



THE SOCRATIC METHOD AS AN APPROACH IN TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Mary Grace Ann S. Mague
Senior High School Teacher, Our Lady of Peace School
Antipolo City, Rizal, Philippines
marygraceann.mague@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Enhancing the critical thinking skills of students is one of the principal goals of many educational institutions. This paper presents various articles discussing the general features of the Socratic Method in improving the critical thinking skills of students. Specifically, this study focuses on the importance of incorporating Socratic questioning in teaching Social Studies. The primary resources of this paper were taken from international journals. Related studies reveal that when teachers use Socratic questioning, students examine and probe their thoughts by making them explicit thus allowing them to develop and evaluate their thinking while overtly expressing their ideas. This in turn, is the paramount objective targeted by the Socratic Method, a student with an enriched critical mind.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Socratic Method of Teaching, Social Studies

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking as the primary cognitive skill is one of the targeted areas that education is prompted to nourish. With this skill, we are able to process information given to us with the aid of our senses and to think profoundly such information. Poor critical thinking necessitates risks such as weak decision-making, repeated mistakes, inappropriate assumptions, etc.

Several independent educational researchers, including Adler (1982), Sizer (1984), and Goodlad (1983), have voiced a need for more Socratic teaching in our classrooms. Teaching by questioning, particularly in classes of social studies, these researchers say, will help children develop powers of understanding, thinking, and communicating. Through oral defense of their opinions and participation in sustained, free discussion, students are able to develop better self-images, which affects their motivation to learn (Kay and young, 2010).

Some teachers may find it difficult to let students express their ideas in a thoughtful manner. More often than not, most educators focus on accomplishing the objective of their daily lesson plan but tends to compromise the opportunity of improving the argumentative and problem solving abilities of their students. This is why it is crucial that educators facilitate healthy discourses with their students.

One of the reasons that teachers tend to emphasize coverage of the material over engaged thinking is that they do not fully appreciate the role of questions in teaching content. Consequently, they assume that answers can be taught separately from questions. Indeed, so buried are questions in established instruction that the fact that all assertions—all statements that this or that is so—are implicit answers to questions is virtually never recognized (Elder and Paul, 2010).

In this article, the Socratic method of teaching will be given emphasis as it supports the objective of enriching the critical thinking abilities of students. With social studies as the main subject where this technique is employed, this review will serve as a source to future researchers apt to promote development of the Socratic method as an effective strategy to boost the cognitive skill, specifically the critical thinking skills of students.

DISCUSSIONS

The Socratic Method

The Socratic Method dates back to Socrates. Socrates was a Greek philosopher who lived in Athens in the 5th century BC and featured in the dialogues written later by his student Plato. (Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, Hajer, 2009). Socrates' mother was a midwife. With how he understood his mother's work, Socrates claimed that just like his mother he was practicing midwifery. Only his mother helped pregnant women deliver babies, whereas he helped his followers deliver knowledge (Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, Hajer, 2009). Socrates reached the fame for engaging others in conversations whose goal was to define broad ideas such as virtue, beauty, justice, courage, and friendship by discussing their ambiguities and complexities. (Delic, Becirovic, 2016).

Furthermore, Delic and Becirovic (2016) explained in their work the characteristics of the Socratic Method. According to them, “Socratic Method is not teaching in the conventional sense of the word. Teacher is an observer, a helper, guide but not the purveyor of knowledge. Lectures with undeniable facts and truths and rote memorization or, in other words, guiding the students is replaced with shared dialogues between students and teachers where both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning.” The Socratic method as an approach to teaching makes use of systematic questioning and inductive reasoning. The Socratic Method has five stages:

1. Wonder (posing questions such as: what is courage, what is virtue, etc.);
2. Hypothesis (an answer to the wonder, one gives his opinion or claim about the question which becomes a hypothesis of the dialogue);
3. Elenchus, refutation and cross-examination (the core of Socratic practice; the hypothesis is called into question and the counterexample is given to prove or disapprove the hypothesis);
4. Acceptance/ rejection of the hypothesis (participants accept or reject the counterexample);
5. Action (acting on the findings of the inquiry) (Delic and Becirovic, 2016).

Using Socratic method in teaching, giving students questions and not answers, we simply force students’ reasoning and the logical relationships of their existing knowledge and experience (Delic and Becirovic, 2016).

In the field of education, the word “Socratic” is descriptive and thus synonymous to “systematic questioning”. The Socratic Method of Teaching incorporates open ended questions that are high level which prompts analysis, arguments, and discussions among students. This method is particularly aimed at enriching students’ critical thinking which is one of the most important cognitive abilities that people need for survival.

In the book authored by Victor Moeller (2015), he defined Socratic Method as an exercise in “reflective thinking” that, according to John Dewey has two elements: **doubt** – a problem about meaning which initiates it—and **an act searching** for a solution(s) to solve that problem that begs resolution.

