

Critical Skills in the Early Years

Vicki Charlesworth

HAWKER BROWNLOW
EDUCATION

Contents

Foreword Ted Wragg	5
Acknowledgements	6
Chapter 1 Introduction	
What is the Critical Skills Programme?	8
Why implement Critical Skills in a foundation stage setting?	11
Our story	13
How to use this book	14
Chapter 2 How to develop a learning community	
Highlight everyday problems – providing opportunities	17
Model the importance of process	21
Establish routines through contextual problems	22
Use learning tools	25
Move beyond a clapping culture	27
Introduce strategies for conflict resolution	28
Value acts which promote community	29
Use whole-class and group check-ins	31
Encourage shared responsibility for the learning environment	33
Develop a Full Value Contract	35
Chapter 3 A whole-class challenge	
How to do a whole-class challenge	40
Ideas for whole-class challenges	42
Moving on from the debrief	46
Chapter 4 Challenges in pairs and small groups	
How to do a small-group challenge	49
Ideas for challenges in pairs	51

Chapter 5 A sequence of challenges and the introduction of roles

A sequence of challenges	58
The learning cycle	61
Ideas for small-group challenges	62
Introducing task roles	62

Chapter 6 Feedback and assessment


The benefits of formative assessment in the early years	65
Feedback	67
Self-assessment	69
Peer-assessment	71
Using rubrics as an assessment tool	71

Chapter 7 Linking Critical Skills to early years practice

Problem solving	76
Decision making	80
Critical thinking	83
Creative thinking	86
Communication	88
Organization	92
Management	96
Leadership	98
Ownership	101
Self-direction	104
Quality	107
Character	109
Collaboration	112
Curiosity and wonder	114
Community	117

Chapter 8 Progressive indicators of achievement

Progressive indicators of critical skills	121
Progressive indicators of fundamental dispositions	123
<i>Bibliography</i>	127
<i>Useful resources</i>	128
<i>CD-ROM resources</i>	129
<i>Index</i>	130

Teachers' resources to accompany this book are available on the CD-ROM which can be found on the inside back cover. An icon  in the margin indicates there is a resource related to that section. A list of these resources can be found on page 129.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As a nursery class teacher, I am constantly looking for ways to enhance the learning that takes place in the classroom. How can I ensure that children are equipped with skills that will help them succeed as members of a class, school and the wider community? In particular, I have been concerned with the following questions:

- ☆ How can skills such as ownership, self-direction and decision making be taught to young children?
- ☆ How can I help children to develop mutual respect and understanding?
- ☆ How can I facilitate collaboration among children – rather than just co-operation?

Through the Critical Skills Programme (CSP) I have found an effective way of addressing all these questions. The programme is easy to implement with young children and is aimed at developing certain skills which they will continue to build on throughout their school lives. These ‘Critical Skills’ are essentially life skills, and there are eight of them:

- ☆ problem solving
- ☆ decision making
- ☆ critical thinking
- ☆ creative thinking
- ☆ communication
- ☆ organization
- ☆ management
- ☆ leadership

In addition, the programme seeks to develop seven fundamental dispositions:

- ☆ ownership
- ☆ self-direction
- ☆ quality
- ☆ character
- ☆ collaboration
- ☆ curiosity and wonder
- ☆ community



Critical skills poster
Fundamental dispositions poster

No early years practitioner would deny the importance of any of these skills and dispositions: they are the life skills that are desirable in all members of society. The question is, how do we get it right? How do we ensure that the children we teach will not only have had experience of using these skills, but will have them internalized to such a degree that they will continue to develop them as they grow physically, emotionally and socially? If this issue concerns you, then the Critical Skills Programme may be the answer you've been looking for.

This book outlines a practical approach to teaching and learning in early years settings, through which the children you teach can develop into confident and independent learners who work collaboratively within a supportive learning community to solve meaningful problems or challenges.

What is the Critical Skills Programme?

The Critical Skills Programme is essentially a problem-based approach to learning. It engages children and young people in their own learning, enhances the day-to-day running of the classroom and facilitates the production of high-quality work.

The programme originated in New Hampshire in 1981, when educationalists and businesses came together in response to the report *A Nation at Risk*. They explored the following questions:

- ☆ What skills are vitally important for students to have by the time they leave school in order to be successful in their lives?
- ☆ What would a classroom be like that gave conscious and purposeful attention to the development of these skills?
- ☆ What skills are lacking in the workforce that impede individual and organizational success?

Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the programme developed and spread beyond New Hampshire to Maine, New York, Vermont and Massachusetts, and continued to grow nationally throughout the 1990s. The programme – known in the United States as 'Education by Design' – was introduced to the UK in 1999 as the 'Critical Skills Programme', and in a relatively short time became established as a highly effective classroom methodology.

While the principles of CSP are described briefly below, it is not within the scope of this book to provide a full exposition of the model: for more details about the programme and how it has developed in the UK, please visit the Critical Skills website. Alternatively, the *Level 1 Coaching Kit* will give you a full account of the programme, how it is structured and what it looks like in practice.

Training on CSP is available (see Critical Skills website), and the initial course takes six days. However, while a training course will undoubtedly be helpful, it is certainly not a prerequisite for implementing some of the Critical Skills principles in an early years classroom, as described in this book.

Skills for life

Critical skills are essentially life skills. As adults functioning in society, we need to be able to make decisions, communicate, solve problems and work together harmoniously. Through CSP, children are able to experience these skills at first hand. They develop an understanding of agreed values, codes of behaviour, and expectations and aspirations for their lives. They are then able to develop their own community; they come to see the advantages of acquiring these skills and developing them through meaningful and contextual experiences.

In an ever-changing global market, workforces are constantly having to evolve and adapt. 'A job for life' is no longer a reality for most people. Employers have to adapt to meet consumer needs and to keep up to date with technological advances. To do this, they need flexible workforces and employees who can think laterally, creatively and critically. They need workforces equipped with the skills to solve problems as they arise and to make decisions where necessary. They also need workforces who think positively about challenge and change, who strive to raise standards and who reflect in order to improve. By implementing CSP in our schools, we are providing this adaptable workforce for the future.

Key principles and practice

We believe that education must be experiential, must nurture independence, and must enable all members of each generation to develop the judgement necessary to take responsibility for:

- the conduct of their lives;
- the shaping of their societies;
- and their participation in global issues.

We believe that judgement is the integration of knowledge, skills, and standards of ethical behaviour that guides decisions, commitment, and action.

Mobilia, W. (1999)

The Critical Skills classroom model is based on four educational ideas:

- ☆ **Experiential learning** – this means that children are given real-life problems to solve, ones that have an impact not only on their life within the classroom, but also on their life outside it.
- ☆ **A collaborative learning community** – in terms of the day-to-day running of the class, this is, perhaps, the most powerful aspect of the programme. CSP provides tools that allow teachers and children to develop a shared responsibility for the classroom environment and a supportive culture whereby they achieve goals together.
- ☆ **Standards or results-driven learning** – children in a Critical Skills classroom take part in activities designed to necessitate the demonstration of their developing knowledge and understanding and of skills and dispositions.

- ☆ **Problem-based learning** – the primary approach to learning is through carefully planned challenges for children to carry out. These are set within a real-life context (contextual for them), and provide them with the big picture in relation to their learning. They can see what they are doing and why they are doing it, and can see the advantages in working through a problem. Through these challenges, children have the opportunity to develop and apply their knowledge and understanding, as well as to demonstrate their critical skills and fundamental dispositions.

The Critical Skills model

The key elements in the Critical Skills model are:

The experiential cycle

Children engage in a challenge, carry it out and perform in accordance with criteria, then reflect upon what they have done and learned. This learning then connects directly to their next challenge. Thus the cycle of learning continues and children come to see exactly how learning takes place.



Taking responsibility

The Critical Skills model allows children to take control over their environment, their learning and ultimately their lives. The experiential cycle encourages them to make their own decisions and understand the consequences of their actions. It is vital that teachers coach, stand back, and intervene only when necessary. This allows children to make the decisions for themselves, taking control and experiencing responsibility at first hand. It is only by doing this that they will develop an understanding of responsibility and what it means for them.

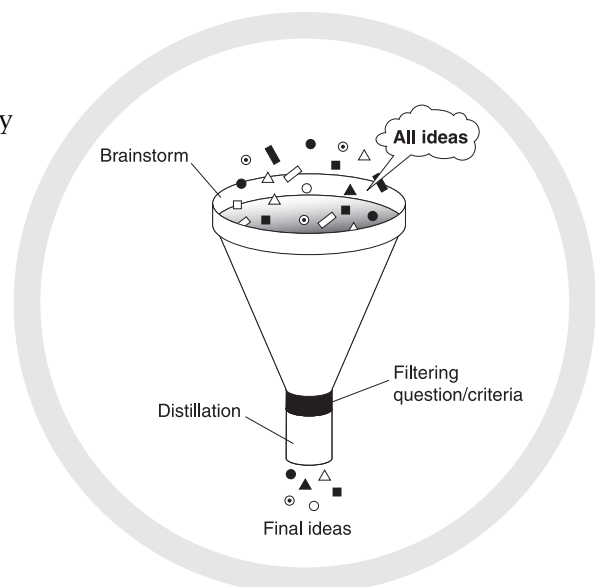
Tools for thinking

In CSP, the development of critical skills is facilitated by a number of tools, such as brainstorming and the distillation of ideas – as illustrated here. There is more on the use of tools in Chapter 2.

