Chapter 3 Commentaries With Paired Teaching Strategies

The following collection of commentaries and paired Green Literacy strategies from our professional development sessions with grades 2–5 teachers is provided here to further support the discussion about selecting and using strategies in chapter 3 of the book, page 57. We start by sharing the commentary, which we wrote and shared with the participating teachers and discussed in a professional development session. This is followed by descriptions of the teaching strategies the teachers paired with each commentary.

A RIVER RAN WILD

We created the following commentary, and the teachers in our sessions read and talked critically about the ideas we wrote about.

Commentary for Personal Narrative of a River

> Unlike traditional personal narratives that require a human life to evaluate, readers have an opportunity to shift their perspective with Lynn Cherry's (1992) *A River Ran Wild*. Readers may take the viewpoint of the animals, the trees, the fish, and the river. Many readers see the river as the protagonist and humans as the antagonists who pollute the river with toxic chemicals and sewage. Readers shift perspective from a person's point of view toward nature's point of view.
>
> *A River Ran Wild* is a personal narrative of the Nashua River and its parallel relationship with people who lived and worked along its shores. Like a botanist's field guide, the mosaic illustrations depict the changes in all living things, such as red-tailed hawks, barred owls, geese, and deer. Young readers see how one species is prevalent in one era, only to become extinct in another. The river's pictorial history lends to the text's significance, which offers insight into ecological change. Each environmental moment connects to a historical moment, and each shows the human impact on the river's health. The story begins with the serene Native Americans who respected the river, moves forward to when colonists claimed the river, and leads up to the industrial era, when toxic chemicals from mills polluted the river, until many decades later, Marion Stoddard and a group of committed individuals cleaned up the river. Stoddard and the Nashua Committee for Concerned Citizens helped pass the Clean Water Bill and restore the river to its natural state.

The teachers were quite interested in the way Lynn Cherry told this story and, during our discussions, reflected that similar tales have occurred over and over across the globe. They expressed the hope that the final part of the tale where the river was restored to health would continue to occur.

Pairing *A River Ran Wild* With Teaching Strategies

In working toward simple comprehension, teachers read *A River Ran Wild*, used the Free Response strategy (see page 66 in the book), and provided time and opportunity for students to view and study the small framing pictures and the magnificent large artwork on each open page. As students shared their responses in small groups and as a class, they integrated aspects of the story they might have missed if they read independently.

To support students in further internalizing *A River Ran Wild*, the teachers asked them to write Dear Agony Letters (see page 66 in the book).

The teachers expressed that the Dear Agony Letter strategy worked well. Their students were able to portray how a Native American was unhappy with the pollution of the river. Other students wrote from the point of view of the river after the industrial period and expressed its unhappiness with the pollution.

To write a Dear Agony Letter, a student chooses one character from the book and writes a letter to Agony explaining what is wrong (see the following example). Then another student responds as Agony. This is a nontraditional way for students to grapple with what characters think and feel and what happens in the story. Each student shared their letters with a small group or the whole class. This strategy reinforces simple comprehension or a mutual knowledge of what happens in each story.

January 5, 1851

Dear Agony,

My name is Oweana, and the river by where I live has gotten too polluted because of the paper mills. The paper is clogging up the river, making it smell. The paper changes the water to whatever color the paper was dyed in the mills. The fish can't live in the river. The birds have stopped making nests in the trees, and the river is dying. Can you please give the Nashuas, my tribe, and me some advice on how to stop the problem? We need as much advice as you can give us.

Yours sincerely,

Oweana

February 1, 1851

Dear Oweana,

I am sorry to hear about your problem, and I have a few ideas on what you can do to fix it. You can start talking to people in your community and see if you can get someone to talk to the people who run the paper mills. Another idea is to protest against the paper mills and not buy paper from them. Remember, though, do not do anything that can cause any harm to anyone or you and your tribe could get in trouble. Another idea is to send letters to the government and ask them for help. Another idea is for you and your tribe to work to clean up the river. By doing this, you may show the paper company that you care, and they may have a change of heart and fix the problem.

Best to you,

Agony

Finally, to hone simple comprehension for *A River Ran Wild*, the teachers paired students to use the Develop a Timeline strategy (see page 67 in the book) to chart what happened to the Nashua River from the preindustrial period to the present. The students studied the pictures or images in the book to create their timeline. In the timeline, teachers encouraged them to describe the image, the event, and the impact of the event on the Nashua River. They asked students to consider how types of

pollution may impact the Nashua River and what may need to be done in the future so that the Nashua River continues to "run wild."

