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Current conditions of learning In elementary school: Problems and solutions

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Abstract

Elementary school education plays a strategic role in developing foundational competencies, making its current condition a critical subject of inquiry. This study aims to describe the present state of teaching and learning in elementary schools, with a particular focus on key problems and their potential solutions. The research employs a literature review method using a critical synthesis approach, drawing on a range of sources including books and peer-reviewed research articles. The findings indicate that elementary school learning is currently experiencing a crisis. In response, this paper offers several solution-oriented strategies to address the identified challenges and enhance learning outcomes at the elementary level.

Keywords: elementary education; learning crisis; educational solutions

INTRODUCTION

One essential component of education as a basic human need (Muha²imin et al., 2022) and a means to improve quality of life (Turwelis et al., 2022) is elementary

school education. This level plays a pivotal role in shaping fundamental competencies that serve as the foundation for students' development at later stages. The development of reading literacy skills, for instance, provides a framework for mastering broader skills across various disciplines (Castles et al., 2018; Navarrete, 2019), and serves as a key to improving educational outcomes (ACDP, 2014). Similarly, building financial literacy competencies in elementary school equips students with essential financial skills for their future (Puspitarona et al., 2019; Hermansyah et al., 2024). Moreover, elementary education represents a crucial period for the formation of students' attitudes, which tends to decline when they transition into secondary education (Aini et al., 2019). Therefore, the aspiration for an excellent future generation is largely determined by the quality of education at the elementary level.

Given the strategic role of elementary education, a comprehensive understanding of the learning environment at this stage is essential. Such understanding enables the identification of key issues and the formulation of solutions to enhance learning effectiveness. This article aims to describe the current conditions of elementary school learning, particularly focusing on its challenges and corresponding solutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article was developed using a literature review approach. This means the author examined various written sources relevant to the theme of this article (Anshori, 2019). These written sources include books and journals from previous research studies. After collecting the sources, the author critically evaluated and analyzed the views presented.

In this study, the various perspectives are positioned as sources of ideas for generating new insights (Sari & Asmendri, 2020). The creation of new ideas was carried out

critically, based on specific considerations, particularly in terms of relevance to the theme of this paper. This implies that the referenced views were not adopted automatically; rather, views that were inconsistent with the theme were excluded, incomplete ideas were expanded, and overly complex arguments were simplified by the author.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Standards of Understanding Learning

Before examining the current conditions of learning problems in elementary schools and their solutions, it is essential to understand the standard definition of learning. In this regard, two main perspectives can be used as references in this article: the biological perspective of learning and the cognitive science perspective (Arends & Kilcher, 2010).

From the biological viewpoint, learning is an activity that alters the physical structure and functional organization of the brain of the learner. These two changes occur sequentially. That is, learning first changes the physical structure of the brain, and afterward, the physical changes will alter the organization of brain functions.

The human brain consists of over 100 billion neurons that function to receive and transmit information through dendrites, axons, synapses, and neurotransmitters, with myelin protecting axons to speed up nerve impulse transmission. Learning plays a crucial role in shaping the brain's structure, strengthening neurons, and enhancing synaptic efficiency, making a rich and active learning environment critical (Schunk, 2012).

The brain is also made up of several regions with specific functions: the frontal lobe for thinking, problem-solving, and planning; the parietal lobe for orientation and sensory processing; the temporal lobe for sound, language, memory, and emotions; and the occipital lobe for visual

processing. The cerebellum controls balance, movement, and reasoning. Moreover, the brainstem regulates basic functions such as breathing and heartbeat, while the thalamus, hypothalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus are involved in sensory processing, hormones, emotions, memory, and learning. Of particular interest is that the brain does not only manage cognition but is also associated with emotional and psychological aspects such as motivation, talent, interest, social skills, and psychomotor functions (Rasmitadila et al., 2021).

