

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN THROUGH PLAY ACTIVITIES

Mutalova Dilnoza Abdurashidovna
Chirchik State Pedagogical University
Associate Professor of the Department of
"Theory and Practice of Preschool and
Primary Education", Ph.D. (PhD)

Abstract

This article examines the development of critical thinking in preschool children through play activities within the context of preschool education. Critical thinking at an early age is understood not as formal logical reasoning, but as the child's ability to observe, compare, ask questions, make simple assumptions, choose between alternatives, explain actions, and solve age-appropriate problems. Play is considered one of the most effective pedagogical tools for developing these abilities because it corresponds to the natural needs, interests, and developmental characteristics of preschool children. The article emphasizes that role-playing games, construction games, didactic games, problem-based play situations, storytelling activities, and cooperative games create favorable conditions for children to express ideas, analyze situations, negotiate with peers, and find creative solutions. Special attention is given to the role of the preschool teacher in organizing a psychologically safe, stimulating, and child-centered play environment. The study highlights that purposeful play activities support speech development, social interaction, cognitive independence, imagination, and reflective behavior. The article also discusses methodological approaches to planning play-based activities aimed at strengthening children's curiosity, reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. The relevance of the topic is connected with the need to prepare children for successful learning at the next stages of education by developing independent, flexible, and conscious thinking from early childhood.

Keywords: Critical thinking, preschool children, play activities, preschool education, cognitive development, problem-solving, child-centered approach, pedagogical methods.

Introduction

O‘YIN FAOLIYATI ORQALI MAKTABGACHA YOSHDAGI BOLALARDA TANQIDIY FIKRLASHNI SHAKLLANTIRISH

Mutalova Dilnoza Abdurashidovna

Chirchiq davlat pedagogika universiteti

"Maktabgacha va boshlang 'ich ta'lim nazariyasi va amaliyoti" kafedrası

dotsenti, p.f.f.d. (PhD)

d.mutalova@cspu.uz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6836-8301>

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada maktabgacha yoshdagi bolalarda o‘yin faoliyati orqali tanqidiy fikrlashni rivojlantirish masalasi maktabgacha ta’lim nuqtai nazaridan yoritiladi. Erta yoshdagi tanqidiy fikrlash rasmiy mantiqiy mulohaza yuritish sifatida emas, balki bolaning kuzatish, taqqoslash, savol berish, oddiy taxminlar ilgari surish, muqobil variantlar orasidan tanlash, o‘z harakatlarini izohlash va yoshiga mos muammolarni hal qilish qobiliyati sifatida talqin qilinadi. O‘yin faoliyati ushbu ko‘nikmalarni rivojlantirishning eng samarali pedagogik vositalaridan biri hisoblanadi, chunki u maktabgacha yoshdagi bolalarning tabiiy ehtiyojlari, qiziqishlari va rivojlanish xususiyatlariga mos keladi. Maqolada rolli o‘yinlar, qurish-yasash o‘yinlari, didaktik o‘yinlar, muammoli o‘yin vaziyatlari, hikoya tuzish va hamkorlikdagi o‘yinlar bolalarning fikr bildirish, vaziyatni tahlil qilish, tengdoshlari bilan kelishish va ijodiy yechim topish imkoniyatlarini kengaytirishi asoslanadi. Shuningdek, tarbiyachining psixologik xavfsiz, rag‘batlantiruvchi va bolaga yo‘naltirilgan o‘yin muhitini tashkil etishdagi roli alohida ta’kidlanadi. Maqolada maqsadli o‘yin faoliyati bolalarning nutqiy rivojlanishi, ijtimoiy muloqoti, bilish mustaqilligi, tasavvuri va refleksiv xatti-harakatlarini qo‘llab-quvvatlashi ko‘rsatib beriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: tanqidiy fikrlash, maktabgacha yoshdagi bolalar, o‘yin faoliyati, maktabgacha ta’lim, bilish rivojlanishi, muammoni hal qilish, bolaga yo‘naltirilgan yondashuv, pedagogik metodlar.

