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Young Children Explore: Critical Thinking for the Early Years



Dr Jane Murray, Senior Lecturer Early Years, explains how her PhD research can help practitioners recognise and evaluate young children's explorations as critical thinkers.

In recent years there has been significant interest in seeing children as participants in research and even researchers, once they have been trained in adult research methods.

My PhD research took a different stance. The Young Children As Researchers (YCAR) project – undertaken at The University of Northampton – aligned children's natural everyday activities with behaviours academics identified as "research". One key finding is a framework of ten "building blocks" for young children's critical thinking through exploration (pictured below).

Recognising these can be useful for practitioners seeking to understand young children's complex reasoning underpinning their exploratory behaviours. Early Years practitioners know the challenges that assessing, planning and guiding young children's explorations and critical thinking can present. They are key elements of "Characteristics of Effective Learning" (CEL) required of young children in England. For each child, practitioners must constantly construct and reconstruct new ways of addressing the characteristics. This makes the practitioner's task

highly specialised and complex, so I have developed a pocket-sized tool containing the "building blocks" of young children's critical thinking through their exploratory behaviours, based on a framework emerging from the YCAR Study: "Young Children Explore: Critical Thinking for the Early Years".

Defining Exploration and Critical Thinking

I sourced definitions of Exploration and Critical Thinking in existing literature and found that many not only relate to adult researchers' work but also have applications to young children's everyday activity.





Pocket-sized tool

Hundreds of examples of children's everyday activities were gathered and subjected to deep-level analysis

Exploration is an established feature of adult researchers' work as a medium for gathering, investigating and justifying knowledge. It is regarded as an epistemological behaviour that reveals and elicits ways of knowing. Social Sciences researcher Stebbins (2001) defines what it means "to explore:

1. To study, examine, analyse or investigate.
2. To become familiar with something by testing it or experimenting with it.
3. To travel over or through a particular space for the purposes of discovery.
4. To examine a thing or idea for (specific) diagnostic purposes."

Critical thinking is also regarded as a key tool for adult researchers: "a defining concept of the Western university" (Barnett, 1997). A range of definitions of critical thinking can be synthesised: critical thinking is "...engagement in purposeful, self-regulatory interpretation, analysis, evaluation or inference in relation to information, resulting in judgment for which a rationale can be ascertained" (Glaser, 1941; Facione 1990; Moon, 2008; Smith, 2002).

About the Young Children As Researchers (YCAR) Study

The YCAR study aim was to conceptualise ways in which young children aged four to eight years are researchers and may be considered to be researchers.

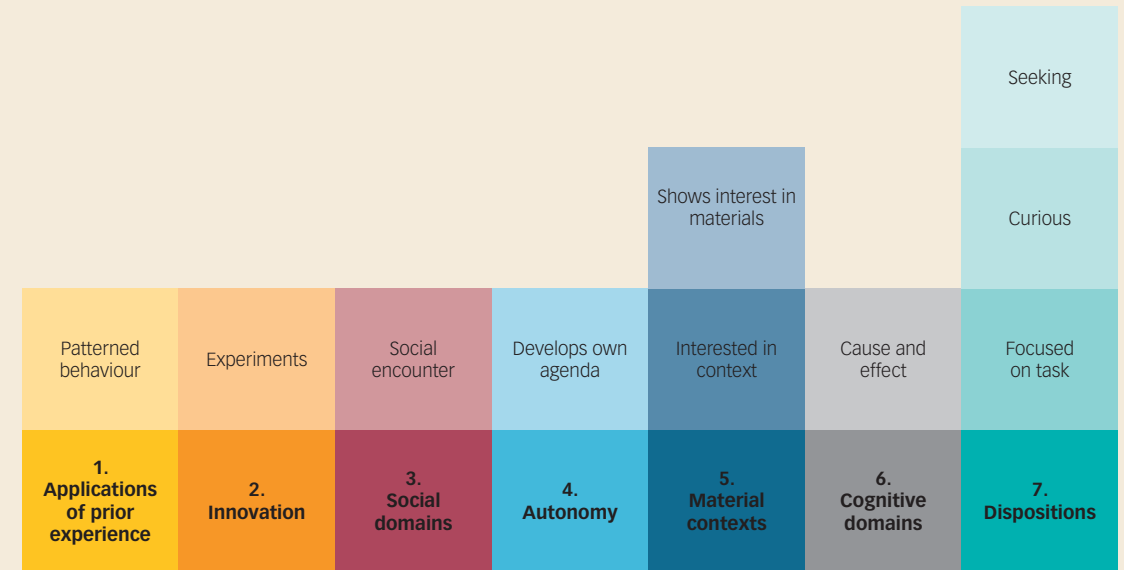
A participatory approach was adopted with 138 children within that age range, their practitioners and parents as well as academics. The YCAR study was conducted in universities, early childhood settings in primary schools and children's

own homes. Hundreds of examples of children's everyday activities were gathered and subjected to deep-level analysis to reveal that many of the children's enquiries conformed to definitions for exploration and critical thinking recognised in research work undertaken by professional adult academics.

Seven **epistemological factors** were identified that affected – and effected – the participating children's engagements in research behaviours, including exploration and critical thinking. Across these epistemological factors, ten categories emerged, forming "building blocks" for young children's critical thinking through exploration:

When determining the quality of young children's explorations and critical thinking in settings, much depends on how well we know children and their contexts. Equally, secure knowledge of research and literature in the early childhood education and care field is vital

Young Children Explore: Building Blocks for Young Children As Researchers. A Framework - Epistemological Factors in Young Children's Everyday Activity (© Murray, 2012)



in helping us to make sense of the extraordinary capabilities our children reveal to us every day. "The Young Children Explore: Critical Thinking for the Early Years Framework" can help practitioners in this complex work. Its basis in rigorous empirical research combined with a significant body of extant literature and research provides confidence that the "building blocks" are trustworthy indicators of children's explorations underpinned by their critical thinking.

Moreover, the framework's epistemological factors that affect – and effect – young children's reasoned constructions of knowledge provide further confidence that making provision for young children's engagements in exploration and critical thinking will give them the best opportunities for effective learning.

Dr Jane Murray is a Senior Lecturer Early Years at The University of Northampton.

Further information...

For more information about the YCAR research project and the pocket-sized tool email jane.murray@northampton.ac.uk

We run a range of CPD events for Early Years practitioners. To find out more please contact Lorraine Harman

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