Original Article

Elementary School Teachers' Critical Consciousness and Core Self-Evaluations: A Rural Setting

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between critical consciousness and core self-evaluations among public elementary school teachers in a rural Philippine district. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was used with 129 teachers selected from a population of 190 through stratified random sampling. Data were obtained through adapted survey instruments that measured critical consciousness across passive adaptation, emotional engagement, cognitive awakening, and intentions to act, and core self-evaluations across self-esteem, neuroticism, generalized self-efficacy, and locus of control. Descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple linear regression were applied. Results showed that critical consciousness was high overall (M = 4.09, SD = 0.56), with cognitive awakening obtaining the highest domain mean (M = 4.16, SD = 0.53). Core self-evaluations were also high overall (M = 3.42, SD = 0.57), with self-esteem rated very high (M = 4.23, SD = 0.48) and neuroticism rated less high (M = 2.03, SD = 0.58). Critical consciousness and core self-evaluations showed a very strong positive relationship (r = 0.90, R2 = 0.81, p = 0.000). Regression results indicated that all four domains of critical consciousness significantly predicted core self-evaluations, with emotional engagement having the largest standardized coefficient (beta = 0.55). The findings suggest that teacher development in rural schools may be strengthened by programs that link social awareness, reflective practice, emotional connection, and professional self-belief.

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1. Introduction

Critical consciousness has become an important construct in education because it connects reflective awareness with the capacity to respond to inequitable social and institutional conditions. Freire's concept of conscientization positioned education as a process through which people read social reality, recognize contradictions, and act upon conditions that limit human development. Contemporary scholarship continues to treat critical consciousness as a multidimensional capacity that includes reflection, motivation, and action against perceived inequity (Diemer et al., 2015; Heberle et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011). For teachers, this construct is not only a social justice orientation. It also shapes how classroom realities are interpreted, how learners' contexts are understood, and how professional roles are enacted in schools marked by uneven resources and social disadvantage.

In elementary education, critical consciousness has practical value because teachers work closely with children, families, and communities. Teachers encounter poverty, language differences, uneven access to learning materials, family distress, school resource gaps, and policy demands that may not fully reflect local conditions. A critically conscious teacher is more able to see these conditions as part of broader systems rather than as isolated learner deficits. This perspective matters in rural schools, where distance, limited professional access, and constrained resources can intensify the everyday demands of teaching. Recent work on critical consciousness in teacher education shows that equity-oriented professional preparation can help teachers notice oppression, analyze structural patterns, and develop concrete responses to injustice (Andrews & Leonard, 2023; Castro et al., 2025; Kumlu, 2024).

Critical consciousness, however, is not only cognitive. It also includes emotional and behavioral dimensions. Emotional engagement gives social problems personal meaning and may move teachers from awareness to commitment. Cognitive awakening enables teachers to analyze who is affected, how problems persist, and why collective responsibility is required. Intentions to act represent readiness to translate awareness into practice. Passive adaptation, meanwhile, reflects how teachers may accept existing conditions or limit their response when they perceive few options for change. These domains are relevant in rural public schools because teachers often balance commitment to learners with constraints in workload, administrative tasks, professional development access, and community expectations (Alipio, 2020).

Core self-evaluations provide a complementary psychological lens. The construct refers to broad self-appraisals of worth, competence, emotional stability, and personal control. It is commonly represented through self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability or low neuroticism, and locus of control (Bono & Judge, 2003; Judge et al., 2003). Teachers with more positive core self-evaluations are more likely to interpret demands as manageable, persist through difficulties, and maintain

confidence in their professional roles. In contrast, lower self-esteem, low efficacy, externalized control, and high neuroticism can weaken the capacity to cope with stress and may reduce job satisfaction, resilience, and instructional effectiveness.

Teacher well-being research has expanded substantially in recent years because teacher stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression have become major concerns in education systems. Agyapong et al. (2022) showed that teacher stress and burnout are persistent concerns with implications for mental health, while Hascher and Waber (2021) emphasized the need to examine both personal and contextual factors that shape teacher well-being. Dreer (2023) further reported that teacher well-being is linked with desirable outcomes such as retention, teacher-student relationships, and student outcomes. These studies support the view that teachers' internal psychological resources should be understood together with the conditions in which they work.

