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Silenced by the gaps? The status of critical literacy in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence

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Key words: critical literacy, Scotland, critical reading, curriculum.

Abstract

Critical literacy foregrounds the relationship between language and power by focusing on how texts work and in whose interests (Luke 2012: 5). It is highlighted as an "important skill" within Scotland's national educational framework for 3-18 year-olds, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), yet what the concept means is far from clear for policy users (Scottish Government 2009e). Using a lens that draws from critical discourse analysis, critical content analysis (Luke 2001; Beach *et al* 2009; Fairclough 2010), and Ball's method of policy analysis (2015), this paper finds that the term 'critical literacy' has been applied inconsistently and incoherently within key CfE documentation, including the frequent and inaccurate conflation of critical literacy with critical reading and critical thinking. We argue that the CfE's use of 'critical literacy' is something of a misnomer, given that the version presented is an amalgamation of literacy-related competences that draw largely from psychological and not from socio-political perspectives of literacy. This is a missed opportunity in terms of the Scottish Government's stated commitment to social justice in policy terms (Scottish Executive 2000; Scottish Government 2016), not forgetting the powerful benefits that a critically literate stance could bring to Scotland's learners in this time of communicative change and challenge. While this paper provides a contextualised view of the ways in which the term 'critical literacy' has been incorporated into educational policy in Scotland, its implications go beyond national boundaries.

Scotland's educational context

Scotland's national educational framework, The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), has been recognized by the OECD as an "ambitious and important departure that has sought to develop a coherent 3-18 curriculum around capacities and learning, rather than school subjects, taking a different approach to assessment and national prescription from what was in place before" (2015: 37). The previous Scottish curriculum, known as the 5-14, was said to be over-crowded and lacking in relevance by the time of its reform. A public consultation about the future of Scottish education, known as the 2002 "National Debate", fed into longer-term educational policy planning, leading to the eventual implementation of the CfE in 2010.

Underpinned by "wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity", the same aspirational values that are inscribed on the Scottish Parliamentary mace (Scottish Executive 2004; Priestley & Humes 2010: 351), the stated purpose of the CfE is to develop young people as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (Scottish Government 2009h). Learners build these key capacities through engagement with a developmentally-staged sequence of Experiences and Outcomes that stretch across eight curricular areas. The CfE highlights literacy, numeracy and health and well-being as of centrally importance to all, meaning that practitioners are also held responsible for developing and evidencing these three subjects across the curriculum. Given that critical literacy is included within the overall description of literacy across learning (Scottish Government 2009b), developing critical literacy is the responsibility of every teacher.

Yet the CfE has also been described as a "mastery curriculum dressed up in the language of a process model" (Priestley & Humes 2010: 357); a contradictory mix that has caused tensions in practice (ibid) and some professional disquiet (Priestley & Minty 2013). These structural issues are exacerbated by the CfE's deliberately "ahistorical and atheoretical" design (Priestley & Humes 2010:358), an approach that leaves key terms, such as critical literacy, loose and undefined within the documentation. As Priestley has noted, this denies users "the conceptual tools to make sense of policy, [in order to] reconcile it with local needs" (2010: 23-24). Describing the effects of atheoretical curricular design in far broader terms, Street has observed that it allows dominant cultural and ideological assumptions to be disguised and presented as neutral and universal (2003: 77).

Priestley has also raised concerns about the trend towards "proselytizing rhetoric" (2010: 26) that can be found in the "new breed" of national curricula, that includes the CfE (2010: 23). Policy makers' use of such a tool can contribute to the masking of ideological goals, especially when coupled with an atheoretical design. Taken together, Street and Priestley's comments show how the absence of theory makes it harder for users to *make policy mean* within their specific contexts, while also making it far easier for policy officials to sidestep awkward questions about the inherently selective and ideological nature of curriculum design.

Framed by these understandings, this paper offers an analysis of critical literacy's presentation within Scotland's CfE and considers the implications of its vagueness. The documents under examination pertain specifically to the delivery of English teaching and literacy across the curriculum. Discussed in more detail below, briefly, they are:

- two separate Principles and Practice papers: *Literacy and English* (Scottish Government 2009b) and *Literacy Across Learning* (Scottish Government 2009c).

