

Submission to the Ministry of Education regarding the draft Curriculum-
From Susan Sandretto and the Critical Literacy Research Team¹

Introduction

This submission has been prepared as part of the consultation process for the draft New Zealand Curriculum. We are writing to comment on and clarify the use of the term 'critical literacy'. The authors of this submission have been involved in a research project on critical literacy. The project began as a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded project in 2005 that will continue through 2007 called *A collaborative self-study into the development and integration of critical literacy practices* (for more information go to <http://www.criticalliteracy.org.nz>). Teachers from primary (2005-2007) and secondary (2007) schools in the Dunedin area are working alongside researchers from the University of Otago to collaboratively investigate the development and implementation of critical literacy strategies for use in guided reading and as well as other curriculum areas.

In this submission we discuss the term 'critical' and the critical literacy research team's growing understanding of critical literacy. We then introduce a broader vision of literacy known as multiliteracies. Finally, we make some recommendations for changes in the curriculum framework.

Critical

The term critical has a number of different meanings that can have positive or negative connotations. It can be used to mean faultfinding, as in hypercritical. It can imply analysis that leads to an opinion, such as critical thinking. The term critical can be used to mean extremely important, as in this is a critical phase. It can also mean indispensable or vital, such

as the hard-drive is critical to the functioning of a computer. It can mean life threatening: He is in a critical condition. Critical can signal a property of a system that is about to undergo a change, as in critical temperature. And finally, the term critical can be used to indicate the amount of mass necessary to sustain a chain reaction.

The multiplicity of meanings for the term critical increases the probability that different readers will make different sense of the term when used in a policy document. It becomes vitally important then, for the authors to signal their intentions for the reader. This is particularly the case when the reader is to base practice, in this case teaching practice, on his or her interpretation of the term. For the Critical Literacy Research Team, when the term critical is paired with literacy, it holds a very specific meaning.

Critical literacy

Critical literacy has a long history and a number of different theoretical influences (Larson & Marsh, 2005). We use the term critical literacy to describe ways in which teachers and students can deconstruct traditionally taken-for-granted texts (Lankshear, 1994). The findings of our 2005 research (Sandretto et al., 2006) lead us to believe that critical literacy for classroom practice involves supporting students to become aware that:

- Texts² are social constructions;
- Texts are not neutral;
- Authors draw upon particular discourses³ (often majority discourses) and assume that readers will be able to draw upon them as well;
- Authors make certain conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts;
- All texts have gaps, or silences, and particular representations within them; and,
- Texts have consequences for how we make sense of ourselves, others and the world.

Another important aspect of critical literacy for us is supporting students in making connections between texts and their lived experiences.

Teachers and students have particular roles when engaging in the classroom practice of critical literacy. Teachers are responsible for setting up and maintaining a caring and supportive environment where students respect each other's responses and experiences, and can develop greater empathy for others. Teachers are also responsible for modelling a questioning stance towards texts. Students are responsible for contributing to discussions with the understanding that ideas are under consideration, but that critical literacy is not about critiquing people. Teachers are responsible for assisting students to consider multiple interpretations and readings of texts, rather than to search for the one 'right' reading. And finally, teachers are responsible for co-constructing understandings with students by supporting students to develop a meta-language of critical literacy, or a language to talk about critical literacy.

This version of critical literacy differs from the ways that the term is used in The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for consultation 2006. In the section "Learning languages" under the heading "Why study a language?" of the Draft Curriculum it states: "By being able to communicate in an additional language, they gain access to broader fields of knowledge and so extend their creative and critical literacies" (p. 18). One reading of this statement is that the authors intended to signal critical, as in important or vital literacies. Another reading is that students will enhance their critical thinking skills by learning another language. Yet another reading is that by learning another language, students will be supported to become critically literate as we are using that term.

If this statement remains as it is currently written, however, we fear that teachers who encounter our work (Sandretto & Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006- in press) may be discouraged from implementing critical literacy strategies into their classroom practices. The strategies we propose may not fit with their readings of critical literacy. We recommend that the statement read: "By being able to communicate in an additional language, they gain access to broader fields of knowledge and so extend their multiliteracies".

Multiliteracies

In preparing current students for the workplace of tomorrow, we are preparing them for the unknown. The rapid advance of science and technology makes it more difficult to define the knowledge that students will need in the future, as what is new today becomes obsolete tomorrow. Literacy is one important area where students will need to develop a wide range of dispositions, orientations, and skills. What counts as literacy has evolved from "simply the ability to read and write" (Walter, 1999, p. 31) to an understanding that: "Being literate in a contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography and more" (International Reading Association, 1996 as cited in Braunger & Lewis, 2006, p. 4).

