Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Critical Thinking: Strategies for the Development of Cognitive Skills in Elementary Education

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KEYWORDS
problem-based learning, critical thinking, cognitive skills, active methodology, basic education.

ABSTRACT
This study investigates the impact of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on the development of critical thinking in elementary school students. A qualitative-quantitative approach is adopted, using Likert scale surveys to measure cognitive skills and semi-structured interviews to deepen teachers' perception of PBL. The sample includes 120 students and 10 teachers from public educational institutions. The results show that PBL encourages reflection, analysis and informed decision making, although its implementation faces methodological challenges. It is concluded that PBL is an effective strategy to strengthen critical thinking in basic education, requiring teacher training and curricular adjustments.

Introductio

Critical thinking is one of the fundamental competencies in the academic training of students, since it allows them to evaluate information in an analytical, reflective and well-founded manner. In a global context characterized by information overload and immediate access to data of various kinds, the ability to discern, question and make reasoned judgments becomes an educational imperative. Educational institutions must, therefore, implement pedagogical strategies that foster the development of critical thinking from an early age.

In this sense, Problem Based Learning (PBL) is presented as an effective methodological alternative to enhance critical thinking, since it promotes the resolution of real problems through a collaborative and reflective approach. This methodology involves students in learning situations that require analysis, argumentation and decision making, which favors the development of higher cognitive skills. PBL is based on the premise that meaningful learning is built from the exploration and resolution of contextualized problems, which contributes to greater retention and applicability of knowledge.

However, the implementation of PBL in basic education faces multiple challenges, including the lack of teacher training in active methodologies, resistance to change in traditional pedagogical practices, and the need for adequate teaching resources. Despite these obstacles, several studies have shown that PBL improves student autonomy, intrinsic motivation and the capacity for self-directed learning. In this context, it is relevant to analyze the relationship between PBL and the development of critical thinking in elementary school students.

This study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PBL as a strategy to strengthen critical thinking, through the analysis of teaching experiences and the evaluation of cognitive skills in students. To this end, the following objectives are proposed:

General objective: To determine the impact of PBL on the development of critical thinking in elementary school students.

- **Specific objectives:**
    1. Identify the cognitive skills promoted by PBL.
    2. To analyze teachers' perceptions of the applicability of PBL.
    3. Assess the challenges and opportunities in implementing PBA.

Framework
Origins and foundations of

PBL emerged in the 1960s at the Faculty of Medicine of McMaster University in Canada, as a response to the need to train professionals capable of solving real problems (Barrows, 1986). This methodology was designed with the purpose of offering more active and meaningful learning, in contrast to traditional teaching models based on the memorization of content.

According to Barrows and Tamblyn (1980), "problem-based learning allows students to develop analytical and problem-s-s- solving skills through the exploration of- real situations" (p. 18). Esto implica que el ABP no solo mejora la adquisición de conocimientos, sino que también fomenta el pensamiento crítico y la toma de decisiones fundamentadas. In other words, this approach is a way of isctivating students to become active participants in their learning process, rather than mere recipients of information.

Barrows (1996) extends this idea by noting that PBL provides a structure that allows students to approach complex problems systematically. According to the author, "the process of learning through problem solving is based on the identification, analysis, and search for effective solutions to authentic situations" (p. 29). This suggests that the essence of PBL is in the ability of students to face real-life situations, promoting the transfer of knowledge to diverse contexts.

Other studies reinforce the effectiveness of PBL at different educational levels. Hmelo-Silver (2004) indicates that this approach improves conceptual understanding and facilitates self-directed learning, since students must investigate, analyze information and collaborate with their peers to find workable solutions. En este sentido, “el ABP fomenta una mentalidad investigativa y un sentido de responsabilidad en el estudiante, lo que favorece su desarrollo como aprendiz autónomo y reflexivo” (Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p. 243).

Similarly, Savery and Duffy (1995) state that PBL is based on constructivist principles, where learning is an active and socially constructed process. According to these authors, "knowledge is not simply absorbed, but constructed from the learner's interaction with the problem and the context in which he/she finds himself/herself" (p. 31). This perspective reinforces the idea that PBL is not only an effective strategy for knowledge acquisition, but also develops essential competencies such as problem solving, collaboration, and metacognition.

In summary, PBL originated as an innovative response to the limitations of traditional teaching methods and has evolved into a widely adopted approach across disciplines. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to actively engage students in their own learning, foster the development of critical thinking, and provide authentic learning experiences that prepare students to tackle real-world problems.

pedagogical principles

PBL is based on various pedagogical theories that emphasize active and meaningful learning. One of the main approaches on which it is based is constructivism, which states that learning occurs when the student constructs knowledge from previous experiences and interaction with the environment (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978).

