

23 - 25 October 2026

Geneva, Switzerland

Creating the Conditions for Critical Thinking: A Mixed-methods Study of Teacher Stance in Middle School Classrooms

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Abstract

Critical thinking is considered as one of the main outcomes of education, typically developed through instructional techniques and activities that empower students to ask questions, think logically, and explore a range of perspectives. However, many classroom conditions may support or hinder these activities. Among these conditions is teacher stance. This study examined the relationship between teacher stance and students' critical thinking. Teacher stance was defined as the relational and epistemic orientation through which teachers position themselves in relation to students, knowledge, and learning. A mixed-methods approach was utilized, wherein 215 students and 30 teachers completed parallel questionnaires about perceived teacher stance. The questionnaires allowed student and teacher perceptions of teacher stance to be examined and compared. Students' critical thinking was assessed through performance measures administered at two points in time to examine change over the study period. Semi-structured interviews with selected students and teachers sought to uncover which teacher approaches fostered or hindered their willingness to question, reason, and challenge themselves and their peers. Quantitative results showed that teacher stance was positively associated with change in students' critical thinking. Among the components comprising teacher stance, dialogic openness and epistemic openness emerged as having the strongest associations with critical thinking. Qualitative findings found that students felt comfortable questioning and rethinking their thoughts when teachers allowed them to be autonomous learners and open to dialogue. Consequently, we assert that fostering student critical thinking necessitates not only implementing pedagogical methods that cultivate these skills but also establishing classroom settings conducive to such experiences.

Keywords: Dialogic Teaching; Epistemic Openness; Intellectual Autonomy; Teacher–Student Interaction