It is emphasized again that learning is an activity that stimulates the development of the physical and functional parts of the brain, as described above. It is clear that there are various areas and functions within the brain, and in order to stimulate these diverse areas and functions, an environment rich in learning stimuli is needed. Such a learning environment is centered around multi-sensory stimulation to engage the brain, which involves intervening in multiple brain regions and functions.

From the cognitive science perspective, an understanding of the cognitive, social, and emotional domains in learning is obtained. According to the cognitive science perspective, learning is not only related to cognition but also psychological or emotional aspects such as interest (Irab et al., 2024), motivation and self-efficacy (Hidayatullah et al., 2024; Maisaroh et al., 2023), values (Wardhani et al., 2022; Aningsih et al., 2022), and social aspects such as collaboration with others. It is undeniable that a deficit in basic psychological needs can pose learning challenges for elementary school students (Aquami et al., 2024).

There are four key concepts in cognitive science (Arends & Kilcher, 2010). *First*, human intelligence is multidimensional. *Second*, the memory system enables students to collect, process, store, and transfer information. *Third*, prior knowledge in students serves as the foundation for learning new information. *Fourth*, metacognitive

knowledge helps students become aware of their cognitive processes, monitor their progress, and apply effective learning strategies to achieve their learning goals.

From the cognitive perspective, it is clear that learning should align with multiple intelligences as a reflection of diversity, uniqueness, and equitable education (Gani et al., 2024). Therefore, learning must develop all dimensions of intelligence. Learning is also related to information and the memory system. Thus, learning must facilitate a reciprocal relationship between these two components so that students can successfully store and utilize the information they learn. Learning is also a process of utilizing existing potential in students. Furthermore, learning is a strategic activity so that, in addition to mastering knowledge, students can also become independent through the use of these strategies.

From the perspectives of biology and cognitive science described above, it can be concluded that learning is a complex activity that involves changes in the brain through a rich and active learning environment, focusing on multi-sensory stimulation to intervene in multiple brain areas and functions. Learning is an activity that strengthens neurons, enhances synaptic efficiency, and optimizes the functions of the lobes and other brain structures. Learning also means an active process that develops multiple intelligences, organizes memory to store and transfer information, and utilizes prior knowledge to master new knowledge. In addition, learning must foster metacognition so that students can master knowledge and achieve independence. Therefore, learning not only develops the cognitive domain but also the social and emotional domains of students holistically.

Learning Issues in Elementary Schools

The current issue in the learning domain in elementary schools is the emergence of a learning crisis

(Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kemendikbudristek, 2024). The learning crisis is described as "schooling ain't learning," which refers to a situation where students attend school, but learning does not actually take place (Pritchett, 2013). In other words, students are present at school, and teachers teach them a range of materials, but students do not experience true learning during these encounters.

When linked to the standard definition of learning, the learning crisis in elementary schools indicates that the learning process has not effectively stimulated brain development due to the monotonous learning environment that fails to activate the students. Furthermore, the learning is not based on multiple intelligences and does not consider the thinking process and the dialectic between knowledge and the student's memory system. This also means that the learning process is not based on strategies that can actively engage and empower students. Therefore, learning remains partial and fragmented in developing elementary school students.

This learning crisis is partly triggered by an overly packed curriculum (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kemendikbudristek, 2024), which forces teachers to prioritize completing the material rather than focusing on optimal student understanding. Teachers lack the flexibility to facilitate the optimal development of students' learning due to the pressure to cover the curriculum content. This situation not only affects the students but also causes stress that impacts teachers' performance (Agung et al., 2024).

The teacher's priority is the content material, not how students learn that content. For teachers, teaching has been narrowed down to a routine and automatic activity through drills or repetitions just to finish the material (Haryanto in Siswoyo, 2013), without considering the conditions and learning needs of the students. Teachers

prioritize preparation and content completion over ensuring that students are truly exposed to the material (Fatimah et al., 2024). Teachers also sometimes neglect the concept of content pedagogy knowledge analysis (Putra et al., 2024), resulting in an inability to effectively facilitate the learning process for students.

