



Exploration of critical literacy skills in teaching environmental issues to early childhood in the coastal region

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Abstract

With the amount of abundant information in an online environment, critical literacy is needed to encounter misinformation and disinformation. Critical literacy can be taught from the early age to strength the ability to understand information and to think the meaning of information, stories, events, pictures and others. The research aim was to explore the critical literacy activities in early childhood education using a picture book and contextual setting with the theme of environment activities. The research used a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. Themes were gathered through observations and conversations with children. All information and patterns were coded and interpreted to create themes. The sample used purposive sampling, from 13 children aged 5 to 6 year-old in the coastal region of the Tomini Gulf during their literacy activities. The results showed that children had an awareness to connect the issue from the topic to their daily lives. These activities give children the chance to voice their opinion and solution even though the exploration to this activity has not been fully maximized. Lastly, children engaged in the literacy activity through identifying and creating meaning from the pictures and other clues of the book. Therefore, implementing critical literacy should integrate familiar settings and picture books that in line to children's literacy.

Keywords: critical literacy; early childhood education; picture book

INTRODUCTION

The development of literacy has continued to improve year by year. Currently, the government has made literacy skills one of the main programs that every student must possess, as outlined in the policy of the Pancasila student profile (Juliani & Bastian, 2021). One of the aspects of the Pancasila student profile is critical thinking, which includes acquiring information/ideas, analyzing and evaluating reasoning, reflecting on thoughts and thinking processes, and being able to make decisions (Irawati, Iqbal, Hasanah, & Arifin, 2022). However, a gap exists within society, where critical thinking skills are not possessed by the majority of the Indonesian population. The results of the

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test to measure literacy, numeracy, and science skills among 15-year-old students in 2018, showed that Indonesia ranked 74th out of 79 participating countries (OECD, 2018).

Indonesia's PISA results serve as a benchmark for the country's relatively low literacy skills, particularly in reading literacy among 15-year-old students, who scored 371 points compared to the average of developed countries at 487 points (Sari & Setiawan, 2023). This fact highlights the need for ongoing intervention to enhance the literacy skills of students in Indonesia. One of the efforts that can be undertaken is to teach literacy from an early age. The concept of critical literacy should ideally be introduced early on, shaping the way children think. Implementing critical literacy at the early childhood education level (PAUD) can be seen as a learning journey where children are encouraged to think critically and reflect on the meanings presented in texts, stories, situations, and specific events (Law, 2020). Moreover, this concept can shift the narrow understanding of literacy as merely reading and writing to a broader skill set involving higher-order thinking. This includes developing the ability to comprehend, identify, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed or written materials adapted to various contexts (UNESCO, 2017). Brosseuk, Exley, dan Neumann,(2020) also state that literacy not only focuses on the four traditional skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking but has also evolved to include viewing and understanding visual representations. This demonstrates that the understanding built by literacy skills continues to evolve with the times. For instance, the ability to view and comprehend images is crucial today, as modern information is often conveyed through videos or images on social media, necessitating the development of the ability to critically assess visual information.

Another important aspect to understand is that critical literacy education must be tailored to the context of the children's lives. Therefore, this research focuses on the critical literacy skills of early childhood students within the theme of climate change education in the coastal area of the Tomini Bay region (Kawasan Teluk Tomini or KTT). The theme of climate change is particularly relevant because it directly relates to the lives of students who attend school and reside in the coastal KTT area. These children experience firsthand the issues related to waste that pollutes their schoolyards and homes, as it is carried by coastal currents. Additionally, they observe that the sea level in their area rises every year, which could eventually threaten their homes. These issues

are closely linked to the children's lives, thereby sparking meaningful discussions relevant to their circumstances. As stated by Trott dan Weinberg (2020), children who learn about the dimensions of climate change are encouraged to think critically by exploring who is responsible, how it happens, and why. Thus, climate change becomes a timely and meaningful topic that can be taught to children. This topic not only provides an opportunity to teach critical literacy but also directly touches on the future of children who are born and raised in coastal areas.

This underscores the importance of teaching science in a more engaging way, which in turn fosters greater confidence, higher participation, and improved achievement among students. Therefore, contextual learning also exposes children to various activities that enhance critical literacy skills within a supportive environment, particularly through the issue of climate change. It is essential to understand that critical literacy education cannot simply be transferred from one setting to another; rather, it must be adapted and modified to suit the contextual needs of children's learning (Bjerknes et al., 2024).