The term multiliteracies (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Education Queensland, 2000; The New London Group, 1996) captures an understanding that to be literate today, we need not only to be able to read and make sense of the multiple forms of texts that we encounter, but also we need to be able to use the new communication technologies that are coming to form central parts of our lives (Anstey & Bull, 2006). In other words, "The multiliterate person can interpret, use and produce electronic, live, and paper texts that employ linguistic, visual,

auditory, gestural, and spatial semiotic⁴ systems for social, cultural, political, civic, and economic purposes in socially and culturally diverse contexts” (Anstey & Bull, 2006, p. 41).

In the Draft Curriculum, the section on Designing a School Curriculum contains the statement: “Critical literacies such as financial literacy, in which students build personal financial capability so that they are able to contribute to New Zealand’s future economic well-being” (p. 26). This is an example of a theme a school might use to organise a learning programme. While we do not dispute the importance of students becoming financially literate, we believe that by using the term as a synonym for critical literacy may do students a disservice as they are not one and the same. We recommend that the statement be revised and another example of a theme be provided or that “critical literacy” be used in the way educators will find this term defined in educational research literature.

Recommendations

The development of a new national curriculum is an opportunity to prepare our current and future students for a rapidly changing future, or ‘new times’ (Gee, 2000). We believe that the students who are currently in New Zealand schools will need multiple literacies in order to be successful global citizens in this rapidly changing world (Carrington & Marsh, 2005; The New London Group, 1996). This broader conception of literacy suggests that: “Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia” (Education Queensland, 2000, p. 9).

The Four Resources Model by Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999) provides a framework for the ‘repertoire of practices’ that students need to develop. It has been adopted by

Education Queensland (2000) and the Department of Education in Tasmania (2006), as well as recommended by Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull (2006) to incorporate multiliteracies into classroom practice. This model suggests that the repertoire of practices that students need to be able to acquire includes: code breaker, text participant or meaning maker, text user and text analyst (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Education Queensland, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Code breaker refers to the practices readers use to break the codes and systems of written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts. Text participant relates to the ability of readers to make meaning from texts. Text user represents the practices of using texts effectively in everyday situations. And lastly, text analyst emphasises that texts are not neutral and signifies the practices of analysing texts.

When considering pedagogy that will support student development of text analyst practices, critical literacy becomes important (Anstey & Bull, 2006). By supporting students to become critically literate we are supporting them to go beyond the face value of texts to examine how they are constructed and to consider their effects. As Barbara Comber (2001) explains:

“When teachers and students are engaged in critical literacy, they will be asking complicated questions about language and power, about people and lifestyle, about morality and ethics, about who is advantaged by the way things are and who is disadvantaged” (p. 271).

We argue that it is the right of all New Zealand students to develop a full repertoire of practices. Current handbooks advocate learning the code, making meaning and thinking critically (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006). The first two aspects map directly onto Luke and Freebody’s (1999) model. The third aspect, thinking critically, relates more closely to the practices of text analyst, but the examples provided in the handbooks do not echo how others have interpreted these practices. For instance, Allan Luke (2000) lists the following questions

as a means to illustrate the practices involved in being a text analyst: “What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naïvely and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent?” (p. 454). In contrast, the description in the handbook of “thinking critically”, in our opinion, does not necessarily encourage teachers to take this tact with texts:

Becoming literate involves reading and writing beyond a literal, factual level. It involves analysing meanings, responding critically to text when reading, and being critically aware when composing texts. It also involves responding to texts at a personal level, reflecting on them, and finding reward in being a reader and a writer. (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 24)

We believe that the ultimate goal of literacy instruction is to support students to develop a full repertoire of literacy practices, including critical literacy. Indeed, “One static approach to literacy education limits the enormous power of our children to lead us into an increasingly complex future” (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000, p. 292).

In conclusion, we recommend that a fuller conceptualisation of literacy be developed in the New Zealand Curriculum. By drawing upon a conceptualisation of multiliteracies, we may be able to support students, and teachers, “to design social futures, to forge self-determining, ‘agentive’ pathways through text- and discourse-based communities and economies” (Luke, 2000, p. 457) and prepare them for the unknown.

End Notes

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² The research team has a broad definition of what counts as a text. Texts are found in written, verbal, digital or multi-media and visual forms. In other words: “A text is a vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society” (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3).

³ We use the term discourse to refer to “socially constructed and recognised ways of doing and being in the world, which integrate and regulate ways of acting, thinking, feeling, using language, believing and valuing” (Lankshear, 1994, p. 6). For us, the term discourse emphasises the power of language and encourages us to focus on the ways in which language works in different contexts.

⁴ Semiotic systems refer to the set of signs or symbols used in any given text. Semiotic systems include linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural and spatial systems (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

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