The teachers brought to their class the idea that this is a personal narrative of the Nashua River watershed. Students gave reasons why this seemed accurate to them or not, having to support their reasons with information from the text. A typical student response was, "Yes, I think it is a personal narrative of the Nashua River because it tells the life of the river from when Indians lived there to when it was polluted with mills and finally cleaned up. So it tells the life of the river."

Next, the students chose a time frame from their timeline of the Nashua River and wrote a Dear Character Letter (see page 67 in the book and the following example) from the river as a character in the story at that point in time to the people in the timeframe chosen.

> May 17, 1968
>
> Dear Marion,
>
> Thank you so much for working to restore me to health. I hated being so smelly and polluted. Plus, all the fish that used to swim in me had died and I missed them. I know you did a lot of work to get this done. You traveled to all the towns along the river. You got people to sign petitions. You protested to politicians. You convinced the paper mills to process their waste instead of dumping it into me. Plus new laws were passed so that the factories stopped polluting me.
>
> I am so happy that now I flow cleanly, freely, happily. And people enjoy being in and around me.
>
> Thanks again, forever grateful,
>
> Nashua River

To develop perspective comprehension, the teachers involved students in the Compare Behaviors strategy (see page 67 in the book) with the following steps.

1. In small groups, students completed the chart, comparing the attitudes and actions toward the river by Chief Weeawa's people, the people during the Industrial Revolution, and Marion Stoddard and the people who worked with her.
2. Students explored connections to their own lives and contemplated which of these three kinds of attitudes and behaviors of the characters most resemble their own ideas and why.
3. Teachers pushed students to dig into their own personal experiences so that they could make connections by having them cite evidence from the text.
4. Students considered the questions, *What kind of attitudes, thinking, and actions do we need in the future to continue to keep the river clean? Why do you think so?*

Teachers continued to pose higher-level thinking questions, pushing their students to form individual opinions. Students wrote their opinions and provided support from the text about why they thought this way.

We hope you will try out these engaging reading and writing strategies either with *A River Ran Wild* or another book of your choosing.

SEEDFOLKS

We call *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997) a personal narrative of a project. It shows many points of view about creating a community garden through different character voices. Although *Seedfolks* is realistic

fiction, the way the stories are portrayed by the different characters underscores our concept that individual stories are connected to a larger community story.

Commentary for Personal Narrative of a Project

Seedfolks is a novella that focuses on multicultural urban life and how people hold on to stereotypes of others who are different from them. It is set in an economically challenged, diverse urban neighborhood in Cleveland where neighbors have little trust in each other, especially in those different from themselves. The novel begins with a young Vietnamese American girl planting lima beans in a neglected trash-filled lot to honor her dead father. From this small start, a community garden project transforms the neighborhood into one where people help each other.

A different member of the community tells each chapter in the first person. The reader considers that individual voices are heard but conceptualized against the backdrop of the whole. Not all the voices tell rosy stories; some, especially at the beginning of the book, are bleak. However, each story weaves together to build a community of voices. These voices are male and female from many age groups and ethnic backgrounds. By the end of the book, readers have heard a great diversity of voices developing or observing a neighborhood garden.

Pause and Consider: How does the story demonstrate that working together on a project can change one's point of view?

Pairing *Seedfolks* With Teaching Strategies

In moving toward simple comprehension and criteria comprehension, as a prereading exercise, the teachers, using the Free Response strategy, asked their students to consider the front cover of the book with its many faces. What do these faces represent? What can you predict about the story from looking at the cover? Next, they asked their students why they think the book is titled *Seedfolks*. What words or images come to mind when thinking about the title and the front cover? While they read the book, the teachers had students write their thoughts on sticky notes and keep them for reference. In this way, students began to organize their thoughts so that they would be able to cite evidence in the text quickly when required. Once students finished the book, students discussed what the author says about the title, and they determined an alternative name for the book and their reasons for choosing this alternative. Using the sticky notes they created while reading the book, they cited evidence from the text to support their ideas. For more detailed consideration, some of the teachers in the professional development session asked their students to briefly describe each character and how working in the garden with the other community members affected them by completing a character chart (see the following example).

