

Early Childhood Matters is a journal about early childhood. It looks at specific issues regarding the development of young children, in particular from a psychosocial perspective. It is published twice per year by the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

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Cover and inside cover: Isaan Bright Child Programme, Thailand
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Contents

Editorial	3
Focus on...	
Critical thinking: A brief overview of practice and theory <i>Krisjon Olson</i>	5
In practice	
Teaching young children to ask why and discover how: The Isaan Bright Child Programme	11
A commentary	
Fostering critical thinking as an aim of education <i>Jaap Doek</i>	19
Other perspectives	
Iceland: Philosophy for Children in action <i>Ingibjörg Sigurthórsdóttir</i>	24
The links between Philosophy for Children and resilience <i>Ramón Eduardo Lascano</i>	28
Insights from the field	
India: Thinking skills in Mobile Crèches	30
Mozambique: Critical thinking skills and HIV/AIDS	33
South Africa: The roots of critical thinking	36
Resources	38
News from the Foundation	42



Editorial

Critical thinking is the theme of this edition, something that seldom appears as the sole focus of work with young children and indeed is not always overtly articulated or highlighted within programmes. Yet the ability to think critically is actually widely fostered as part of the holistic development of young children. This can be seen in many project activities, for example, those that require children to engage in looking, understanding, reflecting, judging and making choices. These kinds of almost mechanical processes, and similarly mechanical notions such as cause, effect and consequence, are important in encouraging children to learn how to think critically. But they are a means to something much more exciting, the internalisation of critical thinking and its transformation into an ability that, often unobtrusively, will guide children through the many dilemmas, decisions and choices they will have to face in life. And the greater that ability, the better the consequences for children, their families, their communities and their societies. To underpin practice that has such aims, a review of strategies and teaching methods is offered on page 5. This also includes a review of the extent to which the youngest children are considered capable of critical reflection.

How does this look in practice in programmes that do have an overt focus on critical thinking? The Isaan Bright Child Programme (see page 11) is a creative and participatory programme that is transforming the nature of preschool, kindergarten and early primary education in Thailand by supporting teachers as they help young children to develop critical thinking skills. The Programme has three central aspects: supporting young children in developing these skills; local curriculum development that is appropriate to the specific culture and language; and teacher training and networking. One of the many interesting aspects of the programme is that it is rooted in Buddhist

perspectives and understandings and therefore moves towards its objectives through typically Buddhist approaches. Yet, in many ways, it has similarities with what might be called a 'Western' approach to critical thinking as exemplified by 'Philosophy for Children' that is introduced on page 26. Central to Philosophy for Children is the idea of the excitement of discovery, reflection and analysis, as young children are helped to create what is called 'a community of enquiry' that allows them to explore and better understand their world, other people, and themselves. The programme is based on age-specific sets of stories about everyday happenings in the lives of children. Storylines raise philosophical questions in the children's normal language, and in the ways that children might talk about issues and ideas. An exploration of a programme centred on Philosophy for Children starts on page 24.

Just as critical thinking can so often to be found across a range of activities in early childhood development work, it also shares commonalities with other human abilities or capacity that are the subject of attention in programmes for young children. One example of this is explored in the article on page 28. This deals with resilience – the capacity to thrive despite adversity. The author observes that understanding reality is an important element in the development of resilience in children; and is fundamental in enabling them to transform and overcome adversities. In the same way, critical thinking begins with understanding reality and has the objective of enabling children to respond appropriately. In both cases, children understand what they are living, and how they link up to other actors around them. This overlap and complementarity strengthens abilities or capacity.

But the ability of young children to think critically is not always acknowledged by adults, nor is critical thinking by young children always welcome. For example, as children move from early childhood



KIWAKUKU, Tanzania
Photo: © Bernard van Leer Foundation/Jim Holmes

Children are often expected to reduce their critical thinking ability to simple problem solving

programmes into the formal education system, they may find that they are not encouraged to think too widely, and instead are expected to reduce their critical thinking ability to simple problem solving. The consequence is that valuable contributions to discussions and understandings are lost. Beyond restating the fact that young children can, will and should be encouraged to think critically, it is useful to remember that the 'right' to think critically is upheld by international conventions and agreements. (see page 19).

In the section entitled 'Insights from the field' we show examples of projects that put principles of critical thinking into practice with young children. Although they may not be seen as such, they present clear models of how to promote the capacity of young children for critical thinking, always adapted

to the children's context and the issues that concern them (see page 30).

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* also introduces a new section called 'Resources', which includes materials and a bibliography that covers both theory and practice on the theme of the edition. This time, the resources are for those who wish to go deeper into critical thinking, and who want to know which other organisations are also working on this theme (see page 38).

Jim Smale, Teresa Moreno
Editors

Critical thinking

A brief overview of practice and theory

Krisjon Olson

Krisjon Olson is a PhD Candidate in the Anthropology Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Following two years as a Hart fellow in Guatemala with the Foundation-supported 'Refugiados del Mundo' project, she was a 'Colleague-in-residence' at the Bernard van Leer Foundation from October 2003 to April 2004, with support from the Fulbright-Hays Program. She is currently in Guatemala, continuing her research on children and genocide. This article maps out the efforts of various scholars and educators to establish strategies and teaching methods to cultivate critical thinking in young people. It also examines the extent to which a young child is capable of critical reflection.

The idea that schools should do more than require the rote memorisation of facts and figures has been particularly fashionable over the past 20 years. Children must also learn to analyse and evaluate information and concepts and thereby deal more effectively with everyday life. They need to be able to solve problems and act in creative ways to confront an ever-changing world.

Philosophers and psychologists have provided lengthy deliberations on the subject.¹ Philosophers emphasise the importance of children's exposure to causality and logic, while psychologists focus on the educational process as it relates to each child's physical and emotional development.

According to some of these perspectives, the improvement in children's cognition allows them to produce new ideas and confront problems by reasoning through them. This 'critical thinking' allows children to explore their own concepts, derive conclusions and dispute the reasoning of others. Children might also be encouraged to assess their

thoughts and devise certain kinds of arguments about these thoughts. This sometimes lends itself to an interpretation of critical thinking as a simple enterprise involving rational choice.

However, critical thinking should properly also encompass additional elements, such as the recognition that belief systems – social, ethical, religious, political – affect our consideration of even the simplest issues. Thus, in *How We Think*, John Dewey, already in 1910, called for a child education that also focuses on 'reflective thought'. This would allow for the dynamic, ongoing exploration of any belief or form of knowledge 'in the light of the grounds that support it' and within an endeavour to understand the implications contained in that belief or piece of knowledge. Dewey rejected the knowledge-transmission model and held to a pragmatic theory of inquiry that requires certain skills and a disposition on the part of the child to use these skills.

Critical thinking therefore involves two resources: knowledge and performance. It is a way of thinking that is invested within a way of acting in the world. Critical thinking is not necessarily natural or easy, in Dewey's view, so teaching is essential if one wants to accomplish more than merely pass along received knowledge. This understanding of critical thinking continues to yield significant influence today.

Is knowledge the same as thinking?

In general, when one says 'I know', one doesn't know, one believes. (Marcel Duchamp)

Why should we bother with children's thinking at all? Isn't it enough if they learn to 'know'? Those who promote critical thinking argue that, of course,