

# ***Children's Literature, Ecocritical Dialogues and Social-Emotional Learning: Developing Integrated Teaching Practices***

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## **Abstract**

An innovative primary teacher education course at the University of Padova combines children's literature, ecocritical dialogues, and social-emotional learning (SEL). It aims to enhance educational quality and prepare teachers for global environmental and social challenges. Developed through the Green Dialogues project, it fosters internationalization and interdisciplinarity. This article examines the course's interdisciplinary teamwork, focusing on its design and teaching methods. A case study highlights the benefits of incorporating ecocritical and SEL approaches in climate action teacher education. The course illustrates how children's stories can foster environmental and social consciousness and empathy among students. This approach not only enhances pedagogical practices but also prepares teachers to contribute meaningfully to climate literacy and social equity in European higher education.

**Keywords:** children's literature, ecocritical thinking and social justice, social-emotional learning, interdisciplinary teamwork, teacher education.

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# 1. Introduction

The landscape of European higher education is at a crossroads: While higher education is contending with complex issues, the potential for transformation over the next few years is enormous. At the heart of this transition is the dual necessity of improving the quality of higher education and the calibre of the future educators it forges. The challenge is to emphasise the critical role of higher education institutions in developing skilled, transformative primary school teachers capable of navigating and contributing to an increasingly complicated and interconnected world (Bonk & Zhu, 2022).

Because of the pressing need to conform with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the global education agenda (Griebeler, Brandli, Salvia, Leal Filho, & Reginatto, 2022), the quality of higher education in Europe is under scrutiny. The incorporation of the SDGs into curricula demonstrates a trend towards education that, in addition to being academically demanding, is ethically anchored and globally focused. This change calls for novel ways of teaching, learning and conducting research that are interdisciplinary, collaborative and globally engaged (Serafini, de Moura, de Almeida, & de Rezende, 2022).

In this changing landscape, the Green Dialogues project stands out as an example of innovation and is a testament to the power of collaboration among three universities: Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, University of Padova, and Universitat Internacional de Catalunya. This effort combines improved teaching and learning quality, curriculum design and development and the use of cutting-edge teaching and learning methodologies. Green Dialogues, which focuses on dialogic teaching and the development and application of theoretical and didactic perspectives on children's literature relevant to the SDGs, not only deepens teaching and learning practices but also strengthens dialogue among academia, teachers, teachers and students, and students themselves.

This article delineates an interdisciplinary partnership between scholars from two diverse disciplines – children's literature and history of education, and psychology. Both of them are members of the Green Dialogues Research and Teaching Unit at the University of Padova, in the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, which aims to unite under the same umbrella scholars who formally belong to the four discipline sections. We describe the quest to create, test and polish a unique course that combines children's literature, ecocritical dialogues and social-emotional learning (SEL). After presenting the educational context and theoretical framework, we discuss the development of an innovative course that integrates these disciplines. In so doing, we highlight the interdisciplinary and dialogic teamwork that

underpinned this educational effort and provide a thorough study of the course design and the teaching and learning methods developed. We also analyse a case study related to a special assignment, a video analysis, to demonstrate the crucial role that this teaching experience played in masterfully weaving together theories from the course's several modules to establish a precedent for successfully combining children's literature, sustainability, and education. We conclude with some remarks on the significant implications of this integration for the future of teaching and learning, which emphasises the critical role of sustainability and social justice in transforming educational environments.

## **2. Background and Theoretical Perspectives**

The discourse around higher education in Europe is becoming increasingly focused on the themes of sustainability, internationalisation, interdisciplinarity, cooperation and mobility. These components are essential for dismantling academic silos, promoting intercultural dialogue and strengthening students and teachers' sense of a European identity and unity. The shift in European education towards a more collaborative and networked environment is essential to producing teachers who are learned as well as culturally aware and compassionate. Through the promotion of staff and student exchanges, joint research endeavours and coordinated curriculum development, the foundation for a more cohesive and robust European educational network can be established. In addition to improving the standard of teacher education, these initiatives support the overarching objectives of promoting European citizenship and equipping teachers to successfully manage the challenges of global education. Higher education institutions can play a crucial role in shaping a future where education is a driving force for sustainability, inclusivity, and global engagement.

