

CZU: 159.955.5:373.3

[https://doi.org/10.59295/sum9\(176\)2024\\_42](https://doi.org/10.59295/sum9(176)2024_42)

## **CRITICAL THINKING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS. A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON STANDARD AND MORE RECENT PERSPECTIVES**

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This article is intended to discuss a topic that is essential to the development and well-being for pupils' worldwide – critical thinking. This analysis takes into account two perspectives: the standard mechanism and more recent reinterpretations of teaching critical thinking to children. Pupils need to be taught, from a young age, different techniques in an attempt to develop their critical thinking; with the purpose of helping them filter all that, they receive through the means of electronic gadgets. Well-known researchers such as Matthew Lipman, or Jeremy Harmer have their works enriched nowadays by recent researchers such as Ellen Galinsky in a desire to enhance the quality of studies in classroom contemporaneous dynamics. It is never too late for teachers to guide pupils in acquiring not only basic abilities, such as reading or writing, but also other life skills meant to help them filter, analyze, evaluate, and decide for themselves.

*Keywords: critical thinking, pupils, primary school, internet, social media, technology.*

### **GÂNDIREA CRITICĂ LA ELEVII DIN ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTUL PRIMAR. O PRIVIRE GENERALĂ ASUPRA PERSPECTIVELOR TRADIȚIONALE DAR ȘI A CELOR ACTUALE**

Acest articol își propune să discute un subiect esențial pentru dezvoltarea și bunăstarea elevilor din întreaga lume – gândirea critică. Analiza ia în considerare două perspective: mecanismul standard și reinterpretările mai recente ale predării gândirii critice copiilor. Elevii trebuie învățați încă de la o vârstă fragedă diverse tehnici pentru a le dezvolta gândirea critică, cu scopul de a-i ajuta să filtreze tot ce primesc prin intermediul dispozitivelor electronice. Considerațiile cercetătorilor bine-cunoscuți, precum Matthew Lipman sau Jeremy Harmer, sunt astăzi optimizate de cercetători recenți precum Ellen Galinsky, în dorința de a îmbunătăți calitatea studiilor în dinamica contemporană a sălii de clasă. Nu este niciodată prea târziu pentru profesori să-și ghideze elevii în dobândirea nu doar a abilităților de bază, precum citirea sau scrierea, ci și a altor abilități de viață menite să îi ajute să filtreze, să analizeze, să evalueze și să decidă asumat.

*Cuvinte-cheie: gândire critică, elevi, școala primară, internet, social media, tehnologie.*

#### **Introduction**

Teachers find themselves nowadays in an interesting and equally challenging position. Young pupils do not seem to be interested in what the teacher has to say, explain or demonstrate. Pupils seem to give no importance whatsoever to what is happening around them, get easily distracted, and lack patience. They seem to have devised a new personal universe limited to electronic gadgets and virtual friends. A change has to occur in the classroom. The world around children is changing and teachers need to adapt. All the new information that simply bombards young students comes without any kind of filters and is the teacher's duty at school, as it is their parents' at home, to teach them how to filter it.

There is one certain thing that defines the human species and that is their rationality. People are rational and this implies that they can think, an ability that clearly differentiates them from other creatures. It is the thought, a human's super power, that defines people as having an extraordinary complex mental mechanism. A process that helps interpret and evaluate information, a connection between the human mind and the outside world, but human thinking is not a uniform process. It is something that progresses with time and thrives on the information received at school, at home or by exploring one's surroundings.

From this field of psychological interpretations and understanding of the human mind comes the theory

of critical thinking. A concept largely discussed in the '80s, critical thinking has come again to haunt teachers by forcing them to change the way they teach. Pupils still need basic skills like reading or writing, but how the teacher does it makes the difference.

In the 80s the American National Institute of Education undertook a series of conferences that had as their main topic early education and children's problem-solving process. The key words in education become thinking and cognitive abilities. This is a time when names such as Edward de Bono, Matthew Lipman, or Susan Carey became known worldwide [15]. These conferences are also the place where all agreed that critical thinking needs be taught to pupils [15; 12].

