

## Critical Thinking and Book Talk Using Picturebooks

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

To develop children's concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:

- Engagement, listening and attention
- Social conventions
- Awareness of others
- Sentence structure and grammar
- Acquisition and use of vocabulary
- Demonstration of understanding
- Requests and questions
- Categorisation
- Retelling and elaborating
- Playful and creative use of language
- Information giving, explanation and justification
- Description, prediction and reflection

### Introduction

This Support Material introduces children to critical thinking by using **good quality literature** and the **Critical Thinking and Book Talk** (CT and BT) approach (Roche, 2015).

Picturebooks are often thought of as belonging only in infant classrooms, but they are perfect for introducing children of all ages to big ideas, critical engagement, and the notion of making-meaning together through thinking and discussion. Using picturebooks in this way helps to create **real readers** (Leland, Lewison and Harste, 2013).  
Real readers

- know how to read
- can read for enjoyment and understanding
- can look beneath the surface
- challenge any assumptions and premises that may be hidden
- can also examine their own assumptions and discuss them with others.

While reading picturebooks aloud is a wonderful practice, research shows that it is largely through the

thinking, interaction and dialogue that happens after the reading, that development as outlined in the earlier bullets, happens.

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### Planning and Organising a CT and BT session

#### Time and Frequency

Choose a period of 45–60 mins when you are reasonably sure of minimal interruptions in the classroom. Try to ensure that the CT and BT session does not immediately follow an extended classroom activity or task. A CT and BT session once a week is ideal.

While a session once a week is ideal, once a fortnight might be more practical.

Have the children sit in a circle in a quiet space, e.g., the library or a space in the classroom cleared of furniture. The teacher also sits in the circle and is in role as a teacher while the story is being read to the children.

After reading the story, the teacher takes on the role of class member in the circle for the remainder of the session.



It is important that the teacher maintains this role of class member within the circle and allows the discussion to flow, only speaking when it is his/her turn.

It is important that the teacher maintains this role within the circle and allows the discussion to flow, only speaking when it is his/her turn. It is also important to resist the temptation to turn the discussion into 'work' by following it with 'an activity'. Allow the discussion to be simply that – a discussion.

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### Choosing Books

It is important to choose good quality books that have been written and illustrated with care. A picturebook is not the same as an illustrated book. If the images were removed from an illustrated book, the story would still be complete. A picturebook needs the images to complete the story. *Rosie's Walk*, by Pat Hutchins, is a good example. This story would completely fail without the illustrations depicting the fox's misfortunes. When choosing a picturebook, ask yourself:

- *What could I do with this book?*
- *Is the context of the story familiar to the children?*
- *What are the underlying topics which might provide a stimulus for critical thinking?*
- *Can the children make connections between the story and/or images and their own experiences?*
- *Does the book present a different viewpoint on some issue? For example, Mo Willems' book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* presents the ludicrous idea of a pigeon having ambitions about being a bus-driver, but it also shows the wheedling power of a small child who is intent on getting his/her own way.*

Initially, the teacher might choose a suitable book for the CT and BT session. Subsequently, if a child presents a book and suggests it would be a good book for discussion, you can

evaluate it and consider what can be garnered from it in terms of concepts for analysis or issues for discussion.

See the Support Material, *Suggested Picturebooks for Junior Infants to Second Class* for assistance in choosing books which might interest children and involve them in rich discussions.

### Organisation

Providing adequate time for children in a large or multi-grade class to contribute, in turn, to the group discussion may require a long period of time. Facilitating two smaller groups might be a better option. If so, assign a task to the other group that allows them to work independently. If you have teacher support available in the classroom, this might allow you to work with individual groups without interruption. It is important to differentiate the session in accordance with the age, ability and interest levels of the group.

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### Agreeing Discussion Rules

Explain to the class that they will need to do three things really well:

- **listen** very carefully to the story and the questions
- **think** very hard
- **tell** each other **what they think**.

It is really important that the children participate in negotiating the rules in order that they feel a sense of ownership of them.

### Suggested CT and BT rules

1. *We will listen with care and respect.*
2. *We will think before we speak.*
3. *We will speak with care and respect.*
4. *We can agree or disagree with someone, but we will give our reasons.*



### Exploring and Reading the Picturebook

The teacher presents the picturebook and models an examination of the book cover using key vocabulary, including *front cover*, *dust sheet*, *flap*, *title*, *illustrator*, *author*, *back cover*, *blurb*, and *spine*. The teacher might comment that sometimes the front and back cover illustrations give clues about the story. The children can be invited to comment too. The teacher then models examination of the **peritext** – the end papers, the dedication and the copyright – and points out that there are also sometimes clues to the story in the little pictures on these pages. The children can contribute noting what they see, commenting on clues for what might happen in the story, describing what the illustrator does and so on. In a good quality picturebook, there is rarely a redundant line or word; they have all been very carefully chosen and positioned by the author.