At the same time, the quality of teaching is more relevant than ever in improving the calibre of student teachers. Teachers play a critical role in developing the knowledge, values, and skills of the future generation by acting as change agents (Baker-Doyle, 2017). The demand for high-quality teacher preparation includes a thorough understanding of international concerns, expertise in promoting European citizenship and the capacity to motivate students to become engaged, knowledgeable citizens. The creation of courses that may connect local and global settings is vital, and these courses should provide a learning environment that is dialogic, inclusive, and reflective and conducive to critical thinking (Alexander, 2017). Being collaborative and supportive while dialoguing in class also provides social and emotional benefits. According to the literature, promoting empathy in teachers is critical

for developing compassion and the deep listening and perspective-taking skills necessary for them to develop tolerance, respect and, eventually, an appreciation of cultural and individual differences (Kounenou et al., 2023).

This approach was developed based on an innovative previous teaching experience that integrated ecocriticism (Goga, Guanio-Uluru, Hallås & Nyrnes, 2018) and new materialism perspectives and their educational ramifications in children's literature (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020). In particular, it emphasises the agency and intricate interactions between human and non-human phenomena through a theoretical lens that examines the relationship between literature and the environment (Barad, 2007; Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty, 1996). Through this approach, how children's literature can act according to a multifaceted mode is also critically highlighted: it can foster an educational culture in which narratives serve as catalysts for environmental consciousness, social engagement and can foster new methodological openings in textual and empirical work with children's books for/by/with young audiences (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023). Creating collaborative learning spaces is crucial for engaging in ecocritical discussions about literature (Campagnaro & Goga, 2021). This perspective is linked to the educational purpose of creating debate, participation and communal knowledge among students. It encourages them to study environmental topics and sustainability through literary analysis and debate (Campagnaro & Goga, 2022). Incorporating these arguments into the curriculum fosters a participative and inclusive classroom climate and prepares educators to address complicated environmental issues (Goga & Pujol-Valls, 2020).

In dialoguing about the complex set of interactions that link human beings to the environment and vice versa through the lens of ecocriticism, the role of emotions and consequently the thoughts and behaviours of readers are valued as drivers of possible personal and contextual changes. This aligns with SEL. With reference to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015) model, students with social and emotional competences recognise emotions and manage them effectively, are aware of their social competences, show empathy towards others and use all this knowledge to make responsible decisions that involve the self and others. More than 20 years of research testify to the benefits of this type of education for school success, positive identity development, a positive school climate and reducing at-risk behaviours (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). SEL has recently also been linked to early career education (CE) in the SELCE model as a way to support the development of a positive identity since early ages. This is important because it offers a framework that lays the foundations for achieving sustainable societies (Howard & Ferrari, 2022). In addition, the notion of transformative SEL proposed by Jegers, Ruivas-Drake, and Williams

(2019) emphasises its potential to promote social changes that are aligned with the SDGs. The authors in fact argued that investing effort to cultivate these competences in all children increases inclusiveness across all contexts, helps reduce inequality and promotes social justice. The contribution of the SEL approach can thus only enrich teachers' skills by promoting increasingly effective and incisive dialogues that build ecocritical awareness and management competences.

### **3. From Theory to Practice: The Course Development**

With the desire to engage in quality education that, as per target 4.7 of the SDGs, should ensure that all students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become engaged in sustainable development and social justice, we decided to respond to the Green Dialogues call by proposing a new teaching course for the university-level primary education degree. The decision to develop a new course allowed us to align ourselves with international suggestions that emphasise the need to think of sustainability not as an add-on to existing courses but, as Sterling (2013) stated, the guiding principle for designing new courses. Such courses should propose concepts, content, values, competences and teaching methodologies that are embedded in the sustainability framework from the very outset.

As we moved along this path towards sustainability and in line with the suggestion by Annan-Diab and Molinari (2017), we made interdisciplinarity a reality through the valorisation of our specific academic paths. In fact, the new teaching course, *New Theories and Historical Perspectives in Children's Literature: Sustainability, Social Justice and Cultural Diversity*, intricately blends pedagogy and literature, which are the main fields of study of the first author, with positive and vocational psychology, which are those of the second author, to align closely with the Agenda 2030 principles.

