

Reading to think. The non-fiction picturebook in the development of critical thinking

Leer para pensar. El libro ilustrado de no ficción en el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico

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Abstract

Among the educational challenges to be faced by the information society, the development of critical thinking is one of the objectives most highlighted in reports and curricular plans. Such an objective is proposed with the intention of building democratic societies, which is in turn a complex and difficult goal to concretise in teaching programmes. In this sense, in-depth reading, argumentative skills and information competency are often identified as necessary skills that require the coexistence of printed and digital formats, according to various studies. Within this framework, the non-fiction picturebook aimed at children favours these skills due to its characteristics, as can be concluded from this study. Thus, based on the review of the catalogues of 61 publishers and the analysis of 250 non-fictional works, the keys to the construction of these books are presented through the selection of a representative corpus that is provided as a proposed reading programme in Primary Education. Titles such as *Supongamos* (Da Coll, 2015), or *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y los niños* (Brami y Billon-Spagnol, 2018) are therefore considered to be particularly appropriate for training critical readers.

Key words: Children's non-fiction picturebooks; critical thinking; argumentative skills; in-depth reading; information society; critical reader.

Resumen

Entre los retos educativos que debe afrontar la sociedad de la información, el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico se erige como uno de los objetivos más destacados en los informes y planes curriculares desde la pretensión de la construcción de sociedades democráticas, un objetivo que, por otra parte, resulta complejo y difícil de concretar en las programaciones didácticas. En este sentido, la lectura en profundidad, la capacidad argumentativa o la competencia informacional suelen señalarse como habilidades necesarias que requieren, según diversos estudios, del formato impreso en convivencia con el digital. En este marco, el libro ilustrado de no ficción dirigido a la infancia favorece, por sus características, estas habilidades, tal y como se depende del estudio realizado. De este modo, a partir de la revisión de los catálogos de 61 editoriales y del análisis de 250 obras no ficcionales, se exponen las claves de construcción de estos libros a través de la selección de un corpus representativo que se aporta como propuesta de lectura en Educación Primaria. Se considera así que títulos como *Supongamos* (Da Coll, 2015), o *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y los niños* (Brami y Billon-Spagnol, 2018) resultan especialmente adecuados en la formación de lectores críticos.

Palabras clave: Libros ilustrados infantiles de no ficción; pensamiento crítico; capacidad argumentativa; lectura en profundidad; sociedad de la información; lector crítico.

1. Introduction

1.1. In-depth reading and critical thinking in the digital society

One of the challenges faced by the information society in terms of reading is none other than the incorporation of critical citizens into the new cultural ecosystem; citizens who possess the necessary strategies to express themselves using their own judgement in the midst of digital and analogue paradigms (De Amo Sánchez-Fortún, 2021). In this respect, Wolf (2018) insists on the necessity of building a biliterate reading brain based on the idea that the way we read changes the way we think, and thus, different digital experiences that surround readers on a daily basis distract them from in-depth reading as a means of developing critical thinking and empathy. As a starting point, the author poses questions to form the basis of research on reading in the digital society:

Will new readers develop the more time-demanding cognitive processes nurtured by print-based mediums as they absorb and acquire new cognitive capacities emphasized by digital media? For example, will the combination of reading on digital formats and daily immersion in a variety of digital experiences—from social media to virtual game—impede the formation of the slower cognitive processes such as critical thinking, personal reflection, imagination and empathy that are all part of deep reading? Will the mix of continuously stimulating distractions of children’s attention and immediate access to multiple sources of information give young readers less incentive either to build their own storehouses of knowledge or to think critically for themselves? (Wolf, 2018, pp. 20-21)

Other studies, such as those by Cordón-García (2018, 2020), Baron (2021), Delgado et al. (2018) or Gil Pelluch et al. (2020), and reports such as *Lectura en papel vs. lectura en pantalla* (Kovač and Van-der-Weel, 2020) or *Developing literacy skills in a digital world*, presented by the OECD (2021), similarly state that print reading favours in-depth reading and reading comprehension. The study published by Støle (2020) insists on the conditions required for in-depth reading, screen reading inferior in terms of comprehension due to the lower level of attention required by digital texts and readers’ overconfidence regarding screen reading. Furthermore, the author analyses the fact that in-depth reading seems to be more difficult for people who use digital media regularly, since ‘typical fast-paced reading patterns [are] connected with online reading’ (Støle, 2020, p. 55). In the same report, Schilhab et al. (2020) emphasise the sense of stability that printed paper bestows on a physical book, making it the most suitable medium for the development of in-depth reading.

The report prepared by the European Union (2016) on the creation of a work plan for culture (2015-2018), *Promoting reading in the digital environment*, among others, states the need for reflection on a new reading ecosystem that develops a reader who knows how to select, filter and organise information in order to convert it into knowledge, that is to say, a reader with information competency.

1.2. Critical thinking and argumentation in education

In education, the construct ‘critical thinking’ is often closely linked to argumentative skills, which are complex and require high-order thinking (García-Barrera, 2015). As explained below, the UNESCO reports or the current Spanish Education Law, among others, refer to the development of citizens’ critical thinking as a cornerstone in the construction of democratic, participatory societies that, collectively, are capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century (Caro-Valverde, 2018).

The report *Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*—commissioned by UNESCO and prepared by the International Commission on the Futures of Education (2022)—includes the Sustainable Development Goals set by the 2030 Agenda approved by the Member States of the United Nations. Accordingly, this report is based on a committed concept of education shared by the European Union: life-long education understood as a public and collective project for a sustainable future, built on the commitment to human rights, democratic participation and caring for the planet. With this purpose, the report casts serious doubts on educational models based on established truths and instead encourages questioning, the development of critical thinking, educational innovation and the shared, creative creation of a body of knowledge that is able to respond to new problems from an interdisciplinary perspective.

As well as emphasising this active, critical role of citizens regarding absolute truths, the report insists that education must ensure access to accurate information that provides a solid basis for opinions and knowledge-building. In this respect, the report recommends using different methodological approaches as a basis for contemporary study programmes that prepare students to handle different sources of information to help them to confirm their findings and reach sound conclusions. Thus, among other proposals to update education, the report suggests counteracting disinformation through ‘scientific, digital and humanistic literacies that develop the ability to distinguish falsehoods from truth’ (p. 4) and ‘a love for understanding, accuracy, precision, and a commitment to truth’ (p. 154):

The right to education is supported by (and supports in turn) the right to information and the right to culture. Freedom of opinion and expression can only be properly maintained when people have the ability to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. In our media-saturated contemporary world, rife with fake and misleading news, education has an essential role to play in supporting people’s quests for accurate information and enabling their desire to pass it along faithfully, free of manipulation. (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022, p. 116)

Similarly, in the context of education in Spain, Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, which amends Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education (hereinafter LOMLOE) also covers the Sustainable Development Goals set by the 2030 Agenda and appeals for training that allows people to ‘take fundamental decisions and assume an active role’ (Spain, Parliament, 2020, p. 12287171). In this sense, there are frequent references in the LOMLOE to encouraging critical thinking in the stages of primary and secondary education linked to skills development and comprehensive training of students, especially regarding technological competency and the recent inclusion in the curriculum of the area of education in civic and ethical values.

Along the same lines, Royal Decree 157/2022, of 1 March, which establishes the organisation and minimum teaching requirements of primary education (Spain, Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022), introduces the concepts of critical thinking and argumentative skills in a way that is both cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. Emphasis is firmly placed on the development of critical thinking and the adoption of habits for the critical usage of available resources, particularly digital resources, both by fostering key competencies such as linguistic communication, digital competency, citizenship or entrepreneurship competency, and in the areas of knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment, Spanish language and literature, mathematics, foreign language, art, physical education or education in civic and ethical values.

Argumentative skills are also mentioned repeatedly in the Royal Decree (Spain, Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022) as linked, in particular, to the areas of mathematics, knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment, education in civic and ethical values and Spanish language and literature. Argumentation is involved, therefore, in the processing of information from the different content in each area, but its function is the same in all of them, that is, to encourage students' social involvement, to create cooperative work environments in the classroom, to promote scientific reasoning or to provide training in how to solve conflicts through dialogue.

More specifically, in the area of Spanish language and literature, the emphasis is on training a competent, autonomous and critical reader who can understand and interpret complex written and multimodal texts that help them to face the challenges of the modern information society. To this end, the specific competencies and basic knowledge in this area include media and information literacy, which is taught by focusing on information search strategies, acknowledgement of authorship, handling of different documentary sources and the comparison, organisation, critical evaluation and creative communication of information. Side by side with digital reading, the fundamental role of the school library in training this type of readers—who need to learn criteria in order to select texts depending on their needs and interests—is also recognised.

The school library has the potential to become the hub for learning basic knowledge and acquiring competencies, offering resources both for sharing, reflecting and expressing personal reading preferences, and for furthering innovation, creativity and critical thinking in the educational community. It is also advisable to establish reading groups with shared interest; develop strategies to help students to choose the texts that interest them, appropriate them and share their own reading experiences in an individual and creative way; and establish contexts that lead to reading, by challenging students to engage in inquiry and offer ways for readers to connect emotionally with the texts. (Spain, Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022, p. 71)

In short, based on UNESCO recommendations, the current curricular framework aims to produce active, critical, responsible, democratic citizens who are committed to human rights and the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. To this end, educational programmes should encourage the development of students' critical thinking through their social participation and during the teaching-learning process. Therefore, this participation may be prompted by the creation of collaborative work environments as they involve students in finding and organising accurate information to use for problem-solving and stimulate their argumentative skills to express and defend opinions, findings

or knowledge and use dialogue to handle conflicts—which are a natural part of social relationships—in a non-violent way.

Although the documents mentioned clearly state the relevance of critical thinking and argumentation as educational objectives, these are complex constructs that require further definition when they are introduced in the classroom. Therefore, in order to provide teaching programmes and learning situations that are consistent with their development, it is necessary to delve into the understanding of these concepts and identify the skills involved (García-Barrera, 2015; Kuhn, 2019). In this sense, we consider that the input by Ennis (2011, 2018) and Kuhn (2018, 2019) may help to shed light on teachers work and identify categories of interest in a review of resources, such as the contemporary non-fiction picturebook, insofar as they may aid the development of critical thinking, argumentative skills and, as a consequence, training of critical readers.

In theory, based on the definition provided by Ennis (2011, 2018), critical thinking could be described as reasonable, reflective thinking that people adopt when they decide what they believe about a subject or what they are going to do in relation to a problem requiring decisions-making. It therefore refers to a process involving the implementation of a series of skills identified by Ennis (2011, 2018) that may be included in educational programmes as objectives or evaluation criteria. Among the skills described by the author, we highlight, for example, the ability to focus on a question, the analysis of arguments, formulating and answering clarifying questions, questioning the credibility of sources and information, the use of graphics, handling misunderstandings, empathy or sensitivity towards others, the use of deduction, inference and rhetorical strategies or the competent use of technology. According to Ennis (2011, 2018), model critical thinkers try to stay well-informed, attempt to base their beliefs on truths, are conscious of their own thought processes, justify their decisions, offer reasons and present a position clearly and honestly; to this effect, they consider other points of view than their own, show concern for the feelings of others and avoid being the cause of confusing or intimidating situations.

In turn, Kuhn (2018, 2019) believes that argumentation is the essence of critical thinking and a fundamentally collective and contextualised social and cultural practice. The author, as a result of her research, proposes creating classroom situations in which students can engage in peer-to-peer dialogic argumentation based on topics related to their own experiences and later progress onto more controversial and relevant ones that cause social concern. With these practices, over time, the planning, consideration, writing and reading of arguments and reasons become the activity's focal point and the way to develop students' social and individual argumentation competency.

Based on the same social concept of argumentative skills, Guzmán-Cedillo and Flores-Macías (2020) analysed 73 studies in educational contexts conducted between 2000 and 2016. Their results reveal as overlapping practices that are suitable for educational settings: shared, contextualised educational proposals; an interdisciplinary approach to the topics to be discussed; horizontal interaction between learners combined with a teaching process that includes knowledge of argumentative types that may be identified in texts; expressing an informed opinion; or the development of counter-arguments based on the understanding of other positions:

Research increasingly acknowledges the activity of cooperative argumentation, which requires a social view of the argumentative process whilst adhering to contextual rules concerning the subject or reality that the interlocutors are discussing. (Guzmán-Cedillo and Flores-Macías, 2020, p. 27)

Finally, we draw attention to the work of Bezanilla et al. (2019), who conducted a literature review of the main methodologies used to encourage critical thinking according to expert authors, as well as the methodologies most frequently used by university teachers in Spain and Latin America. Based on the results of the first part of their study, we have obtained the following strategies or guidelines for teachers:

- Integrate critical thinking into the syllabus design of subjects.
- Ask students complex questions.
- Offer practical experience and outline solutions to problems which may arise during decision-making.
- Select activities with a real-life context.
- Work with different sources of information (in class, outside the classroom, online...)
- Encourage inquiry and reflective dialogue.
- Suggest that students write journals, documents, portfolios...
- Use visual representations, concept maps.
- Understand the classroom as a research community.
- Analyse the arguments that students use.

