

## **Engaging Children in Philosophical Inquiry through Picturebooks**

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Children's picturebooks present meaningful opportunities for thinking through life's important questions. In this article, the authors outline the process and benefits of using picturebooks to support philosophical inquiry amongst preschool and elementary aged children. We discuss how philosophical inquiry can promote critical thinking in children, considerations in the use of culturally responsive and abolitionist feminist curriculum and pedagogy in teaching philosophy, and we highlight the utility of multiple stakeholder collaboration for successful philosophical inquiry projects in schools. The article closes by discussing key recommendations for the implementation of philosophical inquiry programs in preschool and elementary schools.

*Keywords:* philosophical inquiry, picturebooks, philosophy, critical thinking, multiculturalism, abolition feminism

### **Reflection Questions for Practitioners**

- What picturebooks can I use in my classroom that support philosophical inquiry?
- How can I encourage my students to be critical, humanistic, and justice-oriented thinkers through using picturebooks?
- How can undergraduate and graduate students support young readers in developing their cultural awareness, self-identity, and confidence?
- What collaborative skills are required for creating and implementing a curriculum that encourages philosophical discussions in early childhood programs and schools?

Children are innately curious and seek answers to many of life's big questions. They regularly ask adults questions such as "Where did we come from?" and "What is fair and just?" Previous scholars have shown that children reap significant educational benefits from prioritizing such philosophical inquiry at a young age, including strengthened problem-solving skills and increased school engagement (Lipman, 2008; Wartenberg, 2014, 2009). In order to respond to such questions in ways that encourage continued philosophical inquiry, educators must reflect upon the ethical nature of such questions and have the skills to guide

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children in learning to ask thoughtful and probing questions (Wartenberg, 2014, 2009).

Thomas Wartenberg (2014), a leading scholar of teaching philosophy in preK-12 schooling, discusses the significance of *philosophy* as follows: At its most basic level, philosophy attempts to solve fundamental puzzles about our lives and the world in which we find ourselves (p. 4). Children are philosophical thinkers and are capable of confronting philosophical issues influenced by their childhood experiences in solving problems (Matthews, 1994, 1980). Children who are able to identify and inquire into personal, social, and economic complexities exhibit important critical thinking skills that can allow them to engage in democratic society in personally and politically meaningful ways. Critical thinking is central to questions of social and political democracy, and one of the functions of schooling is to develop citizens who think deeply about ethical concerns affecting a range of communities and public constituents (Portelli, 1994). Thus, it is important for educators to learn how to guide students in critical and philosophical thinking.

Philosophy is not a required subject and is missing in most elementary schools in the United States and Canada. And yet, children's picturebooks are commonly employed in a range of geographic spaces within schools, including school libraries and classrooms, and are used for a range of purposes, including for teaching English Language Arts, Social Studies, and other subjects. Picturebooks are an excellent entry-point to discussing ethical and philosophical questions, and thus we assert that picturebooks may be mobilized in a range of school spaces and subjects in order to present a culturally responsive curriculum (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2014; Murriss 1992) that responds to a range of identity-based experiences in a pluralistic society while advancing issues of equity and justice (for more studies of mobilizing picturebooks for social justice see: Maton et al., 2022; Skrlac Lo, 2019; Wargo & Coleman, 2021; Wiseman, Vehabovic, & Jones, 2019). Educators can hone children's critical thinking skills through mobilizing philosophical inquiry, and this article provides an image of how such programs can and have been implemented in the preK-6 classroom.

This article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the design of the philosophical inquiry program on which this article is based, and the research that we conducted on this program. Next, we outline, in turn, three curriculum design factors that preK-6 educators should consider when teaching philosophical thinking through children's picturebooks: the significance of philosophical inquiry in promoting critical thinking in children; the impact of culturally responsive discussion on raising student engagement; and the benefits of educator collaboration in philosophical inquiry projects. Following this, we offer some final thoughts summarizing how preK-6 teachers might mobilize critical and philosophical thinking through integrating philosophical read-aloud and discussions of picturebooks in their own classrooms. The article closes by discussing key recommendations for the implementation of philosophical inquiry programs in preschool and elementary schools.

