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ABSTRACT

By offering children the opportunity to speak up in the classroom, educators help build a vital foundation in open-mindedness that is essential for critical thinking. Teaching children to be critical thinkers requires that teachers listen to what children say, encourage them to talk, and not insist that they share the teacher's beliefs. Young children immediately believe in their own ideas, have complete assurance on all subjects, and are impervious to experience or different points of view. Interaction with others is the primary way that children move out of this egocentric manner of thought. Because of the strong connection between language and thought, children need to practice their language skills to improve their thinking ability. Aside from family settings, school is a good place to help children learn these skills. Unfortunately, teachers, like parents, often lack the time to listen patiently, offer guidance, and discuss issues. There are many ways of opening up the time for class discussions and many benefits to doing so. These benefits include increased enthusiasm for the subject and creativity in thinking about the different ideas involved. If children are to receive these benefits, teachers must overcome: (1) beliefs that children learn more from adults than from each other and that children are easier to manage when they are kept quiet; (2) the fear that dialogue may prove psychologically damaging to children; and, most importantly, (3) the tendency to make one's feelings about children contingent on the children's beliefs. (AC)

Children Should Be Heard: Developing an Open-minded Foundation in the Early Years

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Children Should Be Heard:

Developing an Open-Minded Foundation in the Early Years

Parents, teachers, administrators, and academics currently are hearing a lot about critical thinking, in the form of theory and in advice on how to successfully teach it in the classroom. All wonderfully-designed-materials-for-helping-accomplish-this-in-the-classroom aside, there are things we can do as teachers to help encourage critical thinking which involve only our understanding, support, and encouragement. There are things we can do that involve modelling good communication skills, and giving children the opportunity to practice these skills themselves. This article proposes to address the need to give students in our classrooms a chance to be heard. It presents the argument that by offering children the opportunity to speak up, we, as educators, help build a vital foundation in open-mindedness that is essential for critical thinking in this multicultural world in which we live.

As an elementary teacher, I have worked on long-term strategies for infusing critical thinking across the curriculum. And as a scholar in the field of critical thinking, my experience and knowledge leave no doubt, we have to start with the young child. If we want to teach children how to be critical thinkers, we have to begin by listening to what they have to say, and encouraging them to talk. And we need to be very careful not to make our evaluation of them, or feelings toward them, contingent on their having specific beliefs. In particular, we must not insist that their beliefs be the same as ours. It is my plan to begin by looking at how a child reasons, and then move on to a discussion of the positive things we can do as teachers to encourage the foundational development of critical thinking. Finally, I will look at the obstacles that stand in our way, and threaten to make us unsuccessful at our task.

HOW THE CHILD REASONS

Critical thinking is a social event. It involves being able to look at a problem from more than one point of view, and to access the reasons that support these different points of view, in order to make a judgment about which is the best, the right solution to the problem. If a person has no realization that there is more than one point of view, and what her point of view is, then she will not be aware that she can be wrong, or that she can misunderstand a problem. We do not begin our practice and development of the ability to reason with an understanding about point of view, or what ours might be. We have to learn this, and the way we learn it is through interaction with others. This lack of knowledge about points of view is what Piaget lab led "ego-centrism." All of us are forced to view the world through our own eyes, hear the world through our own ears, and gather the knowledge we do through our other senses, too. In this sense, we are all ego-centric. But a young child is unique in her egocentricity for she hasn't yet learned that she is doing this. She hasn't learned that how she experiences the world is unique to her, and that others don't experience it necessarily the same way. This is Piaget's special sense of "ego-centricism," which he wrote about at great length. (*Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, 1928) He says that "ego-centrism" is a characteristic that prevails with children below the age of about 7-8 years, when they have trouble with introspection because they are not conscious of their thought. Children are not even aware that they have a separate point of view. They think theirs is just like everyone else's. They have the capacity to believe immediately in their own ideas, have complete assurance of all subjects, and are 'impervious to experience.' They do not seek verification for truth, because they don't even sense the need to do so.