There is a crisis in the teachers' deep engagement during learning moments with all their knowledge and skills as educators (Maisaroh et al., 2023). Teachers do not involve themselves from the students' perspective. Research shows that elementary school teachers still do not utilize media in the learning process, use conventional teaching methods, and students tend to memorize the material (Al Farizi et al., 2019). Students who engage in memorization cannot manage information as part of self-regulation skills, which should be nurtured from the elementary school level (Bala et al., 2020). Another consequence is that elementary school students' mastery of scientific literacy as a tool to understand knowledge is inadequate (Yuliana et al., 2021).

The loss of the spirit of teaching in the learning process prevents students from experiencing high-quality learning. Evidence shows that more than half of elementary school teachers' teaching does not reflect 21st-century learning. Most elementary school teaching uses teacher-centered methods (59.17%) and conventional methods (59.17%), which result in a lack of development in higher-order thinking skills in students, no use of technology in teaching (100%), and a misalignment with students' developmental stages in elementary education (53.33%). However, elementary school teachers are strong in content mastery (95%) and can deliver material clearly and thoroughly in class (Sumardi et al., 2020). While this seems positive, a teacher's fluent mastery of material signals dominance in the classroom.

Teachers' bias toward students' learning needs can also be analyzed through the lens of inclusive education.

This perspective is important because inclusive education addresses the unique learning needs of students, which must be met as part of the right to equal learning opportunities (Kawuryan et al., 2021). Openness to inclusive education reflects how teachers are willing to serve the diverse learning needs of students. However, research indicates that while elementary school teachers are positive toward children with disabilities, they are not as supportive of inclusive education (Sunardi et al., 2024). Elementary school teachers face difficulties in designing effective learning strategies to meet the needs of all students with varying unique needs (Rasmitadila et al., 2021).

The learning crisis is also related to the learning resources used in elementary schools. The reality shows that, amid limited digital learning infrastructure in rural areas and teachers' limited innovation, textbooks remain the dominant learning resource used by elementary school students (Rashidi & Ghaedsharafi, 2015; Bansiong, 2019; Chang & Windeatt, 2021; Paraschiv & Dascalu, 2023; Ghonchepour et al., 2024). If digital learning resources were available, the challenges of 21st-century teaching and learning could be addressed (Syahid et al., 2023; Suwanto et al., 2022). The creative use of such media could reduce the gap in literacy skills. For example, Firdaus et al., (2024) found that the iPusnas e-book was more effective than traditional textbooks in improving numeracy skills in 5th grade students. Diari et al., (2023) also found that the use of mobile-based technology positively impacted learning outcomes, independence, and allowed students to learn at their own pace and comfort. However, such learning resources still face challenges in being applied on a large scale in Indonesia.

The use of traditional textbooks can positively impact the development of independent and cooperative elementary school students, emphasizing inclusivity, respect for diversity, and intercultural appreciation (Maulidina et al.,

2024), and can provide activities and experiences that enrich students' perspectives on the cultural diversity of Indonesia (Sadiah et al., 2024). However, some textbook structures do not adequately educate students to become effective learners. For instance, in the 2013 Curriculum version of textbooks, the text arrangement usually begins with instructions or commands related to reading materials, followed by the reading text itself. The instruction section is often brief, such as "Let's Read" or "Let's Observe." Sometimes, there are also slightly longer instructions, like "Read the following text!" (Kusumawati, 2017).

Instructions like "Let's Read" and "Read the following text!" lead elementary students to perceive reading as merely an act of reading, without needing to pay attention to specific strategies or the speed and time involved in reading. The impact would be different, for example, if the textbook instruction read, "Read the following text for three minutes using the SQ3R technique!" This instruction would educate elementary students to consider reading speed and strategy.

