

Chapter 66

The Power of Praxis: Critical Thinking and Reflection in Teacher Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the concept of infusing critical thinking and reflection as part of professional development for teachers, as well as provides recommendations for schools to promote critical thinking and reflection as part of teachers' daily practice. Constructs, such as problem posing and dialogue, are introduced to provide examples of promising practices to consider implementing as a means to enhance critical thinking and reflection amongst teachers when participating in professional development. Additionally, professional learning communities and self-directed professional development are introduced as spaces for teachers to practice these constructs to transform their praxis. Providing opportunities for critical thinking and reflection is one of many steps schools and districts must take, to bring about the positive change required for future success of the education system.

INTRODUCTION

In today's classrooms, teachers are inundated with extensive curricula along with the pressure of increased accountability and high-stakes testing. To be effective in the modern educational environment, teachers are required to think about their lesson plans; interactions with students, peers, and parents; grading; alignment of curricula to standards; promoting student engagement and learning; and development and analysis of formative and summative assessments.

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The Power of Praxis

In practice, efforts to promote critical thinking about all of the facets of modern teaching practice are limited to lesson plan templates and data meetings centered around Tier II intervention decisions. Largely absent is ongoing support to promote critical thinking as a tool to improve practice and better manage the plethora of daily demands placed on teachers. Essential to this support is the role of teacher reflection. Critical reflective thinking helps teachers understand the specific contexts of their classroom environments and develops their professional artistry of their practice.

Teaching is not a neutral act (Freire, 2000). In fact, what occurs outside the classroom affects what happens inside the classroom with teaching and learning. Students' lives, teachers' lives, the social, cultural, and political happenings that occur outside the classroom do not stop at the schoolhouse door. This can be seen today in the current politically charged climate we are currently experiencing in the United States and seeing over and over on television, social media, and on radio. Teachers and students do not forget about these happenings when they enter schools. Therefore, teachers need opportunities to critically think and reflect on how these outside social and political forces impact what happens in their classrooms. For example, if one teaches at a school, located in an impoverished area where students of color are constantly moving from one foster home to another and never really feeling like they have a place to call home, the teacher should understand that what is happening outside of the school to these students impacts what happens inside the classroom. Students may have experienced trauma, violence, death of a parent, abandonment, etc. They may not have the support they need in their foster home to help them learn coping skills; so many of these children's needs go unheard and untreated. As a result, the student goes to school traumatized, scared, hungry, sick, etc. Some of these children may act out while others disengage but yet teachers expect them to learn without even knowing what is really going on in their lives. Critically reflecting how governmental institutions like the foster care system work and what it fails to do for some of these children will help teachers find ways to navigate the school system in a way to reach their students so they find some kind of success in their schooling.

Another example would be if teachers teach students who live in a neighborhood where their community is constantly under surveillance by the police. When these students come to school they may see school resource officers as a threat rather than a resource. Teachers would need to critically reflect on their discipline policies and determine if school resource officers are being used as resources or as a punitive measure when the behavior could have been addressed in the classroom where the teacher has a sound discipline policy. How can they de-escalate a situation in the classroom and work with the student to bring about dialogue and understanding? Critically thinking and reflecting on the social and political forces that exist outside of the classroom can help teachers learn to be deliberate and intentional in their classroom (Bognar & Krumes, 2017).

The goal of this chapter is to examine how instructional practices in critical thinking and reflection are best applied to/in classroom practice and professional development for teachers, and to provide recommendations for schools to promote critical thinking and reflection as part of teachers' daily practice. The relationship between critical thinking, reflection, and praxis, or the iterative marriage between theory and practice, is detailed. This chapter also describes how dialogue and problem-posing support these constructs. Lastly, the role of instructional coaching and professional learning communities (PLCs) in promoting critical thinking and reflection by facilitating dialogue and problem posing is addressed. Teachers are in a position of power. What they say, do not say, and what they do and do not do will impact their students' lives every day they step into the classroom, leaving their mark on their students. Providing opportunities for critical thinking and reflection is one of many steps schools and districts must take, if we want to see the change that is needed in our education system.

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