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Thank you to Lizzie,
for staying with me through a long night,
battling mønsters and stumbling across the finish line.

Ann

Abstract

This project addresses whether in-service teachers and pre-service teachers feel they have the agency to utilize picture books to promote critical thinking, with a particular focus on 4th and 5th grade. A total of six interviews were conducted; a small group of pre-service teachers and a pair of teachers were interviewed three times. Each interview featured a different picture book with a different theme, but they also included more general questions, ranging from teacher agency to defining critical thinking. The results indicate that the use of picture books is currently somewhat limited in the English classroom, while elements of critical literacy was more often included. The pre-service teachers also had a more positive attitude towards teaching critical thinking, while the teachers equally emphasised the importance of vocabulary and grammar, noting that elements of critical thinking were already implicitly present in many aspects of their normal teaching practice. While previous research also suggests that the use of picture books can motivate learners to share viewpoints on meaningful issues, this study suggests that the use of picture books can be an inclusive entryway to learning the necessary vocabulary to discuss the themes within the books in light of critical thinking.

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1.0 Introduction

Critical thinking and critical reflection are themes that are being introduced to pupils at an earlier age than ever before, particularly due to the new National Curriculum which was introduced in 2020. One of the main purpose of this research paper is to explore solutions that will help younger learners understand critical literacy and critical thinking. However, not all teaching methods take into account that in order for the pupils to be able to talk about their own opinions and views, they must first be given the necessary vocabulary to do so. Another issue with introducing these themes to young children is that the majority of the existing research seems to mainly target older learners. By introducing critical thinking through picture books, pupils in the lower grades will have an easier entryway to the language being used to discuss both the content and the theme(s) presented in the books, as well as the vocabulary needed to express their own opinions.

The curriculum in English for 4th grade states that “The pupil is expected to be able to read and talk about the content of various types of texts, including picture books” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020a). Additionally, the core curriculum contains a section about critical thinking and ethical awareness, which includes the requirement that “they must also be able to understand that their own experiences, points of view and convictions may be incomplete or erroneous. Critical reflection requires knowledge, but there is also room for uncertainty and unpredictability” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b). This is supported by the section regarding social learning and development, which notes that “to learn to listen to others and also argue for one's own views will give the pupils the platform for dealing with disagreements and conflicts, and for seeking solutions together” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020b).

These sections from the National Curriculum demonstrate how important it is for pupils to be able to reflect on and communicate their own opinions, as well as to see things from others’ point of view. For this to be possible, we must make sure that the pupils have the vocabulary and skills necessary to discuss these different viewpoints, and the teachers’ agency of choosing when and how to teach this is essential.

Teacher agency is defined as “1. The ability of teachers to make informed classroom and professional development decisions based on classroom needs, reflections, and considerations. 2. A teacher’s willingness and ability to take action and make changes” (IGI Global). This concept will be explored further in the theory section, but reflects Priestley, Biesta and Robinson’s (2013) model of teacher agency which “draws attention to three

interactive dimensions of agency: iterational (the teachers' past life and professional experiences), projective (creative configurations of future goals) and practical-evaluative (present judgements amid contextual constraints)" (p.97). Biesta and Tedder (2006) mostly agree with this explanation of teacher agency but simplify it by claiming that agency is informed by the past, oriented toward the future, and acted out in the present.

As the focus of this project is on the use of picture books to promote critical thinking, we will also be discussing critical literacy, as these concepts are closely related. Critical literacy can, according to Allen Luke, be understood as a learning approach wherein the reader is aware that no text is neutral, and critically assesses not only the text and its content, but also its author, its intended audience and the historical context. This will be explored in more detail in the theory section below, but builds on an important paper by Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002), in which they were able to narrow down the definition of critical literacy into four distinct dimensions: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382). For the purposes of his research project, these four dimensions apply equally to critical thinking, as the terms become more or less synonymous when discussing written texts. As such, they will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The purpose of this study is to discover whether the teachers feel they have the agency to utilize picture books in early childhood education in order to promote critical literacy. More specifically, the study attempts to answer two research questions:

1. How would teachers and pre-service teachers use picture books, such as *The Suitcase*, *Welcome* and *The Recess Queen* to promote critical thinking in 4th and 5th grade and engage those pupils in discussions about critical literacy?
2. How would teachers and pre-service teachers exert judgement and control over their own teaching practice, and seek to promote critical thinking?

The scope of the study is limited to three specific picture books, with each book focusing on a different topic: lies, bullying and inclusion/exclusion. The scope is further focusing on 4th and 5th grade, as this age group is underrepresented in the research that has been carried out previously. Lastly, it is limited to the definitions explained in the theory section below.

Before exploring the answers to the research questions, this paper will first present some previous research, followed by a theory section which will define and further explore important terminology. Thereafter, the methods used to collect the data will be included,

before presenting the results of the data collected and the analysis therein. The results will then be discussed in light of the research questions, ending with a conclusion.

2.0 Literature review

Kuo (2009) used an English conversation activity to analyze 26 Taiwanese students, to investigate the extent to which the goals of critical literacy were achieved in the classroom as well as its implication for implementation in Taiwan. He found that instruction based on social-issue picture books were effective, not only in promoting socially constructed literacy learning, but also in eliciting meaningful themes for the pupils. These findings suggest that learners are likely to be motivated to learn the language so they can express their own viewpoints and interpretations to others.

Papen and Peach (2021) used video-recordings of a group of 10 and 11-year-old learners interacting with a picture book about refugees to examine the use of critical literacy in schools. They found that the learners' emotional engagement with the book was crucial for both the critical discussion that followed, and their investment in making sense of the story. These findings suggest that books with an interesting story and/or illustrations can capture young learners' attention and motivate them to express their viewpoint and engage in critical thinking.

3.0 Theoretical perspectives

The following theory section addresses the use of picture books, critical thinking, and teacher agency. It also explores the connection between critical literacy and critical thinking.

3.1 Picture books in education

Some scholars argue that the use of picture books in education is an important factor in the decline of literacy among young learners (Protheroe, 1993). Protheroe (1993) claims that "Looking at a picture actively prevents children younger than nine from creating a mental image and can make it difficult for older children" and states that the use of television and video games – visual media – is an important component in today's illiteracy. While this may be a somewhat outdated view, the fear that visual media may be making children less literate and less intelligent remains prevalent to this day. Although there does not appear to have been much research done on the connection between picture books and reduced literacy, there are some studies that suggest there is a correlation between time spent watching TV and a reduction in recreational reading (Ennemoser & Schneider, 2007; Shin, 2004). After analysing data from more than 192 000 students in 22 countries, Drummond and Sauer (2014)

discovered a small but non-negligible decline in reading performance from students who played multiplayer video games daily. Despite this, the researchers concluded that “the results suggest that the impact of video-gaming on academic performance is too small to be considered problematic” (Drummond & Sauer, 2014). On the opposite side of the spectrum, Nicholas (2007) claims that due to the ubiquity of visual media in everyday life, today’s children expect images in almost everything they encounter, and that “graphic orientation needs to become an instructional opportunity and be incorporated into the educational process in ways that are beneficial to the learning environments” (Nicholas, 2007, p. vii).

Arguments for the use of picture books in education are also supported by research which shows how important the use of supportive pictures can be, especially when learning a new language. “Illustrations are literature in their own right” and can help learners to “fortify their creative ability and expand their feeling of perception” (Bartleby Research, 2022). It is a common saying that “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Through the use of picture books, a teacher can guide the learner to connect to the characters, offer understanding and compassion, assist in passing on significance and expand their vocabulary; Hues, shapes, numbers, letters, creatures, sports and more, are instances in which a picture book can be more helpful than a pure text.

There are, however, some more arguments against the use of picture books. Picture books are more expensive than books without pictures, primarily due to full-colour media being significantly more costly to print, compared to black and white. In cases where the author is not the illustrator, the price may also be affected by the need to compensate multiple creators. Digital versions of picture books are often cheap but require an investment in digital devices which may be prohibitively high for schools and families. The unusual formatting of picture books can also create issues with e-reading platforms that have primarily been developed for a more standardized book format. Picture books are often formatted with large, often square-ish pages, with illustrations that cover a significant portion of the page. Most devices used to read digital books, such as smartphones, tablets and e-readers, are oblong and significantly smaller. Unless the picture book is adapted for digital display, it can be very difficult to correctly display the illustrations, and the integration of and size discrepancy between the text and illustrations can make the text illegible in e-reading applications that do not have a zoom function. Even in applications where such a function exist the reader may be forced to choose between reading the text and displaying the image, which is detrimental to the reading experience.

Another barrier for reading picture books digitally is the fact that many e-reader devices, such as the Amazon Kindle, are only able to display content in black and white, and even colour e-readers display colours at a significantly lower resolution than black and white content.

Amazon sales ranks between 2016 and 2019 suggest that picture books are significantly more popular in print (Fruhlinger, 2019).

Admittedly, some types of digital media, especially when properly modified for such a purpose, can improve the reading experience compared to a printed version.