1.3. The non-fiction picturebook

In this context, the non-fiction picturebook is relevant, in principle, due to the nature of its content, the reading proposals it contains and its position as one of the most successful sectors in the publishing industry (Jan, 2021). There is a need, therefore, to reflect on the characteristics of this type of book and the role it plays in the formation of critical citizens.

Taberero-Sala et al. (2022) conducted a review of the genre in which they describe the keys to reading the contemporary non-fiction picturebook, thus identifying the procedures followed by this publishing sector. In this way, the non-fiction picturebook—in some cases non-fiction album (Taberero-Sala, 2022)—proposes breaking with the linearity of discourse in an appeal to inquisitive readers (Von Merveldt, 2018), from the fragile boundaries between fiction and non-fiction—in line with Bauman’s fluidity of limits (Bauman, 2017), to open discussion, far from the encyclopaedic nature of these works, also from a subjective and emotional evocation of what is called ‘the real world’ (Grilli, 2020), and from the physical aspect of reading dominated by materiality as a key structural element (Salisbury, 2020). Along the same lines as the hybridisation of language, content and readers provided by the multimodal nature of discourse (Pappas, 2006; Von Merveldt, 2018; Smith and Robertson, 2019; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Grilli, 2020; Romero-Oliva, Heredia-Ponce et al., 2021, among others), the contemporary non-fiction picturebook is close to a mixed paradigm connecting art and knowledge by portraying critical, creative readers explained out of the curiosity born of wonder.

Thus, one of the most significant parameters in characterising this type of work was described by Sanders (2018) in his study *A literature of questions. Nonfiction for the critical child*. The author analyses the non-fiction book in terms of the presentation of information biased simply by authors' selection of some pieces of information to the detriment of others, and takes an interest in the aesthetic strategies that invite readers to become involved in the texts, to interact with them, to engage with the information in a reflective, dialogic way. The intention is not to present information for it to be merely absorbed, but rather to encourage readers' research by arousing their curiosity and wonder.

Nodelman (1987), in an work entitled *Non-fiction for children: Does it really exist?*, defines non-fiction texts as fictional, since all of them reflect the author's subjective perception of the topics selected. As Grilli (2021) states, non-fiction picturebooks, far from representing the world in a neutral way, transmit an individual view of the universe that the reader may or may not share.

In this sense, these works propose critical readers who ask questions about what they are presented with, who take a stance about what they are shown, who notice flaws in the discourse and question the credibility of information. Non-fiction, as Sanders (2018) indicates, drifts apart from the traditional concept of authority by casting doubts on factual literature. The author thereby identifies the essence of non-fiction books with the way they create critical readers and provoke a 'reflective engagement with information' (Sanders, 2018, p. 6). Based on Barthes' ideas (1994) on the 'death of the author' and Freire's (2002, 2010) assumptions regarding critical pedagogy, along with Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic concept of the novel, Sanders (2018) identifies the critical reader in those works where cracks are revealed in the texts' authority and questions arise and guide the process of intellectual inquiry. Therefore, the centralisation of meaning in a single, authorised source of true knowledge is questioned. Hence, instead of providing answers, non-fiction books that develop critical thinking advocate inquiry to promote debate, arouse curiosity and generate enthusiasm. Only when non-fiction books drift apart from the concept of factual literature can critical reading be introduced. Sanders (2018) defends that the essence of non-fiction lies in creating a 'literature of questions'. In his study, the author focuses on analysing voice, characters and peritexts, fundamentally to define the discourse markers that identify the books or 'moments in books' that encourage critical reading. In doing so, he defines a discourse in which the reader has a part and negotiates meanings, both through the visible narrator's own voice and the characters' vulnerability, or through the multiple strategies afforded by reading the peritexts.

Finally, the current tendency of non-fiction picturebooks to move towards what has been called 'hybrid character', 'non-fiction narrative' or 'dual-purpose texts' (Colman, 2007, 2011; Enríquez and Shulman-Kumin, 2014; Graff and Shimek, 2020; Gill, 2011; Meyer, 2020; Sanders, 2018; Smith and Robertson, 2019; Taberero-Sala et al., 2022) shows that the fictional element extends the boundaries of non-fiction to include mixed informative-narrative paradigms. These books thereby combine the transmission of apparently objective content and the author's subjective view in ways that inspire the reader's empathy (Cain, 2015). On many occasions, they are also based on an artistic and experiential component that extends the relationship between the book and its environment, through feedback that transforms the individual's relationship to the

context, as studied in the new line of research on children's books originating in the paradigms of ecocriticism (Goga, Guanio-Uluru, Hallås and Nyrnes, 2018).

2. Analysis method

The main objective of this study is to identify the keys to construct non-fiction picturebooks through the selection of a representative corpus that is provided as a reading proposal for primary education, a fundamental stage in educating readers and beginning to develop critical thinking.

Therefore, in order to propose non-fiction books that foster critical thinking and other associated skills, such as in-depth reading, argumentative skills or information competency, we present the results of the analysis performed on a preliminary sample of 61 publishers and 250 non-fiction books. The selection criteria were: publishers specialising in children's picturebooks in Spain and Latin America with a solid background of publishing non-fiction works or collections. Table 1 shows the list of selected publishers.

Table 1.