Several studies have proposed approaches to teaching critical literacy to early childhood students in response to various issues (Kim & Yang, 2021; Law, 2020; Nash, et. al., 2018). These approaches combine the use of storytelling with picture books, direct instruction, and the formulation of meaningful questions to develop children's critical literacy skills. The first approach involves storytelling with children through picture books, which is used to teach them about various topics that represent reality and convey important messages that children can grasp (Kim, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for this research because young children are naturally drawn to the visuals in picture books, and the stories are relevant to their life contexts.

Kim dan Yang (2021) conducted research with young children that allowed them to create their own alternative stories and images based on what they observed. This approach helps children to modify the storyline and develop their own ideas about what they read, rather than merely aligning with the author's voice. All books were carefully examined and selected by teachers according to their quality and appropriateness for young readers, with the reading sequence determined by the level of difficulty. During story discussions, teachers encouraged children to connect their experiences and background knowledge with the text, helping to expand their thinking by asking open-ended questions that require critical thought. Teachers also fostered positive social interactions among the children, including sharing different ideas, listening to others,

and respecting differing opinions. These activities created a more supportive critical literacy environment, where teachers challenged children to express their ideas about the books, ask questions, share opinions, and develop a critical perspective on the stories. These children also had the opportunity to challenge dominant or taken-for-granted interpretations and to voice their own perspectives (Honan et al., 2013).

The success of literacy education cannot be separated from its context. To effectively design literacy activities, the materials and activities used must be tailored to the children's context. In this study, the coastal area context was chosen to teach critical thinking skills by focusing on the topic of climate change. This topic can stimulate children to share their opinions and ideas because it is closely connected to their daily lives, thereby providing meaningful learning experiences (Willis & Exley, 2018). Contextual learning also exposes children to various activities that enhance critical literacy skills in a supportive environment, particularly through the lens of climate change issues. It is important to understand that critical literacy education cannot simply be transferred from one place to another; instead, it must be adapted and modified to fit the contextual needs of the children. Therefore, in this study, modifications were made in the selection of teaching media and the research location, which included not only classroom-based activities but also outdoor activities to directly observe the coastal environment around the school.

Furthermore, formulating questions can trigger and provoke critical literacy in early childhood through activities that align with their developmental stages. Asking thoughtful questions provides opportunities for children to respond critically and engage in higher-order thinking. Open-ended questions encourage open-mindedness and do not limit the children's answers. A child-centered approach allows children to express their own perspectives and understandings as they make sense of their world, enabling them to connect prior knowledge and develop their own working theories (Whyte, 2019). In addition to questions posed by the teacher, it is also essential to encourage children to be proactive in asking their own questions. Striking a balance between teacher-led and child-initiated questions is crucial, as it fosters an environment where both parties actively listen to each other and exchange thoughts, opinions, and inquiries based on personal experiences and feelings.

This study aims to explore the critical literacy skills of children aged 5-6 years through the theme of climate change, which directly impacts their lives in the coastal

area of the Tomini Bay region, using a contextual learning approach. Furthermore, the selection of media and the formulation of prompting questions for critical literacy education are applied based on the guidelines from the research by Kim dan Yang (2021).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach. This approach was selected based on several considerations: (1) to introduce and explore how critical literacy practices influence the development of children's critical and creative thinking; (2) to gain a deep understanding of the transformative journey children experience in using critical literacy; (3) to capture the complexity of the literacy learning process in the context of climate change issues within their social and cultural environment; and (4) to evaluate the process and effectiveness of critical literacy practices and provide recommendations for critical literacy activities conducted in schools.

The research was conducted in four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Freebody, 2003). The planning stage began with identifying the focus or problem, which involved observing the target school for the research, primarily focusing on literacy activities in the classroom, and adjusting to the characteristics of the location and the children involved in the study. In this case, the school is located in the Tomini Bay area, and a literature review was conducted to formulate literacy activities. The acting stage involved the implementation of activities at the school, consisting of four learning sessions, with two sessions held inside the classroom and two outside the classroom. The observing stage was carried out by observing the entire process, including the stages of activities, media, and strategies used, while taking notes, and recording videos and photos. The reflecting stage involved continuous improvement by modifying the activities for subsequent stages where possible, and reporting the results (Creswell, 2014).

