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A collaborative self-study into the development of critical-literacy practices—a pilot study

In preparing the students of today for the workplace of tomorrow, we are preparing them for the unknown. With technology and science advancing at a rapid rate, what is new today becomes obsolete tomorrow. Thus it becomes more difficult to define what knowledge those who are students now will need in the future. Educationalists predict that what will not become obsolete are critical-thinking skills: “The power to interpret, to be critical and to be able to navigate will be highly-prized attributes in the well-educated person of the twenty-first century” (Newby, 2005, p. 299).

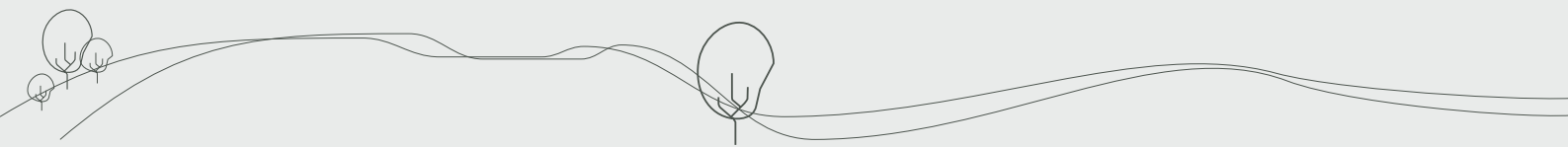
Literacy is one important area where students will need to develop a wide range of dispositions, orientations, and skills. What counts as literacy has evolved from “simply the ability to read and write” (Walter, 1999, p. 31) to an understanding that:

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)

Included in this evolving definition of literacy is a broadening of what counts as “texts”, from printed and visual formats to include oral and digital material as well.

This pilot project consisted of collaborative self-study research into the development of critical-literacy practices within primary schools. Two teachers from each of two primary schools in the Dunedin area developed a project in partnership with two researchers from the University of Otago. The teachers, with the assistance of the researchers, collaboratively investigated the development and implementation of an enhanced critical-literacy focus within everyday guided-reading practices in their classrooms. The research sought to:

- enhance the understandings and pedagogical practices of critical literacy for the participating primary school teachers;
- document the implementation of critical-literacy strategies within regular, ongoing, guided-reading lessons in the participating teachers’ classrooms;
- involve focus groups of students in stimulated-recall interviews to comment on a guided-reading lesson using critical-literacy strategies;
- produce collaboratively theorised reports of the research process and findings to share with audiences of both researchers and teachers; and
- elaborate on ways in which the pilot could be expanded and enhanced in a future research study.



What is “critical literacy”?

In this pilot project, the research team uses the term “critical literacy” to describe ways in which teachers and students in primary schools can deconstruct traditionally taken-for-granted texts (Lankshear, 1994). The findings of our 2005 research lead us to believe that critical literacy for classroom practice involves supporting students to become aware that:

- texts are social constructions;
- texts are not neutral;
- authors make certain conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts; and
- these choices then have consequences for how we make sense of ourselves and others.

In our view, critical literacy also includes supporting students in making connections between texts and their lived experiences, considering multiple interpretations and readings of texts, and considering what is at stake as a consequence of any particular reading (Comber, 2002; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2001).

By incorporating critical-literacy strategies within guided-reading lessons, the participating teachers sought to promote the conditions for new and different kind of textual practices, practices that examine the nature of literacy itself—in particular, the ways in which current conceptions of literacy create and preserve certain social, economic, and political interests (Morgan, 1997).

In this research project we used critical literacy as a tool to increase students’ comprehension of texts. The term “reading comprehension” describes the ways in which students make meaning from texts and includes: understanding the message(s) of texts; making connections to prior knowledge; understanding the purpose(s) of texts; understanding the form and function of texts; making personal responses to texts; and thinking critically about texts (Ministry of Education, 2003). Teachers can assist students to increase their comprehension of texts through a number of specific strategies, including: making connections; forming and testing hypotheses about texts; asking questions; creating mental images or visualising; inferring; identifying the author’s purpose and point of view; identifying and summarising main ideas; analysing and synthesising; and evaluating ideas and information (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 131–134). While many of these strategies converge with critical-literacy practices, this research project sought to unpack and augment aspects of comprehension in direct and focused ways that are not often provided to teachers within literacy handbooks, or examined in traditional standardised tests of comprehension.

Research questions

This project investigated the following research questions:

- What critical-literacy strategies can be integrated most effectively within guided-reading lessons in the New Zealand context?
- What changes can be found in students’ ability to relate texts to their lives?
- What changes are evident in students’ comprehension of texts?
- What are the teachers’ experiences of the collaborative self-study research process?