### **Philosophical Inquiry for Children: Research and Theory**

Philosophy for Children<sup>1</sup> has been practiced in many countries since the 1980s. However, mainstream schooling has generally engaged this subject with limited interest, and philosophy has not generally been embedded within public school curriculum policy (Millett & Tapper, 2012). Philosophy for Children is mainly focused on children's cognitive, moral, and aesthetic growth through shared inquiry into philosophical issues (Reznitskaya, 2008; Lipman, 1988). Millett and Tapper (2012) emphasize the importance of integrating philosophy into education because it plays a critical role in the study of cognitive (epistemology) and argument (critical thinking) skills. Scholars support guiding children in philosophical discussions because it can promote their philosophical participation in both formal school environments along with informal settings extending beyond the classroom (Murriss, 2000; Haynes, 2001; Matthews, 1994). Alongside the values ascribed to socialization in critical thinking skills, engaging in a dialogic collective environment encourages children to identify and pursue thought-provoking questions. For children to express their ideas, philosophical inquiry encourages them to provide reasons for their stance and participate in dialogic conversations with peers and adults where they can exhibit skill in justifying their viewpoints. Therefore, practices that encourage dialogic discussion, such as creating and challenging each other's reasoning promote psychological tools (Vygotsky, 1962) that enhance critical thinking skills. Philosophy for Children pedagogy provides an environment that promotes future philosophical discussions founded on the transfer of argumentative debate.

Liou and Rojas (2021) argued that students reposition themselves as generators of knowledge when culturally affirming practices are nurtured and when they participate in their own educational experience established on a humanistic and justice-oriented foundation. Previous studies have shown that culturally responsive curriculum supports young children in building self-confidence and self-acceptance (Gunn, Brice, & Peterson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2014; Compton-Lilly, 2006). Additionally, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) noted that early childhood educators' effectiveness in supporting a child's learning is primarily predicated upon understanding a child's family and community. Nevertheless, to implement culturally responsive practice involves educators focusing not only on learning about family and community, but also on having a more complete understanding of every child's ethnicity and cultural identity (Gay, 2018).

Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022) point to the necessity of an abolition feminist framework in change-making work. An abolitionist feminist framework bridges the feminist commitment to enhanced dialectic and relationality with a decarceral logic. Here, state, and individual violence are considered inextricably bound, and thus this framework involves the —ability to look both inward and outward, to meet both immediate demands and confront broad systems of injustice<sup>2</sup> (Davis, Dent, Meiners, & Richie, 2022, p. 4). When teaching picturebooks through an abolitionist feminist lens, children are guided to examine the relationality amongst book characters, ponder the significance and impact of violence on

people and communities broadly, and consider how to nurture a collective sense of enhanced safety, support and resources for people and communities. An abolition feminist lens encourages the classroom community to engage in dialectical and relational sense-making processes while honing skill in, and commitment to, working through challenging conflict together (Davis, Dent, Meiners, & Richie, 2022; Love, 2019). This framework presents a useful mechanism for assessing the quality and criticality of curriculum and pedagogy when teaching philosophical inquiry through picturebooks.

### **What Did the Project Look Like?**

The University of Northeast is a state university well-known across one state for its K-12 teacher preparation programs. The Philosophy department located in the University of Northeast has instituted a program called Children's Philosophy Program. The program seeks to support preservice teachers in both identifying a direct relevance of philosophical thinking and coursework to their future professional work as educators, as well as providing opportunity for preservice teachers to gain experience teaching philosophical thinking.

