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VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM: HOW ELEMENTARY TEACHERS NAVIGATE QUESTIONING TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is a foundational life skill in 21st-century education, essential for navigating rapid global change. This study examined the types of questions elementary teachers use to promote critical thinking, how these strategies are planned and implemented, and the resulting effects on learner engagement. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 elementary teachers across five municipalities in the 2nd Congressional District of Cotabato. Findings indicated that while teachers utilize foundational and scaffolded questioning to build a factual baseline, they also employ analytical and higher-order thinking prompts to deepen cognitive engagement. The research concludes that intentional, scaffolded dialogue—supported by a mistake-friendly classroom climate—successfully fosters independent reasoning and student agency even within systemic constraints such as large class sizes and time pressure.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has emerged as a core competence necessary for preparing learners to navigate a complex and information-heavy world. Early education serves as a critical space for cultivating this ability, with classroom interactions and the way teachers frame questions playing a central role in shaping the depth of student thinking. While research has explored inquiry-based strategies in upper grades, there remains a lack of qualitative evidence regarding how elementary teachers adapt their questioning to scaffold critical thinking for younger learners. This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of elementary teachers in real-life classroom settings to optimize questioning practices for

deeper learning. It specifically seeks to understand the types of questions used, the challenges faced by educators, and the specific classroom practices that support effective questioning.

METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the subjective viewpoints and lived experiences of elementary teachers. The research was conducted in the 2nd Congressional District of Cotabato, encompassing the towns of Makilala, President Roxas, Arakan, Antipas, and Magpet. A total of 25 participants were selected using purposeful, criterion-based sampling, requiring at least three years of teaching experience and a current assignment in Grades 3 to 6. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide grounded in Socratic questioning principles and Bloom's Taxonomy. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful categories. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality via pseudonyms, and compliance with the Institutional Research Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

The findings identified several major themes regarding questioning strategies, beginning with the use of foundational and scaffolded questioning to ensure a factual baseline before moving toward higher-order analysis. Teachers reported using "what" and "where" prompts for literal comprehension while employing "why" and "how" questions to stimulate analytical and evaluative thinking. Planning strategies often involved aligning questions with national standards and Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to spontaneous student needs. Student responses often involved an initial hesitation or need for "wait time," followed by collaborative meaning-making where learners bridged theoretical concepts with personal narratives and real-life analogies. However, significant challenges were identified, including language barriers, time constraints, large class sizes, and teacher mental exhaustion, which often forced a focus on content coverage over deep inquiry.

DISCUSSION

Effective classroom inquiry requires a synergy between structured pre-planning and the ability to respond to emergent student needs during live delivery. Scaffolding serves as a vital bridge, moving learners from simple recall to the complex cognitive processing required for independent thought. The results suggest that when students are allowed sufficient wait time

and encouraged to integrate personal experiences, they demonstrate higher engagement and an improved ability to justify logical claims. This transition is often supported by collaborative interactions, such as "Fishbowl Discussions" or peer-led "Gallery Walks," which shift the focus from individual performance to a collective search for meaning. Ultimately, balancing pre-planned design with spontaneous adaptation in a supportive environment fosters transformative outcomes where students take full ownership of their academic journey.

CONCLUSIONS

The journey toward a thinking classroom is a shared evolution that relies on an educator's strategic planning and a student's willingness to embrace ambiguity. Success in fostering critical thinking is not measured by the speed of a response but by the depth of inquiry and the resilience students demonstrate when encountering difficult problems. This study demonstrates that even within the constraints of large classes and strict curricula, meaningful growth is possible through intentional, scaffolded dialogue. By respecting silence, providing necessary scaffolds, and connecting academic content to lived experiences, teachers cultivate a lifelong habit of curiosity rather than mere rote compliance. Ultimately, the most transformative interactions occur in the space between the question and the answer, preparing learners to become independent, critical citizens.