Publishers selected

1	A buen paso	22	Ekaré	43	Nórdica
2	A Fin de Cuentos	23	Fondo de Cultura Económica	44	Nube Ocho
3	Akiara Books	24	Fulgencio Pimentel	45	Nuevo Nuevo e
4	Alba	25	Galimatazo	46	Océano
5	Amanuta	26	Gato Sueco	47	Parramon
6	Anaya	27	Geo Planeta	48	Pastel de Luna
7	Andana	28	Iamiqué	49	Penguinkids
8	Babel Libros	29	Impedimenta	50	Pequeño editor
9	Babulinka Books	30	Juventud	51	Picarona
10	Barbara Fiore	31	Kalandraka	52	Pípala
11	Blackie Books	32	Kókinos	53	Silonia
12	Blume	33	Lata de Sal	54	SM
13	Bookolia	34	Liana Editorial	55	Siruela
14	Bululú	35	Libre Albedrío	56	Takatuka
15	Calibrosopio	36	Libros del Zorro Rojo	57	Tecolote
16	Coco Books	37	Litera	58	Thule
17	Combel	38	Lóquez	59	Tres Tigres Tristes
18	Corimbo	39	Lumen	60	Wonder Ponder
19	Cuatro Azules	40	Maeva	61	Zahorí Books
20	Edelvives	41	Media Vaca		
21	Ediciones Castillo	42	Milrazones		

During the review stage, the publishers' catalogues were examined and some of their non-fiction titles were selected, according to their topicality, variety of themes, artistic quality, recognition, age of the potential implied reader and digital promotion—for example, we took into account the design of book trailers as virtual epitexts that guide and shape a reading method (Tabernero-Sala et al., 2022).

In an initial examination, the instrument we used to study the works was the documentary analysis grid proposed by Romero-Oliva, Heredia-Ponce et al. (2021, 2022). This tool was designed to analyse and systematise the characteristics of non-fiction picturebooks and was validated by experts. The grid structure is based on four areas of interest, composed of 105 items, which favoured a more descriptive initial analysis:

- *Technical data of the book.*
- *The book as an object:* physical and paratextual aspects of the book.
- *Content of the work:* structure, concept of information, discursive and graphic facilitators, textual typology, narrative voice, possible audiences...
- *Book and school:* educational level, type of reading proposed, links with curriculum content...

Once this first, detailed report on the books had been completed, the study identified elements that were usually present and could be interpreted as the most frequent indicators of the categories characterising contemporary non-fiction picturebooks. The analysis thereby confirmed the presence of construction keys as described in previous studies such as those by Sanders (2018), Grilli (2020) or Von-Merveldt (2018). Among the categories detected, Table 2 includes those with particular links to the skills required for the development of critical thinking.

Table 2.
 Categories detected in the analysis

Categories	Indicators	Titles selected
Analysis of reality	Current topics Human Rights and SDG Social conflict Discourse markers implying flaws in veracity	- <i>Así es la dictadura</i> (Equipo Plantel and Casal, 2015) - <i>La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños</i> (Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2018)
Inquiry	Questions Challenges Interactivity Appeal for the reader to reflect	- <i>Marie Curie. En el país de la ciencia</i> (Cohen-Janca and Palmarucci, 2020)
Reliability	Biographical notes on the authors Specialist authors Objective data Graphs and tables Authoritative arguments	

Document polyphony	Fragmentation Variety of text types Visual facilitators Glossaries Hypertextuality References to other works Incomplete information	- <i>Mexique. El nombre del barco</i> (Ferrada and Penyas, 2017) - <i>Panthera Tigris</i> (Alzial and Rajcak, 2018)
Hybridisation	Multimodality First person narrative voice Fictionalised real-life characters Fictional narrative Ellipsis Word and image Rhetorical resources Digital extensions	- <i>Supongamos</i> (Da Coll, 2015) - <i>Un par de ojos nuevos</i> (Duthie et al., 2022)

Finally, out of the works that exhibited several of the indicators identified, we selected a reduced corpus of seven books in which the presence of these construction keys was noticeable. We consider that the corpus selected corresponds to suitable reading material for training readers and developing critical thinking and argumentative skills in the primary education stage. This proposal is consistent with UNESCO guidelines (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022) and the current curriculum framework (Spain, Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022) and will require teachers' guidance in educational contexts.

3. Results

By way of results, we present below the analysis of the selected corpus. The corpus is composed of seven books with discursive characteristics that aim to encourage reflection and critical thinking in childhood. We consider that the analysis of these characteristics provides the reading mediator with key points of interest in designing a reading programme that can be introduced into the primary education classroom.

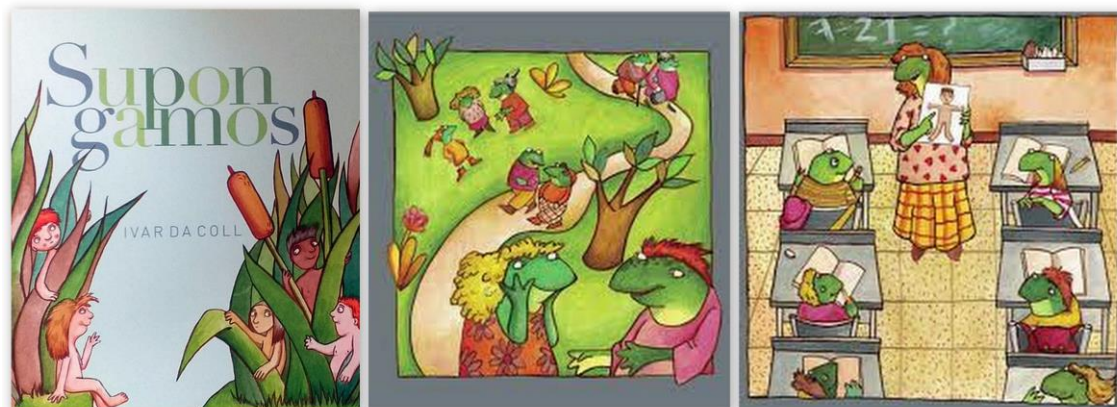
3.1. Reading of *Supongamos* (Ivar Da Coll, 2015)

Supongamos is an album published by the Colombian author Ivar Da Coll with the publisher Babel Libros. As most creations by Ivar Da Coll, he is the sole author of both the text and illustrations. The narrator speaks directly to the readers, ironically offering them a hypothetical case: what if frogs were children and children were frogs.

Suppose that frogs were as big as children...
 ...and children were as big as frogs.
 (Da Coll, 2015)

This is how the book begins and it maintains the same graphic and conceptual structure on each double spread. The text, which is always on the left-hand page, reserves the first line for the verb in the first person plural, printed in green, followed by a short text of two or three lines that reflect the initial hypothesis accompanied by an illustration referring to the central argument of the supposition in each case.

