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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Critical Thinking, Self-Regulated Learning, and Academic Responsibility among Grade 5 Learners: A Qualitative Exploration of Classroom Practices in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines

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Abstract

The development of critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility has become increasingly important in preparing learners for lifelong learning and academic success in the twenty-first century. Elementary schools play a vital role in cultivating these competencies through classroom practices that encourage independent thinking, learner autonomy, and responsible academic behavior. This study explored the classroom practices employed by Grade 5 teachers in fostering critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility among learners 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 5 teachers. Thematic analysis revealed six major themes: (1) Inquiry-Based Learning Encourages Critical Thinking; (2) Learner Autonomy Promotes Self-Regulation; (3) Goal Setting and Reflection Strengthen Learning Ownership; (4) Collaborative Learning Enhances Responsibility and Accountability; (5) Contextualized Learning Develops Meaningful Engagement; and (6) Teacher Guidance and Positive Reinforcement Foster Academic Responsibility. Findings indicate that classroom practices emphasizing inquiry, reflection, collaboration, and learner-centered instruction significantly contribute to the development of higher-order thinking skills, self-directed learning behaviors, and responsible academic attitudes. The study highlights the importance of creating supportive learning environments that empower learners to become active participants in their educational journeys. Implications for instructional improvement, teacher development, and curriculum enhancement are discussed.

Keywords: critical thinking, self-regulated learning, academic responsibility, classroom practices, qualitative research, elementary education, Philippines

Introduction

Education in the twenty-first century extends beyond the transmission of knowledge and focuses on developing competencies that enable learners to adapt to rapidly changing social, technological, and academic environments. Among these competencies, critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility have emerged as essential skills that contribute to lifelong learning and personal success. Schools are increasingly expected to cultivate learners who can think independently, manage their own learning processes, and assume responsibility for their academic performance.

Critical thinking involves the ability to analyze information, evaluate evidence, solve problems, and make informed decisions. According to Facione (2020), critical thinking enables learners to engage in reflective judgment and reasoned decision-making. Educational researchers emphasize that critical thinking is a cornerstone of effective learning because it allows students to process information meaningfully rather than merely memorizing facts.

Self-regulated learning refers to learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes. Zimmerman (2013) describes self-regulated learners as individuals who proactively set goals, employ learning strategies, monitor progress, and reflect on outcomes. Self-regulation empowers learners to become active participants in their education and contributes significantly to academic achievement.

Academic responsibility, meanwhile, encompasses learners' commitment to completing tasks, meeting expectations, demonstrating accountability, and maintaining positive attitudes toward learning. Responsible learners exhibit discipline, persistence, and ownership of their academic obligations.

Despite the recognized importance of these competencies, limited qualitative studies have explored how classroom practices in Philippine elementary schools contribute to their development. Understanding teachers' experiences and instructional strategies can provide valuable insights into effective educational practices. Therefore, this study explored the classroom practices utilized by Grade 5 teachers in Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines, to develop critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility among learners.

Review of Related Literature

Critical thinking has been widely recognized as an essential educational outcome. Facione (2020) argued that critical thinking involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Educational environments that encourage questioning, problem-solving, and reflection foster the development of these skills.

Constructivist learning theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences and social interaction (Piaget, 1973). Inquiry-based learning, collaborative activities, and authentic problem-solving tasks provide opportunities for learners to engage in critical thinking and knowledge construction.

Zimmerman (2013) emphasized that self-regulated learning involves cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes through which learners control and direct their learning activities. Research has shown that learners who engage in self-monitoring, goal setting, and reflection demonstrate higher academic achievement and greater persistence.

Academic responsibility is closely associated with learner engagement, accountability, and motivation. Studies indicate that classroom environments promoting autonomy, responsibility, and positive teacher support contribute to the development of responsible learning behaviors (Wentzel, 2012).

Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and guided participation in learning. Teachers play a crucial role in scaffolding learners' thinking processes and facilitating the development of self-regulation and responsibility.

The literature suggests that classroom practices emphasizing inquiry, reflection, collaboration, and learner autonomy can significantly influence learners' cognitive and behavioral development. However, more qualitative investigations are needed to understand how these practices operate in elementary school settings within the Philippine context.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore teachers' lived experiences regarding classroom practices that develop critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility among Grade 5 learners. Phenomenology was selected because it allows researchers to examine participants' perceptions and experiences concerning a particular educational phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Potia Elementary School, Ifugao, Philippines. Ten Grade 5 teachers participated in the study through purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on their teaching experience and direct involvement in classroom instruction.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective discussions. The interview protocol focused on instructional strategies, learner behaviors, classroom experiences, and perceived outcomes related to critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework, involving familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, and interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, and audit trail procedures. Ethical principles including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Inquiry-Based Learning Encourages Critical Thinking

One of the most dominant themes emerging from the participants' narratives was the significant role of inquiry-based learning in cultivating critical thinking among Grade 5 learners. Teachers consistently emphasized that learning becomes more meaningful when learners are encouraged to investigate problems, formulate questions, analyze information, and construct their own understanding rather than merely receiving information from the teacher.

One participant explained:

"Kapag binibigyan namin sila ng problema o sitwasyon na kailangan nilang pag-isipan, mas nagiging mapanuri sila sa kanilang mga sagot."

Another teacher shared:

"Mas natututo silang magtanong at magsuri kapag sila mismo ang naghahanap ng sagot."

A third participant added:

"Napapansin ko na mas nagiging interesado sila kapag hindi agad ibinibigay ang sagot. Mas gusto nilang tuklasin kung bakit ganoon ang nangyari."

Another teacher remarked:

"Kapag may mga gawain na nangangailangan ng paghahambing, pagsusuri, at pagbibigay ng sariling opinyon, mas lumalabas ang kanilang kakayahang mag-isip nang malalim."

Classroom observations revealed that teachers frequently utilized problem-solving activities, inquiry circles, investigative tasks, project-based learning, case analysis, brainstorming sessions, and guided classroom discussions. During these activities, learners were encouraged to examine different perspectives, gather evidence, justify their answers, and defend their conclusions. Teachers reported that learners became increasingly curious, reflective, and willing to challenge assumptions as they engaged in inquiry-oriented learning experiences.

Participants further observed that inquiry-based activities transformed learners from passive recipients of information into active constructors of knowledge. Instead of focusing solely on obtaining correct answers, learners learned to appreciate the process of questioning, investigating, and reasoning. Such experiences helped them develop analytical skills that extended beyond classroom lessons.

The findings suggest that inquiry-based learning serves as a powerful pedagogical approach for nurturing higher-order thinking skills. By exposing learners to authentic problems and encouraging them to seek solutions independently, teachers create opportunities for critical reflection and intellectual engagement. Inquiry-based instruction allows learners to practice reasoning, evaluation, interpretation, and decision-making, which are central components of critical thinking.

These findings strongly support constructivist perspectives emphasizing active knowledge construction and inquiry as mechanisms for cognitive development. Piaget (1973) argued that learners construct understanding through active interaction with their environment and through experiences that challenge existing mental structures. Similarly, Facione (2020) identified interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation as core dimensions of critical thinking. Research by Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) further demonstrated that inquiry-based learning enhances learners' problem-solving abilities, conceptual understanding, and analytical reasoning. Likewise, Kuhn (2019) emphasized that engaging learners in inquiry and argumentation promotes the development of evidence-based reasoning and reflective judgment. The present findings affirm that inquiry-oriented classroom practices play a critical role in developing critical thinkers capable of addressing complex academic and real-life challenges.

Theme 2: Learner Autonomy Promotes Self-Regulation

Another significant theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was the role of learner autonomy in fostering self-regulated learning. Teachers consistently described how providing learners with opportunities to make decisions about their learning helped them develop independence, accountability, and responsibility.

One teacher stated:

“Kapag may pagkakataon silang pumili kung paano nila gagawin ang gawain, natututo silang maging responsable.”

Another participant explained:

“Unti-unti naming tinuturuan silang gumawa ng sariling plano para matapos ang kanilang mga gawain.”

A teacher further shared:

“Kapag binibigyan namin sila ng kalayaan sa pagpili ng paraan ng pagkatuto, mas nagiging determinado silang tapusin ang kanilang mga responsibilidad.”

Another participant remarked:

“Napapansin ko na mas natututo silang mag-manage ng oras kapag hindi lahat ay dinidikta ng guro.”

Teachers reported implementing independent learning activities, self-paced assignments, differentiated tasks, learning contracts, choice boards, project-based activities, and individualized learning plans. These strategies allowed learners to make decisions regarding task completion, learning strategies, and time management. Participants observed that learners gradually developed the ability to prioritize tasks, monitor progress, and solve learning challenges independently.

Classroom observations indicated that autonomous learning opportunities encouraged learners to become more proactive and self-directed. Rather than relying entirely on teacher supervision, learners learned to initiate tasks, seek resources, evaluate their progress, and make adjustments when necessary. Teachers noted that learners became more confident and responsible as they gained greater control over their learning experiences.

The findings suggest that learner autonomy functions as a foundational component of self-regulated learning. When learners are entrusted with decision-making responsibilities, they develop ownership of their academic experiences and become more invested in achieving learning goals. Autonomy encourages learners to engage in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own performance, thereby strengthening self-regulatory behaviors.

These findings align with Zimmerman's (2013) theory of self-regulated learning, which emphasizes that successful learners actively participate in their own learning through goal setting, strategic planning, self-monitoring, and self-

reflection. Similarly, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that promotes intrinsic motivation, engagement, and personal growth. Research by Schunk and Greene (2018) further demonstrated that learners who experience autonomy in educational settings exhibit higher levels of persistence, motivation, and academic achievement. The present study confirms that learner autonomy serves as a crucial mechanism for developing self-regulation among elementary learners.

Theme 3: Goal Setting and Reflection Strengthen Learning Ownership

Participants also emphasized the importance of goal setting and reflection as essential classroom practices that promote learner ownership and metacognitive awareness. Teachers described these strategies as effective tools for helping learners become more conscious of their learning processes and academic responsibilities.

One teacher remarked:

"Bago magsimula ang linggo, pinasusulat namin sila ng kanilang mga layunin."

Another shared:

"Kapag nagre-reflect sila sa kanilang ginawa, mas naiintindihan nila kung saan sila nagkulang at kung paano sila mag-iimprove."

A participant further explained:

"Nagiging mas responsable sila kapag nakikita nila ang kanilang progreso at natutukoy nila ang kanilang mga dapat pang pagbutihin."

Another teacher stated:

"Kapag sila mismo ang nagsusuri sa kanilang performance, mas nagkakaroon sila ng ownership sa kanilang pagkatuto."

Teachers reported utilizing learning journals, reflection notebooks, goal-setting worksheets, progress monitoring charts, self-assessment checklists, and portfolio activities. Learners were encouraged to establish short-term and long-term goals, monitor accomplishments, identify obstacles, and formulate plans for improvement.

Classroom observations revealed that reflective activities promoted deeper self-awareness and accountability. Learners became more capable of identifying strengths and weaknesses, recognizing effective learning strategies, and making informed decisions about future learning actions. Teachers observed that learners who regularly engaged in reflection demonstrated greater persistence, self-confidence, and commitment to achieving academic goals.

The findings indicate that goal setting and reflection strengthen learner ownership by encouraging active participation in the learning process. Rather than viewing learning as something imposed by teachers, learners begin to perceive themselves as responsible agents capable of directing and improving their own academic performance.

These findings support Zimmerman's (2013) model of self-regulated learning, which identifies forethought, performance monitoring, and self-reflection as essential phases of successful learning. Similarly, Pintrich (2004) emphasized that goal-setting activities promote motivation, self-awareness, and strategic learning behaviors. Research by Panadero (2017) demonstrated that self-assessment and reflection significantly enhance metacognitive regulation and academic achievement. Moreover, Hattie and Timperley (2007) argued that reflective feedback processes help learners understand where they are, where they need to go, and how to reach their goals. The present findings suggest that systematic goal-setting and reflective practices contribute significantly to the development of learner ownership, self-regulation, and academic responsibility among Grade 5 learners.

Theme 4: Collaborative Learning Enhances Responsibility and Accountability

Another significant theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was the role of collaborative learning in

developing responsibility and accountability among Grade 5 learners. Teachers consistently emphasized that group-based learning activities provide opportunities for learners to understand the importance of fulfilling responsibilities, cooperating with peers, and contributing meaningfully to collective goals.

One participant explained:

“Kapag may group work, natututo silang tuparin ang kanilang tungkulin para sa tagumpay ng grupo.”

Another stated:

“Natututo silang maging responsable dahil alam nilang may ibang umaasa sa kanilang ambag.”

A third teacher shared:

“Kapag hindi nila nagawa ang kanilang bahagi, nakikita nila agad ang epekto nito sa buong grupo kaya mas natututo silang maging accountable.”

Another participant remarked:

“Mas nagiging disiplinado sila kapag may mga gawain na nangangailangan ng pagtutulungan dahil ayaw nilang mapahiya o madisappoint ang kanilang mga kagrupa.”

Classroom observations revealed that teachers frequently utilized group projects, peer tutoring, cooperative learning activities, collaborative problem-solving tasks, team-based investigations, and group presentations. During these activities, learners were assigned specific roles and responsibilities, requiring them to coordinate efforts, communicate effectively, and complete assigned tasks for the benefit of the group.

Teachers observed that collaborative learning helped learners develop not only academic skills but also social and behavioral competencies. Participants noted that learners became more dependable, organized, and committed to completing assigned tasks when they recognized that their contributions directly influenced group outcomes. Learners also learned to negotiate responsibilities, resolve conflicts, and support one another in accomplishing common objectives.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag may leader, recorder, at reporter sa grupo, natututo silang gampanan ang kanilang tungkulin at respetuhin ang trabaho ng iba.”

Another participant added:

“Nakikita namin na mas nagiging responsable sila dahil natututo silang mag-coordinate at magbigay ng suporta sa kanilang mga kaklase.”

The findings suggest that collaborative learning serves as an effective platform for fostering accountability and shared responsibility. Through cooperative experiences, learners begin to understand the consequences of their actions and develop a sense of commitment toward collective success. Responsibility becomes a social practice rather than merely an individual expectation.

These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the significance of social interaction in cognitive and behavioral development. Learning occurs through collaborative engagement with others, where learners internalize social norms and responsibilities. Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2017) argued that cooperative learning promotes accountability, positive interdependence, and interpersonal competence. Research by Gillies (2016) further demonstrated that collaborative learning environments enhance learner engagement, responsibility, communication skills, and academic achievement. The present findings indicate that collaborative classroom practices contribute significantly to the development of responsible and accountable learners capable of working effectively with others.

Theme 5: Contextualized Learning Develops Meaningful Engagement

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of contextualizing instruction to make learning more relevant and meaningful for learners. Teachers described how connecting lessons to learners' real-life experiences, community contexts, and cultural backgrounds increased learner interest, participation, and understanding.

One teacher noted:

"Mas nagiging interesado sila kapag ang halimbawa ay nanggagaling sa kanilang komunidad."

Another participant explained:

"Kapag may kaugnayan sa kanilang buhay ang aralin, mas nagiging aktibo sila sa pag-aaral."

A third teacher shared:

"Mas mabilis nilang naiintindihan ang konsepto kapag nakikita nila ito sa kanilang pang-araw-araw na karanasan."

Another remarked:

"Kapag ginagamit namin ang mga sitwasyon sa kanilang paligid, mas nagiging makahulugan ang pagkatuto para sa kanila."

Teachers reported integrating local issues, indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions, environmental concerns, community events, and familiar situations into classroom instruction. Lessons were frequently linked to learners' daily experiences, family life, agricultural practices, and community realities.

Classroom observations revealed that learners displayed greater enthusiasm and engagement when classroom activities reflected their lived experiences. Teachers observed increased participation during discussions, stronger motivation to complete tasks, and improved comprehension when lessons were contextualized.

One participant explained:

"Kapag tungkol sa kanilang komunidad ang halimbawa, marami silang naibabahaging ideya at karanasan."

Another teacher stated:

"Mas nagiging interactive ang klase dahil nakakarelate sila sa paksa."

Participants noted that contextualized instruction enabled learners to see the practical value of what they were learning. Rather than perceiving lessons as abstract concepts disconnected from reality, learners understood how knowledge could be applied in everyday situations. This increased their motivation to learn and strengthened their sense of relevance and purpose.

The findings indicate that contextualized learning enhances meaningful engagement by connecting academic content to learners' prior knowledge and experiences. Such connections facilitate deeper understanding, promote active participation, and increase intrinsic motivation.

These findings support constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed through interactions between new information and existing experiences (Piaget, 1973). Similarly, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) emphasized that meaningful learning occurs when instruction builds upon learners' prior knowledge and contextual understanding. Research by DepEd's contextualization framework likewise highlights the importance of adapting instruction to local realities to improve learner engagement and achievement. The findings of the present study demonstrate that contextualized learning serves as a powerful strategy for promoting meaningful educational experiences and sustained learner engagement.

Theme 6: Teacher Guidance and Positive Reinforcement Foster Academic Responsibility

The final theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the critical role of teacher guidance and positive reinforcement in developing academic responsibility among learners. Participants consistently emphasized that learners require continuous support, encouragement, and constructive feedback to develop responsible attitudes

toward learning.

One teacher shared:

“Mahalaga ang paggabay sa kanila lalo na kapag nahihirapan silang tapusin ang kanilang mga gawain.”

Another remarked:

“Kapag pinapahalagahan namin ang kanilang pagsisikap, mas nagiging responsable sila.”

A third participant stated:

“Mas nagiging determinado silang tapusin ang kanilang mga gawain kapag nakakatanggap sila ng positibong feedback mula sa guro.”

Another teacher explained:

“Hindi lang pagkakamali ang dapat makita ng mga bata. Kailangan din nilang maramdaman na napapansin ang kanilang pag-unlad.”

Teachers described using various forms of positive reinforcement, including verbal praise, recognition systems, certificates, classroom incentives, encouraging comments, individual conferences, and mentoring sessions. Feedback was often focused on learner effort, improvement, perseverance, and responsible behavior rather than solely on academic performance.

Participants observed that learners became more motivated when teachers acknowledged their efforts and accomplishments. Recognition of progress encouraged learners to persist despite difficulties and to develop a stronger sense of accountability for their academic responsibilities.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag pinuri mo sila dahil natapos nila ang gawain sa oras, mas ginagawa nila itong ugali.”

Another participant added:

“Unti-unti silang nagiging responsable dahil nakikita nilang may magandang bunga ang kanilang pagsisikap.”

Classroom observations revealed that supportive teacher-learner relationships fostered trust, confidence, and motivation. Learners were more willing to seek help, accept feedback, and improve their performance when they perceived teachers as supportive and encouraging.

The findings suggest that positive reinforcement and teacher guidance function as important motivational mechanisms that strengthen academic responsibility. Through encouragement and constructive support, learners develop confidence in their abilities and become more committed to fulfilling academic expectations.

These findings align with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes the influence of positive experiences, encouragement, and social support on learner motivation and performance. Learners who believe in their capabilities are more likely to persist in challenging tasks and assume responsibility for their learning. Similarly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) argued that effective feedback significantly influences learner achievement and motivation by providing direction for improvement. Research by Wentzel (2012) further demonstrated that supportive teacher-student relationships contribute to learner engagement, responsibility, and academic success. The findings of this study affirm that consistent teacher guidance and positive reinforcement are essential components in cultivating academically responsible and self-motivated learners.

Conclusion

The study revealed that Grade 5 teachers at Potia Elementary School employ diverse learner-centered classroom practices that contribute significantly to the development of critical thinking, self-regulated learning, and academic responsibility. Inquiry-based learning, learner autonomy, goal setting, reflective practices, collaborative learning, *Azal Arts and Humanities*

contextualized instruction, and positive reinforcement emerged as key strategies supporting learner development.

The findings demonstrate that effective classroom practices extend beyond content delivery and promote cognitive, behavioral, and affective growth. Through meaningful learning experiences, learners develop the capacity to think critically, regulate their learning processes, and assume responsibility for their academic success.

Implications of the Study

The findings highlight the need for schools to strengthen learner-centered pedagogical approaches that promote inquiry, reflection, and autonomy. Teacher professional development programs should focus on strategies that enhance critical thinking, self-regulation, and academic responsibility.

Curriculum developers may consider integrating more reflective and inquiry-based activities into instructional materials. School leaders should also foster classroom environments that encourage learner ownership, accountability, and meaningful engagement.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen inquiry-based and problem-solving instructional approaches.
2. Incorporate structured goal-setting and reflection activities across grade levels.
3. Increase opportunities for learner autonomy and independent decision-making.
4. Enhance collaborative learning experiences that promote accountability.
5. Develop contextualized instructional materials relevant to learners' local experiences.
6. Conduct future studies involving learners, parents, and school administrators to obtain broader perspectives on learner development.

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