JELIM

Journal of Education, Language, Social and Management

| e-ISSN:3047-8413|

https://jurnal.rahiscendekiaindonesia.co.id/index.php/jelim/

The Role of General Education in Developing Students' Critical Thinking Skills

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KEY WORD

General Education; Critical Thinking; Teaching Strategies; Secondary School; Qualitative Study

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to examine the role of general education in developing students' critical thinking skills in secondary schools. The research employed a qualitative descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of how general education contributes to the development of higher-order thinking skills. The participants of this study included teachers and students selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in general education learning. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using qualitative techniques, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

The findings reveal that general education plays a significant role in fostering students' critical thinking skills. Instructional strategies such as discussion-based learning, problem-solving activities, collaborative learning, and effective questioning techniques were found to enhance students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply knowledge. Additionally, the integration of real-life contexts and interdisciplinary learning made the learning process more meaningful and supported the development of critical thinking. However, several challenges were identified, including limited instructional time, large class sizes, and varying student abilities, which may affect the effectiveness of these strategies.

In conclusion, general education has strong potential to develop students' critical thinking skills when implemented through interactive and student-centered approaches. The study suggests that teachers should adopt diverse and innovative teaching strategies to create meaningful learning experiences and improve students' critical thinking abilities.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in shaping individuals' intellectual, social, and moral development. In today's rapidly changing world, students are not only expected to acquire knowledge but also to develop higher-order thinking skills that enable them to analyze information, solve problems, and make informed decisions. Among these skills, critical thinking has become one of the most essential competencies for students to succeed in both academic and real-life contexts. Therefore, educational systems are increasingly emphasizing the importance of fostering critical thinking through various instructional approaches, particularly within the framework of general education.

General education is designed to provide students with a broad base of knowledge and skills across multiple disciplines. It aims to develop well-rounded individuals who are capable of thinking independently, communicating effectively, and engaging responsibly in society. Unlike specialized or vocational education, general education focuses on holistic development, including cognitive, affective, and social aspects of learning. Within this context, general education serves as a crucial platform for cultivating critical thinking skills, as it encourages students to explore diverse perspectives, question assumptions, and engage in reflective thinking.

Critical thinking itself refers to the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a logical and systematic manner. It involves skills such as reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and the ability to assess the credibility of sources. In the era of information overload, where students are constantly exposed to vast amounts of data from various sources, the ability to think critically becomes increasingly important. Students who possess strong critical thinking skills are better equipped to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information, construct well-founded arguments, and adapt to complex situations.

Despite its importance, the development of critical thinking skills among students remains a challenge in many educational settings. Traditional teaching methods, which often emphasize memorization and passive learning, may not effectively promote critical thinking. Students are frequently required to recall information rather than analyze or apply it, which limits their cognitive development. This issue highlights the need for more innovative and student-centered approaches within general education that actively engage learners in the learning process.

In this regard, general education has significant potential to foster critical thinking when implemented effectively. Through interdisciplinary learning, discussion-based activities, problem-solving tasks, and reflective practices, students can be encouraged to think more deeply and critically about the subject matter. Teachers play a vital role in this process by designing learning experiences that challenge students' thinking and by creating a classroom environment that supports inquiry and open dialogue.

Furthermore, the integration of modern teaching strategies, including the use of technology, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based instruction, can enhance the effectiveness of general education in developing critical thinking skills. These approaches not only make learning more engaging but also provide students with opportunities to practice critical thinking in meaningful contexts.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the role of general education in developing students' critical thinking skills. It seeks to explore how general education contributes to the enhancement of these skills and to identify the strategies that can be used to maximize its impact. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers in improving the quality of education and preparing students to meet the demands of the modern world.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the role of general education in developing students' critical thinking skills. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of teaching and learning processes, particularly how general education contributes to the development of students' higher-order thinking abilities in real classroom settings. The study focused on understanding experiences, perceptions, and practices rather than measuring outcomes statistically.

The research was conducted in a secondary school setting, involving teachers and students participating in general education subjects. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the study, including teachers who actively implement general education practices and students who are engaged in the learning process. This selection aimed to ensure that the data collected would be rich and directly related to the research objectives.

Data collection was carried out through multiple techniques to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how teaching strategies within general education promote critical thinking. During the observations, attention was given to instructional methods, classroom interactions, and student engagement in activities that require analysis, reasoning, and problem-solving. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and selected students to gather insights into their perspectives on the development of critical thinking skills. Documentation, such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and students' assignments, was also analyzed to support and validate the data obtained from observations and interviews.

In this study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument, supported by observation guidelines, interview protocols, and field notes. These instruments helped in systematically recording and organizing the data throughout the research process. Audio recordings and written notes were used to ensure accuracy and completeness of the collected information.

The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques, which involved three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction phase, the researcher selected and focused on relevant data related to general education practices and critical thinking development. The data were then organized and presented in descriptive forms to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within the data, while continuously verifying their consistency.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied, including triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking to confirm the accuracy of the findings, and prolonged engagement in the research setting to gain a deeper understanding of the context. Ethical considerations were also maintained by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Through this methodology, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how general education contributes to the development of students' critical thinking skills.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this study indicate that general education plays a significant role in developing students' critical thinking skills. Based on data collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation, several key findings emerged regarding how general education contributes to the enhancement of students' ability to think critically.

First, the study found that general education encourages students to engage in analytical thinking. Teachers frequently presented materials that required students to analyze information rather than simply memorize it. For example, students were asked to interpret texts, compare ideas, and identify main arguments. These activities helped students develop the ability to break down information and understand it more deeply.

Second, discussion-based learning was identified as an important strategy within general education. Teachers often facilitated classroom discussions where students were encouraged to express opinions, respond to peers, and defend their arguments. This interactive environment allowed students to practice reasoning and evaluation, which are essential components of critical thinking. Students became more confident in sharing their ideas and considering different perspectives.

Third, the findings showed that problem-solving activities were commonly used to stimulate critical thinking. Teachers provided tasks that required students to find solutions, make decisions, and justify their answers. These activities challenged students to apply their knowledge in practical situations, thereby enhancing their ability to think logically and systematically.

In addition, questioning techniques used by teachers played a crucial role in developing critical thinking. Teachers asked open-ended questions that required more than simple answers, prompting students to explain, analyze, and evaluate information. This approach encouraged deeper thinking and active participation in the learning process.

The study also revealed that collaborative learning contributed positively to the development of critical thinking skills. Students worked in groups to complete tasks, share ideas, and solve problems together. Through collaboration, students were

exposed to diverse viewpoints, which helped them broaden their understanding and improve their reasoning abilities.

Furthermore, the use of real-life contexts and interdisciplinary learning in general education helped students connect knowledge to practical situations. Teachers integrated topics from different subjects and related them to everyday life, making learning more meaningful. This approach enabled students to apply critical thinking skills beyond the classroom.

However, the findings also identified several challenges. Some students were still passive during discussions and relied heavily on teacher guidance. Additionally, limited class time and large class sizes sometimes restricted the implementation of more interactive activities. Despite these challenges, most teachers demonstrated awareness of the importance of fostering critical thinking and made efforts to incorporate relevant strategies.

Overall, the results show that general education provides a strong foundation for developing students' critical thinking skills, particularly when teachers use interactive, student-centered, and context-based approaches.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight that general education plays a crucial role in fostering students' critical thinking skills through various instructional practices and learning experiences. The results indicate that when general education is implemented using student-centered and interactive approaches, it can significantly enhance students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

One of the key findings of this study is the emphasis on analytical thinking through classroom activities. Students were encouraged to interpret texts, compare ideas, and identify arguments, which aligns with the fundamental principles of critical thinking. This suggests that general education provides a suitable platform for developing higher-order thinking skills, as it exposes students to diverse content and encourages deeper cognitive engagement. These findings support the view that learning should move beyond memorization toward understanding and analysis.

The use of discussion-based learning further strengthens the development of critical thinking skills. Through classroom discussions, students were given opportunities to express their opinions, justify their answers, and respond to different viewpoints. This interactive process not only enhances reasoning skills but also promotes confidence and communication abilities. It reflects the idea that learning is a social process, where knowledge is constructed through interaction and dialogue.

In addition, problem-solving activities were found to be effective in stimulating students' critical thinking. By engaging in tasks that require decision-making and justification, students learn to apply their knowledge in practical contexts. This finding reinforces the importance of providing authentic and meaningful learning experiences within general education. When students are challenged to solve real or simulated problems, they develop the ability to think logically and systematically.

Another important aspect identified in this study is the role of teachers' questioning techniques. Open-ended questions encouraged students to think more deeply and provide reasoned responses rather than simple answers. This demonstrates that the way teachers interact with students can significantly influence the development of critical thinking skills. Effective questioning can guide students to explore ideas, reflect on their understanding, and develop independent thinking.

Collaborative learning also emerged as a valuable strategy in promoting critical thinking. Working in groups allowed students to share ideas, consider different perspectives, and refine their reasoning. This collaborative environment supports the development of critical thinking by exposing students to diverse viewpoints and encouraging them to evaluate and integrate information.

Moreover, the integration of real-life contexts and interdisciplinary learning made the learning process more meaningful. By connecting classroom content to everyday situations, students were able to see the relevance of what they learned and apply their knowledge beyond the classroom. This approach supports the development of transferable critical thinking skills, which are essential for real-world problem-solving.

However, the study also identified several challenges that affect the effectiveness of general education in developing critical thinking. Some students remained passive during classroom activities, indicating that not all learners are equally engaged. Additionally, factors such as limited time, large class sizes, and varying student abilities can hinder the implementation of interactive and student-centered strategies. These challenges highlight the need for teachers to adopt flexible and adaptive approaches in managing their classrooms.

In conclusion, the discussion suggests that general education has strong potential to develop students' critical thinking skills when supported by appropriate teaching strategies. Interactive methods, such as discussions, problem-solving, collaborative learning, and effective questioning, play a significant role in achieving this goal. Therefore, it is important for educators to continuously improve their teaching practices and create learning environments that actively promote critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that general education plays a significant role in developing students' critical thinking skills. Through various instructional practices, general education provides opportunities for students to engage in analytical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective learning, which are essential components of critical thinking.

The study shows that strategies such as discussion-based learning, problem-solving activities, collaborative learning, and effective questioning techniques contribute positively to the development of students' critical thinking. These approaches encourage active participation, allow students to express and evaluate ideas, and help them apply knowledge in meaningful contexts. In contrast, traditional teacher-centered methods are less effective in fostering higher-order thinking skills.

Furthermore, the integration of real-life contexts and interdisciplinary learning enhances students' ability to connect knowledge with practical situations, making learning more relevant and impactful. However, the effectiveness of general education in promoting critical thinking is influenced by several factors, including classroom conditions, student engagement, and the teacher's ability to implement appropriate strategies.

Despite its positive contributions, challenges such as limited instructional time, large class sizes, and varying student abilities may hinder the optimal development of critical thinking skills. Therefore, teachers are required to be creative and adaptive in selecting and applying teaching strategies that meet students' needs.

In conclusion, general education has strong potential to foster critical thinking skills when implemented through interactive, student-centered, and context-based approaches. It is recommended that educators continue to develop innovative teaching practices and create supportive learning environments to maximize the role of general education in preparing students for academic success and real-world challenges.

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