Figure 1.
Cover, back cover and page of *Supongamos* (Da Coll, 2015)



From the perspective of the discourse markers, the narrator's voice adopts the first person plural in the present subjunctive, which places the discourse in the realm of possibility and directly invites the readers, through the use of the plural, to accompany the narrator in each of the hypotheses. The readers are required, through the verbal discourse markers, to participate in an exercise of 'putting themselves in someone else's shoes'—of empathy—and the receptor participates in the book as one of the protagonists. The album opts for a dialogic concept that requires the readers' active collaboration in the negotiation of meaning. Thus, the narrative voice moves away from the concept of unquestionable authority and offers the readers gaps in which they can find a space to continue exploring the proposal. It is only at the end of the album that the narrative voice changes to the first person singular and leaves the subjunctive mode to 'indicate' semantically that there is doubt about what may happen:

Well, we won't continue
supposing because
I suppose that this story
may have an unhappy ending.
(Da Coll, 2015)

Supongamos offers the reader a game of hypotheses that the book cover reveals only partially, as it shows several naked boys and girls who peep out of the reeds, looking happy and relaxed, and the back cover provides the rest of the hypothesis with a textless image in which the frogs are strolling in the park and enjoying themselves as if they were children.

The layout of the cover (figure 1) in which the groups of boys and girls are facing each other, hints at a type of uneasy contrast that will acquire meaning later on during the course of the story, as the 'supposition' becomes increasingly disturbing on each successive double spread until it reaches the climax:

Let's suppose
that one day at school
the teacher tells
her students:
'Your homework for tomorrow,

for each one of you,
is to bring a child
in a jar'
(Da Coll, 2015)

The structure up to this point alternates between the left-hand page with text and the right-hand page with motifs and illustrations around the text box; however, this order collapses at the moment of greatest tension, which causes the margins to disappear and pages with grey backgrounds and the actions sketched in outlines. Previous pages hinted at the disappearance of the frameworks to announce the hypothesis of highest tension.

The relationship established between text and image in this multimodal discourse, so characteristic of the picturebook, can be defined from the complementarity (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001) involved in ellipsis as a construction procedure. The text says nothing about what is expressed by the images (Durán, 2009) and, therefore, it is the reader who must fill the gaps in order to construct meaning. Thus, to some extent, the author's choice approaches what has been referred to as *animal fantasy* (Nikolajeva, 2014) and the greatest paradox is found in the characters' expressions: the frogs always have carefree and cheerful expressions while the children and their parents look increasingly worried as the story unfolds.

The sequencing of images and words in the story is a result of recurring patterns, as is suitable for a reader who requires a certain level of certainty, although the narrator operates in the realm of possibility rather than that of certainty. This fact, once again, forces the readers to draw their own conclusions during the dramatic escalation of suppositions, until the image shows a child in a jar ready to be dissected...The playful nature of the irony appeals to the readers, inviting them to engage with the subject matter that seeks to raise their awareness. In this way, the book can be interpreted ecocritically in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (Goga et al., 2018).

Regarding the paratexts, the square-shaped, paperback format appeals to children who are required to accept the ludic suggestion made by the narrative voice: to play at what might happen. The flyleaves, in contrast, are the prelude to the work, showing illustrated plant motifs that evoke the content on the cover as they alternate with the image of a child's head peeking out of the reeds. The writing is also in large-sized fonts with double spacing on a white background, which is another attractive point for children.

In short, the discourse unfolds in the area of hybridisation, on the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, in order to develop the concept of empathy through the interaction of the perspectives of the children and the frogs; this interaction is reflected both in the verbal discourse markers and in the opposing, symmetrical layout and ellipsis, used as rhetorical construction strategies. As Sanders (2018) states when he defines non-fiction books as a literature of questions, *Supongamos* challenges readers and makes them reflect on the very basis of empathy, which leads them to put themselves in the position of abused animals. In doing so, the aim is to arouse the audience's interest in the issue addressed, in questioning, and in acquiring a commitment to respect animals (Von Merveldt, 2018).

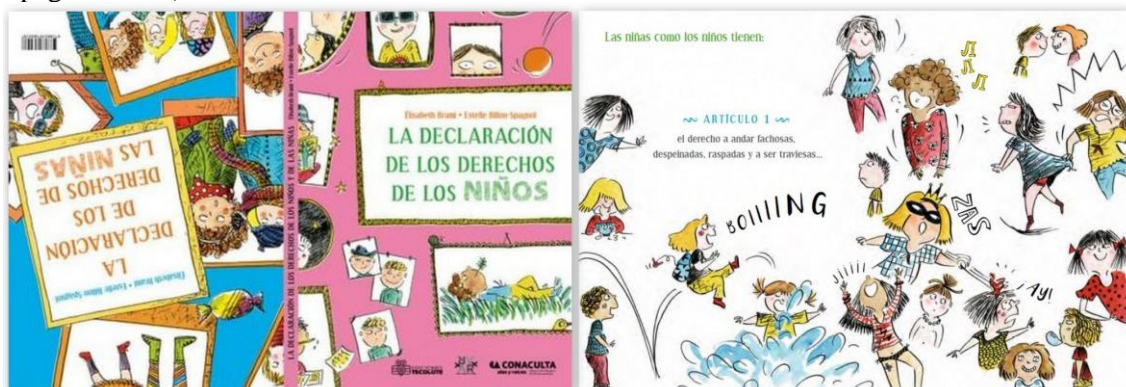
3.2. Reading of *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños* (Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2018)

The same premises used in this literature of questions form the basis for titles such as *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños* by E. Brami and E. Billon-Spagnol (Tecolote, 2018). In this work, the interplay between format and reading contrasts with the boys and girls' viewpoints about the reversible, 'upside-down' layout. The narrative voice in this book is the expository third person, typical in 'universal statements' of a legal nature, and uses different visual elements to invite the reader to reflect on children's rights, through the equality represented in the contradictory combinations of colours—pink backgrounds for boys and blue backgrounds for girls—characters and the seriousness of the texts in the articles above humorous illustrations that are somewhere between the style of a comic and caricature, and the layouts dominated by wild activity full of life, respect for diversity and, above all, freedom.

The text and images build a discourse that invites the readers to reflect, using verbal and graphic discourse markers. In this case, the activity of reading guided by the reversible format (figure 2) engages the readers by establishing spaces in which they can learn about different viewpoints regarding the same reality, through the handling proposed by Gustave Verbeek. The discourse in the declaration of girls' rights is based on the statement of boys' rights, using the narrative voice to define, in this case, a series of ideological consequences that can be inferred from the interaction between the verbal authority of the third person, the images, which have no connection in some places and act as a contrast in others (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001), and the format, which uses the technique of reversible texts and plays on the contrast of colours and graphics throughout the book.