Preschool education is one of the most important stages in the formation of a child’s intellectual, social, emotional, and creative development. At this age, children begin to understand the surrounding world through observation, imitation, communication, imagination, and practical experience. Their thinking is closely connected with play, movement, language, emotions, and direct interaction with objects and people. Therefore, the development of critical thinking in preschool children should not be understood as the teaching of abstract logical rules, but as the gradual formation of curiosity, independent judgment, comparison, questioning, reasoning, choice-making, and simple problem-solving abilities. These qualities are especially important in preparing children for further education and for active participation in social life.

In modern preschool education, critical thinking is considered an essential component of cognitive development. A child who can ask “why,” compare different objects, explain personal choices, listen to another opinion, and search for alternative solutions begins to develop the foundations of independent thinking. Such thinking helps children not only remember information, but also understand relationships between events, identify causes and consequences, and apply their experience in new situations. In this sense, critical thinking is directly connected with speech development, social communication, emotional self-regulation, creativity, and practical activity.

Play activities occupy a central place in preschool pedagogy because play is the natural form of learning for young children. Through play, children explore social roles, test ideas, make decisions, negotiate with peers, solve conflicts, and express their imagination. Unlike formal instruction, play allows children to act freely, make mistakes safely, repeat actions, and find solutions through personal experience. This makes play a powerful means of developing critical thinking. For example, in role-playing games children analyze social situations, distribute roles, plan actions, and justify their behavior. In construction games they compare shapes, sizes, materials, and spatial relationships. In didactic games they classify objects, identify similarities and differences, follow rules, and make choices. In

problem-based play situations they search for solutions and explain their decisions.

The teacher's role in this process is especially significant. Critical thinking does not develop automatically in any play situation. It requires purposeful pedagogical guidance, a supportive environment, and carefully selected questions and tasks. The preschool teacher should create conditions in which children feel safe to express their ideas, ask questions, disagree respectfully, and try different ways of solving a problem. Instead of giving ready answers, the teacher encourages children to think by asking questions such as "What do you think will happen?", "Why did you choose this?", "How can we solve this differently?" and "What can we do next?" Such questions stimulate reflection, reasoning, and active participation.

In the context of preschool education, developing critical thinking through play activities is relevant because it corresponds to the developmental needs of young children and supports the goals of child-centered education. For pedagogical universities preparing future preschool teachers, this issue has particular importance. Future educators must understand how to design play-based activities that develop children's curiosity, independence, communication, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Thus, the study of play as a means of developing critical thinking contributes to improving the quality of preschool education and strengthening the professional competence of preschool teachers.

Methods

The research was conducted on the basis of a pedagogical analysis of the possibilities of developing critical thinking in preschool children through play activities. The methodological approach of the study was based on the idea that critical thinking in early childhood develops most effectively when children are involved in active, meaningful, emotionally engaging, and socially organized play situations. Therefore, the research focused not only on the content of play activities, but also on the teacher's guidance, children's participation, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving behavior during play.

The study used observation, pedagogical conversation, analysis of educational activities, comparison, and generalization methods. Observation was applied to identify how preschool children demonstrate elements of critical thinking during different types of play. Special attention was paid to such indicators as asking

questions, comparing objects and actions, explaining choices, making assumptions, offering alternative solutions, cooperating with peers, and correcting mistakes. During observation, children's behavior in role-playing games, construction games, didactic games, storytelling games, and problem-based play situations was examined. These types of play were selected because they create different opportunities for intellectual, social, and creative activity.

Pedagogical conversation was used to determine how children express their thoughts, justify their decisions, and respond to questions during and after play. The teacher asked open-ended questions that encouraged children to think independently rather than repeat ready-made answers. For example, children were invited to explain why they selected a certain role, how they planned to build an object, what could happen if a rule was changed, or how a conflict between players could be solved. Such conversations helped reveal the level of children's reasoning, speech activity, imagination, and ability to understand cause-and-effect relationships.