3.2 Critical literacy

The roots of the modern principles of critical literacy are frequently associated with Frankfurt School's critical theory from 1920s Germany (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 301). However, the name most closely associated with the growing prominence of critical literacy in the last century is that of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher who wrote extensively on the use of literacy to empower the poor and uneducated. He argued that in learning to read and write, these people gained the ability to look critically at their situation and take action to change the society that was oppressing them (Freire, 2013). However, as Freire himself noted, "It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them" (Freire, 2018, p. x), and such practices should always be adapted to the place and time where they are being used. In the ensuing decades since Freire's words were first published, critical literacy and critical pedagogy practices have developed and branched out to a degree where it is very difficult to find a universally agreed upon definition. However, an attempt will be made to illuminate some of the more popular interpretations.

Yoon (2016) broadly defines the term as "cultural, social, and political practices that examine the relationship between language and power in texts" (p. 33). Text is used here in a broader definition than simply the written word; "A text is any expression, written, spoken, drawn, printed or shown" (Lohrey, 1998, p. 23). As such, almost anything with which we interact on a daily basis could be considered a text, meaning that critical literacy is an important component in almost every interaction we have with the world around us. Yoon (2016) expresses this by saying that reading a text is almost like reading a society, because society, and by extension the world, will be represented in the text. She described this with a phrase commonly attributed to Freire, "reading the world by reading the word" (Freire, 2005, p. xv).

According to Allen Luke, critical literacy is a learning approach wherein the reader is aware that no text is neutral, and critically assesses not only the text and its content, but also its

author, intended audience and historical context. Critical literacies should lead to an awareness of how it will try to manipulate and position the reader, an attitude of critical and constructive scepticism towards texts but also aid in developing a curious mind that wants to understand ideologies, solve problems, and investigate their relation to the world. To achieve this, one needs know how language and text works, and also be exposed to a rich content base in order to be able to debate about these texts (Rajalingam, 2015).

After reviewing a broad range of definitions used in educational and linguistic research, Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) were able to synthesize the definition of critical literacy into four dimensions: “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice”, noting that “these four dimensions [...] are interrelated—none stand alone” (p. 382). Vasquez, Tate and Harste (2013) support this by stating that the critically literate tend to show an affinity for those four dimensions. They further assert that people tend to uncritically default to the familiar when it comes to practices and beliefs. It is only through acknowledging and understanding this bias that a person can re-evaluate and change the ways in which they act and think (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 8).

3.2.1 The four dimensions of critical literacy

In most cases, what an individual considers to be “normal” or “common sense” is heavily influenced by the norms and social structures of the society and community the individual belongs to. Unless there is an obvious conflict, we rarely look beyond the surface of these issues to truly question why things are the way they are, and whether they could ever be different. The goal of *disrupting the commonplace* is to look beyond this veneer of social norms, to consider different perspectives than the ones we are used to seeing, and to look for long term solutions to issues rather than temporary “quick fixes”. (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 8-10). In order to gain this perspective, it is very important to engage critically with texts, understanding them as a product of the history and culture from which they arose, and as a reflection of the experiences and attitudes of their creators. It is central to this dimension to question how texts are attempting to position those who perceive them, and this awareness is especially important when it comes to popular media being consumed for pleasure, often wholly uncritically, despite having a strong subconscious influence on the population (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382-383).

In order to *interrogate multiple viewpoints*, we must make an effort to approach issues from different angles, trying to understand why people have chosen to act in certain ways and why

they would consider this to be the best course of action. By doing this, we often gain greater insight and empathy for people who may be very different from ourselves, as well as an understanding of situations and experiences which are outside of our normal purview, or which we were previously only able to see from one side. By taking a broader and more accepting view of issues that may previously have been incomprehensible to us, we are able to adapt our own future behaviour and actions (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 11-12).

Focusing on and *unpacking socio-political issues* entails understanding the socio-political systems we belong to and challenging the social structures that legitimize unequal power relationships. By understanding how these imbalances are maintained, as well as the relationship between power and language, we can work toward disrupting unfair systems in order to create a more just and equitable world. By understanding how language and literacy grants power and the ability to participate in society, we are better equipped to help marginalized people claim these same benefits (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 13).

As noted by Lewison et al. (2002), *taking action and promoting social justice* “is often perceived as the definition of critical literacy”. However, this dimension cannot function in isolation. Without the change in perspective and broadened understanding provided by the other three dimensions, the individual “cannot take informed action against oppression or promote social justice” (p. 383-384). “Taking social action is an attempt to move the school curriculum to the community; to make it relevant to the lives of the students we teach” (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 15). While most children, especially the very young, exert very little influence on the world around them, and are not in a position to promote social justice on any large scale, even small changes experienced at an early age can have a significant social justice impact in the long term. As an example, a conscious effort to use respectful and inclusive language in the elementary school classroom will encourage the pupils to use the same language in their home life, and draw their attention to the ways in which language can be used to create either inclusion or exclusion. By including the pupils in these choices, and allowing them to discuss, influence and understand the measures taken to promote social justice within (and eventually outside) the classroom, educators can show their pupils that their thoughts and opinions are valid, and that despite their age, they can make valuable and important contributions to their community.

3.3 Teacher agency

There are many interpretations of what teacher agency is, and while there are elements that the majority agree with, some have very different stances. When described simplistically,

teacher agency might seem synonymous with teacher autonomy: the independence to think and make decisions, and the ability to act on those decisions. In fact, some academics choose to use the terms teacher agency and teacher autonomy interchangeably. However, although there is a definite overlap between the two, there are also significant differences: while teacher autonomy relates directly to the teacher's autonomy in how and what to teach, teacher agency encompasses many aspects of the teacher's life and situation, not just those directly related to carrying out their teacher role.

Although definitions of the term are many and varied, it is more or less impossible to concisely explain what the concept of teacher agency truly encompasses, as “agency remains an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature, where it is often not clear whether the term refers to an individual capacity of teachers to act agentially or to an emergent ‘ecological’ phenomenon dependent upon the quality of individuals’ engagement with their environments (Biesta & Tedder, 2007)” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 135).

IGI Global defines teacher agency as “The capacity of teachers to act purposefully to direct their professional growth, find solutions to challenges they face, and improve their practice” (2022). Calvert (2016) agrees with this interpretation, claiming that “teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals” (p. 52). Conversely, Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) opine that “Agency [...] is not something that people can have; it is something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve (Biesta & Tedder, 2006)” (p.3). A somewhat neutral definition of teacher agency, which addresses professional growth as well as mentioning the need for action and change, is the one used in the introduction of this research paper: “1. The ability of teachers to make informed classroom and professional development decisions based on classroom needs, reflections, and considerations. 2. A teacher's willingness and ability to take action and make changes” (IGI Global, 2022).

This paper will explore the term using Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2013) model of teacher agency. The model consists of three dimensions, all interconnected. The first dimension is *iterational* and includes a teacher's past experiences. The second dimension is *projective*, meaning the short- and long-term goals the teacher has, as well as the plans needed to reach them. The last dimension is the *practical-evaluative*, which consists of three overarching considerations: the cultural, the structural and the material (Alford et al., 2019).

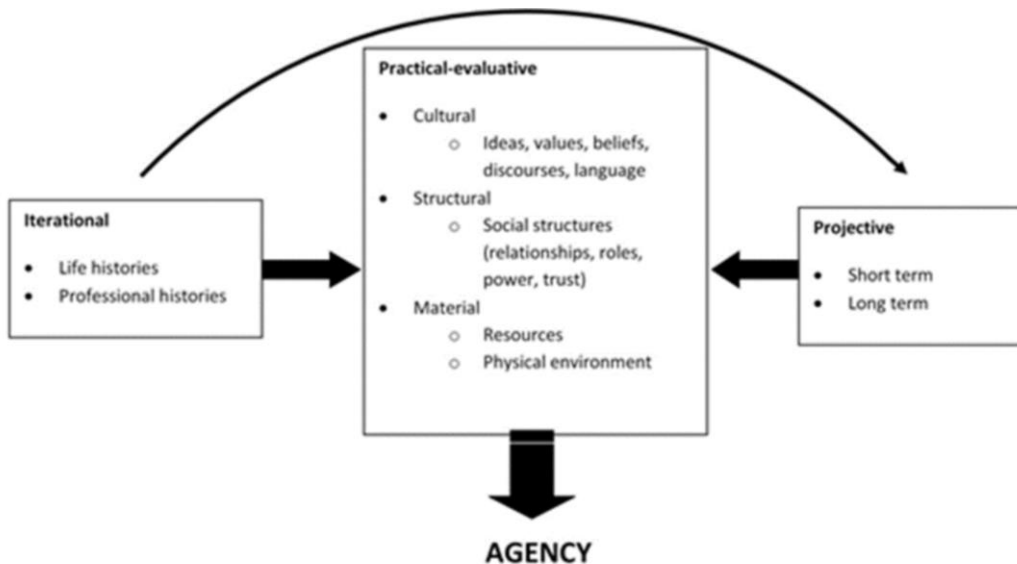


Figure 1. Understanding teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2013, p. 202).

A teacher's ability to act agentially is heavily dependent on the resources available to them, whether it be time, money or physical space. Additionally, social structures, such as the roles of teacher and pupil, the power balance of these roles, and the level of trust which is built on having a good relationship with each other, all influence how the teacher might wish or be able to act. When cultural considerations such as values, beliefs and ideas are also taken into consideration, it becomes apparent how many concepts a teacher must juggle in order to make informed classroom decisions before being able to create change. Agency, then, "is a matter of personal capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 201).

