Chapter 76

Supporting Teacher Candidates' Development of Critical Thinking Skills Through Dialogue and Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This chapter employs a dialogic, sociocultural perspective to describe ways teacher educators can support teacher candidates as they develop the critical thinking skills needed to make the transition from student to teacher in contemporary classrooms in the United States. Data from a longitudinal qualitative study are used to examine the utility of problem-posing seminars and subsequent reflection as tools that can help English teacher candidates embrace the tension they encounter as competing ideologies both complicate and nurture their efforts to enact a student-centered framework for teaching. Specifically, participants' reflections on their efforts to employ dialogic approaches to teaching are explored in the context of standardized curricula and classroom settings. Data suggest that making dialogue and reflection key facets of teacher education programs creates conditions for critical thinking and creativity to flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Rapidly evolving demands related to participation in a democratic society are transforming all aspects of the personal, civic, and economic lives of students in the 21st century. Economic rationales for education reforms are changing the landscape of teaching and learning (Boggs, Stewart, & Jansky, 2018) as classrooms become increasingly standardized (Cuban, 2009; Dierking & Fox, 2012; Ravitch, 2013; Stewart & Boggs, 2016). Changes in the workplace make the capacity for critical thought and creative thinking a fundamental attribute for success (Resnick, 2017). Paying careful attention to these changes

and thinking about what they mean for students and teachers in classrooms is, as Leu and Kinzer (2000) argued, a vital element of preparing children for their futures. In his discussion of the importance of developing students' abilities to engage in creative thinking, Resnick (2017) noted that "two-thirds of today's grade-school students will end up doing work that hasn't been invented yet" (p. 4). But, Resnick maintained, creative thinking is a crucial attribute for success in all areas of life—not just in the workplace. Students living in 21ˢᵗ century society will succeed in all aspects of life "to the extent that they are able to access the best information in the shortest time to identify and solve the most problems and communicate this information to others" (Leu & Kinzer, 2000, p. 113). All of these fundamental elements of success in contemporary life require the capacity for critical thought, and teachers play crucial roles in helping students learn to think critically.

Classrooms are unique social and cultural spaces (Gallimore and Tharp, 1990) where students are prepared for participation in society. Teachers must have the ability to engage in critical thought in order to work through the challenges they encounter as they prepare students for success in and beyond the classroom. Critical thinking, however, is a literate practice that must be developed and nurtured. Teacher educators, then, must have a means of supporting teacher candidates (TCs) as they develop the ability to think critically during the transition from student to teacher. This chapter draws upon the experiences of TCs who engaged in structured, collaborative problem-solving activities during student teaching to discuss a framework that teacher educators can adapt to suit their own contexts and implement to support the development of TCs' critical thinking abilities.

THE TRANSITION FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Preparing TCs to make the transition from student to teacher in contemporary classrooms is a complex endeavor. As TCs begin working in classrooms and applying the concepts they study in university coursework, they must develop the creative and critical thinking abilities to bring the theoretical world of the university setting into dialogue with the practical world of their placement classrooms. The disparate and distinct settings of the university classroom and the student teaching field experience can be a significant source of tension for TCs. During the student teaching semester, the gap that can exist between theory and practice often takes shape in what researchers commonly refer to as the *two-worlds pitfall* (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Basmadjian, 2007; Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985). TCs must make sense of the contradictions between the standardized instructional strategies often modeled by cooperating teachers (CTs) and the student-centered theories they have studied in their university courses (Smagorinsky, Jakubiak, & Moore, 2008). In their work examining the factors that contribute to the development of the concepts that guide teachers' instruction, Smagorinsky, Rhym, and Moore (2013) found that the two distinct settings of university preparation programs and field placements can present TCs with "competing and contradictory views about how they should go about their work" (p. 148). Managing the tension created by opposing perspectives requires TCs to think both critically and creatively, and teacher educators have a responsibly to support TCs as they develop the ability to think critically and bring competing ideologies into productive dialogue with one another. By offering experiences for TCs to engage in dialogue that flattens hierarchies (Fecho, 2011) and welcomes multiple perspectives, teacher educators can create a context for learning within the student teaching semester that supports the development of critical thinking. Engaging in structured dialogue designed to guide TCs through challenges can help them develop the critical thinking skills needed to navigate the constraints

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