Person's name	Country from	What drew them to the garden?	Draw a picture.	How did they view people different from them before working in the garden? Why?	How do they view people different from them after working in the garden? Why?
Kim	Vietnam	Honoring her dead father, who had been a farmer in Vietnam		Kim was frightened of people in the neighborhood. When she found Wendell (who is White) watering her beans, she didn't say anything, only "her eyes got even bigger."	In the last unit, we did talk about a girl who was planting beans early the next spring.

Students could complete further rows for other characters, such as Ana, Wendell, Gonzalo, Leona, Sam, Virgil, and Nora.

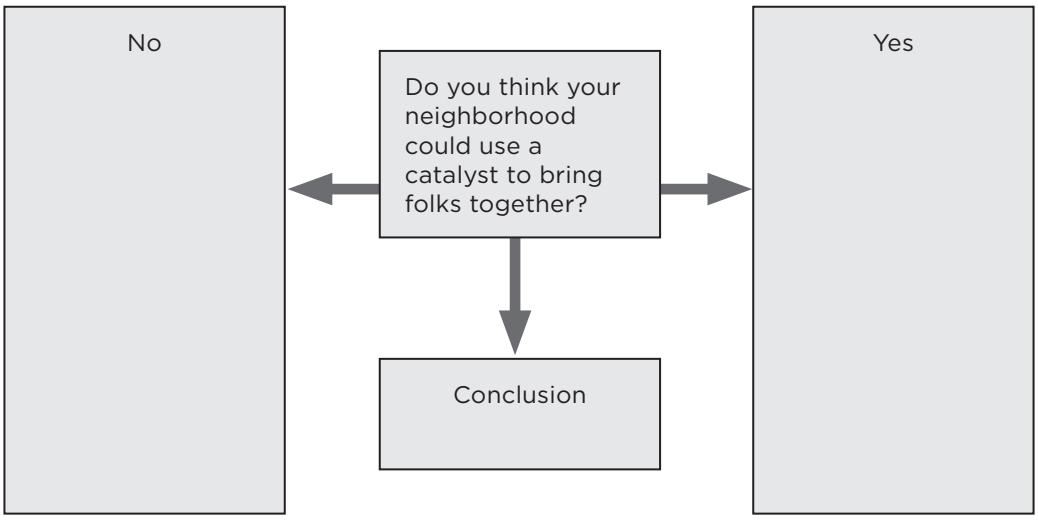
Seedfolks operated as a catalyst to bring together folks in an economically challenged, urban, multicultural neighborhood. As different members of this neighborhood began talking to each other while they worked in the garden, they began breaking stereotypes they held of each other, trusting each other, and helping each other.

In moving toward perspective comprehension, Green Literacy teachers in the professional development sessions readied their students for the Compare Behaviors strategy with the following steps.

1. The teachers led their students as they discussed how the neighborhood garden was a catalyst or change agent that brought folks in the neighborhood together.
2. Students working in pairs considered the questions, Do we see acts of leadership occurring in this community garden? If so, what are they?

For example, a student deemed Leona's initiative to travel to the public health department to request the city to clean up the trash an act of leadership. As the class listed characters' leadership actions, they supported their ideas by drawing from the text in this way.

In gaining perspective comprehension for *Seedfolks*, Green Literacy teachers in the professional development effort also asked their students to consider different sides of this issue before drawing conclusions by using a discussion web (Alvermann, 1991). See the following example.



This strategy uses a graphic display, a discussion web, to scaffold students' thinking about the ideas they contribute around the question, Do you think your neighborhood could use a catalyst to bring folks together? The two sides of this issue took some thinking and reflection on the part of students. Taking the no position, students came up with ways their neighborhood is already cohesive and supportive of different kinds of people or that there is no value in such cohesion, so there is no need for such a catalyst. Taking the yes position, the students gave reasons why a catalyst such as a community garden would be helpful to their community. They used the following process.

1. Students work in pairs to generate the pros and cons of the question on the discussion web, Do you think your neighborhood could use a catalyst to bring folks together?
2. Students may use keywords and phrases to express their ideas and need not fill in all the lines. They should, however, push themselves to list an equal number of pros and cons.
3. Partners combine into groups of four to compare responses and work toward consensus on a conclusion. The teachers explained that it is OK to disagree with other members of the group and to keep an open mind while listening to others. If the group cannot reach consensus, dissenting views may then be offered during the whole-class discussion.
4. After each group has reached a conclusion (or not), the teacher provides each group with three or four minutes to decide which of all the reasons best supports the group's conclusion. A spokesperson reports the consensus conclusion and may give dissenting opinions if any.

The teachers in the sessions shared stories about using the discussion web in their classrooms. They talked about how students saw their neighborhoods differently when it came to feeling connected. In this urban school, many students needed support to learn English as a second language. Walking into classrooms, we saw a mix of students—Black and Puerto Rican students who lived nearby, Latino students, and students from Africa who took buses from across the city.

With such a diverse group, students had unique perspectives on neighborhood life. Some shared stories of strong connections, like neighbors enjoying meals together or helping with after-school babysitting. Others described neighborhoods where families kept to themselves and didn't interact much. Even with these differences, the teachers noticed one thing in common: Students cared about building community. Many loved the idea of a neighborhood garden to bring people together, while some pointed out ways their neighborhoods already felt close, even without a garden.

JANE'S JOURNEY

Jane's Journey (Knauer, 2011) highlights the transformative power of passion and perseverance. We selected this example to show how Jane, far from a "traditional" scientist, followed her deep love for gorillas all the way to Africa. Many doubted that a woman—especially one without a scientific degree—could make a meaningful contribution, yet she defied expectations and succeeded. Her journey demonstrates how passion drives purpose, inspiring young people to pursue their interests and convictions to create meaningful change in the world. Next, we share the commentary for *Jane's Journey*, which is a personal narrative of the woman whose life had great impact on others.

Commentary for a Personal Narrative of an Individual

> Lorenz Knauer's (2011) film, *Jane's Journey*, focuses on primatologist and environmental activist Jane Goodall, who dedicated her life to the natural world and its preservation. In particular, Jane focused much of her time and research on primates, such as chimpanzees. Jane believed in human and primate friendship. This personal narrative is a call to arms for animal and human rights. We consider this a personal narrative of a human and primate friendship. As the film tells the story of Jane Goodall, so the story of primates unfolds. Viewers are also introduced to Jane's Roots and Shoots organization, which connects people and their animal advocacy for a sustainable planet.

The film starts with the seventy-five-year-old Jane reflecting on her life. Through her recollections and film footage, we meet the girl who visited Tanzania to commune with the chimpanzees.

Pause and Consider: How do these brief glimpses into Jane's early career, marriage, and motherhood impact you the reader? What do you think about the major life shifts in Jane's life, such as when she first went to Kenya and when she opened the Jane Goodall Institute in 1986? How did Jane empower people to make positive differences in the lives of all living things, including primates?

The discussion around *Jane's Journey* during the session was animated. Some of the teachers had already watched the video; others relied on the commentary we wrote. The teachers were amazed by Jane's dedication and drive first to go and do her research on the chimpanzees and then to continue to spend her life working to educate others concerning the plight of animals such as chimpanzees due to changes in our Earth's conditions.

Pairing *Jane's Journey* With Teaching Strategies

As action toward simple comprehension and criteria comprehension, while watching the film, the teachers used the Free Response strategy to ask their students to jot down responses to the following open-ended questions about Jane Goodall, her projects, and the people who supported her.

- What does Jane do?
- Who were the people in the different parts of Jane's life that supported her as a child, when she went to Tanzania to study chimpanzees in her twenties, as she conducted many studies of the chimpanzees, and finally, during her life as an activist?
- What projects did she talk about?

Later, moving toward perspective comprehension, in a large-group discussion, the students shared their thoughts and ideas. The students revisited their ideas and gathered in small groups to discuss what motivated Jane to become an activist later in life. Each group made a list of reasons and then compared their lists in the whole group.

The students engaged in a discussion about Jane Goodall's life and the people who supported her. The teachers used the following questions as guidance.

- What were the events in Jane Goodall's life that helped shape her role as an environmental leader?
- How did people support her? How did she seek out support?
- What were the results of her efforts? How did her actions and leadership help change situations in the world?

Finally, the teachers encouraged their students to develop a critical perspective by asking them to journal their ideas through which they connected or compared their lives to Jane's life. The students journaled and shared their ideas of how their perspectives are similar and different from that of Jane Goodall's.

