

Grief, Resilience, and Sustainability: Applying the UNESCO Competency Framework to K. J. Chien's *The Ones Left Behind*

Mariya Azim Khan¹, Aziz Ahmad², Ahmad Zia³

¹ Visiting Faculty, Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan, haya68072@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan, azizahmad@uom.edu.pk

³ maz.hawk710@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v4i1.1383>

Abstract

This paper analyzes K. J. Chien's 2025 short story *The Ones Left Behind* in terms of the UNESCO Competency Framework of Education to Sustainable Development. The paper employs a close reading of *The Ones Left Behind* and illustrates how the story's main character, Grace Chan, applies sustainability competencies in her everyday life. Grace is the proprietor of a family restaurant in Puerto-China, a New York district well-suited to the climate. She has lost her entire family and is now confronted with another foe, a faulty storm-water system that can destroy the mulberry trees that her grandmother planted. The research uses four fundamental competencies: Systems Thinking, Anticipatory, Normative, and Strategic. Besides the core competencies, two secondary competencies have been used, i.e., Collaboration and Self-Awareness. The analysis reveals that Grace pursues the ecological effects of the interdependent systems, acts based on the risks of the future rather than waiting until she is certain, lives by her principles in a world of opposing forces, and takes local action now to fix blocked pipes in the infrastructure. Another instance of collaborative problem-solving is her collaboration with Quique Flores. The paper concludes that sustainability competencies can be made visible in human terms through literary fiction, which can be better understood than through abstract definitions. *The Ones Left Behind* reveals that the concepts of grief, community, and local action cannot be discussed outside of the context of real sustainability practice.

Keywords: UNESCO Competency Framework, Education for Sustainable Development, Climate Adaptation, Community Resilience, Grief and Sustainability

Introduction

K. J. Chien's short story, *The Ones Left Behind*, is not a climate fiction story. There is no countdown to disaster, not a single bad event, no character giving a speech about the state of the planet. We are instead greeted with the plight of a grieving restaurant owner, Grace Chan, in a New York neighborhood called PuertoChina, who is trying to preserve some mulberry trees and a family heritage amidst a broken stormwater system. Climate change has already occurred in this world. The community is dealing with its repercussions, one year at a time, one repair at a time.

This specificity is the reason why the story is a useful object of study. According to the UNESCO Competency Framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), people need the following eight skills to think, act, and contribute responsibly in order to realize a sustainable future: Systems Thinking, Anticipatory, Normative, Strategic, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Self-Awareness, and Integrated Problem-Solving (UNESCO, 2017). This paper suggests that *The Ones Left Behind* is a sustained example of the UNESCO ESD competencies at work. The analysis of Chien's story is used as a case in point of how Grace Chan is a person who is able to exercise a Systems Thinking competency in tracing consequences through complex processes of interconnected ecological and social systems; Anticipatory competency in taking action on possible futures, rather than waiting for them to be certain; Normative competency in maintaining her grandmother's values under pressure; and Strategic competency in

improvising effective local action from limited resources. Two secondary skills are explored as secondary themes, particularly with the relationship between Grace and Quique Flores, and with the gradual, painful understanding that she must continue to live, i.e., Collaboration and Self-Awareness.

It is the primary point of this analysis that literary texts are not an instrument for complementing sustainability education, but rather a space that can be used to discuss sustainability competencies in a manner that transcends definition. Language is provided to us by frameworks. It is stories that put that language in the world.

The paper is structured as follows: A brief overview of the literature and the competencies of ESD is followed by a review of relevant scholarship where the relationship of story and sustainability education is explored, and then followed by a description of the qualitative textual analysis methodology used to read the story. The theoretical section outlines the framework for UNESCO ESD and how it is applicable to Chien's story. The analysis section guides us through six competencies, using specific text passages. The paper ends with a discussion of the educational implications of reading climate fiction from a competency perspective. The study caters to the following two research questions:

- i. How does Grace Chan's response to personal loss and environmental threat demonstrate the Anticipatory, Normative, and Strategic competencies as defined by the UNESCO Competency Framework for Sustainability?
- ii. In what ways does the relationship between Grace and Quique Flores embody the Collaboration and Systems Thinking competencies, and what does their partnership reveal about the role of community in sustaining both ecological and human systems?