Embedded within a foundational Philosophy course, the Children's Philosophy Program places preservice teachers in local schools, childcare centers, and community-based schools to facilitate 30-minute to one-hour long philosophical inquiry sessions for eight consecutive weeks. Here, preservice teachers draw upon and apply their foundational philosophical training when reading and discussing children's picturebooks with school children in preschool to sixth grade (preK-6). The college students' task is to carry out interactive reading sessions with the school children while encouraging the children to ask philosophical questions, guiding children to construct thoughtful answers, and expanding the children's understanding of broader questions surrounding issues of sociopolitical and environmental ethics. After they gain one year of experience as volunteers in this program, some preservice teachers are chosen to serve as teaching assistants in the Children's Philosophy Program initiative, where they mentor volunteers and model teaching philosophical inquiry for their peers.

The Children's Philosophy Program initiative encourages its teaching assistants who mainly consists of preservice teachers to collaborate with one another, critically examine children's picturebooks, and critically reflect upon their classroom presentations for future planning purposes. The program faculty provides the teaching assistants with guidance on how to carry out interactive reading sessions, how to ask philosophical questions, and how to guide thoughtful conversations about issues of broader philosophical significance.

The research study informing this paper draws upon data from a focus group study of how five teaching assistants in the Children's Philosophy Program reflect upon their learning and engagement in the program. According to Creswell (2002), focus groups involve collection of extensive data based on the group's collective understanding of an experience. Therefore, focus groups are useful

when the participants have similar experiences, are asked open ended questions, and are prompted to respond.

In this study, all five teaching assistants had completed the foundation course in Philosophy that prepared them to teach philosophical inquiry to students using children's literature and volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences in the Children's Philosophy Program initiative. In the focus groups, they were invited to share their experiences, perceptions, and reflections in the Children's Philosophy Program. They then met with study investigators, Authors 1, 3 and 4, who are faculty at University of Northeast, and interviewed the teaching assistants using open-ended questions during the interviews. Focus groups were conducted through Webex teleconferencing software and were held three times for a period of one hour each. All teaching assistants were given the opportunity to share their perceptions and experiences in promoting philosophical inquiry using picturebooks.

The research study used purposeful sample of the participants (i.e., the teaching assistants) because of their similar experiences (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). During the three sessions, the investigators probed and restated the group responses to elicit longer and more comprehensive responses. At the end of each interview session, the participants were asked to clarify or add information. Data was analyzed by the investigators using a field notes-based analysis with transcripts of video tapes (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Using the questions from the protocol, words and phrases that were meaningful to the study were identified with description of the main themes. Data was recursively analyzed through culturally responsive pedagogy and abolitionist feminist frames, derived from the scholarly literature. To validate the results and increase credibility of the focus group study, findings were shared with the participants through a process of participant validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The findings discussed in this article are based on a study of how teaching assistants reflect upon their participation in teaching philosophical inquiry through children's picturebooks in the Children's Philosophy Program. Note that pseudonyms are used in this article to represent the study's participants, philosophy program, and university. We, the authors, assert that our findings hold important lessons and implications that can guide both preservice and in-service teachers in designing effective philosophical inquiry curriculum for preschool through sixth grade students.

## **Findings**

### **Critical Thinking and Philosophical Inquiry**

The teaching assistants led interactive reading sessions with children through reading picturebooks aloud and asking the children open-ended questions to trigger discussion of philosophical themes. One teaching assistant noted, "all the kids are very attentive and love the stories. They love seeing us come." Philosophical inquiry activities were a popular weekly activity amongst children in the school.

The Children's Philosophy Program intended to provide opportunity for philosophical discussions through asking questions designed to provoke children's thinking and actively engage them in the learning process. One teaching assistant stated, "I approach teaching in the program by asking a lot of thought-provoking questions with my end goal, and the thought in the back of my mind of leading a discussion." The teaching assistant further clarified that they would follow this up by questioning what they [i.e., the students] have been thinking about... and approaching it from a different angle. The teaching assistants sought to construct questions that would encourage children to look at philosophical issues from multiple perspectives and angles.

