

Women's Development. In the course of listening to Lateefah's story we discover that, at a very young age, she had a child. Now she is struggling to educate herself, hold a job, and care for her tiny daughter. A teenager using the computer programme can hear Lateefah's words and watch her in a small apartment with her child. They can enter a journal, which is part of the programme, to reflect upon Lateefah's choices and the ways in which she now chooses to live her life. The presentation challenges many commonly held assumptions about what constitutes responsible behaviour, and asks young people to make their own judgements.

The programme also offers up present-day problems, such as the legal case against the tobacco industry in the United States and the fairness of generic drug production in South Africa. The user is encouraged to navigate the programme freely, writing, listening, and watching at will. The problems portrayed demand consideration based on thoughtfulness and contemplation.

In practice there is no simple correct response, no fixed answer. Instead children are offered the opportunity to reflect upon their own beliefs, prejudices, knowledge, interests, and aspirations. They might come to realise that many people, like themselves, make hard choices each day; and perhaps they will also come to confront their own difficulties in a new way. Although aimed at older children, the programme closely parallels approaches held to be appropriate for younger children too.

#### Notes

1. See, for example, the work of psychologist Robert Coles on the moral, political, and religious lives of children; or the work of philosophers Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida on thinking and action.
2. In the literature on critical thinking important issues surface about what kind of knowledge we produce and whether any knowledge, in the process of its creation, is dependent upon one's position and interests.
3. See 'Character Counts' at [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org)

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## The Isaan Bright Child Programme

# Teaching young children to ask why and discover how

*Human beings, children or adults, are able to protect themselves by their own capable thinking. Only if we encourage children to think, or provide them a chance to develop their critical thinking skills then they can protect themselves. And it is not only our belief; it is the truth.*

Santi Chitrachinda, Artistic Director, MAYA

The Isaan Bright Child Programme is a creative and participatory programme that is transforming the nature of preschool, kindergarten and early primary education in Thailand. The programme promotes an entirely new approach to teaching and learning, which allows preschool teachers to help young children to develop critical thinking skills. The programme focuses on teachers and schools in the Northeast (Isaan) and the North of Thailand, two of the least developed regions in the country.

The programme involves more than just a methodology; it also provides teachers with tools to work with and an institutional structure through which they can support each other and reach out to others. It helps preschool teachers to develop the capacity to make their own lesson plans and to actively participate in networks of teachers. These teachers' networks are the driving forces behind the success of this programme. For instance, the network in the Isaan region, where the programme initially started, is now playing an active role in the process of mobilising the Northern teachers' network.

The Programme has three central aspects: supporting young children in developing their critical thinking skills; local curriculum development that is appropriate to the specific culture and language; and teacher training and networking.

In this interview, MAYA's Programme Director Somsak Kanha and its Artistic Director Santi Chitrachinda respond to questions about how MAYA

works with teachers and local communities to help give preschool children a better start, and how it has applied the concept of critical thinking in the specific context of education in Thailand. And, as they do so, they bring out the complexity of MAYA's work and all that underpins it.

*ECM: The Isaan Bright Child Programme has its roots in the Bright Child 2000 Programme, which MAYA set up with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the slum areas of Bangkok. Why did MAYA choose to extend the Bright Child Programme to Isaan and to the Northern region, and what new challenges did this present?*

MAYA: We decided to extend Bright Child to Isaan because it is one of the poorest areas in Thailand and many of the slum dwellers in Bangkok originally came from there. Isaan is a large open area where distances are much greater than in the crowded slums of Bangkok. It also meant dealing directly with the Ministry of Education, rather than the municipal authorities. And we had to address a different group of people. In the slum areas, there are few trained teachers, especially at preschool level. Very often mothers take it upon themselves to look after groups of children. In Isaan, we were working with formally trained teachers, so our approach was slightly different. But, in effect, we were faced with similar problems in both cases: we had to convince people that they were capable of taking effective action themselves to improve the prospects of preschool children.

Despite the challenges of the new context, the programme in Isaan moved forward more quickly than we expected. We originally planned to try it out in one province for the first year and then extend it to the other 19 provinces in the region in the second and third years. We actually completed that in two years, so – because teachers in the North had heard about the programme and wanted to know why it wasn't being implemented in their region, too – we

decided to expand it to the Northern region in the third year. That meant modifying the model again, but at least we had a better understanding of the situation after working in Isaan for two years. The Isaan model was not perfect and there are certain areas in which we are still unsure what to do, but we are learning all the time.

*ECM: How does MAYA go about setting up a programme in a new area?*

*MAYA:* When we first go into an area, we organise a theatre performance to open up an issue that children have shown concerns them, and then we ask the people what they think about it. For many of them, it is the first time they have discussed children's problems publicly and it is hard to convince them that they can do anything structural to solve them. We tell them it is not as difficult as it seems and ask them what they want the children to be like in the future. They say they would like them to be clever and have useful skills, and not be naïve so that people cannot take advantage of them. Then we develop a curriculum that responds to these needs. This is what happened in Bangkok and Isaan, and later in the Northern region. At preschool level, children are prepared through experiential learning not just to deal with the present but also for the future.

Once we have got the initial message across, we encourage people to organise and work together so that they can support each other, raise money and negotiate with the authorities from a position of strength. In Bangkok, the teachers organised themselves into a committee and negotiated with the municipal authorities for a 100% pay rise, from 2,000 to 4,000 Baht per month (USD50 to USD100). That is still not much, but it was a significant achievement. In Isaan and the Northern region, with our assistance, the teachers have set up their own networks and meet each other at seminars and workshops to learn from each other. We also organise other mobilisation activities, such as asking local primary schools to provide support for the programme.

*ECM: The Bright Child Programme seems to have been a great success, achieving the support of teachers, local communities and the authorities with very little*

*resistance. Yet it must have required quite a change in culture. How do you explain the way the programme appears to have been accepted so easily?*

*MAYA:* Well, it is certainly not just because of us. We believe that MAYA's work has set an example for teachers in particular to develop their own ideas. Some have been teaching for a long time, and they no longer stop and think why they became a teacher in the first place. So in our workshops, we ask them to remember how they felt on their first day as a teacher and to list three things they have done for the children that have made them happy, and three bad things that they have done. Many of them become emotional when they remember this. Teaching is a profession with an ethic, not just way of earning money. We believe that it is compassion for the children, together with what they have experienced in the workshop, that has given the teachers the strength to go from where they were to where they are now.

And, of course, the success of the programme has a lot to do with the context within which we work. In Thailand, we had a Western-style education system for a long time, but it was not very successful, because of a lack of good quality teaching materials. Then, in the late 1990s, there was the economic crisis, when many things that people had always believed in no longer worked. Since they had nothing to lose, they were more prepared to try something else. And although it did require a culture change, it was a change back to something that many people recognised. The programme makes use of local knowledge and local resources, much of which is traditional and rooted in our culture.

So the education system was in a mess, and we came along with some simple and recognisable solutions. We saw teachers with 30 or 40 children and no materials to teach them with. We asked them: what is the simplest way to solve this problem in the classroom? And we came up with what we call the Experiential Activities Planner (EAP). In EAP, you have an introduction, content and conclusion just as you find in every learning situation: it's nothing new. But the teachers did not know how to deal with the content. So we worked with them to develop four steps to generate the content: identifying a problem; exploring the problem; group work to

share and refine what has been discovered; and then communicating the results with the other groups. Together with the warm-up (introduction) and the debriefing (conclusion), this makes a learning unit of six steps in all. In practice, the point is for teachers to produce content that stimulates and enables children to think critically, not to simply tell them what to think. That means that the teachers don't necessarily have to write much: a learning unit might only need a few lines to do the job.

