readers of *The Lost Words*, but co-creators in its mission. The classroom becomes a space of rewilding – of language, perception, and ecological thought – where the lost is not only remembered but imaginatively reawakened. In doing so, education fulfills its highest purpose: to cultivate attentive, empathetic, and literate citizens who are capable of seeing, naming, and caring for the world around them.

#### 4. SUMMER: SLOWING DOWN WITH NATURE, ECOLOGICAL MINDFULNESS AND SENSORY LITERACY

The final phase of this interdisciplinary project engages with the summer season through Jo Loring-Fisher’s *Taking Time* (2020) (Image 8), a picturebook that harmoniously integrates themes of mindfulness, ecopedagogy, and global ecological awareness. This text provides fertile ground for pedagogical exploration, offering young readers an opportunity to contemplate their relationship with the natural world through both a sensory and ethical lens.

*Taking Time* is notable for its multimodal and affective richness, blending poetic narration with evocative illustrations that depict diverse children from around the globe pausing to observe nature in their immediate environments (Kalogirou, 2021). While the text may be approached through various interpretive frameworks, its ecological significance is central. It gently underscores the fragility and beauty of the cyclical rhythms of nature, conveying a sense of loss that accompanies environmental degradation or disruption of the seasonal cycle.

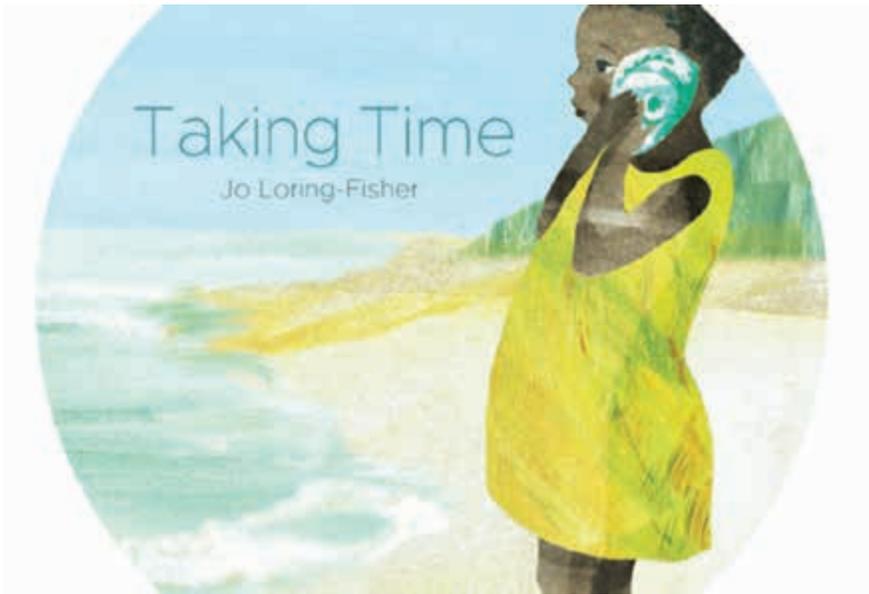


Image 8

At its core, *Taking Time* advocates for a mode of attentiveness that aligns closely with both mindfulness practices and ecocritical literacy. It prompts readers to slow down and engage in a kind of “close reading” of nature – an interpretive and perceptual attentiveness that parallels literary analysis but is directed toward the “open book” of the living world. This practice encourages a deepened sense of presence and fosters emotional and ethical connections to the natural environment. According to Kalogirou (2005) the archetypal perpetual cyclical time of nature lies at the core of this book: “The book invites children to slow down and take their time to gather up the blossom dancing tree, to listen to a bird’s song in the breeze, to watch with awe a spider build her home, etc. [...] In all its visual and verbal manifestations the book celebrates the encompassing beauty and the wisdom of life, the harmonious cyclic rhythm of nature. The child figure is closely connected to nature and totally synchronized with its pulses and rhythms (like the rhythmic purr of a cat in the fifth opening). The book conceives and depicts time as a natural phenomenon; the sun rises and sets, seasons change, sunshine and snow, life and death alternating in nature in which there is generic (not individual) rebirth.

Several key pedagogical and ecocritical themes emerge from the text:

- *Slowness and Perceptual Engagement*: The book invites children to pause, observe, and reflect – a practice increasingly rare in accelerated digital cultures. This slowing down is not only a mindfulness strategy but also an ecological one, emphasizing the value of sustained attention as a means of cultivating care for the world.

