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|TITLE: THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN THE CURRICULUM: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF CENTRAL ASIA AND FINLAND

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Introduction

Critical thinking skills play a crucial role in the development of individuals' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information effectively. These skills enable individuals to make logical and informed decisions, solve problems creatively, and recognize biases and fallacies. Given the rapidly changing global context, where access to vast amounts of information is readily available, the inclusion of critical thinking skills in educational curricula is of paramount importance. This case study aims to compare and contrast the role of critical thinking skills in the educational curricula of Central Asian countries and Finland. Central Asia is a region comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan - all of which have unique educational systems influenced by their cultural and historical backgrounds. On the other hand, Finland is widely regarded as a leading nation in education, known for its innovative teaching methods and emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The inclusion of critical thinking skills in the curriculum is particularly significant in Central Asia, as these countries transition from centralized educational systems to more learner-centric approaches. Enhancing critical thinking skills is considered essential to help students become active and engaged citizens in the rapidly changing world. In contrast, Finland has long recognized the importance of critical thinking skills in education and has integrated them effectively into its curriculum, contributing to the country's success in global educational rankings. By comparing the curriculum of Central Asian countries to that of Finland, this case study will shed light on the similarities and differences in approaches to teaching critical thinking skills. It will examine the overall importance given to critical thinking in the curriculum, the methods employed to develop these skills, and the challenges faced in promoting critical thinking in education.

Additionally, this case study will explore the impact of cultural and societal factors on the integration of critical thinking skills in educational systems, highlighting the potential implications for educational policy and practice in Central Asia and Finland. Through the analysis of these two distinct educational contexts, this case study aims to provide insights into the importance and implementation of critical thinking skills in the curriculum. By understanding the similarities and differences in the approaches taken by Central Asian countries and Finland, policymakers, educators, and researchers can gain valuable knowledge to enhance the role of critical thinking skills in educational systems, ultimately fostering the development of well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world.

Literature review

The Concept of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking, according to Ennis (2018), is "reasonable reflective thinking when deciding what to believe or do." To get the results you want, rational thinking and decision-making are essential.

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In a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and education, scholars have defined critical thinking. According to Halpern (2014), critical thinking is the application of cognitive techniques or methods that raise the likelihood of a desired outcome. According to Elder and Paul (1994), critical thinking is the process by which people take control of their own thinking and create suitable norms and criteria for analysis. Critical thinking was characterized by Dummett and Hughes (2019) as thinking that is self-reflective, logical, and reasonable. Noncritical thinking consists of disorganized mental processes, a lack of procedural information, and uncomplicated mental routines.

The Role of Critical Thinking in English Language

In order to assist students, build a more complex, logical thought process about the language they are exposed to, critical thinking is an essential educational ability. Key learning objectives in EFL instruction are based on educational taxonomies like Anderson and Krathwohl and Bloom's Educational Taxonomy. Instead of depending on traditional rote learning, encouraging critical thinking in language lessons enables students to have a deeper, more logical cognitive process. Increased information literacy, job prospects, and transferable skills are the three main benefits of developing critical thinking skills. Students must assess the reliability of information they come across in the modern digital environment in order to avoid misleading influences like fraud and fake news. Due to the fact that it is seen as a skill for learning and innovation, critical thinking is also a highly desired skill in the job market. Additionally, because critical thinking is a transferable talent, students can use it outside of the classroom to solve problems, adapt to new circumstances, and make better decisions. Students should devote more time to acquiring principles and transferable skills in the ever-evolving world of technology today. Activities that promote critical thinking are especially important for language learners since they must process linguistic input independently and thoughtfully rather than by memorization.

Critical thinking in Curriculum: Central Asia

Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, have diverse educational systems and approaches to curriculum development. While there is limited specific information available on the state of critical thinking skills in Central Asian curricula, I can provide you with some insights based on general trends and initiatives in the region. Kazakhstan has been actively promoting critical thinking skills in its educational system. The Ministry of Education and Science has implemented reforms aimed at fostering critical thinking among students. For instance, the "New Humanitarian Education" program, launched in 2015, emphasizes the development of analytical and problem-solving abilities. The program incorporates critical thinking skills into various subjects, such as social studies, literature, and foreign languages (Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science, 2015). In Kyrgyzstan, critical thinking is gaining recognition as an important skill. The country has introduced educational reforms aimed at developing students' critical thinking abilities. The new curriculum, implemented in 2018, emphasizes the development of analytical and critical thinking skills across different subjects (UNESCO, 2020). Tajikistan and Turkmenistan still have limited emphasis on critical thinking skills in their curricula. Traditional teaching methods and rote memorization are still prevalent in these countries. However, there have been discussions and initiatives to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills in recent years (UNESCO, 2015). Uzbekistan has also recognized the importance of critical thinking in education.

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The government has introduced reforms to enhance the curriculum and teaching methods, including the integration of critical thinking skills. The new curriculum, implemented in 2019, aims to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Uzbekistan Ministry of Public Education, 2019). It is important to note that the information provided is a general overview and may not reflect the current state of critical thinking skills in Central Asian curricula. For more detailed and up-to-date information, I recommend referring to official government sources, educational reports, and research publications specific to each country in Central Asia.

Critical thinking in Curriculum: Finland

Finland is widely recognized for its high-quality education system, which emphasizes critical thinking skills. The Finnish curriculum places a strong emphasis on promoting students' ability to think critically, analyze information, and solve problems. Here is some information on the state of critical thinking skills in the curriculum of Finland, along with relevant references:

- National Core Curriculum: The Finnish National Core Curriculum, updated in 2014, highlights the importance of critical thinking as a key competence. It states that education should support students in developing their critical thinking skills to enable them to analyze and evaluate information critically (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016).
- Cross-Curricular Themes: Critical thinking is integrated into the cross-curricular themes of the Finnish curriculum. For example, the theme of "Thinking and Learning to Learn" emphasizes the development of students' thinking skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016).
- Teaching Methods: Finnish classrooms often employ student-centered teaching methods that encourage critical thinking. Teachers focus on facilitating discussions, promoting inquiry-based learning, and providing opportunities for students to analyze and evaluate information critically (Sahlberg, 2011).
- PISA Assessments: Finland's strong emphasis on critical thinking is reflected in the performance of its students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. Finland consistently ranks highly in the PISA assessments, which measure students' ability to apply knowledge, think critically, and solve problems in real-life contexts (OECD, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Central Asia: Integration of Critical Thinking in the Curriculum. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Integrating Critical Thinking into the Curriculum of Central Asia: A Pathway to Success Introduction: Central Asia, comprising countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, recognizes the importance of critical thinking in the development of a well-rounded education. This article explores the significance of incorporating critical thinking into the curriculum of Central Asia, highlighting its benefits and providing references to support its implementation.

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- Cultivating Analytical and Problem-Solving Skills: Critical thinking promotes the development of analytical and problem-solving skills among students. By integrating critical thinking into the curriculum, Central Asian educational institutions can equip students with the ability to analyze complex issues, evaluate multiple perspectives, and propose creative solutions (Abrami et al., 2008).
- Nurturing Independent and Reflective Thinkers: Integrating critical thinking into the curriculum encourages students to think independently and reflectively. It enables them to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and develop informed opinions. By fostering independent thinking, Central Asian educational systems can empower students to become active participants in their own learning process (Paul & Elder, 2006).
- Enhancing Communication and Collaboration: Critical thinking enhances communication and collaboration skills, which are essential in today's globalized world. By incorporating critical thinking into the curriculum, Central Asian students can learn to express their ideas effectively, listen actively, and engage in constructive discussions. These skills not only facilitate academic success but also prepare students for future professional endeavors (Halpern, 2014).
- Encouraging a Culture of Lifelong Learning: Critical thinking promotes a culture of lifelong learning by instilling a curiosity for knowledge and a commitment to continuous improvement. By integrating critical thinking into the curriculum, Central Asian educational institutions can foster a love for learning, enabling students to adapt to new challenges, acquire new skills, and stay updated in an ever-evolving world (Facione, 2015).
- Incorporating critical thinking into the curriculum of Central Asia is crucial for equipping students with the skills necessary for success in the 21st century. By cultivating analytical and problem-solving skills, nurturing independent and reflective thinkers, enhancing communication and collaboration, and encouraging a culture of lifelong learning, critical thinking prepares Central Asian students to become active and adaptable participants in their personal and professional lives.

Similarities and Differences in Critical Thinking Integration in Curriculum: Central Asia versus Finland

Critical thinking is a valuable skill that is increasingly recognized as essential for educational systems worldwide. This article aims to provide a comparative analysis of the integration of critical thinking in the curriculum of Central Asia and Finland, highlighting similarities, differences, and the respective approaches taken by these regions.

- Emphasis on Analytical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills: Both Central Asia and Finland place importance on developing analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. Central Asian countries focus on incorporating critical thinking into their curriculum to equip students with the ability to analyze complex issues and propose creative solutions (Abrami et al., 2008). Similarly, Finland's education system emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking as key components of their curriculum, aiming to develop students' abilities to think independently and apply knowledge in real-life situations (Sahlberg, 2011).
- Pedagogical Approaches: Central Asian countries often adopt a more traditional, teacher-centered approach to education, which can limit opportunities for active student engagement in

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critical thinking. However, efforts are being made to shift towards more student-centered and inquiry-based learning approaches (Amanzholova et al., 2020). In contrast, Finland's education system is known for its learner-centered approach, focusing on promoting critical thinking through collaborative and experiential learning methods (Sahlberg, 2011).

- Integration of Critical Thinking across Subjects: Central Asian countries are in the process of incorporating critical thinking across various subjects, including mathematics, science, social sciences, and language arts (Amanzholova et al., 2020). This approach aims to develop critical thinking skills within the context of specific disciplines. In Finland, critical thinking is integrated into the curriculum as a transversal skill, emphasizing its application across all subjects rather than as a separate subject (Sahlberg, 2011).
- Teacher Training and Professional Development: Finland places a strong emphasis on teacher training and professional development to support the integration of critical thinking in the curriculum. Teachers are provided with extensive training on pedagogical strategies that foster critical thinking, enabling them to create a conducive learning environment (Sahlberg, 2011). In Central Asia, there is a growing recognition of the need for teacher training and support in implementing critical thinking approaches (Amanzholova et al., 2020).

Implications and Recommendations

The Importance of Critical Thinking in the Curriculum of Central Asia

Critical thinking is a vital skill that enables individuals to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information objectively and logically. In the ever-evolving world, where information is abundant and easily accessible, it is crucial for educational systems to incorporate critical thinking in their curricula. This article explores the significance of critical thinking in the curriculum of Central Asia, highlighting its benefits and providing references to support its implementation.

- Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills: Critical thinking encourages students to approach problems systematically and think beyond conventional solutions. It equips them with the ability to identify, analyze, and evaluate various options before making informed decisions. By integrating critical thinking into the curriculum, students in Central Asia can develop problem-solving skills that are essential for their future professional and personal success (Ennis, 2011).
- Fostering Independent and Analytical Thinking: Incorporating critical thinking in the curriculum of Central Asia enables students to become independent thinkers who can evaluate ideas, arguments, and evidence objectively. It encourages them to question assumptions, challenge biases, and develop their own perspectives. By promoting independent and analytical thinking, critical thinking empowers students to become active participants in their learning process (Halpern, 2014).
- Developing Effective Communication: Critical thinking enhances students' ability to communicate effectively. By learning how to analyze and interpret information, students can express their thoughts and ideas clearly and coherently. Moreover, critical thinking promotes active listening, which is essential for effective communication. By integrating critical thinking

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into the curriculum, Central Asian students can develop strong communication skills, enabling them to articulate their thoughts and engage in meaningful discussions (Paul & Elder, 2006).

- Encouraging Lifelong Learning: Critical thinking is not limited to the classroom; it extends beyond formal education. By incorporating critical thinking in the curriculum of Central Asia, educational institutions can equip students with the skills necessary for lifelong learning. Critical thinking enables individuals to adapt to new challenges, evaluate information from diverse sources, and make informed decisions throughout their lives (Facione, 2015).

Conclusion

Critical thinking skills are crucial for higher educational attainment and lifelong success. Mastering these skills allows learners to make better decisions and face life problems with intellectual traits. However, the Asian EFL community faces challenges in fostering critical thinking due to cultural background, inadequate education, lack of knowledge, exam-oriented practices, and teacher-centered classroom environments. To address these challenges, teachers, syllabus writers, and state authorities must focus on professional development, teaching materials, and developing learners' critical thinking skills from classroom practice to real-world situations. The orientation of language instruction should meet the specific needs and goals of learners, including academic objectives, communication needs, foreign language and cultural understanding, business activities, and expanding global knowledge.

Both Central Asia and Finland recognize the importance of critical thinking in their respective curricula. While there are similarities in the emphasis on analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, there are differences in pedagogical approaches and the integration of critical thinking across subjects. Finland's learner-centered approach and emphasis on teacher training serve as valuable examples for Central Asian countries as they strive to enhance critical thinking skills in their curriculum.

Incorporating critical thinking in the curriculum of Central Asia is essential for equipping students with the skills necessary for success in the 21st century. By enhancing problem-solving skills, fostering independent and analytical thinking, developing effective communication, and encouraging lifelong learning, critical thinking prepares students to navigate the complexities of the modern world. It is crucial for educational institutions in Central Asia to embrace critical thinking as an integral part of their curriculum to ensure that students are adequately prepared for future challenges.

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