

You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES**

of Ms. Loredana Lombardi

Which will take place **ONLINE** on  
Monday, 18th October 2021, 17:00 (5 pm CEST)

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**PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN SCHOOL SYSTEM:  
PROMOTION OF CRITICAL THINKING FROM CURRICULUM  
DESIGN TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

**JURY**

**INTERN:**

**Prof. dr. Katrien Struyven - Chair - VUB**  
**Prof. dr. Valérie Thomas - VUB**  
**Prof. dr. Frederick Mednick - VUB**

**EXTERN:**

**Prof. dr. Sebastiano Moruzzi – University of Bologna**  
**Prof. dr. Carlotta Capuccino – University of Bologna**

**PROMOTORS**

**Prof. dr. Koen Lombaerts - VUB**  
**Prof. dr. Free De Backer - VUB**

## SUMMARY

Research in educational policy recognizes the importance of strengthening children's capacity to think critically in order to form critical citizens. In a context of schooling, this means teaching children to make judgements using fact-based knowledge and to adopt an open and inquiring mindset. To achieve these goals at policy level, a strong integration of critical thinking into the school curricula is necessary. However, this is rather limited in primary education practice nowadays. Therefore, the first objective of this dissertation was to investigate how primary school curriculums refer to the concept of critical thinking, and what characteristics, core skills and approaches to critical thinking are reflected in textbooks and syllabi. Official policy documents of the primary school curriculum and syllabi of the European Schools System were investigated. Consequently, the second objective in the subsequent studies was to examine primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of the concept of critical thinking in their classroom practice and professional background. The studies were conducted within the European Schools System in Belgium.

The main results stress: (i) European Schools' primary school curriculum offers support to critical thinking, although it should be implemented with all the core skills in a structured manner across the syllabi; (ii) the need to foster a student-centred classroom environment is considered crucial to stimulate critical thinking by promoting active learning and allocating more responsibility to pupils; (iii) valuable teaching practices are used to stimulate critical thinking skills, making pupils aware of their learning processes; (iv) teachers have a good understanding of the concept of critical thinking based on their professional background, but there is still a need for additional practical support (e.g., guidelines, courses) for teacher professional development in this field.

Through this body of research, this thesis aims to contribute to defining critical thinking in the context of curriculum design and the professional development of primary school teachers. The results provide insights for future practice and research on innovative teaching methods to promote critical thinking in primary education.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Loredana Lombardi is a member of the BILD research group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Her work focuses on identifying the determinants for promoting critical thinking in education in order to support teachers in implementing critical thinking skills in the classroom.

Before starting her PhD, she worked as a policy officer at the Italian Ministry of Education, where she collaborated on several projects with the European Commission and international organizations in the field of education.