



# A Reason for Hope

## *Situating Arts Education within Eco-Justice Approaches to Climate Literacy*

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### **Abstract**

Student mental health concerns in a post-Covid world have drawn attention in the field of educational research. The following article theorizes an experience of implementing a professional development workshop in April 2024 to support high school educators as they guide young people toward climate literacy and connect it to student mental health. Feedback from the workshop confirmed that many participants had not intentionally explored the curricular possibilities of addressing climate studies in their classrooms, many were ready to build tangible next steps to cultivating climate literacy in their classrooms.

### **Keywords**

Climate literacy, arts education, student mental health

## Introduction

In April 2024, Minnesota Public Radio reported on the results of a study conducted by the University of Minnesota suggesting many K12 principals in the state face challenges with adolescent mental health: 94% of school administrators report “student mental health challenges are a significant barrier to student learning” (Shockman, 2024). Student mental health concerns in a post-Covid world have drawn attention internationally, especially as a challenging issue steeped in political implications, like reduced federal funding for school support systems (ibid). As former Minnesota K12 teachers now working in teacher education, we found the study's results alarming. This prompted us to consider how our expertise in arts education and climate literacy could contribute to addressing student mental health challenges. In response, we designed a professional development (PD) workshop exploring the intersection of artistic practice, adolescent mental health, and our shared climate future.

The following article theorizes our experience of implementing this PD workshop with high school educators in April 2024; our experiences confirm that when educators consider how to provide opportunities for young people to develop climate literacy while expressing their feelings about climate change, it has the potential to connect to broader conversations around youth mental health. Below, we provide an overview of our project, highlight takeaways from the experience, and end the article by identifying next steps for this project.

## Workshop Design

Guided by research in education highlighting climate literacy and adolescent youth, we partnered with high school educators to explore the following question: what do K12 educators need to know about climate change in order to support their students as they develop climate literacy? Additionally, what would happen if we introduced K12 teachers to stories of hope about a climate future, and gave them tools to develop curricular experiences that stoke a sense of possibility and optimism amongst youth about a climate future? We developed a 120-minute professional development workshop focusing on hope for the climate future. Our goals included getting teachers to think about their own beliefs and feelings about the climate emergency, consider

the impact of “doom and gloom” stories and how they might contribute to emotional stress for adolescent youth, support youth to think about the climate by integrating storytelling and artistic practice into the classroom, and add opportunities to develop climate literacy during the academic year 2024-2025.

### **Considering Our Climate Future**

Using the adage, “[t]here’s room for screaming... and there’s room for dreaming” (Soloski, 2024), we grounded the workshop with an important reminder: in order for teachers to support youth in exploring their feelings about the climate crisis, educators must first understand how they feel about a climate future. As they considered what these ideas meant to their own experiences, we emphasized the multi-dimensionality of climate discourse by highlighting issues beyond “sustainability.” Topics included: challenging human exceptionalism, addressing speculative futures as sustainable futures, questioning the permanence of individualism at the expense of collectivism, valuing the power of regeneration, imagining and experimenting with cohabitation and interdependence between species. We wanted teachers to understand that feelings about a climate future are valid, while also an important part of one’s personal and professional life.

### **From Gloom to Glee: Exploring Students’ Thoughts on a Climate Future**

A goal of the professional development workshop was to give language to feelings associated with the climate emergency, particularly those most impacting today’s adolescent youth, like climate grief and eco-optimism. Providing learning opportunities to explore emotions as part of arts education experiences allows youth to ponder where they fit into climate conversations, especially since youth understand the world through their thoughts, dreams, and emotions: “Having the ability to think long term and dream toward a future is fundamental to youth’s participation in broader community spaces” (Lee, Currie, Saied, & Wright, 2020, p. 5). According to Hickman et al. (2021), when asked for their opinions on the future, over half of more than ten thousand young people surveyed felt that humanity was doomed. This makes sense, given that “[g]lobally, young people increasingly experience eco-anxiety and mental ill-health in response to climate change.” Equally important, “[s]ocietal inequality further

contributes to eco-anxiety in young people” (Woodland, Hassall, Kennedy-Borissow, 2023, p. 5) because young people often feel a lack of agency to address their “heightened awareness of these issues” (ibid). If “a person’s capacity to cope with feelings the [climate] crisis evokes can affect their ability to contribute to much-needed activism” (Diffey, 2022, p. 499), then understanding places around the globe where ecosystems thrive despite significant stressors may be a productive way to approach climate conversation and contribute to a sense of hope about the future.

### **Storytelling, Artistic Practice, and the Promise of Hope**

One way to address climate feelings might be to “help students pose and pursue questions about topics and texts” (Damico, Baildon, & Panos, 2020 p. 685) focusing on the climate through the arts. Leveraging visual and performing arts means youth can experience re-storying their lives to generate new understandings of a planetary future. During the workshop, we asked teachers to consider what youth should know about the climate crisis and connect it to relevant questions about the materiality of artistic practice. Some participants wondered how discipline-specific resource materials unintentionally contribute to climate instability. Dance education scholar Melanie Kloetzel (2023) writes, “we must examine our relationship to both land and other beings and offer an honest accounting of how our daily choices and activities impact both the local and global” (p. 3). Diving into the materiality of a subject matter offers a granular approach to climate literacy, one that is both needed and necessary.

We challenged teachers to think broadly about situating artistic practice in climate conversations. For example, what nearby landmarks hold significant environmental implications, and how can these implications be rendered artistically? What can students learn by examining how local issues, such as transportation or access to health care, can promote climate justice while also disproportionately harming marginalized communities? How can artistic practice support critical thinking about climate justice and its impact on youth’s personal lives?

### **Discussion and Implications**

Investing in a climate future remains paramount in a world pummeled by fractious discourse and misinformation about climate change. Current climate discourse

highlights the urgency for youth to consider ethical and speculative futures as members of a global society facing climate change. And K12 teachers may just hold the answer for how to engage youth in developing their climate literacy. Curricular initiatives that get kids thinking about climate change can be an effective strategy to build their overall climate literacy (Kolenatý, Kroufek, & Činčera, 2022). Yet, “[t]eachers often lack adequate teacher preparation in knowledge and practices for engaging their students to address the climate crisis” (Beach, 2023, p. 507). Thus, we developed an arts-focused professional development workshop for high school teachers ([included in this issue](#) of *Climate Literacy in Education*). The goal was to bring awareness to climate literacy as a curricular pursuit in arts-specific contexts because “[t]he potential of art lies in its ability to generate awakenings to the new world” (Foster and Turkki, 2023, p. 93). Our work introduced arts-specific approaches to climate literacy and strategies youth can take up when creating narratives that confront climate change as part of eco-justice. By taking an arts-focused approach to climate conversation, youth can disrupt dystopic views of climate futures and promote genuine optimism as a viable approach to a balanced ecological future.

Feedback from the workshop confirmed that while some participants understood how the climate emergency impacted their personal lives, many had not intentionally explored the curricular possibilities of addressing climate studies in their classrooms. By the end of the workshop, several educators could identify tangible next steps to cultivating climate literacy in their classrooms, starting in the fall of 2024. One theater teacher committed to developing a “page to stage” production of *Old Enough to Save the Planet* (2021) by Loll Kirby for local elementary school students to highlight how feelings function in climate advocacy. In collaboration with the article authors, this project premiered in May 2025.

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