Figure 2.

Covers and pages of *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños* (Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2018)



It is worth noting the *Amnesty International* logo in the publisher's peritext, expressly supporting this declaration:

Amnesty International 'supports' this declaration which aims to put an end to preconceived ideas and stereotypes. This curious list of made-up rights reminds us of the importance of respect for equality for everyone.

(Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2018)

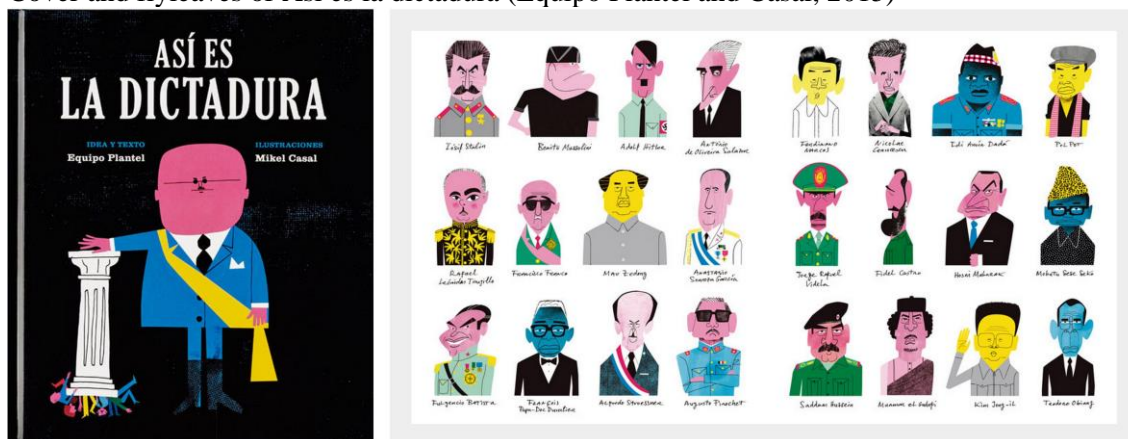
In this sense, the publisher's peritext is significant due to the presence of the logo and the discourse markers used to define the work when it identifies it as a 'curious list of made-up rights'. This introduces, therefore, a reflection on the discourse's own existence somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, by including the concept of curiosity (Taberero-Sala, 2022; Von Merveldt, 2018). Along the same construction lines we find *La Declaración de los derechos de las mamás y de los papás* (Tecalote, 2016)¹.

3.3. Reading of *Así es la dictadura* (Equipo Plantel and Casal, 2015) and *Un par de ojos nuevos* (Duthie et al. 2022)

In the same register, we find the reworking of *Así es la dictadura* by Equipo Plantel, updated with illustrations by Mikel Casal by the publisher Media Vaca in 2015. In this case, the narrative voice, which is in the third person and shows no apparent bias, provides definitions that, although they may seem academic from the perspective of descriptive logic, are very familiar to children. On the one hand, the illustrations interact with the historical intertext in verbal silence—once again ellipsis—and, on the other, the publisher's peritext on the flyleaves (figure 3) and in editorial texts such as 'Antes de leer *Así es la dictadura*' (*Before reading Así es la dictadura*), 'Test sobre la dictadura' (*Test on dictatorship*) and 'La dictadura. Ayer y hoy' (*Dictatorship. Yesterday and today*) identify the spaces where the reader is required to ask questions and reflect on the answers generated by these questions.

Figure 3.

Cover and flyleaves of *Así es la dictadura* (Equipo Plantel and Casal, 2015)

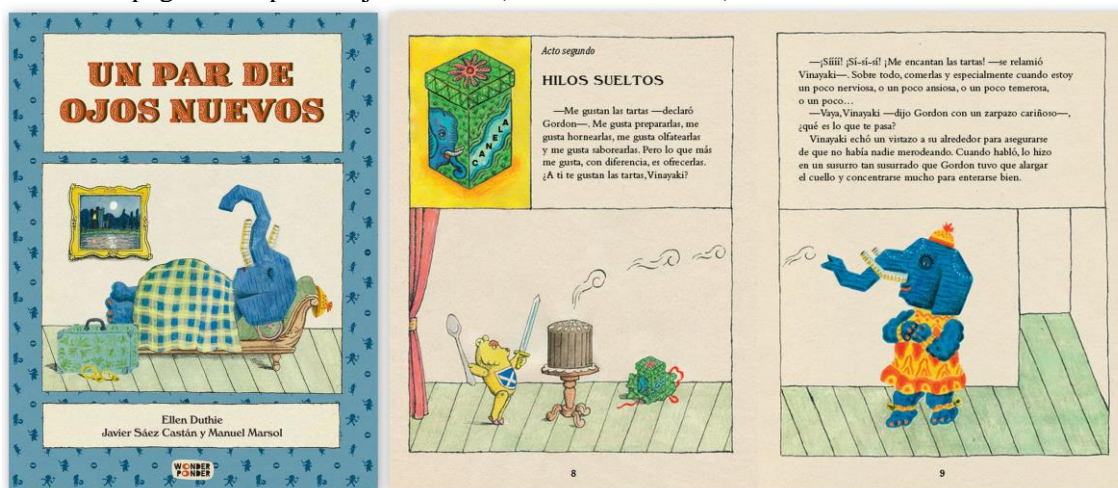


The publishing Wonder Ponder project—run by Ellen Duthie and Raquel Martínez (Aparicio et al., in production; Colón, in production)—is similarly representative. This is a specialised project on visual philosophy for children that uses questions as the central feature of its creations and physical handling during the act of reading as distinguishing feature. The project's catalogue includes works in which questions are posed directly to readers, as the system of scenes and cards in *Mundo Cruel*, *Yo, persona*, *Lo que tú quieras* and *Pellízcame*, an *interplanetary questionnaire* with an interactive design as *¿Hay alguien*

¹ Both books are the translations of the original French works. In this case it is noteworthy that *La Declaración de los derechos de las mamás y de los papás*, originally published in 2016, was translated into Spanish before *La Declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños*, which was originally published in 2014 and later translated in 2018.

ahí? (Duthie and Studio Patten, 2022) or *Un par de ojos nuevos* (Duthie et al., 2022). In this last book, the readers' spaces are created through an apparently fictional discourse, as this story has the structure of a play in seven acts (figure 4) in which, as well as echoes of authors such as Lobel, Sendak, Steig or Burningham himself, there is paratextual discourse, both in the peritexts—format, graphics, flyleaves, covers, title pages—and in the virtual epitexts (Lluch et al., 2015; Taberero-Sala, 2021), which portray a model reader who discovers non-fictional discourse 'behind the scenes' in fiction. This collection is called 'Libros para rumiar' (*Books for Pondering*) and with good reason. The project is similarly part of a line of self-referential, metafictional reflection, as the audience deciphers the intricacies of the link between fiction and non-fiction, a process that Wonder Ponder had already initiated in some way by including fictional maps in the visual philosophy boxes to create interaction between the different levels of fictionalised reality.

