
Encouraging Children’s Voices: Supporting Primary Students’ Questioning and Seeking

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Supporting Primary Students’ Questioning and Seeking

“But did you hear what Caleb was saying?” and “Did you hear what my genius Lukas said?” are examples of what I often hear during Diana Foster’s reading lessons when I spend time in her 1st-grade classroom. The teacher’s talk routinely draws attention to children’s thinking and interests. Children have frequent and multiple opportunities to ask questions, express feelings, and share ideas and information.

Mrs. Foster’s reading lessons offer important insights into teachers’ celebrating of diverse voices. Her lessons include simultaneous attention to English Language Arts (ELA) and science or social studies, and they engage children in the tasks of constructing new knowledge and affecting change in the school or local community. The teacher includes teaching moves that showcase and use children’s questions and

statements to achieve learning goals. In her lessons, children have time and support for developing their voices.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the insights gained from Mrs. Foster’s reading lessons. First, I will provide background information about the teacher’s instruction. Then, I will share one of her reading lessons and describe how she worked toward her students’ growth in asking questions and seeking answers. Finally, I will highlight how the teaching moves encouraged children’s voices.

The Instructional Setting: Children’s Reading, Writing, and Talking

Mrs. Foster’s reading lessons are situated in extended units of study that ask children to develop solutions to problems or to create products that help others (e.g., Duke & Martin, 2019). Within and across the units, the teacher simultaneously addresses ELA and science or social studies learning standards. She devotes separate time to children’s learning to read and to write, using Reading and Writing Workshop (i.e., whole-group minilessons, small-group instruction alongside independent reading, and whole-group sharing periods; e.g., Calkins, 2000). Also, the teacher relies on a range of texts, including fiction and nonfiction books and digital media. Children are asked to read, write, and talk daily, and their work and learning are focused on world knowledge and affecting change.

Mrs. Foster’s simultaneous attention to ELA and science or social studies learning standards aligns with contemporary recommendations. Scholars and professional organizations advocate for teachers’ simultaneous attention during kindergarten through 2nd-grade lessons (e.g., Cabell & Hwang, 2020; National Research Council, 2012). The integrated instruction benefits children’s learning (e.g., Wright &

Gotwals, 2017). Children have opportunities to gain knowledge and skill related to (1) language and literacy, (2) the natural or social world, and (3) disciplinary literacy (e.g., Cervetti et al., 2012). Disciplinary literacy is the “ability to engage in social, semiotic, and cognitive practices, consistent with those of content experts” (Fang, 2012, p. 19) and involves use of the kinds of texts and literacy strategies that are central to the work of practitioners such as historians or scientists (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2011). Historians and scientists seek to construct and share knowledge and to affect change in the natural or social world. Their reading, writing, and talking are focused on learning, teaching, and advocacy. Children’s development in all three areas are believed to be foundational to school success beyond the primary grades, college and career readiness, and adulthood goals (e.g., Moje, 2015).

Moreover, Mrs. Foster’s teaching incorporates the available guidance for equitably addressing children’s learning through integrated instruction (e.g., Pearson et al., 2010). Children’s reading, writing, and talking are central to the instruction and occur within units of study (e.g., Brock et al., 2014). Teachers lead demonstrations and discussions, offer clarifications and practice, and engage children in inquiry, read-aloud, and writing activities (e.g., Vitale & Romance, 2012; Welsh et al., 2020). For example, Welsh et al. (2020) observed the 2nd-grade teacher in their study enacting an ELA–science unit driven by children’s inquiry and replete with read-aloud and writing (including drawing) activities. Rather than just reading nonfiction books focused on scientific topics during ELA instruction or using a science-focused theme to connect lessons across the school day, the teacher’s addressing of the children’s ELA and science learning was combined and balanced.

The Reading Lesson: Question-Driven Reading

Mrs. Foster’s reading lesson focused on asking questions and seeking answers within texts. The lesson included a whole-group minilesson. Then, children read independently while the teacher taught two small-group segments. Finally, an end-of-lesson sharing period was offered. Below, I share information about the lesson’s background. Then, the transcript of the minilesson and sharing period are provided.

