

## THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

**Denisa Ramona CHASCIAR, Ph.D. Cnd.,**  
Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania,  
[denisaramonachasciar@yahoo.com](mailto:denisaramonachasciar@yahoo.com)

**Vasile CHASCIAR, Ph.D. Cnd.,**  
University of Craiova, Romania,  
[chasciarvasile@yahoo.com](mailto:chasciarvasile@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *In a world characterized by cultural diversity and unprecedented information abundance, the development of critical thinking among primary school students becomes a fundamental educational priority. This study investigates the role of teachers in stimulating critical thinking through cultural activities, considered privileged contexts for the formation of analysis, reflection and interpretation skills. The research, of mixed type, was carried out on a sample of 60 primary school teachers, coming from urban and rural schools. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to identify pedagogical perceptions and practices regarding the integration of the cultural dimension in the teaching process. The results highlight that cultural activities – such as storytelling workshops, thematic visits, educational theatre and intercultural projects – are an ideal framework for developing critical thinking, cultural empathy and reflective thinking. The participating teachers emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and experiential learning to stimulate autonomous and creative thinking. The study contributes to the understanding of how the cultural dimension can become a strategic tool in the formation of the essential cognitive and social competences of the contemporary child.*

**Keywords:** *critical thinking; cultural education; primary education; teacher role; reflective learning.*

### Theoretical foundation

In recent decades, critical thinking has become one of the most important skills promoted by modern education, being essential for

active and responsible participation in a democratic society. Ennis (2018) defines critical thinking as a rational and reflective process, oriented towards decision-making and making judgments based on relevant criteria and solid evidence. Beyond the logical component, critical thinking also involves an ethical and cultural dimension, as it involves the analysis of arguments from multiple perspectives and the understanding of their social consequences (Facione, 2020).

Dewey (2018) considered reflection the core of all educational thinking and emphasized that the learning process becomes authentic when the student is encouraged to observe, formulate questions and propose hypotheses. In the same direction, Paul and Elder (2019) argue that the formation of critical thinking involves the development of intellectual dispositions such as courage, empathy, perseverance and intellectual honesty, which are reinforced through active and meaningful educational experiences.

Recent research has shown that early school age is a favorable time for the initiation and formation of critical thinking. Mason and Metcalfe (2023) show that students between the ages of 6 and 10 show a natural curiosity and an openness to exploring different perspectives, which creates conditions conducive to the application of critical thinking strategies as early as primary education. Thus, critical thinking should not be seen as a skill reserved for adolescence, but as a skill that can be developed gradually, through educational and cultural activities adapted to the needs and cognitive level of children.

Cultural education provides a privileged context for the formation of reflection, empathy and independent thinking. Culture, in an educational sense, does not only mean the accumulation of information about art, traditions or heritage, but represents a process of building identity and understanding human diversity (Banks, 2020). From this perspective, the cultural dimension of learning becomes a catalyst for students' cognitive and moral development.

Cultural activities, such as storytelling, educational theatre, art workshops, museum visits or intercultural projects, create authentic learning contexts in which children are challenged to compare, interpret and argue. Lipman (2003) introduced the concept of community of inquiry, showing that through dialogue around cultural and moral themes, students develop not only their cognitive skills, but also their democratic values. In this sense, culture becomes a meeting space between reason, emotion and personal expression.

According to the OECD report (2022), cultural education fosters critical thinking because it combines conceptual learning with students' personal experiences. UNESCO (2023) also highlights the importance of art and cultural heritage in stimulating reflection on identity and

promoting social cohesion. For primary school students, cultural activities are an effective way to develop cognitive flexibility, curiosity and moral sensitivity. Through contact with various forms of cultural expression, children learn to formulate their own opinions, to appreciate different points of view and to look for personal meanings in educational experiences.

The teacher has a fundamental role in creating educational contexts that support critical thinking and cultural reflection. He is no longer just a transmitter of information, but becomes a facilitator of dialogue and a mediator of cultural meanings. Brookfield (2017) states that the reflective teacher is one who constantly analyzes his own beliefs and helps students examine their perspectives in turn. In a similar vein, Mezirow (2018) believes that transformative learning occurs when educational experiences lead students to reevaluate their beliefs and attitudes.