Alongside the investment in individuals, as Leal Filho (2015) contended with respect to the approaches needed to implement sustainability at a university level, the role of the academic environment, both in terms of university policies and those of the primary teacher education degree course (in this case), is crucial. The realisation of this specific course was made possible due to the recent general decision by the University of Padova to become an inclusive, international and sustainable institution and the efforts of the facilitators of the primary teacher education degree course to foster internalisation. The intense work done to make this course available through mobility programmes, which was promoted by the president and the commission for internationalisation, created the ideal conditions to start the

course in this degree program. *New Theories and Historical Perspectives in Children's Literature: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Cultural Diversity* is one of the new courses delivered in English to attract international students and allow Italian students to broaden their horizons, together with courses titled *School Evaluation for Quality Education* and *Social Pedagogy for Global Citizenship*. Our participation in the meetings of the commission for the internationalisation of the course was crucial in initiating our collaboration and developing a common understanding and vision aligned within the internationalisation aims of the institution. At the same time, the opportunity to take part in the *Green Dialogues* project offered us the space to start to gain a reciprocal understanding of our respective fields of teaching and learning, and to explore them in the light of the SDGs and ecocritical dialogue. In a critical meeting during which we shared some of our research, we realized that children's literature was an integral part of both our activities and that we shared the goal of sustainability, particularly with regard to quality education for all and to making inclusiveness in study, life and work contexts a significant outcome. We derived benefit from a continuous process of dialogue and were able to agree on shared goals and methodologies that could find expression in the proposed course, which was activated in the 2022/23 academic year.

The new course comprises two modules of 30 hours each for a total of eight ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and explores cutting-edge perspectives within children's literature. The first module has its roots in children's literature and links it to sustainability, new materialism and imagination. The module *New Theories and Historical Perspectives in Children's Literature: Sustainability, New Materialism & Imagination* has a threefold aim: a) to develop students' aesthetic literacy and enhance their engagement with ecocritical dialogues through the use of challenging picturebooks, aligning closely with the focus on object-oriented criticism, sustainability, social justice and equity in children's literature theory; b) to explore various perspectives on these themes by employing content analysis and video content analysis to deepen students' understanding of the narratives and artistic expressions within picturebooks; c) to design teaching activities that are carefully aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) of the Agenda 2030, ensuring that students not only learn about these important issues but also understand how they can contribute to these global goals through children's literature. The second module focuses on children's positive development and addresses several aspects of diversity. The *Children's Career Education and Cultural Diversity* module aims (a) to address SEL and early career development as crucial ways to foster positive

development among all students; (b) to critically challenge students regarding how SEL and early career education activities can be planned and implemented through the lens of social justice and environmental consciousness to overcome personal and contextual limitations and promote the participation of all in several life contexts; and (c) to discuss how, by taking SEL and career education theories and practices into consideration, children's literature can be critically analysed and dialogue fostered especially within the context of SDGs 4, 10 and 8 (Decent work and economic growth).

The course thus aims to offer students the opportunity to study and analyse children's literature according to a multi-perspective and interdisciplinary research and teaching approach that is capable of strengthening the ability of future teachers to act in complex contexts as agents of change.

#### **4. Learning Activities and Teaching Methods**

The course was first delivered in the second semester of 2023 from March to May, and we are currently running the second edition. Two 3-hour lessons (6 hours per week) were provided weekly. The course was carefully planned in advance: the aims, content, methodologies, assignments and learning assessments were decided about one year before it started. This was essential to allow students with an interest in mobility programmes to learn about the course in the host university well in advance.