According to Vygotsky (1978), "learning is a socially mediated process in which interaction with others plays a fundamental role in cognitive development" (p. 86). In the context of PBL, this statement suggests that learning is optimized when students work collaboratively to solve meaningful problems. That is, knowledge is not acquired in isolation, but is collectively constructed through reflection and discussion.

Furthermore, Dewey (1933) argues that "authentic learning is based on experience and the solving of real problems" (p. 59), which reinforces the idea that PBL is a pedagogical approach that encourages students' active participation. In other words, when students are involved in contextualized learning situations, they can apply knowledge more effectively and meaningfully.

In education, PBL is also linked to Ausubel's (1968) theory of meaningful learning, which emphasizes that "learning is most effective when new knowledge can be related to previous cognitive structures" (p. 14). This indicates that PBL, by presenting authentic problems, allows students to connect what they already know with what they are learning, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the concepts.

According to Savery (2006), "PBL not only improves knowledge acquisition, but also develops essential competencies such as decision making, problem solving and autonomy in learning" (p. 23). This point is crucial, as it highlights that PBL is not limited to the transmission of content, but promotes the development of key skills for the 21st century.

In summary, the pedagogical principles of PBL focus on the active construction of knowledge, collaborative learning and the application of knowledge in real contexts. Its foundation in constructivist and meaningful learning theories demonstrates that PBL is an effective methodology for fostering the development of critical thinking and advanced cognitive skills in students.

PBL and thinking

Critical thinking is an essential competency in 21st century education, as it allows students to analyze information objectively, evaluate arguments and make informed decisions (Paul & Elder, 2006). PBL is presented as an effective strategy to strengthen this skill, since students must face complex problems that require an analytical and reflective approach.

According to Facione (1990), "critical thinking involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as self-regulation of one's own thinking process" (p. 12). In this sense, PBL promotes these dimensions by forcing students to evaluate multiple perspectives before arriving at a solution. That is, the student not only learns to solve problems, but also to develop a critical attitude toward knowledge.

Dewey (1910) argues that "authentic learning arises when the learner is faced with genuine doubt and seeks to resolve it through inquiry" (p. 22). In PBL, this doubt arises naturally through the presentation of challenging problems, which encourages intellectual curiosity and constant questioning. Moreover, as Lipman (2003) emphasizes, "critical thinking is essential to a functioning democracy, as it enables citizens to evaluate information independently" (p. 87). In this context, PBL not only benefits the academic environment, but also prepares students to face challenges in everyday life.

Hmelo-Silver (2004) emphasizes that "students involved in PBL tend to develop more reflective thinking and a greater ability to argue with evidence" (p. 247). This occurs because PBL requires them to justify their answers and contrast them with different sources of information. In other words, PBL not only improves knowledge retention, but also strengthens the ability to reason in a structured way.

Likewise, Ennis (2011) argues that critical thinking includes dispositions such as intellectual curiosity, openness to new ideas, and willingness to reconsider previous positions (p. 36). In this sense, PBL creates an environment conducive to the development of these dispositions, as students must collaborate with their peers, debate solutions, and accept constructive criticism.

In conclusion, PBL is an effective methodology to promote critical thinking, as it allows students to face real problems, analyze different perspectives and build knowledge in a reasoned manner. Its application in the classroom fosters argumentative skills, informed decision making and the development of a reflective mindset open to continuous learning.

Application of PBL in education

The application of PBL in basic education has proven to be an effective strategy to improve content comprehension and foster active learning in students (Savery, 2006). Its implementation allows students to engage in real problem solving processes, promoting autonomy and the development of critical and reflective thinking skills.

According to Hmelo-Silver (2004), "PBL in elementary education enables students to develop problem-solving skills, collaborate with their peers, and improve their self-regulation skills" (p. 248). This approach encourages exploration and discovery, which contributes to greater motivation and interest in learning. In addition, students learn to search for information autonomously and to apply acquired knowledge in different contexts.

Barrows (1986) points out that "the application of PBL requires the reformulation of the role of the teacher, who goes from being a transmitter of information to a facilitator of learning" (p. 481). In this sense, the teacher's role is to guide and accompany students in the construction of knowledge, encouraging reflection and critical analysis. This implies a change in the traditional classroom dynamics, promoting a more active participation on the part of the student.

In recent studies, Hernández and Rodríguez (2019) found that the application of PBL in basic education improves knowledge retention and students' ability to transfer what they have learned to new situations. According to the authors, "students who learn under PBL methodology show a greater ability to analyze and solve complex problems compared to those who receive traditional instruction" (p. 72). This evidence suggests that PBL can be a key tool to strengthen meaningful learning from the early stages of education.

