

Susan Sandretto and the Critical Literacy Research Team

# A collaborative self-study into the development and integration of critical literacy practices: A summary

During 2006–7 four Dunedin primary schools and one secondary school, involving a total of 16 teachers, took part in the project. The participating teachers became familiar with the literature on the theory and practice of critical literacy, and developed, implemented, and evaluated critical literacy strategies in their regular classroom programmes.

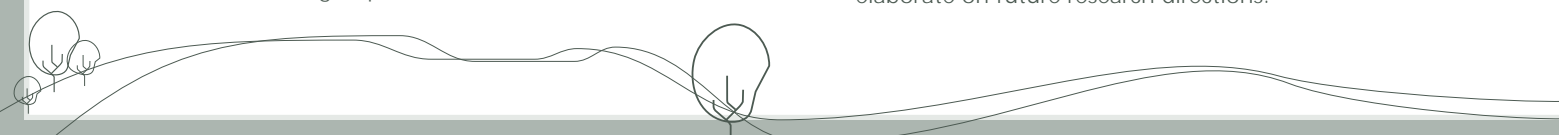
Critical literacy has a long history and a number of different theoretical influences (Larson & Marsh, 2005). We use the term “critical literacy” to describe ways in which teachers and students can deconstruct texts (Lankshear, 1994). We believe that “critical literacy is a critical thinking tool that encourages readers to question the construction and production of texts. Using critical literacy tools, readers consider inclusion, exclusion, and representation in texts, relate texts to their own lives, and consider the effects of texts” (Sandretto & Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006a, p. 23).

The Critical Literacy Research Team argues that critical literacy forms an important part of a multiple literacies, or multiliteracies, view of literacy and literacy teaching. Multiliteracies position reading as “a social practice” (Luke, 1995, p. 97) rather than “simply the ability to read and write” (Walter, 1999, p. 31). A number of educationalists have highlighted the “new times” we are preparing students for (Gee, 2000). We believe that, in order to be successful global citizens in our rapidly changing world, students will need to develop a “repertoire of practices” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 3) to engage with texts. The four resources model by Luke and Freebody (1999) provides a framework for the “repertoire of practices” that students need to develop. This model suggests that the repertoire of practices that students need to acquire includes: code breaker; text participant or meaning maker; text user; and text analyst (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Queensland Department of Education, 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. Lastly, text analyst emphasises that texts are not neutral and signifies the practices of analysing texts. This project explored text analyst practices.

## Aims and objectives

The research sought to:

- enhance the understandings and practices of critical literacy for the participating teachers
- support students in selected classes across four primary schools (and one secondary) to develop multiple strategies of accessing and interpreting texts
- document the implementation of critical literacy strategies into regular guided reading lessons (Phase 1) and across the curriculum through curriculum integration (Phase 2) (Beane, 1997)
- involve focus groups of students in stimulated recall
- interviews commenting on a lesson using critical literacy strategies
- collect data to chart growth of reading comprehension and reading achievement in relevant curricular areas
- produce collaboratively theorised reports of the research process and findings to share with audiences of both researchers and teachers
- inform the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) programme at the University of Otago
- elaborate on future research directions.





## Research questions

1. What critical literacy strategies can be most effectively integrated within guided reading lessons and across curriculum areas in the New Zealand context?
2. What changes were evident in students' comprehension of texts?
3. In what ways was the reading achievement of students enhanced?
4. What forms of assessment enabled the team to chart student growth of critical literacy skills?
5. What changes were found in students' ability to relate texts to their lives?
6. How did the research process support teachers to become more effective in implementing critical literacy strategies?
7. In what ways are the research capabilities of the participating teachers enhanced?

## Research design

The research design was based on the 2005 research (Sandretto et al., 2006a) and featured:

- collaborative planning sessions (using teacher release time) to allow for the development of critical literacy strategies
- a variety of data-gathering methods including videotaped lessons; audiotaped stimulated recall interviews with student focus groups; audiotaped peer interviews with the participating teachers; standardised literacy assessment tools; and the piloting of a critical literacy rubric
- space created for collaborative data analysis, theorising and writing (using teacher release time).