Literature Review

For the first time in the study, Wiek et al. (2011) identified the core competencies that individuals need to respond to sustainability challenges. What was so effective about this framework was that it wasn't about what people should know about sustainability; it was about what people should be able to do, how they should think, how they should decide, and how they should act in situations of complexity and uncertainty. According to UNESCO's (2017) learning goals for ESD, competencies are elaborated as measurable outcomes that can be applied at different levels of education, from primary to higher education.

The translation of sustainability education and the potential contribution of the humanities to the translation process is now an emerging research interest. Rieckmann (2018) argues for a way of learning beyond a mere transfer of information, which requires reflection, a degree of experiential involvement, and the capacity to engage with value conflicts in complex ways. This is important for literary analysis because fiction is the genre of text that requires this type of engagement. Megbowon and Uwah (2022) make a similar point in the context of African literary studies, showing how the narrative is the means by which African writers have been able to model a responsible conduct of their communities, which translates to their relationship with each other as responsible parents, educators, and resource managers that is socially sustainable. In their work, they demonstrate how literature has been utilized for a long time to process the ethical dimensions of sustainable living without ever using the term 'sustainability'.

The usefulness of literature to sustainability discourse is not coincidental. Dashe (2019), however, indicates that the narrative and creative approach has not received attention from writers and program managers in the field of sustainability-related projects, which has been used more as a decoration than as a constitutive element. He believes that literature is an essential medium that allows societies to reveal new truths, new paths, and discover new ways of doing things, a concept that is very similar to the UNESCO framework's definition of Anticipatory competency: imagining possible futures and working towards desired ones. Malik et al. (2024) speak about the multiple stresses of population growth, industrialization, and environmental degradation in Pakistan, which indicates that sustainable development requires not only green investments and better agricultural technologies, but also a shift in the mindset of communities towards their land use.

Amitav Ghosh (2016) challenges the reader of serious literary fiction and poses a question: why has serious literary fiction so far failed to deal with climate change, while genre fiction has marched in bold strides into it? The realism of fiction isn't broad enough to capture the scale of climate change, he says. Chien's story does not have this: it is not realist or dystopian, but quietly speculative, with adaptation to climate change

being the way of life. A related strand is explored by Karmakar (2025), who offers a notion of “slow hope” that is ecological, rather than despairing, or overly hopeful, but more grounded and incremental in its approach to engagement with nature. *The Ones Left Behind* is one of these orientations: Grace does not save the world. She saves some trees, and she clears a pipe.

Heise (2008) provides a more general theoretical approach to the study of ecologically engaged fiction, claiming that modern environmental writing is not only about “sense of place” but also about “sense of planet”, i.e., an awareness of local environments as part of a global system. The ecological imagination of Grace Chan is evident in her understanding of the dangers of a blockage in the reservoir to her silkworms and her restaurant, and in how this local knowledge is at once systemic, historical, and forward-looking. According to Waterman (2025), the protagonist’s response to food insecurity, water scarcity, and displacement due to climate change is the subject of Sonia Irum’s study on environmental thought in modern Pakistani fiction. The world of PuertoChina, of floating farms, permeable pavements, and silkworm nurseries, is just this tradition of geographically defined, environmentally based narrative.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative design and a close reading of the text. Qualitative research design was deemed right as the study reads intently, thinks carefully, and makes inferences about the content of the text in terms of human experiences, values, and behaviors. *The Ones Left Behind* by K. J. Chien, published in 2025, has been used as the primary text. UNESCO’s Competency Framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (2017) has been employed as the theoretical framework. This framework offers eight well-defined competencies: Systems Thinking, Anticipatory, Normative, Strategic, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Self-Awareness, and Integrated Problem-Solving. Competencies are clusters of skills that one needs to be responsible and sustainable in the world.