Figure 4.
Cover and page of *Un par de ojos nuevos* (Duthie et al., 2022)



3.4. Reading of *Mexique. El nombre del barco* (Ferrada and Penyas, 2017) *En el país de la ciencia* (Cohen-Janca and Palmarucci, 2020) and *Panthera tigris* (Alzial and Rajcak, 2018)

Based on hybrid approaches for structuring discourse involving readers' inquiry, curiosity, manual actions and empty spaces between what is clearly stated and what is merely suggested by the multimodality of the non-fiction picturebook, there are representative titles such as *Mexique. El nombre del barco* by María José Ferrada and Anna Penyas, published by Libros del Zorro Rojo in 2017, *Marie Curie. En el país de la ciencia* (Cohen and Palmarucci, 2020) and *Panthera Tigris*, by Sylvain Alzial and Héléne Rajcak, published by Ediciones Iamiqué, in 2018.

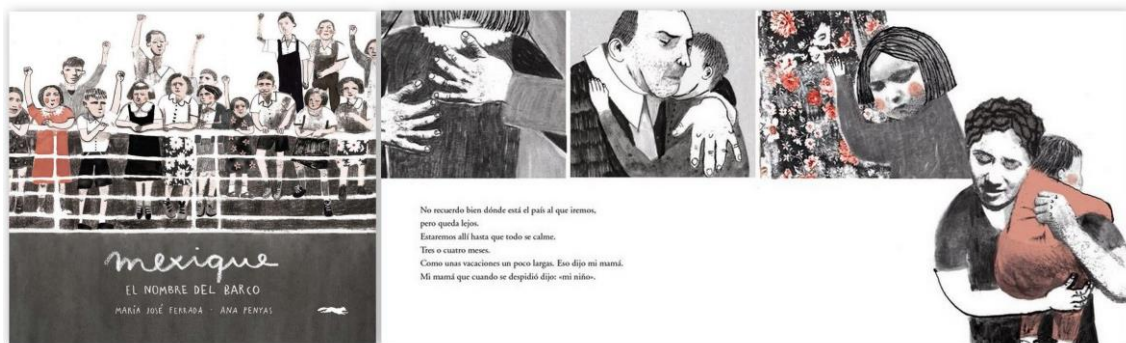
Mexique reworks a real event from the middle of the Spanish Civil War. In May 1937, the sons and daughters of republicans set sail for Mexico on a ship called *Mexique*. A journey that was meant to be temporary became permanent exile due to the defeat of the republicans and the beginning of the Second World War.

The book is presented in a 22.8 x 20.4 cm, hardback format. The book as object includes a digital presentation available on the publisher's website that provides useful information for the reader: the book's most representative illustrations, access to the first pages of the book or a book trailer designing a reception mode. This digital tool provides informational content that appeal to the story and the emotions provoked by the passage mentioned using a narrative voice focalised on one of the child protagonists. The video lasts almost a minute and a half and begins with a voiceover of children counting the passengers on the *Mexique*—a total of 456 children on board. The book trailer includes the essential historical details accompanied by an animation with illustrations from the book and black and white photographs retrieved from historical collections supporting the veracity of the story.

The technique of a *collage* of images in subdued tones (figure 5) intensifies the approach of hybridisation between reality and a fictionalised version of it using a poetic voice in the first person, thereby adding bias to the information from fear, uncertainty and hope born of innocence so that readers identify with these emotions and find meaning in the book's multimodal discourse:

I don't really remember where is the country that we head for/
but it's far away./
We'll be there until everything calms down./
Three or four months./
Like a rather long holiday. That's what my mummy said./
My mummy, who called me 'my boy' when she said goodbye.
(Ferrada and Penyas, 2017)

Figure 5.
Cover and page of *Mexique. El nombre del barco* (Ferrada and Penyas, 2017)



There is also an epilogue for the reader in which the author tells the real story that she fictionalised and reveals the ultimate meaning of her creation, which is none other than to raise awareness, generate questions and touch hearts, as advocated by Sanders (2018) for the non-fiction book. The modification of the narrator of the informational text at the end of the work from the first person singular to the first person plural—which corresponds to a chorus of voices reflecting the authors and publishers' voices—in order to establish the ideological basis of the proposal is of particular interest in a critical reading:

This book focuses on the story of this voyage and the hope they felt: that, on leaving the ship, fate would hand them a decent life (...) the sort of life that we believe all human beings should have, especially when it comes to children.

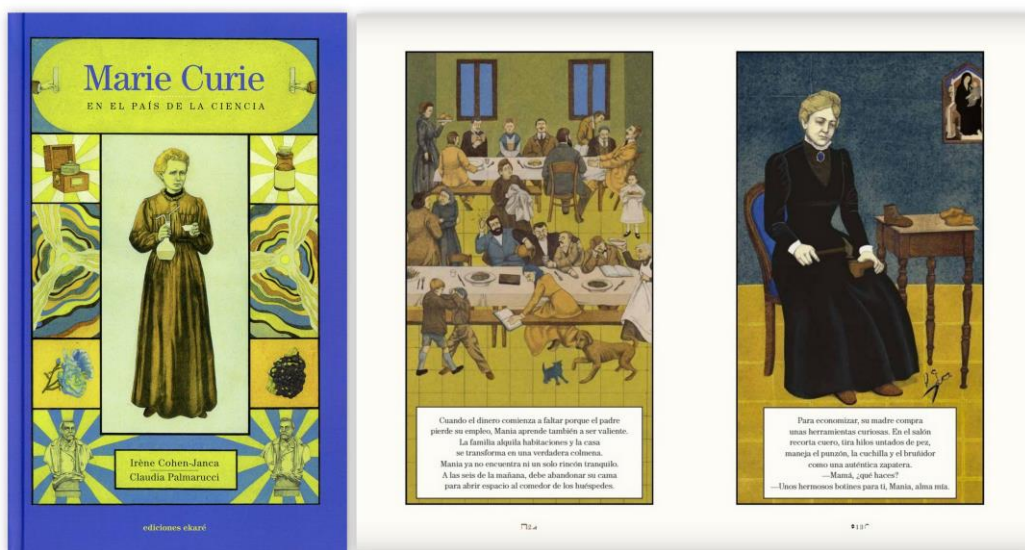
(Ferrada and Penyas, 2017)