- *Sensory Literacy*: Through its poetic structure and vivid imagery, *Taking Time* nurtures an embodied literacy – one in which sight, sound, touch, and emotion are integral to understanding and meaning-making. This aligns with contemporary theories in ecopedagogy that advocate for somatic and affective modes of learning as vital for ecological awareness.
- *Global Interconnection*: The text depicts children from varied cultural and geographical contexts engaging with local nature, reinforcing the idea that while ecosystems differ, the act of noticing and appreciating nature is universal. This supports an ethic of shared responsibility for planetary stewardship and fosters cross-cultural empathy.
- *Celebration of Diversity and Interdependence*: The narrative implicitly celebrates both human and ecological diversity, reminding readers that differences – whether cultural, biological, or seasonal – are essential to the richness and resilience of life.

In this way, *Taking Time* serves as both a literary and ethical tool for educators seeking to integrate ecocritical awareness and mindfulness into summer classroom practices. It provides a reflective and emotionally resonant conclusion to a seasonally structured curriculum that foregrounds ecological literacy, emotional intelligence, and global citizenship. Ultimately, it positions the act of taking time not only as a personal practice but as a political and ecological imperative – a quiet yet powerful resistance to the forces of environmental neglect and cultural disconnection.

Jo Loring-Fisher's *Taking Time* (2020) offers an evocative invitation to slow down and reconnect with the natural world through mindfulness and reflection. Designed for use during the summer months, when children have more opportunities to engage with their environment, the following activities translate the book's themes into developmentally appropriate learning experiences for both primary and middle school students. These activities aim to nurture ecological awareness, emotional literacy, and multimodal expression, fostering a deeper sense of connection to nature and self.

The first activity invites students to create paper crafts based on small natural objects that appear in the book *Taking Time*, such as feathers, leaves, or stones. These are called “keepsakes” because they are special and remind us of a moment in nature. Students will use basic art materials (like paper, scissors, glue, crayons) to make their own versions of these items.

Then, students will imagine: What if this object could speak? What would it say? Younger children can write or say short, simple sentences or rhymes – for example, “I am a leaf dancing in the wind.” Older students can write short poems or monologues (a short speech) from the point of view of the object. They can explore where the object came from, what it has seen in nature, or how it feels about the world. This activity helps students build empathy, imagination, and emotional connection with the natural world. These

are important parts of ecological literacy – understanding and caring about the environment.

Next, the show-and-tell activity invites students to bring in a cherished non-technological object or a photograph thereof, sharing its significance by describing who gave it to them and why it matters. They then write short narratives or reflections expressing their emotional connection to the item. This storytelling is extended through collaborative play, where students swap objects (e.g., temporarily exchanging the seashell for another student's pinecone from a forest walk) or integrate them into a shared imaginative space – such as a “magic garden” named *Paradise* or *Our Mother Planet*. In this collective world, each object is placed with care and given a story – like the seashell becoming a home for a magical sea creature, or the pinecone growing into a talking tree.

To prompt deeper reflection on absence and value, students engage in a visualization task where they draw a planet devoid of their favorite objects or natural elements. This creative exercise encourages them to consider the impact of loss on their imagined world, using color and composition to express emotions such as emptiness or longing. By confronting the idea of what a world without these treasures might feel like, learners develop a heightened awareness of environmental fragility and the importance of conservation.

Building on emotional literacy, pupils participate in a reflective writing activity where they complete prompts like “I feel happy when...” or “I enjoy...” related to their experiences and cherished moments. These individual reflections are then combined into a collaborative class poem, which is displayed to celebrate shared joy and diversity of feeling. This collective poetic assemblage not only strengthens vocabulary and expression but also nurtures a sense of belonging and gratitude, both essential to fostering a caring relationship with the environment.

Drawing on musical inspiration, students listen to “My Favorite Things” from the famous musical movie *The Sound of Music* (1965) directed by Robert Wise and written by Ernest Lehman, to examine how simple joys are catalogued and celebrated. Using this as a model, they create their lists of favorite things, intentionally including natural phenomena, sensory experiences, and non-material joys alongside objects. This exercise enhances auditory and lyrical skills while broadening their understanding of value beyond possessions, reinforcing an appreciation for the intangible richness of their surroundings.