Lesson Background

Mrs. Foster’s reading lesson was one of many lessons I observed during my first semester in her classroom. She (alongside other primary teachers) was part of a research project exploring kindergarten through 2nd-grade teachers’ professional learning (e.g., Martin & Snow, 2022). The teachers invited my research team into their classrooms to observe their 90-minute ELA instructional block and responded to our interview questions as they completed a series of ELA-focused professional development activities and applied their learning to their own classroom teaching. All teachers taught in the same primary school, which served children living in a sprawling region that included a small town outside of a densely populated city and the town’s surrounding rural zones. In 2020-2021, the school’s enrollment included 637 kindergarten through 2nd-grade students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Of these students, 84% were White; 16% were Black, Indigenous, People of Color [BIPOC]; and 36% were eligible for free and reduced-price federal lunch programs. All teachers in the school had access to book collections within their classrooms, titles borrowed from the school library, and digital media available through the teacher’s laptop and children’s iPads. Mrs. Foster’s classroom included 1st-grade students demonstrating

varied achievement levels, ranging from below- to above-grade level in reading. She had a large collection of fiction and nonfiction books, supplemented with tubs of the school library's books and digital media.

Mrs. Foster's reading lesson occurred during one of my 90-minute observations of her classroom. I sought greater understanding of how she supported children's learning by identifying, categorizing, and compiling the teaching moves intended to enable them to ask and answer questions (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The lesson analysis yielded four insights into Mrs. Foster's support of children's question-driven reading, which are detailed in a subsequent section ("Insights Gained from the Reading Lesson").

Whole-Group Minilesson: Interactive Read-Aloud

The teacher read aloud and led a discussion of a nonfiction book that disseminated information about Earth's oceans (Gregory, 2014). Throughout, she focused on questioning and the group's collective answering of those questions:

Mrs. Foster: But did you hear what Caleb was saying? He doesn't understand how the water stays on the Earth. He doesn't understand when you have water that is just sitting around, it spills, right? So his question is why isn't the water falling off the Earth into space? What do you think, Dean?

Dean: It's the gravity that's pushing it up.

Mrs. Foster: You think the gravity in the Earth—okay, so now we have another question. What's gravity?

Students: Oh!

Mrs. Foster: Oh, all of these questions, friends! Oakley?

Oakley: Is it gravity because it's always down?

Mrs. Foster: Right, because when you see pictures of astronauts, they're just floating around in the spaceship. We don't do that here. Right? Because gravity is what holds us on the Earth. And it holds the water on the Earth, too, Caleb. We could probably study that a little more if we wanted to. Where could we find that information about gravity? Where could we find information about gravity, Asher?

Asher: On Earth, they have gravity. The gravity is pulling down.

Mrs. Foster: Where could we find information about gravity?

Asher: In a book.

Mrs. Foster: In a book or the Google, like you said yesterday. . . . Siri, yes.

Caleb: I'm asking my question because we once watched a *Magic School Bus* where there was gravity pulling down.

Mrs. Foster: Okay, so gravity is the same thing pulling down the water, yes?

Asher: Sometimes people think it's like gravity is pulling down, but if you look closer, I sometimes think it's the moon.

Mrs. Foster: Yeah, there's something to do with the moon and the tides and, yeah, we've got a lot to discover. We do. Can I tell you something truthful? Can I be really really honest with you? I don't really know how it works either. . . . I'm going to be learning with you, right?

(Teacher and students discuss what they already know about the ocean. Teacher begins to introduce the lesson's nonfiction book.)

Mrs. Foster: So, look at this book. What kind of book do you think this is going to be? . . . A fiction book or a nonfiction book? What do you think, Skyler?

Skyler: Nonfiction.

Mrs. Foster: Nonfiction because nonfiction means it has real facts, right? It has information in it that we can learn. I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to listen while I read and see if you can find the answers to my questions. Because that's what good readers do. They come to a book with questions, and they read to find the answers. . . .

(Students and teacher discuss why the book is nonfiction.)

Mrs. Foster: Let's listen to the questions. You're so curious. "What is the ocean?" is my first question. "How many oceans are there?" is my second question. And "How much of the ocean is covered by ocean water?" That's my third question. We're going to *listen* to me read

(Teacher finishes the book introduction, reviews highlighted words and the glossary, and begins reading aloud and helping students to articulate answers.)