Challenges

The design and use of challenges is a key element of CSP. Challenges are essentially problems that the children have to work together to solve. By taking part in challenges, the children are able to:

- ☆ develop understanding through performance
- ☆ demonstrate their developing skills and attitudes



- ☆ attend to the processes of learning and social interaction
- ☆ see the big picture that makes the work worth doing.

Why implement Critical Skills in a foundation stage setting?

It may be argued that all early years practitioners see the development of social skills as paramount to the work that they do with young children, and that all good foundation stage settings are developing these skills without the aid of CSP. We all know these skills are vital, but it is not sufficient, in my opinion, to rely on their being acquired through daily social interactions and chance incidents. This book offers an approach which not only treats these skills as specific and teachable concepts, but also provides practitioners with the strategies of implementation in order to maximize learning. These strategies, activities, opportunities for observation and assessment leave nothing to chance.

A recent study into early years practice has highlighted the need for a model such as Critical Skills in the early years classroom. The EPPE research (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) aimed, among other things, to identify characteristics of effective pre-school settings. The effectiveness of each setting was determined by the outcomes of the sample children studied. The findings showed that in the most effective settings:

- ☆ staff guided the learning but did not dominate it
- ☆ peer interactions were usually positive (e.g. co-operating and sharing)
- ☆ staff provided some opportunity for children to work together to complete a task.

These three descriptions exactly fit the Critical Skills model. Using this approach, children benefit from a level of 'sustained shared thinking' whereby two or more individuals work together to solve a problem. They work towards and meet early learning goals in a contextual way. Adults are involved in the process at a level that is necessary to enhance learning. This classroom dynamic nurtures independence and creates a shared responsibility among the children. The children are able to contextualize their own learning, see the big picture and understand the advantages of solving problems together. By doing this, they develop a sense of trust in one another and are able to acknowledge and celebrate success, not only in themselves, but in their peers.

What does an early years Critical Skills classroom look like?

There are nine notable characteristics of a Critical Skills classroom. This is what you would see if you walked into an early years setting that was using a Critical Skills approach.

- ☆ **Children frequently work as a team** – whether they are working together to construct a train track or to tidy the blocks, children are gaining the skills necessary to work as a team. This goes beyond simply working alongside others – which frequently happens in early years

settings. Rather, the children actually collaborate to get a job done. This collaboration is acknowledged, highlighted and praised as a desirable behaviour which facilitates the day-to-day running of the class.

- ☆ **Children actively solve meaningful problems** – it is the role of the teacher to create meaningful ‘problems’ for the children to solve. By stopping the group and stating, ‘We have a problem in the class; I need your help’ the teacher is able to engage the children immediately. They are then invited to suggest solutions to whatever problem is affecting their learning. For example, the problem could be that paintings hung up to dry are falling down because there is a draught. Children are invited to think of possible solutions, which are talked through – even the seemingly unworkable ones – before a decision is reached.
- ☆ **Children publicly exhibit their learning** – they are given the opportunity to share their work with others. By developing a ‘clapping culture’, children begin to value the appreciation of their peers and are able to share with them what they have achieved. When the group is stopped to celebrate a particular success, the children are given instant feedback on their achievement, and this appreciation is modelled for the other children. A day in an early years classroom can be so hectic that it can be easy to miss achievements. It might be that a child has sampled a new food at snack time or has managed to put their coat on independently; these incidents are not overlooked. The children learn to praise one another and value their achievements.
- ☆ **Children reflect on what they are learning and doing** – they are given the opportunity to respond to questions such as: ‘What did you do?’ and ‘How did you solve the problem?’ This doesn’t always come at the end of a challenge. In fact, it is probably more meaningful to encourage reflection all the way through the learning process, because this provides instant recognition and fosters the habit of constant reflection on the part of the children.
- ☆ **Children apply quality criteria to their work** – the children know what they have to achieve – and for very young children this does have to be made completely explicit. For example, if they are working together to make a boat, they need to know that it must be big enough and strong enough to carry a particular toy. These criteria are made clear from the start and referred to at various stages of the challenge. This means that the children are always aware of what they are working towards. Similarly, the quality criteria are applied to the general expectations of behaviour on a daily basis. Allowing the children to decide what constitutes ‘good listening’, for example, means they are more likely to achieve it because they have set an achievable standard themselves.

