



Critical Dialogue: Climate Literacy in Context

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Abstract

In this conversation Kate Werthwine, a high school English teacher in Pasco County, Florida, and Alexandra Panos, a former middle grades ELA teacher who is currently Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies at the University of South Florida and Editor of *Climate Literacy in Education*, talk about Kate's artwork published in this volume. Kate and Alex discuss how the current laws and policy practices in Florida have impacted the stories that get shared in classrooms, including those that support learners in their own journeys to understand who they are and where they are from.

Keywords

[Florida](#), [zines](#), [place-based education](#), [book banning](#)

Alex

When I think about this piece, the first thing I wonder about is how that bookshelf came to be empty.

Kate

So, last year, the bookshelf was full. It was a classroom library. I had all sorts of books that I had collected in both English and Spanish. At the start of this year, with some of the changes in legislation and different decisions being made at the local level here in Florida [and across the United States, see for example: [Friedman & Tager](#), 2021; [Russel-Brown](#), 2022; [Sachs et. al](#), 2022], the decision at my school and other schools around me—out of an abundance of caution—was to store the classroom library until we got more definitive guidance. So on the first day of school, I had an empty bookcase, which was very different from last year.

Alex

Where are your books?

Kate

My books right now are stored in the reading department. I did get a couple of boxes of books pulled from the book room that the school already okayed. So I now have two bins with some books that students can read in their free time. But the other books that I had collected are still in the reading room which students do not have access to.

Alex

I just have to say this censorship is so deeply heartbreaking, maddening. I'm so sorry this is happening to you and your students. I guess I'm very struck that you are explicitly, or at least to me it feels very explicit, in this piece saying this empty bookshelf is part of climate literacy. Why do you see those things as so interconnected, or juxtaposed?

Kate

I think there's two things that really stand out to me. One is that some of the books I'm waiting to find out if I can put out are stories that touch on [ecojustice](#). But, right now I don't know... can we even talk about those stories? Can we read those stories in our classroom? The other thing is, for me, I know some of those books were stories that helped me as a kid connect with where I live and the environment around me. I see these books as a way for my students to also learn about where we live and connect to the environment around them. Right now, they don't have access to these stories in their place of learning. I think that telling stories and learning the stories about the place where you are is important for not only understanding where you live, but who you are. I think of different books that I read growing up in Florida that were meaningful to me, like [Strawberry Girl](#) (Lenski, 1945/2011) or [Hoot](#) (2002/2019). They helped me understand who was here before me and how this place that I live in came to be. We take these stories, these guides, that teach us about ourselves and the natural world we are a part of with us wherever we go. Right now, it's hard to figure out what stories we are allowed to tell in schools.

Alex

We get stories in so many ways. Books are not the only ways we get stories; certainly they're an important one. I guess it also makes me think about the hidden consequences your empty bookshelf brings up. This legislation is not only about books. It's also about the web pages and news stories and other ways of thinking that the policies and laws in your district and others across the state of Florida (and the US) are navigating and that you're navigating. There is a chilling effect on all of the stories that we get to tell about who and where we are, and where we live. When I think about responding to environmental crises, we need as many stories at our disposal as we can find: to be present, to be with our past, and to imagine new futures together. When laws like these deprive teachers and children of autonomy in the stories they get to tell and share with one another—limiting children's

autonomy to forge new ways of being with one another—this allows climate crisis and climate injustice to perpetuate. The story of your experience is a story that deserves to be told, so thank you for sharing this beautiful piece.

Kate

I think stories are survival guides. I really do. Because that's how we learn from other people. And so right now, just having that sense of not even knowing what stories we can tell is disturbing. What's going to be okay in the classroom to actually use? It's hard trying to navigate all this stuff when we don't have specific guidance. As a teacher, I want to make sure that my students have access to the best things possible and access to the best education possible. Right now, I am on uneven ground. What *can* I do? What *can* I give my students access to? What do we all need, right now? We need survival guides, we need stories.

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