- the Literacy and English Experiences and Outcomes (Scottish Government 2009d) and Literacy Experiences and Outcomes (Scottish Government 2009e).

Before moving onto this analysis, an overview of recent critical literacy scholarship is offered. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between critical literacy, critical reading and critical thinking, with an especial focus on the fact that these terms can be misapplied, confused and conflated. Finally, the CfE's construction of critical literacy is analysed, with examples.

Critical literacy: context and background

Much has been written about critical literacy in recent decades, with scholars including Barbara Comber (2013) and Allan Luke (2012) providing thorough accounts of its origins, development and uptake in classroom contexts around the world. Its research profile has increased too, with a significant increase in the number of articles published about critical literacy observed between the 1990s and the start of the current decade (Rogers & O'Daniels 2015: 72). This does not mean, however, that the status of critical literacy is settled or can be taken for granted. Critical literacy's central concern with the relationship between language use and power makes it inherently political and therefore a *risky* pedagogic stance for a teacher to take up or for a national government to encourage within classrooms. Jennifer O'Brien has described the "vehement" hostility of teacher colleagues towards her development of critical literacies in the early years and their perception of her work as invalid, destructive and manipulative (2001: 165). Critical literacy has been "officially squelched" (Luke 2018:76) out of the Australian National Curriculum following a negative campaign led by neoliberal politicians and antagonistic press that labelled critical literacy as "a new form of politically correct indoctrination" (ibid). According to Janks

and Vasquez (2011), the changing demands of 21st century communication have caused some notable literacy educators to feel critical literacy has "passed its sell-by date" (2011: 2).

Against this backdrop, advocates of critical literacies continue to advance the project along new lines. Writing together, Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019) have proposed critical literacy as "a way of being and doing" that supports diverse learners, issues of social justice and equity. Janks (2017) has called for a refocusing on the moral consequences of the questions raised by critical literacy education, including what it means to be socially just because: "we still have to decide whether to take up the positions on offer, together with their attendant interests. This is a moral decision as not all interests contribute to a more just social order" (2017: 32). Freebody has re-emphasized the "positive thesis at the heart of critical literacy", that makes it possible for "dissensus" to become a core and valued social practice (2017: online) instead of something to be schooled out of learner in the early years.

National organizations have picked up the critical literacy mantle too. In the face of "changing political and media climates", members of the US National Council of Teachers of English have resolved to promote pedagogies that support "civic and critical literacy' and to "support classroom practices that examine and question uses of language in order to discern inhumane, misinformative, or dishonest discourse and arguments" (NCTE 2019: 2). In the UK, an All-Party Parliamentary Committee report on the phenomenon of fake news has advocated the teaching of critical literacy skills to all children (National Literacy Trust 2018).

Yet the "utterly contingent" nature of criticality (Luke 2012: 9), means there can be no one way of 'doing' critical literacy (Simpson 1996; Comber 2013). Instead, critical literacy is understood to be an embodied stance, attitude or disposition (Garcia *et al* 2018) that informs the act of meaning-making from any text. While many approaches are possible, most 'critical literacies' draw from a set of commonly-held assumptions and increasingly well-formed traditions (Rogers & O'Daniels 2015) that are often explicitly rooted in Paulo Freire's theoretical principles. These key understandings include the recognition of literacy as a social and cultural construct (Street 1984; Luke 1994; Cook-Gumperz 1986); the understanding that literacy's functions and uses are never politically neutral (Kamler & Comber 1997;

Janks 2010); and the acknowledgment that the meanings constructed by texts are always ideological and bound up with (im)balances of power (Street 1984; Kamler & Comber 1997; Garcia *et al* 2018). Aukerman describes a critically literate stance as one that invests readers with a sense of "textual authority", that recognises the multiplicity of perspectives, the contingency of interpretation as well as the ideological nature of texts and reading (2012: 43). Behrman's description of critical literacy as "a theory with implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology" (2006: 490), captures the attitudinal and personal nature of such a stance, while also gesturing towards the dangers associated with the reduction of critical literacy to a method or checklist (Comber 2003; Garcia *et al* 2018).