The principles promoted by this new critical thinking movement go further in time to the constructivist theories that state the primary role of subject in its seek of knowledge. Strictly speaking, constructivism is not a theory but rather a philosophical explanation about the nature of learning [11; 12; 13; 15].

Thus, critical thinking becomes an active process of learning that encourages reflexion, debate and free speech, three key factors which will initiate the pupil to become the architect of its own concepts, thus achieving knowledge.

Mielu Zlate made a systematization of the thinking process. He envisions a differentiation between nine types [21]. Critical thinking is alongside reproductive and productive- creative thinking. Reproductive thinking functions in a linear way, unproductive by means of quality. Productive- creative thinking, on the other hand, implies the possibility of multiple solutions and the discovery of new possible principles concerning a given problem [21].

Researchers state that thinking in a critical manner implies that one must constantly evaluate, be curious, ask questions, or look for answers. However, one must not overlook the negative implications to this. One might receive the tag of an attention seeker or opposing others just as a means of getting only his idea through.

By using professor Sălăvăstru's scheme to compare the concept of critical thinking, one can make a clear differentiation between facts stated in the 80s by Matthew Lipman and contemporaneous observations made by Ellen Galinsky [17;18].

### **Critical Thinking and Matthew Lipman**

Lipman's considerations pin point a truth that parents, students and teachers sometimes tend to overlook. „The school is a battleground because it, more than any other social institution, is the manufacturer of the society of the future, and virtually every social group or fraction therefore aspires to control the school for its own ends” [13; 15].

What Matthew Lipman did to the classical curriculum is something that had never seen before in the American public school system. With his philosophical novel for children „Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery”, Lipman initiates what will be known as The Philosophy for Children. This is a technique that encourages teachers to promote the idea that a classroom is actually a „community of inquiry”, a place where students exchange ideas. Any pupil can be a valuable contributor to any kind of topic [10; 13; 15].

Inside a classroom, the message travels three ways: from teacher to student, from student to teacher and from student to student. A connection meant to develop listening skills, willingness to approve others arguments and openness to the possibility of changing ones believes. „In short, the classroom is designed to reinforce the student's potential for reasonableness. This involves more than being able to engage in skilful reasoning” [11; 13; 15].

Matthew Lipman states that critical thinking is in itself self-correcting and sensitive to context. It can identify its own lacks and errors and is capable to correct them [15].

### **Critical thinking in Ellen Galinsky's perspective**

Adapting to the model of self improvement literature, Ellen Galinsky's book „Mind In The Making” moves critical thinking outside the classroom and places it in the field of essential life skills. Like walking, eating, or speaking, critical thinking is just as important and together with physical and mental abilities defines the modern man.

Her book begins with a very simple experiment in which the readers are asked to think of a couple of words, which describe best modern, day-to-day life. Words such as complex, distracting, fast moving, 24-7, and stressful seem to define what people endure, but this is not true just for adults, children face the same obstacles as well [6, p. 7].

To navigate this world, children need to focus, to determine what is important, and to pay attention, amid many distractions. In this aspect, she identifies three essential points about these life skills:

- These skills are not only important for children.
- Adults need them as well.
- Adults have to practice them as well to promote them to children [6, p. 14].

These life skills could not develop without the brain's pre-frontal cortex, the place where the executive functions of the brain happen. This part of the human brain functions as a sort of manager. This is the part which manages attention, emotions, and behaviour in order to reach one's goals.

Her work emphasizes seven essential life skills:

#### 1. Focus and self control

Focus and self-control involve many executive functions of the brain, such as paying attention, remembering the rules, and inhibiting one's *initial response to achieve a larger goal* [6, p. 14].

#### 2. Perspective thinking

Peter Drucker, known as the father of modern management, calls this an “outside-in perspective”, seeing things as a customer would see them - and deems it responsible for launching the most successful new businesses [6, p. 68-100].

