



“The Next Right Thing”: *Frozen 2* and Youth-Led Activism

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Abstract

In “The Disneyfication of Climate Crisis: Negotiating Responsibility and Climate Action in *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Frozen 2*,” we argue that *Frozen*, *Frozen 2*, and *Moana* encourage young people to identify with princesses who take action against metaphorical climate change. Although the films are hampered by Disney’s own capitalist framework, extratextual discussion and activities can push young viewers past these limitations. This article demonstrates how to use *Frozen 2* as a springboard for effective ecopedagogy in elementary-school settings.

Keywords

[ecopedagogy](#), Disney, [youth participatory action research \(YPAR\)](#), [activism](#), [Frozen](#), [Frozen 2](#), [Moana](#)

In “[The Disneyfication of Climate Crisis: Negotiating Responsibility and Climate Action in *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Frozen 2*](#),” we argue that [Frozen](#), [Frozen 2](#), and [Moana](#) encourage young people to identify with princesses who take action against metaphorical climate change, even if the films do not achieve fully effective [ecopedagogy](#) as defined by scholars such as Moacir Gadotti, Angela Atunes, Richard Kahn, and Greta Gaard. The films themselves are hampered by Disney’s own capitalist framework, but extratextual discussion and activities can push young viewers past the limitations of the films toward a more fully realized and active ecopedagogy. This article focuses on using *Frozen 2* as a springboard for effective ecopedagogy in elementary-school contexts.

Our original “Disneyfication” article is guided by Gaard’s analysis of ecopedagogy, which can be condensed into three questions to ask of children’s environmental media: 1) does it challenge the binary and power imbalance of human/nature?; 2) does a community or solitary child solve the environmental issues?; and 3) does it describe nature as having subjectivity and agency, or is nature passively rescued? (pp. 327–30). As we conclude, *Frozen 2* does particularly well at giving nature its own agency, satisfying the third of Gaard’s criteria. However, *Frozen 2* does not quite meet the

other two criteria. In order to mobilize the film as an effective ecopedagogical tool, the work started in the film must be finished outside of it through discussion, research, and projects.

From the start, expanding on the ecopedagogical potential of *Frozen 2* must be grounded in a willingness to let go of the traditional power associated with adults and teaching. Gaard argues that effective ecopedagogy challenges the binary and power imbalance of humans versus nature as well as the parallel relationship of children versus adults. Therefore, research and activism extending from this film should be youth-led. This means going beyond constructivist principles of education and farther into surrendering adult control over the learning situation. The [Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\)](#) approach offers guidance for adults who want to learn how to put power in the hands of young people to develop more equitable adult-child community partnerships. YPAR is designed with middle and high-school-aged young people in mind, but children in elementary school can achieve similar levels of leadership through an intentionally designed sequence of lessons that utilize P. David Pearson & Margaret C. Gallagher's [model of gradually releasing responsibility](#). Children who are accustomed to top-down structures in their classrooms, especially, will benefit from a slow introduction to having the power to direct research and produce solutions alongside adult collaborators.

The process of gradually helping children recognize their own potential as activists can begin with the modeling present in *Frozen 2* itself. The characters Anna, Elsa, and Kristoff may be much older than elementary school students, but we describe in our “Disneyfication” article how these protagonists are designed to encourage children to identify with them. In order to prompt children to think more about how these characters are problem-solvers, students can be asked to describe how each of these characters recognizes a problem and takes action to resolve it or help another character resolve it.

This conversation can lead into discussion of individual heroism versus community solutions. In our “Disneyfication” article, we show how *Frozen 2* relies too heavily on individual action rather than community activism, which is another of Gaard's criteria for effective ecopedagogy. Pairing the film with nonfiction books about community activism could produce more helpful comparisons about how real people take action and how this looks similar to and different from the action the characters take in the film. Ideally, these books would demonstrate adults and children working side by side rather than “heroic” but isolated celebrity child activists. Examples might include Christina Soontornvat and Rahele Jomepour Bell's [To Change a Planet](#), books about Indigenous community relationships to the natural world such as Traci Sorell and Frane Lessac's [We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga](#), or books about communities in nature such as Tara Kelley and Marie Hermansson's [Listen to the Language of the Trees](#). Teachers might also be tempted by project books such as Penny Arlon, Susuan Hayes, and Pintachan's [The Extraordinary Book That Eats Itself](#), and while having a few such books on hand for students to see as models might be helpful, one of the foundational principles of ecopedagogy is that children develop projects for themselves rather than rely on adults to provide the ideas and materials.

In addition to encouraging activism in young people, *Frozen 2* offers natural opportunities to explore the topics of damage to water and [forest ecosystems](#), [colonial violence](#) against nature

and Indigenous people, and intergenerational responsibility in the real world. However, learning more about the real versions of environmental damage or colonial violence may elicit big emotions. Here, again, the potency of using *Frozen 2* characters as models comes into play. Anna’s song “The Next Right Thing” would be a powerful way to model dealing with the unpleasant emotions that come along with damage, violence, and accepting responsibility. [Environmental destruction](#) and failed attempts at fixing it may produce strong [climate emotions](#) in children, including sadness or hopelessness, especially if the destruction in question has led to sickness or death for people or animals. Children may have heard adults complaining that environmental problems are too big or someone else’s responsibility. Discussing the lyrics of this song and encouraging students to apply Anna’s situation to their own potential feelings—say [climate grief](#) or [climate anxiety](#)—would pair well with social-emotional learning goals and give them additional language for when they may encounter these emotions.

Having discussed their own potential as activists through the lens of *Frozen 2*, students can explore local environmental issues and consider how they can be resolved. Expanding this outside the film means taking the fictional agency depicted in the film, where nature spirits have the power to trap a whole forest and demand help from Elsa, and transferring that fantasy-based concept into conversations about what nature can do in real life and where it needs human help. Just as this framework establishes adults and children as collaborators, the final task is to frame research projects and activism as a collaboration with [nature](#). Some possible resources to begin thinking about this collaboration might include [The White House’s Nature Base Solutions Resource Guide](#), a 43-page document that includes a list of federal priorities for climate change reduction, the [National Environmental Educational Foundation’s Citizen Science initiatives](#) which includes a list of ongoing federal projects that require local volunteers such as tracking butterflies or frogs, or mapping bird habitats, and the [National Science Teaching Association](#) study on climate education in Alaska. While not directly accessible to elementary-aged students, these resources, along with the [Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\)](#), might help guide educators in thinking about student-led collaborative activism.

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