

## Chapter 52

# Encouraging Preservice Teachers' Critical Thinking Development Through Practitioner Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents findings from a phenomenological study that investigated the experiences of elementary preservice teachers engaged in semester-long inquiries during a yearlong student teaching internship. The authors found that practitioner inquiry was a means to support the critical analysis of teaching practices and classroom experiences. The preservice teachers first identified an aspect of teaching from which they wanted to learn, systematically studied their practices in that area, and transferred that knowledge to other aspects of their teaching. This research supports that practitioner inquiry can be used in teacher education coursework to encourage preservice teachers to take more active roles in their learning to become critical thinkers and to generate knowledge for student learning and professional growth.*

### INTRODUCTION

Practitioner inquiry is a form of professional learning defined as the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 2009). The educators use inquiry as a critical thinking tool to evaluate and assess their own practices in order to act for change by asking questions or “wonderings,” gathering data to explore their wonderings, analyzing the data, making changes

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in practice based on knowledge constructed, and sharing learning with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Through this process of critical praxis, practitioners gain new understandings of their philosophies and actions, and are able to make more informed professional decisions that shape their practice and inspire other educators (Oberg, 1990). By connecting theory with practice, inquiry encourages deep thinking about learning in ways that foster creative changes in one's teaching while raising the voices of teachers (Meyers & Rust, 2003). Practitioner inquiry has long been a tool for supporting the learning of preservice and inservice teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Crocco, Bayard & Schwartz, 2003). For these reasons, it has potential for helping to encourage preservice teachers to take a more active role in their learning, to become educators who think critically and generate knowledge for student learning and professional growth.

Many scholars argue that there is a need for preservice teachers to learn to think critically about their practices to challenge assumptions, recognize problems of practice, and take on leadership and advocacy roles (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Dawson, 2007; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2017). By developing critical dispositions, preservice teachers can better connect beliefs and goals with concrete teaching practices. In doing so, they learn that it is a natural and normal part of teaching to assess one's teaching as well as students' learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Practitioner inquiry gives preservice teachers the tools to carry out critical thinking practices.

The literature makes evident that by using practitioner inquiry with preservice teachers, teacher educators can teach preservice teachers to problematize their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), increase their awareness of students' needs (Dawson, 2007; Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Levin & Rock, 2003), and develop their understandings about the role of teachers (Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005). There is a need in the literature, however, for more reports of research on how teacher educators can initiate and sustain such efforts. In response, the purpose of this chapter is to report on the ways one teacher education program engaged preservice teachers in practitioner inquiry during an internship seminar, to help encourage them to take more active roles in learning from teaching.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study described in this chapter sheds light on the ways practitioner inquiry impacts preservice teacher learning. Within the framework of a qualitative approach, the study is situated in a phenomenological design, which focuses on human experiences (Baptiste, 2016). Researchers conducting phenomenological studies are interested in analyzing a phenomenon to understand the structures that make up one's experience (Moustakes, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The purpose of phenomenology is to grasp the meaning of an experience by engaging in direct contact with individuals who have lived the experience or are living the experience. Set in a professional development school, and focused on yearlong elementary teaching interns, the study sought to better understand how the phenomenon of engaging in practitioner inquiry influences teacher candidates' understandings about teaching and learning.

### **Study Context**

This study investigated the experiences of elementary teacher candidates in a professional development school (PDS) partnership during their final semester of an elementary teacher education program. Com-

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