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Leadership's Role in Cultivating Critical Thinking Competencies through an Organizational Learning Culture: A Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Xue Wei Hong[a]*, Gary Tan Peng Liang[b]

[a] *Malaysia University of Science and Technology (MUST),Block B, Encorp Strand Garden Office, No. 12, Jalan PJU 5/5, Kota Damansara, 47810 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia*

[b] *Wawasan Open University (WOU),54, Jln Sultan Ahmad Shah, 10050 George Town, Penang, Malaysia*

[a]*Email:xue.weihong@phd.must.edu.my*

[b]*Email:pltan@wou.edu.my*

Abstract

This study investigates the crucial role of leadership in enhancing critical thinking teaching competencies in Technical and Vocational Education (TVE), with a focus on the impact of organizational learning culture. It reviews literature across educational leadership, pedagogy, and organizational behavior to explore how leadership support and learning agility influence the development of critical thinking skills. The research identifies leadership practices that foster a supportive environment for innovative teaching methods like problem-based learning and collaborative projects. Challenges such as curriculum limitations and assessment of critical thinking are also addressed. The necessity for professional development to bolster educators' critical thinking and teaching skills is highlighted. The findings emphasize that leadership dedication to a learning culture not only boosts teaching competencies but also equips students for success in a dynamic global job market. This contribution to educational discourse underscores the vital role of leadership in promoting critical thinking-focused practices, providing valuable insights for enhancing TVE systems.

Keywords: Leadership in Education; Critical Thinking; Technical and Vocational Education; Organizational Learning Culture; Professional Development.

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* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

The cultivation of critical thinking skills in students necessitates an educational environment that encourages active engagement, questioning, and reflection. Effective pedagogical strategies that have been identified include problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and the use of real-world scenarios. These approaches facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge to practical situations, thereby enhancing the development of critical thinking [1,2].

Problem-based learning is a student-centered pedagogy in which students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem. This method fosters critical thinking as students are required to analyze the problem, research different approaches, collaborate with peers, and propose viable solutions. In the context of TVE, PBL can be particularly effective as it mirrors the complexities and uncertainties present in real-world technical and vocational scenarios.

Collaborative learning involves grouping students to work together towards a common academic goal. This approach encourages the exchange of ideas, debate, and negotiation, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter and enhancing critical thinking skills. In technical and vocational settings, collaborative projects can simulate workplace teamwork, preparing students for the collaborative nature of modern work environments.

Incorporating real-world scenarios into the curriculum allows students to apply their technical knowledge and critical thinking skills to address practical challenges. This method bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, making the learning experience more relevant and engaging for students. It also prepares students to navigate the complexities and unpredictability of professional practice.

While the benefits of incorporating critical thinking into TVE are clear, educators face several challenges in implementing these pedagogies. These challenges include curriculum constraints, assessment difficulties, and the need for professional development. Educators must navigate these obstacles to create an environment conducive to the development of critical thinking skills.

The prescriptive nature of some technical and vocational curricula can limit the flexibility educators have to incorporate critical thinking exercises into their teaching. Finding a balance between delivering specialized content and fostering critical thinking requires innovative curriculum design and the integration of critical thinking objectives into technical subjects.

Assessing critical thinking skills poses a challenge due to their complex and multifaceted nature. Traditional assessment methods may not adequately capture students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and create. Developing authentic assessment strategies that accurately reflect critical thinking skills is essential for validating the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches.

Educators themselves must possess strong critical thinking skills and be adept at teaching these skills. Professional development opportunities focused on critical thinking pedagogies are vital for equipping educators with the tools and strategies necessary to effectively foster these skills in students.

The integration of critical thinking skills into technical and vocational education is crucial for preparing students to thrive in a complex and rapidly changing world. By adopting pedagogical strategies that promote active engagement, real-world application, and collaborative learning, educators in Shaanxi, China, and beyond can enhance the critical thinking competencies of their students. Overcoming the challenges associated with implementing these strategies requires a concerted effort from educators, institutions, and policymakers to prioritize critical thinking as a core component of technical and vocational education.