3.4 Teacher agency and critical thinking

As discussed in the previous section, teacher agency is the ability and opportunity to make changes and teach in a way that is relevant for both themselves and their pupils, even when the end goals are pre-determined by curricular aims. Critical thinking is an important tool for any teacher hoping to achieve this. The teacher will need to disrupt the commonplace and examine their pupils' iterational experiences, their practical-evaluative cultural experiences which influence their projective goals and the motivation they have to reach them. Sometimes the teacher will need to interrogate multiple viewpoints to find out how each pupil learns best. "From teachers' agency we can learn how to inform a critical teaching and learning process that is responsive to the needs of diverse students" (Lopez, 2011, p.77).

With its focus on social justice, questioning power and enacting societal change, critical thinking has strong inherent radical traits. After all, “critical literacy is rooted in the work of Freire, whose call for radical pedagogical change advocated for a sweeping transformation in ways of thinking” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 473-474). This may put it at odds with traditionally based curricula and social structures. As such, it is crucial that teachers have the agency to choose how to

Although modern curricula may include critical thinking as a learning goal, they do not necessarily give teachers the tools or instruction they need to teach it. Traditional education tends to use a “testing and right answer” model, where the role of the teacher is to convey accepted fact to their pupils (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). Because critical literacy is difficult to quantify and test for, it is difficult to justify prioritising it over other learning goals which are more obvious and easier to measure (Alford, Schmidt & Lyngfelt, 2019, p. 3-4).

4.0 Methods

This section will first present the methodological approach which was used in this research, followed by an explanation of how the data was collected. Next will be the data organization and how the interviews were analysed, as well as a presentation of the ethical considerations that were taken. Finally, this section will touch on the validity and reliability of the methods used.

4.1 Methodological approach

In order to investigate how teachers and pre-service teachers would use picture books to promote discussions about critical thinking, and to what extent they felt they had the agency to exert judgement and control over their teaching practice, this study has taken a qualitative approach.

4.1.1 Quantitative vs. qualitative

Quantitative research tends to be based on data gathered from a large group of subjects. This data is often expressed in numbers or graphs and is generally used to confirm theories or hypotheses. A common way to gather data for this type of research is by conducting surveys with pre-determined multiple-choice answers, or by using a sliding scale, limiting the potential variables to get clear and specific results. These types of results tend to be easily replicable. Sometimes a quantitative research method is used as a starting point, before delving deeper into the subject using a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research is used to get a better, more in-depth understanding of concepts or ideas, and tends to be expressed in words rather than numbers. This type of research requires fewer respondents, and interviews with open-ended questions are commonly used to gather the data. Because there are no parameters set to limit the responses of the participants, this type of data is very difficult to quantify, so it is usually analyzed by summarizing, categorizing, or interpreting the responses. As the goal of this study was to discover *how* the participants would use picture books to promote critical thinking, as well as *how* they would exert judgement and control over their teaching practice, it was decided that a qualitative approach would yield the best results.

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Samples

It was decided that the teachers would need to have experience teaching English in 4th or 5th grade, to ensure that they would be familiar enough with the age group to give constructive and relevant answers. Similarly, only pre-service teachers who had taken at least 30 credits worth of English and were in their 4th or 5th year of study would be eligible to participate, as a certain level of proficiency, and to some extent experience, would be required. Furthermore, it was decided that the interviews should be held in person, to allow the researcher to better observe non-verbal communication and give the interviewees the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and opinions freely and organically with each other. Because of this, the participants needed to live within a certain radius of the University, and as a result, this sample of participants all have roughly the same cultural background. Although quite a few qualified participants agreed to be interviewed from the outset, several of these were forced to withdraw due to outside influence, chiefly issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, we were left with only two teachers, with 17 and 30 years of teaching experience respectively, and three pre-service teachers, ranging from no extra experience to four months' worth of part-time teaching experience.

4.2.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted in focus groups, with one group consisting of teachers and one of pre-service teachers. Both groups were interviewed three times, and all of the interviews lasted approximately one hour. The three interviews respectively focused on a different picture book, each with their own theme, as shown in the table below. At the start of the interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to read through the relevant picture book before answering the questions. They were also provided with the title of the book in

advance, as well as a link to a YouTube video of the book being read, giving them ample opportunity to prepare if they wished to do so.

Books and themes	2 in-service teachers	3 pre-service teachers
Book 1 <i>Welcome</i> Theme: Inclusion & Exclusion	Focus group 1	Focus group 1
Book 2 <i>The Recess Queen</i> Theme: Bullying	Focus group 2	Focus group 2
Book 3 <i>The Suitcase</i> Theme: Lies	Focus group 3	Focus group 3

Topics covered by the questions included, but were not limited to: The books' usefulness, whether it would be appropriate to teach to the target age/grades, the participants' willingness to use them in a classroom setting, and how the picture books could be used in teaching. Several of the questions were based on the theory of teacher agency (Biesta et al, 2015). The interviews were mainly conducted in English but supplemented using Norwegian when necessary to ensure that the participants were able to fully comprehend the questions and express their thoughts and opinions.

Interviewing teachers and pre-service teacher through this qualitative method, gives a range of perspectives from different levels of teaching experience and exposure to critical thinking, in addition to their views on the different themes presented in each picture books. Furthermore, the participants were able to discuss the points on which they agreed and disagreed, allowing for further clarification and exploration of the expressed viewpoints and making it easier for the researcher to compare and contrast the answers, as well as see how they correspond to the theories and definitions presented in the previous section. By conducting several interviews with the same participants and a similar set of questions yet focusing on a different picture book and different themes each time, it should be possible to find answers to the research questions.

While the original intent was to use focus groups, those usually consist of 4-12 participants but can have as few as 3 members. The reason for originally choosing focus groups was so that the participants would not feel targeted when questioned, and so they could generate and bounce ideas off of each other. The focus groups usually jointly explore questions presented

by the researcher, frequently based on an open-ended interview style. The attention would be on their verbal interactions, though a few notations of non-verbal actions could be included if necessary to explain the transcription later on (Marková et al., 2007, p. 28, 33).

In studying socially shared knowledge in dialogue, the researcher has to cope with emotional and relational problems which the participants express through a variety of symbolic means. They may have a fear of losing face or other kinds of socially induced fears, they may express antagonism against others, and so on. Not only do participants in dialogue actively attempt to understand their social world, but they also employ a variety of cunning skills to mislead others and to express certain fake intentions, which they want the others to believe to be true (Marková et al., 2007, p.26).

For all but the last teacher interview, COVID-restrictions were in place, causing few people to willingly participate, and of those few, three fell ill to COVID-19 and were unable to join. Additionally, many teachers were overworked because so many were home sick. When asked, only a few teachers across several schools agreed to participate. It took two months, and the lessening of COVID-restrictions, to find additional teachers willing to join in the interviews. As time was needed to transcribe, analyze, and discuss, it was decided to go forward with the interviews, despite an original intention of interviewing a group with a minimum of three participants.

4.2.3 Analysis of the themes presented in the picture books

In this researcher's experience, the topics of *lies*, *bullying* and *exclusion/inclusion* are highly relevant topics within the Norwegian education system, due to their prevalence in Norwegian school, which means it is important to make sure they are incorporated into our teaching practices.

According to FHI (2016), about 13,3 % of children in primary school are involved in bullying, either as a victim, a bully, or both. "Bullying is not a conflict, but a form of abuse" (FHI, 2016). In the Core Curriculum, the section on Human Dignity states that "no pupil is to be subjected to discrimination", and that "pupils must also contribute to the protection of human dignity and reflect on how they can prevent the violation of human dignity" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2022b).

Exclusion and inclusion are similarly relevant themes. While exclusion is often used consciously and maliciously as a form of bullying, it can also be the result of subconscious

bias rather than intentional abuse. Some of the most common factors that can determine whether a child is excluded or included are matters such as appearance, nationality, religious beliefs, disabilities and neurodiversity, as well as hobbies/personal interests, but anything that makes a person stand out from what is considered “normal” can be enough to cause others to ostracize them. As emphasised in the section on *an inclusive learning environment* in the Core Curriculum: “When developing an inclusive and inspiring learning environment, diversity must be acknowledged as a resource” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2022b). By being made aware of their subconscious biases, especially at an early age, pupils can adjust their attitude and make conscious decisions about inclusion, both in school and later in life. Celebrating differences in the classroom can be a catalyst for greater societal change.

The last theme that will be explored in this research is *lies*, and the line between make-believe, white lies and outright lies. Exploring and understanding the difference between these, what constitutes a lie and the difference between appropriate and inappropriate lies is an important aspect of growing up. Exploring this topic in English has the added benefit of expanding the pupils’ vocabulary of useful words and concepts.

4.3 Data organization and analysis of interviews

While analyzing the data, the quotes from the interviews were organized into one or two of the following 13 categories. The reason some of them were put in two categories, was for instance quotes that explained in detail a hypothetical lesson focusing on discussions about critical thinking; That would mean it contained associations to both the categories of critical thinking and the detailed teaching procedure. Whenever possible, a single category was chosen, or the quotes separated into parts that fit only one category.

Category	Pre-service teachers	In-service teachers	Total
Agency	23	7	30
Ability	29	19	48
Belief	43	23	66
Practice	48	26	74
Reflection	93	32	125
Relevance	62	25	87
Teaching Procedures	42	20	62
Detailed teaching procedure	35	5	40
Theory	3	0	3
Association	32	13	45
Critical Thinking	74	46	120
Preconceptions	25	10	35
Training	8	7	15

Table 1. The organization of data into categories based on analysis of the transcriptions.

Agency has to do with what the teachers decide, want and associate with the terminology. Ability is about capacity and what the participants feel they are able and willing to do. Belief has to do with judgement, and whether they evaluate something to be good or bad. Practice mainly has to do with teaching practice, meaning past experience or specific, if hypothetical, plans. Practice encompasses many aspects, thus a few more categories were needed: Reflection, which is reflecting upon hypothetical aspects, understanding consequences and offering alternatives or solution. Relevance makes connections to possibilities in practice, while teaching procedures contains suggestions on how to teach, though in a more general way. Detailed teaching procedure is also about teaching procedures, but with specific steps and content. Theory is also divided into four categories: Association, which is the activation of prior knowledge and to some extent also experience. Critical thinking contains the participants' definitions or associations, while preconception is about prior beliefs. Finally, there is training, meaning prior formal or informal training in or towards teaching practice,

though mainly the theoretical side. If there was any mention of theory that did not fit into these categories, they were put in the generic theory section.

4.4 Ethical considerations

An application to record the interviews was submitted to and approved by NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data). The recordings were then transcribed and anonymized, before being destroyed. Until the recordings had been fully transcribed, the recorder was stored in a safe location, accessible only to the researcher and their supervisor.

The participants were given an information letter (adapted from NSD's information letter template) in advance of the interviews. This letter outlined the purpose of the project, who would be responsible for it, why they were being asked to participate and what their participation would involve. This information was then repeated before the start of their first interview. Each participant signed a written consent form, and these were also destroyed at the end of the project. The consent forms clearly stated that participation was voluntary, that consent could be withdrawn at any time without any explanation being required, and that withdrawal would not lead to any negative consequences. Furthermore, the participants were informed of the following, in accordance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation:

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data (NSD, 2021).

4.5 Validity and reliability

The independent validity was the books chosen as a focus for each interview, which were the same for both groups of interviewees, giving it a high validity. The dependant validity concerns the participants' answers to the interview questions, which are unique to each participant, meaning a lower validity overall. Kriukow (2018) notes that in qualitative studies, there are three common threats: Researcher bias, reactivity and respondent bias. As the researcher had a more familiar relationship with the pre-service teachers over time, it reduced

the reactivity threat and respondent bias, while at the same time that may have increased the researcher bias. The researcher and her supervisor critically discussed data and interrogate different interpretations of codes and categories. To establish trustworthiness in the analysis, “markers such as reason for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices were demonstrated throughout the process” (Nowell et al, 2017, p. 3).

Additionally, while the analysis of the data was completed by the researcher alone, the dependant validity, the criteria and definitions of codes used in the analysis had confirmability through their supervisor, the independent variable.

While reliability concerns how easy or difficult it is to influence the results, Kriukow (2018) claims that “In qualitative interviews, this issue relates to a number of practical aspects of the process of interviewing, including the wording of interview questions, establishing rapport with the interviewees and considering ‘power relationship’ between the interviewer and the participant (e.g. Breakwell, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007; Silverman, 1993)”. In this case, the pre-made questions for the interviews were carefully worded, leading to higher reliability, while the follow-up questions were less so. Additionally, the interviewer had established a great rapport with the pre-service teachers by chatting about anything for several minutes before each interview. The teacher interviews were more formal, as the researcher was both more unfamiliar with them as well as them being in more of a time constraint, potentially leading to lower reliability in that setting.

5.0 Results

The results have been divided into three sections. The first is about the interview results regarding teacher agency; What the term means, some examples of how the participants view the different aspects of teacher agency, and a few extracts to exemplify their viewpoints. Secondly, how the participants understood critical thinking and some experiences or suggestions they offered. Thirdly, the interview results relating to the utilization of picture books to promote critical thinking, and some limitations and considerations that the interviewees said.

5.1 Interview results: Teacher agency

A teacher needs the ability and capability to teach, a belief that what they are teaching will promote learning, and then a plan for how to practice it. These three issues will be examined separately later in this section, as we start by looking at what the overarching meaning of teacher agency entails.

5.1.1 Teacher agency

Teacher agency is a combination of the teachers' ability and willingness to teach, their beliefs presented as judgment, evaluation and consideration, and the actions they take to create change. Additionally, there are the three interactional dimensions of teacher agency: iterational (the past), projective (goals) and practical-evaluative (influenced by cultural, structural and material elements), which influence the analysis of the interviews.

The in-service teachers both found the term *teacher agency* to be abstract and difficult to comprehend. After discussing the term for a while, the teachers said they felt that they had autonomy in their work, and that both their past and their professional experiences strongly influenced their actions. Furthermore, they indicated that they would try to appear neutral when discussing issues related to critical thinking but would still guide the discussion. "We have to be sensitive all the time to 'how is this discussion? In wha- which direction does it lead this class?' Mhm. And then we, we *make* choices. Eh, and ... have an agency, as teachers" (L).

The pre-service teachers seemed more comfortable discussing and attempting to understand the term. One of them interpreted teacher agency as what they, as an individual, could do, but which was still limited by outside forces: "as a teacher, you have to do what the school or the society wants you to do" (P1). Another tentatively agreed, but claimed that within their own classroom there would be more freedom, so long as the curriculum was followed. The iterational dimension of teacher agency was also brought up, as it influenced how they taught: "Maybe I think more about the future of the kids, when I'm teaching. But I'm also using my pa- – like, my life, to help them with *their* future. So, *my* experiences, I'm teaching *them* how they can handle it in their future" (P1). They also discussed to what extent they would choose to intentionally influence the pupils during discourse regarding critical thinking. They all agreed that they would try to stay neutral and not influence the pupils' perception and opinions, unless said opinions could be harmful to themselves or others, in which case they would explain why it was problematic:

I will always try to be neutral, no – no matter what, because everyone's allowed to their own opinion. But then again, I would, like – if someone says something that I compl- – because they don't fit with the societal values, right? Because that's the thing. If people are, like, being really, uh, like, discriminating people or, like, being really harsh, then you would try to kind of discuss – Yeah! [...]

Yeah! You won't get anywhere by telling them that "no, that's wrong". You would just have to kind of join the discussion and try to kind of get them to answer for themselves. And then you would kind of explain the other side (P2).

The in-service teachers agreed on this point, as they said something very similar:

"I think, as [L] just mentioned, you have to find that balance between, eh – it's not up to us to tell the students what is right and what is wrong. Eh, but of course – except from very obvious cases, like racism and maybe, eh, violence, and, and, for example the, the pride. Eh, you would – there you would just give them the correct answer is, it's okay to be gay, it's okay to be, ehh, from another country, to have another skin colour. Those things are obvious. But I think, concerning politics or religion or any other, eh, how do you say, yeah, things in society, they should be able to – you, you want to give them as much knowledge as possible, to make them able to take their own decisions, based on their own knowledge. So, you have to enlight – enlight them" (M).

The pre-service teachers said that in teaching practice they had several limitations on what or how to teach, including the time and focus needed to research or perform the task related to said practise, the curricular aims, their lack of relation to the pupils and a lack of sufficient materials, such as a picture book for each pupil. Despite this, they expressed a feeling of freedom in *how* they chose to teach within those constraints: "Obviously you have to teach certain things, but you can choose how to teach it" (P3). One even expressed great freedom in the way they taught during teaching practise: "I feel like I could do so much; Because when you had an idea and, like, I want to try and do this and then you did it" (P1). However, they went on to note that while working part-time as a substitute teacher, they had to follow someone else's teaching plans, which limited their agency significantly.

The in-service teachers also agreed that there were several limiting factors, and listed group and class size, the physical surroundings, the competence aims, the number of adults in each class and financial restraints as limitations on what they were able to do. Yet similar to the pre-service teachers, they agreed that they had freedom in the choice of method: "There are still a lot of things we can do, and it's up to our imagination and up to our motivation how good the teaching is, I think. So, if you're very motivated, you can do, eh, great things under, eh, the circumstances, I think" (M). This was followed up by a claim that: "the content is not forced upon us, but what they are going to learn, eh, eh – is, is written [in the curriculum]. So

okay, so if I want them to be better writers or readers in English by using picture books, I think that's up to me to choose" (M).

5.1.2 Ability

Ability is about capacity and what the participants feel they are able and willing to do.

The in-service teachers were confident in their ability to teach and would repeatedly say they could teach different themes and activities in their respective (and theoretical) classes:

Even though the story's exaggerated, it's absolutely possible to find some topics, and find some issues in this book that are also ... therein, for example in my class. So, I think you could – we're talking about making good decisions, making good choices in PALS [systematic and effective prevention measures that direct positive attention to all school students, to prevent behavioral problems], and this book could easily be used as a tool for that (M).

They did make allowances for different levels of engagement, comprehension, and motivation, but while they mentioned that it could at times be challenging, only in one situation did one of them report hesitancy to teach, and that was due to their difficulty with pronouncing nonsense words contained in the picture book. Even so, they reflected that it could lead to a good learning experience for the pupils:

I think I might have to read it a bit for myself first, because it's not, it's not a problem if we don't know all the words as a teacher, but sometimes we have this... fright, this, "oh, we don't know all of it", and we can't pronounce all the words as a teacher, and that stop us doing it. But it's a good learning for teachers and as well as teacher, no I mean as well as pupils, that we can read these books without knowing all the words. And we can enjoy them, and we can learn from them even though we don't know all of them (L).

The experienced teachers repeatedly adapted the hypothetical lessons to fit the age and ability of the pupils; by modelling the task, by dividing the learners into groups based on comprehension of English, by adapting the difficulty of the questions or discussions, or by letting them answer and/or discuss in pairs before doing the task in plenary. The only adaption they found to be more challenging, was if a minority of pupils found the theme or picture book to be "childish" or "boring", where their only solutions were clear classroom management or choosing a different picture book from the outset.

Contrary to the experienced teachers, the pre-service teachers were more hesitant and cautious in their answers. They indicated that whether they could teach certain themes or engage the class in discussions using English was more dependent on the specific class or the learners' proficiency, rather than basing it on their own ability:

I could do it in the first class I'm thinking about, but like, only a few of them will be able to like [discuss it in English], but that that's not beneficial for anybody but like... And then I was in 7th grade, and they were like, you have a kid that's... they barely knows English or Norwegian and then like... It's always somebody that's, there's somebody that's, like gonna get it, and somebody that's not gonna get it [comprehend] quite as much (P1).

This group were quick to point out challenges, and more hesitant to suggest solutions; even when they presented solutions, they hedged and answered with tentativeness: "If you use pictures or you kind of use your body language and your language and how you speak and intonation and everything, you can still get a lot of them on board. But you would still have to know, how proficient your pupils are" (P1). They seemed to believe that teaching certain topics would require near-omniscience, and that they were not qualified to speak on matters or make suggestions unless they had definitive solutions: "It's very difficult, because you need to be aware of everything" (P2). "Not all adults can help [stop the bullying]. So, like, what then? That's, like, the hardest thing, I think. Like, talking to them about it is fine, but ... giving solutions is a little bit harder" (P3). "And it's also difficult when you have – like, say you have a student in the class that's actually *been* through this [...]. Like, how do you bring this up in a respectful way?" (P2).

One of them stated quite plainly, when speaking of teaching about bullying, that they did not feel they had the competence to teach it: "What, if I have the ability? Well, I feel like I've s- said earlier that it's quite hard, so maybe not?" (P1). Most of their uncertainty can be traced to their lack of experience: "I find it difficult because I haven't experienced it" (P1). "I don't have that much experience with that age group. So, I don't, like, with the subjects, with the English subjects, so I don't know how proficient they are" (P2).

The most experienced of the pre-service teachers stated that: "I think I would be able to teach it ... I mean I – I don't have all the knowledge about the topic, right? But I know how it can happen" (P2). Acknowledging that even without a complete grasp of the topic, they could still impart important knowledge to the pupils. "I feel like the hardest part is maybe being creative

with how you teach things, and not just like, ‘oh I have a book. I’ll make them read it, or I’ll read it’, so, yeah” (P3).

5.1.3 Belief

Belief has to do with judgement, and whether they evaluate something to be good or bad; The belief that what they are teaching will promote learning. For the most part it was the picture books and the themes presented therein that was assessed in terms of usefulness and appropriateness; The participants did, however, also assert judgment over aspects of critical thinking and its use in the (English) classroom.

All the participants judged that the picture book *Welcome* was both good and appropriate, that it had a good moral, and was easily readable. The in-service teachers had several arguments as to why: “I think the book – the pictures are very, eh, colourful, I think that could be inspiring for small children. And it’s almost like a fairy tale, because of the three bears, the three cows” (M). “There are, of course, discrimination in the book, but that’s, eh, some- – that is something, eh, okay, our sympathy is with the ones who are being discriminated, not the ones discriminating” (M). “It’s also the, eh, the moral of including, and then when they g-gets – when they get included, they also include someone else. They show that they don’t want to be like the rest” (M). The pre-service teachers also mentioned how the pictures could aid the younger pupils in understanding inclusivity, but they also mentioned some other themes that could be introduced in a non-threatening way: “It’s good. Uhm, especially with something, like, talking about refugees, and also global warming, friendship. Uhm, yeah, I think I’d use it” (P3). This book turned out to be the favourite of several participants across both groups, though none were able to conclusively say why: “this book just *stuck* with me. I really enjoyed it. Just like, the drawings, and how, like, it progresses, and it’s kind of, things are happening [...]. *I really like this book*, but not necessarily the best one for teaching, but personally, I really enjoyed this one” (P2).

The experienced teachers thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Recess Queen* but felt the pupils would get more out of it if the teacher read, as that would maintain the flow of words as intended: “I think if *I* read it, there are rhymes in it, and wor– the sounds in the, in the book, eh, are like, fun to read. So, I think they will like the book, even if they don’t understand every single word, and that is a good learning, that they don’t *need* to understand *all* of the words” (L). Additionally, they believed it would be a useful tool for teaching about bullying, though with the caveat that it was too childish for 6th and 7th grade while it could probably be

enjoyed by the youngest pupils as well, seeing as the theme was appropriate for any age group.

While the pre-service teachers all agreed that the topic of bullying was important in any grade, none of them were impressed by *The Recess Queen*. They felt the main character was too one dimensional. “I just don’t feel any sympathy towards Jean” (P3). “she’s just mean, and I kind of, don’t like that, because we don’t, see any change in her, except for the, like, last two pages” (P2). They agreed that it could be a good conversation starter but judged that there were better books for the purpose of teach critical thinking.

The in-service teachers believed that *The Suitcase* presented a good moral: Be kind, “trust people, and don’t act – or don’t do anything mean to people just because they are a bit different” (M). Despite them evaluating it as a good book that would also be appropriate to teach, they did not believe it would engage the pupils, at least not to the same extent as the other two books. “it’s not a book I think many pupils will- would like very much [laughs], because it’s – ah, there’s little action [...]. It needs a lot of interpretation to – to get into” (L). As they felt the book needed more interpretation and discussion to be enjoyed, they judged that 4th or 5th grade would be the lowest grades they could use this book with.

The pre-service teachers found *The Suitcase* to be sad yet interesting but ended up arguing for a long time whether it was appropriate to teach now, due to the war in Ukraine recently breaking out. Some argued that it made it more appropriate, while others felt it would be somewhat disrespectful or triggering to use now. They agreed that the book itself was good, was an easy read, and contained an appropriate theme presented in a suitable way. “Because of what you said, I guess that book does take up a lot more topics and themes, so, for teaching, you could use it in many difficult – [scoffs] difficult? – many different ways” (P2), “if you’re talking about, like, refugees and immigration, then I think maybe *The Suitcase* ... fits at least me better, ‘cause it feels like he had to travel, he misses his home. It’s – I don’t know, I just really like that story a lot better” (P3).

The in-service teachers asserted that the new curriculum may have too great an emphasis on critical thinking, particularly when it comes to a second language where they judged grammar and vocabulary to be equally important. “when we, as teachers, always have to – to emphasize on ‘this has to be critical thinking’, then it makes it too much” (L). “They – they need to – to learn the words and to understand the book not to [sigh] have emphasis on critical thinking. But if you see a – sees a – see it as a possibility to – to make them *wanting* to get

a meaning across, then it's good" (L). "if you're going to teach critical thinking, I think it's easier when the students are bit older. Like fifth grade." (M).

5.1.4 Practise

This section about practice mainly has to do with past teacher experience or specific, if hypothetical, plans; For the pre-service teachers, this includes teaching practice. While many aspects are included in the term *practise*, any information unrelated to past experiences will be explored in the section below regarding the utilization of picture books to promote critical thinking.

The in-service teachers had several examples to draw from, ranging from reading picture books for fun, to using critical thinking when discussing current events. One of the experienced teachers had used authentic books in their English lessons, as well as watching news on BBC, thus exposing the children to the natural cadence and sentence structure used by native speakers. Despite the pupils being aware of how words should be pronounced, this teacher was not embarrassed to sometimes mispronounce a few words or needing to look up the meaning of some of them: "if you make a mistake when you're supposed to pronounce the words, ok, I can live with that. I do that all the time when I'm speaking English" (M).

Of great relevance to this study, one of the experienced teachers had used a picture book called *The Rainbow Fish* to critically discuss some of the contained within. "*The Rainbow Fish*. Okay, so he don't want to share his shells with the other fish, eh, and soon he's alone because he's very selfish. And then he starts to share, and he's not that beautiful in the end, and but then – eh, but then he suddenly has a lot of friends, and he's much happier [...]. So, we used it in the arts and crafts lessons, and then we had a topic about friendship" (M). They had used it as an interdisciplinary topic, combining English with arts and crafts to make three rainbow fish.

They have also been using current events to interrogate multiple viewpoints and generate a better understanding of the situation in the world at large.