## Findings

We found that students involved in the critical literacy project enhanced their understandings of critical literacy and their ability to think critically. For example:

Researcher: Why do you think we're doing critical literacy?

Student: To see what sort of ideas we come up with when we like have to really think about what we're reading and not just kind of take it at face value. (Stimulated Recall Interview\_15\_03\_07, p. 2)

Students developed an awareness that critical literacy involves:

- stating and supporting your opinion and therefore there are not any "right" or "wrong" answers
- examining representation in texts
- not taking texts at face value

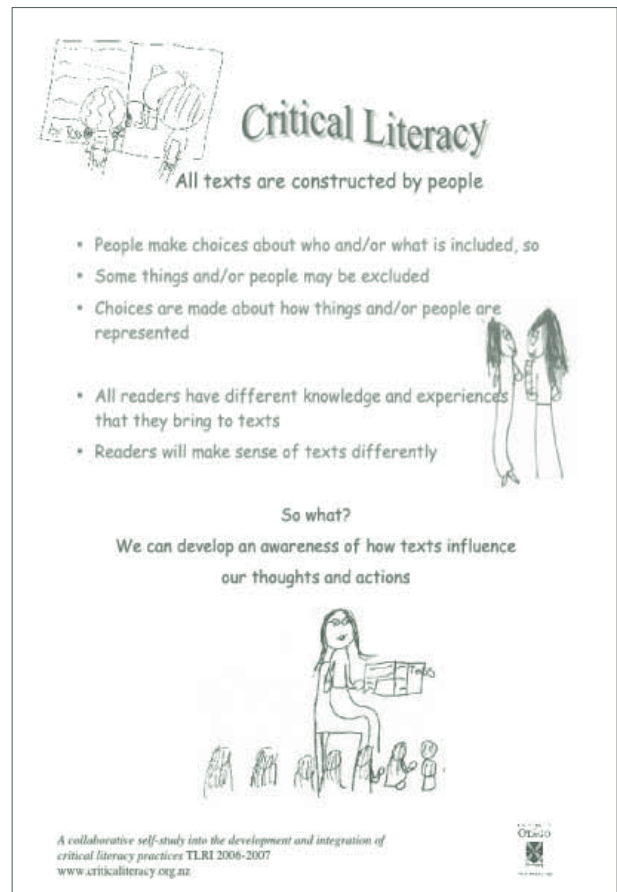
- examining the construction of texts and considering the choices that authors make
- considering inclusion and exclusion in texts
- thinking about the impact that any given text has had on one's thinking and actions.

Students were able to engage with texts more deeply and make more links between texts and their lives. As noted by one of the students, "critical literacy gets your brain thinking".

Teachers used the following strategies to enhance their instruction of critical literacy across curriculum areas:

- direct teaching of the metalanguage (specific vocabulary of critical literacy)
- the poster developed by the Critical Literacy Research Team to illustrate key teaching points (Figure 1)
- a wide diversity of texts, including stories, articles, visual, and digital texts
- reflection on their questioning skills, in particular with a focus on wait time
- active construction of a talking atmosphere where students felt confident and comfortable to contribute to the discussion.

Figure 1 Poster





Resources developed by the team to support critical literacy instruction can be found at <http://criticalliteracy.co.nz>.

The research team developed and piloted a critical literacy rubric to chart the growth of students' understanding and application of critical literacy. The rubric is based on the poster and thus reflects the teaching points from the lessons and, in our view, an authentic form of assessment. This rubric shows a great deal of potential to form part of a repertoire of assessment tools that teachers can use.

The research team found the stimulated recall interviews, where students were interviewed by researchers directly after a lesson, although not developed for use as an assessment tool were a very useful way to chart student growth and understanding of critical literacy. This could be used as a formative assessment tool to inform literacy instruction.

