

YOUNG THINKERS OF THE FUTURE:

DEVELOPING CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING FROM AN EARLY AGE

BY RUSSELL GRIGG

How should schools prepare students for the future? According to a recent YouGov poll of parents in United Arab Emirates, the most important skills schools can teach their children are creative and innovative thinking. Employers agree. In a fast-changing economy, they want to keep ahead of competitors and need employees who can spot new opportunities and 'paint outside the lines.'

But what do we mean by creative and critical thinking? Put simply, these are complementary skillsets which help people identify and solve problems effectively - creative thinking does this by adding value and novelty, while critical thinking applies logic and order. Creative thinkers ask: 'What if...?' whereas critical thinkers ask 'Why?' and 'So what?'

This might appear all too academic for young children. But this is not so. By creating a stimulating learning environment, carefully scaffolding learning and by adopting consistent whole-school teaching strategies, the foundations for creative and critical thinking can be well set in the early years. Here, children as young as three and four are capable of posing thoughtful questions, exploring ideas and imagining new worlds. In my recent book, *Teaching Creative and Critical Thinking* (Grigg and Lewis, Sage, 2019), We report upon how teachers achieve this through the use of thinking hats, visible thinking routines, thinking maps, thinkers' keys, Philosophy 4 Children, cognitive acceleration and promoting habits of mind such as persisting and striving for accuracy. We illustrate these approaches through real-life case studies, in a range of contexts.

For example, in one school, early years' practitioners use puppets such as 'Connie Confidence', 'Gabby Get-a-long' and 'Pete Persistence' to model the habits of mind that are essential for life. Teachers use engaging starting points such as a sports league to challenge children's thinking and encourage discussion and debate, while paintings and interesting objects are used in other lessons, as the



stimulus for young children to see, think and wonder about the world.

Creativity is not a special inborn gift bestowed upon some children and not others; neither is it confined to the arts. These are damaging myths. All children have the capacity to be creative across a range of subjects. Of course, thinking does not happen in a vacuum. Children need something to think about and this is why infusing thinking skills across the curriculum, rather than as stand-alone exercises, is likely to bring most benefits. Establishing inviting role-play areas, such as a bakery, building site or market stall, opens up lots of possibilities for planning, explaining, comparing, questioning, testing, sequencing, inferring and analysing. In *Teaching on a Shoestring* (Grigg and Lewis, Crown House, 2018) we describe more than a thousand practical ideas to

develop these kinds of skills through using everyday objects such as apples, cardboard boxes and feathers. There's no need for teachers to spend money on expensive resources. The humble cardboard box can be turned into space ships, photo frames, paint palettes, hats and even a drive-in movie, to name a few creative uses.

The great Italian educator Maria Montessori considered all children were like 'young explorers' eager to investigate their world and make 'what if' discoveries. In our experience this is often the case, and our role as teachers is to develop stimulating, authentic contexts for young children to talk about and develop thinking skills across the curriculum. The importance of building 'cities for creativity' was highlighted at the recent World Government Summit in Dubai. The foundations begin in the nursery.



Dr Russell Grigg is an Education Inspector at the UAE's Ministry of Education's School Improvement Unit and author of many books and materials on teaching. He provides courses on creative and critical thinking. You can follow him on Twitter @russellgrigg