Discussions of concepts such as empathy, respect, courage, compassion, and other important human values were common in the philosophical inquiry lessons. These ethical and dispositional concepts also frequently emerged in the teaching assistants' reflections upon the lessons that they taught. For example, the teaching assistant read out loud the picture book, *The Name Jar*, and asked children about their individual experiences of having experienced put-downs due to diversity in skin color, name/s, or elements of physical appearance, and the children impatiently recalled and shared many such occurrences. In addition, the teaching assistants led further discussions that provoked conversation amongst the children about how they felt and expressed courage when facing significant challenges or when defending others who experienced put-downs connected to their identity-based differences. Here, children enthusiastically discussed issues of social worth connected to outer appearance rather than the inner person. The teaching assistants found that children were eager to discuss concepts exemplifying moral values, including issues of conformity, courage, self-identity, beauty, social pressure, and empathy.

The teaching assistants also asked students to think deeply about relationships and connections in their own lives. In reading and then discussing the book, *Will You Be My Friend?*, authored by Sam McBratney and illustrated by Anita Jeram, one teaching assistant drew attention to new vocabulary words while guiding discussions about the meaning of friendship, how to interact with friends, how to show affection to friends, and different ways to show love to family members of a friend. Another teaching assistant stated that it is critical to think deeply about the questions to ask students about important matters such as friendship, because friendship may be defined differently based on the diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds of friends. She pointed out: "Friendship... is accepting people that are different, accepting that you can have a best friend that looks completely different than you, maybe their family speaks a different language, and having that acceptance is part of friendships." Here, the teaching assistant draws attention to the importance of having an open mind, while reducing prejudices, biases and stereotypes in order to support students in learning to strengthen their socioemotional skills connected with friendship.

We find that critical thinking skills were important for shaping how children interpreted their environment and their orientation toward issues of equity and social justice. The teaching assistants in our study stressed that children are philosophical thinkers and pushed back on the prevailing notion that philosophy is

too hard for children. Rather, they articulated that open-ended questions are useful for placing agency in the hands of children, as they become increasingly empowered to think and talk for themselves.

### **Culturally Responsive and Abolition Feminist Curriculum**

The Children's Philosophy Program prioritizes the use of culturally responsive and abolitionist feminist picturebooks and strives to create an environment that encourages children to openly share their thoughts about cultural issues that directly connect to their backgrounds and experiences while building relationships with one another. Thus, teaching assistants are encouraged to ask questions that allow students to bring their cultural and other identity-related backgrounds into the classroom and hone their pedagogical skill in designing and implementing culturally responsive curriculum.

Children learned about cultures different from their own through picturebook read-alouds and discussions. In our study, several teaching assistants discussed reading picturebooks that portrayed cultures that diverged from the heritages and experiences of the children they taught. The picturebook *The Arabic Quilt: An Immigrant Story*, authored by Aya Khalil and illustrated by Anait Semirdzhyan, features a young child who has newly immigrated from Egypt to the U.S. and experiences teasing in school. After reading this book, the children became immensely interested in Arab culture and Arabic language. The teaching assistant guiding discussion of this book, Stephanie, encouraged children to look up their names in Arabic, and share empathetic feelings for the protagonist. Another teaching assistant, Valentina, read children the picturebook *The Name Jar*, which is authored and illustrated by Yangsook Choi, and portrays a young Korean girl who is new to school in the U.S. and explores questions of whether or not to change her name to one that is Americanized in order to make her classmates and teachers more comfortable, and ends with the young girl choosing to keep her real name. The teaching assistant sought to nurture empathy and understanding for the protagonist of this story amongst children and did so both through asking probing questions as well as personalizing the story.

When discussing their experiences teaching culturally diverse curriculum, both Stephanie and Valentina shared personal stories with the children in order to build enhanced empathy and connection with the texts. Stephanie and Valentina disclosed bicultural perspectives and told the children about their experiences learning to adapt to the American classroom when they first came to study in the U.S. In our study's focus group, Valentina described how her personal narrative kept the children captivated, and especially when she revealed that she had experienced teasing due to her name and had been bullied because she did not speak English fluently. Valentina also described to the children how she had been forced to change her name multiple times in order to accommodate teachers who found it difficult to correctly pronounce her name. Both Valentina and Stephanie expressed appreciation that Children's Philosophy Program classroom placed

them together, because it allowed them to collaborate, connect and share common experiences.

