Critical literacy in early childhood education: Questions that prompt critical conversations

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This article proposes the use of questioning as a strategy to foster and provoke children’s critical thinking through the medium of literacy. The art of questioning includes adults both asking questions in purposeful ways and eliciting children’s responses and questions. This strategy prompts children to make connections to prior knowledge and experiences, share perspectives, reflect on ideas and explore possible responses. This article is informed by both the author’s own research and a range of literature. Examples of questions and conversations are provided to demonstrate how critical thinking can be fostered in early childhood education settings. In this article, picture books are viewed as a valuable resource for teachers to nurture critical thinking as they can portray concepts and ideas that are meaningful and relevant for children.

Introduction

When children engage in shared reading with educators, they develop an understanding of the story and meaning of the world around them. This understanding can be deepened by supporting children to develop a critical stance so that they become confident to engage in critical discussions on current and meaningful topics that touch their lives. Picture book reading is not just about what children can see and hear, but also how it makes them feel, think and how these ideas might be applied to their lives. This comprises engagement in critical literacy: a learning journey where children are encouraged to think critically and reflect on meanings presented in texts. This article draws on findings from my own studies in China (Law & Zheng, 2013) and New Zealand (Law, 2012) to explore the ways in which teachers can use picture books to support the development of children’s critical thinking.

What is critical literacy and why is it important in early childhood education?

The origins of critical literacy can be traced to domains such as feminism, multiculturalism, critical theory, anti-racism, and post-structuralism, each presenting different perspectives on the influence of power dynamics in society (Janks, 2000). Comber (1999) clarifies that despite the different orientations, the starting point of these viewpoints are:

...about shaping young people who can analyse what is going on; who will ask why things are the way they are; who will question who benefits from the ways things are and who can imagine how things might be different and who can act to make things more equitable (p. 4).

Based on a literature review spanning thirty years, Lewison, Flint and van Sluys (2002) found that critical literacy provides educators with the opportunity to explore social issues and discuss ways children can contribute to positive change in the community (cited in Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012). It is vital to encourage children to be open to different perspectives and explore challenging concepts presented in texts, such as diversity, divorce, stereotypes, bullying, disability, and poverty as these are issues relevant to people of all ages, including children in the early years (Lewison et al., 2002; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). The objective of the discussion therefore does not stop at the analysis of text but includes reflection on one’s own experiences, which promotes social awareness and positive actions.
One might question how relevant social issues are to children in early childhood education. Ayers, Connolly, Harper and Bonnano (cited in Hawkins, 2014) point out that “children as young as three have the capability to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards particular groups” (p. 725). The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa (Te Whāriki) (MoE, 2017) supports the cultivation of social justice. The strand contribution voices the aspiration that children will demonstrate “confidence to stand up for themselves and others against biased ideas and discriminatory behaviour” (p. 37). Teachers can achieve this through creating opportunities for children to “discuss bias and to challenge prejudice and discriminatory attitudes” (p. 39). Therefore, young children can be involved in critical literacy through meaning making, perspective sharing, and reflecting on the social justice concepts presented in picture books.

**Picture book reading**

Picture book reading is an interactive, sociocultural experience, where adults and children can engage in collaborative learning (Helming & Reid, 2017; Norris et al., 2012). Picture books make great teaching tools as they bring in fresh perspectives on social issues, prompting children to explore concepts and consider how this might influence their actions (Robertson, 2018). When children’s perspectives broaden through critical discussions, positive attitudes towards others in society are also likely to take shape (Kim, 2016). Picture book reading also supports the development of oral language needed for critical thinking and discussion (Education Review Office [ERO], 2017). Shared picture book reading enables meaningful, shared conversations and the introduction of a wide vocabulary, while children ask questions and share their understandings and experiences (ERO, 2017). An example of this was evident in my study when children were asked during a reading session using the children’s book *Don’t Panic Annika* (Bell & Morris, 2011):

> “What does that mean when you say ‘panic’? When did you feel scared?” to which a child responded: “When I was four or even three, every morning, I was scared and I could not even see my mum or my dad; I thought it was a monster”, while another expressed, “When I was trying to peel the potatoes, I thought I was going to hit my finger. I know what panicky means. You scream, crying and like stomping your feet” (Law, 2012, p. 66).

This question supported the children to connect a new word to their real life experiences, which helped them “make sense of learning, literacy, life and themselves” (MoE, 2009, p. 23). When teachers support children to learn new words through making connections to prior knowledge and experiences, children will then have the vocabulary needed to engage in further conversations around the topic.