2. Literature Review

The imperative to foster critical thinking among students, particularly within the context of Technical and Vocational Education (TVE), is becoming increasingly recognized in educational discourse and policy. This is especially true in China, where the shift towards an industrialized economy necessitates a workforce equipped not only with technical skills but also with the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and innovate. This evolution in educational priorities is reflected in the growing emphasis on developing critical thinking skills within TVE programs, which are seen as crucial for preparing students for the demands of the modern job market [3]

2.1 Critical Thinking in TVE

TVE, or Career and Technical Education (CTE) as it is also known, plays a significant role in China's education system. Its origins trace back to the early 20th century, with the establishment of vocational schools aimed at producing technical assistants for various sectors. Since then, the landscape of TVE in China has evolved considerably, especially with the establishment of polytechnic institutions in 1993 to address the need for paraprofessional workers in fields like drafting, mechanics, and computer analysis [4]. Today, these institutions offer a range of programs at the diploma and certificate level, designed to meet the burgeoning demands of China's industrial and business sectors [5]**.** The emphasis on critical thinking within TVE programs aligns with China's broader educational goals. The Chinese Ministry of Education, recognizing the importance of critical thinking for national progress, has integrated critical thinking into the country's educational policy frameworks. This policy direction underscores the belief that critical thinking is essential not just for individual student success, but for the country's overall development and competitiveness on the global stage [6]

2.2 Educators' Role in Fostering Critical Thinking

Educators in TVE institutions, particularly lecturers at polytechnics, are at the forefront of this educational shift. Their role extends beyond the transmission of technical knowledge; they are tasked with creating learning environments that encourage students to question, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. This requires a departure from traditional rote learning and memorization towards pedagogical approaches that prioritize problem-solving, creativity, and decision-making — skills that are highly valued in today's workforce [7,8].

However, the transition to a critical thinking-focused curriculum is not without its challenges. Despite the policy emphasis and the recognized importance of critical thinking, research indicates that students in China's polytechnic programs may still be lacking in these skills. This gap suggests difficulties in effectively implementing critical thinking pedagogies within the TVE context, a challenge compounded by a lack of comprehensive research on

critical thinking in the Chinese educational system [9].

2.3 Research Directions and Implications

Given these challenges, it is crucial for further research to investigate the pedagogical strategies employed by TVE educators in China, their perceptions of these strategies' effectiveness, and the external factors that may influence their implementation. Such research can provide valuable insights into how critical thinking can be more effectively integrated into TVE curricula, thereby enhancing the quality of education and better preparing students for the demands of the workforce.Moreover, understanding the distinctions in the application of critical thinking pedagogies between engineering and non-engineering programs within polytechnics is essential. These insights can inform the development of tailored teaching strategies that align with the specific goals and purposes of different TVE programs, ensuring that all students, regardless of their field of study, are equipped with the critical thinking skills necessary for success [10,11].

3.Proposed Framework

This framework is built upon the foundational principles presented by [9], who argue that critical thinking skills can be effectively imparted through various cognitive strategies and techniques. [12] expand on this by identifying specific methodologies such as questioning, working in small groups, role-playing, and engaging in debates to nurture these skills. These pedagogical approaches are crafted to improve students' capabilities in areas like analysis, interpretation, inference, explanation, and the self-regulation of their cognitive processes.The significance of critical thinking as an epistemic inquiry process is highlighted, demonstrating its compatibility with questioning techniques and collaborative learning in small groups. Through the exchange of ideas and exposure to a diversity of perspectives, students are able to deepen their understanding of subjects [13]. Role-playing and debate are further cited as effective means for enhancing critical thinking skills, enabling students to better understand and engage with various viewpoints, thus fortifying their analytical abilities.As [14] discuss, a wide array of strategies exists beyond those mentioned that can promote critical thinking among students. The choice of specific teaching methods may be influenced by the educational program's structure. While this framework provides valuable guidance for selecting appropriate pedagogical techniques, it is not exhaustive of all the methods available for teaching critical thinking [15].