- ☆ **Teachers mediate, coach and support the learning process** – as early years practitioners, they are continually observing the children, following their leads and engaging in their play, where necessary or appropriate. These practices are easily transferred to the Critical Skills approach. Teachers observe the children, recognize the need to interact, and highlight the learning process to them. Comments such as ‘I like the way you asked Sarah what she thought’, or ‘You made a decision: well done!’ affirm the priority placed on the skills that the children are demonstrating.
- ☆ **Targeted learning results or standards guide the culture, the curriculum and assessment** – many if not all of the early learning goals are achievable through the Critical Skills approach, and these goals are made explicit to the children. They are told that by deciding together how their product will be made, they are learning to work as part of a group (personal, social and emotional development). They are told that listening to someone in the group is helping them to take turns when they are talking (communication, language and literacy). In this way, children begin to see what they are working towards. This relates to the idea of giving children the big picture to contextualize their learning for them.
- ☆ **Work is interconnected** – children can see that they are learning from their experiences. Referring back to prior experiences and building on these is a powerful method for enhancing learning in young children. They begin to reflect on what they did last time, how it affected them and what they will do next time as a result. This can be as simple as understanding that the day before there was not time for a story because it took longer to tidy the block area. The children may then decide either to work more quickly or to enlist more help in order to finish earlier and have time for a story. This progresses as the children complete challenges and engage in debriefing to think about what went well and what they will need to do in order to improve next time. This is the basic principle of formative assessment: establishing where you are in terms of learning, where you need to be in order to take the learning forward and coming to an understanding of how to close the gap.
- ☆ **Children take responsibility for and ownership of their learning and the classroom community** – they are involved in decisions which affect their learning environment. For example, if a role-play area is to be created, children are asked to list what they will need, then are helped to collect resources and to create the new area. This kind of activity results in the children taking ownership over the classroom. Similarly, if there is a problem, they are given the opportunity to solve it together. This gives them strategies for solving conflict independently, without the need for adult intervention, which is vital in a challenge situation.

Our story

I began implementing the Critical Skills model with a class of Year 4 children at Mont Nicolle Primary School in Jersey, Channel Islands. I then transferred to a group of Year 6 children, where I saw the power of this method of teaching and learning. The children took responsibility for their own learning and were able to decide what the benchmarks of quality should be for their work and their behaviour. This facilitated the smooth running of the classroom because the expectations were set by the children themselves. They agreed what would be fair, reasonable and achievable, and they were able to work towards this because it was so explicit. They understood what 'quality' meant in terms of their conversation and their ability to listen to others and be an audience, and in terms of their work. They were able to articulate the benefits of this method to their parents and visitors to the school, encouraging them to understand how they were learning and how this method made them feel. They were truly empowered by Critical Skills, and I believe that the knowledge and understanding along with the skills and dispositions that they acquired will continue to develop with them through secondary school and on into adult life, because they are, essentially, life skills.

My next challenge was to transfer the Critical Skills Programme to children at the foundation stage. The big questions were, could three and four year olds:

- ☆ work together to solve a problem?
- ☆ understand what it means to be a good listener?
- ☆ make decisions with their peers?
- ☆ take responsibility for their learning environment?
- ☆ appreciate their own achievements and those of others?
- ☆ reflect on their learning to enhance the process in the future?

The answer to all of these questions proved to be 'yes'. It is possible to implement Critical Skills in a foundation stage setting: our children are, and this book is, testament to that.

Critical Skills has enabled me to develop a culture of shared responsibility. The children know that the nursery is 'ours', and they acknowledge that they have a say in how it operates. They help out with displays because it is in their interest; they want their nursery to look attractive. They work together to tidy up because it is everyone's responsibility. They help each other because they understand what it feels like when someone helps them. They tell me when someone has let them join in a game because they appreciate how this makes them feel, and how difficult it can be to let others play. They can be heard saying things like 'I think there's a problem', and offering solutions. Our constant modelling has resulted in comments such as 'We could take turns, couldn't we?' and 'Shall we share it?' – which are amazing to hear from children who are only three and four years of age. The atmosphere in the room is calm (most of the time!) as the children are able not only to co-operate but to collaborate within the setting. They have developed what I call a clapping culture, whereby they frequently celebrate their own successes and those of their peers. I can honestly say that it is a joy to be in our Critical Skills nursery classroom.