The coding process involves reading the story and identifying and choosing passages, actions, and character decisions that align with one or more of the UNESCO competencies. Each moment in the story is then coded (labeled) according to competency from the framework. For example, when Grace visits the stormwater system to find out more about why water collection is not working in the city, this moment is noted as a Systems Thinking competency. She is discovering the interconnections of systems like mulberry trees, the silkworm nursery, food, and water. The moment she rushes to repair the pipes prior to a heat wave is recorded as Strategic competency: Taking concrete and innovative action to address a sustainability threat at the local level.

This does not set the story structure. It enables the framework to shed light on the story that is already there. The aim is to show how the literary text can be a space of relevance for developing competencies related to sustainability and how the story of Chien can provide a rich description of what competencies look like when they are experienced.

Rationale of the Theoretical Framework

UNESCO’s ESD Competency Framework is the proper analytical framework for this story, for three reasons.

First, the primary text is set in a future city that has already collapsed ecologically. Grace resides in PuertoChina, the NYC neighborhood that has been flooded, infected with epidemics, and hit by heat waves. The community has resorted to floating farms, permeable pavements, and stormwater systems, behind the scenes of sustainability practice. The UNESCO framework was specifically created to study this type of world.

Secondly, the central conflict of the story is not personal conflicts. Grace’s sadness is undeniable, but it’s a very real threat, too: the stormwater system isn’t operating properly, and the mulberry trees her grandmother planted may not survive the next heat wave. Grace needs to consider how things are interconnected, what the consequences will be, act strategically, and collaborate with others. They are not a tangential aspect. These are the events of the story.

Third, the relationship between values and action is explored. Grace doesn’t do things without any thought. She does them because of her ideas about family, continuity, place, and responsibility. Grace’s values are at the core of her character, and she understands and acts on them, even in situations of conflict and

uncertainty, which is her Normative competency. With the support of the UNESCO framework, we have the language to examine this moral component academically.

Anticipatory, Normative, Strategic, and Systems Thinking are selected as core competencies for analysis. Two more competencies are briefly mentioned as secondary themes: Collaboration and Self-Awareness. Critical Thinking and Integrated Problem-Solving competencies are not included in separate sections in the story, but they are present. UNESCO defines Critical Thinking as challenging norms and positioning things in the sustainability discourse. Grace challenges authority, but it's not really of the discourse-level, critical questioning kind; it is of the Strategic competency kind, pushing Issa, the water foreman, to prioritize the repair of the reservoir. Integrated Problem-Solving is the competency that sums up all others; it is best seen as the product of the overall analysis, not a separate theme for analysis.

Analysis

In the analysis, the plot and characters of *The Ones Left Behind* (2025) will be directly related to the selected UNESCO competencies (2017, p. 10). Each competency is discussed in a separate section. In this context, the moral lessons or learning objectives that are taught by the story are discussed at the end of this discussion.

Systems Thinking Competency

The Systems Thinking competency, according to the UNESCO (2017) framework, is defined by the following skills: the skills to identify and see connections; the skills to think about complex systems; the skills to think about how systems are embedded in many different fields and on many different scales; and the skills to cope with uncertainty (p. 10).

This skill is demonstrated by Grace Chan in the narrative but not in an abstract and scholarly sense. She illustrates it by the practical, embodied knowledge of a person raised within a complex system of ecology and social organization and who, through her intuition, is aware that the components of the same are interdependent. This is apparent when Quique tells Grace that the stormwater reservoir in Grand Street is not filling as it ought. Worry is not the answer for Grace. It is a quick mental map of the impacts of the multi-linked systems: The chest of Grace grew tight as she pictured the next two months of heat waves and her grandmother's trees: withered roots beneath the earth, brown and yellow silver leaves, and no use to the silkworms to eat. It was a dreadful omen: a nursery, where there were starving, dead silkworms, a wreck of a restaurant.

This precautionary fear leads Grace to follow a series of interdependencies: storm water system, health of the mulberry tree, leaves, nutrition of silkworms, and viability of the restaurant. She is not aware of these as individual issues. She views them as a chain, and failure of a chain threatens the whole system.