This research was conducted at an early childhood education center (PAUD) located in Bone Bolango Regency, which is part of the Tomini Bay area in Gorontalo Province. The subjects of this study were 15 children aged 5-6 years who attended a similar early childhood education institution. Data were collected through direct observation of daily literacy activities at the school. The collected data were then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Creswell, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The critical literacy activity conducted at one of the Early Childhood Education centers (PAUD) in Bone Bolango was attended by fifteen (15) children. Data collection was carried out over the course of four (4) sessions, during which the researcher designed critical literacy activities using a picture book titled "*Petualangan Botol Plastik*" ("The Adventure of a Plastic Bottle") by Tika Kid, consisting of eighteen (18) pages and tailored to early childhood levels. This picture book was chosen because it addresses issues related to waste, which is prevalent around the children's school due to its location on the coast. Waste produced daily, if not properly managed, or if it ends up accumulating in the ocean, can alter marine ecosystems, potentially contributing to global warming and climate change.



Fig 1: Plastic bottle adventure book

The critical literacy activities were conducted over four sessions, both inside the classroom and outdoors (in the coastal area). These sessions were followed by literacy activities involving reading books and discussing waste and its impact on the surrounding coastal environment. From these activities, three (3) themes emerged in the literacy activities, as follows:

Awareness of the problems in the surrounding environment

The first session began by engaging the children in critical literacy activities. The children identified both their home and school environments. A conversation took place between the children and the teacher.

- Teacher : Who lives near the beach?
Children : I do! (raising their hands)
Teacher : Okay, now we're going to learn about the environment. What are some things we usually find in our surroundings?
Child A & B : There's sand, bottles, jugs, and plastic (taking turns to answer).
Teacher : (The teacher then moves and asks a child about the image in the picture book "Petualangan Botol Plastik"). What's this picture?
Child C : The ocean... There's a picture like that in the ocean, a plastic bottle.
Teacher : Oh, why do you think there is trash in the ocean? Who throws trash on the beach?
Children : People...
Teacher : If the beach is dirty with trash, what should we do?
Children : Clean it up...
Teacher : Okay, so now let's look at the book. Here's Rina, her father, mother, and Rina's little sister (pointing at the picture). And then the plastic bottle says, "Hi... I'm a plastic bottle, I went with Rina to the beach." What's this picture?
Children : A bird...
Teacher : Suddenly, the sky gets cloudy, and strong winds come. What happens when the wind blows?
Child D : (demonstrating) It's very strong...
Teacher : Look here, what's this picture? What do you think this is? (showing the image of flying plastic waste)
Child E : The bottle is flying in the wind.

Expressing opinions and concluding solutions

Through this literacy activity, children were also encouraged to freely express their opinions and draw conclusions. An example of the conversation is as follows:

- Teacher : Okay, before we begin, I want to ask, what did we learn on Tuesday?
Children : Trash.
Teacher : Where do we see trash?
Child E : On the beach, there are plastic bottles, paper, wood, boxes, and all sorts of trash.
Teacher : That's right. So, we will continue the story from yesterday, okay?
Child F : Miss, I saw very strong winds at my house.



Fig 2: Strong winds visible

- Teacher : Oh, really? There was wind, okay, now look at this picture. Yes, the ocean is clean; it's important to keep it clean. If it's dirty and the trash ends up in the ocean, what will happen if fish eat the trash?
- Child B : The fish might die.
- Teacher : Alright, let's look at this picture. What do you see? (showing a picture).
- Child G : The trash is flying because of the wind. The trash is scared because of the wind.
- Teacher : Yes, there's wind, there's rain, and what else?
- Child H : There's a child, a car, a father, and a mother.
- Child C : The plastic bottle is sad because there's a lot of trash, and it's lost.
- Teacher : That's right, it's sad because it's lost. Why else might it be sad? It's asking for help because the trash has been eaten by a whale and is now inside the whale's stomach. What's inside the whale's stomach?
- Child E : There's paper, a bottle, a toothbrush, and a cup.
- Teacher : Okay, let's continue. Look at the whale that has eaten the trash. What's the whale's condition now? (showing a picture).
- Children F and I : It's dead because it ate too much trash.
- Child J : Miss, I throw my trash in the trash can.
- Teacher : Very smart. Okay, let's move on. What's this?
- Child D : Yes, there's a bottle. What else is there?
- Child H : There's a grandpa picking up trash, and then he throws it away.
- Teacher : Right, so here we see someone who cares about cleanliness, that's the grandpa. So, we should be like this grandpa, okay? If there's trash, throw it in the trash can (then showing the next picture).
- Child G : The trash is taken away by a truck, and it's happy.

