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# Literacy models across nations: Literacy and critical literacy in teacher training programs in India.

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## Abstract

The thrust towards constructivist learning and critical thinking in the National Curricular Framework (2005) of India implies shifts in pedagogical practices. In this context, drawing on grounded theory, focus group interviews were conducted with 40 preservice teachers to ascertain the contextual situation and the likely outcomes of applying critical literacy across the curriculum. Central themes that emerged in the discussion were: being teacher centred/ learner centred, and conformity/autonomy in teaching and learning. The paper argues that within the present Indian context, while there is scope for changes to pedagogy and learning styles, yet these must be adequately contextualised.

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*Keywords:* critical literacy; critical thinking; comparative education

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## 1. Introduction

In India, the National Curricular Framework (2005; NCF hereafter) by NCERT, aims to address critical thinking across curricular areas to bring about significant change to teaching and learning. The NCF (2005) acknowledges 'market forces' and 'commodification of knowledge' and desires educators 'respect children's native wisdom and imagination' (p. 5). The focus on developing the 'critical' is of particular interest to this study in view of India's education system which has a colonial past. The present day education system in India had its inception during the British rule providing it with a Western, often elitist focus, with western forms of knowledge, transmission modes of teaching resulting in passivisation of learners. It was a system that was based on the complete denouncement of everything indigenous; it aimed at training personnel for work in the colonial government, and to spread European literature and science (Sharma, p. 82). However, present day requirements in terms of education demand that curricular

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changes be made that could assist students adapt to the immense changes that are occurring nationwide and globally.

In this scenario, a postcolonial approach to education is committed to re-examine the colonial as entrenched in the system and to expose through critique the misfit that has occurred between education and social, cultural environment. In India, as in Australia postcolonial perspectives highlight critical thinking and critique as an important aspect of education. In order to address the effect of colonialism and globalisation on education, the NCF (2005) acknowledges the importance of teaching children and teachers to share and reflect, understand and relate, to differences, and to learn to question received knowledge critically (p. 5).

Developing critical literacy through critical questioning of texts is especially problematic in a context ridden by contradictory tensions of the traditional and the modern. In this paper, I explore the voices of 40 preservice student teachers who are grounded in Vygotsky's constructivism and aim to become elementary school teachers. Drawing on constructivism these student teachers firmly believe that learning is a contextual activity promoted through the social, historical and cultural context of the learner and with appropriate scaffolding by the teacher. This is similar to student teachers in Australia who are grounded in constructivism and draw on the context to make meaning in teaching and learning. Within the larger context of a globalised world, teacher trainees also recognise the importance of drawing on theoretical knowledge that has been tried elsewhere, in this case, literacy theories and models of Australia. Yet, in discussions with the students teachers the contextual became significant as it illustrated the desire to, and the difficulties of, incorporating literacy theories and models practiced successfully in Australia. The paper concludes by arguing that while literacy models that advocate critical literacy elsewhere are appropriate, these must be adapted appropriately within the required context.

## **2. The notion of critical literacy**

Notions of being 'critical' have become increasingly significant in learning with the move from teacher centred to student centred forms of learning. The notion of critical literacy openly acknowledges that literacy is socially and culturally contextual (Gee, 1996; Comber, 2001; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 2003). This shift has brought to the forefront a broader definition of becoming literate as encompassing a deep understanding of themes and ideologies within texts. By a critical questioning of texts, critical literacy expects a variety of perspectives, through constant recursive revisiting of dominant themes and sub-themes. For Dozier, Johnston and Rogers (2006), 'critical literacy involves understanding the ways in which language and literacy are used to accomplish social ends' (p. 18). In general, critical literacy in education is focused on developing the agency of teachers and students, yet it does not overtly advocate that reality can somehow be reached by unpacking texts and disrupting ideologies.