The analysis of educational activities was directed toward identifying the pedagogical conditions that support critical thinking. These conditions included the availability of a safe and stimulating play environment, age-appropriate didactic materials, freedom of choice, cooperation among children, teacher support, and the use of problem-based tasks. The study also considered whether the teacher encouraged children's initiative, accepted different answers, created situations requiring choice, and guided children toward reflection.

In organizing play activities, the teacher used several methodological techniques. These included creating problem situations, using "what if" questions, encouraging children to compare and classify objects, asking them to predict outcomes, involving them in group decision-making, and inviting them to explain the results of their actions. Role-playing activities were used to develop social reasoning and communication. Construction games were used to develop planning, comparison, spatial thinking, and problem-solving. Didactic games supported classification, attention, memory, and rule-based thinking. Storytelling games encouraged imagination, sequencing, explanation, and interpretation.

The collected information was analyzed qualitatively. Children's responses, actions, and interactions were compared before, during, and after play-based tasks. The main purpose was to identify how purposeful pedagogical organization of play can strengthen preschool children's curiosity, independence, reasoning,

communication, and creative problem-solving skills. This methodological framework made it possible to view play not as entertainment only, but as a significant pedagogical means of developing the foundations of critical thinking in preschool education.

Results

The results of the study show that play activities create favorable pedagogical conditions for the gradual development of critical thinking in preschool children. During play, children demonstrated the ability to observe objects and situations more attentively, compare different options, ask simple explanatory questions, express personal opinions, and make choices based on their own understanding. These manifestations were especially noticeable when the teacher organized play not as a mechanical repetition of actions, but as a meaningful activity involving problem situations, dialogue, cooperation, and reflection.

Role-playing games had a positive influence on children's social reasoning and communicative thinking. When children played the roles of family members, doctors, shop assistants, builders, teachers, or travelers, they had to understand the logic of social relations, distribute responsibilities, follow the rules of interaction, and explain their behavior to others. In such situations, children began to think about cause and effect in social communication. For example, they discussed why one character needed help, how a problem could be solved, or what should be done if another child disagreed. These activities supported the development of argumentation, empathy, decision-making, and the ability to consider another point of view.

Construction games also proved to be effective in developing elements of critical thinking. While building houses, bridges, towers, roads, or other objects, children compared shapes, sizes, colors, materials, and spatial positions. They tested different ways of joining parts, corrected mistakes, and searched for more stable or beautiful solutions. If a construction collapsed, children tried to identify the reason and rebuild it differently. This process encouraged analysis, prediction, experimentation, and practical problem-solving. Children gradually became more confident in explaining why one material or form was more suitable than another. Didactic games helped strengthen classification, comparison, attention, memory, and rule-based thinking. Activities such as grouping objects by color, size, function, or shape encouraged children to identify similarities and differences.

Games involving puzzles, matching cards, sequences, and logical pairs supported children's ability to notice patterns and make simple conclusions. Children who initially waited for the teacher's direct instruction began to show more independence in choosing strategies and explaining their answers. This indicates that didactic play can be an effective tool for moving children from passive perception to active cognitive participation.

Problem-based play situations produced particularly important results. When children were asked questions such as "How can we help the lost toy?", "What should we do if there are not enough materials for everyone?", or "How can we build a bridge so that the car can pass?", they actively searched for solutions. They offered different ideas, compared them, listened to peers, and sometimes changed their initial opinion after discussion. Such situations developed flexibility of thinking, cooperation, speech activity, and readiness to solve problems creatively.

The results also revealed that the teacher's guidance plays a decisive role in the effectiveness of play-based critical thinking development. Children responded more actively when the teacher used open-ended questions, encouraged several possible answers, accepted mistakes as part of learning, and gave children time to think. In groups where the teacher gave ready answers too quickly, children's independent reasoning was weaker. Therefore, purposeful pedagogical support, a safe emotional atmosphere, and well-planned play tasks significantly increased children's cognitive initiative, curiosity, and ability to explain their decisions.

