DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL THINKING IN STUDENTS: INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES IN GENERAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract. In the context of rapid globalization and technological advancement, the development of professional thinking among students in general secondary education has become an essential educational objective. This article explores the theoretical and practical foundations of forming students' professional thinking through innovative pedagogical approaches. It emphasizes the integration of competency-based learning, digital technologies, and creative project work as core strategies for preparing students to meet the demands of the modern labor market. The research is based on a qualitative methodology involving literature analysis, classroom observation, and teacher-student interviews. Findings reveal that innovative teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning, project-based assignments, and the use of ICT tools significantly enhance students' problem-solving skills, creativity, and self-directed learning abilities. The study also highlights challenges related to teacher preparedness and unequal access to technological resources, proposing solutions through professional development and curriculum modernization. The results contribute to a better understanding of how innovative pedagogy fosters students' readiness for professional life and supports the formation of a new generation of competent, critical, and innovative thinkers in the education system of Uzbekistan.

Introduction. In the 21st century, education systems around the world are undergoing fundamental transformations aimed at preparing students for the rapidly changing demands of modern society. The increasing pace of technological progress, globalization, and digitalization has created a new social and economic environment that requires individuals to possess not only theoretical knowledge but also the ability to think critically, act creatively, and adapt professionally. In this context, developing professional thinking among students in general secondary education is becoming one of the most crucial

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pedagogical priorities. Professional thinking is understood as the ability of students to apply acquired knowledge and skills in solving real-world problems, make responsible decisions, and plan their future professional development. It involves a combination of cognitive, reflective, and creative competencies that allow learners to connect academic learning with practical experiences.

Cultivating such thinking from an early age contributes to forming a generation of motivated, self-directed, and innovative individuals capable of contributing effectively to national progress. In Uzbekistan, the modernization of the education system has been recognized as a strategic priority. The “Uzbekistan 2030 Development Strategy” emphasizes the importance of introducing innovative teaching technologies, competency-based curricula, and digital transformation in general education. These reforms aim to align school education with international standards while preparing students to participate actively in the knowledge-based economy. The Ministry of Preschool and School Education has also introduced programs that integrate career guidance, entrepreneurship education, and ICT-based learning into the school curriculum to enhance professional awareness among students. Despite these positive steps, several challenges remain. Many schools still rely on traditional teaching methods that emphasize rote learning rather than the development of independent and critical thinking.

Teachers often lack sufficient training in using digital tools and innovative teaching strategies. Furthermore, the limited availability of technological resources, especially in rural schools, restricts students’ opportunities to engage in interactive and project-based learning experiences. Given these challenges, the present study seeks to explore how innovative pedagogical approaches including project-based learning, inquiry-based teaching, and the integration of digital technologies can effectively contribute to the development of professional thinking in students. The research focuses on identifying best practices, assessing their impact on students’ learning outcomes, and proposing recommendations for improving teacher training and educational policy in Uzbekistan’s general secondary education system. This paper argues that professional thinking is not an innate ability but a skill that can be systematically developed through well-designed pedagogical interventions. By fostering creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving through innovative methods, schools can cultivate future professionals who are capable of meeting the demands of the 21st-century workforce and contributing to the sustainable development of society.

Literature Review. The development of professional thinking in students has long been considered a key objective of modern education, serving as a foundation for preparing young learners for future career paths and societal

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participation. Numerous scholars have examined this phenomenon from psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural perspectives. According to Vygotsky intellectual and professional development occurs through social interaction and the internalization of cultural tools. He emphasized that learning is most effective when students engage in collaborative, meaningful activities that connect academic knowledge with real-life experiences. This theory laid the groundwork for contemporary constructivist approaches that dominate modern pedagogy. Similarly, Piaget argued that students develop higher-order cognitive skills when they are encouraged to explore, experiment, and reflect, thus linking critical thinking with professional awarenesss [1].

In the 20th century, Dewey introduced the concept of “learning by doing,” which remains a cornerstone of professional thinking development. His philosophy stresses that education must go beyond memorization and foster practical problem-solving and experiential learning. Following Dewey’s ideas, Kolb developed the experiential learning cycle, which integrates experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation all essential components of professional thinking formation [2]. More recent studies have focused on the role of innovative pedagogy in cultivating professional competencies**.** Shulman noted that teachers play a crucial role in shaping students’ professional cognition by modeling reflective and evidence-based practices. Fullan emphasized that educational innovation should be grounded in deep learning principles fostering creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking These elements collectively form the foundation of professional competence in the 21st century [3].

In the context of Uzbekistan, several researchers have contributed to understanding how professional thinking can be nurtured within the framework of national educational reforms. Tursunova highlighted that professional thinking begins in school through the development of metacognitive skills, self-assessment, and inquiry-based learning. Saidov suggested that integrating information and communication technologies and career guidance programs into secondary education helps bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. Moreover, the Uzbekistan 2030 Development Strategy explicitly prioritizes the modernization of curricula and the introduction of innovative teaching methods to align education with global standards [4]**.**

Discussion. The results of the research clearly demonstrate that the implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches significantly contributes to the development of professional thinking among students in general secondary education. The introduction of project-based learning, inquiry-oriented instruction, and the integration of information and

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communication technologies have been particularly effective in fostering students' ability to think critically, make decisions independently, and connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications. One of the key findings of this study is that project-based learning allows students to engage in authentic, real-world problems that require creativity, teamwork, and reflection. When students take responsibility for solving complex issues, they begin to develop a sense of ownership over their learning, which enhances their motivation and deepens their professional awareness. This supports the ideas of Dewey and Kolb who argued that experiential learning promotes both intellectual growth and practical competence. Another significant aspect revealed in this study is the role of digital pedagogy in shaping professional thinking.