We've been using the Ukraine, eh, the war in Ukraine, eh, a lot, by use – eh, because the Aftenposten Junior, was – they opened their pages about – all the articles about the Ukrainian – the war in Ukraine, eh, were open. So we had that as – we used the texts from Aftenpost- – all the articles from that newspaper, we used as text to read and write about. Eh, so we had a lot critical thinking, because they had to write their view

on the war. And we discussed it, eh, so, what's the – what's the – 'medborgerskap og –', eh – Citizenship and – 'Demokrati'. Democracy (M).

Last year we were talking about the election in United States, and we talked about Donald Trump [...] we tried to see him from two sides, because *some* are – *most* are critical to him, okay, but he also have some points. So, we tried to be critical (M).

The in-service teachers said that they had always been teaching some version of critical thinking, but perhaps less in English until the most recent version of the National Curriculum commenced. "I think we always have been re-trying to make the pupils reflect on all kinds of things, since I started being a teacher, but not that much in English class, really" (L). "Then again, they need to practice a bit discussion, but not too much, and not *dangerous* [sensitive] issues" (L).

It does not have to start with deep discussions in English. The pupils need to be introduced to critical thinking in slow but interesting ways. Once they are familiar with the concept can they begin to also use critical thinking in English.

"This year I had a lesson where they were discussing different points of views, and I need to do this on a – in topics that are not ... eh, too... threatening [sensitive]. So, I started by family culture, like, some house they put their feet on their table while watching TV, and others don't, they [the pupils] all do this [activity, and argue], pro/contra. And they were discussing! And all kinds of, well some, eh families they all, always eat sweets on Saturday, and some eat it every day, pro/contra" (L).

The interviews ended by one of the experienced teachers exclaiming: "I am actually going to try it, I think. Just – just for the fun of it. Because we've been sitting here discussing this for hours, and we need to see what happens when we try it!" (M). This was regarding the use of *The Recess Queen*, and the discussions and critical thinking regarding the theme of bullying.

The pre-service teachers had respectively: 1. No additional experience, 2. A little experience from being a phoned in substitute teacher, though only called in a few days, and even when called, functioned more as a teacher assistant than a regular teacher, 3. Some experience from being a consistent substitute teacher for the last 4-5 months.

The pre-service teachers had no experience in neither teaching critical thinking nor in the use of picture books, although they were familiar with several that *could* be used for such a purpose. One of them had, however, planned together with their practice group, a lesson in

critical thinking: “We were thinking about having three different texts and from different publishers and having the kids read them and discuss, like, which one would you trust, and which one do you not trust and why” (P1). Additionally, one pre-service teacher had attended a lesson where sensitive issues were brought up:

’cause, I work in 3rd grade, and now we have ‘uke 6’ [week 6] and they’re talking about ‘overgrep’ [abuse] and, but it’s not like – they’re not talking about sex, but they were talking about like what’s allowed, and it’s your body, right? So, if you could use it in so many ways and you can make it more for the older and for the younger, but it depends on, like, how you focus on it (P1).

All of the pre-service teachers agreed that they wanted to try using either *Welcome* or *The Suitcase* in a class, focusing on critical thinking as they could see the potential, especially in an interdisciplinary setting: “Yes, I think it would be good. Uhm, especially with something, like, talking about refugees, and also global warming, friendship. Uhm, yeah, I think I’d use it” (P3). “I think I would talk about all of these topics, because I think they’re all important, and it doesn’t really matter that they’re so young. So, you should sti- should still touch upon them” (P2).

5.2 Interview results: Critical thinking

As previously stated in the theory section, critical thinking in combination with text is similar to critical literacy. The four dimensions of critical literacy were mentioned in interview number two for each group, meaning some answers may contain that terminology.

Additionally, they were asked to convey what they perceive critical thinking to be.

One of the pre-service teachers stated quite plainly, when speaking of teaching about bullying, that they did not feel they had the competence to teach it: “What, if I have the ability? Well, I feel like I’ve s- said earlier that it’s quite hard, so maybe not?” (P1). Most of their uncertainty seemed to stem from their lack of experience: “I find it difficult because I haven’t experienced it” (P1). “I don’t have that much experience with that age group. So, I don’t, like, with the subjects, with the English subjects, so I don’t know how proficient they are” (P2).

The most experienced of the pre-service teachers stated that: “I think I would be able to teach it ... I mean I – I don’t have all the knowledge about the topic, right? But I know how it can happen” (P2). Acknowledging that even without a complete grasp of the topic, they could still impart important knowledge to the pupils. “I feel like the hardest part is maybe being creative

with how you teach things, and not just like, ‘oh I have a book. I’ll make them read it, or I’ll read it’, so, yeah” (P3).

5.1.3 Belief

Belief has to do with judgement, and whether they evaluate something to be good or bad; The belief that what they are teaching will promote learning. For the most part it was the picture books and the themes presented therein that was assessed in terms of usefulness and appropriateness; The participants did, however, also assert judgment over aspects of critical thinking and its use in the (English) classroom.

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The pre-service teachers also mentioned how the pictures could aid the younger pupils in understanding inclusivity, but they also pointed out some other themes that could be introduced in a non-threatening way: “It’s good. Uhm, especially with something, like, talking about refugees, and also global warming, friendship. Uhm, yeah, I think I’d use it” (P3). This book turned out to be the favourite of several participants across both groups, though none were able to conclusively say why: “this book just *stuck* with me. I really enjoyed it. Just like, the drawings, and how, like, it progresses, and it’s kind of, things are happening [...]. *I really like this book*, but not necessarily the best one for teaching, but personally, I really enjoyed this one” (P2).

The experienced teachers thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Recess Queen*, but felt the pupils would get more out of it if the teacher read it out loud, as that would maintain the flow of words as intended: “I think if *I* read it, there are rhymes in it, and wor– the sounds in the, in the book, eh, are like, fun to read. So, I think they will like the book, even if they don’t understand every single word, and that is a good learning, that they don’t *need* to understand *all* of the words” (L). Additionally, they believed it would be a useful tool for teaching about

bullying, though with the caveat that it was too childish for 6th and 7th grade, while it could probably be enjoyed by the youngest pupils as well, seeing as the theme was appropriate for any age group.

While the pre-service teachers all agreed that the topic of bullying was important in any grade, none of them were at all impressed by *The Recess Queen*. They highlighted the fact that the main character was too one-dimensional. “I just don’t feel any sympathy towards Jean” (P3). “she’s just mean, and I kind of, don’t like that, because we don’t, see any change in her, except for the, like, last two pages” (P2). They especially found the ending unrealistic, as the conflict was entirely resolved without it feeling earned – the bully stopped being a bully and immediately became friends with all the other children. While they agreed that it could be a good conversation starter, they did not think it was well-suited for the purpose of teaching critical thinking.

The in-service teachers believed that *The Suitcase* presented a good moral: be kind, “trust people, and don’t act – or don’t do anything mean to people just because they are a bit different” (M). Despite describing it as a good book that would also be appropriate to teach, they did not believe it would engage the pupils, at least not to the same extent as the other two books. “it’s not a book I think many pupils will- would like very much [laughs], because it’s – ah, there’s little action [...]. It needs a lot of interpretation to – to get into” (L). As they felt the book needed more interpretation and discussion to be enjoyed, they judged that 4th or 5th grade would be the lowest grades they could use this book with.

The pre-service teachers found *The Suitcase* to be sad yet interesting, but spent a lot of time discussing whether it was appropriate to teach now, due to its thematic similarity to the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, which had recently broken out. Some argued that this made it more appropriate, while others felt it would be somewhat disrespectful or triggering to use now. They agreed that the book itself was good, was an easy read, and contained an appropriate theme presented in a suitable way. “Because of what you said, I guess that book does take up a lot more topics and themes, so, for teaching, you could use it in many difficult – [scoffs] difficult? – many different ways” (P2), “if you’re talking about, like, refugees and immigration, then I think maybe *The Suitcase* ... fits at least me better, ‘cause it feels like he had to travel, he misses his home. It’s – I don’t know, I just really like that story a lot better” (P3).

The in-service teachers asserted that the new curriculum may have too great an emphasis on critical thinking, particularly when it comes to a second language where they judged grammar and vocabulary to be equally important. “when we, as teachers, always have to – to em- have emphasis on ‘this has to be critical thinking’, then it makes it too much” (L). “They – they need to – to learn the words and to understand the book not to [sigh] have emphasis on critical thinking. But if you see a – sees a – see it as a possible-bility to – to make them *wanting* to get a meaning across, then it’s good” (L). “if you’re going to teach critical thinking, I think it’s easier when the students are bit older. Like fifth grade.” (M).

5.1.4 Practise

This section about practice mainly has to do with past teacher experience or specific, if hypothetical, plans; For the pre-service teachers, this includes teaching practice. While many aspects are included in the term *practise*, any information unrelated to past experiences will be explored in the section below regarding the utilization of picture books to promote critical thinking.

The in-service teachers had several examples to draw from, ranging from reading picture books for fun, to using critical thinking when discussing current events. One of the experienced teachers had used authentic books in their English lessons, as well as watching news on BBC, thus exposing the children to the natural cadence and sentence structure used by native speakers. Despite the pupils being aware of how words should be pronounced, this teacher was not embarrassed to sometimes mispronounce a few words or needing to look up the meaning of some of them: “if you make a mistake when you’re supposed to pronounce the words, ok, I can live with that. I do that all the time when I’m speaking English” (M).