Additional activities further extend these themes. For example, guided nature walks encourage students to engage in mindful observation, focusing on the sensory details of their surroundings, listening to birdsong, feeling the textures of leaves, or noticing subtle seasonal changes. Journaling these observations promotes sustained attention and personal reflection, key skills for ecological literacy. Primary students may draw pictures and label simple

observations, while middle school learners write descriptive paragraphs or short reflective essays.

Another engaging task involves collaborative creation of a “Seasonal Rhythm Calendar,” where students map local seasonal changes using drawings, photographs, or collected natural materials. This visual tool helps them recognize and respect the cyclical nature of ecosystems, reinforcing the book’s emphasis on the circularity of time and ecological processes.

Students can also participate in “Gratitude Circles,” where they verbally share moments of appreciation for nature or relationships, fostering social-emotional learning and strengthening community bonds. This can be complemented by creating “Thank You” notes or posters addressed to the natural world, integrating literacy and environmental ethics.

For an experiential science connection, teachers might guide students in planting a “Slow Garden” with native species that bloom or bear fruit over the summer, providing a living classroom to observe growth and seasonal change firsthand. Students document the garden’s progress through drawings, photos, or diary entries, linking hands-on stewardship with the mindfulness practiced in *Taking Time*.

Lastly, students can engage in mindful movement or yoga sessions outdoors, guided by prompts from the book that emphasize breathing, sensing the environment, and grounding in the present moment. These practices support holistic well-being, connecting physical awareness with ecological mindfulness.

Together, these activities embody the ethos of *Taking Time* by emphasizing attentiveness, emotional connection, and creative expression. They encourage children to slow down, observe closely, and reflect on their relationship with the natural world. By integrating art, writing, storytelling, music, movement, and science, the curriculum supports multimodal learning suited to the developmental stages of primary and middle school students. Moreover, by fostering emotional intelligence alongside ecological awareness, the activities position the classroom as a space where self-care, others, and the planet converge, cultivating the mindful guardianship that *Taking Time* so beautifully advocates.

## A CALL TO ACTION: IMAGINING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

We live in an era characterized by an unprecedented ecological crisis – anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, food insecurity, and forced migration. Addressing these issues demands more than just technological solutions; it calls for a radical cultural shift in how we perceive and interact with the natural world. Within this transformative effort, literature teaching emerges as a vital tool for cultivating ecological awareness and emotional intelligence.

Our pedagogical project situates literature at the heart of this shift by designing a curriculum that incorporates ecopedagogy, mindfulness, and emotional literacy. Through a carefully curated selection of literary texts, both fiction and non-fiction, picturebooks, and poetic works – we guide students from primary until middle school to explore themes of interdependence, care, loss, regeneration, and responsibility. Stories like *The River* by Alessandro Sanna, *Belonging* by Jeannie Baker, *Taking Time* by Jo Loring-Fisher and *The Lost Words* by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris help young readers engage with nature not just as a backdrop but as a co-participant in their lives and learning.

The chosen texts promote eco-consciousness by drawing attention to the beauty and fragility of the natural world while fostering empathy – for animals, for displaced communities, and for future generations. Literature circles, reflective journaling, creative writing, and dialogic reading strategies offer entry points for students to reflect on their relationship with the planet and their capacity to act as stewards of its well-being (Kalogirou, 2012). In doing so, the classroom becomes a space where imagination and action intersect.

As Paulo Freire profoundly observed,

“A peasant who by banking standards was completely ignorant said: ‘Now I see that without man there is no world.’ When the educator responded: ‘Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that all the men on earth were to die, but that the earth itself remained, together with trees, birds, animals, rivers, seas, the stars . . . wouldn’t all this be a world?’ ‘Oh no’, the peasant replied emphatically. ‘There would be no one to say: This is a world’” (Freire, 1970/2005: 82).

Freire reminds us of humanity’s unique ability for self-reflection and the power of naming, imagining, and transforming. It is precisely this human capacity – our ability to dream of a more just and sustainable world – that literature nurtures. Literature opens the door not only to awareness but to agency, inviting young readers to see themselves not as passive observers but as active participants in shaping the future of our planet. By embedding ecological literacy and empathy at the core of literature education, we offer students not only knowledge but hope – and with it, the tools to help restore the balance of the world they will inherit.

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