Young children believe they are always understanding each other, and have no suspicion of the "ego-centric" character of their thought. This is the reason why, at this age, children will have no trouble finding answers to questions, though they

cannot explain how. They don't trouble themselves with the reasons or motives which have guided them. From my experience with young children, I am convinced that Piaget is right about this concept of "ego-centricism." It is the older child who can be ego-centric in the sense that we normally speak of, as being selfish and self-centered. This form of ego-centrism should be labeled psychological egoism, for it requires a sense of self, and this is exactly what is missing in young children.

What is important about Piaget's concept of "ego-centricism," from a critical thinking point of view, is that because the child is unconscious of her own thought, she is also unaware that she has a point of view, and that other people have points of view, or that hers may be different from theirs. Being able to think critically requires being able to reflect on the results of one's own thinking process, and be aware of other points of view. What moves a child out of her "ego-centric" thought onto another level of reasoning is interrelating with other people. As Piaget says, "We become conscious of ourselves to the extent that we are adapted to other people." (*Judgement and Reasoning in the Child*, p. 210) This is why I said earlier that critical thinking is a social event.

It is important, that we, as adults, not make the mistake of assuming the young child understands our point of view, or is capable of asking us questions to clarify what we are saying. From this discussion we can see that the child is merely going to assume she is always understanding, the idea that someone means something different than what she understands hasn't occurred to her yet.

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Since we uncovered above that what moves a child out of her "ego-centric" thought onto another level of reasoning is interrelating with other people, I would like to turn now to a discussion concerning interaction with other people, in the

form of language. There is a strong connection between language and thought. Language, like critical thinking, is social, and thinking has been defined by Plato as inner-speech, the talk (conversing, debating) one does with oneself, within one's own mind. (The Dialogues of Plato, 1937) This process of introspection is not one that comes naturally to us. We don't, as young children, trouble ourselves about the reasons that have guided our actions, the results of our reasoning. It seems that it isn't until we are socially pressured by argument and opposition that we seek to justify ourselves in the eyes of others, and begin to acquire the habit of watching ourselves think or of attending to the assessment of the outcomes of our thinking. From the critical thinking viewpoint, this idea of acquiring the habit of watching one's thinking is important. Piaget says that a child will begin to develop introspection around the age of 7-8 years, and that the process of change will become noticeable because the child will go from immediately finding the answer to questions, without any ability to say how, to having to search and grope for the solution, but still unable to say how. By around 7-8 the child is capable of pure introspection. ..."(A)ll introspection is extremely difficult, for it requires that we should be conscious not only of the relations which our thought has woven, but of the actual activity of thought itself." (*Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, p. 146)

AS EDUCATORS

Children need to practice and improve upon their language skills. It will improve their ability to communicate as well as their thinking abilities. They need a chance to be heard. It sounds so simple, and what's great about it, is we can do it for free; well, almost for free. It does cost us something, it costs a lot of time.

Parents and teachers live in a world that is very hectic and busy. Along with the complicated life many of us now seem to be living has come a loss of time to just relax and talk to each other. Giving children time to be heard is not as easy as it

sounds. We need to listen to what they have to say, but when we do we squeeze it in? Young children, just learning how to talk, don't speak very quickly or clearly, so not only do we need to listen, but we need to be willing to listen patiently and to be able to offer guidance. When or how parents do this will be something that has to be worked out, but that it needs to be worked out is certain. It is important that children have a chance to communicate with the parent, alone, and with the family, jointly, in order to develop their language ability and their thinking ability. As Piaget pointed out, by the time children are 7 or 8, they are ready and able to talk socially with a group of people. This is when they begin to be confronted with the notion that not all people think alike and that there may be more than one point of view. This is when they also can begin to learn how to think more critically, and learn what are sound reasons to support a position expressed, etc. Coincidentally, this is also a time when they walk through the school doors, into our classrooms.