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*The project has been a success, not because of us, but because it has helped the teachers to come to a new understanding of who they are and why they are doing this work.*

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When we explained this to the teachers, they saw that it can be understood in terms of Thai tradition. A central element of Buddhism, our main religion, is suffering. The first step is to know your suffering. In modern terms, that means identifying it, understanding it and analysing it. The second step is to know the causes of your suffering. And then Buddhism asks: why are you still suffering? Why do you not do something about it? So you imagine what it is like not to have the problem – that is the third step. The fourth step is working out how to get to the situation of not having the problem. Then you make a plan. In Buddhism the plan has eight elements, starting with having the right theory to achieve what you need to do. If your theory is wrong, your actions will be wrong. The second element is about having the right focus, about focusing not on pleasure, or hatred but just on love and how to solve the problem. Buddhism is a very scientific religion – and existentialist. There is no God, only man. You are responsible for your own actions.

*ECM: This all sounds a little abstract when we are talking about small children of preschool age. Are young children capable of grasping such complex concepts? How does the method work in practice, in the classroom?*



Photo: Angela Ernst

### Oscar van Leer Award 2003

On 20 November 2003, at the Nieuwe Kerk in The Hague, The Netherlands, the Oscar van Leer Award 2003 was presented to MAYA: the Art and Cultural Institute for Development, for its Isaan Bright Child Programme in the Northeast (Isaan) and North of Thailand. The Oscar van Leer Award is presented every two years to a Foundation-supported project 'for excellence in enabling parents and communities to help young children realise their full potential'.

*MAYA:* the Art and Cultural Institute for Development is a non-profit organisation founded in Bangkok in 1981. MAYA (which means 'illusion' or 'the irresistible beauty' in Thai) provides technical assistance in social development, with a focus on disadvantaged communities. It specialises in preschool education, children and youth development, education of parents, health promotion and environmental education. MAYA has made its name with internationally recognised and ground-breaking theatre performances and outstanding professional children's theatre. Its theatre groups have been invited to perform in various countries and to present their thinking in academic forums about education in theatre and critical thinking development. In 1982 the organisation was awarded The Best Mobile Folk Theatre for Central Region by the National Youth Bureau of the Office of the Prime Minister.

The partnership between MAYA and the Bernard van Leer Foundation started in 1992 and the award-winning Isaan Bright Child Programme started in 1999. In addition to their early childhood work, MAYA is also engaged in a Healthy School Curriculum project, and a programme called Children in the Know which is a production about the dangers of television propaganda. MAYA views each of these activities as pieces of a jigsaw, which, fitted together, can span the whole range of education from preschool to primary and high school level. In this way, MAYA puts into practice its belief in taking a holistic approach to educational reform.



MAYA: In the old system of 'chalk and talk', teachers told children what they believed they needed to know rather than letting them experience it or construct it themselves. EAP training aims to show children how to connect different perceptions and understandings for a specific purpose. For example, the teacher may ask the children: how can we make our village happier? The children will then go to the village and ask the people the same question. When they come back, they discuss the answers, make drawings and discuss them in the group. Then the teacher asks them to choose the best one answer. That is very difficult, but when they have finally chosen one, the teacher asks the whole class to work together on a theatre presentation for the people of the village.

Performing in this way helps the children to understand the problem. It is also a form of feedback to themselves, to their peer group, to the teachers

and to the community. And the children can do it. It takes time, and they have to put it in their own words, but if the issue is clear, they can be very focused – more so than adults. After some time, we try to make the issue a little more complex. Not so much that they become frustrated and lose the desire to learn, but just to stimulate them.

The important thing is that the information that children receive is structured in such a way that they can understand it. For example, we use a parable we were told as children about how the salt came into the sea. It was about a fisherman who had a magic grinder which provided him with anything he wanted. One day, a bad man stole the boat and asked the grinder to produce a lot of salt, which was very precious at that time. But he did not know the magic word to stop it and it just kept on producing salt. Eventually, the boat sank to the bottom of the sea, but the grinder went on churning out salt.

