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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

The ability to think critically and learn independently has emerged as one of the most essential competencies required in the twenty-first century. As educational systems worldwide strive to prepare learners for increasingly complex social, economic, and technological environments, schools are expected to move beyond traditional knowledge transmission toward approaches that empower learners to become active constructors of knowledge. Critical thinking enables learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, solve problems, and make informed decisions, while independent learning equips them with the capacity to regulate their own learning processes and adapt to changing circumstances.

The Philippine educational system, through the K to 12 curriculum, emphasizes the development of higher-order thinking skills, lifelong learning competencies, and learner autonomy. The Department of Education advocates learner-centered pedagogies that encourage active participation, inquiry, collaboration, and reflective thinking. Such approaches are particularly important in elementary education where learners begin developing cognitive, metacognitive, and self-regulatory skills that influence future academic success.

Research has consistently demonstrated that learner-centered teaching practices enhance critical thinking and independent learning outcomes. According to constructivist learning theory, learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and social experiences. Educational scholars have argued that when learners are provided opportunities to investigate, question, collaborate, and reflect, they become more capable of engaging in higher-order cognitive processes.

Despite the growing emphasis on learner-centered education, limited studies have explored how elementary teachers in rural Philippine contexts implement teaching practices that cultivate critical thinking and independent learning skills. Understanding these practices is particularly relevant in geographically and culturally diverse communities such as Ifugao, where contextualized and culturally responsive teaching plays a significant role in educational delivery.

This study explored the experiences and practices of Grade 6 teachers in Potia Elementary School regarding the cultivation of critical thinking and independent learning skills among learners. By examining classroom strategies, instructional approaches, and teacher perspectives, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on learner-centered education in elementary schools.

Review of Related Literature

Critical Thinking in Elementary Education

Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and synthesize information to arrive at reasoned judgments and decisions. Facione (2020) describes critical thinking as purposeful and self-regulatory judgment involving interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. Developing critical thinking skills during elementary education provides a strong foundation for academic achievement and lifelong learning.

Studies indicate that classroom environments encouraging questioning, inquiry, and problem-solving promote critical thinking among young learners. Educational experiences that challenge learners to justify answers, analyze alternatives, and evaluate evidence facilitate deeper cognitive engagement.

Independent Learning and Learner Autonomy

Independent learning involves learners taking responsibility for their own educational processes through goal setting, self-monitoring, reflection, and self-assessment. According to Zimmerman (2019), self-regulated learners actively participate in their learning by employing cognitive and metacognitive strategies that improve performance and motivation.

Independent learning has been associated with increased academic achievement, motivation, persistence, and lifelong learning capabilities. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating autonomy by gradually transferring responsibility from teacher-directed instruction to learner-directed activities.

Learner-Centered Teaching Practices

Learner-centered teaching emphasizes active participation, collaboration, inquiry, and authentic learning experiences. Weimer (2018) explains that learner-centered classrooms shift the focus from teaching to learning by encouraging learners to become active participants in constructing knowledge.

Instructional approaches such as project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, reflective activities, and experiential learning have demonstrated effectiveness in fostering critical thinking and independent learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory proposed by Piaget and expanded by Vygotsky. Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences, social interactions, and reflection. Learning occurs when learners engage with meaningful tasks, solve authentic problems, and connect new information to prior knowledge.

The study is also supported by Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which emphasizes learners' active participation in managing their cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes during learning. These theories collectively explain how learner-centered practices facilitate the development of critical thinking and independent learning skills.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 6 teachers describe their learner-centered teaching practices?
2. What classroom strategies are employed to cultivate critical thinking among learners?
3. How do teachers promote independent learning skills in the classroom?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing learner-centered approaches?
5. What insights can be drawn from teachers' experiences in fostering critical thinking and learner autonomy?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 6 teachers in cultivating critical thinking and independent learning skills among learners through learner-centered teaching practices. Phenomenology was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines. Participants consisted of ten Grade 6 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria included having at least three years of teaching experience and active involvement in implementing learner-centered instructional practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective conversations. Interview questions focused on instructional strategies, learner engagement, critical thinking development, independent learning opportunities, and implementation challenges. Classroom observations provided contextual validation of teaching practices, while reflective discussions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, maintaining anonymity through pseudonyms, and securing voluntary participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework involving familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Trustworthiness was established through member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and audit trails to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of findings.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and reflective discussions generated six interconnected themes that describe how Grade 6 teachers cultivate critical thinking and independent learning skills through learner-centered teaching practices in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines.

Theme 1: Inquiry-Based Learning as a Catalyst for Critical Thinking

One of the most dominant themes that emerged from the study was the consistent use of inquiry-based learning to encourage learners to think critically, ask questions, and investigate ideas independently.

Participants emphasized that rather than providing direct answers, they intentionally guided learners toward discovering solutions through questioning and exploration.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag may bagong aralin, hindi ko agad ibinibigay ang sagot. Hinahayaan ko silang magtanong, mag-observa, at magbigay ng sariling ideya bago namin talakayin ang tamang konsepto.”