Aside from settings at home such as the dinner table, or while riding in the car, when learning how to socialize and argue a point or discuss an issue are developed, school is another excellent place to help children learn these skills. As teachers, we have a wonderful opportunity to help children develop their language and thinking abilities, and we can help them develop both simultaneously through conversation and dialogue. Remember, if thinking is the mind talking to itself, and answering its own questions, then dialoguing is just the externalization of this same process. Just as at home children need the opportunity to practice talking and listening to others talk, this need doesn't go away when they walk into the classroom. How better to realize this opportunity, than through open classroom discussions, and smaller discussion groups? Yet, my experience is that children have little or no opportunity to discus issues in class, especially elementary children. Why? The number one reason would probably be the same one that parents are struggling with: lack of time.

Elementary teachers, today, have a curriculum that includes physical education, and maybe beyond that (i.e., aerobics), art, music (choir and band), computers, foreign languages, not to mention social studies, spelling, handwriting, math, reading, language, science and health, and often special programs designed to educate children about drugs, alcohol, sex, and child abuse. Each day also includes classroom management activities such as moving to and from all of these activities, roll call, lunch count, and recess. There just isn't enough time in the day to do all of this, let alone to do it very well!

Teaching children how to have a large or small group discussion takes time. And then getting a discussion going in one's class, and giving it the opportunity to develop and be completed takes time. We cannot have the kind of discussions we need to be able to have in our classrooms, in order to help children develop their critical thinking skills, without making changes in our curriculum. We have to find ways to allot enough time in our days for dialoguing and discussion, which means something else will have to go. Paraphrasing the words of a great thinker, Alfred North Whitehead, from his essay, "The Aims of Education" (1929), we should teach a few things well, and make the time to go into depth on core subjects, instead of doing all subjects at a superficial level.

By teaching at a superficial level, we are teaching children to think at a superficial level. Also, what is admitted from our teaching due to lack of time, I am assuming, not to lack of skill or knowledge. is the presentation of alternative points of view and the reasons to support our arguments. Often we resort to lecture-type lessons, because they are efficient and place us in control of management of class and information given. When we lecture we are asking students to take our word for it. We use argument by authority, which, from a logical point of view, is an invalid form of argument. We could be accused of being indoctrinators rather than teachers. (Scheffler, 1973)

Getting a class going on a discussion is very simple, once one has established basic ground rules such as: the children will wait their turns to speak, and not interrupt each other; everyone will have an opportunity to speak, if they desire; all ideas will be appreciated; no one is allowed to make fun of what anyone else has to say, etc. At first the teacher will want to be very supportive of children having the courage to speak out, and offer their ideas. Later the children will need to learn to offer reasons to support their ideas. Over time, the teacher may find (s)he has to put a time limit on how much they can say, as they won't want to stop talking! I infused critical thinking into all of my classroom's subject areas, rather than teach it as a separate subject. This appears to be the best approach to teaching critical thinking skills, as infusion will most likely encourage the use of these skills as life skills in all areas of a child's life. (for more on infusion see Paul, 1990 or Swartz, 1987)

Some of the wonderful side-effects of opening up a classroom to discussions is that it encourages enthusiasm for the subject being discussed and creativity in thinking about the different ideas involved. It helps students develop a playful, experimental personality towards ideas. It also seems to help build students' confidence in themselves, as they learn to speak before a group and present their ideas. The reverse of this skill of learning to talk in front of a group is that children also have to learn to be better listeners, when others are talking. I have seen children learn to be open to new experiences, and develop a passion for reasoning. There are especially wonderful side-effects for children a teacher may have in the classroom with learning disabilities. These children do not show their intelligence easily through their writing and reading skills, but they have the opportunity to show how bright they are in discussions, through their oral skills.

