

# Leading Qs

What questioning techniques can early years practitioners use to help children use their critical thinking skills to the utmost? **Elizabeth Powell** investigates

**E**ach school has a unique and special ethos, and this ethos dictates the culture of the school. The culture informs how practitioners view children – it is through this lens that interactions are guided. What is your image of the child, and does it match your school's? This is not a question we ponder over often, but it is important. It focuses us on the capabilities of young children and how these are viewed and fostered in our settings.

In the 1993 seminar 'Your image of the child: Where teaching begins', Loris Malaguzzi said, 'The concept of the image of the child can be imagined as a pair of glasses that adults and teachers unconsciously wear and through which they come to see children in a particular way. It matters which glasses teachers look through because the way they see and understand children informs the curricular and pedagogical choices they make as teachers.'

## RECRUITMENT OPPORTUNITIES

How do you recruit with this in mind? Normal lesson observations



PHOTOS: ELIZABETH POWELL



and adult-led group tasks don't really cut the mustard. At Horsforth Newlaithes Primary School, we ask the practitioner to use some information about individual children (see example below) to come up with a way for each child to find their 'learning pit' (an appropriate challenge). The practitioner is given a short piece of information about each of the children they will work with.

For example:

E is a very creative girl. She is great at problem-solving and takes a lead easily. She finds it harder to negotiate and compromise.

A is a bright boy. He is a leader in construction and problem-solving. People like his ideas and often get involved in projects he has initiated.

I is a quiet girl who has great ideas but doesn't often show them. She lacks confidence and can be easily thrown by challenges unless she is given time. When she is engaged, she shows great enthusiasm.

**All pictures:**  
Eden starting the process of making her medal, mixing paint and cutting the shape (see Case study)

## FIND OUT ABOUT

● Nursery World's EYFS Essentials training videos: [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/eyfs-essentials](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/eyfs-essentials)

J is a child who loves other people and who has a great sense of fun and sense of humour. He finds coming up with his own project ideas challenging and can rely on others to come up with ideas.

S is a bright boy who has good ideas but doesn't always offer them forward. He loves design and construction but doesn't always stick at a task and will give up easily.

The practitioner would then be expected to guide an open-ended task where children were challenged but also where the practitioner showed how they could use this information to tailor their questioning and support. This is not easy, but it does help us to recruit practitioners who can understand the importance of information about individual differences.

## FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON

We focus heavily, as part of our ethos, on careful questioning, to enable children to think critically and deeply, giving them the time and space to formulate their own thinking and ideas. When we observe potential candidates, increasingly we see very little of this, in fact often none at all.



These are examples of leading questions and statements which direct children with heavy subtext. The task (bridge-building) has been chosen by a practitioner:

- Do you need Sellotape to attach that? (subtext: use Sellotape).
- Will your bridge be strong enough if you just use paper? (subtext: don't just use paper).
- Remember, triangles are strong shapes (subtext: use triangles).
- If you work together, you might be able to attach that part of the bridge (subtext: work together).

These questions and statements lead children to a pre-defined outcome, chosen already by the practitioner. It becomes a 'guess the answer in my head' scenario.

Alternative questions which allow the children to think and consider options and approaches without being told are:

- Think about joining techniques you know about. Which one would work best here? Why?
- What makes a good bridge? What features does it need? How can you make sure your bridge has these features?
- How can you ensure that the bridge is strong enough?
- What can you change or adapt to make the bridge stronger?
- Is there something you can do differently to help you to secure that part of the bridge?
- What would happen if you added a weight here?

## JOURNEY OF A PRACTITIONER

Ella joined us at Newlaithes having undertaken the questioning task on her recruitment day. I interviewed her, after two terms at Newlaithes, to see how she reflected on her new position and the questioning skills she has adopted since working with us.

Elizabeth: What made you apply for a job here at Newlaithes?

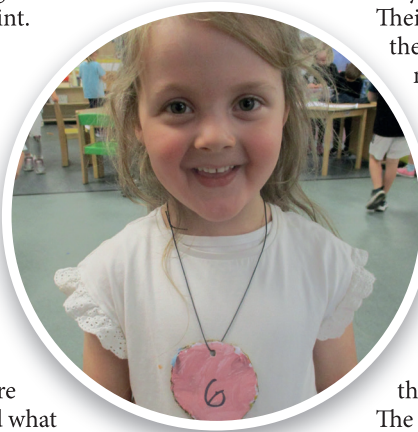
Ella: I'd researched the job first. I had been on the website, spoken to people that knew the school and read the previous *Nursery World* articles and realised that Newlaithes has the same ethos as me. Where I worked previously, we focused on end points and it jarred with my own thinking. This caused me stress. I felt that we had to work on things which were less important. We really felt the external pressure of getting children to a particular point.

Elizabeth: Have you changed your interactions with the children, particularly your questioning?

Ella: One thing that has stood out for me is having patience and taking time. I have learnt to be happy to have a gap between my question and the response. I wait much longer now. I am much more open to children's ideas and what

**We focus heavily on careful questioning, to enable children to think critically and deeply**

**Eden was proud to have finished making her medal**



they are saying. I question, guide and support them to help them to make their ideas manageable. They have ownership now over their learning and my job is to support, to facilitate. I used to know the end point, guiding the children to get there and quickly. Writing is different too. At my last school, it was heavily scaffolded and children were not thinking for themselves. At Newlaithes, writing opportunities are bespoke and tailored to individual needs and interests. The children have such ownership of their work, which means they really care.

Elizabeth: What other impacts of our ethos have you seen at Newlaithes?

Ella: As P.E. lead, I often take the children out of school to sporting events, and our children stand out. They are more collaborative, they work really well together. Their resilience is good. When the children do cross country, many children from other schools finish crying. Our children finish with smiles on their faces. They are not bothered about position but a sense of achievement. I am also blown away by the children's intrinsic motivation and their deep sense of pride in their achievements. I love it. The children seem happier. ■

## case study: the importance of individual feedback

Eden began at Newlaithes as a very quiet girl, who spoke rarely and played little. She would play with one child she knew but observe the other children, watching from a distance. After months of guidance and support, through careful questioning and feedback, Eden has learnt to see her learning capacities and to challenge herself. She has become much more independent and she also seeks and uses feedback from adults more. She has begun to develop a belief in herself as a learner.

Eden began to share more of her home life at school and one day she brought a medal in that she had got from a gymnastics class. She liked to wear it and kept it at school. It became a concern that she might lose it and it was clearly precious, so she set about making one which could stay at school.

Ella: What do you need to do first?

Eden: Make the medal.

Ella: What shape is the medal? Eden then tried to draw a circle. It didn't look like a circle.

Ella: Does that look like a circle?

Eden: No.

Eden then drew a very tiny circle, the size of a small coin.

Ella: What looks different about your circle and your medal?

Eden identified that it was too small. She then went to the maths area and found a flattish cylinder to draw around. She managed to draw around this and cut it out. She then went to show it to Ella.

Ella: What do you need to do next?

Eden: Paint it.

Eden wanted it pink and purple and needed support to make these colours. Ella guided her. She mixed the paint and painted it independently. She checked

after each step and needed a lot of reassurance. Once the medal was dried, she wanted to make a ribbon. She chose to use paper. Ella showed her the shape of the paper.

Ella: What can you do to make it like a ribbon?

Eden: Cut it up.

Eden did this and she was helped to assemble the medal as this was beyond what we term her 'Goldilocks Zone' – i.e., too challenging.

Eden used small independent steps. Each time she manages to carry out a challenge, using her own critical thinking skills, she becomes more confident. Questioning is used to guide and facilitate her own thinking so that gradually she will internalise the process she has been guided through. Eden was so proud of herself when she finished this challenge.