Research design

The research design featured:

- collaborative planning sessions (using teacher release time to allow for the development and implementation of selected critical-literacy strategies);
- a variety of data-gathering methods (including videotaped guided-reading lessons, stimulated-recall interviews with student focus groups, audiotaped interviews with teachers, and teacher-selected resources to gather information on student comprehension); and
- space created for collaborative data analysis, theorising, and writing (utilising teacher release time).

Findings

What critical-literacy strategies can be integrated most effectively within guided reading lessons in the New Zealand context?

We adopted the following strategies:

- the development of our own localised version of what critical literacy means to us in the New Zealand context, and the understanding that this “definition” will continue to evolve;
- direct modelling and teaching of a metalanguage about critical literacy (based on the definition developed by the research team) that will enable students to discuss critical-literacy concepts;
- the use of critical questions to support students to examine a wide variety of texts;
- careful selection of texts that lend themselves to critical examination; and
- (re)structuring guided-reading lessons by implementing a critical-literacy focus on the second reading of any text (this also created opportunities to enhance student comprehension).

What changes can be found in students' ability to relate texts to their lives?

The research found that students can use their own personal experience as a means to question and challenge texts. However, if students do not have the requisite experience to foster multiple readings of texts, there is the possibility that they may be excluded from a text.

What changes are evident in students' comprehension of texts?

Running record data showed that there were mixed results overall. However, most children increased their reading accuracy and their reading age, and many increased their level of comprehension.

The difficulty with measuring the students' growth in reading comprehension in relation to their increasing development of critical-literacy skills was that there are not any standardised measures of reading comprehension that ask the kinds of questions we were asking students. The most commonly used tool, running records, typically asks recall- and inferential-type comprehension questions.

There is an urgent need for the development of standardised assessment tools that would enable teachers to chart in detailed ways student growth in both critical-literacy skills and reading comprehension.

What are the teachers' experiences of the collaborative self-study research process?

The teachers commented on the research journey in the exit interviews:

[It] has been a wonderful overall package.

It has been a real collaborative effort and the degree of collegiality has been great.

It was valuable to have time for study, time for reading, time for looking at the theory without feeling pressured to have it in place by the very same day or two weeks ago.

To have time and space to reflect has been a real luxury.

Valued the working days highly, the sharing, the time to reflect, being able to view the tapes, being able to approach the questioning in a clearer way.

The quality quiet space that was just for us, away from the classroom, has made us feel valued as professionals.

Limitations

There is an urgent need for the development of standardised assessment tools that would enable teachers to chart growth in critical-literacy skills and reading comprehension in detailed ways.

Relationship of the project to the principles of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative

Strategic value

Ultimately, this project was about raising student achievement. It used critical-literacy strategies to assist all students to develop a deeper comprehension of texts. The project team found that the critical-literacy strategies did support all students to engage with texts in more personal ways. In addition, they provided a way for students to develop greater empathy for others as they considered the outcomes or consequences of texts and representations. The members of the research team gained an understanding of effective critical-literacy strategies for the New Zealand context that will in turn inform the practice of others, and thereby contribute to enhanced teaching and learning in schools.

Research value

At the time of this report, the participating teachers had been involved in contributing to or co-presenting four conference presentations (Sandretto et al., 2006; Sandretto, Tilson, Hill, Howland, et al., 2005; Sandretto, Tilson, Hill, Upton, et al., 2005; Tilson, 2005), and the sole presentation of one workshop (Upton & Hill, 2006). The research team believes that it is one of the strengths of the research design and the TLRI fund that team members have been supported to grow their research capabilities and capacity to such an extent.

Practice value

The critical-thinking skills developed through critical literacy are lifelong skills that ultimately are transferable to any context. These skills have not been taught regularly in New Zealand schools—one parent remarked to the researchers during a parent information night: "I've never been asked to think like this before". The research team believes that it is vitally important for teachers to continue to explore ways of implementing critical-literacy skills in classroom practice.

Further research

We are continuing our research into the implementation of critical literacy during 2006 and 2007. The context will expand from guided-reading lessons to wider curriculum integration, and will include more teachers and schools in Dunedin.



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Lead authors and researchers



Susan Sandretto is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Otago. Her research interests include teacher education, gender equity and social justice. Her current research project, "A collaborative self-study into the development and integration of critical-literacy practices", is a TLRI-funded project that will extend through to the end of 2007.



Jane Tilson, now of Cambridge, England, was a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Otago. Her research interests include critical-literacy practices and comparing different international perspectives on the teaching of reading.

Practitioner partners

Our practitioner partners were Peta Hill, Rae Howland, Rae Parker, and Jennie Upton.