Mrs. Foster: Well, I think that we have to go with what the scientists that wrote the book are telling us, and they said 72%, right? We can't just make stuff up. We have to go with the facts that we find. Okay? So let's read the next card. We are trying to figure out how many oceans there are. So this says . . . five, or just one?

Bailey: I think there are five oceans.

Mrs. Foster: Let's listen: "You may have heard that there are five separate oceans on Earth. These oceans are described as the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic, and Antarctic or Southern Oceans. But guess what?"

Mrs. Foster: But listen: "Guess what? There's actually just one."

Mrs. Foster: "The world ocean or the global ocean is one body of interconnected salt water." Look, this word, "interconnected" is highlighted. That means it's going to be in the glossary. . . . It's right down here for us. . . . Interconnected means "joined together and dependent on each other." So "interconnected salt water . . ." How many oceans are there?

Students: One!

Mrs. Foster: One. We have five names for parts of the oceans, but it's really just one great big ocean. Lukas?

Lukas: I knew it was one big ocean because on the globe the water isn't separated. . . .

Mrs. Foster: Woah! Did you hear what my genius Lukas said? He said he knew it was just one because there's no separation! There's not a place where it's just separated completely, is it?

(Teacher and students continue to read and to answer the third question.)

Mrs. Foster: . . . Did we answer all three of our questions?

Students: Yes. We did!

Mrs. Foster: Did we get smarter by reading that book?

Students: Yes.

Mrs. Foster: Yes, we did. We learned things we didn't know. Guess what? That's what readers do with informational text. That's what you do with nonfiction. The other thing I want to tell you . . . It is great to get your questions answered, but smart readers get more questions. What?! What?! What?! What did Mrs. F just say? When you read, you're reading to answer your questions, but smart readers also figure out that they have more questions once they get those questions answered. That's what we should be doing. When you're reading, you're trying to answer questions you have, but your brains are always thinking. You're always wondering. Right now, I'm wondering . . . why they call it the Pacific Ocean. Why did they come up with that name? Why is it the Atlantic Ocean? Why did they name one ocean five different names? Why did they do that? Did they just decide one day, I'm going to call this ocean this and this ocean this or is there a reason they named those oceans that? I don't know! But where could I find out?

Lukas: Oh! In a book!

Mrs. Foster: In a book! You're exactly right! I'm also wondering why have we only explored 5% of the ocean? Why?! Do you realize that the ocean is right here on the Earth, and do you know that they say some people think we know more about the moon than we do about the ocean? Okay.

(Teacher continues to talk about her question and about exploring the ocean.)

Hudson: This is too much learning for me. I think my brain's going to explode!

Mrs. Foster: Your brain is not going to explode. But I want you to think about these things when you're reading. You're getting answers to your questions, but good readers, big thinkers, always have more questions. Okay? Keep that in mind for the rest of your life. . . .

(Teacher gives directions about their independent reading and launches a review.)

Mrs. Foster: What did Mrs. F say that all smart, good readers do? You know? You're going to answer your questions but you're also going to have . . . Bailey?

Bailey: More questions.

Mrs. Foster: More questions. You're going to answer questions but you're going to have more questions and when you get more questions . . . what are you going to do? Lukas?

Lukas: Answer more questions.

Mrs. Foster: Answer more questions. And when you're answering those more questions, what are you going to do? Hudson?

Hudson: Get more questions.

Mrs. Foster: You're going to get more questions, and then you're going to answer those questions. And then you're going to get more questions. And then you're going to answer those questions. It's a never-ending process. Okay . . .

In the minilesson, Mrs. Foster introduced question-driven reading and the nonfiction book, shared a list of questions, helped children to find answers to each question, and reviewed the lesson. Throughout, she focused on readers' question-asking and -answering.

Sharing Period: Children's Reflections

Mrs. Foster's reading lesson ended with a whole-group sharing period. The class reflected on their independent reading experiences and learning.

Mrs. Foster: I had friends who were taking notes on Post-Its, and I had boys who were creating new questions. The Red Group was creating questions and answering questions. It was phenomenal! Do you know what *phenomenal* means? Fabulous! You did very, very well. Okay. I want you to turn and tell somebody that you did not partner read with a new fact or a question that you had answered today. . . .