Critical literacy draws on notions of literacy to argue that discourses that surround people and the ideologies invested in these discourses have contextual and personal perspectives and are worth examining if only to enable individuals to adopt alternative perspectives alongside their current views. It is not the overt aim of critical literacy to overturn all dominant perspectives regardless of their use or application. Rather, the aim is to position the reader to take a stance by examining the pros and cons, the push and pull of various strands within a text and through it to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world, and the self. The intention is to examine texts closely to enable meaning making by the reader so that h/she can arrive at their perspective with regards to the authorial intention and the ideologies that are represented. To achieve a deep comprehension of texts, Freebody and Luke (1990; 2003) propose a staggered process that enables the reader to unpack a text in multiple ways. Termed the four resource

model, the steps are interrelated though distinct in intention: cracking the code, text participation, meaning- making and text analysis. These four processes are recursive, continuous and intertwined. This model developed and used widely in Australia was seen as a means to sensitize student teachers in India in reading the word and through it reading the world. The study discussed the application of the four resource model to different curriculum areas in elementary education in India. The model was not applied in a narrow manner of exploring print texts but at a more general level of seeking to unpack the different phases of comprehension and arriving at critical literacy in different curricular areas.

### 3. Methodology and data analysis

Drawing on constructivist grounded theory as proposed by Bryant (2002); Charmaz (2005; 2008) this study is based on the results that emerged to the key question: What are the perspectives of student teachers on adopting critical literacy within the context of Indian education? Based on constructivism, the research situation was seen as emerging from the context of the particular times and ‘interactional situations’ (Charmaz, 2008, p. 160). Drawing on systematic procedures that were also flexible, the situation was first assessed by the researcher to understand the context of learning and the complexities in moving to a dialogic classroom set up that is currently underway in India. Data collection was conducted through conversations with student teachers and teacher trainers and through focus group interviews that were more in the nature of whole group discussion. While the focus group interviews were conducted with 40 participants, the conversations were held with 5 teacher trainers. The focus group interviews were conducted for an hour with participants with set questions that were modified and adapted to the needs of the discussion. The interview data was constantly compared to the conversations, and to the themes in the NCF to identify common themes that could emerge. The focus group interview data and conversations were pieced together to deduce students’ comprehension of the word ‘critical’. At the word level the codes that emerged were ‘criticise and ‘critical’ which then led to categories emerging from the codes: syllabus demands; textbook restrictions, and prescriptive teaching; lack of critical literacy skills in education overall. Thus the interview data got sorted into the following two themes: being teacher centred and child centred; conformity and autonomy in learning. In this paper these two themes that arose from the focus group interview are discussed.

The discussion started with the students arriving at a consensus on the term ‘critical literacy’. In order to explain and arrive at critical literacy, I had to discuss the word ‘critical’ and the word ‘criticising’ with the students. Their perspective on the word ‘critical’ was important to how they perceived the significance of ‘critical literacy’. The participants defined critical thinking and literacy as the ability ‘to analyse’, ‘to oppose’, ‘to bring to the forefront’, as ‘explaining the perspectives from all angles’, comprehending that, ‘some questions do not have one answer and accepting these’; some thought that ‘being critical is to get to the finer aspects of a topic and not only examining the negative’. For some others the term critical implied, ‘To let them question and ask themselves how it is happening’. Others thought: ‘Teachers should not give opinions and let students decide for themselves’. ‘Teachers should realise that the child is expecting something and let the child express’. ‘Some others thought of critical thinking and literacy as a kind of change, for example, in science a point where lines start to bend – an alternate way of thinking’<sup>1</sup>. All these viewpoints were taken into consideration as these enabled a grounded discussion of themes with the ‘critical’ aspect as central.

#### 3.1 Theme: Teacher centered and child centered

When questioned whether they comprehended the term critical literacy as applicable to their curriculum areas the following responses emerged:

‘Earlier when we did mathematics the children had vague objectives; I planned an activity where the children had to play with numbers so that they could learn numbers. The activity was planned to help the

child do mathematics with the understanding of maths in daily life. In a meaningful context through talk, they were thinking in context. I think then it also is easier to accept the child and to think beyond the activity. They decided on the meaning they thought was important.’ In this example, the teacher illustrates critical meaning making as significant. Another student said, “In Science – I was talking about living and non-living by asking them to look outside and examine the tree, they looked at the tree and said it was non-living. They were not able to distinguish and when I explained it in the context of their own body and self, they could understand. They could understand ‘why’ when they could relate it to their own context’. These comments made by student teachers underline the importance of a child centred curriculum and their readiness to undertake a critical approach to texts .