Another participant shared:

“Mas natututo sila kapag sila mismo ang naghahanap ng sagot. Nakikita namin na mas malalim ang kanilang pag-unawa kapag sila ang nag-aanalisa.”

Classroom observations revealed that teachers frequently used open-ended questions, problem scenarios, prediction activities, and guided investigations. Learners were encouraged to justify their answers and explain their reasoning rather than simply recalling information.

The findings suggest that inquiry-based learning serves as a powerful mechanism for promoting higher-order thinking among elementary learners. By engaging learners in questioning and investigation, teachers create opportunities for analysis, evaluation, and reasoning.

These findings support the work of Hmelo-Silver et al. (2019), who argued that inquiry-based learning strengthens learners' critical thinking by requiring them to construct explanations and evaluate evidence. Similarly, Kuhn (2018) emphasized that inquiry activities develop reasoning skills because learners must formulate arguments and assess competing perspectives. Research by Bell et al. (2020) further demonstrated that inquiry-oriented classrooms significantly improve learners' analytical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Within the context of Potia Elementary School, inquiry-based learning appeared to empower learners to become active participants in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information.

Theme 2: Collaborative Learning Promotes Knowledge Construction and Critical Reflection

The second theme highlighted the importance of collaborative learning activities in enhancing both critical thinking and learner independence.

Teachers consistently reported utilizing group discussions, peer learning, cooperative tasks, and collaborative projects to encourage active participation.

One participant stated:

“Kapag magkakasama silang nag-uusap tungkol sa isang problema, mas marami silang naiisip na solusyon kaysa kapag mag-isa lang silang nagtatrabaho.”

Another teacher remarked:

“Sa group activities, natututo silang makinig sa opinyon ng iba at ipaliwanag ang kanilang sariling pananaw.”

Classroom observations showed learners engaging in collaborative problem-solving, peer feedback, and group

presentations. Teachers acted as facilitators rather than sole sources of knowledge.

The findings indicate that collaborative learning provides opportunities for learners to articulate ideas, evaluate differing viewpoints, and co-construct knowledge. Through interaction with peers, learners become more reflective and analytical in their thinking.

These results align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Johnson and Johnson (2019) found that cooperative learning significantly enhances critical thinking and academic achievement. Similarly, Gillies (2020) reported that collaborative learning environments encourage deeper reasoning and metacognitive engagement among learners.

The findings further support Slavin's (2020) assertion that cooperative learning promotes both academic and social development by fostering dialogue, reflection, and shared responsibility for learning.

Theme 3: Problem-Solving Activities Enhance Analytical and Decision-Making Skills

Teachers identified problem-solving activities as a central component of learner-centered instruction.

Participants emphasized that authentic and real-life problems encourage learners to analyze situations critically and generate solutions independently.

One teacher explained:

"Kapag may situational problems, kailangan nilang pag-isipan nang mabuti ang posibleng sagot. Hindi sapat ang simpleng pagmememoria."

Another participant shared:

"Ginagamit namin ang mga problemang malapit sa kanilang karanasan para mas maging interesado silang maghanap ng solusyon."

Observations revealed the use of case scenarios, project-based tasks, mathematical investigations, and community-based problem-solving activities.

Teachers reported that these activities improved learners' ability to identify issues, evaluate alternatives, and justify decisions.

The findings suggest that problem-solving activities facilitate critical thinking by exposing learners to complex situations that require analysis and reasoning.

Jonassen (2018) argued that problem-solving serves as one of the most effective strategies for developing higher-order cognitive skills because learners must integrate knowledge, evaluate evidence, and formulate solutions. Likewise, OECD (2021) emphasized that problem-solving competencies are essential for preparing learners to navigate modern societal challenges.

Research by Kim et al. (2020) further demonstrated that authentic problem-solving experiences improve learners' critical thinking, creativity, and independent decision-making skills.

Theme 4: Learner Autonomy is Strengthened through Self-Directed Learning Opportunities

A significant theme emerging from the data was the intentional provision of opportunities for learners to manage their own learning.

Teachers described allowing learners to make choices, conduct independent research, and complete self-paced learning tasks.

One participant explained:

"Binibigyan namin sila ng pagkakataong maghanap ng impormasyon gamit ang mga aklat at iba pang resources para
Azal Arts and Humanities

hindi sila laging umaasa sa guro.”

Another teacher stated:

“Unti-unti naming ibinibigay sa kanila ang responsibilidad sa kanilang pag-aaral upang matuto silang maging independent.”

Classroom observations revealed the use of learning stations, independent projects, research activities, and learner-generated outputs.

Teachers emphasized that fostering autonomy requires gradual scaffolding and consistent encouragement.

These findings indicate that self-directed learning opportunities cultivate learner responsibility, initiative, and confidence.

Zimmerman (2019) argued that self-regulated learning develops when learners actively participate in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes. Similarly, Knowles (2018) emphasized that autonomy enhances motivation and lifelong learning readiness.

Research by Broadbent and Poon (2021) demonstrated that learners who engage in self-directed learning exhibit stronger academic performance and greater persistence in completing complex tasks.

The findings highlight the importance of empowering learners to take ownership of their educational experiences.

Theme 5: Reflective Practices Foster Metacognitive Awareness and Independent Learning

Teachers consistently emphasized reflection as an important strategy for developing critical thinking and learner autonomy.

Participants reported using reflective journals, learning logs, self-assessment activities, and post-task reflections.

One teacher shared:

“Pagkatapos ng gawain, pinapasulat namin sila kung ano ang kanilang natutunan at kung paano nila ito natutunan.”

Another participant explained:

“Kapag nagre-reflect sila, mas naiintindihan nila ang kanilang strengths at mga bagay na kailangan pa nilang pagbutihin.”

Observations indicated that reflective activities encouraged learners to evaluate their performance, identify challenges, and plan improvement strategies.

The findings suggest that reflection strengthens metacognitive awareness by helping learners become conscious of their thinking processes and learning strategies.

Schraw and Dennison (2018) emphasized that metacognition plays a crucial role in effective learning because it enables learners to monitor and regulate cognitive processes. Likewise, Flavell’s theory of metacognition highlights the importance of self-awareness in academic development.

Research by Panadero (2019) found that reflective practices significantly improve self-regulation, critical thinking, and academic achievement. Similarly, Andrade and Brookhart (2020) reported that self-assessment and reflection enhance learner independence and motivation.

The findings indicate that reflective practices serve as a bridge between critical thinking and self-directed learning.

Theme 6: Supportive Classroom Environments Encourage Independent Learning Behaviors

The final theme highlighted the importance of creating supportive and psychologically safe learning environments.

Teachers emphasized that learners become more willing to think independently when they feel respected, valued, and free to express ideas without fear of criticism.

One participant stated:

“Kapag alam nilang ligtas silang magkamali, mas nagiging aktibo sila sa pagsagot at pagbibigay ng opinyon.”

Another teacher remarked:

“Mahalaga ang magandang relasyon sa pagitan ng guro at mag-aaral upang magkaroon sila ng kumpiyansa sa sarili.”

Observations showed that teachers consistently encouraged participation, acknowledged learner contributions, and provided constructive feedback.

The findings indicate that supportive classroom environments strengthen learner confidence and encourage risk-taking in learning.

Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory suggests that positive learning environments enhance self-efficacy, which influences learner motivation and persistence. Research by Ryan and Deci (2020) further demonstrated that supportive educational environments satisfy learners’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Similarly, Wentzel (2019) found that positive teacher-learner relationships significantly contribute to learner engagement, academic motivation, and independent learning behaviors.

The findings underscore the critical role of classroom climate in facilitating critical thinking and learner autonomy.

Conclusion

This study explored the learner-centered teaching practices employed by Grade 6 teachers in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines, to cultivate critical thinking and independent learning skills among learners. Findings revealed that teachers actively implemented inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning, problem-solving activities, self-directed learning opportunities, reflective practices, and supportive classroom environments to foster higher-order thinking and learner autonomy.

The study demonstrates that critical thinking and independent learning are not developed through direct instruction alone but through meaningful learning experiences that encourage inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and responsibility. Teachers serve as facilitators who guide learners toward constructing knowledge, evaluating information, and managing their own learning processes. The findings affirm the value of learner-centered pedagogy in preparing elementary learners for lifelong learning and active participation in society.

Implications of the Study

Educational Practice

The findings highlight the importance of integrating learner-centered approaches into everyday classroom instruction. Teachers should continue designing activities that promote inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and independent problem-solving.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum developers may strengthen critical thinking and learner autonomy by incorporating more authentic tasks, project-based activities, and reflective learning experiences within the curriculum.

Teacher Professional Development

Professional development programs should focus on inquiry-based instruction, metacognitive strategies, collaborative learning techniques, and learner autonomy frameworks to enhance teachers’ instructional capacities.

School Leadership

School administrators should foster learning environments that support innovation, reflective teaching, and learner-centered practices. Providing instructional resources and mentoring opportunities can further strengthen classroom implementation.

Future Research

Future studies may examine learner perspectives, parental involvement, and the long-term impact of learner-centered approaches on academic achievement and lifelong learning competencies.

8. Recommendations

1. Strengthen the implementation of inquiry-based learning across elementary grade levels.
2. Increase opportunities for collaborative and project-based learning experiences.
3. Integrate structured reflective activities into classroom instruction.
4. Develop school-based programs that promote self-directed learning skills.
5. Provide regular teacher training on learner-centered pedagogies and critical thinking instruction.
6. Encourage parental support for independent learning at home.
7. Conduct longitudinal studies examining the sustained effects of learner-centered teaching practices on learner outcomes.

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