The story has this systems awareness in the wider context as well. The story talks about the changes that have occurred in the city over the decades: "derelict office buildings around the restaurant turning into neighborhood farm plots; workers of New York City replacing concrete sidewalks with permeable pavement to protect PuertoChina against flash storms". Grace has been raised in a city that has had to be forced to re-plan as a system due to climate change. It is not something that she has developed, but rather a bequest, her systems thinking.

The way systems thinking must be able to handle uncertainty is also shown in the story. The failure of the stormwater is not disastrous yet. There is water in the reservoir. In another two weeks, a heat wave could or could not occur. Grace is not waiting until it has happened. She does this immediately to ask because she understands that in a complex system, it is usually too late to wait before a problem actually happens.

Anticipatory Competency

UNESCO (2017) defines Anticipatory competency as the ability to envision and to evaluate different futures, possible, probable, and desirable; to create one's own futures; to apply the precautionary principle; to estimate the effects of actions and to manage risks and changes (p. 10).

It is this ability that characterizes all that Grace does to run the restaurant and maintain the mulberry trees. She does not merely react to what is going on. She reads about the environment all the time to get indications of what could occur, and she acts before issues grow to crises. This is best portrayed when she is conversing

with Issa, who is the water foreman. Issa says that the repair can be delayed as there is still water in the tank and no heat wave is predicted within two weeks, but Grace counters this: “You know the weather’s unpredictable.”

The precautionary principle is in action. Grace will not trust to a probable tomorrow (the weather will be fine; the reservoir will be all right) on which to act. She is insisting on planning for a potential, more terrible future since the cost of erring is too great. She is using the fundamental concepts of anticipatory thinking: something bad could happen, and it can be prevented, and therefore, do it now when the risk is low.

Another anticipatory competency is the skill to have a vision of a good future and strive towards it. The future that Grace desires is clear. It is a thriving restaurant, alive with silkworms, healthy mulberry trees, and a neighborhood that has survived another season. This vision is linked to her past, to the story of Nai Nai, to family history, but in fact, it is future-based. Grace does not strive to retain the past as it is. She is attempting to carry something of the past that is of critical importance to a new habitable future.

The other element of the emotional price of anticipatory thinking can also be found in the story. Grace is not abstractly concerned when she thinks of the faltering of the mulberry trees. The special sorrow of one who has lost too much already and can lose no more comes to her.

Normative Competency

Normative competency outlined by UNESCO (2017) is the capacity to interpret and discuss the norms and values that guide a single action; and to mediate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets within a field of conflict of interests and trade-offs, uncertain knowledge, and contradictions (p. 10).

The behavior of Grace in the story is quite well-founded in a rather unstated set of values. She appreciates intergenerational continuity. She appreciates place and belonging. She appreciates the worth of physical labor. She takes care of the animals she has, and she adores the memory of those who went before her as a guide for what she must do next. To Grace, these are not abstract values. They are embodied in the rites she observes every evening: she places food on the family altar, talks to the photos of her parents and grandparents, sweeps out old ash incense, and puts new sticks. These rituals are acts of normative competence; they are how Grace continues to look back on the values that inform her behavior.

The normative base of Grace can be regarded as the best in a silent dialogue near the end of the story when she and Quique discuss the reasons why both have chosen to stay in PuertoChina despite the challenges: “I don’t want to. I’d miss the neighborhood too much. It feels like a part of me.” Moreover, this sentiment is echoed in Quique, where he explains how the floods took away those who had means and choices and left those who had neither the means nor the wish to go: Everybody else was displaced. We were such a poor family that we could not go anywhere.

Bargaining incompatible values in the state of discord and uncertainty is also a skill to be bargained with, as per the definition of normative competency. This is what Grace experiences when she must make decisions on how to push Issa to get resources. She is aware that Issa is already overstretched, having a burst pipe on Astor Place. It has a real clash of priorities. By tenacity, by the social plausibility of Quique, by the mere strength of her personality, she negotiates and gets enough attention to have the blockage at least noted and addressed. She does not compromise her values when she is under pressure.