(Students share with each other. Teacher calls group together again to share out.)

Mrs. Foster: Hudson, what's a question you had answered today?

Hudson: A question that I had answered was . . . if dolphins didn't have lungs, they wouldn't be able to breathe.

Mrs. Foster: Right. Because dolphins have lungs. So we learned that dolphins have lungs

Mrs. Foster: Did you learn something new today . . . or did a question get answered for you?

Finn: Dolphins breathe out of their blowhole.

Mrs. Foster: Dolphins breathe out of their blowhole Reagan?

Reagan: There's only one-third of dry land on the Earth.

Mrs. Foster: There's only a third of dry land on the Earth. Huh. So two-thirds of the Earth is covered in water. Interesting. Thank you for sharing that fact with us today. That's awesome. You blow me away every single time we start learning about something. Because you have such great questions and you're such smart thinkers. I'm so impressed.

During the sharing period, Mrs. Foster summarized and praised children's independent reading activities. Then the teacher invited children to recall their questions and answers. She

closed the sharing period with additional praise for their questioning and thinking skills.

Insights Gained from the Reading Lesson

Mrs. Foster's reading lesson offers four insights into supporting children's asking of questions and seeking of answers. Her foundational teaching moves include modeling, leveraging, informing, and enabling children's question-driven reading.

Insight #1: Modeling Question-Driven Reading

Teachers' modeling involves verbalizing of questions and showcasing of attempts to find answers within nonfiction books and digital media. Displaying commitment to asking and answering questions while reading is also key.

In the lesson, Mrs. Foster often modeled question-driven reading. For example,

- "Can I tell you something truthful? Can I be really honest with you? I don't really know how it works either. . . . I'm going to be learning with you, right?"
- "'What is the ocean?' is my first question. 'How many oceans are there?' is my second question. And 'How much of the ocean is covered by ocean water?' That's my third question."
- "Right now, I'm wondering . . . why they call it the Pacific Ocean. Why did they come up with that name? Why is it the Atlantic Ocean? Why did they name one ocean five different names?"

In these moments, Mrs. Foster told the class that she was interested in answering the question which had emerged during the before-reading discussion ("What is gravity?") and had questions of her own with which she wanted

their help in answering. Also, the teacher identified new questions that emerged when the group addressed one of her original questions.

Teachers can use Mrs. Foster's teaching moves to model question-driven reading across the school day. Expressing the desire to ask and answer questions, sharing questions related to authors' main ideas in nonfiction books and digital media, and looking for answers to the questions can highlight the value of question-driven reading and help children to understand how experienced readers ask and answer questions while reading the texts.

Insight #2: Leveraging Children's Question-Driven Reading

Teachers' leveraging involves recognizing and publicizing instances when children (on their own initiative) verbalize questions, attempt to find answers, and display commitment to question-asking and -answering while reading. Teachers' own attempts to clarify children's answers also may be included.

In the lesson, Mrs. Foster routinely took action when the class exhibited question-driven reading behaviors. For instance,

- “But did you hear what Caleb was saying? He doesn't understand how the water stays on the Earth. He doesn't understand when you have water that is just sitting around, it spills, right? So his question is why isn't the water falling off the Earth into space?”
- “. . . Okay, so now we have another question. What's gravity?”
- “Okay, so gravity is the same thing pulling down the water, yes?”
- “. . . Did you hear what my genius Lukas said? He said he knew it was just one because there's no separation! There's not a place where it's just separated completely, is it?”

- “The Red Group was creating questions and answering questions. It was phenomenal! Do you know what *phenomenal* means? Fabulous!”

In these moments, Mrs. Foster repeated children's individual and collective questions. The teacher also paraphrased children's attempts to answer questions, and she drew their attention to instances when they were choosing to engage in question-driven reading.

Teachers can follow Mrs. Foster's example when children display question-driven reading behaviors while reading or listening to read-alouds of nonfiction books and digital media. Repeating children's responses can help them to understand when they and their classmates are asking questions and seeking answers. Assisting children's attempts to articulate their own answers and inviting classmates' attention to the attempts also may encourage them to engage in question-driven reading.