Teacher : Yes, that's right. So, the trash that grandpa picked up was taken to the trash bin, and the trash can also be recycled. So, what can the recycled trash become?
Children D & H : It can become flower pots, pencil holders, and look nice.

Connecting the text with real-life issues

During an outdoor learning activity, the children were brought to observe the waste problems near the beach and around their school. After observing their surroundings, the children were then encouraged to relate what they saw to their environment and the text they had read about waste. The conversation is outlined as follows:

Teacher : Hi, kids! Let's take a look at what's in front of us.
Children : There's trash, plastic, and wood.
Teacher : Yes, there's trash and the ocean. Does it look nice or not when trash is scattered around? (pointing at the trash)
Child D : No, because the fish might eat it and die.
Teacher : And then, if the fish go down into the ocean, what happens?
Child E : They get eaten by sharks.

The next day, the teacher took the children for a walk around the schoolyard and the beach. During this opportunity, the children connected what they observed at the beach with the picture book they had read earlier.

Teacher : Hello, okay, so where are we now?
Children : At the beach.
Teacher : Where are we? Yes, we're at the beach. The purpose of bringing you here is to observe the environment. So, in the surroundings, there are many things you should be aware of, one of which is trash. So, if you see trash, what should you do? You should clean it up.
Child H : I saw someone sweeping earlier, but they dumped the trash over there (pointing to the trash near the beach).
Teacher : Yes, so yesterday we went to the beach. Do you all like going to the beach?
Children : Yes...
Teacher : How does it feel? Are you happy or not?
Children : Happy.
Teacher : So, when you go to the beach and see trash, what should you do? You should clean it up. And tell your friends not to throw trash into the ocean, because what might eat it?
Children : Sharks.
Teacher : Yes, sharks might eat it. And what will happen to the shark?
Children : It will die.

The results presented in the literacy activities carried out with the child raise three important themes. These three themes are the result of grouping the answers and relationships of the child's activities as well as the themes of research.

Awareness related to problems surrounding the environment

The results of this study indicate that children possess a strong awareness of the home and school environments in which they live. When confronted with environmental issues, they can easily identify what is wrong in their surroundings. They are able to provide examples of behaviors that contradict the actions they should be taking. This underscores the importance of the social context of learning and development, which relies heavily on the significant contribution of presenting issues as part of the discussion (O'Halloran, Tan & E, 2013; Hasanah, Sunarno, & Prayitno, 2021). Such interactions enhance children's knowledge as they listen and talk with adults, specifically their teachers, and also allow teachers to better understand their students. The children's involvement in discussions about waste problems in the schoolyard serves as part of contextual learning. John Dewey, a social constructivist theorist, similarly emphasizes the importance of teachers being responsive to children's needs during the learning process (Gleim et al., 2022). He believed that children construct meaning through direct experiences. Luke (2012) also argued that critical literacy is closely related to a sociocultural perspective, where literacy is understood as an action built within a social context through shared problems and negotiations, rather than as an abstract concept. Children should be viewed as protagonists of their own learning, exploring their own choices and freedoms to create a meaningful and democratic learning environment (Yoon, 2020).

The success of literacy education cannot be separated from its context konteks (Derby, Macfarlane, & Gillon, 2022; Leon, 2023). The context of the issue of marine and beach waste enriches the discussions held with the children. For instance, when children mentioned that many people, including their own families, dispose of trash on the beach, they recognized that this behavior is wrong and understood its impact on the ocean. The materials and activities used were well-aligned with the children's context, enabling them to actively engage in the discussions. However, the exploration of activities that could deepen their understanding of waste management was less evident.

For example, the teacher had not yet initiated activities that could reduce waste, such as recycling or putting up signs to discourage littering.

Expressing opinions and concluding solutions

In the literacy activities conducted with the children, it was observed that they were able to express opinions and suggest possible solutions. However, the responses given were still quite limited. For example, the number of words the children used was very few, and their expressions or body language were only occasionally employed. This limitation is due to the lack of sufficient vocabulary stimuli related to expressing opinions. Words and phrases such as "I agree," "I disagree," "In my opinion," and others were not adequately introduced. This is because the discussion model was generally dominated by the teacher, and the children were given the opportunity to speak primarily in the context of answering open-ended questions, which typically required one or two-word responses (Yang et al., 2023).