#### 3. Communicating

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says that observing children communicate is actually seeing their mind at work [6, p. 104-115].

#### 4. Making connections

At one point, all pupils or adults have epiphanies, situations that were a mystery become all of a sudden clear, called an „ah” moment [6, p. 168-173].

#### 5. Taking challenges

Pupils face every day challenges. Various situations occur at school, at home or with their friends. These challenges, positive or negative, can be stressful.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, directed by Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard University, has conducted a research on the level of stress that young children face and how they cope with it. The conclusion was that, while there are different types of stress, the key factors in whether these experiences ultimately have a positive, tolerable or toxic impact on children's development are how long the stress lasts and whether or not children have safe and dependable relationships with people to whom they can turn for support [6, p. 248-230].

Young pupils seem to be scared to take on challenges due to their fear of failure and public shaming.

#### 6. Self-directed, engaged learning

For a research paper, Ellen Galinsky reached out directly to the people that created and evaluated the impact of several learning programmes. She discovered that many things made a difference, such as emotional and intellectual learning being linked. But above all stood the fact that all those involved in the research became “community learners”. Teachers, pupils, and parents all shared their motivation for learning.

As Nobel Prize winner James Heckman of the University of Chicago puts it, „motivation begets motivation” [6, p. 299-302].

#### 7. Critical thinking sums up all the essential life skills

At its base, critical thinking is actually a permanent search for the truth and knowledge. These are meant to guide beliefs, decisions, and actions. Critical thinking develops from childhood and into adulthood and it must be promoted. It parallels the reasoning used in the scientific method because it involves developing, testing, and constantly redefining theories about „what causes what”. [6, p. 200-204].

The complex description of critical thinking comes with several other details. For example, the fact that it develops in six steps:

- identify the dilemma, problem or issue;
- determine the goal;
- come up with alternative solutions;
- consider how these alternatives solutions might work;
- select a solution to try;
- evaluate the outcome and, if the solution isn't working, try something else;

Furthermore, the author states that from all skills, critical thinking draws on all the skills.

It takes self control to define the issue and determine the goals, then one has to take into consideration alternative solutions, and finally to evaluate the evidence to determine whether the result is functional.

Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what one is doing, to look at the dimensions of the task, and to evaluate [6, p. 201]. Just as in the case the '80s conferences when one could go back as far as constructivist theories, Ellen Galinsky identifies a precursor to critical thinking as the process of theorizing [6, p. 206].

Children are constantly developing theories, too. Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says that children are using the same kinds of processes as scientists. They are making up theories about what is happening around them and at the same time they are checking to see if those theories fit what they see and what other people are telling them. They test their theories by asking questions and making predictions and this is extremely obvious if one pays attention to their play patterns [7].

### **Critical Thinking In The Classroom**

Taking a teacher's viewpoint into perspective, many have come to realize the limitations of the theorized teaching books and in the end it is up to the teacher and its ability to always adapt or change. The job of a teacher is made up of several other skills. They have to be perfect actors that excel on the classroom's stage. They have to be researchers who always try to look beyond what is common knowledge. Moreover, they have to be refined psychologists who understand how the human mind works. Every classroom listener comes with its own unique habits, comprehensions, and emotions. How can teachers manage this all? By understanding that children have two learning abilities.

Firstly, they learn from others. Children do not see people's actions as something that happens randomly- they focus their attention on what people in their lives seem to transmit. This, consequently, leads to learning by imitation [7].

Secondly, they are curiosity. Young pupils accumulate knowledge from their direct experiences. It is true that young children often seem enforced by their curiosity, eager to understand and finally to master the information that they have gathered [7].

### **How can teachers promote critical thinking in the classroom?**

In an attempt to analyse the multitude of perspectives discussed above, one must have an overview on certain patterns that emerge in the classroom. There can never be a correct assumption about developing critical thinking without overseeing the mechanism of pupils' personal interpretations and the impact that their environment and social particularities have on their assessments. It is an interesting experiment for a teacher to see how children form arguments about what certain concepts mean or stand for.