Strategic Competency

UNESCO (2017) refers to Strategic competency as the ability to come up and engage in innovative actions jointly, which will further enhance sustainability at the local level and above (p. 10). It is here that Grace acts instead of thinking and feeling. Grace is not waiting until institutional channels take their course when Quique informs her of bad news about the reservoir, on which she says, “Let’s take a walk.” What follows is a definite plan of action. Grace herself visits the water station to find out what has gone wrong and what has caused the blockage. She is aware of the only source she possesses (the intern who already takes pictures of the location of pipes). She takes that resource, uses Quique to assist her, and they literally dig out blocked pipes before the heat wave can strike.

The story is a graphic and unsensitized account of this:

“Grace didn’t wait for him to finish. She picked up a long stick with steel bristles on the end. She snaked it up the pipe and pulled; it stuck. Quique grabbed the

handle and together, they yanked out the debris from the pipe. Rotting leaves, wood mulch, and mud tumbled out, vomiting over their pants and shoes.”

This is local sustainability work. It is not policy. It is not advocacy. Two dirty-handed individuals are fixing a pipe to keep a group of trees alive so that a small restaurant can keep a neighborhood fed. UNESCO's definition of Strategic competency identifies action as local, and the story that Chien tells does not contravene this definition.

The other strategic competency term that is used is the term collectively. Grace does not work independently. She recruits Quique, and she takes advantage of the resources of Issa. She has an interpersonal style. She has heard that good action locally must be done by the establishment of ad hoc alliances based on common problems. This relates to the Collaboration competency, which is discussed in the next section.

Furthermore, she does not adhere to an existing guideline on how to have a reservoir repaired. She improvises. She goes to the place, she sees who is there, she takes the tools that are there, and she works. The readiness to go beyond the anticipated role (from the owner of the restaurant to a pipe-cleaner) is what makes her strategy successful.

Competency of Collaboration (Secondary Theme)

Collaboration competency is defined by UNESCO (2017) as the skill to learn with others; to comprehend and appreciate the needs, views, and actions of others (empathy); to comprehend, relate, and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to handle group conflicts; and to help people collaborate and participate in problem solving (p. 10).

The main place of this competency in the story is the relationship between Grace and Quique. They work together in an informal fashion. It is based on a childhood friendship, on a common place of residence, and a long history of dependence on each other. Quique brings Grace the information she needs (about the reservoir). Grace provides Quique with a sense of direction and of urgency. They can solve a problem together that they cannot solve individually or at the same rate.

Quique is not merely helpful to Grace. He offers his physical labor, his social connection with Issa, and his emotional accessibility. Grace, in her turn, allows herself to be helped since she is all alone, and she works for the community.

The other theme that Chien depicts is the collaboration between the family restaurant of Grace and the food system of PuertoChina as a whole. Grace gets watercress at the floating farm of Quique. She will even go to the extent of trying the seaweed of his next crop. She goes to Plot 685 to get all that she requires for her restaurant. The restaurant is not a one-off venture. It is deeply rooted in the network of local producers, urban infrastructure, and local relationships. This web of interconnected events is even a manifestation of joint sustainability thinking.

Self-awareness Competency (Secondary Theme)

UNESCO (2017) defines self-awareness competency as the capacity to reflect on one's own place in the local community and (global) society; to constantly review and further provoke the actions; and to manage one's own emotions and desires (p. 10).

The emotional register is the most obvious manifestation of Grace. She knows that she is grieving. The fact that her sorrow drives her passion is known to her. She accepts it and does not freeze:

“Grace blinked until her eyes stopped stinging. If she was going to cry, she wasn't going to go and do it in front of Quique Flores and embarrass herself. Instead, Grace cleared her throat and crossed her arms. “Well that settles it,” she said.”

Worse still, the last scene of the story in the silkworm nursery reveals Grace being faced with a self-realization. When she kisses Quique, she cries, and then she recalls that she could not share this joy with her family. The story is not sorrowful after all. It ends with a voice that is within herself: “Go on, it said. Live.”

The greatest self-understanding is the role she plays in the community, the duties she performs, and the expectations she once had for the future if it had not been plagued by the loss. Both require continuation. They are aware that they must decide to live even though such a choice appears to be a betrayal of grief.