NO ONE IS TOO SMALL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The teachers realized that Greta Thunberg's (2021) *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* provides a powerful and fitting conclusion to the series of books and media they chose. With our guidance, the teachers chose this example to end the series because Greta's youth serves as both a mirror and a window—reflecting the potential within their students and opening the door to new possibilities for how they can see themselves as change makers. In Greta's story, the teachers could see that one young person's vision and persistence can spark global discussion, especially given her proficiency in using social media, a trait of the students in the teachers' classes. From her solo protest outside the

Swedish Parliament to inspiring millions worldwide, Greta demonstrates what is possible when a young person's passion meets action.

As we reflected on the selections the teachers chose from Greta's book of speeches, the narrative invited the teachers and us to consider the profound power of young voices. Could we encourage our students to see themselves in her journey? Her age and determination are a clear reminder that small actions can lead to significant impact. For students who need models of what leadership and courage look like, Greta provides a tangible, relatable example of how they, too, can rise to meet urgent challenges. We invites you to reflect on how we can create spaces for students to step through that door and into a future they help shape.

Commentary for Excerpts of Greta Thunberg's Speeches to Political Leaders

We have chosen four selections from Greta Thunberg's (2021) powerful book of speeches, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, which was listed as a New York Times bestseller. The speeches we chose are "Unpopular," "Our House Is on Fire," "I'm Too Young to Do This," and "You're Acting Like Spoiled, Irresponsible Children." In these speeches, Greta uses expressive and assertive language (what some may consider "pushy") to make her point about the need for clarity about the climate crisis and its urgency. She introduces herself by giving her name, age (fifteen), and her home country (Sweden). She emphasizes that she speaks on behalf of Climate Justice Now, a coalition of organizations advocating for climate justice. She emphasizes the need for clear speaking about the Climate Crisis. Most of these speeches are taken from speeches she made at Climate Change conferences where she was invited to speak. In calling out world leaders for creating an untenable situation for the present younger generation as well as future generations, she also recognizes that less developed countries suffer the greatest climate catastrophes. These speeches emphasize the difficult position in which our present world leaders, especially leaders in privileged societies, are placing the rest of the world.

Some of the teachers used the excerpts provided by us. Others asked their students to read the whole book. You can get copies of *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* if your teaching situation allows it. See page 69 in the book for the commentary we wrote, which includes excerpts from her speeches.

The participating teachers were quite interested in Greta Thunberg. In the discussion, they particularly focused on how she saw her Asperger syndrome diagnosis as a gift. They thought that this lens seemed to have created her focus on what matters to her, which is climate change. Some thought of it as "over focus." Some of the teachers shared their personal experiences, including with students who had Asperger syndrome or were on the autism spectrum.

During the discussion of the commentary, the teachers talked about Greta's use of forceful language concerning what is happening to our earth. This conversation led the teachers and us to develop the teaching strategy Examining Preachiness of Language (see page 68 in the book).

We also shared with the teachers the book *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis* (Thunberg, Thunberg, Ernman, & Ernman, 2020), written by the whole family from the voice of Greta's mother, Malena Ernman. The story tells how the family fought problems at home by listening to Greta and taking global action, including Greta's decision to go on strike from school, igniting a worldwide rebellion. Many of the teachers became interested in finding out how Greta was supported by her family, so they acquired and read this book for their background knowledge, which they shared with the other teachers as well as their students.

The students noted that Greta was the only leader in the unit that was a young person. The teachers reported to us that the short excerpts from Greta's speeches to world leaders at international meetings made an impression on their students. The students found it remarkable that a person as young as Greta was asked to talk to world leaders. The students tuned into the fact that Greta used social media to get attention so that she was invited to speak at global conferences with world leaders. They noted that her message was one of urgency, more so than the message of the leaders in the other books and film. The students made a point of how young Greta was when she gave these speeches. Some of the students mentioned that age did not stop Greta from making a difference, so that idea sunk into the minds of the students of the teachers.

Pairing Excerpts From *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* With Teaching Strategies

Toward simple comprehension and criteria comprehension, the Green Literacy teachers had their classes form small groups of three or four. Over several days, these groups met, read either Thunberg's

speeches or their excerpts to each other, and wrote free responses to their reading. The teachers encouraged these free responses to focus on their reaction to what Greta said in each essay as well as the language she used.

Moving from criteria comprehension to perspective comprehension, the teachers initiated a whole-group discussion, asking each group to share their responses, supporting their ideas by citing evidence from the text. The teachers encouraged each student to consider their own skills. They focused on the differing reasons or points of view brought forth in Greta's speeches. For example, to the question, How did Greta bring attention to the Climate Crisis?, a typical student response was, "She went on strike from school, and she knew how to get media attention for her strike. I know how to use the media more than my parents do."