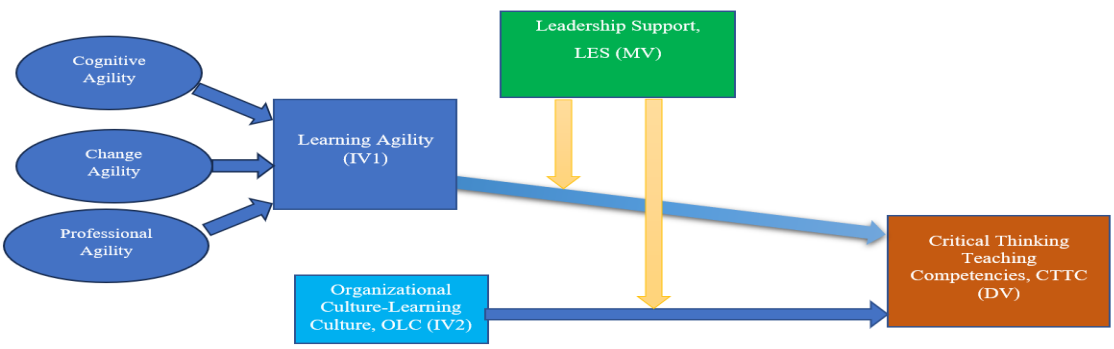

Figure1

3.1 Hypothesis Development

Hypothesis 1: Learning Agility has significance positive impact on critical thinking teaching competencies.

Reference [16] delve into managerial agility, which, when applied to educational leadership and teaching, emphasizes the importance of adaptability and quick learning in response to changing classroom dynamics and educational demands. This agility is crucial for teachers aiming to cultivate critical thinking skills in diverse student populations.

Reference [17] offer a meta-analysis on instructional interventions affecting critical thinking, providing empirical evidence that supports the idea that specific teaching strategies can significantly improve students' critical thinking abilities. This work underscores the necessity for teachers to be agile learners themselves, as they must constantly adapt and refine these interventions to meet their learners' needs effectively.

Reference [18] discusses global practices in teacher education, highlighting the value of learning agility in navigating the complexities of teaching competencies across different educational systems. Her insights suggest that educators who are quick learners and adaptable can more effectively implement critical thinking pedagogies that are culturally and contextually relevant.

Reference [19] introduces the concept of a growth mindset, which aligns closely with learning agility. Educators who embrace a growth mindset are more likely to seek out new teaching strategies, including those that foster critical thinking, and persist in the face of challenges, thereby modeling critical thinking and learning agility for their students.

Reference [20] explores the role of intelligence in lifelong learning and success, arguing that adaptive and creative skills—key components of learning agility—are as important as analytical skills. This perspective reinforces the idea that teaching for critical thinking requires an agile approach to education, where teachers apply a broad spectrum of cognitive strategies to foster deep learning.

Reference [19] challenge the notion that higher-order thinking skills and low-achieving students are mutually exclusive. Their work supports the premise that with agile teaching methods, which adapt to the needs of all learners, educators can elevate the critical thinking abilities of students regardless of their initial achievement levels.

Reference [20] focus on the science of acquiring expertise through deliberate practice. For educators, this suggests that developing competencies in teaching critical thinking is an ongoing process that benefits from intentional practice and adaptability—an embodiment of learning agility.

The discussion on how learning agility influences critical thinking teaching competencies, supported by a diverse range of references, underscores a crucial aspect of contemporary education: the necessity for educators to be adaptable, innovative, and continuous learners themselves. This synthesis of ideas from [21,22,23,24,25] provides a multi-faceted view of how teaching practices can evolve to meet the demands of the 21st-century classroom.

Reference [26] underscore the role of effective teacher evaluation in promoting professional growth. Their framework suggests that learning agility—characterized by the willingness and ability to learn from experiences and apply that learning to new and varied situations—is key to teacher development. This agility enables educators to refine their teaching practices continuously, thereby enhancing their ability to foster critical thinking in students.

Reference [27] highlights the importance of innovative educational research and its practical application in the classroom. By embracing adaptability and creativity, educators can leverage learning sciences principles to develop students' critical thinking competencies. This approach emphasizes the dynamic nature of teaching and learning, where educators are encouraged to experiment with and implement pedagogical strategies that respond to the evolving needs of their students.

Reference [28] introduces the concept of signature pedagogies, which demands a deep understanding and adaptability in applying discipline-specific strategies. This idea is particularly relevant to teaching critical thinking, as it requires educators to be versatile in their methods, ensuring that they engage students in ways that promote higher-order thinking.

Reference [29] discuss the integration of differentiated instruction with understanding by design, highlighting the necessity for learning agility in educators. This approach to teaching allows educators to tailor their instruction to meet the varied needs of learners, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the development of critical thinking skills.

Reference [30] champions learner-centered teaching, which necessitates a departure from traditional teacher-centered methods. This pedagogical shift demands high levels of learning agility from educators, as they must continually adapt their roles and strategies to facilitate the active participation of students in their own learning process, thereby enhancing critical thinking.

Reference [31] expands the discussion to include the fostering of creativity and entrepreneurship alongside critical thinking. This broader educational goal underscores the importance of learning agility in educators, not just in adapting teaching strategies, but also in reshaping educational environments and curricula to prepare students for the complexities of the modern world.

In summary, these studies paint a comprehensive picture of the modern educational landscape, where the ability to adapt, innovate, and learn from a variety of experiences is invaluable. By fostering learning agility in educators, the field of education can better address the diverse and evolving needs of students, equipping them with the critical thinking skills essential for navigating the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. This body of literature serves as a foundation for further exploration and dialogue among educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to advancing effective teaching and learning practices in our rapidly changing society.

These studies advocate for a pedagogical approach that values adaptability, continuous learning, and the strategic application of diverse instructional methods. By embracing learning agility, educators can more effectively develop and apply teaching strategies that promote critical thinking, preparing students to navigate complex problems and scenarios both in and beyond the classroom. This body of research offers a robust framework for educators,

curriculum developers, and policy makers aiming to cultivate environments that nurture critical thinking skills through agile learning practices.

Hypothesis 2: Organization Learning Culture has significance positive impact on critical thinking teaching competencies.

The significant impact of an organization's learning culture on the enhancement of critical thinking teaching competencies is a theme that resonates across the domains of organizational behavior, educational psychology, and teacher professional development. At the heart of this discourse is the recognition that a learning culture within schools and educational institutions—defined by a set of values, practices, and norms that champion continuous learning, the exchange of knowledge, and an openness to new ideas—serves as a critical support system for the development of teaching competencies. These competencies are particularly vital for the instruction of critical thinking, a skill that demands a high level of cognitive sophistication.

Delving into the scholarly literature provides further insights into this relationship. Reference [32] introduced the concept of the learning organization in his work, drawing a connection to the idea of a learning culture within educational settings. He posited that organizations with learning at their core exhibit enhanced capabilities in innovation and problem-solving, skills that are directly applicable to the teaching of critical thinking.

Similarly, Reference [33] explored how the culture of an organization influences the behaviors and practices within it, concluding that a culture emphasizing learning and intellectual development is conducive to the cultivation of educators' critical thinking teaching competencies.

Further supporting this notion, Reference [34] synthesized findings from over 800 meta-analyses to highlight the profound effect of teacher effectiveness on student learning outcomes. He argued that support for professional development in critical thinking within organizational cultures significantly bolsters teaching competencies.

Reference [35] examined the challenges and strategies associated with educational reform, underscoring the critical role of collaborative learning and collective responsibility in promoting educational innovation, including the instruction of critical thinking.

Reference [36] offered a unique perspective on the influence of individual beliefs about learning and intelligence on the ability to adapt and grow. She suggested that a learning culture endorsing a growth mindset empowers teachers to advance their critical thinking teaching competencies through the embrace of challenges and the application of feedback.

Reference [37] advocated for the creation of professional learning communities within educational organizations, highlighting these communities as supportive environments that value critical inquiry and reflective practice—both essential for the development of critical thinking teaching competencies.