Children participating in the Isaan Bright Child Programme



Stories like this one teach lessons – in this case about moral behaviour and about cause and effect; and it also offers an explanation about why the sea is salty. It isn't the right explanation but it shows there are explanations for many things. Later, when they are capable of greater understanding, children learn the real explanation. Using stories like this is very common.

We use a similar approach in introducing HIV/AIDS. Children may not understand HIV but stories like fables and parables can make it possible to work with the idea of how the AIDS virus makes people very sick, how we can look after them, how to deal with someone dying. After that, you can tell them more about the nature of the disease. They may not understand it all, but they will know that it involves such things as prejudices and relationships and sadness and sorrow. It may seem that we are dealing with issues that are too difficult for children, but if we structure it right, they can understand it. That is how EAP works.

ECM: How does your interpretation of critical thinking compare to the way the concept is used in the West?

MAYA: Critical thinking can be looked at from different perspectives. You can look at it holistically or separate it into different elements. In the West, many academics specialise in a certain subject because they think there is a gap in knowledge in that area. That kind of curiosity is important, but if you don't have that knowledge, it doesn't mean that you don't know anything. We believe that there is a large enough body of knowledge in our country, although things we knew in the past may now have been forgotten: there is nothing really new. However, we can't just repeat the same questions, and make the same mistakes that Aristotle did; we should concentrate on the present and ask ourselves what actions we can take.

Many people, especially in the West, see critical thinking as very structured, or as a skills-development technique. But you can also work on critical thinking by referring to context, by giving it an element of social reality, with the aim of finding alternative solutions to social problems. Both approaches are necessary. At this stage, preschool children need to develop skills, so they are given

exercises. But skills are not an end in themselves, they are a means to an end. And that end is how to make a better life, a better society, a better world.

For us, critical thinking is just one element in developing thinking skills. Creative thinking is another and they all work dynamically together. When we introduced the notion of critical thinking into Thai education, we used knowledge from the West and the East and looked at it holistically. With EAP, the children develop a whole range of thinking skills: they learn to analyse problems, develop their own points of view, respect other viewpoints, and try to make others understand theirs. There is a synthesis of critical and creative thinking to produce something that makes sense to others. With critical thinking you make sense of what you are experiencing right now and creative thinking helps you to make sense of what you should be moving towards in the future. According to Western thinking, children's creative abilities are developed most during the early years. So it is a good time to introduce critical thinking to stimulate their creative skills even more.

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ECM: Particularly in its first years, MAYA was criticised for devoting too much attention to the development of thinking skills and neglecting the child's physical development. Was that a fair criticism?

MAYA: We take a holistic view. Of course physical development is important and it is very much a part of the programme. EAP includes elements that enhance fine-motor movement. Drawing, for example, and dance. Classical Thai dancing uses the fingers a lot and is good training for writing and other skills involving delicate finger movement. Children learn by touching and feeling, but you don't need classical ballet training or Montessori

toys. You can use things that are on hand in the local situation. In Thailand, children improve their balance and coordination by threading string through two half coconut shells and walking on them. In this way, we combine traditional practices and 'modern' – or rediscovered – concepts to help the child's all-round development.

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*ECM: Is it difficult to achieve a balance in the classroom between this holistic approach, which allows the child a lot of freedom, and the need to provide direction?*

*MAYA: We let the children explore things themselves, but at the same time, we offer direction. They are free to take that direction or not, and we hope that they will eventually find their own direction. So we might suggest one thing, but it will not be the only option. The child may suggest an alternative. It doesn't matter what, as long as the child can explain how the two are connected. All children are different and everyone has the right to develop their own potential. So the starting point and the end point may be different but the process is very similar. It's like eating. Everyone has to eat, and we all gather around the dining table. Some will eat more quickly than others. Some will not eat at all, but they will still be at the table. Others will not come to the table at all, and that is fine too as long as they have a good reason. But they will always be welcome at the table. This is the Eastern way: to control without controlling, and to know that your aim when controlling is to make control unnecessary.*