As this last point suggests, making critical literacy mandatory via a national curriculum, for example, heightens the risk of the concept becoming denatured and reduced to a 'tick box' process with a guaranteed outcome (Aukerman 2012). Zacher Pandya has described one commercial package's attempt to standardize critical literacy and inquiry as an "ill-fated endeavor" in which students' authentic and "difficult" questions about texts were rejected if they did not conform to established processes (2012: 21). Conversely, Luke has noted that the lack of an "official curriculum definition or even a formal academic/ scholarly doxa" enabled critical literacy to flourish in Australia (Garcia *et al* 2018: 75), albeit temporarily, until moves to greater standardization ensued. At this point, it is worth reinforcing the fact that this paper's focus is on the presentation of critical literacy within CfE documentation and not on the possibilities offered by any commercial packages that Scottish schools may purchase. The next section considers the relationship between critical literacy and the related concepts of critical reading and thinking.

Critical literacy, reading and thinking

Given the similarities between their names, it is not surprising that the term 'critical literacy' gets con-flated with 'critical reading' (Cervetti *et al* 2001; Bonsur Kurki 2015). To explain the differences between them, scholars including Luke (2012) and Cervetti *et al* (2001) have drawn attention to the "liberal-hu-manist" understandings (Luke 2012: 6) that influence critical reading and the critical social theories (Cer-vetti *et al* 2001; Cooper & White 2008) that frame critical literacy.

When considered in relation to critical literacy, critical reading can be understood as a rational and "reasoned approach to identifying author bias" (Luke 2012: 6) that tends to emphasize individualized and affective aspects of readers' responses to texts (Rosenblatt 1986) over the socio-contextual. The term 'critical reading' can also be understood as referring to the *technical skills* associated with higher-order comprehension strategies and textual analysis (Cooper & White 2008: 108). Citing Spache's work from the 1960s, Cervetti *et al* have summarized the instructional goal of critical reading as the development of higher levels of comprehension and interpretation (2001). Under this approach, learners are taught how to investigate sources and make inferences, how to recognize an author's purpose, to distinguish opinion from fact, and to detect propaganda devices.

Closely related to critical reading is critical thinking, an approach that draws from similar theoretical traditions in that it aims to develop "autonomous thinkers who can engage in a constructive scepticism" (Daniel & Auriac 2013: 420). This is done by teaching learners to judge the credibility of sources, to identify the quality of an argument and to defend a point of view (Daniel & Auriac 2013: 418). Many children in Scotland will encounter critical thinking in the classroom via their teachers' use of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1956), an approach that encourages learners to reflect on thinking processes via an organized sequence of cognitive categories. Learners ascend a hierarchical and compartmentalized ladder of 'thinking skills, including remembering, understanding, analysis and evaluation, often according to teacher perceptions of ability. Like critical reading, critical thinking is characterized by its localized and singular nature (Bonsor Kurki 2015: 16), given its emphasis on the individual rather than the collective.

There are clear overlaps between critical literacy, critical reading and critical thinking that are mutually beneficial. All three position students as active meaning-makers; place a focus on textual analysis (Cervetti *et al* 2001) and recognize the cultural resources that individual learners bring with them to the classroom (Luke 2012: 7) although the extent of this can vary. Where critical literacy diverges and extends away from critical reading and thinking is through its explicit engagement with issues of power and social critique (Garcia *et al* 2018). According to Comber, critical literacy can take learners past "spot-the-stereotype-on-the-page" type exercises (2001: 171), towards a deeper-seated critical consciousness or recognition of the political, social and linguistic circumstances that generate and structure such representations.

As Bonsor Kurki has noted, thinking critically can support the development of critical literacy (2015: 16) but this does not mean that critical thinking - or reading - can be equated with critical literacy. In other words, the terms are not synonyms and should not be used interchangeably.

Yet such overlaps between approaches and terminology make it easy for the nuanced nature of theoretical distinctions to become lost in translation from theory into policy or practice. Labels can be used interchangeably; powerful theoretical concepts can become toothless. While policy makers could avoid such nebulousness by systematically grounding terminology in theory (Priestley 2010), it may not always be ideologically expedient for them to be less vague. As discussed below, the frequent intermingling of 'critical literacy' with 'critical reading' and 'critical thinking' within the CfE is significant for it not only robs critical literacy of its potential as a mean for encouraging pedagogies *for* social transformation (Cervetti *et al* 2001) and social justice, but it does so at a time when such approaches are heralded as vital by the Scottish Government in its other policy spheres (Scottish Executive 2000; Scottish Government 2016).