Insight #3: Informing Children's Question-Driven Reading

Teachers' informing involves offering explanations of the processes central to asking questions and seeking answers within texts. Teachers also may clarify why and how readers ask and answer questions before, during, and after reading.

In the lesson, Mrs. Foster actively informed children's question-driven reading. For example,

- “Because that's what good readers do. They come to a book with questions, and they read to find the answers. . . .”
- “Well, I think that we have to go with what the scientists who wrote the book are telling us, and they said 72%, right? We can't just make stuff up. We have to go with the facts that we find.”

- “. . . Did we answer all three of our questions?”
- “It is great to get your questions answered, but smart readers get more questions. What?! What?! What?! What did Mrs. F just say? When you read, you’re reading to answer your questions, but smart readers also figure out that they have more questions once they get those questions answered.”

In these moments, Mrs. Foster explained that readers seek answers to questions and use the words and ideas in the text to answer the questions. The teacher drew attention to the parts of the text which held those answers. She also conveyed that question-driven reading includes readers’ confirmation of answers and posing of new questions.

Teachers can inform children’s question-driven reading during whole- and small-group lessons. Sharing brief explanations of why and how readers ask and answer questions as children listen to or read nonfiction books and digital media can help them to enhance their own asking of questions and seeking of answers.

Insight #4: Enabling Children’s Question-Driven Reading

Teachers’ enabling involves providing firsthand opportunities for children to engage in the processes central to asking questions and seeking answers. The opportunities include children’s own question-asking and -answering and also their verbal rehearsal of the processes.

In the lesson, Mrs. Foster frequently invited children to experience and talk about question-driven reading. For instance,

- “Because gravity is what holds us on the Earth. And it holds the water on the Earth, too, Caleb. We could probably study that a little more if we wanted to. Where could we find that information about gravity? . . .”

- “I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to listen while I read and see if you can find the answers to my questions.”
- “Look, this word ‘interconnected’ is highlighted. That means it’s going to be in the glossary. . . . It’s right down here for us. . . . Interconnected means ‘joined together and dependent on each other.’ So ‘interconnected salt water’ How many oceans are there?”
- “Hudson, what’s a question you had answered today?”

In these moments, Mrs. Foster provided teacher-guided and on-their-own practice opportunities. The teacher encouraged the class to answer the questions she had posed and to ask and answer their own questions. She also encouraged children to take stock of whether they had addressed each question and supported their use of the book’s words and ideas when answering questions.

Moreover, Mrs. Foster created additional opportunities for children who needed further practice. After the teacher’s minilesson, she conducted two small-group segments featuring question-driven reading. The segments can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

As the appendices show, Mrs. Foster used the same teaching moves alongside different nonfiction books. In Appendix 1, the teacher explained the task and shared her questions. After the group finished reading, she led a discussion in which children articulated their answers, and she supported their use of the nonfiction book’s words and ideas. In Appendix 2, Mrs. Foster’s after-reading discussion drew attention to children’s thinking and reviewed the importance of question-driven reading. Then, the teacher helped children to share their answers to their questions. Finally, she reviewed the group’s experience and learning.

Teachers can enable children’s question-driven reading with the nonfiction books and

digital media used across the school day. Posing questions for the class to answer, asking children to come up with their own questions, and encouraging classmates to find answers to each other's questions can help children to gain first-hand experience. Also, reviewing children's questions and answers may help children to check and confirm they have addressed their questions and used the text's words and ideas in their answers.

Beyond the Reading Lesson: Encouraging Children's Voices

Teaching reading lessons is one approach to encouraging children's voices in the primary grades. As Mrs. Foster's lesson demonstrated, the teaching offers opportunities for teachers to model, leverage, and inform children's asking of questions and seeking of answers within texts. Also, the teaching offers children opportunities to experience and talk about the processes involved in question-driven reading.

Importantly, teaching lessons is not the only approach. Children's voices also can be encouraged through teaching moves that highlight the usefulness of asking questions and seeking answers and that value children's attempts to do so throughout the day. Examples include

- Posing and addressing questions during the morning routine.
- Recording teachers' and children's questions about topics of study on charts.
- Noting children's individual questions and subsequently offering them nonfiction books and digital media that address their questions.
- Making connections to children's questions during read-alouds and science and social studies lessons.
- Recounting anecdotes featuring question-driven reading from teachers' out-of-school lives throughout the school day.