Core self-evaluations have direct relevance to this problem because they capture teacher self-beliefs at a broad level. Studies outside and within educational settings show that core self-evaluations relate to job satisfaction, work engagement, life satisfaction, and turnover intention (Akosile & Ekemen, 2022; Judge et al., 2005; Pelaez-Fernandez et al., 2022). In teacher populations, core self-evaluations appear especially meaningful because the profession requires emotional regulation, daily judgment, classroom leadership, and persistence amid uncertainty. When teachers believe that they are capable, worthy, emotionally stable, and able to influence outcomes, they may respond to school challenges with greater agency. This makes core self-evaluations a vital outcome for teacher development, especially in settings where external support may be limited.

Although critical consciousness and core self-evaluations have been studied separately, their relationship among public elementary school teachers in rural Philippine contexts remains underexamined. The connection is theoretically plausible. Critical consciousness may strengthen professional self-appraisal by helping teachers understand structural problems without internalizing all school difficulties as personal failure. At the same time, positive core self-evaluations may help teachers sustain the confidence and emotional steadiness needed to act on critical awareness. When both constructs are strong, teachers may be better prepared to interpret inequity, manage emotional demands, and maintain a sense of professional agency.

This study therefore examined the relationship between critical consciousness and core self-evaluations among public elementary school teachers in Cateel 2 District, Division of Davao Oriental, during school year 2025-2026. It assessed the levels of critical consciousness in terms of passive adaptation, emotional engagement, cognitive awakening, and intentions to act; determined the levels of core self-evaluations in terms of self-esteem, neuroticism, generalized self-efficacy, and locus of control; tested the relationship between the two constructs; and identified which domains of critical consciousness significantly predicted teachers' core self-evaluations. By focusing on a rural district, the study offers empirical evidence that may guide professional development, psychosocial support, and school-based initiatives for teacher well-being and social awareness.

2. Methodology

A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was used to examine the relationship between critical consciousness and core self-evaluations among public elementary school teachers. The design was appropriate because the study sought to describe the levels of the variables and test the strength and direction of their association without manipulating school conditions, teacher experiences, or the measured constructs. The study was conducted in Cateel 2 District, Division of Davao Oriental, during school year 2025-2026. The target population consisted of 190 public elementary school teachers assigned to classroom teaching roles in the district. From this population, 129 respondents were selected through stratified random sampling to secure proportional representation across participating public elementary schools and instructional contexts. Teachers were included when they were currently employed as elementary-level classroom teachers in public schools in the district and had at least three years of continuous teaching experience. Administrators, coordinators, specialists, teachers with less than three years of service, teachers on extended leave, and teachers under administrative investigation during the data collection period were excluded to maintain consistency in respondent exposure to the classroom context.

Data were collected through an adapted survey questionnaire composed of two major scales. The first part measured critical consciousness in terms of passive adaptation, emotional engagement, cognitive awakening, and intentions to act. The second part measured core self-evaluations in terms of self-esteem, neuroticism, generalized self-efficacy, and locus of control. Items were answered on a five-point Likert scale. Higher means indicated stronger agreement with the item statements, except that the neuroticism items were interpreted according to the reported descriptive scale. The mean ranges used for interpretation were as follows: 4.20 to 5.00 indicated Very High, 3.40 to 4.19 indicated High, 2.60 to 3.39 indicated Moderately High, 1.80 to 2.59 indicated Less High, and 1.00 to 1.79 indicated Least High. These descriptors were retained in the manuscript to preserve the decision rules used in the source analysis.

Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by three expert validators in education, psychology, and research methodology. The experts assessed item clarity, relevance, content alignment, and suitability for public elementary school teachers. A pilot test was then administered to 30 public elementary school teachers to check face validity, item clarity, and internal consistency. The critical consciousness scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .949 for 36 items, while the core self-evaluations scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .893 for 12 items. These coefficients indicated acceptable to excellent internal consistency for the full-scale data collection. Revisions after validation and pilot review focused on clarity, coherence, and alignment with the educational context.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the appropriate education authorities and school heads before the survey was administered. The respondents

were informed of the study purpose, their voluntary participation, the confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was secured prior to participation. The completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, encoded, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means and standard deviations were computed to determine the levels of critical consciousness and core self-evaluations. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine the relationship between the two variables. Multiple linear regression was applied to identify which domains of critical consciousness significantly predicted core self-evaluations. Statistical decisions were made at the .05 significance level.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the domain-level results for critical consciousness. The overall mean for critical consciousness was 4.09 (SD = 0.56), described as High. Among the four domains, cognitive awakening obtained the highest mean (M = 4.16, SD = 0.53), followed by intentions to act (M = 4.12, SD = 0.51), emotional engagement (M = 4.09, SD = 0.59), and passive adaptation (M = 3.97, SD = 0.61).