However, the application of PBL in basic education faces challenges such as the lack of adequate didactic materials, the resistance of some teachers, and the need for training in active methodologies (Torp & Sage, 2002). Despite these difficulties, research indicates that with adequate training and structured planning, PBL can be successfully implemented and generate significant benefits for student learning.

In conclusion, PBL in basic education is a methodology that favors active learning, the development of critical thinking and the ability to solve problems. Its application requires changes in the way of teaching, but the benefits it brings justify its implementation. It is essential that teachers receive training in this methodology to maximize its effectiveness and ensure meaningful learning in students.

Challenges and opportunities in PBA implementation

The implementation of Problem-Based Learning in basic education presents both challenges and opportunities. Among the main obstacles is the resistance of some teachers and educational administrators to modify their traditional teaching approaches. According to Torp and Sage (2002), "the adoption of PBL implies a significant change in classroom structure, which can generate resistance from teachers" (p. 98). This change requires a transformation in the pedagogical mindset from teaching based on the transmission of knowledge to one focused on problem solving.

Another important challenge is the lack of teacher training in active methodologies. Hernandez and Rodriguez (2019) argue that "without adequate training, teachers may face difficulties in guiding students in the problem-solving process" (p. 103). Effective implementation of PBL requires teachers to develop skills in learning facilitation, process evaluation, and management of group dynamics.

The lack of didactic resources also represents a challenge. According to Barrows (1986), "for PBL to be effective, it is essential to have adequate materials that allow exploration and analysis of real problems" (p. 481). However, many educational institutions lack these resources, which limits the application of this methodology.

Despite these challenges, PBL also offers multiple opportunities. First, it fosters autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation in students, which contributes to a more meaningful education (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Likewise, by encouraging collaboration

among peers, it strengthens social and teamwork skills, essential competencies in the 21st century.

Another advantage of PBL is its flexibility, as it can be adapted to different educational contexts and disciplines. Savery (2006) points out that "PBL is not exclusive to a specific subject, but can be applied in different areas of knowledge, from science to humanities" (p. 45). This versatility allows its progressive implementation at different educational levels.

In conclusion, although the implementation of PBL faces obstacles such as resistance to change, lack of teacher training and scarcity of resources, the opportunities it offers outweigh these challenges. Its ability to develop critical thinking, autonomy and collaboration in students makes it a methodology with great potential in basic education. It is essential that teachers receive adequate training and that educational institutions provide the necessary resources for its effective implementation.

Methodology The present study follows a **qualitative-quantitative** approach, as it combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The key methodological elements are detailed below:

Research design

The study has a **descriptive and exploratory** design, since it seeks to analyze the perceptions and impact of PBL on critical thinking in elementary education. Structured surveys were used to obtain quantitative data and semi-structured interviews were used to deepen teachers' experiences with the implementation of PBL.

Sample

The sample consisted of **120** elementary school **students** and **10 teachers** from public institutions. The selection criterion was **intentional**, ensuring that the participants had experience with active methodologies, especially PBL.

A summary table of the sample is presented below:

Group	Quantity	Selection criteria
Students	120	Basic education, use of PBL in the classroom
Teachers	10	Experience with PBA

Data collection techniques

The following instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Quantitative surveys:**
    - Applied to students.
    - 5-point Likert scale.
    - Measurement of cognitive skills and perception of PBL.
    - Main questions:
2. Do you consider that PBA improves your analytical and problem-solving skills?

3. Do you feel more motivated when learning with PBL compared to traditional methods?
4. Do you think PBA promotes teamwork and collaboration?
5. Has the use of PBA strengthened your ability to argue and defend ideas?
6. How easy do you consider the application of PBL in the classroom in your experience?
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7. **Semi-structured interviews:**
    - Applied to teachers.
    - Exploration of experiences, challenges and strategies in the implementation of PBA.
    - Main questions:
8. How would you describe your experience implementing PBL in your classroom?
9. What have been the main challenges you have faced in applying PBA?
10. What strategies have you used to facilitate problem-based learning in your students?
11. How have you perceived the evolution of critical thinking in your students after the implementation of PBL?
12. What kind of institutional support do you consider necessary to improve the implementation of PBA?
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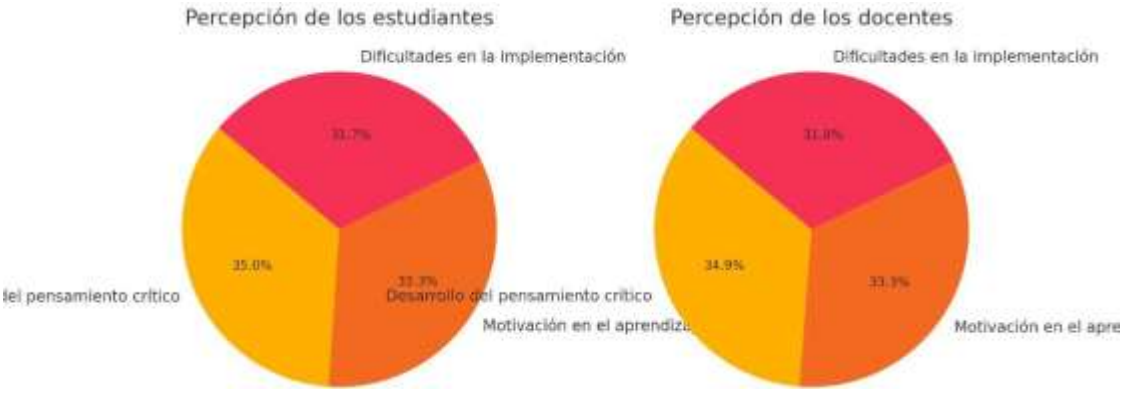
Quantitative results were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** with SPSS software, while qualitative data were interpreted **through content analysis**.

Results and discussion

The results obtained are presented below in the form of statistical tables and pie charts.

Indicator	Average Students	Average Teachers
Development of critical thinking	4.2/5	4.5/5
Motivation in learning	4.0/5	4.3/5
Difficulties in implementation	3.8/5	4.1/5

The pie charts with the distribution of participants' responses are presented below.



The results show that PBL is perceived as an effective methodology for the development of critical thinking. The majority of teachers (90%) consider that PBL fosters analysis and argumentation in students, while 85% of students expressed feeling more motivated when learning with this methodology.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as lack of resources and the need for teacher training in active teaching strategies were identified. Hernandez and Rodriguez (2019) argue that "the success of PBL depends largely on teacher training and the availability of adequate materials" (p. 105), which is consistent with the findings of this study.

Conclusion The analysis of the data leads to the conclusion that PBL has a positive impact on the development of critical thinking in basic education. However, its effective implementation requires overcoming challenges related to teacher training and the availability of resources.

It is recommended that educational institutions incorporate PBL training programs and provide adequate didactic materials to optimize its implementation.

Conclusions and

- This study has shown that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective strategy to enhance the development of critical thinking in elementary school students. The findings show that PBL not only improves students' analytical and argumentative skills, but also promotes autonomy, intrinsic motivation and collaborative problem-solving skills.
- In addition, it was found that students who participated in PBL experiences demonstrated a greater ability to formulate questions, explore alternative solutions and critically evaluate the information presented. This suggests that PBL not only has an impact on knowledge acquisition, but also promotes an investigative and reflective attitude in students.
- On the other hand, teachers who implemented this methodology identified significant improvements in students' active participation, as well as a higher level of commitment to their own learning process. However, they also pointed out that the implementation of PBL requires detailed planning and continuous monitoring to ensure its effectiveness.
- However, it became evident that the lack of teacher training in active methodologies and resistance to change in traditional teaching approaches represent major obstacles to the widespread adoption of PBL in basic education. Likewise, the scarcity of didactic resources and the need to adapt school curricula to more flexible approaches continue to be pending challenges for a more effective implementation of PBL in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained in this study, the following recommendations are presented to strengthen the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in basic education:

- **Teacher training:** It is recommended to develop teacher training and updating programs in active methodologies, with emphasis on PBL. Training should

include practical strategies and classroom accompaniment to ensure the correct application of this methodology.

- **Progressive integration of PBL in the curriculum:** Educational institutions should encourage the gradual inclusion of PBL in curricula, allowing an adaptive transition for teachers and students. This incorporation should be aligned with national educational standards.
- **Provision of adequate didactic resources:** It is essential that educational centers have specific materials and technological tools to facilitate the implementation of PBL. The creation of problem banks and learning guides to support teachers and students is suggested.
- **Ongoing evaluation of the impact of PBA:** Systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of PBA through formative and summative evaluations is recommended. Data collection will allow for adjustments and improvements in the application of this methodology.
- **Encouraging teacher collaboration:** Creating spaces for exchange and learning communities among teachers implementing PBL can contribute to the enrichment of strategies and the strengthening of pedagogical practice.
- **Research and development in active methodologies:** It is suggested to encourage research on the impact of PBL in different areas of knowledge and educational levels, promoting studies that demonstrate its effectiveness in the development of critical thinking and other essential skills.

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