Teaching assistants sought to center questions about racial, cultural and citizenship diversity in their discussions with students. One teaching assistant spoke about discussing the book *Same, Same, but Different*, authored and illustrated by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw. This book features two boys that live in different countries and maintained connection through writing to one another as pen pals. The teaching assistant described how discussions about this book led students to an understanding that despite the boys having different lifestyles and experiences, they still had similarities that should be embraced.

The teaching assistants in this program stated that they prioritized children's mental health over academic needs and practiced culturally responsive teaching through making adaptations to support children who needed assistance. One teaching assistant explained how she sought to first understand students' interests and hobbies prior to engaging them in a philosophical inquiry session. Another teaching assistant acknowledged that the teaching experience of philosophy led her to self-reflect on subconscious stereotyping and critically reflect upon her experience of growing up in an environment populated by people with similar cultures. Overall, our study finds that young children responded positively to such culturally responsive resources and discussions.

The researchers would like to note that while the teaching assistants seemed to have some awareness of the significance and impact of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, that there was little discussion of the use of picturebooks in pushing back upon broader systems of structural and systemic domination and oppression. Thus, in this sense, we believe that our project holds room to continue to grow in order to take up core principles of abolition feminism in our work with children and undergraduate and graduate students.

### **Collaboration Strengthens Philosophical Programming**

Our study finds that multiple stakeholder collaboration promotes enhanced relationality, empathy, and learning. The teaching assistants, university faculty, classroom teachers and children worked together as a team in order to ask thoughtful questions and gain insights into the backgrounds and experiences of others. The teaching assistants explained that they frequently worked together to design curriculum and that they sought to share leadership roles in the classroom. They planned their reading sessions as a team and would follow up each teaching session with a debrief session afterward. The teaching assistants learned from one another and honed their skills through witnessing the pedagogical decisions of others and reflecting upon their teaching experiences.

Team collaboration led to the development of a creative range of solutions when pedagogical difficulties arose. For example, the shift from in-person to remote instruction during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic created some logistical problems for the Children's Philosophy Program. Subsequently, key organizers in the Children's Philosophy Program team met (i.e., the teaching



assistants and the program director), and collectively developed interactive methods for using virtual instructional tools. Their collaborative problem-solving allowed the program to meet their goals. Success was evident even amidst several technical mishaps during virtual reading sessions because the team worked together to address glitches and plan ahead to predict and mitigate technological difficulties.

Continuing collaboration amongst volunteers and TAs was critical for productive teaching experiences. Collaboration was wrapped into all stages of the curriculum planning process, including when teaching assistants would help volunteers identify a topic, choose a picturebook, and prepare the lesson presentation. One teaching assistant suggested, I think going forward, that our college students that are volunteering for this program [should] understand that the more collaboration between them and the teaching assistants, the better the experience everyone is going to have in the meetings [with children]. Collaboration was positioned as necessary for enhancing relationships and pedagogical strength, in order to create a rigorous classroom teaching experience.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Philosophical inquiry through reading and discussing children's picturebooks holds significant potential for strengthening children's critical thinking skills. Further, such inquiry allows for a process of humanizing literacy pedagogies through creating a literacy learning environment that fosters students' critical thinking and promotes social justice education (Schutz, Woodard, Diaz, & Peek, 2019). The process of asking, and seeking to answer, creative and probing questions helps children and adults alike to sharpen their analytic skill and probe into deeper ethical questions connected to social, economic, and political issues. Children should be involved in discussions that foster philosophical inquiry at a young age (Lipman, 2008), and teachers can improve their skill in asking questions and mobilizing philosophical inquiry in the preschool and elementary classroom through concerted self-study and collaboration with colleagues who are similarly committed to boosting children's critical thinking skills through philosophical curriculum and pedagogy. Our study finds that multiple stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of philosophical curriculum and pedagogy helps strengthen the quality of classroom activities, the philosophical questions that are asked of children, and other challenges that arise in the classroom.