*ECM: Do you think that the Bright Child Programme will have a lasting beneficial effect on the development of the children?*

*MAYA: The programme hasn't been running long enough yet to be able to say whether it has had a*

*lasting beneficial effect. We are, however, convinced that it will have a positive impact on the children in the long run.*

*ECM: What do you hope today's preschool children will be like in ten years' time?*

*MAYA: Happy. In the sense that they will have had a good start in doing the things they want to do, rather than what they have been forced to do. Secondly, they should have learned that this world contains good and bad, and that they have the power to choose whether to do something good for other people or something bad. Cleverness itself is not important. It's their skills that are important, their ability to think, their ability to solve problems and to look out for each other, their ability to make the most of their potential. Children need know what potential they have so that they can choose how to use it.*

*ECM: Apart from the effect on the children, are there other ways of measuring the programme's effectiveness?*

*MAYA: We have learning units for the teachers, that they work with after they have attended the workshop. Some do it better than others, but the important thing is that they are still thinking about the method. We assist them by editing what they have written and sending it back to them. And we have a scale to measure the teachers' performance, similar to the scale used nationwide by the government but less extensive. It shows that many of the teachers have improved since they started using the method. Some have been given awards, including 'National Teacher'. The government, too, is very positive about the method and the results it has achieved.*

*ECM: What are the reasons for the growth and success of the Bright Child Programme?*

*MAYA: We have a regular staff of eleven including documentalists, and are supported by a large number of loyal volunteers. Many are highly skilled and remain in this work for many years. The mobile team has workshops every day, around the country, including Sundays. To achieve a critical mass, you need to move quickly. Once the teachers have set up networks and can help other teachers, it achieves its*



MAYA combines traditional practices and 'modern' concepts to help the child's all-round development

own momentum. We support that with facilitating activities. There is a national seminar every year, which gives the teachers something to look forward to and helps them focus on the objective. When we organised the Isaan Bright Child Seminar in the second year, we expected about 200 people, and about eight or nine hundred came. Primary school teachers receive little respect in Thailand, compared with secondary school or university teachers. This was the first time they could say what they think. With our help, they set up the first network, and then organised the national seminar. They were surprised at what they could achieve – it was a process of empowerment. In the third year, when the programme had expanded to the Northern region, the national seminar was held there. We expected 1,000 people and 3,000 turned up! The teachers from Isaan wanted to come and greet the newcomers while the newcomers for their part wanted to receive the pioneers from Issan. The

Prime Minister attended that seminar. The teachers asked him straightforward, simple questions about his childhood and his own time at school, and about how his policy was going to support early childhood development in Thailand. He gave very honest answers and shortly after the seminar he called for the government's policy on free basic education to be revised to include preschool, and indeed the policy is going to be changed. So the teachers are very happy because it shows that, if they get organised, their voice can have an impact.

*ECM: The Bright Child Programme seems like a continuing success story, but you must have some worries.*

*MAYA: The programme has moved very fast and we sometimes worry about whether quality and quantity are still in balance. But we cannot wait to see what happens. We have to move forward, or*



we will miss the train. So we get on the train, and see what we can do as we are going along. That is a weak point, but it is better than just standing still. The project's aim is to embed the concept and then try to spread it out as much as possible in order to achieve that critical mass. It is a choice you make: to remain small and exclusive or to cover as wide an area as possible. We chose the latter. So we work with all teachers, good or bad, those who welcome the project and those who don't. Often teachers who are not happy about the project at first become our closest allies once they have seen the value of the method.

