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ALBANIAN PRE SERVICE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL THINKING DISPOSITIONS

Abstract:

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers' critical thinking dispositions, and their self reported attitudes to foster these dispositions in their future students. The underlying purpose was to evaluate the atmosphere of critical thinking in teacher education programs and to make recommendations for improvement in handling critical thinking preparation in these programs. The study was conducted with 38 students about to complete the master in education program in teaching history in Albania. Mixed methods were used to better tap into their perceptions. Results showed that truth-seeking was a highly valued characteristic, whereas systematicity and inquisitiveness was not regarded as important or feasible. Furthermore, the dispositions were seen to contribute to personal and societal development, whereas the lack of appropriate exposure was considered a threat.

Keywords:

pre-service, perceptions, dispositions, critical thinking

Introduction

Critical thinking is the new buzz word in education. Every teacher is supposed to teach for that. Every curriculum designer makes sure it is on the top of the outcome list and every administrator boasts about its inclusion in their districts or schools. It is deemed as an invaluable skill that will help the individuals and societies survive and progress in the 21 st century. Many traditionalists maintain that there is too much noise and not enough action. In fact they believe there is no place for a lot of action. Mastering content will automatically push into deep, high-level, expert thinking that will lead into what people call critical thinking. Others believe that the human nature is inherently flawed so if left to our own devices, we fall prey to certain influences that derail our thinking and make it bad. Consequently, if not taught or trained, little critical thinking will happen despite the knowledge one accumulates (Duron et.al., 2006). Can we risk not doing that? "Considered as a form of thoughtful judgement or reflective decision-making, in a very real sense critical thinking is pervasive" (Facione, 2013). And yet, people sometimes display its valued skills and other times completely ignore them thus becoming an antithesis of CT.

The very nature of critical thinking is the culprit of all uncertainties. Memorizing a set definition would be against its spirit. Tolerating ambiguities, being open to new ideas and different perspectives, seeking reasons and support, being able to change in the light of new evidence, being flexible and openminded all contain a degree of uncertainty. A person who is disposed to use critical thinking is described as having a critical spirit not in the negative and hypercritical sense. On the contrary, this term is used in a positive way which means " probing inquisitiveness, a keenness of mind, a zealous dedication to reason, and a hunger or eagerness for reliable information" (Facione, 2013, p.10). The importance of this kind of mindset is not new. Dewey made this point by writing that although no one can think about everything all the time " there is such a thing as *readiness* to consider in a thoughtful way the subjects that do come within the range of experience" (Dewey, 1933, p. 136). If left to decide between attitude and the knowledge of the skill of logical reasoning, he choses the personal attitudes or as they are widely called today dispositions. Giancarlo & Facione (2001) describe the disposition towards critical thinking as "the consistent internal motivation to engage in problems and make decisions by using thinking". Halpern (1999) underlined that "Critical thinking is more than the successful use of the right skill in an appropriate context. It is also an attitude or disposition to recognize when a skill is needed and the willingness to exert the mental effort needed to apply it" (p. 72). While dispositions may be important for all categories of work since skills alone are not a guarantee for success, they become paramount in teachers. Studies on teaching critical thinking (or any other skill for that matter) highlight the importance of modeling. Modeling does not only provide students with examples, it also motivates them, increasing the purpose and the value of critical thinking. Students learn more from what teachers do than from what they say. So a teacher who does not show tendencies or dispositions to think critically, can hardly contribute in instilling that mind set in his/her students. On the other hand, teachers' beliefs and perceptions play an important role in classroom practices. (Pajares, 1992). The classroom is a highly unpredictable environment and when in doubt, teachers usually rely on their beliefs and preconceptions. Obviously beliefs and perspectives about critical thinking play an important role in the effort of fostering them.

Students who develop critical thinking dispositions are inclined to employ critical, reflective thinking when engaged in problem solving and analysis across various domains (Giancarlo & Facione, 2001). A tendency to see them as redundant and a lack of adequate awareness, may leave us with the risk of educating a generation without the proper tools needed in the fast changing and unpredictable future. As for the Albanian context, there are practically no studies that touch this realm. Reports from international tests show that Albanian students score lower than their neighboring peers and are far behind the average of OECD. (World Bank, 2014). Teacher education is one area which has been blamed upon. Both pre and in service education has not addressed the need to adequately prepare teachers in this field (MAS, 2014).

For these reasons, this study set out to look at the perceptions of pre-service teachers' critical thinking dispositions, and their self reported attitudes to foster these dispositions in their future students. The underlying purpose was to evaluate the atmosphere of critical thinking in their teacher education programs and to make recommendations for improvement in handling critical thinking preparation in them.

Dispositions of critical thinking

In an attempt to come to a certain degree of agreement on the definition of critical thinking and its indicators, the American Philosophical Association commissioned a study that came up with both the definitions of skills and dispositions of CT. The report of the study gives this description of an ideal thinker:

"The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgements, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. (Facione 1990, p. 2)

If defining the attitude to think critically has proven difficult, measuring it has brought much debate among scholars. Different measuring instruments have been created including more or less similar categories but the uneasiness of measuring the "unmeasurable" has made many researchers uncomfortable. Nonetheless, there is a plethora of studies on measuring critical thinking dispositions in pre-service as well as in-service teachers. As this study focusses on the perceptions and attitudes of pre-service teachers towards critical thinking dispositions and their willingness to pass them onto their future students, it will fall short on an extensive consideration of different measures and their validity. However, the categories determined in the California Critical Thinking Dispositions used to create the questionnaire for this study will be delineated below.

Based on what has come to be known as Delphi report, Facione et.al. (1995) compiled the critical thinking components measured by California Critical Thinking Dispositions Inventory.

Inquisitiveness measures intellectual curiosity and desire even when the application of knowledge is challenging or not readily apparent.

Open-mindedness addresses tolerance of divergent views and awareness of personal bias.

Systematicity measures being organized, focused, and diligent in inquiry.

Analyticity involves reasoning and using evidence to solve problems and entails being alert to the need to intervene when necessary.

Truth-seeking measures the intellectual honesty which gives one the desire for the best knowledge in any situation, the inclination to ask challenging questions and to follow the reasons and evidence wherever they lead.

Self-confidence measures trust one places in one's own reasoning processes.

Maturity means judiciousness which makes one see the complexity in problems and to desire prudent decision making with no hurry.(p. 5-6).

The California Critical Thinking Disposition has been widely used to measure dispositions in various fields and especially in education. Giancarlo and Facione (2001) used it to test the critical thinking dispositions of freshmen in 1992, and then again to test seniors 4 years later. It was found that during their high education students "came to endorse more strongly the ideal of putting aside personal biases in the pursuit of good evidence and reason" (p. 43). An additional finding of this study showed a statistically significant difference in attitudes on several of the scales of students from different fields so study. The Humanities, Letters, and Languages students scored highest on Truth-seeking and Open-mindedness of all the other groups (Natural and Physical sciences; Mathematics, Computer Science, and Engineering; Business Administration and Communication; Social and Behavioral Science and Liberal Studies; and Undeclared). Business and Communications students scored lowest of all the discipline clusters on Inquisitiveness, Open-mindedness and Truth-seeking.

Methods

A mixed- research methodology was employed to collect data for this study. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) highlight the advantages of mixed methods research as they present a more complete view of the phenomena that would each one of them separately. A quantitative survey was developed to tap into the perceptions and importance the prospective history teachers have and give to critical thinking dispositions. The quantitative data was triangulated with margin explanations and comments which gave the chance to the willing participants to better explain the reasons and factors influencing their choices.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Albanian pre-service teachers about critical thinking dispositions?
2. What are the perceptions of pre-service Albanian teachers on fostering the dispositions of critical thinking skills in their future students?

Participants

The participants of the study were chosen via convenience sampling as the random sampling technique was not feasible. 38 students enrolled in of master of education in teaching history in high schools were chosen for the study. Albanian higher education

system was restructured in 2005 to fit the Bologna Declaration and unify systems across Europe. The undergraduate or the so called bachelor study program length went down a year from four to three years and master program enrollment capacity increased dramatically as it was among the requirements to enter professions previously accessible after a 4-year undergraduate program. The participants of the study were about to graduate as high school teachers of history.

Instrument

The instrument used for the study was composed of two parts. The first part consisted of 14 likert scale items (two items for each disposition) that included statements about the prospective teachers' perceptions of the dispositions. The participants had to read 14 items and rate according to a five-point likert scale from completely unimportant to completely important. The questions were based on the dimensions determined by Facione et. al. (1995, P 5-6) stated above. Two dichotomous questions were asked for general information about CT. The second part was composed of statements related to their ability to foster these dispositions in their future students. In both parts, participants had to totally agree (5), agree (4), be neutral (3), disagree (2), and totally disagree (1).

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed after class. Seven participants opted out of the study. The willing participants were provided with written and verbal explanations about the study and were instructed to ask clarification questions as necessary before or during the completion of the questionnaires. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to answer the first and the second research questions. The margin comments were analyzed for emerging themes.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics was used to address question one and two. The term critical thinking is well known among students but only 38 % of them know it is a departmental outcome. Table 1 presents descriptive data for question 1. Participants fall short on the inquisitiveness category with 68 % and 63 % disagreeing and totally disagreeing respectively with learning new information regardless the topic and asking questions on a regular basis. Inquisitiveness, related to being well informed and intellectual curiosity, is at the heart of the teaching profession and especially history teachers. The success of professional development sessions depends on it. A lack of intellectual curiosity may also lead to poor content preparation as the teacher candidates might not value the learning process and might be there only to get a diploma. In the open-mindedness category 74 % consider others' views but only 34 % are concerned about their own biases. This last finding is alarming as history is prone to bias and being able to think like a historian means being able to question sources and recognize bias. Systematicity is another area where participants are not very keen on being organized and persistent in inquiry with only 37 % agreeing of planning before tackling questions or issues. Planning in history might not seem very imminent, but to the profession of teaching it is invaluable. Analyticity is a crucial skill at school and in the working place. Being analytical leads to connecting observations with one's theoretical knowledge base, and anticipating events likely to threaten the safety

or limit potential of the work being done (Facione et. al. 1995). These skills are vital to improving classroom experience both for teachers and students. Being aware of the consequences of historical facts is crucial in historical thinking so prospective teachers need to engage in it. Results show that 50 % rely on good reasoning and 63 % anticipate consequences. One of the highest scoring categories is truth-seeking. It refers to the inclination of being inquisitive even when clashing with personal beliefs, conclusions and perceptions. The truth-seeking professional continually evaluates new information and evidence and is reflective and responsive to changes in the developments in his/her field (Facione et.al.,1995). Participants aren't either lacking self-confidence as 60 % are proud about understanding others' opinions and 58 % are confident in the ability to tackle tasks.

Table 1 Perceptions about dispositions

Category	TA	A	N	D	TD
Inquisitiveness	Learn new information regardless of the topic				
	2	2	8	21	5
Open-mindedness	Ask questions on a regular basis				
	1	3	10	18	6
Systematicity	Consider other people's or sources' opinions and views				
	12	16	10		
Analyticity	Be concerned of your own biases				
	3	10	8	15	2
Truth-seeking	Making a plan before answering questions				
	6	8	7	14	3
Maturity	Be diligent when trying to find answers				
	8	14	4	8	4
Self-confidence	Rely on good reasoning and arguments to defend ideas				
	7	12	6	7	6
Inquisitiveness	Anticipate consequences of events and ideas				
	9	15	10	4	
Open-mindedness	Pursue knowledge even if it s against your opinion				
	11	21	5		1
Systematicity	Change your mind in light of additional facts or evidence				
	15	20	2	1	
Analyticity	Be proud with the ability to understand the opinion of others				
	10	13	6	9	
Truth-seeking	Be confident in the ability to express you opinion and reasoning				
	8	14	4	10	2
Self-confidence	Use different sources to verify facts				
	5	18	8	7	
Maturity	Consider that things aren't as they appear to be				
	12	15	9	2	

As for question 2, the participants were asked to rate the willingness to foster these abilities in students. Table 2 shows descriptive data for this question. According to the data 50 % would foster inquisitiveness, 55 % would foster open mindedness, 34 % systematicity, 60 % analyticity, 32 % truth-seeking, 68 % would foster self confidence and 58 % would foster maturity in judgement. In regards to fostering these skills in the future, except systematicity no disposition scored less than 50 % but the lack of a high percentage except fostering self confidence might be due to the finding that although teachers have positive attitudes towards critical thinking they may actually not be doing so due to the lack of knowledge of how to teach that (Whittington & Newcomb, 1993).

Table 2 Perceptions about fostering dispositions

	Foster inquisitiveness			
5	13	11	9	
	Foster open-mindedness			
8	13	9	5	3
	Foster systematicity			
3	10	9	10	6
	Foster analyticity			
12	11	7	6	2
	Foster truth-seeking			
8	13	12	5	
	Foster self-confidence in reasoning			
11	15	2	7	3
	Foster maturity in judgement			
7	12	9	8	2

Qualitative Data

Many students wrote comments both in favor and against the dispositions. Certain themes prevailed among others. The pressure of the content to be covered in both their majors and in the anticipated curriculum made some participants feel like they needed no more inquiry. " *I can hardly put up with the information we already cover and feel like I don't need more questions or inquiry*" complains one student. " *There is not a lot of time for questions*" writes another; " *if I find something interesting, maybe*". Better contribution to the society through these dispositions was illustrated by comments like: " *The mess that has been made with the recent history needs to be sorted out even though some might not like it;*" *truth-seeking helps all the society*". The value of a historian as a truth-seeker was clear as 32 out of 38 participants agreed that pursuing knowledge even if it is against one's opinion is important for them. Making a plan was seen more as a skill that benefitted other fields and not so much history: " *Now that I am doing research for my thesis I see the need for planning that I didn't see while studying history*"; " *you need a lot of time for that*". Benefits to personal advancement was another theme that came up. Other's views were considered as helpful by some: " *Considering others' opinions is important for me because I can built on them*" ;" *it makes you more tolerant*";" *providing reasons sharpens your brain and makes the others listen to you*". Inadequate critical thinking atmosphere in class was represented by the following: " *using different sources is important but we didn't do it a lot in school*"; " *it's important to be self confident but you should also be careful about what you are saying not to be laughed at*".

Conclusion

Critical thinking dispositions are seen by the authorities in the field of critical thinking as factors that could influence its practice. As such they should be cultivated in teachers with the purpose of passing them onto their students. This study set out to look at the

perceptions that pre-service history teachers hold about CT dispositions and their willingness to foster them in their profession. The results of the questionnaire showed that inquisitiveness and systematicity aren't very well received whereas truth-seeking was deeply valued and viewed as important. Qualitative data showed that CT dispositions are judged as important for their impact to self and society but are undermined by inadequate exposure during teacher preparation programs and traditional content dominated teaching styles. It can be inferred that creating an environment where these traits are explicit and cherished will positively effect its transfer to teacher candidates and hopefully to their future students.

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