

Public First x Kialo opinion research report

Introduction

We set out to explore public opinion on critical thinking and oracy, to discover whether there is public appetite for changes to the education system that would place greater emphasis on these lifelong skills. We focussed on testing the concepts rather than individual ways to change the curriculum. This included the public's level of basic understanding of the terms 'oracy' and 'critical thinking', and went deeper into the perceived benefits.

There is widespread support among parents for schools to allocate more teaching time to improving critical thinking and communication skills in children. Parents want teachers to incorporate these skills into existing subjects to balance teaching subject-based content with skills like critical thinking and communication, however they generally don't know what teaching and assessing these skills would look like.


Below we explore the details of the public appetite for this and delve into possible avenues for policymakers to enact change.

Key findings

Government budget cuts in staffing and education is widely considered one of the most important issues currently affecting schools. This was followed by bullying and children's mental health in schools (33%), attracting high quality teaching staff into the profession (24%), and the absence of real-life skills (23%).

Parents believe that teaching skills like critical thinking is just as important as teaching subject-based content. We found that 61% of parents believe that they are just as important, with 23% reporting that teaching subjects like maths, science and English is more important. However, only 12% of respondents believe that skills like creativity, critical thinking and teamwork are more important than teaching subjects-based content.

There is widespread support for teaching communication skills but parents lack awareness of the associated terminology. 60% said they believe improving children's communication skills is one of the most important things that schools should provide, but only 16% said they could explain what "oracy" was, while 58% said they had never heard the term. On the other hand, 17% said they could explain "tutorialism" - a fake term - and another 28% said they had heard of it.



A majority of parents believe the purpose of schools is to equip children with practical training so they can succeed in the “real world.” Parents agree that the most important things for schools to provide are communication skills (60%), confidence (59%), and preparation for the world of work (56%).

Private schools are perceived to perform better across every category, however parents generally do not believe that children who are privately educated are any better prepared for life after school than children who are state educated. Parents with children in state school would rather send their children to private school if they could afford it (47%, with 20% saying they **definitely** would send them to private school).

Parents widely agree that children need dedicated teaching in critical thinking skills at all levels of schooling, alongside traditional subjects, but that not enough time is allocated for it. Nearly two-thirds of parents (62%) believe there should be dedicated time to teaching critical thinking during subject lessons more than once a week, with 17% saying critical thinking skills should be taught in every lesson. However, nearly two-thirds of parents (65%) feel that teachers are unable to facilitate discussion and debate because they are required to cover so much subject-based content.


There are many perceived advantages of incorporating critical thinking into school curriculums, in particular improving decision-making (61%), developing more well-rounded children (52%), improving communication and debating skills (52%), and helping children in the working world (52%). Despite these benefits, parents are relatively unsure what teaching critical thinking actually looks like (20%) and are concerned that teachers are currently not prepared to teach critical thinking (31%).

Methodology

We ran a 1,000 sample, nationally representative poll of parents in England in January 2024 to understand the scale of people’s opinions towards the current state of education in the UK and, more specifically, their views on critical thinking.

To help tease out some of the themes that arose in the poll, we ran four focus groups on Thursday 11th and Thursday 18th January. We ran these groups in constituencies where the swing needed for Labour to win the seat from the Conservatives would nationally translate to a Labour majority in government. All participants in these groups were parents with children in state school. These groups were:

- Scarborough and Whitby with participants who were Conservative 2019 voters, now open to voting Labour or Conservative
- Finchley and Golders Green with participants who were Lib Dem 2019 voters, now open to voting Lib Dem, Labour or Green
- Scunthorpe with participants with any voting history
- Macclesfield with participants with any voting history



We have outlined our findings below.

Purpose of school

Fundamentally parents see the purpose of school as being to prepare their children for the “real world” and to ensure they graduate as well-rounded individuals. The majority of parents we surveyed believed that the purpose of schooling is to equip children with the practical training needed to succeed. They agree that the most important things for schools to provide are communication skills (60%), confidence (59%) and preparation for the world of work (56%). This sentiment was also raised in our focus groups:

“I think there should be a level playing field that everyone comes out with a rounded education that enables them to fulfill their full potential” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

For some parents, this concept of being “well-rounded” extended to looking into sending their children to schools that employed alternative ways of educating children.


“It was very important for me that the school had an acknowledgement and an understanding of what looked after children need. It was important to me for a school that has more of a therapeutic kind of approach as opposed to strict”- *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

“I looked into forest school as a sort of an alternative to a mainstream setting. It's that kind of experience being outside more, in a natural environment more and growing their own food. Not becoming totally self sufficient obviously, but that kind of thing”.
- *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*

While most parents we surveyed believed that schools should focus more on teaching discipline, facts and knowledge instead of creativity and expression, there was still a significant minority (41%) that felt it was more important to teach creativity than knowledge and facts. Maths and English are perceived to be the two most important things for children to learn in school, above any other school subject or broader skill. Indeed, 80% of parents think maths is one of the three most important traditional subjects, followed by English literature and language (63%) and the sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) at 42%.

On social skills, 41% of parents in our poll thought that schools should emphasise the importance of letting children express themselves instead of the importance of discipline. The importance of social skills came up strongly and repeatedly in our focus groups.

“I would focus more on social and cognitive qualities, teaching them about not bullying, differences, disabilities and all round more than the education” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*



“They might not be doing well in maths or English. It's good to have but realistically unless you have pursued a career that uses that, are you going to be discussing Pythagoras' theorem? Probably not. Realistically I think the social aspects are more about setting yourself up for success and how to converse with people, you know, different way to communicate” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby,*

“I would say that that's actually the most important one is to actually recognise that we're all different. And to get on with everyone” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

Another major skill that was repeatedly raised in our groups was to build confidence in children that would prepare them for the world after graduation.


