Colin Seale on Closing the Critical Thinking Gap

An attorney and renowned speaker argues that critical thinking shouldn't be a "luxury good" in schools.

All students should have access to instruction that lights a fire in them and allows them to think critically and complexly. In this discussion with acclaimed education writer and speaker Colin Seale, he unpacks why this isn’t happening in all schools and offers ways that teachers and school leaders can begin to think and do differently to make sure it does.

PREMIUM RESOURCE

EQUITY INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Colin Seale was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. He was tracked early into gifted and talented programs and given opportunities his neighborhood peers were not. These early experiences with opportunity gaps and his struggles to make sense of the barriers he and his friends faced sparked an interest in educational equity. His later experiences as a math teacher and an attorney heightened this interest and led him to found thinkLaw, an organization that helps educators use inquiry-based instructional strategies to boost students' critical thinking skills. His work is anchored on the belief that every child can be taught the skills they need to think critically, and that all teachers can create lessons that challenge and inspire their students.

Seale is a widely sought-after speaker and the author of Thinking Like a Lawyer: A Framework for Teaching Critical Thinking to All Students (*Prufrock Press*, 2020) *and* Tangible Equity: A Guide for Leveraging Student Identity, Culture, and Power to Unlock Excellence In and Beyond the Classroom (*Routledge*, 2022).

What is the critical thinking gap, and how can educators close it?

When I started practicing law, I was on all these different education-related committees, and everyone was talking about critical thinking as "the key to 21st-century readiness" and "the future of the workforce." But when you start to look at how critical thinking looks in practice in K–12 classrooms, it's often being treated as a luxury good. You'll see critical thinking in an after-school mock trial program, or for an honors program that serves 8 percent of the school population, or for the special debate team or the selective entry school.

And I'm like, if critical thinking is so essential, why aren't we teaching it to all kids? Why do we assume that some kids can't do it? And what I began to realize is that it is not a gap of ability. It's a gap of expectations. And when we start thinking about what it would look like to teach critical thinking to all kids, we're really addressing a very specific aspect of the belief gap. Because if you're buying into the idea that some kids *can't*, you're essentially guaranteeing that they will *not*. Kids are going to school and not even getting content delivered at grade level. Or if they do get content at grade level, they rarely get asked challenging questions that raise the bar.

> **“ How do we create the kind of environments where we have a tier-one instructional design model that**

unleashes the gifts and talents of all students by design?

So, a lot of what I've been obsessing about over the last eight years is, How do we create a world where we no longer reserve critical thinking for the most elite kids at the most elite schools? How do we create the kind of environments where instead of hoarding a certain kind of instruction for your gifted and talented students, we have a tier-one instructional design model that unleashes the gifts and talents of *all* students by design?

Has the critical thinking gap gotten worse since the pandemic?

The reality is we've always talked about things like summer slide and some kids being academically behind their peers. The pandemic has just allowed us to see even more of these sorts of academic struggles. There are a lot of well-meaning administrators and teachers saying, "We gotta meet kids where they are." And I say, "How about we don't?" If where they are is below grade level, why would we meet them there? Now we might *acknowledge* where they are now and where they need to be. But if we use a culturally responsive model for critical thinking—if we can use *who* they are and *how* they are to get them where they need to be—then we can create a low-floor, high-ceiling framework where kids can have access to challenge and rigor from the very start of a

lesson.

Educators are understandably exhausted, and the idea of adding "one more thing" to their plates can overwhelm them. Can you give us one or two strategies teachers can use to incorporate critical thinking into what they are already teaching?

I try to give teachers frameworks they can use in their regular instructional planning time so they can seamlessly integrate critical thinking into what they are already doing. It's not one more thing, it's the thing. But it creates these spaces where discussion and dialogue become part of the process, where critical thinking is the tier-one expectation that every kid gets access to. These can be low-floor, high-ceiling questions that get kids talking—instead of making them memorize facts about the Revolutionary War, ask them, "What was the most significant event of the Revolutionary War?" Instead of having them just solve math equations, give them two wrong solutions and ask them which is the *most* wrong.

I did a training in a school in the Midwest a while ago on how to incorporate this low-floor, high-ceiling questioning into your tier-one instruction so it doesn't feel like one more thing. The next day, I see a U.S. government teacher starting with the question, "What would it look like if every state had its own currency?" And these kids were on fire. They were going back and forth, saying things like, "I don't want your nasty Illinois money," having so much fun discussing this

captivating opening question, and this learning experience set the teacher on fire as well. And this lesson was on U.S. monetary policy. Not the most interesting thing in the world, right? But she had them. She hooked them.

But here's the kicker to that story. At the end of the day when I debriefed with the assistant superintendent and the building administration and told them who that teacher was, they couldn't believe it was that teacher. She was a 25-year veteran who had been burnt out and never tried anything new. And I realized the joy that I saw in that classroom was hers. And it was contagious.

In your book, you emphasize teaching kids to "think like a lawyer." How is the way attorneys are trained to think different from the way students usually think in schools?

As a kid, I was always a gifted underachiever, or better yet, a gifted *selective* achiever. Meaning, if I was really into something, I'd go all-in, but if I wasn't into it at all, I wouldn't do anything. And I never really got good grades. But when I went to law school (at night, while teaching math by day), it changed everything. I graduated at the top of my class. Because I wasn't just memorizing information. I wasn't just trying to get a right answer. I was thinking on my toes, I was playing all the angles. And what was very interesting is that these traits that educators often call "street smarts" actually had academic value.

We have many past presidents, founding fathers, and leaders in

business and industry who have a background in the law. This is because when you think like a lawyer, you're hardwired to look at problems and solutions from multiple perspectives, to ask questions until you get the information that you need to make a wide variety of claims, and to back those claims with valid and developing evidence.