In the primary cycle, the teacher must translate cultural resources into learning experiences that stimulate analysis, interpretation and argumentation. Activities such as dramatizations, debates, interpretation of literary texts, or analysis of visual art elements provide students with the opportunity to think critically and express personal points of view (Paul & Elder, 2019). Participatory methods, such as storytelling, project-based learning or philosophy for children, promote autonomy and the capacity for reflection.

The European Commission (2023) recommends integrating the skills of reflection, critical thinking and intercultural learning in all disciplines, and teachers need specialised training to implement them effectively. In Romania, recent research shows that cultural activities can stimulate critical thinking if they are accompanied by an evaluation based on argumentation, creativity and collaboration, not just on the reproduction of information (Stan & Iucu, 2022). The teacher thus becomes a cognitive guide, but also a cultural model that inspires values, attitudes and openness to diversity.

Although the importance of critical thinking and cultural education is unanimously recognized, their application in primary education encounters a number of difficulties. The curriculum is often centered on the transmission of knowledge, and assessment emphasizes correct answers rather than argumentation and reflection (European Commission, 2023).

Another challenge is the inadequacy of teacher training in critical thinking and cultural pedagogy. The OECD report (2023) shows that only a part of primary school teachers have benefited from training focused on reflection, analysis and intercultural dialogue. In addition, the current digital context brings additional difficulties, as students are

exposed to a large amount of information, but do not always have the necessary skills to correctly assess its veracity (Mason & Metcalfe, 2023).

However, there are also important opportunities. The integration of technology into cultural activities, such as virtual museum tours, multimedia projects or international collaborations, can amplify the educational impact of critical thinking. Current trends emphasize a competence-based cultural education, in which reflection, analysis and creativity combine to support the child's integral development.

Therefore, primary school teachers are called upon to build a pedagogy that combines culture, reflection and active participation. The goal is to train students who not only receive information, but interpret, compare and transform it into personal and social knowledge.

### **Research methodology**

The aim of the study was to investigate how primary school teachers contribute to the development of students' critical thinking through cultural activities. The research aimed to identify teachers' perceptions of the relationship between cultural education and critical thinking, as well as to explore the strategies and methods used in the instructional-educational process.

The objectives of the research are:

O1: Identifying the perceptions of primary school teachers on the importance of developing critical thinking in students;

O2: Analysis of how cultural activities are integrated into the school curriculum and extracurricular activities;

O3: Investigating the teaching strategies and methods used by teachers to stimulate reflection and autonomous thinking;

O4: Assessing the perceived impact of cultural activities on students' motivation, empathy and critical thinking.

The hypotheses of the research are:

H1: Teachers who constantly use cultural activities in the teaching process have more positive perceptions regarding the development of critical thinking in students;

H2: There is a significant relationship between the level of professional experience and the degree of integration of cultural education into teaching activities;

H3: Cultural activities that involve reflection and dialogue contribute more effectively to the formation of critical thinking than activities focused solely on the transmission of cultural information.

The research had a mixed design (quantitative and qualitative), which allowed a complex analysis of the phenomenon studied. The quantitative component was achieved by applying a standardized

questionnaire, and the qualitative component targeted semi-structured interviews with a small number of teachers selected from the same sample. This methodological combination offered the possibility to capture both the statistical dimension of general trends and the depth of individual experiences.

The sample consisted of 60 primary school teachers from 10 schools located in urban and rural areas in Arad and Cluj counties. The selection criteria concerned seniority in education (minimum three years), involvement in extracurricular activities and willingness to voluntarily participate in study. Of the participants, 87% were women and 13% men, with an average age of 39.4 years and a teaching experience between 3 and 32 years.

This distribution ensures a balanced representation of educational contexts and allows the comparison of perceptions between teachers with different experience and from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds. Two tools were used for data collection:

**1. The questionnaire on teachers' perceptions of critical thinking and cultural activities**, developed on the basis of the specialized literature (Brookfield, 2017; Facione, 2020; OECD, 2022).

It included 28 items formulated on a Likert scale from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement), grouped into four dimensions:

- perception of the importance of critical thinking;
- frequency of use of cultural activities;
- perception of the impact of these activities on students;
- the reflective attitude of the teacher.

The internal consistency of the instrument was verified by the Cronbach coefficient  $\alpha = 0.86$ , which indicates good reliability.

**2. The semi-structured interview**, applied to a subgroup of 12 participants, aimed to complement the quantitative data with qualitative information on pedagogical practices and the challenges encountered.

The interview guide included questions about the strategies used, examples of relevant cultural activities and the perception of students' involvement in reflection.