There are many suggestions that can be given on how to open up more time in the classroom for discussions. One ideas is: weekly spelling assignments,

handwriting workbooks, questions at the end of social study chapters, etc., could be assigned as homework. For textbook readings: some texts could be used as resource books to turn to when a student needed them, as in a lesson on electricity in science; some texts could be used to help stimulate a classroom discussion, or for outside reading assignments; and someone should be avoided completely, if possible. Just adopting these suggestions would help open up more time for classroom discussions and there are many more helpful suggestions to add to this list. (*Communication in the Classroom*, 1978)

Aside from lack of time to allow classroom discussion and dialoguing, there are other reasons why children are discouraged from talking in class. One is a belief that children learn much more from adults than they can learn from each other, and to allow time for children to talk will cause them to lose academic standing and hinder their learning progress. In other words, the concern is that children don't know enough to be able to learn from what each other has to say. I strongly disagree with this reason. My experience has shown that children can and do learn a lot from each other, and that often they are better able to explain an idea to peers than adults, because the former understand how the child may be thinking, and where her confusion could be. They are closer to the problem themselves.

Another influential reason for not encouraging discussion is the belief that it is much harder to control children when we encourage open discussion than if we keep children quiet, and working individually on assignments. Children are much easier to manage if they are kept quiet, it is maintained, and opening a classroom to discussion is opening the flood-gates to a load of problems. Teachers often have the pressure of knowing that their ability to teach will be judged by their administration staff and parents on how quiet their room is, not on how much the children are learning, or how enthusiastic they are about what they are learning. (Broadwell, 1984)

My experience has shown that effective classroom management does not require silence. My classroom often had a hum to it, as some children would be working together on a project while I would be at a table meeting with a small group for a discussion, and others would be off working individually at their desks. We had silent times built into our schedule, and rules for getting the room silent anytime we needed to, but most often my room was not without noise of some kind. I found that children use to this type of setting were very self-controlled and easily managed. It was children who were not used to this kind of freedom in a classroom who had to go through a period of testing out the limits of its boundaries. Once the rules and consequences were established for them, they too would settle in and get on with their work.

As to judging the quality of a teacher based on how quiet her/his room is, my thoughts are that a room that is always quiet is a room with no life force in it. That a lot of creative thinking and learning can be going on in such a room, I seriously doubt. And I would be concerned about what kind of teaching is going on in such a room, also. Being quiet is a value we have in our culture that we need to examine closely and try to decide when it is appropriate to be quiet, yet this is a message many teachers have received.

Another concern many may have is one that is expressed by Louis Goldman in an article titled, "Warning: The Socratic Method Can Be Dangerous" (*Educational Leadership*, 1984). Goldman is against the idea of having elementary children dialoguing with each other over what should be the foundation of their education. "A proper education of the young must begin with a firm grounding in the nature and values of our culture. ...in the early years we should not take the initiative to demonstrate inconsistencies and other inadequacies in the belief systems we are helping to inculcate." (*Educational Leadership*, 1984, p. 60) Goldman is concerned that dialoguing may prove damaging to young children and may rob

them of a needed sense of security. "It may lead to a growing recognition that there is no truth and that reason is a poor tool. Cynicism and despair may follow." (*Educational Leadership*, 1984, p. 61)

What is wrong about this criticism is that the belief system we are trying to inculcate with young children is that reasoning is a valuable tool. Good reasoning is reasoning that is consistent and adequate, so teaching children to value good reasoning will not lead to inconsistencies and other inadequacies, lack of security, and therefore cynicism and despair. Teaching the value of reasoning, and how to apply good reasoning should help children feel that truth is more within their reach, not less. We are trying to encourage children to wonder and question, which is something they already do spontaneously. We are trying to teach them to be reflective thinkers, and to take their own thoughts seriously. Encouraging children to ask questions should help them learn to take their own thoughts seriously, and help them learn how to refine, and develop their thinking, sometimes even rejecting thoughts they may have.

