

CRITICAL THINKING IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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A THESIS

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by

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CHAPTER I

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

Critical thinking is that thinking which proceeds on the basis of careful evaluation. When thinking in a truly critical manner the child comes to conclusions cautiously and considers all pertinent factors.

Creative thinking is inventive. When thinking creatively the child explores novel situations, reaches or works toward new solutions to old problems, or produces other thoughts which are original.¹

In order to explore the problem of teaching critical and creative thinking at the primary level a study of the following questions is required:

Are basic skills the main business of the primary school and should critical thinking be delayed until later years?

In what ways can curiosity, critical thinking and creative thought be developed in the primary school and can these teachings be successfully incorporated into the language arts program of the primary grades?

Should the goal be to make thinkers of all children?

The problem of creative and critical thinking has been studied by authorities from Arnold (1938) through the contemporaries (Bruner, Guilford, Glaser, Getzels and Jackson, Torrance and others). This information is

¹Based upon definitions of critical and creative thinking provided in Dictionary of Education, ed. Carter V. Good, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1945).

related in this study to the needs of the primary age child of our present day society, who is facing life in a fast moving and changing world where new problems constantly require the attention of an intellect which has been involved in activities of problem solving, discrimination and critical analysis.

In our rapidly changing civilization it is now impossible to predetermine the knowledge which the child will need in order to face the situations he will meet in his grown up world. The child must instead learn how to learn, how to think critically and creatively, and how to develop the attitudes and appreciations which will serve him in his later life.

It has been found that although the smaller child comes to us naturally endowed with the curiosity which greatly facilitates the teaching of critical thinking, there is a tendency for his spontaneity and questioning attitude to begin to show signs of decay or to lie hidden beneath a layer of conformity when he becomes a middle-grader. Can this situation be traced to the many learning environments of the primary school where the quiet attentive classroom is overstressed? Do primary teachers actually foster an idea-thwarting environment as they react to their own pressures to hurry the pupils through the program? Or do the middle grade teachers stifle critical thinking with an overemphasis on control, large group activities, paperwork and directions following? These questions may be unanswerable, yet it seems that a consideration of the classroom environment is most appropriate when investigating the role of critical thinking skills in the program.

At the primary level the building of attitudes of discrimination,

appreciation and curiosity can be greatly promoted through the provision of an environment which consistently emphasizes a feeling of worthiness in each individual child. The studies of Torrance in this area are especially helpful in guiding teachers to establish such an environment and to develop in themselves proper attitudes of understanding, sensitivity and insight.¹

The problem of teachers themselves avoiding a critical thinking approach requires consideration. Can teachers who were taught entirely by the lecture method be expected to teach successfully the skills of critical thinking to little children? How important are the strong personal values and attitudes that the teacher brings to the classroom?

In answering the question: Shall we make thinkers of all children? it is possible that intelligence and other factors may impose limitations; yet interests, attitudes and motivational factors which can be greatly enhanced by the learning environment provided, are significant contributors toward growth in the creative and critical approach to learning. Not all children will become deeply critical thinkers. It seems evident that with varying abilities and levels of social maturity come varying standards for critical thinking skill. That which constitutes critical thinking for one child will not be a truly critical approach for another. Yet it seems likely all children will begin to use their minds more creatively when they are learning in an environment where respect is shown to all individuals and where there is an absence of hurt feelings and pressure. It has been found that early successes with "easy problems" first is important. It seems evident that the teacher must be always

¹E. Paul Torrance, Rewarding Creative Behavior (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), pp. 235-319.

cognizant of her role as the helper of all children as they prepare for a life where constant changes demand optimal development of judgment, discrimination and sensitivity in all persons.

After studying these questions the writer has adapted and devised ways to promote growth in critical and creative thinking in the primary grade classroom, basing the suggestions on concepts developed from the investigation. The emphasis is on ways that such teaching can be accomplished in the language arts area. The freedom-to-question learning environment is emphasized.