“It's not like the old days where you go to school, then you go to uni, or some training, and you get a job and you do that job for your entire life. Now you jump around from job to job to job, if you can get one. So I feel like the best thing that we can do for kids is to teach them to have a good sense of self and to be confident” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

“Obviously, education is important. But there will be jobs that we don't even know exist at the moment. So you can't necessarily train them in those areas. But they can be trained to have the self confidence, the self belief, and the ability to adapt” - *Female, 45, admin assistant, children aged 12 and 8, Macclesfield*

In our survey, teaching skills such as creativity, critical thinking and teamwork were widely perceived as just as important as teaching subject-based content. Respondents were split when asked whether it was more important for children to leave school with good general skills like creativity, critical thinking and problem solving (53%) or good grades in their exams, like maths, English and science (41%). This was mirrored in our groups where the importance of instilling these social skills in children was paramount to participants in the discussions.

“Have you also got the emotional intelligence? Have you also got the creativity? Have you also got the widespread knowledge? Have you also got an open mind and open view? So it's about the balance of all of those things. And being in touch with oneself, and what you stand for, and what's really important to you. I think that's what's really important. That's what I'm drilling into my daughter” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

“They should do it like in early years, it's all about the child's voice. So you obviously teach them phonics and Maths. But you have it all open and you listen to the child. Do they want to paint that afternoon? Do they want to create something out of paper that afternoon? What do they want?” - *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*



“They don't seem to understand the emotions and creativity side of the kids. They're pushing them to do proper schoolwork, like Maths and English and French. She's five years old, she doesn't need to know about French” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

As well as stressing the importance of these skills, the parents in our groups also picked out the importance of creativity and confidence being interwoven into specific subjects. The most obvious of these was drama, with some parents lamenting the lack of provision at their children's schools.

“I don't know if anyone's children's schools do drama. I really wish my children had a chance to express themselves and express creativity and energy in a way. More schools could offer that” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“We did Little Shop of Horrors and it was fantastic. You brought in a lot of diverse groups and got to build and make things and obviously the school got to see it. And I think that part is lacking. Unless it's a Christmas play for younger kids. But for older kids it's a good way to express themselves” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*


“It would help a lot to not be sat there during class reading, where you're dreading when they're picking you, and when you're all reading to each other but actually encouraging the expressive side of English as well” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

Similarly, the importance of allowing creativity in art lessons was raised, with a concern that the adherence to the curriculum of an inherently creative subject was actually stifling the children's creative abilities.

“The way the art courses have been structured for GCSE killed my daughter's creativity. And didn't allow for a lot of art making, it was all about producing a beautiful sketchbook that met the grading criteria. And it really killed her desire to do art, which was heartbreaking, because she's a very creative person” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

“I've got a friend who completely stopped art because it was so restricted” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

Concern around the negative impact of current learning methods on creativity was also raised in less obviously creative subjects, such as maths.



“The teachers actually told her you'll get 80% of the marks for the methodology, and 20% for the answer. So she was taught the method. And now by the time she's come to GCSE, she's forgotten. She hasn't got that spark anymore. And that in a way was the killing of the creativity, the thinking” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

Financial education

The standout request from parents across all the groups was an increase in financial education for their children. This idea was raised consistently with all participants agreeing on the need to integrate it further into the curriculum.

“I would like her to have some focus on management of money” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

For some, the idea of their children being able to manage their finances was a key part of preparing their children for the world afterschool and their views on financial literacy were tied in with being able to function as adults.


“When I was at school I'd love to learn about debit, bills, what things are likely to cost when you leave school and just prepare yourself for the future” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“Maths and English and everything is as important as it's ever been. But from my personal experience, being back in school and not really knowing what the adult life is about and what you're going to when you leave school on bills and everything like that. Maybe adding an extra class like a life class” - *Male, 35, vehicle manufacturer, child aged 11, Scarborough and Whitby*

“To have a basic understanding of finance. In this world with credit cards and, and debt, debt management, and everything like that, because the way the world is, at the minute, it's ridiculous” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*

For many, the concept of being financially literate was closely aligned with being able to perform other adult, practical tasks and was rated as being just as important.

“They should take out some hours in a week, out of the school week, to learn about money. And then about friendships and family and building relationships and how you should feel if you feel sad” - *Female, 28, sales assistant, children aged 7 and 5, Scarborough and Whitby*



“Like how to pay a mortgage? How to fix a car, general things that you need in life, and you're not taught these things” - *Female, 35, carer, child aged 7, Finchley and Golders Green*

There were also concerns raised that the changing nature of finances, with the emergence of digital currency was making it more difficult for young people to be financially literate. As a result, some participants felt that the onus was on the family to teach children about money management as a result of it not being taught adequately at school.

“On the internet everything is crypto, everything goes online. You're not actually physically getting money so they don't see it, so they don't understand it. They just seem to be teaching them random subjects that aren't really going to get them anywhere in life. Arable Farming in Tudor England is not gonna get you anywhere is it?” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*

“The more useful things that my children are learning, they're learning from me and their dad. Like money management and financing. They don't get that from school, they get that from us” - *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*

Views on state and private education

In our opinion research, we explored views on state and private education and the perceived differences between the two. All of the parents in our focus groups had children who attended state school.


Views on state school

In our poll, government budget cuts in staffing and education was widely considered one of the most important issues currently affecting schools. This sentiment was mirrored in our focus groups where the lack of funding was consistently raised as being the biggest issues facing their children's schools.