Along the same lines, a similarly representative book is *Marie Curie. En el país de la ciencia* by Irène Cohen, illustrated by Claudia Palmarucci (Ekaré, 2020). This is the biography of Marie Curie narrated in an intimate, personal style and accompanied by the well-documented work of the illustrator in an annex at the end of the book, which presents the sources behind each of the illustrations and the moment in time that they relate to. In short, a single discourse intertwines the history of both science and art, using the fictional line taken by the verbal narrator to rework the non-fictional content biased by a hyperrealistic illustration framed using the collage technique (figure 6), thereby providing the non-fictional basis:

They say that, sometimes, behind the windows of the old brick building, there walks a shadowy figure, a thin woman with white hair, with eyes the colour of ash. Wearing a long, black smock, she walks through the rooms past the gleaming, white ceramic counters. She sits at a wooden writing desk presided over by an ancient telephone and there she daydreams with her chin resting on her hand. (Cohen and Palmarucci, 2020, p.3)

Figure 6.

Cover and page of Maire Curie. En el país de la ciencia (Cohen and Palmarucci, 2020)



Panthera tigris (Alzial and Rajcak, 2018) follows this same line of hybridisation between fictional and non-fictional discourse by offering the reader spaces in which they can develop their own reflections. The narrative voice in this case uses the third person, in the omniscient style of traditional narrative, as a basis for debate regarding the authority of this voice itself. This is achieved through images and scientific documents that intervene in the fictional story that, ultimately, invites the reader to reflect on experience and reading as sources of knowledge creation.

Figure 7.
Cover and page of *Panthera Tigris* (Alzial and Rajcak, 2018)



4. Conclusions

As reflected in the statement of the theoretical basis for this study, in the information society, critical thinking is one of the cornerstones in the creation of democratic citizens who possess the appropriate strategies to approach in-depth reading based on suitable argumentative and informational competencies (Wolf, 2018). In this framework, the non-fiction picturebook, in its multimodal essence, is recommended as one of the ways to create critical readers (Grilli, 2020; Sanders, 2018). Therefore, as the field of education defends training in critical thinking as one of its priorities (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022), the reading mediator needs specifications when identifying which books are suitable for establishing the basis of this type of thinking and which elements support reading, in order to clearly distinguish the factors on which mediated reading should focus. Studies such as that by Romero-Oliva, Trigo-Ibáñez et al. (2021) indicate the need for teacher training to this effect. Our study has been conducted for this very purpose, out of the need to provide specifications for constructs that are excessively abstract at times, and to propose keys for the mediator to use in identifying critical reading from the non-fiction picturebook. As Chambers suggested (2008, pp. 33-61), the mediator should know, first of all, the keys to construct discourse in order to propose the most suitable mediation strategies for the works selected.

The Readings provided in the analysis above reveal the presence of significant indicators in children's non-fiction picturebooks; these indicators are keys that can be used to identify the development of critical thinking through reading. Three of the most relevant categories in the field explored in this study are, without a doubt, the analysis of reality, questioning and polyphony in the discourse. In this sense, the non-fiction picturebook, or occasionally the non-fictional album, presents indicators of entity, such as the identity of the narrative voice, which is 'overruled' at times, and the interaction of discursive perspectives based on a multimodal concept that provides spaces where readers can develop their reflections whilst learning about the issues addressed. Titles such as

Supongamos (Da Coll, 2015) or *La declaración de los derechos de las niñas y de los niños* (Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2018) are good examples of discursive identifiers to develop critical reading. Thus, topical issues, the narrator's gaps, the hypothesis of direct appeal using the first person plural, and ellipsis as a construction strategy to create the necessary gaps to provide a space for the reader using the relationship between text, images and materiality are considered specific indicators in critical reading in all the works analysed.

Furthermore, a direct appeal in the form of a question addressed to the reader, who is invited to reflect on the subjects presented, also proves to be a significant indicator in works such as those in the Wonder Ponder project, especially the titles specifically about visual philosophy for children.

One of the relevant results of the analysis concerns the importance of paratexts—peritexts and epitexts—in the construction of the non-fiction picturebook regarding reliability as an essential category in the development of the critical reader. Paratexts, both analogue and virtual, are, therefore, of vital importance in discourse intended for children. From a break of linearity to the proposal of a chorus of voices uniting the voices of authors, narrators and publishers. Digital extensions, in turn, establish reading modes based on ideological assumptions that defend ideological premises supported by the documentary nature of images, peritexts and epitexts to help to create a critical reader defined by a literature that offers questions rather than answers, as defended by Sanders (2018). A book such as *Así es la dictadura* (Equipo Plantel and Casal, 2015) is an outstanding example in this aspect.

Lastly, hybridisation (Grilli, 2020) is defined as one of the categories that transcends all the others and is a higher-level construction strategy. From the combination of different types of language, as required by the nature of the picturebook, including the physical aspect of reading, to the metafictional type of reflection on the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, the non-fiction picturebook is based on apparently fictional forms, looking for readers who use their curiosity and wonder to cross the boundaries of artistic discourse, remain at a distance and question the different enunciative instances in order to create their own discourse. The analysis in this study proves that works such as *Mexique, el nombre del barco* (Ferrada and Penyas, 2017), *Marie Curie. En el país de la ciencia* (Cohen-Janca and Palmarucci, 2020) or *Panthera Tigris* (Alzial and Rajcak, 2018) demonstrate the great importance of this category for the development of the critical reader.

In conclusion, the indicators involved in the interaction of the narrative voice—which, at times, lacks authority—the use of peritexts and epitexts—in a reading programme that is clearly ideologised—and, above all, hybridisation—as a key element in the construction of a discourse aimed at readers who identify with the views expressed in the discourse exposed, from a position of both distance and engagement—are essential to discover the works requiring a critical reader, based on the belief that education drives social transformation and reading is one of the ways to achieve this transformation, as indicated by Freire (2002), 2010).

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