

Chapter 19

Strategies for Fostering Critical Thinking in Early Childhood Education

Katrina Woolsey Jordan

Northwestern State University, USA

Michelle Fazio-Brunson

Northwestern State University, USA

Shawn Marise Butler

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is not a new concept in the world of education. However, teaching it to university students in teacher education programs can be difficult. Teaching these skills to students in grade school, especially in the early childhood classroom, comes with its own set of challenges. This chapter outlines strategies for teaching critical thinking skills in interesting and innovative ways, both at the university and early childhood level. Of particular interest is the project approach. During the three phases of this approach, children act as young investigators and apply critical thinking skills in their daily work. Future trends in both teacher education and the education of young children are also identified.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will cover many different approaches to teaching and integrating critical thinking into both teacher education programs and the Early Childhood Education environment. It aims to identify key components of teaching critical thinking to teacher candidates. It will also define and give examples of critical thinking. A major focus will be to identify strategies for teaching critical thinking to teacher candidates as well as key components of teaching critical thinking to students in the early childhood classroom. The chapter will also identify and distinguish among strategies for teaching critical thinking to students in the early childhood classroom. The chapter will culminate with a reflection on ways to teach critical thinking through the Project Approach.

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DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

Critical Thinking is by no means a recent concept. In fact, Socrates used this concept over 2,500 years ago. Other scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, Colet and Erasmus, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Voltaire added to the discipline through the ages (Paul, Elder, & Bartell, 1997). The notion of critical thinking came to the forefront in the 20th century with the publishing of *An Experiment in the Development of Critical thinking* (1941) by Edward Glasser. In his work, Glasser indicated that critical thinking involved three things: (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods (pp. 5-6).

Contemporary authors continue to explore the relevance of critical thinking. Paul and Elder (2008) define critical thinking as, "... that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them" (p. 4). Ennis (2011) subdivides critical thinking into dispositions and abilities. His work, which began in the 1950s, focuses on the dispositions and abilities or skills of critical thinking. He stated that these apply whether critical thinking is explicitly taught as a separate skill or embedded in student activities. Ennis also indicated that "...the ideal critical thinker has the ability to clarify, to seek and to judge well the basis for a view, to infer wisely from the basis, to imaginatively suppose and integrate, and to do these things with dispatch, sensitivity, and rhetorical skill" (p. 5).

A further contributor to the discussion of critical thinking is Michael Austin (2012) who discusses elements which he believes compose the critical thinking process: clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, and consistency. He states, "Clarity of thought is important...; this means that we clearly understand what we believe, and why we believe it" (p. 1). Austin (2012) also indicated that precision can be achieved by asking ourselves specific questions: "What is the problem at issue? What are the possible answers? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each answer?" (p. 1). He also asserts that accuracy is undeniably necessary in this process. Thinkers need information that is both accurate and adequate.

Moving into the 21st century, teaching students how to apply these aspects of critical thinking is a challenge but is also a greater imperative than ever before.

Key Point: Critical thinking involves thought and reasoning, discovering alternative approaches to solve problems and the ability to analyze and reflect on one's thoughts and actions.

BEGINNING THE PROCESS: CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND TEACHER EDUCATION CANDIDATES

Given the importance of cultivating critical thinking skills in children, it stands to reason that such skills must first be fostered and developed in teachers. This means that teacher educator programs should promote the development of critical thinking. Currently teacher education programs, as well as grade school programs around the world, consider critical thinking a skill that their graduates need to master (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2018; European Union Education Ministers, 2015; Ijaiya, Alabi, & Fasasi, 2011; International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 2016; Legendijk, 2013; Ren & Tao, 2014).

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