We decided on a dynamic student-centred approach in which the students could actively participate in their learning process, take responsibility for setting goals, make decisions and evaluate their progress. To achieve these goals and foster their active participation, the lectures and seminars were regularly followed by discussions and debates that aimed to link the students' new and existing knowledge and to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of what was proposed based on both theoretical perspectives and the students' personal experiences. To broaden the variety of the scientific offering, the students also had the opportunity to attend the conference, *Nature Agency. Teaching Children's literature through Dialogic Practices* in April 2023. This event aimed to improve educational quality and promote international collaboration in environmental children's literature. Recent proposals for children's literature and green dialogues were also discussed, with a focus on dialogic instruction and critical interaction with picturebooks. Moreover, they were able to attend workshops at which they experienced new teaching methodologies on the content of the SDGs. In addition to promoting the cultural diversity dimension, an online seminar on international literature was organised to demonstrate different ways of expression, narrative styles and structures in

picturebooks. Notable among the introduced materials were picturebooks from foreign and European publishing houses, such as Tara Books from India, which is known for their innovative artisanal approach to handmade books that stress materiality. This seminar was consistent with the concepts given in Ana Margarida Ramos' research (2022), which examines how contemporary object-books created by small publishers use materiality to recreate historic creative traditions for modern audiences. These publications retain artisanal features in their production, giving each book a distinct and original cultural character, such as particular paper types, printing procedures and bindings. Special attention was devoted to practice, that is, to the implementation of what was discussed in a school context. Accordingly, case studies were proposed. For example, with regard to SEL, the curriculum developed for primary school in the EU project PsSmile (Sgaramella, Ferrari, & Bortoluzzi, 2022) was analysed, and adaptations to several contexts and children's needs were discussed. The students also had the opportunity to select one of the activities and to plan its adaptation in a real-life situation they were familiar with.

The students' degree of autonomy to control their learning, select topics of interest and make decisions was also promoted via project-based learning. To successfully pass the test, the students were required to complete two assignments and an individual oral examination. The first task was to write an essay of approximately 2000 words on a topic of their choice, in which they had to individually discuss some points of connection covered by two modules in the course. This essay was submitted to a peer and later to the teachers for feedback before finally being discussed in an individual interview. In the second task, the students actively engaged in a group video analysis to emphasise ecocritical and dialogic approaches. Working in pairs (two people per group), the students were tasked with producing a 5-minute ecocritical video analysis on a picturebook of interest. In this case, to make this learning more effective, two feedback sessions were also planned. The first feedback session was provided by peers and the second by teachers. Group work was proposed on several occasions during the course, which constitutes a crucial element of the didactical methodology.

Finally, to promote a reflective process, every two weeks the students were required to answer a few questions on Padlet about what they had learned. This was used by the teachers to monitor their own teaching and to provide the students with feedback on the progress of their learning. The development of reflexivity is considered crucial in today's teacher training. Adopting tools that aim to foster a reflective attitude while simultaneously developing a personal and professional identity is recommended (Crotti, 2017). Reflexivity involves reflecting on actions just completed as well as metareflecting during actions,



and it can be promoted through writing exercises. By fostering critical thinking, reflexivity also provides insights into anticipating possible future changes.

To align with the requirements and aims of the course, we chose to emphasise and, indeed, insisted on the use of teaching methodologies that were capable of re-presenting sustainable contexts and approaches during the teaching action. These modes entailed different levels of sustainable interaction.

The first level concerned the dialogic methodology that was used in the classroom. The classic frontal lecture was frequently replaced with intense interactions and pairwise comparisons, and an analysis of materials produced in European contexts (e.g. teaching units on SEL were examined from both theoretical and practical perspectives). Furthermore, as part of their coursework, students had the opportunity to visit the Library of Women and the Exhibition *Beauty and the World: The New Non-Fiction Picturebook* hosted at the Salaborsa Library in Bologna, with a selection of more than 600 of the most interesting non-fiction picturebooks from all over the world. These educational outings complemented their classroom activities, which involved in-depth studies, selections, and discussions of picturebooks and graphic novels that address gender identity, as well as informational picturebooks from diverse global contexts, analyzed through cultural and geographic lenses (Goga, Iversen, & Teigland, 2021).

The second level related to the importance assigned to the interaction between the students themselves. Through groupwork and peer feedback (e.g. photo identity group work), the students were encouraged to develop a co-constructive critical perspective and to negotiate the meaning of certain teaching activities, pathways, book selections and subsequent interpretations. This methodology is consistent with dialogic pedagogical practices, which prioritise dialogue as a means of facilitating the learning experience (Alexander, 2017). These activities fostered a learning environment that prioritised student agency and expression, which in turn motivated the students to engage critically with both the content of the picturebooks and their peers.