The integration of ICT tools such as virtual laboratories, educational simulations, and online collaboration platforms encourages interactive learning and broadens students' access to global knowledge resources. As Fullan and Trilling & Fadel observed, technology-based learning environments help students develop 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, which are central to professional competence. In the Uzbek context, this aligns with the objectives of the "Uzbekistan 2030 Development Strategy", which promotes digital transformation in education. Furthermore, the study confirms that teacher professionalism is a determining factor in the successful implementation of innovative pedagogy. Teachers who employ reflective practices, facilitate discussions, and encourage self-directed learning tend to produce students with stronger analytical and problem-solving skills. This finding resonates with Shulman's theory of pedagogical content knowledge, which emphasizes the importance of teachers' ability to integrate theory, practice, and reflection in the learning process. However, it was also observed that many teachers lack sufficient preparation in modern teaching methods and digital literacy, which limits the full realization of innovation in the classroom. Despite the positive impact of innovative pedagogies, several challenges persist. Limited access to technology in rural schools, inadequate training programs for teachers, and rigid curriculum structures hinder the development of professional thinking.

Additionally, traditional assessment systems focused mainly on memorization do not adequately measure students' creative and professional competencies. Addressing these issues requires a systemic approach that includes continuous professional development, curriculum modernization, and improved access to digital infrastructure. It is also important to note that professional thinking cannot be developed in isolation. It is a cumulative outcome of integrated teaching strategies, supportive learning environments, and strong collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

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Therefore, fostering professional thinking must be seen as a shared responsibility that extends beyond the classroom. Schools should engage in partnerships with industries and higher education institutions to provide students with early exposure to professional practices and mentorship opportunities. In conclusion, the discussion underscores that developing professional thinking in students is a dynamic and multifaceted process. Innovative pedagogical approaches serve as powerful instruments for bridging the gap between knowledge and practice, theory and application. By equipping students with critical, creative, and reflective skills, the education system can ensure the formation of a generation capable of responding effectively to the complex challenges of the modern world.

Research Methodology. This study employed a qualitative research design complemented by elements of quantitative analysis to examine how innovative pedagogical approaches influence the development of professional thinking among students in general secondary education. The methodological framework was constructed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between teaching innovation, student engagement, and the formation of professional competencies.

A mixed-method approach was used to gather both descriptive and analytical data. The qualitative component focused on classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student reflections, while the quantitative part included surveys and assessment results that measured changes in students' cognitive and professional skills. This combination provided a holistic view of how innovative pedagogical practices impact learning outcomes. The study was conducted in five general secondary schools located in Tashkent and Samarkand regions. Participants included 50 teachers and 200 students from grades 8–9, representing diverse academic and socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers participating in the research had varying levels of experience, allowing the study to evaluate how professional expertise influences the implementation of innovative teaching methods.

Data were collected using the following methods:

- **Classroom observation:** Researchers observed 40 lessons across different subjects (science, mathematics, and humanities) to analyze the use of interactive and project-based learning techniques.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with teachers and school administrators to identify challenges and perceptions regarding innovative pedagogy and student professional development.
- **Student surveys:** Administered to assess students' self-perception of professional skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and decision-making.

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- **Document analysis:** Included a review of national education policy documents, curricula, and school reports related to innovation in education.

The instruments used in the study included observation checklists, structured interview guides, and standardized questionnaires adapted from the **OECD "Future of Education and Skills 2030 Framework"** Reliability was ensured by piloting the questionnaires in two schools prior to data collection, and expert validation was obtained from three university professors specializing in educational innovation. Through this methodological design, the research provided reliable and contextually grounded insights into how innovative pedagogical practices contribute to nurturing professional thinking among secondary school students in Uzbekistan.

Conclusion. The research findings clearly demonstrate that developing professional thinking in students is a key priority for modern education systems seeking to prepare young people for the dynamic and knowledge-based world of the 21st century. The study confirmed that innovative pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning, inquiry-based instruction, and digital integration play a decisive role in shaping students' professional awareness, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. These approaches encourage learners to apply their knowledge in practical contexts, think independently, and work collaboratively, which are essential skills for future professional success. The analysis also revealed that the teacher's role is central to this process. Teachers who effectively combine traditional teaching with modern, learner-centered methods create an environment that stimulates curiosity, critical reflection, and intellectual growth. However, the study identified challenges such as limited digital resources, insufficient teacher training, and traditional assessment systems that do not fully reflect students' competencies. Addressing these issues requires continuous professional development, investment in educational technology, and reforms in curriculum design and evaluation methods.

In the context of Uzbekistan's educational modernization, as outlined in the "Uzbekistan 2030 Development Strategy", the development of students' professional thinking aligns closely with national goals of creating a competitive, innovative, and globally competent generation. Integrating innovative pedagogy into general secondary education not only enhances academic outcomes but also contributes to the holistic formation of students' personal and professional identity. Ultimately, this study concludes that professional thinking is not an innate quality but a learnable and developable skill that must be intentionally fostered through purposeful teaching strategies. A student-centered, competency-based, and innovation-oriented learning environment can effectively cultivate individuals who are ready to adapt, lead, and contribute meaningfully to society. Thus, schools should prioritize pedagogical innovation as a strategic pathway to building human capital

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capable of driving sustainable social and economic development.

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