**The art of questioning**

Questioning is defined by how adults ask questions meaningfully and how adults elicit children’s questions through strategies such as probing, listening, commenting, and modelling thinking out loud. Open-ended questions foster a good balance between a hands-on and hands-off approach to teaching as they provoke thinking while accepting individual unique perspectives. Open-ended questions promote open-mindedness and endless possibilities. A child-centred approach allows children to bring their own cultural perspectives and understanding of the world to the table, enabling them to make connections and form their own working theories (Peters & Kelly, 2011). These abilities to make meanings and connections, ask questions, consider multiple perspectives, and make predictions are also learning dispositions beneficial for success in reading (Whyte, 2019).

In addition to teacher questioning, children should be encouraged to be proactive at asking questions as well. It is vital to strike a balance between teacher questioning and child questioning where both engage in active listening and exchanging of thoughts, opinions, and wonderings based on personal experiences and feelings (Mackey & de Vocht-
van Alphen, 2016). This can be achieved by moving away from the commonly used ‘teacher-question, student-answer, and teacher-reaction’ pattern which can inhibit learning if used improperly, as it can cause excessive attention to guessing what is in the teacher’s mind rather than being creative in exploring more in-depth about the texts (MoE, 2003). Levy (2016) supports this noting the importance of creating learning environments where children are encouraged to ask questions and explore dominant discourses in texts, while teachers’ open-ended questions welcome individual opinions and model critical thinking. Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) aspires for children to be active questioners and thinkers on issues in life that are relevant to them. Supporting this goal, children should be encouraged to inquire, reflect, challenge ideas and make meanings, which support engagement in critical literacy. These opportunities for children to express opinions and ask questions are a way to advocate for their own and others’ rights (Luff, Kanyal, Shehu, & Brewis, 2016), contributing both to social justice and creating an equitable learning environment.

**Examples of questions**

Some examples of questions will be shared and discussed in this section to show how they can be used in purposeful ways to promote engagement in critical literacy. This includes making connections to prior knowledge and experiences; sharing perspectives and reflecting on ideas in the story to explore possible responses. It is worth noting that the proposed practices are not hierarchical in importance or sequential, but rather implemented according to both the content and storyline of the books, and the children’s sociocultural context. This includes taking into consideration factors such as families’ beliefs and values, development appropriateness, and the intended outcomes for the children.

**Prompts for making connections to prior knowledge and experiences**

*What happened in the story?*
*What does this [picture/word] say?*
*How do you know?*
*Have you [done/seen] this before? Tell me about it.*
*Can you remember ...? What happened?*
*How is [the character] feeling?*
*Why is [the character] feeling this way?*

When teachers actively support children to make meaning through connecting to their prior knowledge experiences, children are supported in developing a critical stance towards text (Mackey & de Vocht-van Alphen, 2016). When being read a story about *Alfie and the Big Boys* (Hughes, 2007) a group of five-year-old children were asked, “Why is Ian [a big boy in the story] not talking to the little kids?” Although the story portrays Ian as happy playing with another little girl, the children offered their own interpretations suggesting; “He may be angry at them” and “He doesn’t know their names”. This story was purposefully selected for the children who had just transitioned from early childhood centres into new entrant classrooms. By eliciting the children’s voice, the teacher was able to understand the challenges the children were facing and the thoughts that were guiding their actions, and was able to introduce strategies to support their sense of belonging and social competence (Law, 2012).

Books such as *Mum and Dad Glue* (Gray, 2009) and *No Ordinary Family* (Krause, 2013) convey messages around the different family structures; the first a narrative about a child’s feelings over his parents’ separation and the latter looking at children’s experience of being in a blended family. These books resonate with many children nowadays and present opportunities for teachers to use them as a tool to support children to help clarify misconceptions or provide reassurance for the anxiety they may be feeling. Questions like “Who do you live with now?”, “What do you do when you are with [Mum/Dad]?” or “Do you like sharing your room with your [half/step siblings]? Why?” provokes children
to talk about their own experience or opinions which could then lead to further discussions around fairness and family diversity.

**Prompts for sharing perspectives**

What do you think [the character] could do?
What else?
What is going to happen next?
Are these pictures the same or different?

Teachers need to also allow time for children to respond to images before starting to read. Prompt or model thinking out loud if needed, for example: “What can you see?”, “I wonder how [the character] is feeling?”

Empowerment is one of the principles that drives the vision for children at the heart of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Effective questioning and giving time for children to respond to what they see, can empower them to create stories in different ways according to their own views and interests. Questions like “What is going to happen next?” prompt children to make predictions about the story and form questions based on their knowledge of the world, understanding that their voice and opinion are valid while realising that others can bring in their own perspectives too.