Moreover, the collaborative and creative nature of the groupwork helped the students see themselves as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients. The students were prompted to reflect on questions such as the following:

- How can the ecocritical perspective (sustainability, social justice, equity) in children's literature become an important focus of your teaching?
- How would you discuss these topics with your future students?
- Which theoretical approaches or analytical tools would you consider to initiate a green dialogue with your future students?

Additionally, since the students were required to develop an educational project on green dialogues through children's literature in their future schools, they were asked to consider the following:

- How would you introduce and explain this project to your students?
- Which book or picturebook would you select to start the project, and why?

These reflective questions guided the students to think critically about integrating ecocritical perspectives into their teaching practices. The collaborative assignments not only enhanced the relevance of the learning material but also fostered a sense of community and mutual respect among the students. These practices align with the results reported by Goga and Pujol-Valls (2020), which indicated that incorporating dialogic teaching principles into structured literature conversations can greatly improve the ability of students to analyse texts critically and develop a more profound comprehension of ecological and sustainability issues.

The third level concerned the interactions of the students with the materials, novels and picturebooks and content marked by sustainability and inclusiveness, such as *Ronja, the Robber's Daughter*, by Astrid Lindgren (2018) and *Lucia*, by Roger Olmos (2018). Students were also given the opportunity to engage critically with picturebooks that presented skewed perspectives or reinforced stereotypes. This activity was created to help students to reflect, use critical content analysis methods, and improve their ability to critically analyze texts. As an example, for *The Color Monster* (Llenas, 2018) picturebook, emphasis was placed on critical thinking in reading and deconstructing stereotypical that bent the content according to simplistic views that went so far as to flatten and often nullify the complexity of the human emotional universe and often contradicted most accredited theories. In this picturebook, in fact, emotions are impersonated by a monster that is stereotypically coloured (e.g. anger is red, sadness blue), and the possibility of perceiving more emotions in the same moment is not supported. Moreover, the emotions considered do not seem to refer to any of the five basic emotions proposed by Ekman or the wheel of emotions described by Plutchnik.

## **5. Examining the Pedagogical Implications of an Ecocritical Assignment: A Case Study of *Lucia***

To contextualise an assignment within ecocritical pedagogy (Gaard, 2008) and modern educational paradigms, an assignment, in the form of a video analysis was a powerful and effective critical undertaking that involved the delicate synthesis of picturebook content analysis, ecocriticism, SEL and the pedagogical value of children's literature through a dialogic approach. The

assignment was based on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of prior educational initiatives (Campagnaro & Goga, 2022), and it provided extensive experience of ecocriticism via the prism of children's literature. The chosen methodology, the video analysis, goes beyond ordinary textual critiques to allow for a dynamic intersection of visual literacy, narrative analysis and ecocritical discourse via an active dialogic viewpoint. This assignment aimed to help the students gain a deeper awareness of social and ecological concerns by investigating the potential for these viewpoints to be constructively incorporated into the pedagogical practices of future teachers.

The assignment was structured to be undertaken by the students in pairs or small groups. After introducing themselves and presenting the selected picturebook, which had been carefully chosen for its aesthetic appeal, thought-provoking visual story and the ecocritical analysis of its specific double-page spreads, the students were required to design and present a final educational project that was intended to foster 'green dialogues' in a primary school setting using the selected picturebook. The goal was to emphasise to the students how an ecocritical perspective – one that incorporates sustainability, social justice and cultural diversity – can become important in their future educational practices.

In their video analyses, the students were asked to explain their choice of picturebook by addressing the theoretical methods and analytical tools they would use to establish a green dialogue with students while adhering to the theoretical frameworks provided. This analysis was to be delivered in video format for a maximum of 5 minutes. The video needed to combine ecocritical perspectives with enquiries into social justice topics that drew on theoretical ideas from Campagnaro and Ferrari's lectures and the other academic texts that were discussed in class and listed in the test bibliography for the assignment, as underlined in the paragraph 'Background and Theoretical Perspectives'.

