Chapter 8
Developing Pre-Service Teachers’ Critical Thinking and Assessment Skills With Reflective Writing

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs are implementing more reflection into their coursework to better prepare future teachers to think critically in their classrooms. In this multiple-participant case study, the researchers analyze nine PSTs from two different teacher preparation programs. All PSTs participated in one-on-one or small group reading interventions with young children and conducted a series of assessments and intervention lessons over one semester. At the same time, the PSTs took a course focused on reading assessment and intervention. Through the course, PSTs reflected on their intervention practices, student growth, instructional strengths and weaknesses, and additional concerns that could arise during the sessions through the use of reflective writing assignments. Through learning about literacy assessments and conducting literacy interventions and tutoring, PSTs practiced and enhanced their critical thinking skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking, according to Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci and Capa-Aydin (2013), is the process of taking responsibility for one’s own thinking, using this thinking to make decisions and analyze information, and evaluating and assessing learning. While the authors of the present chapter agree with Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci’s and Capa-Aydin’s (2013) definition of critical thinking, the authors want to acknowledge that this definition may not sufficiently describe how teachers’ critical thinking has the potential to impact student learning and growth. Because critical thinking can influence student outcomes and growth within the classroom (and perhaps beyond), teacher preparation programs ought to provide time and space to emphasize and foster critical thinking in teacher candidates (Santoro & Forghani-Arani, 2015). Often, pre-service teachers (PSTs) are tasked with taking the perspective of a student while learning the craft and skill of teaching. However, if PSTs are to be effective future educators, they must learn to utilize critical thinking skills to make informed decisions about data, student learning progress, and lesson objectives.

Rather than the definition listed above, the authors of the present chapter view critical thinking through the lens of Halpern (2014):

"Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions, when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task. (p. 8)"

In this definition, critical thinking is clearly linked to outcomes, which are important when considering teacher education. Every thought or action of the teacher influences students, and should be documented when considering how critical thinking is scaffolded for pre-service teachers. Halpern (2014) also indicates that critical thinking may include problem solving, decision-making, and formulating inferences, which are all part of the daily actions of a teacher.

Critical thinking is exemplified differently in and across learning contexts. For example, asking a kindergartener to think critically about the wolf’s motives in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* differs from a teacher thinking critically about how to analyze student assessment data. Both examples fit the definition of critical thinking outlined by Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci and Capa-Aydin (2013). However, the outcomes and goals of each individual are unique; and, therefore, the process of critical thinking varies.

Reflection has become an accepted practice in teacher education (Beauchamp, 2015). Thus, teacher education programs are implementing more reflection into their coursework as a way to better prepare future teachers for the classroom. Oner and Andadan (2011) purported that teacher educators believe reflective practices offer PSTs an opportunity “to establish relevant connections between theory and practice as they learn to reflect on their actions [and experiences]” (p. 478). Reflective teaching can refine a teacher’s practice beyond skills and strategies to create a habit for reflecting on lessons or interactions through an analytical and evaluative lens (Braun & Crumpler, 2004).

In this chapter, the authors explore how critical thinking can be fostered in two teacher preparation programs through consistent, targeted, and purposeful reflective writing. PSTs in the study were enrolled in literacy assessment and intervention courses in which they learned the theoretical and conceptual foundations of literacy assessment, then applied their knowledge through individualized or small group
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