“Funding is a massive thing at the moment. And schools are doing the best that they possibly can. I mean, I love my daughter's school. I'm very happy with where she's at. But I know that they're really struggling” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

“There are always requests of would you like to make a voluntary donation towards x, y, z which I can't recall, when I went to school” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

“They struggle with money. There's one TA in quite a high need class in my little boy's school and the TA isn't always there. So covering sickness and things that don't



always get a supply in, which I think it's a financial thing"
- Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe

The impact of this lack of funding is most clearly and obviously seen in the class sizes. The increased number of students in each class was raised consistently in our groups, with parents commenting on the negative impact that it has had on their children.

"When he started in reception it was 15 children in a classroom but in Year One it is 32 in a classroom"- Female, 28, sales assistant, children aged 7 and 5, Scarborough and Whitby

We heard that the main negative impacts of the increased class sizes manifested itself in behavioural issues among the children. Unsurprisingly, parents reported that the more children in a class, the harder it was for teachers to discipline and support children who were struggling.

"The teachers try their best but there's not just enough of them for the class sizes. And all it takes is for one child to be disruptive or who struggles a lot. And then their time gets taken away from them learning" - Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby


"There were people with behavioural problems, learning difficulties in my class but nobody could slip on the radar. There was always somebody to help. And the smaller classes are what makes such a huge difference" - Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby

This message was especially clear from parents when regarding children who have additional needs and are struggling due to lack of attention from a teacher who is handling a large class. Indeed, in our poll 42% of parents of children with disabilities were most concerned about the lack of support their children were receiving, more than they were concerned about any other issue.

"Back to the funding, there aren't enough staff in each lesson or in each classroom, for the teacher to be able to deliver that quality of a lesson. Like there might be other children that might have extra needs and things like that. But they don't have the available TAs or one to one help that they should be getting in the classroom so that it means that there's like a knock on effect"- Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green

Some parents were sympathetic to the plight of teachers in this situation and felt strongly that changes needed to be made to make sure that teachers feel more supported at work.

"I have lots of friends who are teachers, and they're under so much pressure and so much stress that hardly any of them stick with it as a profession. If we're doing that to



the people who are in charge of inspiring our children then something must be wrong” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

However other parents were much more critical of their children’s teachers and felt that more needed to be done in the classroom to give them the best education possible, especially when engaging with children who have more difficulty learning.

“They’re very quick to put labels on children who may just be a bit behind. My son is a bit slower than my little girl is. And there’s not really help to support him” - *Female, 28, sales assistant, children aged 7 and 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“In Year One, it feels rushed. They just want to hit these targets. Not saying they don’t care about the children, but I feel like sometimes they maybe put more effort into the more abled kids” - *Female, 26, crane driver, Scunthorpe*

Another criticism of teaching that emerged across multiple groups was the idea that schools are too strict. There was a sense that schools that adopted and enforced excessively stringent rules stifled the child’s ability to learn and had a negative impact on their development.

“Schools are a lot stricter nowadays. My little lad is quite a good boy. but it can be a bit too strict for not necessarily misbehaving” - *Male, 35, vehicle manufacturer, child aged 11, Scarborough and Whitby*

“It is too authoritarian. They don’t engage with learning, it’s just the teachers shouting at the kids all day and it’s just not good. That’s one thing that my son’s school excels at is breaking the will of the kids down” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*


Views on private schools

In our poll, private schools were perceived to perform better across every category, however parents generally do not believe that children who are educated privately are any better prepared for life after school than children who are state educated. In all our groups we asked the participants about their perceived benefits of private schools. It is important to bear in mind that we selected individuals from the groups whose children all attended state schools.

The biggest, and most obvious, benefit of private school was the impact of increased funding. Put very simply and succinctly by one participant:

“Well, it’s like anything in life: the more you pay, the better it gets” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*

Other parents went into more detail about the impact of increasing funding in the classroom.



“Would they have access to more technology programmes, surplus stock, those sorts of things? For any sort of work, you need the tools to do your job. And if you don't have the right amount of books or there aren't enough books to go around then that can create a bit of negativity” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“Money can buy you better teachers, better sorts of equipment and opportunities as well” - *Female, 46, administrator, children aged 12 and 17, Macclesfield*

The increased role of extracurricular activities in private schools was recognised by parents both in the poll and in our groups. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of parents believed that private schools were better at giving children access to extracurriculars, with 31% saying they are much better at this. The impact of more extracurricular activities on children's development was raised in our groups.


“Different opportunities would be offered, like pottery making. So that was a skill and maybe lots of different art things and sports was a huge part of it” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“Better opportunities for trips and stuff because they've got the money to take the children to better places. In my state school they didn't even have enough money to take them to the local theatre for the pantomime” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

In contrast to the funding issues raised in our groups about state schools, the participants commented on the impact that greater funding had on class sizes in private schools that allowed teachers to tailor their learning to the individuals in the classroom.

“They actually have a lot more time. And because the class size is much smaller, they have time to actually think more. And that's where all the additional development comes in. So for example, I think that one of the pupils at private school finished the course six months early, whereas in our school, we had to get this done quickly. We were running out of time, and they had the time to actually sit and enjoy and think” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

“Their teaching opportunities will be much better than the ones the state school have as they're getting more support from the teachers. There's not many of them in the class so they can ask the teacher for help with things they don't understand” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*



“They have smaller class sizes. That would be one of the selling points for me, the class sizes, but my children go to a really small village school, so we have small classes anyway” - *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*

Combined with the impact of smaller classes, there was also the assumption by some participants in the groups that private schools would have better quality of teaching.

“One of the better teachers in the school, in the state school actually left and went to a private school because it was so much easier to teach there” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

Despite these benefits, there were also a number of issues raised by participants about the quality of education in private schools and how well they prepared children for life after graduation. Some had heard first hand from friends who were not impressed by the level of academic attention given to their children in private schools.

“I've got a friend's daughter that goes to a private school, and I haven't heard anything positive about it at all. She actually wants to pull her out of it” - *Female, 33, shift manager, Scunthorpe*


“The friends that I've got that send their children to private school, they're not particularly interested in the academic side of things. It is more the circles that they were in and saving face to have to send their children to private school because their friends do. I've not actually heard anything positive academic wise” - *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*

Some felt that attending private school did not give children a proper grounding in reality and would lead to difficulties for children after they left school and had to engage with people who were not from their private school 'bubble'.

“Oftentimes it is a bubble. And it's not necessarily reflecting the wider world that can sometimes apply beyond the bubble. So in some ways it isn't genuine. And obviously, not all the private schools are the same. There is a variation. However it gives you an insular view” - *Male, 33, sales, children aged 10 and 15, Finchley and Golders Green*

“I've got a friend who went to private school. And we're very, very close. But we're very, very, very, very different. And the problems and things that I've been through and that I deal with, it's sometimes she's away with the fairies and doesn't get it because it's just not her normal sort of life” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

“People from private school, they only know a certain class of people. And they wouldn't be able to relate to others when they try to do business. I get the impression



that they've got their own bubble going on. Because why come out? And when you've got all that money, and you can do these things, why step out and look at that world? Because you don't need to. Whereas state school, you meet people from all different backgrounds” - *Female, 45, admin assistant, children aged 12 and 8, Macclesfield*

These perceived difficulties were also combined with a sense that participants felt there was a lack of benefit to send a child to private school who was already well-educated and motivated, as the impact of attending private school was negligible compared to the impact of the child wanting to learn and having a supportive family.

“This might be a bit controversial, but I think if your child's clever, and gifted, I think they would succeed anywhere. They don't have to go to private school to be clever” - *Female, 26, crane driver, Scunthorpe*

“The way that your child communicates, that's mainly down to the parents. How have they brought that child up to be confident, to ask for what they need? So I think it doesn't matter what school you go to” - *Female, 35, call centre operative, Scunthorpe*

“In state school they are pushing them to get the best results whereas in private school they've already got the parents' money for the education. So I don't feel they would necessarily push them as hard as they would at the state school- *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*


Critical thinking

In both our poll and focus groups, we probed people's views on critical thinking as a concept and its practical application in the education system. We also uncovered insights into how the public think about the benefits of critical thinking can affect their everyday lives.

Perceptions of critical thinking in schools

In our poll, UK schools were seen as doing a good job at developing critical thinking skills in children. Nearly half of parents (44%) said they do a good job, with 13% saying they do a very good job, while only 16% of parents felt schools do a bad job at developing critical thinking skills in children. These findings are interesting as throughout our desk research and interviews with experts, we have found that there are very few, if any, parts of the curriculum that are dedicated to fostering critical thinking skills in children.

To investigate this disconnect further, we asked parents in our focus groups about their views on how critical thinking is currently being applied in schools. Some felt that critical thinking was integrated into the curriculum of some specific subjects, notably History and Business Studies.



“My eldest was doing coursework in History of Medicine and how it has changed. And the teacher said what she wrote is good but that she hasn't backed up her argument and compared the two narratives. And it got me thinking about critical thinking because she was comparing apples with pears into medicine then versus now. And they mentioned how she had to look at two separate arguments and back up her judgements”- *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“They do real world projects like The Apprentice in Business Studies, and enterprise stuff, but they could do more. More how things work in the real world and that skill to the way they look at things and analyse things” *Female, 51, IT delivery consultant, children aged 14 and 12, Macclesfield*

Others felt that the level of critical thinking varied considerably by the subject, with some lending themselves to letting the children develop this skill while others were more distant from it.

“It depends on what they're studying. So someone studying maths and sciences probably isn't going to get a philosophical, critical thinking approach in their lessons” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*


“For our school, it's a mixture depending on the topic. They can go off into their own groups and do problem solving in one lesson or for an hour in a different subject they might be forced to sit and listen, learn it, and then that's the end of that. I think it's a mixture” - *Female, 33, shift manager, Scunthorpe*

Some individuals felt strongly that critical thinking skills were not taught at state schools but that there were greater opportunities for children to develop these skills at private school, therefore worsening the attainment gap.

“Thinking skills are explicitly taught in some schools. And they tend to not be the schools which are underperforming or some state schools. There is an open philosophical sort of approach to questioning and challenging and really getting into the crux of issues. It's not a skill that is promoted in state education, because we're not necessarily building independent thinkers who are going to go on to become the masters of the universe. That's not the purpose of every school's education sort of agenda” - *Male, 33, sales, children aged 10 and 15, Finchley and Golders Green*

Interestingly, some participants felt that their children's schools did foster critical thinking skills but not through the curriculum. Instead it was the diversity of the school and the interactions between classmates from a range of backgrounds and viewpoints that developed this ability in the children.

“I really love that my daughter's school is very rich in cultures and in diversity, so they are being exposed to things that aren't necessarily in the teachers' control. I think it is



really important. And we're having lots of debates at home about loads of different things. And there's loads of questions coming in that are even provoking my thought processes" - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

Benefits of introducing critical thinking in schools

We found widespread support among parents for schools to allocate more teaching time to improve critical thinking skills in children. Nearly two-thirds of parents (62%) believe there should be dedicated time to teaching critical thinking during subject lessons more than once a week, with 17% saying critical thinking skills should be taught in every lesson. However, this would need to be combined with wider curriculum reform as nearly two-thirds of parents (65%) feel that teachers are currently unable to facilitate discussion and debate because they are required to cover so much subject-based content.