In terms of literacy, participants acknowledged that they had to make extra effort in the Indian context. Some participants said: Students have to understand that just by mugging critical thinking will not be developed; they will not construct the knowledge for themselves. They will find learning very boring and there will be no transfer of learning’. Other students agreed with this view: ‘they may not be able to relate their learning, there will be no change in the potential of the child and they will remain at the same level. Asking the right types of questions, of ‘why ‘and ‘where’ will help them provide reason’. The move from a traditional education system to a child centred system was understood as based on meaning making, active participation with critique and negotiation of meaning as central to learning.

### 3.2 Theme: Conformity/autonomy

In view of this category, participants felt that students could be guided to become autonomous learners. As some student teachers stated: ‘I think we can develop the critical in children and we think it is possible to develop these early from the time the child can speak fluently’. Another perspective was, ‘The four resources help us to think how we can form thinking strategies in our own teaching area’. As one participant mentioned, ‘The problem is to first think from the perspectives of the children and to modify the textual knowledge to fit in with the world view or the perspective of the child’. The group saw the benefit of using the four resource model as a means to organise their teaching to fit in with the critical. As one participant expressed: ‘it will help us think through our teaching’. Yet, they also perceived that there will be gaps in the knowledge links; as one of them said: in answering ‘why’ we will have to keep the actual level of the child in mind and not force them to think critical at all costs’. With textbooks as the basis of primary knowledge in India, they also had problems with conforming while drawing on and linking to the background knowledge and different perspectives of the children.

Lack of focus on critical was also seen as a result of large classrooms with up to 50 students. The participants felt, ‘Even though we have lesson plans with critical thinking, it is not possible for all children to speak’. This view was supported by others with views such as ‘how can every child be provided turn to speak’ or ‘How to make it productive in a short space of time in a class is a question the teacher is confronted with’. The theme of conformity and autonomy grounded critical meaning making within the structural limitations of an education system making shifts to constructivist education.

## 4. Discussion

The categories that emerged from the notes made of the NCF as well as the focus group interviews suggest that there is a perceptible move toward the critical aspect in the curriculum. The data was compared with comments made by academics who teach the students. They focused on the word ‘critical’ as important, yet were aware of having to create bridges between the traditional and the constructivist method, and having to explicitly teach advantages of critical literacy across curricular areas.

Based on constructivist grounded theory, of the two questions that Glaser (1978, p. 57) provides, asking ‘what is happening in the researched context’ led the researcher to probe deeper into the education

situation by comparing the data of one focus group with another. Similarities of themes that emerged from this question led to ‘what the data was a study of’ and to the theory of critical literacy presented earlier. The question reiterated that literacy is meaningful in a context as Freebody & Luke (2003) argue, and the discussions with the student teachers proved the importance of being aware of the postcolonial and globalised context that is impacting on the curriculum. At the same time, they were also conscious of having to make difficult choices in terms of moving from a traditional text bound method of pedagogy to a child centred pedagogy that has, at its nexus, critical literacy. Teachers in this study expressed an eagerness to move towards developing the critical as significant in teaching and across the curriculum nevertheless also recognised the difficulties in overemphasising the critical. The focus on critical literacy is not easy for these teachers. They are uncertain how far to take the critical as more important to overall comprehension and any trade off of their traditional mode of teaching requires them to focus on the reflective aspects of literacy. Taking into account the impact of colonialism and globalisation on education illustrates the dilemma of student teachers in adopting radical processes to sensitise their students not having been trained in it themselves.

The data provides deep insights into the need for developing critical literacy as well as understanding the notions of power dynamics in developing the ‘critical awareness’ of students. It explains that teachers comprehend power dynamics and often feel a sense of uncertainty when engaging with critical literacy. To conclude, as the data illustrated, often presented as an ‘agentive activity’ (Dozier, Johnston & Rogers, 2006, p. 162), critical literacy becomes significant when understood as contextually determined.

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<sup>i</sup> The interview data is presented as raw data and language peculiarities are maintained.