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After this exploration, the teacher reads the story slowly with meaning, turning the pages so that all the children can see the pictures. He/she draws the children's attention to details by pointing to them while reading. On completion of the story, the teacher closes the book, giving the children a moment or two in order to process and comment on what they have heard and seen.

### Managing the Discussion

Managing the discussion is important so that all children are offered an opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas. Before choosing a volunteer, it might be useful to revise the rules for speaking and listening.

The children take turns when speaking and sharing with the group. Each child tips the person to his/her left or right (Donnelly, 1984) and this indicates that it is the next child's turn to speak. Children take turns in sharing their ideas democratically; they can *agree* or *disagree* with each other and with the teacher and should supply reasons for their statements. When a full circle has been completed and it is back to the first speaker again, the circle can be repeated or the teacher might generate responses from the group by asking children to put their hands up to speak. It is

important that all children are offered an opportunity to speak and it is important to wait patiently for a response, which might include a child choosing to 'pass'.

### Promoting Critical Thinking

When it is the teacher's turn to speak, he/she might ask a provocative, higher-order question such as, *What does friendship mean?* If the book has presented a concept like loneliness or courage or beauty or loyalty, you could contribute to the discussion with, *I am interested in the word 'beauty'. I think I know what it means but maybe we could explore it a bit more – what do you think it means?* and then follow the 'pass the tip' around again. It's important, therefore, that the teacher has studied the book and the pictures in advance so as to have interesting questions to ask.

CT and BT can be used very effectively with children in Learning Support contexts, where the smaller group setting can facilitate easy-to-manage discussions. For children in receipt of Resource Teaching, the CT and BT approach can be of huge benefit for developing comprehension and oral language.

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Several children may stay at the level of basic description, offering what they liked about the story. Sometimes it might be helpful to use open-ended prompt questions as supports, especially when first introducing CT and BT, e.g.,

- *What did you like most about the story? Like least? Why?*
- *What did you think of the main character? Why?*
- *Does he/she remind you of anyone? Who?*

Other children may decide not to speak and pass their turn. Don't be concerned if this happens. In a CT and BT session, a child's **silence might mean** that he/she is **still thinking**, is busy assimilating and processing new thoughts and ideas, or is simply having a little day-dream.

At the end of the sessions, affirm the children by reminding them of some of their wonderful ideas. Praise the qualities you wish to enforce – listening well, thinking before speaking, speaking clearly and so on.

### *I Agree Because..., I Disagree Because...*

Sometimes children's contributions to discussions focus on repeating what another child has said or they say, *I think that too*. Early on in the sessions, you could begin to structure the use of the special language of *I agree because... I disagree because...*

The teacher's turn gives a great opportunity to **model the language** for children, e.g., *I agree with Joan and John because I think that Goldilocks was wrong to enter the Bears' house without an invitation or Pat and Paula said they were wrong to be angry but I think the Bears were right because Goldilocks shouldn't have gone into their home without their permission.*

**Resist the temptation to tell the children what to think!** Encourage and allow the children to think for themselves. They will become more adept at using the language of *I agree because... I disagree because...* and will learn to give reasons for their responses.

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### Reading and Writing Float on a Sea of Talk

*Reading and writing float on a sea of talk* (Britton, 1983, p. 11). Oral language is at the heart of all learning, and picturebooks provide a great medium for engaging children in imaginative discussion that supports language and literacy development. Children quickly begin to use the language they hear in the stories. As concepts about print are modelled for children, they gain an added bank of new, sophisticated vocabulary.

Allow time for plenty of discussion about the format of the book, the size and position of the pictures, e.g., *Are there frames around the pictures? Do the illustrations go right out to the edge of the page?* The picturebook, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), provides a very good resource for this kind of analysis, as the pictures eventually almost spill out of the pages with the mounting drama – leaving no space for text and lots of space for imagination.

### Closed and Open-Ended Questions

A closed question has only one right answer. For example, *How many buttons are on Humpty Dumpty's coat?* Open-ended questions offer children the chance to speculate and hypothesise and offer alternative answers of their own supported by reason. For example;

- *Why do you think Humpty Dumpty is up on the wall?*
- *Can you touch the moon like Papa did in the story 'Papa, please get the moon for me'?*
- *Can worms think? What might they think about, if they could think?*

Asking children to think for themselves in this way is important for laying the foundation for critical engagement. After introducing the story, refrain from telling the children what YOU think the book is about. Instead, ask them to offer their explanations or opinions.