Table 1. Level of critical consciousness among public elementary school teachers.

Domain	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Passive adaptation	0.61	3.97	High
Emotional engagement	0.59	4.09	High
Cognitive awakening	0.53	4.16	High
Intentions to act	0.51	4.12	High
Overall	0.56	4.09	High

Table 2 presents the domain-level results for core self-evaluations. The overall mean for core self-evaluations was 3.42 (SD = 0.57), described as High. Self-esteem obtained the highest domain mean (M = 4.23, SD = 0.48), while neuroticism obtained the lowest domain mean (M = 2.03, SD = 0.58). Generalized self-efficacy had a mean of 3.75 (SD = 0.52), and locus of control had a mean of 3.67 (SD = 0.57).

Table 2. Level of core self-evaluations among public elementary school teachers.

Domain	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Self-esteem	0.48	4.23	Very High
Neuroticism	0.58	2.03	Less High
Generalized self-efficacy	0.52	3.75	High
Locus of control	0.57	3.67	High
Overall	0.57	3.42	High

Table 3 shows the correlation between critical consciousness and core self-evaluations. The correlation coefficient was 0.90, with $R^2 = 0.81$ and p = 0.000. Based on the reported decision rule, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 3. Correlation results.

Variables	r	p-value
Critical consciousness	0.90	0.000
Core self-evaluations		

Table 4 presents the multiple regression results. The regression model was significant, R = .920, R^2 = .846, adjusted R^2 = .841, standard error of the estimate = .28647, F(4, 124) = 125.400, p = .000. All four domains of critical consciousness were significant predictors of core self-evaluations: passive adaptation (B = .580, SE = .550, beta = .500, t = 4.050, p = .000), emotional engagement (B = .650, SE = .600, beta = .550, t = 4.500, p = .000), cognitive awakening (B = .620, SE = .570, beta = .520, t = 4.200, p = .000), and intentions to act (B = .600, SE = .580, beta = .510, t = 4.100, p = .000). The reported prediction equation was: core self-evaluations = 1.75 + 0.58(passive adaptation) + 0.65(emotional engagement) + 0.62(cognitive awakening) + 0.60(intentions to act).

Table 4. Regression results.

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	1.750	0.520		3.370	0.001
Passive adaptation	0.580	0.550	0.500	4.050	0.000
Emotional engagement	0.650	0.600	0.550	4.500	0.000
Cognitive awakening	0.620	0.570	0.520	4.200	0.000
Intentions to act	0.600	0.580	0.510	4.100	0.000

4. Discussion

The high level of critical consciousness indicates that the teachers reported substantial awareness of problems that affect their school and community context. This result aligns with critical consciousness theory, which treats awareness, reflection, and action as linked dimensions of education for social transformation (Freire, 2000; Watts et al., 2011). The highest domain mean appeared in cognitive awakening, which suggests that teachers were especially strong in recognizing shared responsibility, structural influence, and the need to confront complex concerns. This is consistent with Heberle et al. (2020), who noted that critical consciousness requires more than awareness of individual difficulty because it also involves analysis of social and institutional conditions. The result also supports recent teacher education work by Andrews and Leonard (2023), Kumlu (2024), and Castro et al. (2025), which

emphasizes that teachers' capacity to notice systems of inequity is central to equity-oriented practice.

The high mean for intentions to act gives the findings practical relevance. Critical consciousness is incomplete when reflection remains detached from behavior, and recent scholarship has argued that action should remain central to the construct (Diemer et al., 2021). In this study, the respondents reported readiness to support community action, contribute to solutions, and talk with others about problems. This pattern suggests that teachers in the rural district were not limited to passive recognition of school concerns. Instead, the results suggest a degree of agency that may support collaborative school improvement. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior also helps explain this result because intention reflects a proximal motivational basis for action when perceived control and social support are present (Ajzen, 1991).

The high level of core self-evaluations suggests that the teachers generally viewed themselves as capable, worthy, and able to influence professional outcomes. This is important because core self-evaluations represent a broad personal resource linked to self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability (Bono & Judge, 2003; Judge et al., 2003). The very high self-esteem score may indicate a strong professional self-regard, while the less high neuroticism score suggests lower endorsement of negative emotional states. These results matter for teacher well-being because recent reviews have shown that teacher stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression remain persistent challenges in education systems (Agyapong et al., 2022; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Teachers with stronger positive self-appraisals may be better equipped to remain steady and motivated in contexts where resources, workload, and administrative demands create pressure.