To evaluate the effects of this assignment, we used a previously validated and very effective matrix for analysis (Figure 1). This matrix emphasises aesthetic and ecocritical viewpoints, nature awareness, creative co-creation and communication, which are useful in the assessment process (Campagnaro & Goga, 2022).

Figure 1 -The material green entanglement matrix used to analyse the video assignments

book selected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• title</li> <li>• author/illustrator</li> <li>• publisher</li> <li>• year</li> </ul>
entanglement with the picturebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the picturebook as a background (no interaction)</li> <li>• the picturebook as a witness (simple interaction)</li> <li>• the picturebook as a constructor (strong engagement)</li> </ul>
entanglement with peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• short and linear presentation by each member (one turn)</li> <li>• short and linear presentation by each member (two or more turns)</li> <li>• dialogue in group</li> <li>• hybrid</li> </ul>
entanglement with the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indoors</li> <li>• outdoor nature as background (no interaction)</li> <li>• outdoor interaction with nature</li> <li>• hybrid</li> </ul>
facts of the plot analysed and interpreted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a clear critical, aesthetic, and ecocritical approach</li> <li>• traces of a critical, aesthetic, and ecocritical approach</li> <li>• little or no critical, aesthetic, and ecocritical approach</li> </ul>
suggested eco-didactic project with focus on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• product</li> <li>• process</li> <li>• dialogue</li> <li>• hybrid</li> </ul>

Note. Marnie Campagnaro and Nina Goga ©

This case study goes beyond a mere academic exercise; instead, it is a pedagogical fulcrum for an earth-centric literary investigation and an in-depth examination of the human-nonhuman contradiction. The application of Glotfelty’s ecocritical inquiry (1996) to the examination of picturebooks is thus more than just instructional; it symbolises a pedagogical stance that advocates in favour of a shift in educational practices towards sustainability, inclusion, and ecological ethics.

The case study we selected to present involved two Norwegian students who chose Roger Olmos’ picturebook *Lucia* for their video critical analysis. *Lucia* is an intriguing picturebook about a young child with visual impairment. Her distinct sensory experiences turn everyday sounds and odors into a vibrant explosion of colors and emotions. As Lucia goes about her daily routine, readers are transported into a world seen via of rich, alternate sensory details.

Taking into account the matrix in Figure 1, which can be used to analyse this case study, many elements are discernible. The matrix reveals how the students were able to articulate their ecocritical knowledge as well as critically

evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of including such multidimensional analyses in the educational curriculum.

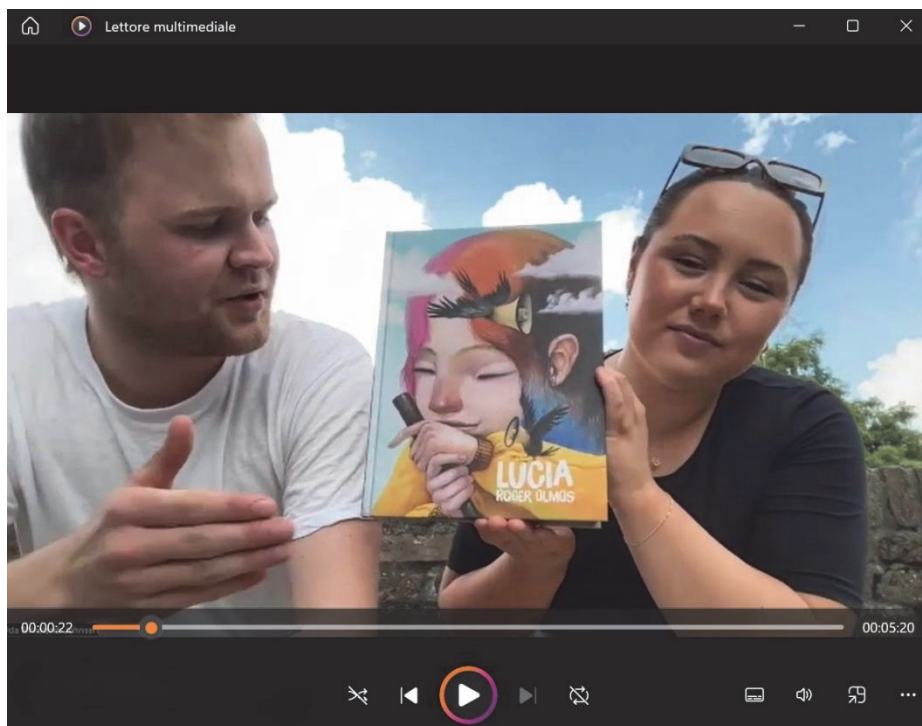
The dimension “entanglement with the environment” and the location that the students selected to film their video analysis are worthy of consideration. Both the students’ video analysis and the picturebook *Lucia* feature strikingly similar backgrounds of vibrant blue skies. This luminous element serves as a deliberate allegorical contrast to the protagonist, Lucia, who is blind. Despite her visual impairment, the choice of such a vivid environment suggests that Lucia may be able to perceive and appreciate colours through other senses. The coincidence in the background colours of the video analysis and picturebook likely occurred by chance, but it highlights a noteworthy similarity in content, particularly the depiction of the clouds. The picturebook’s brilliant blue sky conveys an atmosphere of lightness, which contrasts starkly with Lucia’s darkness and thus emphasises her unique perspective of the world.