The competency of UNESCO is self-awareness, which is required to be able to cope with feelings and desires.

Learning Objectives: What the Story Teaches...

The Ones Left Behind gives forth the following messages of moral and education, which are discussed in the prism of UNESCO.

First, sustainability is not solely environmental. It concerns the human systems, families, neighborhoods, food culture, water infrastructure, and emotional lives, which constitute and make environmental stewardship possible. The mulberry trees in the abstract are irrelevant to Grace. She is upset about them, as her grandmother planted them, as silkworms require them, and as they make her feel connected with some ancient people who did not wish to get swept away by the crisis.

The second lesson is that local action is important. Grace does not address the city council or make a complaint. She visits the pipes and cleans them by herself. The UNESCO model requires local action, and the story affirms that local, grounded, non-glamorous action is no inferior form of sustainability work. It is often the most crucial type.

The third is that grief and sustainability are not opposites. Grace is mourning the entire family. But her lament is not in vain. It makes her more passionately devoted to maintaining what her family had created. That personal loss can reinforce, rather than weaken, sustainability competencies.

The fourth lesson is that values are only lived, not spoken. Rituals, labor, and relationships portray the normative system of Grace. UNESCO framework provokes us to think about the values underlying our actions. The story portrays what it is like to have those values completely incorporated into a lifestyle.

Conclusion

What Grace Chan does in *The Ones Left Behind* (2025) proves to be a surprisingly good fit for the sustainability competencies of UNESCO, even though the story does not refer to that term. She interprets a failed reservoir as a series of events. She does it before she knows. She inherits some values from her dead grandmother and encapsulates them. She cleans out a pipe using a steel-bristle stick. That's the work. She does it on her own and, more importantly, when she is in mourning. The greater aspect of the issue is that literary fiction is not merely an addition to ESD. It's a legitimate way of knowing. It places abilities within an individual who is fearful and unsure, and operating with borrowed equipment, which a policy document cannot. That is no lesser knowledge; instead, it might be more honest. Climate fiction should be primary material in ESD, not decoration. Stories like this one don't make sustainable living easier. They complicate it, and they should.

References

- Chien, K. (2025, January 8). *The ones left behind*. Grist. Retrieved May 22, 2026, from <https://grist.org/climate-fiction/imagine2200-the-ones-left-behind/>
- Dashe, Y. (2019). A Critical evaluation of literary research for sustainable development in Africa. *DASHE Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 1(5), 261–268. <https://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/AJLLS/article/view/850>
- Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226323176.001.0001>
- Heise, U. K. (2008). *Sense of place and sense of planet: The environmental imagination of the global*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001>
- Karmakar, G. (2025). Decolonial hope and planetary solidarity: Fostering sustainability through African life narratives. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 61(3), 313–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2025.2454571>
- Malik, T., Anwar, T., & Karamat, S. (2024). Sustainable development growth: An extensive approach to achieving prosperity and environmental balance in Pakistan. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(2), 238–247. <https://ojs.pssr.org.pk/journal/article/view/632>

- Megbowon, F. K., & Uwah, C. (2022). Society, African Literature and Sustainable Development: An examination of Darko's *The Housemaid*. *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, 11(10), 311–326. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369630765_Society_African_literature_and_sustainable_development_An_examination_of_Darko's_The_Housemaid
- Rieckmann, M. (2018). Key themes in education for sustainable development. In A. Leicht, J. Heiss, & W. J. Byun (Eds.), *Issues and trends in education for sustainable development* (pp. 39–59). UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261445>
- UNESCO. (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives* [E-book]. In *UNESCO eBooks*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Publishing. France. <https://doi.org/10.54675/cgba9153>
- Waterman, D. (2025). Sonia Irum, Environmental Thought in Contemporary Pakistani fiction: Novels of Uzma Aslam Khan. *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts*, 3.2. <https://doi.org/10.4000/1598c>
- Wiek, A., Withycombe, L., & Redman, C. L. (2011). Key competencies in sustainability: A reference framework for academic program development. *Sustainability Science*, 6(2), 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-011-0132-6>