We found many perceived advantages of incorporating critical thinking into school curriculums. These advantages include improving decision making (61%), developing more well-rounded children (52%), improving communication and debating skills (52%) and helping children prepare for the working world (52%).

Despite these benefits, the parents we surveyed were relatively unsure about what teaching critical thinking looks like (20%) and were concerned that teachers are currently not prepared to teach critical thinking (31%).


We teased out the practical implications of the benefits of critical thinking in our focus groups. Participants in multiple groups raised the cross-situational application of critical thinking, defining how learning the skill can be applied to multiple different scenarios.

"On the academic side, it gives an element of realism. For example, if you can't do a maths question, it'd be like 'break it down' and you could adopt that same approach to bullying" - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

"If you incorporate critical thinking into a child from a young age into certain subjects, they're going to learn that and then they will have that knowledge for life" - *Female, 35, carer, child aged 7, Finchley and Golders Green*

Many parents in our groups also raised the benefit that critical thinking can increase individuality in children, giving them the tools and confidence to find their own original ways of thinking.

"We don't want a society full of robots and zombies. We want them to be individual and artistic" - *Female, 28, sales assistant, children aged 7 and 5, Scarborough and Whitby*



“There's loads of amazing teachers that encourage individuality and the child's voice, and are very much about embracing each child and thinking outside the box. But I'd say the school system is very much creating work like that George Orwell thing, isn't it? We're not creating entrepreneurs and people that are going to think outside the box. They want people that are going to do the grunt work” - *Female, 35, steelworker, Scunthorpe*

Another consistently raised benefit of critical thinking was the positive impact that it can have on decision making skills. Many parents felt that teaching critical thinking in schools would allow their children to make better decisions and follow through with their own choices.

“My 10 year old, I work with him a lot on problem solving and breaking things down because when you're a child things can seem so much bigger than the problems that you face. If he doesn't have the skills to think for himself and solve a problem, no matter what his education is in English, maths or any class, he struggles to concentrate and everything seems overwhelming to him and he can't put things into perspective” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*


“He's got to be able to figure it out and stand on his own two feet and know how to work through a problem himself? You need to teach children how to do this, to make their own decisions” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*

“The important thing is being able to empower children with the tools to be able to make confident, informed decisions and think for themselves” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

An important part of decision making raised in our groups was the ability for children to self-reflect and evaluate their own opinions. This was often raised in the negative, with parents commenting on the effect of their children not having the critical thinking skills to self-evaluate and therefore the difficulty of changing their minds when presented with new information.

“She's very adamant that she's right and everybody else is wrong. You can put the proof in black and white in front of her and she's still right and everybody else is wrong” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“She's not been taught how to think for herself or anything. She's under the mindset that when she's 16 she can move out and get her own flat and get a dog. Her school has properly lacked teaching her thinking skills, critical thinking, even basic thinking skills. I don't know how she's going to survive life” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*



The other side of the coin for the ability to evaluate was raised in critical thinking being used by children to evaluate external narratives for their veracity. In groups, examples given ranged from giving children the ability to think critically about overarching societal narratives such as colonialism to being able to judge whether information they are being given by authority figures stands up against their own stress-testing.

“Thinking about messages that they receive from news or even from the curriculum, where does it come from? There's a lot more awareness now around colonialism and how that has impacted on how history has been taught. So I think critical thinking just involves looking at different sides of the story. And I think for kids, this is also important when it comes to their own ethics and morals and decision making and being good members of society as well” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

“When I went to school, the history curriculum was very fixed. And we got it from the perspective the textbooks we were using, working towards passing the exam, rather than actually having that creativity. I think because of the pressures and what's mandated by the DfE, there isn't that much the opportunity to have critical thinking and think outside the box” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*


“If they think they're right then they should have that confidence to question it, whether it's an adult or a child or anybody. They should definitely be able to question what they think is right or wrong” - *Female, 35, call centre operative, Scunthorpe*

Methods of introducing critical thinking

Of the parents we surveyed, the preferred method of incorporating critical thinking into the school curriculum was through real-life problem solving tasks (60%). This was followed by role-playing (41%) and classroom discussions (40%). Meanwhile parents were somewhat less supportive of restructuring exams to incorporate questions that require critical thinking (33%) and increasing group project work (34%).

This preference for integrating critical thinking teaching within subjects was explained by parents' belief that critical thinking and knowledge-based subjects need to be inherently linked for children to reach their full potential. There was a repeated motif in our groups that purely knowledge-based learning was useless unless it was coupled with an ability to think critically about what they have been taught.

“Maths and English is super important. The problem solving and critical thinking is so important too because without one, you can't have the other” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*



“A bank of knowledge so that they can make an informed decision themselves and can make a decision on what they think is right. But if you don't have a bank of knowledge and the evidence and the facts from absolutely everywhere, then you can't make an informed decision. You're just kind of tunnel vision but if you have a rich bank of knowledge, then you'll be able to make an informed decision” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

“If we're going to teach people to be critical thinkers, they need things like history or social studies, all the way through. It's otherwise you have a very, very narrow knowledge base to pull from around how the world works” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

Critical thinking benefits later in life

After establishing that the parents we spoke to were supportive of introducing critical thinking into the curriculum and saw benefits for their children's development, we then looked more specifically at the ways that they felt critical thinking in schools could help their children when they became adults. The main finding from our work was that parents want schools to give them the ability to become well-rounded individuals. In this section, we explore the areas in which parents feel their children would benefit from having well developed critical thinking skills.