In their close reading of Roger Olmos’s picturebook *Lucia*, the two students exhibited “entanglement with the picturebook.” During their video analysis, they continuously interacted with the book by, for example, carefully presenting its cover and introducing the author. They displayed several double-page spreads and always kept the book close at hand and near their bodies. The cover, which features a large portrait of Lucia, the central character, is particularly striking. The students framed Lucia’s serene face, with her eyes closed as if seeing with her imagination an adventurous journey, between their faces. This positioning symbolically incorporated the book into their group. Centrally positioned, “Lucia” effectively became the third member of the group, which underscored the profound connection the students had with the picturebook (Figure 2). Furthermore, a book that focused on inclusiveness functioned as evidence of the inclusivity that the students encountered while discussing it, which made the book both a subject of analysis and an active contributor to the inclusive discourse that it promoted.

With regard to their “peer entanglement”, the students engaged in a vivid and dynamic dialogue with one another. They frequently addressed one another by name and used the name Lucia, which is both the title of the book and the name of the protagonist. They analysed the content, posed questions to one another and commented on the other’s answers by pointing out specific elements of the book. They discussed the illustrator’s visual choices, such as the use of metaphors and symbols, including the presence of a red balloon in the sky on the book’s opening pages. The students commented on the allegorical meaning of this object and related it to the idea of freedom and the metaphorical life journey of Lucia, who navigates the city fearlessly despite her visual impairment. They built comparisons between the text and the visual elements and emphasised the role of imagination and inclusion in everyday life.

In reflecting on Lucia's choices, they remarked, "Since Lucia is blind, she uses all her other senses to create a picture of what the world really looks like . . . She uses hearing to see."

*Figure 2 - The students introducing Lucia as the third member of the group*



In their final effort to develop an eco-didactic project grounded in this work, the students exhibited a noteworthy reflective process. For instance, they questioned whether it was possible to connect the book to ecocriticism. Both agreed that it was and engaged in a close reading of the visual text, arguing that the picture book could indeed be linked to ecocriticism by examining how "the relationship between humans and their environment is portrayed" (e.g., the boy who becomes a smiling flower, the embracing of a tree). Additionally, the students chose to focus on SDG 10: "Reduce inequality". They reflected on their reading practices as teachers in the classroom with children. They asked themselves about the actions they could take, such as turning the pages of picturebooks slowly, showing illustrations carefully and reading the books twice. They pondered, "How can you explain blindness to children?". They

answered this question by using Lucia's story as an example, explaining that "people who have visual impairments use other senses besides sight to understand the world around them." This thoughtful discussion highlighted their ability to integrate environmental, equity and social justice themes into their critical analysis.

Their video critical analysis of *Lucia* revealed various layers of aesthetic, literary and ecocritical meaning. By analysing this picturebook, which surprised the students with its complexity, they were able to elaborate on an aesthetic, ecocritical and pedagogical framework, which invited them to investigate the nuanced realms of disability representation, the interplay of text and imagery and the profound connection with nature. Olmos's tale, which makes no explicit reference to Lucia's visual impairment, provides a framework for debates about disability that go beyond simplistic labels and push for a nuanced understanding based on empathy and inclusivity. Furthermore, the multilingual presentation and deep metaphorical depth of the pictures demonstrate the effective combination of language simplicity and visual complexity, thus allowing for a rich multimodal conversation.