As an example, a vocabulary lesson can accurately illustrate this situation. The presentation dealt with the cultural perspective concerning the celebration of Halloween and an audience consisting of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students.

As means of lesson objectives, there was the familiarization of pupils with Halloween festivities, their particularities, and the celebration worldwide.

Since the beginning of the activity, it came as a surprise the fact that even though the Halloween celebrations are popular, children lacked basic knowledge about them. One of the deceitful details encountered was the translation of the celebration's name itself- hell will win- a mystical, occult element that centered around devils, curses or satanic rituals.

Further explanations were given to the pupils by presenting the Christian custom of offering food to others as tribute for those who had passed away. An interesting fact that was noted here was that this feast is at the beginning of November, close to Halloween.

The next step was a presentation of Mexican traditions and festivals for „Día de los Muertos”- Day of the Dead. This was the point that came with the explanation for the costumes, chants, and cemetery traditions. Pupils made a connection between the Halloween masks and those worn by local Romanian children on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December to scare off bad spirits and finally, the pupils watched a short part from the ”Encanto” movie.

For older pupils this type of lesson could work as a research project. Ask pupils to look for the meaning of words or for the historical background of certain traditions and present their findings to the class.

Curiosity could work just as well in the classroom. For a “daily routine” lesson, an experiment could help pupils learn vocabulary, grammar (Present Simple) and talk about advertising and its impact on consumption behaviour. For this lesson, a Colgate commercial was used, the first Romanian ad for this product, filmed in 1993 and the targeted students were pupils in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

The lesson objectives concerned using the specific verbal tense, but most importantly was to make students talk and debate on advertising.

The activity begun with a simple discussion about pupils` morning routines. The teacher showed the class a toothpaste ad and asked them about the subject of the video, if it was funny and why, what was the purpose of this clip and if they had used that product. Particular attention was given to the last part of the ad where an ink and chalk experiment was performed. The pupils were asked to do the same experiment at home and see if what they saw in the ad was actually true.

The conclusion for this type of lesson is not in the vocabulary or grammar patterns the students use, but actually in their day-to-day activities. What they see or hear can unconsciously motivate them to buy certain items.

For older pupils this type of lesson could be concluded by asking them to do their own commercial and try to convince their colleagues to buy something. After this, the class could say what they liked about the presentation or did not and if they would buy that product or not.

### **General conclusions**

Taking into account theoretical views and classroom personal experiences, both Matthew Lipman’s standard view on critical thinking and Ellen Galinsky’s more recent perspective offer valuable insights into the development of this essential skill in children, yet they reflect different approaches shaped by their respective times and educational contexts.

Lipman’s foundational work emphasizes the importance of teaching critical thinking as a structured process focusing on skills such as reasoning, argumentation, and logical analysis. His approach advocates for creating a classroom environment where students can actively engage in questioning and reasoning to solve problems. This perspective has been instrumental in shaping educational practices that foster intellectual autonomy and cognitive skills from an early age.

On the other hand, Galinsky’s contemporary viewpoint takes a more adaptive approach, recognizing the need for critical thinking skills in a rapidly changing, technology-driven world. She points out the importance of helping children develop not only the ability to think logically but also the emotional and social intelligence necessary to navigate complex, information-rich environments. Her work integrates skills like perspective-taking and decision-making, emphasizing the role of critical thinking in both academic and everyday contexts.

Together, these perspectives highlight the evolving nature of critical thinking education. While Lipman laid the groundwork for a structured approach focused on reasoning and analysis, Galinsky expands this foundation by incorporating the need for flexible, adaptive thinking in response to the challenges of modern society. Both views are crucial for preparing children to thrive in an increasingly complex world, demonstrating that critical thinking is not just about academic success, but also about equipping young people with the tools to make informed, thoughtful decisions throughout their lives.



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*Presented on 11.09.2024*