How critical thinking can give young people the skills to tackle disinformation, fake news and media vested interests

The fear of disinformation and fake news arose repeatedly in our focus groups and participants agreed that increasing critical thinking skills would be an important piece in giving young people the tools to combat the negative impacts of disinformation. These concerns ranged from disinformation surrounding international crises such as the war in Ukraine and COVID to fake news in the UK political system.

“Get them a bit more clued up on what's real and what's not. I'm guilty, I probably fall for the old fake news fact. I think that's because of the way things are on social media, and TikTok, there's a hell of a lot of fake stuff” - *Male, 35, vehicle manufacturer, child aged 11, Scarborough and Whitby*

“My friend's teen believes anything she sees on TikTok. She came home from school a couple of months ago saying that Russia was going to bomb us because somebody said so on TikTok” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“When you're seeing fake news, it's hard as an adult to distinguish between fact and fiction, for example, when COVID was starting [with] all the fake news” - *Female, 46, administrator, children aged 12 and 17, Macclesfield*



“A famous politician can make a statement on the TV, and who are we to, like, decipher whether that was really him or not? Because it's so advanced now?” - *Female, 45, admin assistant, children aged 12 and 8, Macclesfield*

Some parents reported that of some their children lacked the critical faculties to judge for themselves whether a narrative being presented to them was likely to be accurate or whether there were other factors at play.

“I know a lot of stuff [is] fake but you know they can still affect me and I compare myself to things that I know aren't actually real or genuine or I can buy a product that I know can't be real” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“We live in a society now that's very live fast, spend fast, and that's all social media, and I don't think children are equipped with the right skills to realise that life isn't quite like that. I think you're sold a very false narrative, and I think this should be being taught” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*


Another aspect that is separate from deliberate disinformation and advertising with a purpose is the impact of media narratives on the content that individuals are consuming. Individuals in different groups raised the difficulties of being able to judge the existing biases of media and how hard it can be without critical thinking skills to be able to evaluate the sources of information in the media.

“You really don't know what's true and what's not. You're not on the ground certain times, and you don't really know where to where to go for reliable information because it's all rigged in one way or another” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

“It's difficult. Who are the authors? Who's telling the story? It's not easy. And I think it has become increasingly hard, you've got so many different mediums and platforms. Unless we're sometimes there to really see it for ourselves, we're having to rely on our better judgement, which could be wrong” - *Male, 33, sales, child aged 10 and 15, Finchley and Golders Green*

“It's quite terrifying, what we choose to focus on by what we're fed. Like, all of a sudden, where's the war in Ukraine? Not long ago, we were all supportive and it was the biggest thing and then all of a sudden because it's not reported on nobody talks about it and we are so manipulated by what we're fed by the media” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

How critical thinking can benefit adults in the workplace



The benefits of critical thinking skills for adults in the workplace were universally agreed upon across all our focus groups.

Participants could readily name benefits that ranged from the ability to solve complex problems to making well-informed choices that benefited their organisations as a whole.

For some, there were particular jobs that participants felt would benefit from having individuals who were adept at critical thinking. These roles broadly included highly skilled and high level jobs such as roles in academia or CEOs of businesses.

“Jobs in research, you need to know how to solve problems. You need to look at things and think what more can be progressed on this? What more can be done by people who want to find cures for medicines and cancers, they have to think about things at a real depth level because it's not going to be easy. Otherwise it would be done by now. So they have to have these skills to know where to look for answers” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“There's definitely some jobs that would definitely benefit from being a critical thinker, like CEO or in higher levels, where they have to make black and white decisions” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*


“In some specialist fields, they're going to have to do some sort of critical thinking. And if I could install that into their minds early on, they're not going to set themselves up for disappointment later in life. They're not going to think 'I don't know how to solve this problem' so if we teach them early then we can develop the skills more and more as they get older” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“There's going to be certain job roles where you do need to be thinking more critically: teachers, managers of any job role. Managers always have to do critical thinking on the spot” - *Female, 35, carer, child aged 7, Finchley and Golders Green*

However other participants felt that all jobs could benefit from having individuals with greater critical thinking skills and did not feel that they were explicitly more useful in certain, more highly skilled roles.

“In any sort of job you always have to think and you have to be good at problem solving and take your own initiative. Anything from working in a shop to working in a health profession to working in the big top office. You always carry that skill with you” - *Female, 28, sales assistant, children aged 7 and 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

Others raised examples of the negative impacts of working with individuals who did not have well developed critical thinking skills, especially on the wider effect on the workforce as a whole.



“My direct manager, he doesn't see other people's point of view. I can see it damaging the team underneath him. Because he's just he's not got that skill to sort of think about both sides” - *Female, 46, administrator, children aged 12 and 17, Macclesfield*

How greater critical thinking can have wider societal benefits

As well as exploring the benefits in the workplace and in the context of disinformation, we also probed the public's views on the wider benefits to the whole of society that can arise if individuals have greater capacity for critical thinking.

One of the major benefits mentioned was the ability to debate respectfully with other individuals. Participants felt that instilling greater critical thinking skills from a young age gave people the ability to see both sides of an argument and come to a more respectful position, even if it did not lead to full agreement.


“If I'm going to say something I'll always try and justify it with a reason, partly because of the job I do and having to back things up with evidence. If you're going to make an argument, then you should be able to back it up. When you have conversations, you don't necessarily have to agree with people, but you should be respectful enough to understand why they think something whether you agree or not” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“Looking at both sides and looking at the bigger picture and standing back from it. I think it is useful” - *Female, 51, IT delivery consultant, children aged 14 and 12, Macclesfield*

Another aspect of being able to think critically about different views and decision making was the impact that it has on emotional regulation. Some participants felt that being able to consider different opinions and narratives in a critical way allowed people to make better and less emotionally driven decisions, resulting in fewer regrets.