Discussion

The development of critical thinking in preschool children through play activities should be viewed as a gradual pedagogical process that corresponds to the psychological and cognitive characteristics of early childhood. At this stage, children do not yet use complex abstract reasoning, but they actively think through images, actions, speech, emotions, and interaction with adults and peers. Therefore, play becomes the most natural and effective form through which children begin to compare, analyze, ask questions, predict outcomes, justify their choices, and solve simple problems. The findings of the study show that play is not only a means of entertainment, but also a powerful educational mechanism for forming the foundations of independent and reflective thinking.

One of the most important aspects of play-based critical thinking development is the child's active position. In traditional instruction, preschool children may remain passive listeners who receive ready-made information from the teacher. In play, however, they become participants, decision-makers, negotiators, creators, and problem-solvers. This active participation encourages children to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. When a child chooses a role, builds an object, explains a rule, solves a conflict, or changes a strategy, the child is already using elementary forms of critical thinking. Such actions help transform simple activity into meaningful cognitive experience.

The role of the teacher is central in organizing this process. Critical thinking does not develop effectively if play is left completely spontaneous or if it is controlled too strictly by the adult. The teacher must maintain a balance between freedom and pedagogical guidance. Children need enough independence to express ideas and make decisions, but they also need carefully prepared situations that stimulate thinking. Open-ended questions, problem scenarios, comparison tasks, prediction activities, and group discussions are important tools in this regard. When the teacher asks children to explain their choices or think of another solution, play becomes a reflective activity.

The discussion of the results also shows that different types of play develop different aspects of critical thinking. Role-playing games support social reasoning, empathy, communication, and the ability to understand another person's position. Construction games develop planning, spatial thinking, experimentation, and the ability to correct mistakes. Didactic games strengthen classification, comparison, attention, and rule-based reasoning. Storytelling and dramatization activities develop imagination, sequencing, interpretation, and verbal explanation. Problem-based play situations are especially effective because they require children to search for solutions, evaluate alternatives, cooperate with others, and adapt their actions to changing conditions.

For preschool education in the regional context, this issue is especially relevant because modern educational practice increasingly emphasizes child-centered, competency-based, and developmental approaches. Future preschool teachers studying at pedagogical universities must be able to design play activities that are not limited to repetition or discipline, but aimed at developing children's curiosity, initiative, communication, creativity, and reasoning. This requires

methodological preparation, knowledge of child psychology, and the ability to observe children's thinking in action.

Another important point is the creation of a psychologically safe environment. Children demonstrate critical thinking more freely when they are not afraid of making mistakes, when their answers are respected, and when different opinions are accepted. A supportive play environment helps children express ideas, listen to peers, reconsider their own opinions, and develop confidence in their thinking. Thus, the effectiveness of play-based critical thinking development depends on the unity of meaningful play content, teacher guidance, emotional safety, and opportunities for children's independent activity.

Conclusion

The development of critical thinking in preschool children through play activities is an important pedagogical task that supports the intellectual, social, emotional, and creative growth of the child. In early childhood, critical thinking should be understood as the ability to observe, compare, ask questions, make assumptions, choose between alternatives, explain actions, and solve simple problems in accordance with age-related possibilities. These skills do not appear suddenly at later stages of education; they begin to form in preschool years through everyday communication, practical experience, interaction with peers, and meaningful play. Therefore, preschool education has a decisive role in creating the first foundations of independent, conscious, and flexible thinking.