When you put that next to the standards that our kids are being expected to learn in school, it's like, why in the world should we wait until law school to introduce this kind of a model? It's the kind of model that is grounded in practicality, grounded in the idea of learning how to learn.

> **“ Imagine what our country would look like if our kids—as a rule, as a priority, as a goal—were taught to listen to understand, to speak to be understood, and to disagree without being disagreeable.**

We have to get kids to think smartly and critically, to not be so married to their initial gut reaction, to be open to proving themselves wrong. We need to create a space where kids are learning how to listen to

understand, to speak to be understood, and to disagree without being disagreeable. And just imagine what our country would look like if our kids—as a rule, as a priority, as a goal—were taught to listen to understand, to speak to be understood, and to disagree without being disagreeable. That's the power of critical thinking.

You often tell educators to "find the funk" in their lesson planning. What do you mean by that?

When we look at the funk in our instruction, we look for opportunities and hooks to pull kids in. We look to see whether there's any sort of rule, ranking, controversy—something that's not necessarily straightforward that requires some level of debate.

For example, students know that in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. If I ask them why, they could look it up in a textbook, and maybe his motives get simplified to the three "Gs": gold, God, and glory. But to find the funk, I might ask, "Which one of those motives mattered the most?"

Now I've created something where they can argue one or the other. They can make a case for this and make a case for that. And this is where thinking like a lawyer comes in. In a music appreciation class, for example, a teacher might find that students are having trouble classifying genres of music like Baroque vs. Romantic periods. So he might do a lesson on whether the song "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X is a country song. And he might ask students, What makes a country

song country? Are they talking about country things? Are they doing country things in this song? Is there a country guitar playing in the background? It creates a whole framework to allow kids to make a claim, back it up with evidence, make a counterargument that's meaningful, and draw a conclusion. They're learning to think critically in a very specific context because we found that funk. Circling all the way back, this funky exercise models the same type of analysis students need to master to classify genres of classical music.

Why is teaching critical thinking so important to equity efforts?

Our kids need to be able to excel, especially kids who still have to work twice as hard to get half as far in a very unfair system. We have an opportunity with critical thinking for our kids to start to learn how to ask their own questions and design the world as it ought to be. Not just how it is, but how it ought to be. So they don't just play the game, they can slay the game altogether. It's a different level, it's a different kind of learning.

> **Kids should walk away from their learning feeling that they have the power to be difference makers.**

In Phoenix, I worked with a school that was doing a 3rd grade unit on Antarctica. The goal of the unit was to talk about how people in Antarctica overcome barriers to food, shelter, and transportation to make life work. The students had to imagine moving the school for a year to Antarctica. What would they need to do to overcome those barriers? And to spark that thinking, they think about what advice they'd have for a friend who was coming to visit in July in Phoenix —because living here in the summer, these students know a thing or two about extreme weather conditions. At the end of the lesson, the kids use their existing knowledge to figure out how to make life work in Antarctica. But it doesn't stop there. Because right here in Phoenix, we have people who struggle with access to food, shelter, and transportation. So, now they are going to apply their knowledge and write a letter to the city council member. Because why are we learning about something if they can't use it for something valuable in their community? Kids should walk away from their learning feeling that they have the power to be difference makers.

What frustrates you most in the work you do with schools? What gives you the most hope?

You might've heard the phrase, "Doing right is more important than being right." I do an activity with students, educators, and sometimes parents, where we look at a sign that says, "No driving in the park." And the kids talk and teachers talk about who the sign applies to, and they make judgment calls like, "Oh, a bike gets in, but a motorcycle doesn't." But then I ask, "What if there's a kid injured in the park and he's bleeding from the head? The ambulance can either take 10 minutes to get to the kid by going around the park to the parking lot or go straight through the park in 10 seconds." People are like, "Oh sure, the ambulance is an emergency vehicle. It's authorized to do that."

Then I say, OK, what if it's me? I'm a dad, and that's my kid, and I'm driving my Honda CRV. Can I drive through the park in that same scenario? And people are like, "Oh, I'm not sure about that. Probably not." This is what frustrates me. How are we not at a place where we say, "This kid is bleeding from the head. As long as I'm not running over kids along the way, I'm going to drive in the park! I don't care if I can't!"

My organization, thinkLaw, has led family critical thinking workshops for over five years. I learned early on that a great hack for increasing parent and family turnout is to invite their children to come, too. And here is what worries me: In five years of doing this, I have never met a student who thought it would be okay for me to drive in the park.

Never.

People say, "Don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness." I say, how about if I don't ask at all? Why are we even asking when a kid is bleeding from the head? There are so many bad things that have happened in human history because people were just following orders. Education is a ridiculously compliant field where so many of us who did well in school thrived because we were compliant. We can't raise kids to be like that. We need to raise kids that don't just look at the world the way it is, but imagine it as it ought to be. And they have to be psychologically safe enough to know it's OK to drive in the park to save someone who is bleeding from the head. This is why I am so passionate about using critical thinking to create spaces where—for the sake of deeper learning—we maximize opportunities for students to be disruptive on purpose; to be disruptive with a purpose.

On the other hand, what excites me most is that we've got a tremendous foundation for raising critical thinkers. If you look at our kids today, they have a level of savviness and awareness that the previous generation did not. And maybe it's just been my experience, but high schools look so different than they did 20 years ago. Everyone talks to everybody. There's a whole different kind of inclusive environment. And I'm like: We can't blow it. We have an amazing opportunity with kids who are more open, more accepting, more understanding, more in tune with their social emotional needs and mental health needs than any generation before. We need to make sure

they understand their power. They need to understand why they're learning stuff, and they need to know that they already have the keys necessary to create the world as it ought to be.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for space.