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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Elly Purwanti[1*], Siti Khomsiyati[2]
[12]STAI Darussalam Lampung
*✉: ellypurwanti15.ep@gmail.com

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh model pembelajaran Problem-Based Learning (PBL) terhadap keterampilan berpikir kritis siswa sekolah dasar. Penelitian menggunakan metode eksperimen kuasi dengan desain Nonequivalent Control Group Design. Subjek penelitian adalah siswa kelas V dari dua sekolah dasar yang berbeda. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah tes berpikir kritis. Hasil analisis data menunjukkan bahwa siswa yang belajar menggunakan model PBL memiliki keterampilan berpikir kritis yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan siswa yang menggunakan metode konvensional. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa PBL efektif dalam meningkatkan keterampilan berpikir kritis pada siswa sekolah dasar.
Kata Kunci: Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah, PBL, Berpikir Kritis, Sekolah Dasar

Abstract

This study aims to determine the effect of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model on elementary school students' critical thinking skills. The research employed a quasi-experimental method with a Nonequivalent Control Group Design. The subjects were fifth-grade students from two different elementary schools. The instrument used was a critical thinking skills test. Data analysis revealed that students taught using the PBL model had higher critical thinking skills than those taught using conventional methods. These findings indicate that PBL is effective in enhancing elementary students' critical thinking abilities.
Keywords: Problem-Based Learning, PBL, Critical Thinking, Elementary School.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving world, the ability to think critically has become an indispensable skill for students to navigate challenges and contribute meaningfully to society. Educational reforms worldwide recognize the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills, particularly critical thinking, as a central mission in preparing students for the future. This emphasis arises from the understanding that individuals need to move beyond rote memorization and develop the capacity to analyze information, solve intricate problems, and make well-reasoned decisions (Ramadhani et al, 2024). This global recognition of critical thinking's importance underscores a fundamental shift in educational paradigms, aiming to equip learners with the intellectual tools necessary for adaptability and success in the 21st century (Zhang & Ma, 2023).

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Project-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as a dynamic and student-centered pedagogical approach that seeks to foster these crucial critical thinking abilities. Unlike traditional instructional methods that often rely on direct instruction and passive reception of information, PBL immerses students in real-world, personally relevant projects that extend over a significant period. These projects are typically inquiry-based, driven by authentic problems, and frequently necessitate the integration of knowledge and skills across multiple disciplines, culminating in the creation of a tangible product or a public presentation (Zhang & Ma, 2023). This approach contrasts sharply with conventional teaching, which often prioritizes lectures, memorization of facts, and standardized assessments (Kimani, 2024).

Given the growing prominence of PBL in educational settings and the recognized importance of critical thinking, this report aims to address a central question: To what extent does the implementation of PBL models effectively improve students' critical thinking skills across different educational contexts? To provide an evidence-based discussion, this report will synthesize findings from reputable scientific journals, examining the empirical research on the relationship between PBL and the development of critical thinking in students. The structure of this report will encompass an introduction to contextualize the topic, followed by a description of the methods used for the literature review, a detailed presentation and discussion of the findings, and finally, a conclusion summarizing the key insights and implications.

METHOD

This report adopts a systematic literature review approach to investigate the effectiveness of PBL in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. This methodology is particularly suitable given the substantial body of existing research on this topic, as evidenced by the prevalence of literature reviews and meta-analyses within the provided sources. The review primarily focuses on articles published between 2019 and 2023 (Ramadhani et al, 2024), although some sources encompass a broader timeframe (Zhang & Ma, 2023). The data for this review was gathered from secondary sources, including published studies and reports accessible through online journals and academic libraries (Kimani, 2024).

The inclusion criteria for the studies considered in this report were as follows: the study must be an empirical investigation (employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs) that specifically examines the relationship between the implementation of PBL and

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the development of critical thinking skills in students. Furthermore, the studies included must have been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals to ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings.

The process of data extraction involved identifying and retrieving relevant articles based on the inclusion criteria. Key information was then extracted from each study, including the research design employed, the characteristics of the student sample (age, educational level, subject area), specific details about the PBL implementation (duration, project type, teacher role), the methods used to measure critical thinking skills, and the reported outcomes, including any effect sizes where applicable. The synthesis of findings across the selected studies involved a qualitative approach, identifying common themes, recurring trends, and any contradictions or nuances present in the existing research. This method allows for a comprehensive overview of the current understanding of PBL's impact on critical thinking, based on the available empirical evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The body of research examining the effectiveness of PBL on students' critical thinking skills generally indicates positive outcomes. Many studies have demonstrated that implementing PBL methodologies in educational settings leads to significant improvements in students' critical thinking abilities (Kimani, 2024). Meta-analyses, which statistically combine the results of multiple independent studies, further support this conclusion by showing that PBL significantly improves students' learning outcomes, including their thinking skills (Zhang & Ma, 2023). Specifically, these improvements are often observed in areas such as problem-solving, analytical reasoning, and the capacity to apply knowledge to real-world situations (Williamson, 2023). This convergence of positive findings across various studies and synthesized research provides a strong foundation for understanding PBL as a valuable approach to enhancing critical thinking in education.

The mechanisms through which PBL is believed to enhance critical thinking are multifaceted. Engaging in real-world projects necessitates that students actively analyze information, identify and solve complex problems, and apply their knowledge in practical and meaningful contexts. This active engagement promotes deeper cognitive processing and the development of analytical skills. Furthermore, PBL often fosters collaboration and communication among students as they work together to address authentic challenges. This collaborative environment encourages students to share diverse perspectives, debate ideas,

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and collectively construct solutions, all of which are integral components of critical thinking. The emphasis on creating a tangible product or presentation also cultivates creativity, another essential aspect of higher-order thinking. Additionally, PBL encourages self-directed learning, empowering students to take ownership of their educational journey and develop a deeper understanding of the concepts involved. This learner autonomy fosters independent thought and the ability to seek out and evaluate information, crucial elements of critical thinking. The effectiveness of PBL may also be attributed to its alignment with constructivist learning theories, which posit that students learn best by actively constructing their own knowledge through engagement with authentic and significant situations (Kimani, 2024). By providing a context-rich environment where students grapple with real problems, PBL facilitates a deeper and more meaningful understanding that supports the development of critical thinking skills.

The effectiveness of PBL in enhancing critical thinking is not uniform across all contexts and can be influenced by several moderating factors (Zhang & Ma, 2023). For instance, research indicates that the subject area can play a role, with studies showing positive impacts of PBL on critical thinking skills in science education (Ramadhani et al, 2024). The educational level of the students is another important consideration, as different studies have focused on the effects of PBL in high school (Kimani, 2024) as well as in higher education settings (Meng, 2023). The specific strategies employed in the implementation of PBL also appear to be critical. Studies suggest that clear learning objectives, structured support mechanisms provided by educators, and opportunities for reflection on the learning process are crucial components for successful PBL implementation and the fostering of critical thinking (Sari & Prasetyo, 2021). Furthermore, the integration of technology into PBL activities can also influence its effectiveness (Larmer et al, 2015). The availability and effective use of digital tools and resources can enhance students' ability to research, collaborate, and present their findings, potentially further supporting the development of critical thinking skills. Therefore, while the general trend points to the positive impact of PBL, the specific outcomes can vary depending on the context and the nuances of its implementation.

Despite the predominantly positive findings, the research base also reveals nuances and some potentially conflicting results (Guo et al, 2024). For example, one study found that while PBL significantly improved children's science achievement, their attitudes toward science did not change. Another study in undergraduate education indicated that a student-centered PBL approach did not improve students' problem-solving and information management skills,

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which are often considered instrumental general competencies related to critical thinking. Additionally, research has shown that the implementation of PBL did not significantly alter students' perceived utility of teamwork, communication, and creativity in some cases. There are also instances where studies comparing PBL with traditional teaching methods found similar levels of student achievement (Zhang & Ma, 2023). These findings suggest that while PBL holds significant promise for enhancing critical thinking, its impact may be complex and not universally effective across all aspects of critical thinking or in all educational contexts. Moreover, some research highlights the importance of explicit instruction in critical thinking alongside PBL to maximize its effectiveness (Kimani, 2024). This indicates that PBL may serve as a valuable platform for applying and developing critical thinking skills, but direct teaching of these skills might be necessary to ensure comprehensive improvement.

Implementing PBL effectively is not without its challenges and limitations. Collaborative work, a cornerstone of many PBL activities, can present hurdles, with both instructors and students sometimes finding group work challenging. Students' attitudes towards collaborative work can be uncertain, and some may prefer to work independently. The successful execution of PBL often requires specific technical and labor skills, which may be lacking in certain contexts, particularly in underdeveloped countries with limited resources. In the 21st century, information technology plays a crucial role in education, and the effective implementation of PBL often relies on access to and proficiency in using information technology, which can be a barrier in areas with limited technological infrastructure. Time management is another significant challenge, as PBL is generally a more time-consuming learning strategy compared to traditional instruction. The scientific processes often involved in PBL require time for investigation, experimentation, and reflection, which may strain existing curriculum schedules. Social challenges can also arise if project works have the potential to negatively impact the population or social cultures in a region. Furthermore, securing adequate funding is essential for the successful implementation of PBL, as it may require resources for materials, technology, and professional development for educators (Hafeez, 2022). In higher education, faculty resistance to adopting PBL and their readiness to implement this pedagogical approach can be significant obstacles. Faculty members may be unfamiliar with PBL, concerned about increased workload, or prefer traditional teaching methods (Evenddy et al, 2023). Students themselves may also exhibit resistance to change, as some may prefer the familiar structures of traditional learning environments (Chowdhury, 2015). Additionally, PBL often requires significant guidance and facilitation from teachers, and its time-consuming nature can be demanding for

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both educators and students (Nicholus et al, 2023). Addressing these challenges through adequate training, resource provision, and institutional support is crucial for realizing the full potential of PBL in fostering critical thinking.

To maximize the effectiveness of PBL in fostering critical thinking, several best practices should be considered in the design and implementation of projects (Jones, 2019). Projects should ideally begin with a compelling question that sparks students' curiosity and motivates them to explore the topic in depth (Jones, 2019). Integrating PBL across various subjects can help students see the interconnectedness of knowledge and provide a more holistic learning experienc. Encouraging collaboration and teamwork among students is essential, as it promotes communication, shared problem-solving, and exposure to diverse perspectives. It is also important to emphasize the learning process itself, rather than solely focusing on the final product, and to provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and the challenges they encountered. Clear learning objectives should be established and communicated to students, along with structured support and guidance from the teacher throughout the project (Sari & Prasetyo, 2021). Utilizing real-world problems and authentic assessment methods can enhance student engagement and make the learning more relevant (Solomon, 2023). The role of the teacher shifts from a lecturer to a facilitator, guiding students' inquiry, providing resources, and asking probing questions to stimulate critical thinking (Williamson, 2023). Creating a classroom environment that supports collaboration, provides necessary resources, and encourages students to take risks and learn from mistakes is also vital (Chowdhury, 2015). By adhering to these best practices, educators can create more effective PBL experiences that are more likely to enhance students' critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review of empirical evidence indicates that Project-Based Learning generally has a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills. The findings from various studies and meta-analyses suggest that engaging in real-world, problem-driven projects encourages students to analyze information, solve complex issues, and apply their knowledge in practical ways, thereby fostering critical thinking abilities. The collaborative nature of PBL, its alignment with constructivist learning theories, and its emphasis on self-directed learning are likely contributing factors to this positive effect. However, the research also reveals nuances and some inconsistencies, suggesting that the effectiveness of PBL can be influenced by factors such as the subject area, educational level, and the specific implementation strategies

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employed. Challenges related to resources, time, faculty readiness, and student attitudes need to be addressed to ensure successful implementation.

The implications of these findings for educational practice are significant. The integration of PBL into curricula should be considered as a valuable strategy for developing critical thinking skills, a competency increasingly recognized as essential for success in the 21st century. Educators need access to professional development and ongoing support to effectively design and facilitate PBL experiences. Aligning PBL activities with clear learning objectives, providing structured guidance to students, and incorporating opportunities for reflection and feedback are crucial for maximizing the benefits of this pedagogical approach.

From a policy perspective, there is a need to prioritize the integration of PBL into educational frameworks at various levels. Policymakers should consider initiatives that support teacher training in PBL methodologies and the development of high-quality PBL resources. Allocating resources to address the challenges associated with PBL implementation, such as technology access and funding for materials, can also help to broaden its reach and effectiveness.

Future research should aim to further explore the specific mechanisms through which PBL impacts different facets of critical thinking. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of PBL on the development and retention of critical thinking skills. Investigating the effectiveness of various PBL modalities and implementation strategies across diverse educational settings and student populations will also be valuable. Addressing existing research gaps, such as the need for more focused studies in specific contexts like English as a Foreign Language education, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how PBL can best be leveraged to enhance critical thinking in all learners.

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