The teachers explained that when people care a lot about something, such as the Climate Crisis, they may be called "preachy" or "heavy-handed." They considered a text "preachy" when it feels like a lecture. One teacher described a student articulating that she thought that many environmental leaders are labeled as preachy, as environmental leaders often draw attention to grave environmental crises, such as climate change. The teachers expressed that environmental leaders, such as Greta, want people to understand the complex issues and encourage the public to take important action. Using "preachy" language may occur when a writer takes a critical stance and wants readers to understand an issue. The teachers concluded that "preachiness" frequently occurs when the people being addressed have not expanded their vision and that Greta sees this in our world leaders. We led a discussion with the teachers, and the teachers led a similar discussion with their students about how "pushy" or "preachy" language can be negative, especially when it makes the listener feel stupid, defensive, or powerless to create change. They emphasized it is important to recognize the line between speaking strongly and assertively and talking at or down to someone. That assertive communication challenges ideas without shutting people down, while preachy language can close the door to productive conversations. The teachers ended their conversations with their students by noting that Greta's speeches were trying to get people of power to work to figure out a way to change the way the system works.

We shared that when talking to young students about this, we can focus on empathy and respect. Encourage them to think about how their words make others feel. Another way to talk about our environmental crises is to consider both the intent of the speaker as well as the impact of the words. We can each ask ourselves questions like, "How would you feel if someone spoke to you like this?" or "How can you share your thoughts in a way that invites others to listen and respond?" Role playing or analyzing examples can help us practice speaking assertively while staying respectful. This kind of thinking can create strong communication that can open minds rather than close others off.

As authors, we mused on the speech of environmentalists. We think, for example, on a less global level, your father may constantly tell you, "Turn off the lights," which can be irritating when the people involved do not understand that turning off lights conserves energy. Greta takes on more global concerns and the need for everything to change as well as the need to move toward cooperation and collaboration because we are in a climate crisis. We see that Greta Thunberg's way of speaking is one way environmental activists communicate the need for change. While speeches like hers are powerful and inspiring, they're one piece of the bigger picture when it comes to raising awareness and driving action.

We are aware that many environmental activists often share personal experiences or the stories of those impacted by environmental issues to connect with emotions and make the problem feel real. We see them listening to different perspectives and collaborating with others—such as scientists, policymakers, and community members—to build trust and find solutions together. The activists we have observed back their messages with facts, data, and real-world examples to make their case credible and clear. Finally, they lead by example through actions like planting trees, organizing clean-ups, or creating local projects, showing others what's possible and inspiring involvement.

In conclusion, Greta's language is "preachy," and yes, some may feel irritation with what she says. Her urgency underscores the stakes—and her expressing discomfort is exactly what we need to spark action. After the rather long debriefing of Greta's use of preachy language, the teachers began a critical dialogue with their students using the following questions they had developed as a guide:

- Do you agree or disagree that Greta's language is preachy? Why or why not? Explain why you think so.
- Would you think this is still a good book if Greta did not put down the behavior of world leaders? Why or why not?
- What do you think makes a book preachy?
- Why are people turned off by preachy books?

From this conversation, the students began to develop critical comprehension by rating the "preachy" factor of the excerpts from *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*. Deciding whether a book may be too preachy is a complex task. Readers need to question what they are learning and how the author tells it. What do readers infer in terms of information and facts? Greta tells us she is in constant communication with climate scientists and, thus, what she says is accurate. Yet, some criticize her for being too straightforward and simple in her speeches. So, how much of Greta's critical stance does the reader agree with?

Next, the teachers asked their students to move back into their small groups and choose a book to rate in addition to *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* with the Examining Preachiness of Language strategy on a scale of 1 to 5.

Students discussed within peer groups why they rated each book as they did. Then, students supported their ideas with evidence from the two texts. Students had different opinions, and teachers thought this was OK and healthy.

After rating *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* for preachiness and comparing it to the book chosen by the students, the teachers led a whole-class discussion concerning messaging about environmental issues. Students debated if it is important for our messaging not to be heavy-handed or preachy. If not, how can we still get across how vital the environmental matter is? Lively discussions ensued around the question brought up in one classroom by one student about what would happen if she talked as Greta does to her parents or to her teachers. A few felt they could talk as Greta does to at least some of the adults in their lives. Most felt they could not.

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