This leads me to the final point I want to make. One obstacle that can hinder a child's ability to think critically arises when adults make their love for a child contingent on what the child believes. This obstacle most often develops at home with the child's parents. When a child is beginning to learn that she is a separate person with her own point of view, she feels vulnerable and unsure of herself, and insecure about her parents' love for her. She needs to learn that her parents love her, unconditionally, no matter what she believes. If parents give their child love and encouragement only when she sees things their way, she may learn to accept her parent's beliefs unquestioningly. Surely the need for love is, psychologically speaking, much greater than the need to think critically. As the child grows older, she will continue to assume her parents' point of view on issues, often without even realizing it. If she attempts to question their beliefs (her beliefs) and search for

the reasons supporting them, she will meet great resistance and resentment. This is a serious barrier to critical thinking. (Paul, 1990)

We need to give children the message, as parents, that we are going to continue to love them, no matter what they believe. And we need to encourage our children to be independent and think for themselves. This is very difficult to do, because if we encourage our children to think critically and make decisions based on sound reasons, we have to be willing to support their decisions, and go on loving them, even when we disagree with the decision they have made. It is very difficult to stand back and let one's children make decisions, and let them live with the consequences, especially when the parent disagrees with their decisions. Yet this distancing is precisely what <u>should</u> occur, if we are going to raise our children to be critical thinkers. We have to teach them the skills to think critically and then stand back and let them practice these skills.

Just as parents need to be cautious not to make their love for their children contingent on their beliefs, so teachers need to be aware of this same obstacle, in the form that it arises in the classroom. We, as teachers, are often guilty of encouraging children to think that there is one answer, the one we favor. Though we may not be aware of it, we have a tremendous influence on the thinking of our students, and on their adoption of belief systems we hold. We are very good/bad at insinuating what we believe, and then, unwittingly, giving praise, even in the form of higher grades, to those students who give us the answers we agree with.

All of us know what it is like to be a student in a classroom with a teacher who will only accept papers, reports, etc. that agree with his/her point of view. Instead of concentrating on the learning of the subject, and examining it critically, in such a classroom students spend their time trying to "read" the teacher and figure out what (s)he wants. Then they try to give back to the teacher the answers (s)he is looking for, hoping to be rewarded with a good grade. This is exactly the obstacle I

want to warn teachers about. The result of this kind of approach is the discouragement of critical thinking. We want to create an environment in our classroom where children feel so safe and secure that they can express their thoughts and ideas without personal risk.

Does this mean we, as teachers, shouldn't express our beliefs? No more or less than a child's parent, or any other adult for that matter, should. It is impossible not to express beliefs that one has. What is important, though, is that we need to be very clear with our students about what our beliefs are, and try to point out beliefs that are different from ours, other points of view, if appropriate. This means that if we are going to avoid the obstacle of making how a child succeeds in our class contingent on her sharing our belief system, we need to search ourselves and try to understand and reflect on what it is we believe.

SUMMARY

We begin by looking at how a child reasons, and then we looked at how a child's language development can enhance her thinking ability. We then moved to looking at these issues as they effect educators. I examined the importance of letting children talk at home and in the classroom, and suggested reasons why this isn't happening, currently, at home and in our schools. I gave suggestions on how we can make time for classroom discussions. I have urged that children have the opportunity to be heard, at home and in school. We ended this exploration of the topic from an educator's point of view by looking at the same obstacle to the child's development of critical thinking skills that parents need to be concerned about. That is the possibility of making a child's success in the classroom contingent on whether or not she agrees with our beliefs.

I hope this article has given the reader pause to think, ideas to mull over, and issues to discuss. Most of all, I hope the argument presented has successfully

convinced the reader that by offering children a chance to speak up, we, as parents and teachers, help build a vital foundation in open-mindedness that is essential for critical thinking in the multicultural world in which we live.

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