The integration of culturally responsive curriculum that reflects a range of identities amongst student and educator populations opens doors to making and sharing meaningful connections between philosophical questions and personal experiences. Simultaneously, abolition feminist curriculum can encourage students to think in complicated, layered, and dialectical ways about justice while creating opportunities for children to recognize and consider methods for interrupting domination in their real and imaginary lives. In our critical reflection upon this study and project, we determine that we have further to grow in training our

undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants to deeply engage with the tenets of abolition feminist and apply its focus on recognizing and dismantling systems of domination to their work in guiding philosophical discussions with children. We believe that together, culturally responsive and abolitionist feminist curriculum and pedagogy can boost children's engagement in school, assist in establishing a collaborative and caring classroom environment, and support children in the development of their critical thinking and relationality skills. We suggest that classroom teachers reflect upon how they are presenting and discussing picturebooks with preschool- and elementary school-aged children and consider implementing components of a philosophical curriculum and pedagogy into their classroom teaching.

### Recommendations

Teaching children to ask and respond to thoughtful philosophical questions requires incorporating a diverse range of pedagogical and dispositional tools. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations when preparing students to support philosophical inquiry in early childhood and elementary programs and schools:

- **Choose picturebooks that support culturally responsive and abolitionist feminist goals.** Educators should ensure that picturebooks reflect a diverse range of identities (i.e., racial, gender, cultural, social class, disability, and other forms of diversity), while simultaneously supporting student learning about how to recognize and combat interpersonal domination in all its forms.
- **Ask thoughtful questions.** Strong philosophical questions are clear, openended, thought-provoking, and connect the curriculum to children's interests and cultural experiences. Such questions will promote positive self-identity, self-acceptance, and self-confidence amongst the student body.
- **Engage in ongoing assessment of student knowledge and comprehension.** Throughout philosophical discussions, educators should continually assess children's viewpoints, strengths, and gaps in knowledge about the topic. This information will help educators determine which questions are relevant and responsive to the learning needs of their students. Further, it will assist educators in documenting children's progress in meeting the educational goals of interactive reading sessions.
- **Encourage children to take multiple perspectives.** When children are able to view a topic through multiple perspectives, they are better able to learn and practice empathy. Such questions promote learning about diversity and fairness at a young age and foster deeper critical thinking practices.
- **Educators should model strong interpersonal skills.** Educators will be more effective in teaching philosophical inquiry when they can provide

care, patience, understanding, passion for the subject matter, commitment, and flexibility in guiding philosophical discussions.

- **Plan multiple opportunities for children to practice philosophical thinking.** Rather than planning stand-alone events, we suggest regularly integrating philosophical curriculum into the classroom. This will allow children to become acquainted with a range of approaches to critical thinking and will allow them to hone their skills in asking and responding to philosophical questions over time.
- **Educator collaboration strengthens philosophical curriculum and outcomes.** Educators tend to develop stronger curricular and pedagogical skills when they develop curriculum in partnership with other professionals. Teamwork fosters acquisition of collaborative skill in resolving problems that arise in the implementation of philosophical inquiry activities.

#### APPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS:

Practitioners may consider adoption and application of the following key concepts when designing philosophical lessons for children:

- Careful selection of children's picturebooks
- Creating thought-provoking open-ended question
- Preparing a philosophical lesson plan
- Highlighting salient aspects of philosophy in the stories
- Ask children questions to help them understand the book.
- Identify concepts that arise in your discussion.
- Discuss how to apply these concepts to the U.S. classroom context. (Examples of concepts that may arise when reading picturebooks include fear, danger, stealing, bravery, bullying, fairness, colorism, self-identity, beauty, social pressure, conformity, courage, bravery, etc.)

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