The quantitative data were processed using the SPSS program, using descriptive analysis (means, standard deviations, frequencies) and inferential analysis (t-test for independent samples and Pearson correlation coefficient).

The qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, identifying the main recurring themes in the teachers' responses.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results was achieved through methodological triangulation, with the aim of obtaining a

coherent and comprehensive picture of how cultural activities support the development of critical thinking in primary school students.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive analysis of quantitative data**

The results obtained from the questionnaire applied to the 60 teachers indicate a clearly positive perception of the importance of critical thinking in the teaching-learning process. The overall average of the scores for the dimension "importance of developing critical thinking" was 4.56 (SD = 0.41), which shows a high level of awareness of the role of this competence in primary education.

Most of the participants (93%) believe that critical thinking should be stimulated from the primary cycle, and 85% say that cultural activities provide suitable contexts for the formation of the capacity for reflection. However, only 58% of teachers say that they constantly use cultural activities for educational purposes, which indicates a gap between beliefs and practice.

Regarding the perception of the effectiveness of cultural activities, the items related to their impact on students' motivation and participation recorded the highest scores ( $M = 4.61$ ;  $SD = 0.38$ ), while the items related to the development of independent thinking and critical analysis had a slightly lower mean ( $M = 4.22$ ;  $SD = 0.49$ ).

To test the H1 hypothesis, the relationship between the frequency of use of cultural activities and the perception of their impact on critical thinking was analyzed. The Pearson correlation indicated a significant association,  $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < .01$ , which confirms that teachers who use cultural activities more frequently rate their role in stimulating critical thinking more positively.

The t-test for independent samples was used to compare the perceptions of teachers with up to 10 years of experience with those of teachers with more than 20 years of experience. The difference was statistically significant,  $t(58) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , with younger teachers reporting greater openness to cultural and interdisciplinary methods. The result confirms the H2 hypothesis regarding the influence of professional experience on the degree of integration of cultural education in teaching activities.

Overall, the quantitative data show a positive attitude and a solid conceptual understanding of critical thinking, but also highlight the need for greater practical translation into the classroom.

### **Qualitative results – thematic analysis**

The analysis of semi-structured interviews provided a deeper insight into how teachers perceive the link between cultural education and the

development of critical thinking. Following the coding and classification of the responses, four major themes were identified:

***Theme 1: Culture as a medium for reflection***

Most of the participants described the cultural activities as "a space for reflection and interpretation" that helps students understand the world and express their own values. The teachers mentioned that, through stories, role-playing games or artistic activities, children are put in situations that require critical thinking. One teacher said: "Through folk tales, students discover the difference between appearance and essence and learn to judge behaviours, not just facts."

***Theme 2: Dialogue and questioning as formative tools***

The teachers emphasized the role of dialogue in stimulating critical thinking. Many mentioned that open-ended questions, debates and group reflections help children clarify their opinions and argue them. One participant said: "I'm trying to ask more questions than give answers. Children learn to think for themselves when they feel that their opinions matter."

***Theme 3: Creativity as an expression of critical thinking***

Another emerging theme was the link between critical thinking and creativity. Teachers believe that cultural activities stimulate creativity through freedom of interpretation and the possibility of combining different ideas. A teacher from the countryside mentioned: "When students write their own endings for stories or create skits, it is clear that their thinking becomes more independent."

***Theme 4: Obstacles in the application of cultural approaches***

Although all teachers recognize the value of cultural activities, many have reported difficulties related to time, rigid curriculum and lack of resources. A teacher said: "The school demands immediate performance, but critical thinking is formed over time, through discussions and reflection. Sometimes we don't have the space for that."

***Integration of quantitative and qualitative results***

The integrated data analysis revealed a clear concordance between the general perceptions expressed in the questionnaires and the experiences reported in the interviews. Teachers value critical thinking as a major objective of primary education and consider that cultural activities are an effective tool to achieve this goal. However, the application of these practices is influenced by contextual factors, such as the lack of specific pedagogical training or curricular constraints.

Quantitative data confirm the H1 and H2 hypotheses, indicating significant relationships between the frequency of cultural activities, professional experience and perception of their effectiveness. The H3 hypothesis has been partially supported, as teachers recognize the

impact of reflective activities, but mention that their systematic application requires additional time and resources.

The results provide a complex picture of how cultural education can contribute to the formation of critical thinking, while highlighting the need for continuous teacher training and curricular flexibility.

## **Discussions**

The results of the study highlight a high awareness of the importance of critical thinking among primary school teachers, confirming that this competence is perceived as a fundamental pillar of contemporary education. This finding is in line with the theoretical perspectives formulated by Ennis (2018) and Facione (2020), who consider critical thinking an essential condition for intellectual autonomy and active participation in social life. In the current context, marked by cultural diversity and intense information flow, the ability to analyze, interpret and evaluate becomes a central component of the student's formation as a future citizen (Halpern, 2020).

A first important direction drawn from the analysis is the close connection between cultural activities and the development of reflective thinking. The quantitative results showed that teachers who frequently use cultural activities appreciate their impact on critical thinking to a greater extent. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Brookfield (2017), according to which cultural experiences, when accompanied by reflection, create authentic contexts for analysis and interpretation. Also, the study by Marin and Davies (2023) confirms that artistic and cultural activities contribute significantly to the development of critical thinking and the formation of a reflective attitude towards diversity. In a similar vein, Kokotsaki (2022) shows that learning through art and creative expression fosters cognitive and emotional development, supporting students' active involvement in the reflection process.

The analysis of interviews revealed a clear relationship between creativity and critical thinking, an association also confirmed by recent research (Lai, 2021; Fisher, 2023). Teachers believe that the freedom of interpretation offered by cultural activities helps students express their independent thinking, which corresponds to Dewey's (2018) conception of experiential learning. This form of experiential education allows the child to transform knowledge into reflection and to build personal meanings from contact with the cultural world.

The results of the study also indicate that there are significant differences between teachers according to their seniority in education. Younger teachers show a greater openness to the integration of cultural education and reflective methods, which can be explained by recent

trainings that include topics related to critical thinking, transversal competences and interdisciplinarity. Halpern (2020) emphasizes that the development of critical thinking in teachers requires continuous exercise, as pedagogical reflection is formed through experience and collaborative learning. In contrast, teachers with longer experience tend to remain anchored in traditional teaching structures, which highlights the need for lifelong learning programmes geared towards critical thinking and intercultural learning. These findings correlate with the recommendations made by the OECD (2023) on updating teachers' professional skills for 21st century education.

Another relevant aspect is the role of the teacher as a cultural mediator. The qualitative analysis highlighted the fact that teachers perceive cultural activities not only as teaching tools, but also as ways of shaping the character and identity of students. This perspective supports Mezirow's (2018) vision of transformative learning, according to which authentic education involves changing one's way of thinking and understanding the world through critical reflection on experience. In the same sense, Tirri (2022) states that moral education and reflection on values are essential components of critical thinking, especially in the primary cycle, where the basis of ethical judgments is formed.

The research also highlights a number of structural challenges, such as lack of time, rigidity of school curricula and absence of adequate cultural resources. The interviewed teachers noted that these limitations reduce the possibilities of applying reflective methods and cultural projects. These difficulties are similar to those pointed out by the European Commission (2023), which shows that, at European level, the integration of critical thinking into curricular activities is still partial and depends on the individual initiative of the teacher. However, the UNESCO report (2024) highlights recent progress in promoting cultural competence and global citizenship in primary education, highlighting the importance of forming reflective thinking oriented towards dialogue and social responsibility.

The study also reveals significant opportunities related to the use of educational technology to promote culture and critical thinking. The young teachers mentioned the interest in virtual activities, such as online museum tours, digital collaborative projects and the analysis of multimedia materials. Such practices confirm the current orientation of education towards a digital cultural pedagogy, in which cultural experience is mediated by technology, but retains the purpose of reflective and analytical training (OECD, 2022; Marin and Davies, 2023).

Theoretically, the results confirm the validity of models that describe critical thinking as a contextual competence, closely related to the emotional and cultural dimension of learning (Paul & Elder, 2019). This perspective is reinforced by recent research that highlights the relational nature of critical thinking, dependent on dialogue, empathy and moral reflection (Tirri, 2022; Fisher, 2023).

From a practical point of view, the conclusions of the study support the idea that cultural education is a strategic tool for stimulating critical thinking in primary education. Cultural activities help students ask questions, explore multiple meanings and develop their ability to reflect on reality. At the same time, they provide teachers with a flexible framework for integrating transversal skills, combining cognitive and socio-emotional aspects (Kokotsaki, 2022; Lai, 2021).