The teachers participating in the project found that they became more critically literate themselves as well as enhancing their literacy instruction skills. They became more effective at implementing and reflecting on critical literacy strategies.

The teachers also found that their participation in the project gave them the time and space to be the reflective professionals that everyone expects them to be:

But the reality is that this [project] is actually making you accountable as well as reflective as well as empowered . . . I think it keeps teachers fresh, 'cause you can get stuck in a method or strategy and you never change and yet the kids change. (ResearchTeamWorkingDay\_30\_11\_07b, pp. 6-7)

Finally, the teachers found that they enhanced their research capabilities as a result of participating in the project, that in turn enhanced their teaching:

I never really was that interested in research as such. The practicalities is what I wanted. I went to workshops that were practical . . . and if they were backed up by research, all well and good. And I can see now this has . . . widened my view of research and researchers and how the process is important [and] that best practices do need to be backed up by research. (ExitInterview\_10\_11\_06, p. 2)

## Limitations

As noted in the Findings (see full report), we are well aware that there are strengths and limitations in any assessment tool. Nonetheless, a continuing limitation for the use of critical literacy in the curriculum is the lack of a standardised assessment tool to chart student growth in comprehension and critical literacy skills. One area of future research would be for a team with members with expertise in the area of assessment to work together with team members with expertise in critical literacy to design and pilot a repertoire of assessment strategies to use for formative and summative assessment.

## Capability and capacity building

Three years of funding from the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (including for the 2005 research) enabled 10 teachers to be involved for two years. One important finding from this project is that teachers need time and space in order to engage with the research literature, connect with theory, reflect on their own practice, and develop the skills and attributes of researchers. The teachers found that participating in the project enabled them to develop the skills of a researcher that could in turn enhance their teaching, and supported them to disseminate results to colleagues in their own schools and more widely at conferences. The full report lists the research outputs to date from the project. Future research needs to take into consideration the issue of time and space for teacher practitioner-researchers.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the project the participating teachers became more confident and skilled at implementing critical literacy strategies. They developed and trialled a critical literacy rubric as a means to better understand student development of critical literacy skills. They also made use of the stimulated recall interviews as a means to gain feedback on their teaching and examine student understandings of critical literacy. The participating teachers gained skills as researchers and presented their work at national and international conferences. The Critical Literacy Research Team firmly believes that critical literacy should be an integral part of any balanced literacy programme (Sandretto & Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006b). To support this, other types of assessment need to be developed that will give students multiple ways to demonstrate their ability to analyse texts.

## Further research

Future research into the development and implementation of critical literacy across the sector needs to build upon the successful research design of this project and explore ways to support schools and teachers to sustain their practices. What sorts of classroom and school-wide support mechanisms need to be in place in order for the promising practices developed in this project to be sustainable?

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The full reports of all TLRI projects are published on the TLRI website ([www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)).

## The Critical Literacy Research Team



### Phase 2 2007

(L-R) Tui Qauqau, Elsie Boyens, Clive Swale, Susan Sandretto, Scott Klenner, Lisa Hansen, Peter Thorn, Wendy Lamond, Rosemary Coleman



### Phase 1 2007

(L-R) Scott Klenner, Tony Graham, Susan Sandretto, Gill Brown, Jo Harford, Phil Maw, Jo Weggery



### Phase 2 2006

(L-R) Peta Hill, Jennie Upton, Rae Parker, Scott Klenner, Susan Sandretto, Garth Powell, Andrew Straw

**Susan Sandretto** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education Studies and Professional Practice at the University of Otago College of Education. She has been involved in critical literacy research since 2005.

**Scott Klenner** and **Andrew Straw** were the research assistants involved with this project.

Our practitioner partners were Elsie Boyens, Gill Brown, Rosemary Coleman, Tony Graham, Lisa Hansen, Jo Harford, Peta Hill, Wendy Lamond, Phil Maw, Rae Parker, Garth Powell, Tui Qauqau, Clive Swale, Peter Thorn, Jennie Upton, and Jo Weggery.