Of great relevance to this study, one of the experienced teachers had used a picture book called *The Rainbow Fish* to critically discuss some of the contained within. “*The Rainbow Fish*. Okay, so he don’t want to share his shells with the other fish, eh, and soon he’s alone because he’s very selfish. And then he starts to share, and he’s not that beautiful in the end, and but then – eh, but then he suddenly has a lot of friends, and he’s much happier [...]. So, we used it in the arts and crafts lessons, and then we had a topic about friendship” (M). They had used it as an interdisciplinary topic, combining English with arts and crafts to make three rainbow fish.

They have also been using current events to interrogate multiple viewpoints and generate a better understanding of the situation in the world at large.

We've been using the Ukraine, eh, the war in Ukraine, eh, a lot, by use – eh, because the *Aftenposten Junior*, was – they opened their pages about – all the articles about the Ukrainian – the war in Ukraine, eh, were open. So we had that as – we used the texts from *Aftenposten* – all the articles from that newspaper, we used as text to read and write about. Eh, so we had a lot critical thinking, because they had to write their view on the war. And we discussed it, eh, so, what's the – what's the – 'medborgerskap og –', eh – Citizenship and – 'Demokrati'. Democracy (M).

Last year we were talking about the election in United States, and we talked about Donald Trump [...] we tried to see him from two sides, because *some* are – *most* are critical to him, okay, but he also have some points. So, we tried to be critical (M).

The in-service teachers said that they had always been teaching some version of critical thinking, but perhaps less in English until the most recent version of the National Curriculum commenced. "I think we always have been re-trying to make the pupils reflect on all kinds of things, since I started being a teacher, but not that much in English class, really" (L). "Then again, they need to practice a bit discussion, but not too much, and not *dangerous* [sensitive] issues" (L).

It does not have to start with deep discussions in English. The pupils need to be introduced to critical thinking in slow but interesting ways. Once they are familiar with the concept can they begin to also use critical thinking in English.

"This year I had a lesson where they were discussing different points of views, and I need to do this on a – in topics that are not ... eh, too... threatening [sensitive]. So, I started by family culture, like, some house they put their feet on their table while watching TV, and others don't, they [the pupils] all do this [activity, and argue], pro/contra. And they were discussing! And all kinds of, well some, eh families they all, always eat sweets on Saturday, and some eat it every day, pro/contra" (L).

The interviews ended by one of the experienced teachers exclaiming: "I am actually going to try it, I think. Just – just for the fun of it. Because we've been sitting here discussing this for hours, and we need to see what happens when we try it!" (M). This was regarding the use of *The Recess Queen*, and the discussions and critical thinking regarding the theme of bullying.

The pre-service teachers had respectively: 1. No additional experience, 2. A little experience from being a phoned in substitute teacher, though only called in a few days, and even when

called, functioned more as a teacher assistant than a regular teacher, 3. Some experience from being a consistent substitute teacher for the last 4-5 months.

The pre-service teachers had no experience in neither teaching critical thinking nor in the use of picture books, although they were familiar with several that *could* be used for such a purpose. One of them had, however, planned together with their practice group, a lesson in critical thinking: “We were thinking about having three different texts and from different publishers and having the kids read them and discuss, like, which one would you trust, and which one do you not trust and why” (P1). Additionally, one pre-service teacher had attended a lesson where sensitive issues were brought up:

’cause, I work in 3rd grade, and now we have ‘uke 6’ [week 6] and they're talking about ‘overgrep’ [abuse] and, but it's not like – they're not talking about sex, but they were talking about like what's allowed, and it's your body, right? So, if you could use it in so many ways and you can make it more for the older and for the younger, but it depends on, like, how you focus on it (P1).

All of the pre-service teachers agreed that they wanted to try using either *Welcome* or *The Suitcase* in a class, focusing on critical thinking as they could see the potential, especially in an interdisciplinary setting: “Yes, I think it would be good. Uhm, especially with something, like, talking about refugees, and also global warming, friendship. Uhm, yeah, I think I'd use it” (P3). “I think I would talk about all of these topics, because I think they’re all important, and it doesn’t really matter that they’re so young. So, you should sti- should still touch upon them” (P2).

5.3 Interview results: How to utilize picture books to promote critical thinking

The pre-service teachers were eager to share different ways to teach critical thinking utilizing the three picture books presented during the interviews. They also started to connect some of their ideas to the dimensions of critical literacy, and suggested making it into some kind of play, or at least play-acting:

Like, ‘What’s in the suitcase?’ like, before, you know [what’s inside]. Just having some topics that they can discuss, uhm, both from the book and also like, in real life, but related to this topic” (P2) “like different viewpoints, like what he thinks he has in his suitcase, versus them. Um... Uh, like, this isn’t a chair and a house and – but, it – ‘cause it’s a picture (P3).

investigating multiple viewpoints, you would have to like, be in that situation. You would, “OK, I've really, I'm, I'm an immigrant. That's me”, and I would do research and I would note some things about it, and then I would be able to kind of... discuss my case, because, like, not everyone would be an actual immigrant and then you would be able to do that. Some would be like the fox; Very little, like, not trusting them, not like... kind of being hostile, and then they would be able to prepare. And then we all have, like, this debate and talking about it. Like, “Why don't you...? Like, why are you being hostile? Like, why are you here?”, like, talking about these things (P1)

Both the pre-service teachers and in-service teachers had suggestions for questions to elicit critical thinking and critical reflection:

“I guess it's like this book [the recess queen], you only get to see one side of the story. Uhm. Like, what is Jean going through? What is happening at home? Does she have any friends? We don't really know. We don't know anything about her, so we don't really get to know her story” (P2).

“And in the end, it's a very happy ending here. And is it that easy? Is it only that nobody asks you to play that makes it a problem? I just asked some colleagues ‘How is it? This pupil you've got, that is mean to the other in the, in the re- eh, recess? Is this pupil being asked from the others to come and play or not?’. ‘They asked, they asked’, they said. And it's not that simple, and that might be a discussion. ‘Do you agree with the author here? Is it that they are not asked?’. But, we could – even though it's not the only reason, everybody needs a friend. And maybe they are ‘Do you agree? Do everyone need a friends to be happy and to be kind, or not?’. And they can, could use the models on the board, and answer; All of them could use them and answer, and some of them could be encouraged to ask – to answer more” (L).

There were also some ideas for *Welcome*:

Yes. Look at the giraffes. They are sa- saying: ‘Did you hear something?’ ‘No, you?’ ‘We could go and look.’ ‘No.’ Eh. Eh. ‘That's too much bother. Pass the tea.’ Okay, so we see – maybe we can see someth- eh, children starving in Africa. But, okay, we know it's there's, there might be something there, but we are comfortable ourselves, so we don't bother (M).

“Yeah, in *Welcome*, you – you could have different colouring and then colour. Like, where do they show inclusion and where do they show exclusion” (P1). The pre-service teachers also suggested having a debate, or to put on a play.

5.3.1 Other picture books to use to teach critical thinking

The pre-service teachers recommended nine other picture books that they believed would work well in a context of teaching critical thinking: *The Arrival*, *Race Cars*, *The Lorax*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *My Shadow is Pink*, *Just Ask*, *Red – A Crayon’s Story* and *Strictly No Elephants!* These books ranged in topics from race supremacy to identity crisis, and from not judging food by its colour to playing getting out of hand.

The in-service teachers also recommended a couple of picture books: *A Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *The Rainbow Fish*.

6.0 Discussion

6.1 Hypothesis

Before conducting any of the interviews, I hypothesized that the pre-service teachers would have a lot of ideas, knowledge and drive, but that the teachers would temper their responses with experience. The new sections of the curriculum have been taught to the pre-service teachers, who may have a somewhat idealized vision of how to execute it in practise. The teachers may not be as familiar with the new curriculum, but I believed that while they might not include many new elements, they would have already practiced some of it in some form or another, despite it not specifically having been a part of the curriculum prior to 2020. I also wanted to challenge them to think of it and see how open or willing they were to include more picture books and discussions in the English classroom.

6.1.1 Reflections on the hypothesis

For the most part, I feel that the findings line up with my hypothesis.

The teachers, while being experienced in their field and having lots of examples or suggestions, were significantly less familiar with academic language and terms used therein. When asked about their opinions regarding “teacher agency” and “critical literacy”, they fumbled more, and did not always understand the definitions given. The students, even when unfamiliar with the terms, were able to grasp its meaning relatively quickly or discuss it until they discovered a way to comprehend the terms. They were more hesitant regarding experience, and would often end up adding a contingent, such as “depending on the class”. They were less afraid of discovering and learning, even during an interview, and would rather

preface their opinion by saying “I think”, “as I understand it” or “I don’t know if this is correct, but”. The teachers, especially the female teacher, seemed to be afraid of giving the “wrong” answer, and was more reluctant to speak up unless she was confident that her answer was correct.

Despite having received no training in critical literacy and not being very familiar with the concept, the teachers still provided answers and examples.

6.2 Observations

One interesting and surprising discovery was the disparity between each group’s opinion on the books they read. The pre-service teachers mostly agreed that the more simplistic picture books with less text, like “Welcome”, would be more interesting to use in a classroom setting. The reason for this seemed to be that they believed the pupils would more easily be able to interpret the story in their own way and that it would be easier to create discussions. On the other hand, they did not particularly enjoy “The Recess Queen”. The pre-service teachers expressed dislike due to an exaggerated story with little room for interpretation and objected to the overly simplified representation of how to deal with bullying. The teachers, on the other hand, ranked the books in almost the opposite order. They both seemed to really like “The Recess Queen”, as the bright picture and familiar theme would make it more likely for the pupils to comprehend and make associations. They did not seem particularly enthused about “The Suitcase”, as the pictures were more subdued, and they found the storyline boring and sad. They did mention that the different colours of the text, which correlated with the different animals speaking, made it easier to understand.

Another noticeable discrepancy between the two groups were their attitudes toward critical literacy. The pre-service teachers had a general familiarity with and comprehension of the concept but were doubtful of their own abilities to exercise critical thinking. They had many suggestions for teaching critical literacy to their students but seemed to have a very limited confidence in their own ideas. They also believed the curriculum and school administration, as well as factors like time constraints and societal expectations, would severely restrict their ability to focus on critical literacy in their teaching.

The in-service teachers, meanwhile, were largely unfamiliar with critical literacy, having not received any training in it, and they struggled to grasp the concept even when it was explained to them. They did, however, feel that they were already teaching critical thinking on a more or

less daily basis, due to its presence in the other subjects they taught. They used a more basic, “common sense”-based approach than what is used to define critical literacy in an academic sense, but they seemed confident in their own ability to empower their pupils to think critically about the world around them. They also did not see the curriculum as restricting their ability to teach critical thinking, as they were subconsciously integrating it into their overall lesson plans.

It seems clear that both groups would have benefitted from the experiences of the other group: with more training, the in-service teachers would become more aware of their own need to think critically, and be better able to use critical thinking as a conscious part of their teaching, rather than a subconscious one. The pre-service teachers, meanwhile, would benefit from a better understanding of how critical thinking, and the teaching thereof, actually works on a practical level in the classroom, rather than just knowing the theory behind it. It seems clear that further research needs to be done on the practical, hands-on aspects of critical literacy and the techniques used to teach it, and that the results of this research should be made easily accessible to experienced teachers, not just students.

6.3 Limitations

The greatest limitation on this research project was, without doubt, the small sample size, and the limited diversity within the group of participants. While this was partly a consequence of the eligibility requirements explained in the section on data collection, as well as the decision to conduct the interviews in person, matters were further complicated by the COVID 19 pandemic.

For all but the last teacher interview, national COVID-restrictions were in place, and this made it difficult to find people willing to participate in in-person interviews. Many teachers were also unable to spare the time, due to staffing shortages caused by illness and quarantine. Despite asking many teachers working at several different schools, only a single teacher initially agreed to participate. It took two months, and the lifting of most COVID-restrictions, to find a second teacher willing to take part in the interviews. Despite an original goal of conducting the interviews with a minimum of three participants, it was decided to carry out the teacher interviews with only two participants, as time was needed to transcribe, analyze, and discuss the data. Furthermore, five pre-service teachers originally agreed to participate in the interviews, but two had to withdraw due to contracting COVID, leaving only three participants in that group.

Another significant limitation is that none of the participants had used picture books to teach critical thinking. While the male teacher had used picture books in his teaching previously, this was not done with critical thinking in mind. We also did not have the opportunity to use any of the three picture books in a real classroom setting. This meant that all discussions about using picture books in general, and these three books in particular, to teach critical thinking were purely theoretical. The male teacher mentioned a desire to use the picture books from this research project in his class, because he was curious how the results would line up with the theories he and the other teacher had come up with. The pre-service teachers also said they would like to use one of the books in a class. If the scope and timeframe of the project had allowed for it, I would have liked to check in with them after they had an opportunity to use the picture books in their teaching, to discuss their experience and how it closely it corresponded to their expectations.

6.4 Contextual information

In addition to the influence COVID restrictions had on participation, there were a few other contextual factors that influenced the results of this research project.

One of these was the war in Ukraine, which broke out after the first pre-service teacher interview. The war and the ensuing refugee crisis had a clear influence on the reflections of both the pre-service and in-service teachers in the ensuing interviews. It also caused the pre-service teachers to revisit the first book (*Welcome*) with a new perspective during later interviews.. The participants were very hesitant about whether or not they would find it appropriate to use some of the picture books (*Welcome* and *The Suitcase*, specifically) after the war broke out, due to their themes of displacement and discrimination. On the other hand, it was argued that it could also be a great learning tool for teaching pupils about refugees and their experiences. They concluded that it likely would be up to the individual class and whether they needed it and/or could handle talking about it, and that the content and the depth of the exploration of the topic would be adjusted based on age group and maturity.

It should also be noted that all the pre-service teachers participating in the interviews knew each other ahead of time, and before starting the first two interviews, we spent half an hour socializing. While the teachers were familiar with each other in a professional setting, they were not currently working together. They had some shared history, but did spend any time socializing ahead of their interviews. They did end up staying 5 –10 minutes after each interview to discuss topics further, talk about opinions they did not want recorded and/or finish making some point in their own language which they had not been able to express in

English. Having noticed this behaviour after the first interview, I made a point of asking them at the end of each interview whether there was anything they wanted to discuss or clarify in Norwegian. The difference in the relationship between both the researcher and the participants caused the pre-service teacher interviews to have a significantly more casual tone than the teacher interviews, which were more formal, although this tonal difference may also have been influenced by the generational gap between the two groups.

The pre-service teachers mostly agreed that the more simplistic picture books with less text, like *Welcome*, would be more interesting to use in a classroom setting. The reason for this seemed to be that they believed the pupils would more easily be able to interpret the story in their own way and that it would be easier to create discussions. On the other hand, they did not particularly enjoy *The Recess Queen*. The pre-service teachers expressed dislike due to an exaggerated story with little room for interpretation and objected to the overly simplified representation of how to deal with bullying. The teachers, on the other hand ranked the books in almost the opposite order. They both seemed to really like *The Recess Queen*, as the bright picture and familiar theme would make it more likely for the pupils to comprehend and make associations. They did not seem particularly enthused about “The Suitcase”, as the pictures were more subdued and the storyline somewhat boring and sad. They did mention that the different colours of the text, which correlated with the different animals speaking, made it easier to understand.

Some of the pre-service teachers had experience or were familiar with different kinds of picture books and seemed open to input and suggestions of new books. They were creative in their ideas for different ways of utilizing the books in an educational setting but seemed to think that there would be some constraints when it came to resources, time and the curriculum. One of the teachers was less familiar with using picture books in English, or to generate discussions, while the other had used one picture book and seemed open to using “The Recess Queen” in his current class. He seemed to have an almost standardized progression/set-up of how to use the book. What was interesting was that while the teachers were less interested in generating long and deep discussions, they were more aware of the need to integrate other subjects and/or some of the core skills (writing, reading, oral, math and digital). They seemed a bit more realistic in their suggestions for how one might use the books in a classroom setting, and it was mentioned that while one could use them in, for instance, readers’ theatre, the reality was that unless there was set aside time dedicated to it, the likelihood of using such teaching methods were almost non-existent. Only the male teacher

had any experience with a previous picture book used in English with some discussions, and only the one (or possibly two).

7.0 Conclusion

Both the in-service teachers and pre-service teachers would use picture books in their teaching in a variety of ways, such as through reading, writing, discussing, performing plays, colouring trigger words and answering questions, to promote critical thinking in 4th or 5th grade pupils. They presented several approaches to engaging the entire class in discussions about critical literacy: dividing the pupils into groups based on their linguistic proficiency; allowing some pupils to use Norwegian words while challenging others to defend their point of view in English; and letting the pupils work in pairs or groups to discuss their thoughts and opinions before sharing them with the rest of the class. Interestingly, the experienced teachers would discuss more general teaching procedures, while the pre-service teachers went into far more detail, sometimes even planning which questions to ask on which page.

While the pre-service teachers would readily and seemingly often make a conscious effort to promote critical thinking in their teaching practice, the teachers felt that critical thinking was adequately represented in the general curriculum, and that focusing on vocabulary and grammar was just as important, if not more so. All participants felt they had the freedom to choose how to teach critical thinking, and both groups agreed that picture books would be a useful tool for promoting understanding and as a good starting point for discussions. There was some disagreement between the two groups as to which books should be most suitable; The pre-service teachers said they preferred *Welcome*, liked *The Suitcase* just fine, and would probably not use *The Recess Queen*, while the in-service teachers by far preferred the *The Recess Queen*, closely followed by *Welcome*, and were noticeably less enthusiastic about *The Suitcase*.

7.1 Implications

This implies that with time and experience, the pre-service teachers will soon gain the experience and confidence needed to teach. The pre-service teachers had heard of significantly more picture books that could be used for critical thinking, meaning they will bring with them new ideas to share with the experienced teachers. Additionally, it seems as though the learners will benefit no matter what, as the majority felt they had the agency to choose how to teach, and both groups had several ideas for instruction utilizing picture books to promote critical thinking.

7.2 Further research

A potential avenue of research would be to try some of the suggestions presented by the participants and observe what kind of engagement and responses the pupils would provide. Something else that could be interesting is to see how teachers would handle situations when the pupils want to take social action towards a more just world by protesting during school hours. And what do the pupils say to justify leaving school?

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