Overall, the results suggest that promoting critical thinking through cultural activities is not just a pedagogical option, but an educational necessity. Teachers who encourage reflection, dialogue and interpretation contribute not only to the intellectual development of students, but also to their formation as people capable of understanding and valuing cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2024).

## **Conclusions**

The study showed that primary school teachers are increasingly aware of the importance of critical thinking as an integral part of the educational process and recognise the potential of cultural activities to support the development of this competence. The results showed that cultural activities are not only an aesthetic or recreational context, but a formative framework that stimulates reflection, dialogue and interpretation. In this sense, the role of the teacher becomes essential, being both a cultural mediator and a facilitator of the reflective learning process.

Quantitative analysis confirmed the positive relationship between the frequency of use of cultural activities and teachers' perception of their impact on critical thinking. Differences were also highlighted between young teachers and those with long experience, which underlines the need for continuous training in the field of critical thinking and cultural education. Qualitative data completed this perspective, showing that reflection, creativity and dialogue are perceived by teachers as inseparable components of an authentic education.

The theoretical contribution of the study consists in highlighting the relationship between the cultural dimension of learning and the formation of critical thinking, in an essential stage of development – that of primary school. The research confirms that cultural approaches can function as complex formative environments, in which students

learn to think independently and appreciate the diversity of perspectives. At the same time, the results consolidate the literature that describes critical thinking as a contextual competence, at the intersection of reason, emotion and culture.

From a practical point of view, the conclusions support the need to train teachers to use cultural activities as pedagogical tools for reflection and analysis. Integrating arts, stories, and cultural resources into teaching not only diversifies the educational process, but also provides students with the opportunity to explore multiple meanings and express their thinking in a free and creative way. Such an approach contributes to the development of transversal competences, to increase motivation for learning and to the formation of balanced critical thinking.

At the strategic level, the study emphasizes the importance of curricular review and support of educational programs that capitalize on the potential of culture in the formation of critical thinking. The education of the future should go beyond disciplinary boundaries and promote a reflective pedagogy, based on dialogue, participation and openness to diversity.

Future research directions could aim to expand the sample nationwide and explore how cultural activities influence not only critical thinking, but also students' emotional and social skills. A longitudinal analysis of the impact of these approaches on the formation of moral and intercultural values would also be useful.

In conclusion, the development of critical thinking through cultural activities is not only an educational objective, but a formative mission of the contemporary school. Teachers, through creativity and reflection, become the architects of an education that cultivates freedom of thought, respect for diversity and the joy of knowledge.

## References

- Banks, J. A. (2020). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (10th ed.). Wiley
- Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass
- Dewey, J. (2018). *How We Think*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing
- Ennis, R. H. (2018). *Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum: A Vision*. Rowman & Littlefield
- European Commission. (2023). *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Publications Office of the European Union
- Facione, P. A. (2020). *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. Insight Assessment

- Fisher, R. (2023). Philosophy for children and critical thinking in the classroom. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 48, 101299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2023.101299>
- Halpern, D. F. (2020). *Thought and Knowledge: An Introduction to Critical Thinking* (6th ed.). Routledge
- Kokotsaki, D. (2022). The impact of arts-based learning on students' cognitive and emotional development. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 278–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3764>
- Lai, E. R. (2021). Critical thinking and creativity: Twin pillars of 21st century learning. *Educational Review*, 73(5), 645–662. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2020.1846011>
- Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in Education* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press
- Marin, L., & Davies, M. (2023). Critical thinking in cultural and arts education: Teachers' perspectives and practices. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1204885. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1204885>
- Mason, L., & Metcalfe, J. (2023). Fostering Reflection and Critical Thinking in Primary Education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 124, 104089
- Mezirow, J. (2018). *Transformative Learning Theory*. Routledge
- OECD. (2022). *Future of Education and Skills 2030: Learning Compass*. OECD Publishing
- OECD. (2023). *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2023 Results*. OECD Publishing
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2019). *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (8th ed.). Foundation for Critical Thinking
- Stan, C., & Iucu, R. (2022). *Educația emoțională și reflexivă în școala românească contemporană*. Editura Polirom
- Tirri, K. (2022). Moral education, reflection, and critical thinking in primary schools. *Journal of Moral Education*, 51(4), 478–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2021.1964341>
- UNESCO. (2023). *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. UNESCO Publishing
- UNESCO. (2024). *Cultural Competence and Global Citizenship in Primary Education*. UNESCO Publishing.