It is equally important that teachers take time to listen to children, allowing them to share their ideas and ask questions, thereby recognising that they are active participants (Peters & Kelly, 2011). This facilitation of social interactions amongst children prompts them to be open-minded and become aware that people give meaning to texts in different ways (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 2010). This is crucial to critical literacy as perspective-taking and empathy are two social competencies that enhance the attributes of sharing and caring (Robertson, 2018). The digital book *Oat the Goat* (MoE, 2018) is a great teaching tool for encouraging perspective-taking and empathy as children are given opportunities to make choices and justify their opinions. This can be done by asking “What would you do if you were the Goat? Why?” in the scene where Amos, a mossy, green, hairy creature, was laughed at and criticised by a few sheep for how he looks, calling him “a weirdo” and “mossy head”. Further probing concepts of bullying or discrimination can be done by modelling thinking out loud, “Look at Amos, I wonder how he’s feeling when the sheep laugh at him?” With this, children are encouraged to reflect on the situation, share their perspectives, while respecting that their peers may hold differing views from their own.

Wordless picture books like *Bee & Me* (Jay, 2016) is one that facilitates children to use their own unique imagination and prior knowledge to fill in the details, taking away different meanings with them (Law & Zheng, 2013). Throughout the text, children are presented with images that leave them room to question or add their own voice to it. Simple probing questions like, “What can you see?”, “What do you think this picture means?” encourage children’s voice and input, which supports the strand of contribution in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) where children become increasingly capable of “recognising and appreciating their own ability to learn” (p. 37).

**Prompts to reflect on concepts and exploring actions**

What would happen if...?
Is it good or bad to...?
Is it ok if/when...? Why or why not?
What would you do/feel if you are [a character]?
Who do you like in this story? Why?
It is imperative that children recognise how a particular text may affect their feelings, thoughts, or perceptions in order to be active citizens who are able to think about their responsibilities in the environment they live in. *The Selfish Crocodile* (Charles, 2010) illustrates a self-centered crocodile who initially refuses to share the forest with the other animals but eventually becomes friendly and considerate after being helped by a mouse. Children can be invited to share their thoughts through questions such as “Is it ok to have the whole space to yourself? What will happen if you do that?” or “What can you say to your friends so they play with you?” These questions prompt children to use their comprehension of the story and the images to reflect on issues of equality and inclusion and through a collaborative reading experience, they can develop an awareness of certain positive behaviours in life that promotes social justice.

One example from the book *Zoobots* (Whatley & Whatley, 2010) shows how children are supported to not only identify key message of the story but also further reflect on their own thoughts about friendship.

Teacher: *What do you think this story is about?*
Child A: *Making friends.*
Teacher: *What about making friends?*
Child A: *Like they build a friend and that’s kind of like people finding friends.*
At this time, another child, B, added his own point of view about friendship.
Child B: *You cannot have too many friends.*
Teacher: *But was it ok they (the characters) found another friend?*
Child B: *Yes.*
Teacher: *Did it matter in the end what the friend looked like?*
Child B: *No.*
*(Law, 2012, p. 64)*

In this example, the teacher ensures that the main concept in the story connects to the children’s lives and that Child B can form an inclusive view about making friends. Similarly, other social justice issues such as bullying and discrimination can be explored by using books such as *Isaac and His Amazing Asperger Superpowers* (Walsh, 2016) or *Julian Is A Mermaid* (Love, 2018) engaging children in further discussions around the message, leading to prompts that support their application to their own experiences. The first book illustrates how a child with Asperger’s syndrome would perceive the world and the second book is about a boy who wants to be a mermaid. Questions such as “If you are Isaac’s [character] friend, what will you do to play with him?” or “Is it okay for boys to play with dolls?” and “Is it okay for girls to be firemen?” can foster positive attitudes in children to matters relevant to their lives and with the growing awareness of equality, empower them to act with kindness and empathy.

**Conclusion**

Critical literacy in early childhood education is warranted with the increased complexity and diversity of society and the need for children to be socially responsible individuals who can take the lead and make good decisions and actions in life. Critical literacy helps address real life issues through empowering children to make connections, share perspectives, and reflect on ideas and explore possible responses.

This article advocates for the purposeful use of questioning in promoting critical literacy through picture book reading experiences, where there is a balance between teacher questioning and children questioning to promote critical, creative, and reflective conversations. A sociocultural approach has been applied, where children’s prior knowledge and experience are activated and where picture book choices are relevant to matters relating to their lives in order for the learning to be meaningful and impactful. This can be practiced by having reflective teachers who are critical and
conscious of their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases, and an environment that ensures children’s views and feelings are valued and that their voices are listened to.
References