The implementation of critical literacy in early childhood education (PAUD) should be understood as a learning journey where children are encouraged to think critically and reflect on the meanings presented in texts, stories, situations, and specific events (Law, 2020). This was evident in the literacy activities conducted, such as when children were shown images that triggered memories of similar events they had experienced. In this study, for instance, the children were shown a picture of plastic bottle waste, which they immediately connected to examples of people carelessly discarding plastic bottles. Moreover, the concept of understanding images, events, texts, and other forms of media can broaden the narrow interpretation of literacy, which is often limited to reading and writing, into a higher-order thinking skill. This involves developing the ability to comprehend, identify, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed or written materials tailored to various contexts (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). However, during the literacy activities, there was a noticeable lack of stimuli or prompting questions designed to enhance higher-order thinking skills. For example, when the teacher asked, "If the beach is dirty with trash, what should we do?" the expectation was only one specific answer, whereas the children could have been encouraged to think about other possible actions that could be taken.

To be able to develop a critical attitude, children need to get used to engaging in critical discussions where their opinions and thoughts are heard and appreciated, so that they become confident to engage in criticism about current and meaningful topics that

touch their lives (Holyoke & Ries, 2023). Trott dan Weinberg (2020) argued that children who study the dimensions of climate change can help children to figure out: who did it, how and why. It has been described in literacy activities with teachers, however, the development of these activities needs to be enhanced so that the child is accustomed to expressing their opinions and thoughts.

Associates reading text with real problems

The activities or literacy learning that are being done in the school are already going on but are not maximum. Exploring how critical literacy practices influence the development of a child's critical and creative thinking has been seen where children can clearly associate their early understanding with a book topic. They can also capture the complexity of literacy learning processes with the issue of garbage in their neighborhoods and bad habits, for example, considering the sea as a landfill for some of the communities in the Tomini Bay Area.

One of the important aspects of literacy learning is the teacher (Barnes et al., 2017). Teachers are regarded as partners in children's learning, and instead of dominating the learning process, they listen to theories and ideas of children freely, while offering appropriate advice to help children build their own learning. In this study, teachers were seen to involve children in literacy activities even though generally teachers still dominated conversation by giving more information than children. For example, in the process of discussing solutions to pictures of plastic garbage accumulating on the beach, children might argue that they might be different from each other. However, teachers are still less exploring these differences of opinion and focusing on the expected answers.

Children understand that critical literacy activities conducted both inside and outside the classroom help build their own understanding. These activities were documented through images and written texts that explain how the children negotiated their knowledge (Croix, Parsons, Klee, Vaughn, & Yun, 2023). The teacher reflected on and expanded the activities by taking the children to the beach, which helped to reinforce and deepen their understanding. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that critical literacy activities in early childhood education can collaboratively build children's knowledge on the taught topics, enhance problem-solving processes, and assist

teachers in expanding and planning further activities based on previous experiences (Churchward & Willis, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The critical literacy activities conducted on the theme of waste in the school and home environments along the coastal area demonstrated that children were able to develop their literacy skills effectively. Out of the 15 children who participated in the four sessions, 13 actively engaged in discussions about waste issues around the beach and ocean, and participated in picture book reading activities as part of the school's literacy program. Through these activities, the children were able to demonstrate an awareness of environmental issues by understanding the context and relating it to the reading topics. Moreover, although their skills are still developing, the children were able to voice their opinions and suggest solutions related to the topics discussed. To foster a critical mindset, it is essential for children to regularly engage in critical discussions where their ideas and thoughts are heard and valued. During classroom activities, it was often observed that some children were hesitant to express their opinions, feeling that their ideas were not fully acknowledged. Another challenge identified was that the children lacked the necessary vocabulary to articulate their thoughts and opinions, leading to the teacher dominating much of the discussion. However, these activities also provided the children with the opportunity to directly connect their reading with real-life issues present in their lives.

RECOMMENDATION

This research has demonstrated how topics that are relatively challenging to teach can be effectively conveyed if teachers are able to develop literacy activities that are contextual and relevant to children's daily lives. Therefore, in implementing critical literacy activities for children, it is essential to integrate the environment and appropriate reading texts. Additionally, these literacy activities can serve as a foundation for developing literacy skills in early childhood, while also providing a learning model that integrates 21st-century skills, which prioritize literacy.

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