These teaching moves can provide exposure to, and experience with, the processes central to asking questions and seeking answers. Teachers may model the processes and leverage or inform children's usage. Children may practice or verbally rehearse their question-asking and -answering. When teachers consistently and frequently support children's question-driven reading, the benefits can include growth in children's knowledge and skills related to language and literacy, the natural or social world, and disciplinary literacy. Like Mrs. Foster's students, children may "get smarter by reading that book" and may "[learn] things we didn't know." Like her students, children may come to be "always thinking and you're always learning and you're always questioning" (Appendix 2). In conclusion, teachers may help children to find and to use their voices to construct new knowledge and to affect change in the future.

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Appendix 1

Mrs. Foster's First Small-Group Segment

The teacher introduced a nonfiction book about dolphins (Stewart, 2010) and explained students' reading task. Then, students read the book, and she led an after-reading discussion.

Mrs. Foster: Okay, so here's what you need to do. I have some questions that I'd like for you to read to find out. Okay? Here are the questions I'd like for you to answer: Are dolphins whales? Do all dolphins live in the sea?—I don't want you to answer right now. I want you to read to find answers—What is a group of dolphins called? How do dolphins breathe air? And can dolphins do tricks?

(Teacher hands out whispering phones and reviews their use. Students read.)

Mrs. Foster: Has everybody read through at least once? Okay, so can you answer some of my questions?

Mrs. Foster: Okay. When you get the answer to the question, I want you to show me where you found the answer to the question. Can you do that for me? Okay, so the very first question. Are dolphins whales? Are dolphins whales? Oakley, what do you think?

Oakley: I think yeah. I think—

Mrs. Foster: Are dolphins whales? And where did you find the answer? You have to read the sentence to me.

Oakley: "Dolphins are small whales."

Mrs. Foster: "Dolphins are small whales." Dolphins are whales? Yes, our book told us that. Do all dolphins live in the sea? Do all dolphins live in the sea, Asher?

Asher: Most.

Mrs. Foster: But do all?

Asher: Some do, some don't.

Mrs. Foster: How do you know? Show me where you found that in the book.

(Students and teacher continue reading and discussing the answers to the questions.)

During the segment, Mrs. Foster's focus was on readers' question-asking and -answering. She posed questions, and students sought answers while reading. Afterward, they worked together to articulate each answer.

Appendix 2

Mrs. Foster's Second Small-Group Segment

The teacher introduced another nonfiction book about dolphins (Berger & Berger, 2013) and explained students' reading task. Then the group read the book. She led an after-reading discussion.

Mrs. Foster: Can everybody put their book down? Can I tell you something that made Mrs. F so happy? I'm proud of you guys! You read beautifully. But the thing that I loved was how excited you were when you found answers to the questions. It was so cool! Okay, but here's what I'm going to tell you. Why do you think I think it's so important? Why do you think I think it's so important for you to come up with new questions while you're reading? Because you get so excited when you find the answers, right?

Bailey: Because you know that what you found is right.

Mrs. Foster: You have the answers to the questions. . . . Okay, so do dolphins have lungs?

Students: Yes.

Mrs. Foster: Okay so you have to prove it to me. Show me where you found it. Do dolphins have lungs?

Skyler: I found it on page six.

Mrs. Foster: Did everybody find it on page six?

Students: Yes.

(Students and teacher continue reading and discussing the answers to the questions.)

Mrs. Foster: . . . You did an awesome job. You found all the answers to our questions, and we created tons of new questions, right? We have purpose when we go to read next time. We have answers to look for, don't we? Okay. When you're a reader, it's very important that you answer the questions you have, but you also want to create more questions. That's what's going to make you the smartest person I know. Okay? You don't just stop. You're always thinking and you're always learning and you're always questioning. Got it?

During the segment, Mrs. Foster's focus remained on readers' question-asking and -answering. After reading the book, the group worked together to articulate the answers to their questions. Then, she reviewed their experiences and learning.