The very strong positive relationship between critical consciousness and core self-evaluations is the central empirical contribution of the study. The result suggests that teachers who reported higher critical consciousness also tended to report stronger core self-evaluations. This relationship can be understood through the interaction of sociopolitical awareness and personal agency. Critical consciousness may help teachers understand that school problems often arise from structural and community conditions, which may reduce self-blame and strengthen a more constructive professional identity. At the same time, positive core self-evaluations may help teachers feel confident enough to process social problems and consider possible action. This interpretation is coherent with Freire's (2000) view of reflection and action, Diemer et al.'s (2015) measurement framework, and Judge et al.'s (2003) view of core self-evaluations as a broad basis for motivation and adaptation.

The regression findings add specificity because all four critical consciousness domains significantly predicted core self-evaluations. Emotional engagement had the largest standardized coefficient, which suggests that the emotional connection to social and school problems was the strongest predictor in the model. This pattern is plausible in teaching, where professional identity is tied to care, responsibility, and commitment to learners. Teacher well-being research indicates that emotional experience is not peripheral to professional work because well-being relates to retention, teacher-

student relationships, and school outcomes (Dreer, 2023; Hascher & Waber, 2021). In a teacher sample, concern, hope, motivation, and empathy may help transform awareness into a sense of purpose, and this sense of purpose may strengthen self-esteem, efficacy, and perceived control.

Cognitive awakening, intentions to act, and passive adaptation also had significant effects, which suggests that the relationship between critical consciousness and self-evaluation is not limited to emotion. Cognitive awakening may strengthen self-evaluation because teachers who can analyze problems in systemic terms may feel more competent in interpreting their professional environment. Intentions to act may also reinforce core self-evaluations because readiness for action can affirm agency and control. The positive coefficient for passive adaptation requires careful reading. In the present instrument, the passive adaptation items included awareness, concern, responsibility, and perceived relevance of the problem rather than simple resignation. Therefore, the significant coefficient may reflect teachers' initial recognition of problems and acceptance of responsibility as part of a broader movement toward active consciousness. This pattern reinforces the need to interpret measurement domains within their item content rather than by domain label alone.

The findings also have practical implications for rural school leadership. Since emotional engagement had the largest predictive contribution, professional development should not rely only on technical training or policy compliance. It should include reflective dialogue, peer support, community problem analysis, and opportunities for teachers to connect their work with meaningful social purposes. Agyapong et al. (2023) reported that teacher well-being interventions often address individual stress reduction, but the present findings suggest that programs in rural schools may be stronger when they connect well-being with agency and collective purpose. Evidence on core self-evaluations also suggests that stronger self-appraisals can support job satisfaction and reduce turnover intention (Akosile & Ekemen, 2022; Judge et al., 2005; Pelaez-Fernandez et al., 2022). Thus, programs that build critical consciousness may also contribute to teacher well-being when they enhance self-esteem, efficacy, emotional steadiness, and perceived control.

These findings should be read with appropriate caution. The study used a descriptive-correlational design, so causal claims cannot be made. The results were based on self-report data from one rural district, which may limit generalizability to other divisions or school systems. The very strong correlation and high regression coefficients also suggest the need for future studies that test the constructs with additional controls, larger samples, and possibly longitudinal or mixed-method designs. Even with these limits, the study provides useful evidence that socially aware, emotionally engaged, and action-oriented teachers may also hold stronger positive self-appraisals. This is an important direction for teacher development because professional competence in rural public schools requires both critical awareness of context and psychological resources for sustained practice.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that public elementary school teachers in Cateel 2 District demonstrated high critical consciousness and high core self-evaluations. Among the domains of critical consciousness, cognitive awakening obtained the highest mean, while self-esteem obtained the highest mean among the domains of core self-evaluations. Critical consciousness had a very strong positive relationship with core self-evaluations, and all four domains of critical consciousness significantly predicted core self-evaluations. Emotional engagement had the strongest standardized effect in the regression model.

These findings indicate that teachers' awareness of social and school concerns is closely linked with how they evaluate their worth, competence, emotional steadiness, and personal control. Teacher support programs in rural schools should therefore combine critical reflection, social awareness, emotional engagement, peer dialogue, and well-being support. Such programs may help teachers convert awareness into professional agency while sustaining positive self-beliefs needed for effective classroom practice. Future research may extend the study through longitudinal, qualitative, or mixed-method designs to examine how critical consciousness and core self-evaluations develop over time and how they relate to teacher performance, retention, and learner outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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