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### *Scaffolding and More Knowledgeable Others*

CT and BT provides a forum for children to build knowledge together. In classroom discussions, some children can act as **more knowledgeable others** and scaffold the thinking of less articulate or less knowledgeable peers. It is important that each child can participate at his/her own level. With patience and plenty of practice using attractive and interesting picturebooks for CT and BT, the teacher soon sees an improvement in the oral language and literacy skills of the whole class.

### *Planning, Assessment and Evaluation*

Recording is important. Whether you develop a personal 'shorthand' scribble, or use a tape recorder or video camera, recording what the children say is useful for assessment and evaluation. The following questions might be helpful:

- *Who made very interesting points?*
- *Who did not speak?*
- *Who seems to be lacking confidence?*
- *Who may have a language processing difficulty?*
- *Whose attention is limited?*

As the teacher, in planning for oral language development, you decide what Learning Outcomes you wish to focus on each week, fortnight or month. To support your classroom practice, you might make a rubric of skills or criteria that you wish to focus on and then review transcripts or recordings of children's discussions to assess individual children's learning. For example, you might focus on participation, making eye contact, willingness to engage, contributions to discussion, using appropriate language, communication, elaboration on ideas, contributions to discussion, speaking out clearly, sustaining and articulating ideas, understanding questions, processing ideas, speaking in whole sentences, and so on.



It is advisable to select **a few skills or criteria** at a time to focus on and to review. Similarly, it is advisable to choose only **a few children** to observe at a time.



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(Remember: You need permission to video-record or photograph children. Also, teachers need to ensure that any such recording informs the teaching and learning process in a meaningful way.)

### Self-evaluation – Thinking About Your Practice

- *How do I ensure that all children have time to think?*
- *How do I familiarise myself with the stories and the possible areas/topics for discussion?*
- *What have I learned from today's session that might inform my planning for the next CT and BT session and for other curriculum areas?*
- *How can I encourage reluctant children to participate further and contribute to group discussion?*
- *How can I modify my classroom practice to promote more active engagement from the group?*

### Linkage and Integration

#### Visual Arts

Picturebooks can provide a rich and valuable resource for *looking at and responding to visual arts*. Children could discuss why they liked a particular kind of illustration. Perhaps invite them to cluster books together that they think have similar illustration styles. Children quickly recognise the style of artists such as Mo Willems, Eric Carle, David McKee, Satoshi Kitamura or PJ Lynch.

Children might discuss how they think the artist created the pictures and what medium or colours were used. Discussions about art styles can lead to very interesting insights.



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### Other Curriculum Areas

Picturebooks can also be used in conjunction with many other areas of the curriculum. They are ideal for acting as springboards for discussion in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), drama and so on. Below are a few examples of picturebooks that integrate with mathematical topics.

- *Titch* (Pat Hutchins) is ideal for discussions about size and height.
- *Clocks and More Clocks* (Pat Hutchins) is useful for discussing the concept of time.
- *The Shopping Basket* (John Burningham) is ideal for a discussion on money and shopping.

### Above All...

Enjoy the process of getting to know your class in a new way. Many teachers have attested to the fact that they have forged a different kind of pedagogical relationship with their class as a result of sitting in discussion with them weekly or more often. They have also claimed that there is an improved pupil-pupil relationship amongst children who have been 'thinking together'.



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### References

#### Books

Britton, J. (1983). Writing and the story of the world. In B. M. Kroll and C. G. Wells (Eds.), *Explorations in the Development of Writing: Theory, Research, and Practice* (pp. 3–30). New York, NY: Wiley.

Leland, C., Lewison, M. and Harste, J. (2013). *Teaching Children's Literature: it's Critical!* New York and London: Routledge.

Roche, M. (2015). *Developing Children's Critical Thinking through Picturebooks: a Guide for Primary and Early Years Students and Teachers*. Abingdon Oxon. Routledge.

#### Unpublished resource

Donnelly, P. (1984). *Thinking Time, Philosophy with Children: the Educational, Psychological and Philosophical Rationale for Doing Philosophy with Primary School Children*. Open University, M Ed. Milton Keynes: Unpublished thesis.

#### Other helpful resources

Fox, M. <http://www.memfox.com/reading-magic-and-do-it-like-this>

Link to a padlet of resources for using picturebooks: <http://padlet.com/marygtroche/usefulresources>

Suggested Picturebooks, 6–8 years

Developing Children's Critical Thinking using Picturebooks: Videos at <http://action.ncca.ie/resource/Childrens-thinking-and-talking/65>