Methodology

While both authors acknowledge the significance of Freire's influence on their initial understandings of critical literacy, their current practices draw from more recent socio-cultural developments in the broader field of literacy studies, including the conceptualization of literacies as a plural, diverse and fluid "ensemble of communicative practices" (Rowsell & Pahl 2015: 14) that can be embodied and performed as well as logo-centric (Johnson & Vasudevan 2012). As qualified school teachers, both authors have *enacted* the CfE in Scottish primary and secondary settings and have an awareness of what literacy can look like in different schools and departments. As teacher educators, both authors recognize the different and sometimes contradictory versions of literacy that our students encounter during their training and the impact of this on their eventual practice. As such, we take up Ball's *policy as text* position (2015) and recognize the subjective interpretations of the CfE we bring both consciously and unconsciously to this policy analysis. Yet, as Ball suggests, we also recognize the impossibility of predicting how other practitioners might act upon the same material (1993:12). To occupy Ball's *policy as discourse* position (2015), in other words, "the ways in which teacher subjects and subject positions are formed and reformed by policy" (2015:

307), we draw Beach *et al*'s approach to critical content analysis (2009) alongside the principles of Critical discourse analysis (Luke 2001; Fairclough 2010). Critical discourse analysis makes it possible to highlight the social and cultural practices operationalized by language use and the ideological views privileged. As the "instruments and effects of discourse" (Ball 2015: 307), policy texts represent how things are to be done. By reading the CfE against the major tenets in critical literacy scholarship, this paper offers a contextualized view of how critical literacy is constructed by Scottish policy.

Text selection

The CfE policy texts selected for analysis are all those that make explicit reference to the phrase 'critical literacy'. Interestingly, these references occur within documents that directly relate to the teaching of literacy and English, a point that raises questions about the CfE authors' perception of critical literacy's portability and relevance outside of the traditional literacy space. Two of the texts selected are from the Principles and Practice range of documents for practitioners: *Literacy and English* (Scottish Government 2009b) and *Literacy Across Learning* (Scottish Government 2009c). The Principles and Practice papers are short, subject specific documents that cover aspects of learning and teaching, assessment, progression and suggest possible inter-connections between curricular areas (Scottish Government 2009a). As such, they provide an ideological account of the sorts of learning – and learners – that should ideally be 'produced' through engagement with the curriculum.

The Principles and Practice papers are to be read alongside the developmentally-sequenced experiences and outcomes for each curricular area. Under scrutiny here are the Literacy and English Experiences and Outcomes (Scottish Government 2009d) and the Literacy Experiences and Outcomes (Scottish Government 2009e). There is, as Priestley and Humes have identified, a "definite behaviorist slant" to the format of these documents that is obscured by the use of first person "I can…" statements (2010: 353), not forgetting the problematic assumptions made by the schematization of learners' academic development according to stage. Writing about the introduction of outcomes statements into the South African curriculum, Prinsloo and Janks note that the function of such instructions is to explicitly encode the knowledge, values and skills necessary for success (2002: 31). Priestley has blamed policy authors' "intellectual

cherry picking" for the incompatible match of the Outcomes' instrumental approach with the broader, aspirational view of learning articulated by the overarching Four Capacities (2010: 27).

Critical literacy in Scotland's CfE

It is our understanding that previous Scottish school curricula have not explicitly mentioned critical literacy: the CfE is the first. This is not to say that critical literacy is an unfamiliar concept in the wider Scottish education community. Edinburgh, Scotland's capital city, is home to the Adult Learning Project, which was established in 1979 and still delivers adult and community education using Freirean inspired methods. (Kirkwood & Kirkwood 2011). The focus of this next section is on the construction of critical literacy in and across the spread of CfE policy texts introduced above.

According to *Literacy Across Learning: Principles and Practice*, "the important skills of critical literacy" can enable learners to "work out what trust they should place on information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them" (Scottish Government 2009b: 2). As this citation indicates, the phrase 'critical literacy' appears close to the start of this document. In fact, the phrase is used four times within the five pages of this short but important text. Given this example of quite prominent usage, it could be inferred that 'critical literacy' is a seen as a desirable stance for learners in Scotland to adopt. Indeed, it might also seem reasonable to assume that the phrase's inclusion is somehow indicative of an ideological orientation towards "understanding the relationship between texts, meaning-making and power in order to undertake transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order" (Janks & Vasquez cited Janks, Vazquez & Comber 2019: 302). However, in the next section, we discuss why this interpretation is untenable.