The students' engagement with the work through ecocritical perspectives highlighted the intrinsic ability of literature to generate a deep sense of environmental awareness and empathy. Their research both outlined Lucia's aesthetic and thematic complexities, and critically engaged with the broader implications of such narratives in developing an ecologically conscious and socially inclusive instructional ethos.

This task generated various educational implications and contributions regarding the incorporation of ecocritical pedagogy reflections in our course. It exemplifies the transformative potential of ecocritical pedagogy in the field of children's literature by demonstrating an effective connection between theory and practice using an interdisciplinary and dialogic approach. The analytical activity captured in the video analysis assignment demonstrates how theoretical and methodological frameworks in ecocriticism can be effectively deployed to encourage critical thinking, environmental awareness and social empathy among students. It emphasises the importance of incorporating such interdisciplinary approaches into teacher education programmes and providing future educators with the skills to traverse and convey complex ecological and social topics.

The students' critical engagement with *Lucia* in this assignment emphasises the crucial role of children's literature in driving change towards more sustainable and inclusive educational methods. The assignment aligned with the broader goals of sustainability education by fostering a critical dialogue around themes of disability, environmental ethics and social justice.

Furthermore, it served as a model for incorporating such critical dialogues into the fabric of future pedagogical initiatives.

## 6. Conclusion

Our exploration of New Theories and Historical Perspectives in Children's Literature: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Cultural Diversity revealed that this course was able to navigate children's literature, sustainability, SEL and ecocritical dialogues. The structure of the assignment highlighted in our discussion required critical reflection and comparative analysis. Rooted in posthuman principles and ecocritical literature, it fostered a holistic understanding of knowledge production within children's literature.

Our research background from the joint video analysis assignment underscores the significance of aesthetic, material, emotional and green entanglements in learning. This methodological approach, which integrates video content analysis, contributes to the ongoing discourse on transformative posthuman principles. The presented case study reinforces the course's impact and emphasises the importance of questioning and instilling confidence in students' ideas.

Our experience highlights the course's potential to foster interaction, build environmental awareness and address collaborative challenges. Inclusiveness, disability, and equity emerged as integral themes that can shape positive attitudes toward vulnerable groups. The video assignment's practical application by Norwegian students showcases the relevance of the course principles in real-world contexts. It further underscores the course's success in facilitating collaborative design, environmental awareness, and reflective teaching practices.

Although the new course was originally designed primarily as a teaching space to be implemented as part of the Green Dialogues project and to accommodate only students who were mobile through this dedicated stream up to a maximum of eight students, it was opened to all international and even local students. In light of the experience of this first pilot course, the re-edition of the course saw positive growth, which testifies to its promising future. The course has been attended by students related to the Green Dialogues project as well as numerous other future teachers (from both elementary and secondary schools) from different European countries (Germany, Croatia, Greece, Spain, Norway, Finland) who wished to have an undergraduate teaching experience entirely devoted to teaching practices within school contexts. This confirms that this course is able to intercept their interest in joining the literary and visual dimension with childhood, SEL and sustainability according to a broader



spectrum, which includes the environmental dimension as well as dimensions related to social and cultural contexts of inclusion.

This experience serves as a model for other institutions that are seeking to incorporate topics such as sustainability, equity and social justice into their teacher education frameworks in a dialogic manner through children's literature and the promotion of a strong sense of European identity and citizenship through collaborative teaching methods. Transferring this experience to Italian university classes, although desirable, could pose some challenges due to the high number of students that attend such classes, and this needs to be taken into consideration. It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to maintain the same levels of quality of the methodological and evaluative frameworks that we designed and implemented, particularly since even innovative teaching practices and strong engagement from university professors may not be sufficient in large university classes. Structural resources, such as classroom tutors, could make the difference. The hope is that our experience will provide motivation to move forward with such integrated learning practices.

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