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Educating Children to Think Critically in the Primary
School Setting:
The Place of Philosophy for Children

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Abstract

As official policy, *The New Zealand Curriculum* states that its “principle function is to set the direction for student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.6). Educating children to be critical thinkers is a compulsory element of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Hence, as state employees, teachers are obligated to educate for it. Understanding what it is to be a critical thinker presupposes a teacher deciding how best to educate for it, and requires relevant information. As the guiding document however, it is deficient in this respect. It does not provide information for teachers as to what it is to be a critical thinker. Defining the term is contentious among theorists, exemplified by long-standing debate, which has not yet achieved consensus. This makes it all the more important that the Ministry of Education provides definitional clarity of the term, if it is indeed a serious educational objective. This thesis affirms the importance of educating children to be critical thinkers as part of a genuine education for induction into a democratic society. Hence, it provides the definitional clarity for teachers that *The New Zealand Curriculum* does not. This thesis argues that in the primary sector, such an education is best achieved through the guidance and support of the Philosophy for Children programme, and its community of inquiry pedagogy. Transforming the traditional classroom into a philosophical community of inquiry provides the best context, while the Philosophy for Children novels and teachers’ manuals provide content that engages children in thinking critically. A successful transformation has potential barriers. However, overcoming barriers by thinking critically is characteristic of a philosophic paradigm!

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