Socratic Method in Teaching

Socratic teaching focuses on developing students’ cognitive ability, that is, critical thinking. Critical thinking, as defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking (2013), is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. Since critical thinking skills are a high priority and demanded by the job market, educators are of a consensus that it should be one of the primary concerns for any educational institution to produce graduates with a high level of thinking skills, and these skills should be emphasized in every school curriculum (Boa, Wattanatorn, and Tagong, 2018).

In the article of (Elder and Paul, 2010), it was said that there is a special relationship between critical thinking and Socratic questioning because both share a common end. Critical thinking gives one a comprehensive view of how the mind functions (in its pursuit of meaning and truth), and Socratic questioning takes advantage of that overview to frame questions essential to the quality of that pursuit.

Furthermore, the main tool of Socratic teaching is a well-prepared set of questions. Questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. Answers on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such. That is why it is true that only students who have questions are really thinking and learning (Elder and Paul, 2010). It is important that students are given every opportunity to respond to questions and engage them in discussions as these stimulate their minds.

In the act of question-and-answer during a Socratic conversation, another skill developed among students is their interpersonal skill. Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, Hajer (2009) stated in their study that dialogue also provides the conditions for experiencing learning in dialogue with and from each other. The dialogic skills the Socratic Dialogue employs are listening, formulating and reformulating, asking for clarification, checking for understanding, following on from, probing assumptions and explicating them, abstracting and concretizing.

Students in discourse with their teachers during Socratic Dialogue learn from good questions. While learning happens, students think of ideas that come out from good questions thus good answers. Moreover, Socratic questioning does not aim for specific answers. In fact, it encourages many acceptable responses as students enrich their critical thinking. This is why Knezic, Wubbels, (Elbers, Hajer, 2009) said that the Socratic Dialogue trains the dialogic skills which are an important part of interpersonal competence.

It is evident in the book of Erick Wilberding (2014) how the Socratic method is effective in the critical thinking of students. He said that one can use Socratic dialogue to clarify, frame, challenge, and extend student thinking. It guides slow thinking about claims, concepts, issues, and problems of all kinds.

The Socratic Method in Social Studies

The use of the Socratic Method in various disciplines has been of great help since this technique has been given credit for being useful in enhancing the critical thinking skills of learners. In this article, the objective is to navigate the trajectory towards Social Studies which encompasses issues and topics that are worth of cognition among students. During presentations, a teacher may use the Socratic Method to engage students in conversations that will allow them express their opinions starting from a point of reference, that is, a question that the teacher will pose. Not to mention that this method also avoids passive students or learners as this will motivate most students to participate by actively reflecting in order for them to answer questions. As it was mentioned by Mark Saiki (2008), “Good questions are the core of effective teaching”. When the teacher is able

to plan and prepare a set of good questions, this is good for delivery. Also, during classes, students will also prepare and look forward to the class as they will voluntarily participate during discussions.

There are various topics to which a Social Studies teacher can use the Socratic Method. Particularly in the article of Kay and Young (2010), they cited the ReQuest Model developed by Anthony Manzo in 1969. The ReQuest procedure is a one-to-one teaching technique which has been tested in a clinical setting with remedial students ranging from seven to 25 years of age. The results of this experiment strongly indicated that ReQuest was significantly more effective in improving student questioning behavior and reading comprehension than was the Directed Reading Activity (DRA), a widely used five-step teaching strategy for improving reading comprehension (Manzo, 1970).

In History, a teacher may start by presenting a current event or issue and ask students what they think about it. With sustained and free-flow of question-and-answer, guided by concrete processing questions anchored on the topic for that session, students will appreciate every assembly as an opportunity for them to master how to think critically, and be able to remember similar events in the past with the present and interpret them according to the competencies required for that lesson.

In Economics, a teacher may do the same at the start of the muster. As students are unconsciously delaing with day-to-day activities with the sense of economics, they will soon realize how concepts under this subject are embedded in the activities that they do. Of course, this is achieved when learners are guided by good questions from which cognition takes place. When students process their ideas, they are able to express them through the answers that serve as responses to processing questions facilitated by the teacher.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The articles reviewed showed the significance and effectiveness of the Socratic Method in enhancing the critical thinking skills of students. Also, the studies conducted by the researchers featured in this paper cite the positive implications of the use of good questioning to engage students in healthy discourses and improve their interpersonal skills. However, the literature reviewed reveals that there is inadequate resources specifically focused on how the Socratic Method can be used in Social Studies. Hence it is recommended that there will be auxiliary studies that will mainly focus on the use of the Socratic Method in Social Studies. This literature review article will serve as a background for the conduct of future related research on the said topic.

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