*ECM: What direction would you like the programme to take in the coming years?*

MAYA: We would like to see a national network. At the moment, there are networks in two regions, but they are not yet developed enough. Because things are moving so fast, we have to allow Isaan and the Northern region to grow on the basis of their own local circumstances. We are now preparing to move into the Southern and Central regions. If we can establish networks there, too, we can work to strengthen all of them and help them to grow and learn and form a countrywide network. But that is a long way in the future.

We would also like to expand the programme beyond preschool, to primary schools, high schools, even universities, where the teaching is still very traditional. The professor reads something out and the students listen. But young people today are different than they used to be. They are more visual, and communicate in many other ways than just with language. So we need to develop other methods in higher education. That doesn't mean it should be easier: with EAP you study harder, but in a way that is more closely linked to your own reality.

*ECM: Do you think that the MAYA method can be applied outside Thailand, in other parts of the world?*

MAYA: The method has been adopted on a trial basis in Malaysia but not, as yet, elsewhere. But perhaps the potential for reaching out internationally lies not in exporting the MAYA method as such, but in tapping into what we see as an emerging 'synthesis of thinking' between East and West. We believe there

are many points of contact between the Western and Eastern approaches to concepts such as critical thinking. The differences are in the details, the way shared concepts are interpreted in the local situation. The point is to take a holistic approach, to gather together a wide range of scattered objectives into a single aim. Then you can work together with partners around the world, on the basis of a shared understanding, while preserving your own roots. And because that local interpretation makes use of existing and traditional practices, teachers and communities recognise it and can accept it.

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We believe that the specialised way of thinking we see as typical of the West is only a temporary phenomenon, imposed by the 'scientific' method. There is now a tendency in the West towards more holistic thinking. This is a natural swing away from the scientific method and a return to something from long ago. Western science has created its own mentality, but we do not believe that people in the West will continue in that direction. Because all human beings are very creative and take things holistically. If we listen enough and learn from each other, we will find a way forward.

## The Convention on the Rights of the Child Fostering critical thinking as an aim of education

Jaap Doek

*Jaap Doek is chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. He is Professor of Family and Juvenile Law and Director of the Office of International Relations at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is also a deputy juvenile court judge at the District Court in The Hague. Professor Doek is a distinguished member of the European Law Faculties Association and founding member of Defence for Children International (Geneva) and the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse. In this article, he discusses the processes that help to translate the right to education as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) into holistic and inclusive education that aims to realise the potential in all children. Within that broad vision, he shows how quality education that includes critical thinking can be argued for, using the various instruments that have been developed to support the implementation of the CRC.*

Education has been recognised as a right in numerous human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These instruments clarify the nature and the aims of the education that is the object of this right; and one aim of education thus defined is to foster among children the ability to think critically.

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child confirms that every child has the right to education and that this right should be progressively achieved through, among other means, compulsory and free primary schooling.<sup>1</sup>

A World Fit for Children, the outcome document of the United Nations General Assembly Special

Session on Children, held in New York on 8-10 May 2002, builds on this. Thus, paragraph 7(5) of the Declaration that opens the document contains the affirmation that 'All girls and boys must have access to and complete primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality as a cornerstone of an inclusive basic education.'<sup>2</sup>

The document refers to education more than 60 times as a right of children, a duty of states, a means of escaping poverty and gaining a viable livelihood, a way of acquiring essential life skills and so on. The core of the document is a Plan of Action that resulted from more than two years of consensus-building.

A world fit for children is one in which all children get the best possible start in life and have access to a quality basic education... and in which all children, including adolescents, have ample opportunity to develop their individual capacities in a safe and supportive environment. We [the 'States parties'] will promote the physical, psychological, spiritual, social, emotional, cognitive and cultural development of children as a matter of national and global priority. (*A World Fit for Children*)

The Plan of Action lays out four key priorities for children, one of which is the provision of 'quality education'. Clarification on the nature of this quality education can be found in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Within the Convention, Article 29 represents the central record of the aims of education recognised by the States parties. It declares that the education of the child should be 'directed' to: