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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultivating Critical Thinking and Independent Learning Skills among Grade 6 Pupils: A Qualitative Exploration of Learner-Centered Teaching Practices in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines

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Abstract

The development of critical thinking and independent learning skills has become a central objective of contemporary basic education as schools prepare learners for increasingly complex academic, social, and technological environments. Learner-centered teaching practices have been recognized as effective approaches for promoting analytical thinking, problem-solving, self-regulation, and learner autonomy. This study explored the learner-centered teaching practices employed by Grade 6 teachers in cultivating critical thinking and independent learning skills among pupils in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective discussions involving ten Grade 6 teachers. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed six major themes: (1) Inquiry-Based Learning Stimulates Critical Thinking; (2) Learner Autonomy Strengthens Independent Learning; (3) Problem-Solving Activities Enhance Analytical Reasoning; (4) Collaborative Learning Supports Cognitive and Social Development; (5) Reflective Practices Promote Self-Regulation and Metacognition; and (6) Teacher Facilitation and Constructive Feedback Foster Learner Growth. The findings indicate that learner-centered teaching practices significantly contribute to the development of critical thinking and independent learning by encouraging active engagement, self-directed learning, and meaningful knowledge construction. The study highlights the importance of empowering learners to become reflective, responsible, and independent participants in the learning process. Implications for classroom instruction, curriculum enhancement, and teacher professional development are discussed.

Keywords: ***critical thinking, independent learning, learner-centered teaching, self-regulated learning, elementary education, qualitative research, Philippines***

Introduction

Education in the twenty-first century requires learners to possess competencies that extend beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge. Rapid technological advancement, globalization, and the increasing complexity of societal challenges demand individuals who can think critically, solve problems independently, evaluate information, and continuously adapt to changing circumstances. Consequently, educational systems worldwide have shifted their focus toward developing higher-order thinking skills and learner autonomy as essential outcomes of schooling.

Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyze information, evaluate evidence, make reasoned judgments, solve problems, and reflect upon one's own thinking processes. It enables learners to engage actively with information rather than accepting ideas uncritically. According to Facione (2020), critical thinking involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. These skills are essential for academic success and lifelong learning.

Independent learning, on the other hand, refers to learners' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, monitoring progress, utilizing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Independent learners demonstrate initiative, self-discipline, motivation, and the ability to learn beyond direct teacher supervision. Zimmerman (2013) emphasized that self-regulated learners actively participate in their learning processes and exhibit greater academic achievement.

Learner-centered teaching has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach for developing these competencies. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, learner-centered teaching emphasizes active participation, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and learner autonomy. Through learner-centered practices, learners become active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information.

Within the Philippine educational context, the Department of Education continues to advocate learner-centered pedagogies aligned with the goals of the K to 12 curriculum. These approaches aim to develop learners who are critical thinkers, independent learners, and responsible citizens. However, despite growing recognition of learner-centered instruction, limited qualitative research has examined how elementary school teachers implement these practices to cultivate critical thinking and independent learning skills, particularly in rural educational settings.

Potia Elementary School, located in Ifugao, provides a valuable context for exploring how learner-centered teaching practices are utilized in promoting learner development. Understanding teachers' experiences and instructional approaches can contribute to improving educational practices and supporting learner outcomes.

This study sought to explore the learner-centered teaching practices employed by Grade 6 teachers in cultivating critical thinking and independent learning skills among pupils in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines.

Review of Related Literature

Critical thinking has been widely recognized as a fundamental educational outcome. Facione (2020) argued that critical thinking enables learners to make informed decisions, evaluate evidence, and solve complex problems. Educational environments that encourage questioning, reflection, and inquiry contribute significantly to the development of critical thinking competencies.

Constructivist theory provides an important framework for understanding critical thinking development. Piaget (1973) proposed that learners actively construct knowledge through interactions with their environment and experiences. Learning occurs when individuals engage in cognitive processes that challenge existing understandings and facilitate new knowledge construction.

Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and guided participation in learning. Collaborative learning experiences allow learners to develop higher-order thinking skills through dialogue, discussion, and shared problem-solving.

Independent learning has been closely associated with self-regulated learning theory. Zimmerman (2013) described self-regulated learners as individuals who proactively set goals, monitor their progress, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Independent learning promotes responsibility, autonomy, and lifelong learning habits.

Research indicates that learner-centered teaching practices significantly enhance critical thinking and learner

autonomy. Problem-based learning, inquiry-based instruction, collaborative learning, reflective activities, and authentic assessment have been associated with improved learner engagement, self-regulation, and academic achievement (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

Furthermore, studies suggest that teacher facilitation plays a critical role in learner-centered classrooms. Effective teachers create learning environments that encourage exploration, questioning, reflection, and independent decision-making while providing appropriate guidance and support.

Despite extensive literature on learner-centered education, there remains a need for qualitative investigations that explore how these practices are implemented within elementary classrooms and how they contribute to the development of critical thinking and independent learning skills among learners.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore teachers' lived experiences regarding learner-centered teaching practices that cultivate critical thinking and independent learning skills among Grade 6 pupils. Phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a particular phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Potia Elementary School in Ifugao, Philippines. Ten Grade 6 teachers were purposively selected as participants based on their teaching experience, professional involvement, and direct engagement with learner-centered instructional practices.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective discussions. Interview questions focused on instructional strategies, classroom experiences, learner responses, challenges encountered, and perceived outcomes related to critical thinking and independent learning development.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework. The analysis involved familiarization with data, coding, theme development, theme refinement, interpretation, and reporting. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and secure management of research data. Participants were informed of their rights and were assured that their identities would remain confidential throughout the study.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Inquiry-Based Learning Stimulates Critical Thinking

Participants consistently emphasized that inquiry-based learning serves as a powerful strategy for developing critical thinking among Grade 6 learners.