“The emotion can come when you feel like you've either rushed a decision, or you don't really feel you're equipped to make that decision. But if you have the ability to gather the information and gather the evidence, you're more confident in your decisions and that can remove a lot of the emotion. And if you're satisfied, you've done all you can and you're well prepared to make that decision. I think it can help remove the emotion attached to it” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

The final and most macro benefit of instilling greater critical thinking skills in individuals was the ability to drive large scale societal change. Many participants referenced this in terms of the biggest challenges that the world is facing, such as climate change and the rising cost of living.



“If petrol diesel engine cars had started as EVs, how would change the planet today? If you've got critical thinkers who are actually looking at the whole of society and 20 or 30 years forwards, it'll change everything. Because at the moment, we had the development of plastic, which was a revolution and really great. But then no one thought ahead. What's our exit strategy? How do we get rid of it? We can't. So with critical thinking, they'll be actually forward looking and seeing how we can resolve things? And this is what youngsters really need now because it will resolve all the problems of climate change for the future” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

“Nothing's ever going to change because the same people just keep getting it wrong over and over again. And nothing ever changes, nothing. Nothing ever will. So we need some real people who can actually make a change. And then they are probably the children of the future with the critical thinking and the problem solving” - *Male, 42, electrician, Scunthorpe*

How critical thinking can benefit interpersonal relationships


Finally, we explored the impact of good critical thinking skills on interpersonal relationships. The responses and contexts to these benefits were varied. Some participants focussed on the ability to understand differing perspectives and resolve conflict effectively. Others raised the point that being able to think critically allowed individuals to evaluate situations objectively, therefore avoiding assumptions and misunderstandings.

For many individuals there was a strong link between having developed critical thinking skills and high emotional intelligence.

“You need to be able to think about others and critically think to be in a good relationship. Otherwise it's not going to work because you're going to be in the relationship in a very selfish mindset, just thinking about yourself and what you can benefit from it. Just solely thinking about yourself, and not your partner” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“Critical thinking spans whole the whole of your life, it's a valuable asset. But I think emotional intelligence is equally or more important, because you've got to understand the other person's feelings, and know how to respond appropriately to relationships. But I think they go hand in hand personally” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

The link between critical thinking and emotional intelligence was mentioned consistently by participants as having a positive impact on conflict resolution. Critical thinkers who are adept at problem solving were seen as a vital part in navigating the complexities of relationships when disagreements inevitably arose.



“Debate in personal relationships is healthy. At one point you're not always going to agree. No one's perfect. So going back to critical thinking, even as adults you need it. You know to think about what you're arguing for and use arguments as an example for what we are arguing for. Can we solve it? Can we get over it? And then we'll make up and we'll be happy again” - *Male, 35, vehicle manufacturer, child aged 11, Scarborough and Whitby*

“If you can do that you can manage conflict resolution, whether it be in work, whether it be in your private life, whether it be in any walk of life. If you can do that you're not going to get into fights. You're going to be better at work. You're going to be better in your personal life” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

Some participants also mentioned the benefits of critical thinking in giving young people the tools to make independent decisions while being influenced by peers who may not have their best interests at heart. By using their thinking skills to analyse social situations and in understanding their own values and beliefs, parents felt that young people would be better equipped to resist the pressure to conform to behaviours that conflict with their principles.

“It's really important for making those decisions like, “Do I go off with this gang of kids who are going to do something stupid? Is this a good idea?” Especially with teenagers, when so much is driven by their move away from wanting to impress parents and more into their peer group. I think just being able to navigate difficulties in relationships as well. It's easier if you really if you really know yourself, first of all” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

“I've got a brother who's a teenager now. Do you have the confidence to make a decision not to go with those people and be okay to stand out? And stand alone? Being the one that's not in with those guys or making the choice of whether to go to university or to do A Levels or if you're going to follow your friends to college and apprenticeships” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*

Oracy

In our poll there was widespread support for teaching communication skills, but it is important to note that parents lack awareness of the associated terminology. While 60% of parents surveyed said they believe that improving children's communication skills is one of the most important things that schools should provide, only 16% said they could explain what “oracy” was, while 58% said they had never heard the term. Interestingly 17% of respondents said they could explain a fake term that we added to the survey (“tutorialism”) and another 28% said they had heard of it, suggesting that the actual public awareness of oracy may be even lower than the results suggest.

Benefits of oracy

In our groups, the benefits of oracy and good communication skills were agreed upon by all the participants that we interacted with. These benefits varied from facilitating the exchange of ideas to enhancing interpersonal relationships to allowing individuals to achieve their goals more effectively. There was also a consistent feeling that current levels of communication skills both in young people and adults were inadequate and stopping them from achieving their full potential.

“Communication is key for everything, relationships, work, everything, and it's majorly lacking. When it comes to doing it in the flesh and doing it with normal people in everyday life, people are really struggling with it. So I think if children can be encouraged to do that, I think we definitely have a much greater society for the future” - *Female, 21, homemaker, child aged 6, Finchley and Golders Green*


“In secondary school but even in primary, I think they should do debating because that's a huge thing in everyday life. And it helps with communication. It's so important to be able to have a debate and communicate effectively with people in life. You'd use that as an adult all the time, respecting other people's opinions and being able to put your feelings forwards, whether it's feelings, emotions, knowledge, whatever it is, you can use that skill” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“I've been in some presentations in my work and they've made changes that have not necessarily benefited the staff, but the way they've articulated it and sold it, it's gone underneath the radar. And then everyone feels like they're a winner. Some politicians do that. But it is a skill. It's quite remarkable, people can do that. And it can be used in everyday, not just in business, maybe as a police officer or anything like that. It's a really good skill to have. And I do admire people that are really good at it” - *Male, 38, customer service advisor, child aged 9, Macclesfield*

The ability to communicate effectively was also inherently linked with achieving greater levels of emotional regulation. Many individuals in the groups felt that increased oracy skills would allow children to vocalise, and therefore control, their emotions in a more effective manner.

“It's a good way to overcome your own emotional objections and try to be rational and debate. It's nice to have a debate and have a proper in depth conversation. It's nice to talk things through really, a lot can get done” - *Male, 40, software engineer, children aged 15, 10, 7 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“That's where the children have the ability to vocalise what they're feeling and make reasonable arguments” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*



Some participants also mentioned the role that improved oracy and communication skills in general can have in closing the attainment gap. By providing opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to express themselves effectively, oracy can be an effective route for marginalised groups to overcome barriers to academic success. This is a key part of Labour's education policy platform.

“Debating and communicating can get you further in life, even if you don't have the best grades or education. If you're good at communicating you get so much further with it. And even things like teaching them about tone of voice” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

“I work for a very big company. And I know some of the top people that are on very good salaries, none of them have degrees. Most of them didn't go to college. But this is a very big company and good money, but they know how to basically persuade, and negotiate and balance an argument. And they all have that same skill” - *Male, 38, customer service advisor, child aged 9, Macclesfield*

Another benefit of oracy which was raised in the groups is the ability to modulate communication styles for different audiences. This benefit was picked out in terms of increasing a child's persuasive abilities but also for them to articulate their needs in the most effective manner.


“You have to think about what you're saying and who you're talking to as well. You can't speak to a child the way you would an adult. So you have to change the way you're speaking to different people as well. Know how to associate different terms to different people and be able to change your tone of voice and everything” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“If a child is struggling to communicate, they won't be able to communicate with the teacher to let the teacher be aware that they may need extra support” - *Female, 35, carer, child aged 7, Finchley and Golders Green*

“You're able to be sociable and talk to people in different settings and backgrounds. And when we were talking about what we want our children to learn? And I said more of the social side because I feel although my exam results weren't great, in my job I've done well because I can communicate with different people differently” - *Female, 36, housewife, children aged 10 and 6, Scarborough and Whitby*

Oracy in private schools

Our participants felt that oracy skills were emphasised and cultivated more in private schools than in state schools. This was primarily achieved, they thought, through a greater focus on oracy and communication skills in the curriculum.



“At private school, every month they had to make a special project on a topic of their choice and get up in front of the class and give a little presentation. From reception, they all had to do it. And I don't know if they do that at state school at that age or not. That definitely set them up really well for being able to talk about something they were passionate about” - *Female, 51, homemaker, child aged 18, Finchley and Golders Green*

“We have it to an extent in my daughter's school in debating societies, which is really brilliant. But it's not in all of them in all state schools. And I just feel that those children who don't have the opportunities are missing out so much” - *Male, 47, construction project manager, children aged 16, 21 and 24, Finchley and Golders Green*

For some individuals, this difference had a marked impact on the communication styles of children who had a private school education, as opposed to children from a state school.


“I used to drive buses, and I used to pick up from a private school. And I picked up from a normal school after the private school. And I've got to say, a lot of children that I picked up from the private school, were a lot more comfortable engaging in conversation. They were a bit more articulate in their conversation, they would ask about fares and all sorts of stuff, whereas children from the normal schools. A lot of them weren't big on communication and didn't really know how to interact and how to ask for fares and how to ask where the stops were” - *Male, 35, bus driver, Scunthorpe*

Link between critical thinking and oracy

Throughout our opinion research, participants felt that critical thinking and oracy are deeply intertwined, with many articulating that each skill reinforces and enhances the other.

“The two have to work together. You have to be good at communication and speak to people with an open mind. You can't go in prejudging someone because of the circumstances and you have to understand what you might say to offend somebody or that you might be completely wrong. You might go in stating what you believe and have done no prior research. And you'll go in all guns blazing and the other person is wrong, even though you've not done any thinking about the subject” - *Female, 31, shop assistant, child aged 5, Scarborough and Whitby*

“You can be a good communicator but if you're talking absolute nonsense, then it's wasted air. They're all as equally as important. They're all interlinked. And they're all equally as important as one another: being able to assess both sides and reach a justified conclusion and then being able to communicate it. Because also, there's no, there's no benefit in coming to a conclusion and then a decision, and then not being



able to communicate what that decision is and how you've got there and being able to back it up” - *Female, 37, assistant director, child aged 5, Macclesfield*

Some of our participants were able to draw on their real-life experiences of when individuals have not had adequate critical thinking and oracy skills and the negative impact of this, either in their personal or professional lives.

“I do find that I've worked with people who speak with conviction, and come across well, but then in time, you realise they don't actually know what they're talking about. I think we need knowledge to go with the confidence” - *Female, 45, admin assistant, children aged 12 and 8, Macclesfield*

“They don't actually have the skills to back it up, they have the persuasion to get it over the line. But that's it. That's their job done. My experience is they've got the gift of the gab and then they bring the other people who have also got the gift of the gab along with them. And in reality, that's how it works. But it would be nice to see it with somebody with both of those skills. But I'd often say it's usually one or the other. I feel both are important, but for my experience, it's one or the other” - *Male, 38, customer service advisor, child aged 9, Macclesfield*

Conclusion

The results of our opinion research paint a clear picture of the public's views on the education system and, more specifically, on critical thinking and oracy. Fundamentally, parents see the purpose of school as being to prepare their children for the real world and for them to leave school as a well-rounded young adult. Greater incorporation of critical thinking and oracy into the curriculum is seen as a key part of achieving this goal.