The study shows that play activities are one of the most effective means of developing critical thinking because they correspond to the natural needs and interests of preschool children. Through play, children learn not by passively receiving information, but by acting, experimenting, communicating, imagining, and making decisions. Role-playing games help children understand social relations, consider different points of view, explain behavior, and solve communicative problems. Construction games develop planning, comparison, spatial imagination, experimentation, and the ability to correct mistakes. Didactic games strengthen classification, attention, memory, rule-based reasoning, and the ability to identify similarities and differences. Storytelling, dramatization, and problem-based play situations encourage children to express ideas, predict events, justify choices, and search for creative solutions.

The results of the analysis confirm that play becomes a powerful tool for developing critical thinking only when it is organized purposefully. Free play is important for children's emotional comfort and imagination, but the development of reasoning and problem-solving requires pedagogical guidance. The preschool teacher should create situations in which children face age-appropriate questions, make choices, compare alternatives, and explain their decisions. At the same time, the teacher should avoid giving ready answers too quickly. Instead, open-ended questions, encouragement, dialogue, and reflection should be used to stimulate children's thinking. Questions such as "Why do you think so?", "What else can we try?", "What will happen next?" and "How can we solve this problem together?" help children become more active and conscious participants in the educational process.

A psychologically safe and stimulating environment is also essential. Children think more freely when they feel that their opinions are accepted, their mistakes are not punished, and their initiative is supported. Such an environment develops confidence, speech activity, cooperation, and readiness to express personal ideas. For future preschool teachers, this means that professional training should include not only theoretical knowledge about child development, but also practical skills in designing play-based tasks, observing children's reasoning, guiding dialogue, and evaluating cognitive progress.

In general, developing critical thinking through play activities contributes to the quality of preschool education and prepares children for successful learning at school. It supports curiosity, independence, communication, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Therefore, play should be regarded not as a secondary or entertainment-based activity, but as a central pedagogical mechanism for forming the foundations of critical thinking in preschool children.

References

1. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
2. O'zbekiston Respublikasi Maktabgacha ta'lim vazirligi. (2018). *Ilk qadam davlat o'quv dasturi*. Toshkent.
3. Piaget, J. (1964). Development and learning. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 2(3), 176–186.

4. Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2007). Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education. Pearson.
5. Qodirova, F. R. (2018). Maktabgacha pedagogika. Toshkent: Tafakkur.
6. Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and education. Macmillan.
7. Hasanboyeva, O. U., & Tadjibayeva, M. X. (2019). Maktabgacha ta'lim metodikasi. Toshkent: Ilm ziyo.
8. Fisher, R. (2013). Teaching thinking: Philosophical enquiry in the classroom. Bloomsbury Academic.
9. O'zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasi. (2020). Maktabgacha ta'lim va tarbiyaning davlat standartini tasdiqlash to'g'risida 802-son qaror. Toshkent.
10. Bruce, T. (2011). Learning through play: For babies, toddlers and young children. Hodder Education.
11. Jalolova, S. M. (2021). Maktabgacha ta'lim pedagogikasi. Toshkent: Fan va texnologiya.
12. Lipman, M. (2003). Thinking in education. Cambridge University Press.
13. UNESCO. (2021). Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education. UNESCO Publishing.
14. Rahimova, D. A. (2021). Maktabgacha ta'lim tashkilotlarida rivojlantiruvchi muhitni tashkil etish metodikasi. Ta'lim va innovatsion tadqiqotlar, 3, 89–94.
15. Bruner, J. S. (1966). Toward a theory of instruction. Harvard University Press.
16. O'zbekiston Respublikasining "Ta'lim to'g'risida"gi Qonuni. (2020). Toshkent.
17. Wood, E. (2013). Play, learning and the early childhood curriculum. SAGE Publications.
18. G'oziyev, E. G. (2017). Ontogenez psixologiyasi. Toshkent: Noshir.
19. Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Sylva, K. (2004). Researching pedagogy in English pre-schools. British Educational Research Journal, 30(5), 713–730.
20. Musurmonova, O. (2019). Pedagogik texnologiyalar va pedagogik mahorat. Toshkent: Iqtisod-moliya.