One teacher explained:

"Mas natututo silang mag-isip kapag sila mismo ang naghahanap ng sagot sa mga tanong at problema."

Another participant shared:

"Kapag pinapahintulutan silang magtanong at magsiyasat, mas nagiging mapanuri sila sa impormasyon."

Teachers described utilizing inquiry projects, guided investigations, research tasks, and classroom discussions that encouraged learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and formulate conclusions.

These findings support constructivist perspectives emphasizing active knowledge construction and inquiry as mechanisms for critical thinking development (Piaget, 1973; Facione, 2020).

Theme 2: Learner Autonomy Strengthens Independent Learning

Participants highlighted learner autonomy as a key factor in developing independent learning skills.

One teacher stated:

“Kapag may pagkakataon silang magdesisyon sa kanilang pag-aaral, mas nagiging responsable sila.”

Another participant explained:

“Unti-unti naming binibigyan sila ng kalayaan upang matutong magplano at magmonitor ng kanilang gawain.”

Teachers implemented self-paced tasks, independent projects, learning contracts, and choice-based activities that encouraged learners to take ownership of their learning.

These findings align with Zimmerman’s (2013) theory of self-regulated learning, which emphasizes learner autonomy, goal setting, and self-monitoring.

Theme 3: Problem-Solving Activities Enhance Analytical Reasoning

Teachers consistently identified problem-solving activities as effective tools for developing analytical reasoning skills.

One participant remarked:

“Kapag may mga problemang kailangang lutasin, natututo silang magsuri ng iba't ibang solusyon.”

Another teacher shared:

“Hindi lang nila hinahanap ang tamang sagot; iniisip din nila kung bakit iyon ang pinakamainam na sagot.”

Activities included real-life problem scenarios, project-based tasks, mathematical investigations, and case analyses.

The findings suggest that problem-solving activities promote reasoning, evaluation, and decision-making skills. Research by Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) demonstrated that problem-based learning enhances critical thinking and conceptual understanding.

Theme 4: Collaborative Learning Supports Cognitive and Social Development

Participants emphasized the value of collaborative learning in promoting both cognitive and social growth.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag nagtutulungan sila, natututo silang makinig at magbahagi ng ideya.”

Another participant stated:

“Mas lumalalim ang kanilang pag-unawa kapag pinag-uusapan nila ang mga konsepto kasama ang kanilang mga kaklase.”

Teachers utilized group projects, peer tutoring, cooperative learning activities, and collaborative discussions.

These findings support Vygotsky’s (1978) assertion that learning occurs through social interaction and collaborative engagement.

Theme 5: Reflective Practices Promote Self-Regulation and Metacognition

Participants consistently highlighted reflection as an important strategy for promoting self-regulated learning.

One teacher remarked:

"Pinag-iisip namin sila tungkol sa kanilang natutunan at kung paano pa nila mapapabuti ang kanilang pag-aaral."

Another participant explained:

"Sa reflection activities, natututo silang suriin ang kanilang sariling progreso."

Teachers utilized journals, self-assessments, learning logs, and reflective writing activities.

The findings indicate that reflection strengthens metacognitive awareness and learner ownership. Zimmerman (2013) emphasized that self-reflection is a critical component of self-regulated learning.

Theme 6: Teacher Facilitation and Constructive Feedback Foster Learner Growth

Participants identified teacher facilitation and constructive feedback as essential in supporting learner development.

One teacher shared:

"Hindi namin agad ibinibigay ang sagot. Ginagabayan namin sila upang sila mismo ang makadiskubre."

Another participant remarked:

"Ang feedback ay tumutulong upang makita nila kung paano sila mag-iimprove."

Teachers described acting as facilitators, mentors, and guides while providing timely and constructive feedback.

These findings align with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which highlights the role of encouragement and feedback in promoting learner confidence and achievement.

Conclusion

The study revealed that learner-centered teaching practices play a significant role in cultivating critical thinking and independent learning skills among Grade 6 pupils in Potia Elementary School. Inquiry-based learning, learner autonomy, problem-solving activities, collaborative learning, reflective practices, and constructive feedback emerged as key instructional approaches that support learner development.

The findings demonstrate that critical thinking and independent learning flourish when learners are actively engaged in meaningful learning experiences, encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, and provided opportunities for reflection and collaboration. Teachers serve as facilitators who create environments that empower learners to become critical thinkers and independent learners.

Implications of the Study

The findings suggest that schools should strengthen learner-centered instructional practices that promote inquiry, autonomy, reflection, and collaboration. Professional development programs should focus on enhancing teachers' capacity to facilitate critical thinking and independent learning.

Curriculum developers may consider integrating more inquiry-based and self-directed learning activities into instructional materials. Educational leaders should support classroom environments that encourage learner agency, responsibility, and active participation.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen inquiry-based instructional approaches across elementary grade levels.
2. Increase opportunities for learner autonomy and self-directed learning.
3. Integrate authentic problem-solving activities into classroom instruction.

4. Promote collaborative learning experiences that support higher-order thinking.
5. Encourage reflective practices that develop self-regulation and metacognition.
6. Conduct future studies involving learners, parents, and administrators to gain broader perspectives on critical thinking and independent learning development.

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