Reference [38] discussed the transformative learning process, which involves a critical examination of one's beliefs and assumptions. This process is integral to the development of a learning culture that encourages educators to

reassess their teaching practices and assumptions, thereby fostering growth in critical thinking competencies.

In conclusion, the literature vividly illustrates the profound influence of an organization's learning culture on the development of critical thinking teaching competencies. By nurturing an environment that prioritizes continuous improvement, reflective practice, and collaborative learning, educational institutions can significantly enhance teachers' abilities to effectively teach critical thinking. This body of theoretical and empirical work lays a solid foundation for understanding the dynamic relationship between organizational learning culture and teaching competencies, providing valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers dedicated to fostering high-quality teaching practices.

Hypothesis 3: Leadership support has significance positive impact on relationship of Learning Agility and critical thinking teaching competencies.

The connection between leadership support, learning agility, and the development of critical thinking teaching competencies is deeply embedded within the landscape of educational research and leadership studies. Learning agility, defined as the capacity to swiftly acquire and utilize knowledge across various situations, stands out as a pivotal skill for educators, particularly in the context of designing and implementing critical thinking curricula. Leadership's role in educational environments is critical for fostering and sustaining these competencies, as it helps create a nurturing space conducive to ongoing learning and adaptability.

Reference [39] delve into the realm of authentic leadership, underscoring the importance of genuine, transparent, and ethical leadership in cultivating a culture of trust and openness. This form of leadership is essential for encouraging educators to seek out professional development, explore new instructional methods, and refine their approaches to teaching critical thinking. The premise here is that a supportive leadership approach is instrumental in enabling teachers to continuously evolve and improve their pedagogical skills.

Reference [40] expands on this by identifying various leadership behaviors, including a supportive leadership style that provides both emotional and material backing to teachers. This level of support is crucial in empowering educators to enhance their learning agility and, subsequently, their critical thinking teaching competencies. It ensures educators have the necessary resources, time, and motivation to pursue professional development endeavors.

Reference [41] highlights leadership's significant role in adult learning and professional growth, emphasizing the need to create environments that accommodate the diverse learning preferences of adult educators. Leadership that promotes exploration and risk-taking in teaching methods is key to advancing critical thinking teaching skills.

Reference [42] discusses the essential attributes of critical thinkers and the need for a supportive educational environment where teachers can innovate and employ varied instructional strategies. The underlying message is that leadership support is crucial in building a culture where educators can thrive in developing their critical thinking teaching capabilities.

Similarly, Reference [43] underscore the significance of critical thinking in the educational sector, suggesting that

leadership plays a fundamental role in fostering an educational culture that prioritizes and enhances critical thinking. By backing professional development and advocating for the incorporation of critical thinking into the curriculum, leaders can profoundly influence teachers' abilities to cultivate critical thinking competencies among students.

The literature presents a clear synergistic relationship between leadership support, learning agility, and the development of critical thinking teaching competencies. Leaders who actively endorse continuous learning, allocate resources for professional development, and support innovative teaching practices establish an environment where learning agility flourishes. This, in turn, significantly boosts educators' capacities to develop and implement critical thinking teaching competencies effectively. Understanding this dynamic interplay enables educational institutions to better support their teachers, equipping students with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the complexities of today's world successfully.

Hypothesis 4: Leadership support has significance positive impact on relationship of Organizational Learning culture and critical thinking teaching competencies.

The assertion that leadership support significantly influences the relationship between organizational learning culture and critical thinking teaching competencies is supported by a multitude of studies in educational leadership, organizational behavior, and pedagogical development. This relationship underscores the importance of leadership in fostering an environment that not only values but actively promotes a culture of learning and critical thinking within educational organizations.

Reference [44] articulates the profound impact of leadership on shaping organizational culture, including those aspects that pertain to learning and development. Leaders play a pivotal role in defining and modeling the values and behaviors that contribute to an organization's culture, including the emphasis on continuous learning and adaptation. A culture that prioritizes learning is more likely to produce educators who are adept at developing and applying critical thinking competencies in their teaching practices.

Reference [45] introduces the concept of the learning organization, emphasizing the role of systemic thinking and shared vision—facilitated by leadership—in creating organizations that excel in learning. Leadership that champions learning as a core value encourages the development of a culture where critical thinking teaching competencies are valued and nurtured.

Reference [46], in discussing the critical attributes of critical thinkers, highlights the necessity of an environment that encourages experimentation, questioning, and the application of diverse instructional strategies. Leadership support is crucial in creating such an environment, where educators feel empowered to enhance their critical thinking teaching competencies.

Reference [47] emphasize the role of substantive critical thinking across educational disciplines and suggest that leadership can significantly influence the integration of critical thinking into the curriculum. By fostering professional development and supporting pedagogical innovation, leaders can enhance teachers' abilities to develop critical thinking competencies.

Reference [48] Research by Drago-Severson (2009) focuses on leadership's role in facilitating adult learning and development, pointing out that leadership that supports professional growth and accommodates diverse learning needs is key to cultivating a learning culture that advances critical thinking teaching competencies.

Reference [49] discusses various leadership behaviors, including those that provide emotional and material support to followers. Such behaviors are essential for enabling educators to pursue professional development and adopt innovative teaching methodologies that foster critical thinking skills among students.

The literature clearly demonstrates that leadership support has a substantial and positive impact on the relationship between an organization's learning culture and the development of critical thinking teaching competencies. Leaders who create and maintain an environment that values continuous improvement, encourages risk-taking in pedagogical practices, and supports professional development are instrumental in fostering critical thinking skills among educators and, by extension, their students.

4.Conclusion

In conclusion, the interplay between leadership support, organizational learning culture, and the cultivation of critical thinking teaching competencies forms a cornerstone of educational excellence and innovation. The literature robustly supports the notion that leadership within educational institutions exerts a profound influence on fostering an environment conducive to learning and critical thought. Leaders who are genuine, transparent, and supportive create a culture where continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and openness to new pedagogical approaches are valued. This, in turn, empowers educators to develop and refine their critical thinking teaching strategies, thereby enhancing student learning outcomes.

The research underscores the importance of adopting pedagogical strategies such as problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and the integration of real-world scenarios to foster critical thinking skills among students. These methods encourage active engagement, questioning, and reflection, which are essential components of a critical thinking skill set. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is significantly influenced by the support and encouragement from leadership within the institution. Leaders who prioritize professional development, allocate resources for innovative teaching methods, and champion a culture of intellectual growth and critical inquiry pave the way for educators to successfully implement these pedagogical strategies.

Furthermore, the establishment of professional learning communities and the promotion of a growth mindset among educators are highlighted as crucial strategies for developing critical thinking teaching competencies. Through collaborative learning and reflective practice, teachers are better equipped to challenge their assumptions, experiment with new teaching methodologies, and engage students in meaningful learning experiences that promote critical thinking.

The challenges associated with integrating critical thinking into technical and vocational education, such as curriculum constraints and assessment difficulties, emphasize the need for leadership that is adaptable, innovative, and committed to educational reform. Leaders must navigate these obstacles by fostering a supportive learning environment that balances specialized content delivery with the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

The imperative for further research into effective critical thinking pedagogies within the context of technical and vocational education is clear. Investigating the strategies employed by educators, their perceived effectiveness, and the factors influencing their implementation will provide valuable insights into how critical thinking can be more effectively integrated into educational curricula. This research is essential for ensuring that students are equipped with the critical thinking skills necessary to thrive in a complex and rapidly changing world.

In sum, the synthesis of ideas from seminal works in the field of educational leadership and pedagogy reveals a compelling narrative: leadership support and an organizational culture that values learning are indispensable for fostering critical thinking teaching competencies. As educational institutions strive to prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce, the role of leadership in shaping a conducive learning culture cannot be overstated. This foundation of support enables educators to harness the full potential of critical thinking pedagogies, ultimately enriching the educational experience and equipping students with the skills to navigate the complexities of the contemporary landscape.

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