Chapter 17

Preservice Teachers’ Development and Application of Critical Thinking Skills in a Social Studies Methods Course

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking skills are essential in the success of effective citizens. However, it is unclear how well preservice teachers (PTs) are prepared to teach these skills to K-8 students. This chapter investigates the application of PTs’ critical thinking skills in a social studies methods course. In addition, it examines how often PTs include critical thinking strategies in their lesson plans. Findings suggest that PTs consider themselves to be critical thinkers. Yet they may lack the tools, skills, and strategies to promote student engagement with critical thinking through rigorous, complex lessons. The authors present a research study and offer strategies to enhance the development of PTs’ critical thinking skills. The chapter discusses how to promote the transfer of these skills to K-8 students.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The technological revolution that ushered in the 21st century is still impacting our lives today. The exponential growth of digital content, along with unprecedented access to information, requires an astute consumer to navigate the crossroads between fact, fiction, and opinion while evaluating the credibility of content and source. Leaders across education, business, and government agree that citizens, workers, and leaders require specific skills to succeed in this technology-driven landscape. These skills include both the traditional 3Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic) and 4Cs:

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Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: Making decisions, solving problems, and acting when appropriate

Effective Communication: Synthesizing and transmitting ideas in written and oral formats

Collaboration: Working effectively with others, including those from diverse groups and with opposing points of view

Creativity and Innovation: Seeing what is not there and making something happen (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011; NEA, 2012).

The 4Cs skills outline the overall critical thinking process in which one collects and evaluates information to make judgments that guide beliefs and/or actions. Digital literacy, which incorporates the elements of critical thinking to evaluate and use online content, has been increasingly recognized as an essential skill. Digital literacy is a set of skills which enable an individual to find, evaluate, and use digital content in meaningful and responsible ways (ALA, 2018). Shown to be highly impactful, digital literacy has been added as a specific teaching and learning requirement to many elementary, secondary, and postsecondary curricula across the globe (Hague and Payton, 2011; NIH, 2018; Putman, 2015).

A substantial body of research surrounds several facets of critical thinking, including definitions (Facione, 1990), measurement (Bissell & Lemons, 2006), development and teaching (Halx & Reybold, 2005), and application (Phillips & Bond, 2004; Tapper, 2004). Moreover, research findings confirm that the development of sound critical thinking skills is related to improved student confidence and increased perceptions of academic control (Stupnisky, Renaud, Daniels, Haynes, & Perry, 2008), as well as better grades and greater academic achievement (Facione, 2009). A range of research also suggests that development and application of critical thinking skills are crucial for the protection of an effective democratic society (Facione, 2009; NCSS, 2002; Pithers & Soden, 2000).

Pithers and Soden (2000) stated that although “the contemporary education curriculum is a highly contested arena, there seems to be consensus that it should help students to think well and to think for themselves” (p. 237). Furthermore, across all sectors of society (i.e., government, business, education, parents), people believe that graduates should be able to weigh available evidence and make thoughtful decisions (Dallman, 2015).

While the importance of critical thinking is widely recognized, there has also been a demonstrated deficiency in the development and application of critical thinking skills at both K-12 and higher education levels (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008; McKim, 2007; NCES, 2012). The lack of critical thinking skills must be addressed by educators. It is especially crucial when considering society’s increasing reliance on a wide variety of digital news and information sources.

Ironically, this requires asking a generation of teachers with potentially limited critical thinking skills to educate students whose need for these skills may be greater than at any time in history. This expectation requires that teachers possess both the skills and the inclination to think critically. In addition, they must be able to communicate, demonstrate, and promote the use of critical thinking skills in their classroom. Unfortunately, there is a limited body of research on the development of pre-service teachers’ (PTs’) critical thinking skills, as well as their capacity to foster these skills in their students. Furthermore, the limited research raises many unanswered questions. For example, Wineburg (2001) identified a challenge in historical and contextual thought that is highly relevant to the work assisting PTs to develop the skills needed for the contemporary classroom: