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To cite this article: Tatjana Bru Blixen & Justin Pannell | (2020) Teachers' understanding and enactment of critical literacy – A lack of unified teaching method, Cogent Education, 7:1, 1826073, DOI: [10.1080/2331186X.2020.1826073](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1826073)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1826073>



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Published online: 28 Oct 2020.



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Received: 26 November 2019
Accepted: 01 September 2020

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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers' understanding and enactment of critical literacy – A lack of unified teaching method

Tatjana Bru Blixen^{1*} and Justin Pannell²

Abstract: The research project carried out in one primary school in Scotland was guided by an intention to discover and provide up-to-date data on what literacy teachers knew about critical literacy and whether this knowledge was promoted, achieved, and enacted in praxis. By specifically focusing on reading and teachers' approaches to texts, this study explores to what extent critical literacy makes its explicit or implicit appearance in the early years' reading classes as a result of teachers' understanding of it—their content knowledge, personal and professional beliefs. The findings have fueled the discussion about the preconditions for greater and more direct utilization of critical literacy in language classrooms. The knowledge and practices the teachers in this study revealed, reflect a promising springboard for developing new, more unified ways of teaching reading. After being reminded of and exposed to some of the central concepts of critical literacy, the teachers became more interested and confirmed that they would

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Justin Pannell is a PhD student in Educational Linguistics at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA. His research centers on interrogating representations of Black speakerhood in education discourses, unveiling the institutional apparatuses and research practices by which they are generated and reproduced and reconfiguring these representations to reimagine Black futurity. As a teacher, he seeks to inform his teaching with concepts and practices drawn from work in critical fields.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Fundamentally, education concerns transformation at the individual, classroom and societal levels, and critical literacy is a pivotal intervention connecting these scales, since it helps students, through dialogue, to analyze and reimagine power relations, ideologies and normative practices which circulate in students' own societies and which affect them. Focusing on the classrooms of a group of teachers in Scotland, where critical literacy is an explicit goal within circular policy, this study finds that despite the teachers' expressed goal of teaching for critical literacy, a wide gap emerged between this aim and teaching practice. Identifying key institutional, experiential, professional and policy constraints that undermined teaching for critical literacy, this study will be of interest to practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders who hope to ground the theoretical claims undergirding critical literacy in actionable measures that influence pedagogy, curricula and teacher education. In turn, the constraints identified in this study highlight an important reframing of critical literacy which encourages the dramatic shifts needed to enact it through education.

teach for it if they only knew how. This is also one of the main implications of the study for teacher educators, curriculum developers and researchers.

Subjects: Language & Power; Discourse Analysis; Pragmatics; Language & Communication; Language & Cultural Theory; Language & Education; Language Teaching & Learning

Keywords: critical literacy; reading; voice; power; ideology; democracy; curriculum; development

1. Introduction

A substantial body of literature and research in the field of literacy, language studies and teacher education advocates that incorporating critical literacy into the classroom practices has a positive impact on learners' autonomy, their cognitive abilities, intellectual growth, raised awareness and better understanding of the world, democracy, power distribution, social circumstances, responsibility, and alternatives (Alford, 2001; Crookes, 2009; Crowther et al., 2001; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Johnson, 2006; Masuda, 2012). Additionally, given the crucial role of media in manufacturing sophisticated strategies for symbolic and ideological control of almost every segment of human life in contemporary societies, engineering passivity, and preventing us from thoughtful political action, many theorists urgently suggest including critical literacy approaches in schools as well as teacher education curricula (Gainer, 2012; Gounari, 2009; Luke, 2012; Scheibe & Rogow, 2012; Torres & Mercado, 2006; Vasquez & Felderman, 2013).

However, a number of theorists and researchers—such as Lipman (2009), McNeil (2009), Giroux (2011, 2009b)), and Fielding and Moss (2011)—claim that “the potential for critical literacy development [can be] lost in the standardized, step-by-step implementation characteristic of the entire language arts curriculum itself” (Pandya, 2012, p. 20). As a result, critical literacy remains, sadly enough, misinterpreted, and its implementation often fails to meet its stated objectives (Pandya, 2012; Stewart & O'Neill, 2003).

In a similar vein, even though The Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland (The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019) mentions critical literacy, the main emphasis appears to lie on the “can do” statements (Curriculum for Excellence, My Experiences and Outcomes: Reading, The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019) and the importance of certain skills for the 21st century's literacy, such as the ability to separate facts from values. Likewise, the very definition of critical literacy is rather simplified and clearly restricted within certain limits:

In particular, the experiences and outcomes address the important skills of critical literacy. Children and young people not only need to be able to read for information: they also need to be able to work out what trust they should place on the information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them. (Curriculum for Excellence, Literacy across learning: principles and practice, The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019)

The “unit” of our case study consisted of four teachers working within a large school in Scotland as their regular environment and teaching on different levels in four different primary school classes (P2, P4, P5, and P7). Their understandings seemed to be very much aligned with the limited definitions of critical literacy stated in the Curriculum for Excellence (The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019) and the definitions of critical reading/thinking within the tradition of liberal-humanism. The practices teachers described were reflecting merely the veneer of critical literacy theory, and that only indirectly. In the main, teachers' views and definitions were unspecified and fragmented, disparate and abstract, vague and lacking in content knowledge about the importance of engaging readers in social critique, i.e., identifying and transforming the existing representational, social, and cultural forms. The constructs of **voice, ideology, and power** were not associated with literacy lessons, language or reading, but rather with specific subjects, such as history, philosophy and citizenship. However, when they talked about critical literacy, the teachers agreed about its importance and showed an apparent interest in it,

but also admitted that they, unfortunately, never had had an opportunity to learn how to teach it systematically. This study focuses on the preconditions for greater and more direct utilization of critical literacy in language classrooms, as the knowledge and practices the teachers revealed, reflect a promising springboard for developing new, more unified ways of teaching reading.

2. Critical reading vs. critical literacy—historical and intellectual context

Critical literacy has evolved out of a yearning to give some shape and coherence to all those beliefs and practices within school literacy associated with critical pedagogy, emancipatory education, social agency, voice, and democratic participation. In keeping with an underlying commitment to critical pedagogy, it aspires to link practices of schooling, reading, and text understanding to democratic principles of society and transformative social action in the interest of most the vulnerable, oppressed communities—that is, culturally and/or economically marginalized and subordinated groups (Giroux, 2009a; Shor, 1992).

Moreover, critical literacy is fundamentally linked to the ideas of many of the twentieth century's philosophers, sociologists, educators, and activists who opened the door to more complex understandings of immanent criticism, dialectical thinking, human history, power relationships, knowledge construction, and activist citizenry (Darder et al., 2009).

Critical literacy is to be contrasted with critical reading, which draws from traditions of liberal-humanism (Cervetti et al., 2001) and is mainly understood as a development of higher-order thinking skills related to comprehension. Instead, critical literacy is first and foremost a morally and politically committed approach to understanding language in use, stemming from critical pedagogy and serving more and more as an instructional tool in various educational settings (Freebody, 2008; Hagood, 2002; Johnston, 1999; Luke, 2012). Its starting point is the claim that many readers unquestioningly build their own identities and their knowledge of the world on particular versions of reality depicted in texts they encounter (Hagood, 2002).

Critical literacy employs strategies whose main role becomes thus to help individual readers unpack the socially constructed nature of literacy, that is, to assist them in discovering the deeper, often hidden, meaning of a text (Gainer, 2012). More specifically, it helps readers go beneath surface impressions and understand the complexity underneath—texts' processes and techniques that create and sustain social ideologies, normative practices, stereotypical identities, hegemonies, and both overt as well as disguised power relations that work systematically to advantage some people and disadvantage others (Crowther & Tett, 2001; Shor, 1992).

In terms of teaching reading, Fisher (2006) convincingly argues that teachers' emphasis on practice and children's performance, rather than process and learning, a) allows children to retain a naïve understanding of the reading process, b) narrows the perception of what being a reader means and c) prevents them from identifying the goals of learning to read.

Critical educators call upon teachers to employ dialectical thinking, as a mode of critique and social inquiry, in order to realize how all the elements of our reality are ambiguous, containing both their theses and antithesis, how texts are as *they are* but also as *they could be*, how theory and practice, subjectivity and objectivity are coexistent and how “power is both an enabling as well as a constraining force” (Giroux, 2009a, p. 48).

Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to view knowledge as historical and not standardized, that is, constructed and produced under particular historical conditions, and schools as a terrain of struggle for liberation (McLaren, 2009), rather than determined by patterns of domination, which is mutually implicated in a system of socio-cultural reproduction (Broady & Palme, 2000; Darder et al., 2009; Giroux, 2011, 2009a).

3. Design frame, approach and research questions

Fielding and Moss (2011) contend that instead of large-scale quantitative studies in education and measuring predetermined outcomes, we need more critical case studies that illuminate the possibilities and potentialities of democratic experimentalism. The overall aim of this study was to generate rich data on and exploratory evidence of teachers' views and practices that could serve to suggest more focused directions of inquiry about another, related phenomenon, that is, critical literacy.

The research was initially designed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What did teachers understand about critical literacy and practice?
- (2) How did they talk about critical literacy?
- (3) To what extent did their classroom practices reflect critical literacy theories?

However, given the progressive nature of enquiry, we were able to identify several sub-questions as the study progressed:

- (1) Which factors were most influential in forming teachers' views on critical literacy?
- (2) What are the main challenges for further application of critical literacy in language classrooms?

The school in which the project was carried out was a large, urban primary school following the program of the National Curriculum in Scotland. Four teachers (three males and one female, in the age range 32–38) were teaching on different levels in four different classes (P2, P4, P5, and P7). They all had at least five years of teaching experience. The source of the initial body of data was observations of the four classes, three of which were in literacy, and one of which required more substantial thinking and reading. The individual face-to-face interviews with the teachers were conducted a day or two after their lessons had been observed.

The observations provided us with rich field notes about what was going on in the classrooms, although the main focus was on teacher—rather than pupil-oriented activities. We were mostly interested to see and analyze the nature of the given tasks; the kinds of texts used or produced in the lesson; the kinds of questions the teacher asked the children; and the ways in which the teachers encouraged children to talk about/make meaning out of the reading material. Having collected the data, we were able to pose the following questions that helped us interpret it and define some of the thematic codes (Appendix 1):

What kind of texts were used/discussed in the classrooms? Were there any attempts to identify specific representations, power relations or present/absent voices in the stories/novels the children read? Were the pupils asked to transform the reading material? To what extent were teachers prepared for the lessons and willing to allow spontaneous, generative themes?

The interviews were always initiated by the questions about the observed lesson, its aims, and objectives, as the intention was to move from the specific to the more general—from a particular lesson to teacher's usual approaches to and beliefs about the teaching of (critical) literacy and reading. We were also interested in finding out more about their teaching and assessment strategies, the materials/books they used, their previous education, and professional development experience. The questions that were posed (Appendix 2) were open-ended, giving us a more reliable picture—a set of rich, elaborated answers in their rawest form.

The research project was initially concerned about collecting relevant data on critical literacy and its representations, but the teachers' professional attainment and predilection became more relevant during the analysis phase, when the formal research questions were drawn. Finally, we acknowledge the political sensitivity, values, and value judgments involved in the study, but

we also trust that its findings will contribute to the growing debate regarding how to improve literacy education without causing the participants or public policy any harm.

4. Reporting, data analysis and main findings

The collected data were systematically analyzed both during and after the process of data gathering by using a thematic coding approach (Robson, 2011). Teachers' meanings and beliefs, as well as their strategies and tactics used in the classrooms, were coded descriptively. To respect teachers' privacy, we use pseudonyms throughout.

4.1. Mr. Gordon's class

Mr. Gordon was a P4 teacher and his class had just finished the reading of Ted Hughes' novel "The Iron Man". The lesson we observed was well-planned, task-based, and driven by the principle "understand the points of view from which texts are created" but also "check for understanding". In the interview, Mr Gordon explicitly confirmed that the aim had been to help children identify the theme and the main ideas in the novel by picking up the author's views:

I think we've raised an awareness of themes in a novel, what themes themselves are, and in extension to that we've hopefully raised an awareness of the way in which an author might try to convey a broader message through a specific story.

For that particular purpose, the teacher had made flashcards containing various statements, such as "**First impressions can be deceiving**", "**Humans are kind to unusual or different beings that they encounter**" or "**When one fight breaks out, it often leads to more fighting**". The pupils were supposed to work in small groups, look at the cards and decide whether the author would agree or disagree with the given statements. In providing concrete details to support their claims about the general themes of the book, the students moved from the general to the specific. However, the precise form and nature of the theme extrapolated from the text were provided by the teacher through the flashcards and his determination of which flashcards were "right" or "wrong."

When explaining the lesson in more detail in the interview, Mr Gordon said that he was impressed by the children's ability to see the author's views rather than say what they thought. He also added that "[his] fear was that they would just give their views [...] because it happened a few times and [he was] trying to do it right". He wanted his pupils to realize that "[t]here's more than black and white on the page [...], more than the narrative, the tale as told" especially because "[m]oving on to the more conceptual ideas [was] still a bit of a stretch".

The meaning of this particular exercise was thus twofold. It could be seen as a) instrumental in helping children recognize the ideas and test their validity through recalling examples from the book in a liberal-humanist manner and as b) a test of reading comprehension and finding evidence for the teacher's interpretations of the author's views.

From a critical literacy perspective, the lesson was quite teacher-centered, and it is clear from Mr. Gordon's comments that the lesson was created for the sake of practicing a skill, as students were expected to read, interpret, and evaluate each flashcard "properly". Instead of posing questions and helping children arrive at the point where they would be able to derive certain meaning and actually give their own multiple "readings" of the author's views, the teacher chose to give them a prearranged version of the author's world view.

However, at certain point, one of the boys in the class commented that the novel might be about racism and the teacher welcomed the comment as an interesting suggestion but without any further investigations. Power, excluded gender (Iron woman?), or privileged positions (children living outside war-torn societies) were not discussed and connections to real life (such as racism) remained unexplored.

4.2. Mr Wilkinson's class

Mr Wilkinson's class, P7, had finished reading a number of children's picture books and was now working on both theme and symbolism. During our visit they all sat and worked in different groups of 4–6 pupils. Some of them were writing on paper, while the others were in front of the PCs. They talked to each other and seemed fairly enthusiastic.

The task was to create a picture book with text and drawings, that is, to incorporate what they had learned about “theme” and “symbolism” into their own work. Mr Wilkinson explained that “[he] wished to see how much they had retained and if they were able to create their own children's books with their own ideas and concepts contained in the symbolism of their own drawings.” In this way, the task involved a great deal of creativity and putting theoretical knowledge and understanding into practice. The teacher reminded them to look again at the selection of books they had read, as they could help them identify how to include their own ideas in their work.

Although the children were encouraged to examine how authors and illustrators chose certain representations of the world, they did not get explicitly engaged in any kind of social critique or discussions about why those representations were as they were and how or why they could/should be changed. In other words, the practical work they had been assigned, was concerned with (re) creating a new story, but the work was not transformational. It had not been informed by any discussion questioning the original, making a change, including new elements/voices or creating from a different point of view. It seemed that these activities might have occurred and got reflected in children's work unintentionally, or at its best subconsciously.

4.3. Mr Johnson's class

A big salad bowl was drawn on a board in Mr Johnson's P2 class. Two small cards, labeled “reading” and “thinking” were glued to the bowl's two sides. The rest of the board was covered by the following, unfinished sentences: **I'm thinking ... I'm noticing ... I'm realizing ... I'm wondering ... What if ... ?** The children were sitting quietly on the floor while the teacher was reading them aloud an excerpt from “Charlotte's web”, an animal fable written by E. B. White.

The reading was from time to time interrupted by Mr Johnson's attempts to connect to some of the children's own experiences similar to those presented in the reading material. After some time, the teacher asked the pupils to try using some of the sentences that were written on the board and relate them to what he had just read. Children participated actively and every time a new sentence was used, the teacher put another “thinking”- card into the “salad bowl”. When the reading session was over, Mr Johnson counted all the “thinking”- cards and reminded the children that it was important to think while we read and wrote the word “metacognition” on the board.

Finally, the teacher gave them a task called “frozen pictures” which all seemed to recognize as they rushed into the other corner of the classroom and started forming small groups. Mr Johnson explained that they had to reconstruct a scene from the book, that is, the read chapter, using their bodies while the rest of the class had to guess which scene they were referring to. The exercise was done quickly and successfully.

Clearly, Mr Johnson aspired to emphasize the importance of higher levels of reading, such as higher-order thinking skills and meaning-making, and was doing his best to make the point in an interesting and creative way, through something he himself called “ a modeling lesson”. In the interview, he revealed that he had chosen to use the visual cue “salad bowl” in order to introduce this new way of approaching texts which he intended to continue to use. Thus, the connection between factual, technical decoding and cognitive understanding of what is being read was pointed out and recognized as necessary, but also presented through all too direct, rather unnatural, scripted instructions.

The frozen pictures—task, on the other hand, offered more freedom and possibilities for independent, creative activity, but could also be seen as a comprehension or memory test, driven by the principle “check for understanding”. Mr Johnson’s own comment was that “[he] was pleased with [the exercise] because it showed [him] that they understood the story.”

4.4. Ms Robinson’s class

Ms Robinson was teaching P5 and the class we were observing was a part of a subject called *thinking skills*. We learned that in these classes they usually read different kinds of texts and then either discuss various topics within them or employ specific methods, such as lateral thinking, in order to explore moving from employing one known idea to creating new ideas.

This time the text was a picture of a toothbrush and the task was, interestingly enough, to transform the object. Again, they all worked in small groups and discussed how they would create a new and different toothbrush. The teacher walked around and talked to some of the pupils, but did not participate in their decisions. One of the boys asked the teacher why they should transform the toothbrush when it was good as it was. The teacher told him that it was because she wanted to see his lateral thinking and the boy continued to work on the assignment.

After a while, the groups were rejoined in a circle and they presented their ideas to the class. We noticed that most of the “solutions” were based on children’s reflections on the functions of a toothbrush and not its design. Obviously, the exercise did involve imagining a change, thinking generatively about new “issues” (read: designs), but the transformational work was once again assigned to children as a scripted instruction, imposed by the teacher herself and without any elements of the purposeful questioning of the original source. The very aim of the task (developing lateral thinking) was also explicitly stated in a way that demonstrated that not only the teacher but the curriculum itself held the power.

However, both in this and in all other classes we had visited that day, children were given many opportunities to express their points of view and generate ideas. Many voices were heard as they were encouraged to share their thoughts with others, both in small groups and in front of the whole class. All the lessons we observed showed a number of consistent features that strongly suggested an underpinning both subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge of literacy teachers, which will be discussed in the following section. However, the elements of critical literacy practices seemed to be implemented exclusively indirectly and mostly through teachers’ pedagogical or strategic knowledge.

4.5. Teachers’ views and their general approaches to reading

All the teachers tended to define reading in a similar way—a process of fluent decoding, comprehending, responding, and analyzing—showing that its nature was not taken for granted. A good reader was seen as someone who had both knowledge, skills, and understanding; someone who was able to interact with a text, pose and answer questions, make inferences, and connections to the real world.

However, when asked about their own approaches to texts and teaching reading, teachers’ talk and explanations of usual practices revealed the existence of a gap, a clear distinction, between the lower and higher levels of reading, something that was also observable in their classrooms. For instance, when commenting on his own teaching, Mr Gordon said:

We’ve spent a lot of time looking at features of language such as similes, personification, onomatopoeia because lessons are often very language based. But it is nice to spend that time looking at the ideas within a text as well.

In this way, the possibility of gaining insights into the effects of language, functional grammar, and linking this knowledge to a wider picture and understanding of meaning creation was significantly reduced.

Furthermore, all the teachers emphasized the importance of helping children comprehend the reading material, both the surface and the deeper level, because it was important to, as they said, understand other people's agenda, differentiate opinions and facts, balance the truth, and see how an author might try to convey a broader message.

However, none of them mentioned the importance of understanding how the written materials were influencing us as readers, our world views or identities. It seemed difficult for them to recall or give any concrete examples of how children were being helped to comprehend the reading material. They reported that the classes we had observed were rather typical examples of how they worked with texts in literacy classes.

The teachers seemed to be very well aware of the fact that children should learn about the texts' underlying messages, to understand that there was more than just black and white on the page, but they also understood general teaching processes to just be the activities they crafted and carried out. They did employ open discussions, but also provided many questions, tasks, and activities that could, as they pointed out, "gather evidence" about children's understanding of the texts they had read.

While the teachers clearly and frequently insisted on learners' autonomy and their own ability to create questions, the tasks embedding these underlying assumptions seemed to be arbitrary, as no specific directions were given about what those questions were expected to be targeted at. The main emphasis was on children's creativity and higher-order thinking skills that did not involve issues such as power relations, inclusions, exclusions, or representations, at least not through teachers' instructions. Recreating a toothbrush, a picture book or the frozen pictures from a children's book were such examples.

While talking about general approaches to teaching reading, teachers also mentioned that specific toolkits and pedagogical strategies such as small group discussions, written formative assessments, and individual homework were very helpful. One of the teachers had even pointed out that "it would be nice to be able to assess the children's reading comprehension without being with them all the time". Thus, the overall impression was that teachers were mostly concerned with planning various techniques they wished to employ, remaining in this way often relatively passive in terms of sharing their own content knowledge with the pupils. This view is supported by their statements about the importance of teaching skills rather than knowledge:

It's more important that they leave with a set of skills they can apply in various institutions than with a list of facts, like the history of Britain or a list of characters from the books they've read. [T]hey should learn how to find the facts themselves.

Consequently, the scripted instructions as well as the reading materials that were planned in advance left little, if any, space for negotiating critical literacies and generative themes. The teachers said that they were trying to meet the children's own interests and needs as often as they could, but complained about the strict curriculum plans, large number of pupils, and classroom management that had to be taken into account:

I am aware of the importance that students choose their own text but we have not done that [...] because you have got targets to meet up with, you have to access the students [...] and to keep a track of the learning proves difficult, especially with so many students in one class with one teacher[...] but still, being aware of children's choices is quite important.

4.6. Power, voice, positioning and/or ideology

As our questions about the observed lessons and teaching reading in general did not yield any explicit talk about critical literacy, we deliberately set out to explore how the teachers responded to our gradual interrogation about power, voice, and/or ideology in relation to reading. Interestingly enough, none of these words were used by the teachers themselves, as they tended to reply using objective and/or

demonstrative pronouns instead (e.g., Halliday, 1973), language forms which, in this context, suggest a dearth of knowledge or understanding about critical literacy:

We are talking about **those** issues in citizenship and in philosophy lessons as well and we would identify **that** in our discussions. I think it is our job as teachers to make children aware of **that**. I am not sure if we can apply **it** to children's literature [...] I am thinking about **it** in academic terms. Children would not be able to understand **that**. I guess I do **it** in a way which is not always conscious.

Likewise, another evidence of teachers' avoidance of active involvement in textual deconstructions emerged when we talked about how the readers might have been positioned by the books the teachers had chosen for them. One of the teachers was very eager to emphasize that there were no intentions to influence the children, as teaching was supposed to be, as he said, neutral:

[W]e're trying to be as open as we can. There are of course subtle ways in which some texts or institutions are pushing a message, but that is beyond my pre-agree [...] Hopefully, children are informed about the other versions as well. I try to make children form their own views.

Moreover, another teacher claimed that there is little need to take up discussions about voice and power in contemporary children's literature, as it is much less biased today than it was before. When asked about ideology, two teachers were very quick to mention democracy in citizenship as well as history lessons and analysis of some propaganda posters from the World War II. Another teacher talked about thinking skills in philosophy and how children were taught to break the text up into smaller pieces and find a stimulus for a philosophical discussion in order to arrive at the certain point of view.

4.7. *Critical literacy in theory and praxis*

Our first direct questions about what the teachers thought critical literacy was, were answered in following ways:

Critical literacy is getting underneath, making connections and thinking in different ways, from different angles [...] It is a personal thing, an ability to think. It comes from philosophy and cross-curriculum links. It is not only about reading. Critical literacy is about knowing when someone is trying to influence you. I think it would be very much in keeping with the Curriculum for Excellence in terms of the overall principles of empowering the learners to interpret the resources they find, interpret the evidence they encounter [...] what can we trust and what can we not trust.

As we talked about the CPD (continuous professional development) possibilities at their school, we found out that teachers had become independent with their involvement in them; they could identify the areas they wished to pursue and then attend various meetings and courses. We were told that there were many things one might have wanted to look at, as options were endless, but there were also time constraints. Additionally, one of the teachers pointed out that if teachers were to learn more about critical literacy and realize how important it was, it was necessary that someone brought it to their attention as well.

Another evidence of the teachers' insufficient content knowledge about critical literacy is the fact that none of them were able to pinpoint the relevance of teaching for it, and our questions about why it is important to help children become critically literate, invariably was met with the same response: "That is an interesting question!"

As our conversations went on, we were able to engage them more and more by suggesting ways in which critical literacy could be enacted, and as a result, the teachers came up with more varied and full-blooded responses. Two of the teachers, Mr Wilkinson and Ms Robinson, continued to be convinced that critical literacy was about questioning everything, uncovering the writer's agenda, separating opinions from facts, protecting ourselves from propaganda or coming up with philosophical questions. Mr Gordon and Mr Johnson, however, seemed to gain new awareness of the

subject only after they had been reminded of the most crucial aspects of critical literacy—power, voice and transformation:

I'm interested in what you're saying. But that is not something that we focus on in the junior center to a huge extent. [...] We might be hitting critical literacy on higher levels [through] advertising campaigns or various projects but not in literacy classes. [...] There is no explicit focus on it.

I see. It is about morality [...] I guess I do it in a way which is not always conscious [...] I think you have to be critically literate yourself and have the necessary skills in order to be able to teach it. I would definitely do it more systematically if I only knew how.

Thus, in terms of its practical application, teachers saw critical literacy as being related to higher-order thinking skills and raising awareness, but mainly within specific contexts and established topics. Teachers mentioned that they had covered the topics such as marketing in food industry, child labor, or HIV in Africa with an aim of raising children's awareness about the manipulation, injustice and inequities respectively that existed in the world. However, it did not seem to be recognized that critical literacy is never an add-on, that it is important to understand the points of view from which all sorts of texts were created and that societal problems and injustice are a part of our immediate surroundings as well.

4.8. *Criticality and education now and then*

As we talked about criticality and its role in education, both in the present and past, an interesting picture emerged. All respondents agreed that there is a significant difference between the education they received and the one they currently work within: "I always teach my students about critical literacy, but I was not taught about it when I was their age, and other teachers that I talked to could say the same." Nowadays, there are, they claim, many more cross-curriculum links, open discussions, questioning, group work, sharing of ideas, active involvement in learning, and creative engagement. Everyone has a voice and pupils are stimulated in many different ways. In terms of teaching practices, the pedagogical *how* has become much more important than *what* as:

[t]he school has been very enthusiastic about the Curriculum for Excellence and change in the curriculum [which is] to see that the way you teach and the way children are learning is often more important than what you are teaching.

Thus, the main emphasis now seems to lie on the importance of teaching children certain skills and preparing them for, as one of the teachers said, "their future choices in the field of work".

When we addressed the question about what kind of society teachers were able to envision as a result of their own teaching, current curriculum, and educational agendas, they all agreed that they expected it to be as it is today, but much more critical, tolerant, open, and inclusive than at the time they went to school. They were, in other words, not seeing a need for advocating any change in the future. From their perspective, a change had already happened.

5. **The main findings—summary and discussion**

The analysis of a wide range of data concerning teachers' declarative and procedural knowledge indicated that the focal teachers' approaches to reading produced a relatively consistent picture of their understanding and enactment of critical literacy. Broadly speaking, they all seemed to confuse critical literacy theory with its liberal-humanist vestiges, that is, general critical reading, and failed to recognize the depth and scope of critical literacy's radical aims. Their own definitions of critical literacy tended to have been limited to those provided by the Curriculum for Excellence (The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019)—an ability to understand the author's broader messages, separate facts from opinions, and identify the trustworthiness of written sources.

According to teachers' understandings, critical literacy was not applicable to all sorts of texts, contexts, subjects, or age groups, nor was it seen as a frame through which one participated in the

world. It was rather a general criticality they placed weight on. Criticality was understood as a skill developed through contemporary educational practices, necessary for the field of work and our raised awareness about various issues and differences in the world, rather than a real means of knowing, questioning the status quo and making alternatives in the form of self- or social changes.

Tolerance and openness were societal values envisioned as direct results of specific teaching techniques and strategies and not shared content knowledge about the modes of representation, power of language, or ideology/hegemony/identity as social and amendable (re)constructions. Thus, the practices teachers described were reflecting merely the dull guise of critical literacy theory, either through certain contexts and topics outside the ordinary language classes (propaganda posters, advertisements in history lessons and modern studies), through teachers' personal and professional beliefs about democracy (engaging each and everyone in the classroom) or through their general pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of classroom management (questioning, discussions, various projects, and hands-on activities).

The findings in this study recognize that our episteme is one of liberal humanism. They support the suggestions made by Cervetti et al. (2001) and Stewart and O'Neill (2003) who claimed that critical literacy was often mistaken for critical reading within the tradition of liberal-humanism. The fact that some elements of critical literacy were taught exclusively at the higher levels is not consistent with the suggestions made by Vasquez (2004) and Vasquez and Felderman (2013) who were advocating the importance of negotiating critical literacy with preschool children as well.

Critical approaches to media literacy were not common in the junior center (P2 and P4) while the most prevalent activities on higher levels (P5 and P7), in contrast to Gainer's (2012) firmly held beliefs, were exclusively discussions about how certain hypertext messages were achieved and not how the readers could resist their coercive ideological effects.

There was no evidence of teachers' rigorous examinations of language functions, inscribed ideologies, assigned meanings, or power relations in texts in the mainstream literacy classes. Even though there was a visible tendency towards the frequent use of "real books", reading embedded in communicative activities and a clear focus on the meta-language, there seemed to be a lack of connection between the levels of reading. This connection, however, is seen as highly relevant within the context of critical literacy, especially by those who advocate the use of analytical frameworks of systemic-functional linguistics/Halliday's (1973) functional grammar (Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009; Stevens & Bean, 2007).

The classroom practices seemed to be placing heavy emphasis on content, performance, and skills, something that could have contributed to veiling the nature of reading as a process of discovering the world, as previously suggested by Fisher (2006), Gainer (2012), and Giroux (2009b). The teachers in the study seemed to have rather strong beliefs, both personal and professional, about the importance of helping children to make meaning out of what is being read and become critically literate, but they struggled to articulate the real purposes of it. This, in turn, might be attributed to the factors that also appeared to be most influential in forming teachers' views on critical literacy.

Teachers had insufficient content knowledge about the real nature of critical literacy as well as the pedagogical content knowledge about how it can be carried out in practice, as suggested by Peterson (2009), Shor (1992), and Stevens and Bean (2007) and/or Vasquez (2004).

It is plausible that they did not have profound insights into the political nature of literacy or socially constructed (never neutral) nature of all kinds of texts, as suggested by Gee (1999), Hannon (2000), Freebody (2008), and Luke (2012). Teachers' understanding of critical literacy remained thus limited to the beliefs that only certain texts were influencing or persuading readers. Similarly, neither had these teachers' own previous education nor their current CPD possibilities emphasized the role which language plays in power relations (Fairclough, 2001; Giroux, 2009b).

Critical literacy is, as suggested by Atkinson (1997), Cho (2013) and Darder et al. (2009), too fragmented, inaccessible, and lacking in a unified definition. Its very nature is inconsistent with the systems of accountability that prevent teachers from discovering the real reasons for teaching children to become critically literate and from realizing that justice is never done, that there is always a need for change or struggle (Giroux, 2011).

6. Conclusion and implications

The findings in this study are based on examination of the work and thoughts of four teachers and their approaches to reading, seen in light of a range of theoretical foundations which have informed—and continue to inform—both an emancipatory vision and practice of critical literacy. The question that now arises is inevitably about the future prospects of this rather radical approach to literacy education as social inequalities, oppressive institutional structures, and their dominant modes of representation are undergoing a serious re-evaluation and reorganization.

The teachers in the study did not appear to be transformative leaders, but rather loyal to traditional curricula and educational policies instead; they were carrying “the bags full of teaching tricks”, but they were also creative, thinking individuals—true professionals, willing to learn more and interrogate their own standpoints. The teachers emphasized the importance of criticality, frequently attempted to make connections between the texts and readers’ experiences and were familiar with the notions of voice, ideology, and power. They mastered the meta-language of mainstream literacy, recognized the importance of giving more freedom to children and had strong personal beliefs about tolerance and equity.

Therefore, despite the claims that critical literacy could never be a method, we wish to argue, that instead of thinking in terms of dramatic paradigm shifts, we need to consider taking just a step further. If the teachers are to marshal the contributions of critical literacy for struggles in education or elsewhere, they should start from new approaches to reading. For them to undertake this task effectively necessitates the development of a clear understanding of the theoretical foundations of critical literacy, extended content knowledge on constructionist theories and functional grammar as well as strengthening their professional beliefs. However, even more importantly, we would suggest case knowledge, that is, well-described cases that could illustrate the theoretical propositions and help teachers stimulate their readers by asking them the right questions—the questions that would assist them in beginning a journey through serious interrogations of their ideological understandings of the world and imagined alternatives.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Teachers’ understanding and enactment of critical literacy – A lack of unified teaching method, Tatjana Bru Blixen & Justin Pannell, *Cogent Education* (2020), 7: 1826073.

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Appendix 1: Thematic Codes

Thematic code 1. General approaches to reading

<p>Mr Gordon Reflection/Content knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language-based studies, not so much about the ideas • An apparent gap between lower and higher literacy levels • Teaching is neutral • Important to raise an awareness of an author's ideas, learn how an author conveys a world view or a broader message • It is challenging to teach them to pick up the author's views • Understanding the deeper level is relevant but challenging • A good reader should be developing an understanding of the story, the sequence of events, the characters, but also of the themes, messages <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group work, discussions, question masters • Discussions are more interactive now and we are encouraging deeper understanding • The learners' autonomy is important • Tasks that can help students read between the lines • Teachers choose books they believe are interesting for children • Novels, non-fiction texts, seldom media texts • Reading and discussing current affairs three times a week 	<p>Mr Wilkinson Reflection/Content knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading is helpful in understanding how to create your own piece of work • Through writing students are identifying the content they have read • Metacognition and questioning are important, background knowledge as well • Being able to ask questions about the things that are new, to be critical <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are always encouraged to make questions by themselves so they can take responsibility for their own learning • Discussions, group work • Teachers choose books • Separating facts and opinions, balancing the truth • Fiction, non-fiction, media texts but always the same strategy employed
<p>Mr Johnson Reflection/Content knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension requires continuous work • Reading schemes—confident with decoding in my class • Modeling lesson about metacognition is an introduction • More than decoding, children learn a lot of skills that help them understand what they are reading • There are so many strategies about reading, that you easily get lost sometimes • Difficult to explain why understanding is important • Understanding a book is understanding the relationship between characters, the plot, etc. <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of decoding practices, but many pupils want to rush to a higher level • Questioning texts with constructions: "I wonder why", etc. • Comprehension is achieved by making connections to the real world or other texts • It is difficult to articulate it in a way ... • I want them to think about that there's more than the words and the story • I am not a specialist in reading, but I do think I am trying my best • I feel I have a toolkit which helps me • Important to inspire children to read • Books are chosen by a group of teachers • Non-fiction texts are approached by discussions about various issues: table of content, pictures, index, maps, how to find information, how to make own books 	<p>Ms Robinson Reflection/Content knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good readers should be critical, make inferences, comprehend, use specific skills, be able to summarise the text • The depth of understanding is important • Many students are good at decoding, but the comprehension is not there <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All kinds of texts • Making summaries • Questioning and written responses • Identifying key facts in non-fiction texts • Talking about characters and their motifs in fiction texts

Thematic code 2. Teachers' reactions to questions about power, voice, ideology, positioning, and/or transformation

<p>Mr Gordon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaching should be neutral, it is not our role to influence• Teachers are open but children should form their own views• Controversial issues are avoided	<p>Mr Wilkinson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• assessing pieces written for a particular agenda• we are talking about those issues in citizenship and in philosophy lessons as well and we would identify that in our discussions• I think it is our job as teachers to make children aware of that.
<p>Mr Johnson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I now realize that CL is important! It's about morality.• We are constantly manipulated in so many ways, through advertisements, etc.• We talk about democracy in citizenship but also about media and adverts, but on higher levels (P7)• I feel I don't have those important skills to teach CL• Uncertain about whether it can be applied to children's literature (older books are biased not those we have today!)• Children, however, do make comments about pictures.• I am thinking about it in academic terms. Children would not be able to understand that.	<p>Ms Robinson</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A stimulus for a philosophical discussion• It is not the same but there are many similarities• We are breaking it down and trying to find a philosophical question

Thematic code 3. Critical literacy in theory and praxis

<p>Mr Gordon Reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No explicit focus on it. • Why is CL important? It is very important. I'm interested in what you're saying. • My friend is a dentist, well-educated, and he does not know which newspaper he should trust. CL is about knowing when someone is trying to influence you. • How did you learn to be CL? Through life experience. It's a good question. <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History lessons and propaganda texts, but on higher levels (P6, P7), advertising campaigns or various projects but not in literacy classes 	<p>Mr Wilkinson Reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is CL important? It is a very good question! It is important in society, to know other people's agenda and when someone is trying to influence us. • How did you learn to be CL? Some language classes at the university level, but I was not taught to teach it. <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History lessons and propaganda texts
<p>Mr Johnson Reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is CL important? Interesting question! It is not important for everyone. It is an academic discipline. • One has to be critically literate himself/herself and have skills in order to be able to teach it. I would love to learn more. • CL is getting underneath, making connections, and thinking in different ways, from different angles • It's a personal thing, an ability to think • It leads to better understanding of injustices <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I guess I do it in a way which is not always conscious • By showing pictures of women in adverts. I equipped students with an understanding that magazines and women in them are not always real women 	<p>Ms Robinson Reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is CL important? Interesting question! • It comes from philosophy and cross-curriculum links. It is not only about reading. <p>Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with texts in philosophy classes • Making questions

Thematic code 4. Education now and then. CPD possibilities

<p>Mr Gordon Education now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills, preparing for jobs, specific personal traits, discussions that are interactive • Children are lovely, very little objection about the teaching methods • How you teach is more important than what you teach <p>CPD: Many possibilities. Many things one may want to look at. Time constraints.</p> <p>Education before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less discussions • Reading chapters and answering questions • Less active engagement 	<p>Mr Wilkinson Education now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills, jobs, tolerance, openness, matureness, discussions, more criticality than before <p>CPD: Teachers identify areas that they would like to pursue; they attend courses</p> <p>Education before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not so many discussions and attempts to identify issues
<p>Mr Johnson Education now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More focus on important skills related to reading/ none of them were systematically taught when I went to school • More discussions, more open, more creativity, more active involvement in learning, sharing, entertainment • Pupils are stimulated in different ways • Everyone has a voice and it can be very frustrating for a teacher • Everything is hands-on • However, plans are strict, prescriptive curriculum is limiting teachers • Curricula in Western countries in general often try to protect children from certain information and representations <p>CPD: We are now independent with our CPD involvement. The options are endless. Too many courses. When it comes to CL, it also takes someone bringing it to your attention to realise how important it is.</p> <p>Education before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very strict • Less strategies and techniques about learning skills 	<p>Ms Robinson Education now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-curriculum links, more questioning, more tolerance <p>Education before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facts, less about skills

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

1 Significant features of the observed lesson

Can you talk me through the aims and objectives of your lesson?
Was that something you usually do?
What do you think was achieved by the lesson yesterday/the other day?
Why did you organize the session that way?
Was that particular exercise an attempt to transform the materials you had read?

2 Teaching strategies and assessment

What teaching strategies are you aware of using when teaching reading?
Why do you employ those strategies?
How do you assess children's reading competence/performance?
How would you define reading? What is a good reader?
What are the readers in your class particularly good/not so good at?
How do you work with the text? What are the practical steps?
Can you give me any examples of questions you pose when you want to assess the reading comprehension?
Do you talk about ideology and power in the texts you encounter?
Do you ever identify voices?
If you want to question something concerning media text—how does it function? Do you use the same approach as with written, print texts?

3 Texts/books/materials

What kind of texts do you use when you teach reading and why?
Can children choose what they want to read?
Who decides about the books you read? Are they very different?
Who/What do you think is mostly represented in the texts you read?
Do you use media literacy, in what ways and how often?

4 Talking about critical literacy

Can you give me any examples of questions children pose to the texts they have read?
Is it important to be critically literate and why/why not?
How do you see critical literacy?
Do you consider yourself to be critically literate? When and where did you learn it?
Were you ever taught to teach it?
Are the children in your class critically literate?
Do you associate those skills with any kind of freedom in the future?

5 Teacher details and teachers' professional development

Previous education and experience
What are the CPD possibilities in the school?
How is it organized?



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