In conclusion, the learning issues in elementary schools today manifest as a learning crisis, where the learning process has not optimally stimulated all aspects of student development, particularly brain development, which is the foundation for all other forms of development. This occurs because the learning environment has not positioned students as active subjects through a rich learning design. "Rich" in this context refers to how learning is multisensory, stimulating various areas and functions of the brain, and facilitating multiple processes in the thinking system, memory, and intelligences of students.

Solutions to Learning Issues in Elementary Schools

The learning crisis in elementary schools can be addressed by creating a conducive academic atmosphere. This effort is related to creating a rich and active learning

environment that provides multisensory stimulation to facilitate the development of multiple areas and functions of the brain. It is also connected to facilitating multiprocesses in the thinking system and memory, as well as the multiple intelligences of students.

Elementary school teachers need to prioritize a brain-based natural learning system approach to manage the classroom more productively (Rasmitadila et al., 2021). Teachers should employ multimodal strategies to align with the pluralism or diversity of student intelligences. Such teaching approaches value diversity, uniqueness, and equitable education (Gani et al., 2024).

Moreover, elementary school teachers must use strategies that help students process knowledge optimally, ensuring that the knowledge is well-stored in their memory and, most importantly, can be applied in real-life practices. Strategies for anchoring new knowledge to existing knowledge through the use of graphic organizers, analogies, and similar techniques should be employed by teachers to create connections between old and new knowledge for students. Equally important, teachers need to explicitly introduce learning strategies to students to effectively develop their metacognitive skills (Arends & Kilcher, 2010).

Learning in elementary schools should also consider the use of integrated learning approaches. Integrated learning encourages students' curiosity to solve problems through exploration/investigation (Jackman, 2012). It fosters the transfer of knowledge and skills across subjects while stimulating all aspects of students' development (Schunk, 2012).

Additionally, elementary schools should consider using project-based learning approaches to activate students and foster creativity, a crucial skill in the 21st century (Halimah et al., 2020). Teachers may also use traditional games to improve learning outcomes and motivation, as well as develop motor skills, coordination,

speed, strength, strategy, spatial intelligence, and situational analysis skills in students (Aliriad et al., 2024). Along with this, teachers can create educational songs by composing lyrics based on the taught material. This will engage elementary students in singing activities and physical movements, making the learning process more enjoyable and helping them understand the lessons better (Wadiyo et al., 2024).

Another effort is to consider the learning material. Elementary teachers need to strengthen and accelerate the learning of foundational literacy content. Foundational literacy is a priority because it serves as the foundation for learning and mastering other subjects. If foundational literacy is not mastered promptly, students will struggle to effectively learn other subjects.

One type of foundational literacy that needs to be strengthened and accelerated is reading and writing literacy. Effective mastery of reading and writing literacy paves the way for students' development in other aspects (Castles et al., 2018; Navarrete, 2019). Furthermore, mastery of reading and writing literacy can improve students' academic performance (ACDP, 2014). On the other hand, elementary students who have not mastered reading literacy are likely to encounter difficulties across all subjects (Department for Education, 2022).

The essential components of reading literacy that need to be taught in elementary schools include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Hempenstall, 2016). These components should be packaged in multimodal texts, which involve two or more symbol systems to convey information. The material in multimodal texts can enrich the horizon of students' thinking and, in line with recommendations, provide multisensory stimulation to effectively stimulate the development of elementary students' brains.

CONCLUSION

The current state of learning in elementary schools is characterized by a learning crisis. A learning crisis means that students are not experiencing true learning that stimulates all aspects of their development. This issue arises due to the passive and monotonous learning environment in elementary schools. The solution to this issue is for teachers to provide multisensory stimulation aimed at developing multiple areas and functions of the students' brains. Teachers must also design learning based on multiple intelligences and consider the memory system and information processing in students. By doing so, elementary school students will experience holistic development.

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