Principles and Practice papers

As mentioned above, two of the Principles and Practice papers relate to literacy. The first, *Literacy Across Learning* (Scottish Government 2009c) details how teachers are to support the development of language and literacy in all curricular areas. The second, *Literacy and English* (Scottish Government 2009b) specifically targets the teaching of English and literacy as a discrete subject area. These two Principles and Practice papers overlap in many respects, including a shared "future-proof" definition of literacy as:

the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and in learning through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful. (Scottish Government 2009c: 1)

A closer inspection of this definition reveals some curiously mixed messages about literacy in theoretical terms, not least the fixing of the definition by attempting to future-proof it. By portraying literacy as a "set of skills", the CfE authors embody aspects of Street's autonomous approach (2003), a model that presents literacy as a universally-achievable set of technical skills that will bring cognitive and economic benefits for all, regardless of specific circumstances and existing practices. Under this view, it is the individuals who are positioned as deficient if skills are not mastered; a move that enables dominant ideological constructions of literacy to remain and flourish.

Yet parts of the same CfE definition appear to recognize literacy as ideological, or as "rooted in a particular world-view" (Street 2003: 78), given the plurality of possibilities indicated by *"different forms of language and the range of texts"* and the associated inference that literacy practices will always vary according to context, local knowledge and existing ways of being. Individuals are encouraged to "engage fully", words which sound welcoming and inclusive. Consequently, such a perspective *could* be read as proposing a broader view of literacy that embraces learners' diverse funds of knowledge (Gonzalez *et al* 2005) or 'ways with words' (Heath 1983). Sustaining this interpretation much further is a challenge, given the final phrase, "*which society values and finds useful",* and the implication that only certain forms of literacy will be welcomed by this singular and undefined 'society'. From this, we can infer that what is included within the CfE documents about literacy reflects exactly what 'skills' will be valued and found useful by this idealized and ideological Scottish society.

Similarly mixed messages are found throughout the documentation in relation to the concept of critical literacy. On the first page of the six-page *Literacy Across Learning* document, the terms 'critical thinking' and 'critical literacy' are referred to within the same paragraph as desirable skills for learners to develop (Scottish Government 2009b: 1). Yet the terms are not explained and there is no attempt made to discuss

the differences that distinguish the two concepts, meaning that the terms could seem interchangeable to someone unversed in these particular aspects of theory. A slightly more detailed account of what is meant by "the important skills of critical literacy" (Scottish Government 2009b: 2) is provided on the second page of the same document:

> 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.
> (Scottish Government 2009b: 2)

As these lines make clear, being critically literate is linked with a learner's ability to assess a text for its reliability or trustworthiness through the detection of persuasive techniques or language intended to 'influence'. There is no acknowledgement of how such competencies could also be used to explore questions of ideology, power and issues of social equity in the interests of wider social justice (Comber 2003). Such absences suggest that the CfE's version of 'critical literacy' has more in common with the traditions of critical reading discussed above. This can be seen through the privileging of the investigation of sources ['*work out what trust they should place on the information*'], and the recognition that authors might use rhetorical devices to suit their purpose ['*identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them*'], but without any reference to the power dynamics inherent within the structures of the text (Cervetti *et al* 2001) or the conditions surrounding its production.

The idea of *progression* in critical literacy is outlined a page or so later in the same document. According to this, critical literacy can be developed when:

> children move from dealing with straightforward information towards analysing, evaluating and being aware of the trust they should place on evidence. (Scottish Government 2009b: 4)

Once again, critical literacy is equated with the ability to assess evidence for its trustworthiness as well as with the skills of analysis and evaluation. There is also the assumption that critical literacy is best suited for older learners, given the suggested trajectory that moves learners forward from straightforward comprehension in the early stages towards the acquisition of more complex, analytical competencies in later years. This idea is reinforced visually in the Experiences and Outcomes for reading (under the heading of 'understanding, analysing and evaluating'), which illustrate how analysis and evaluation are to evolve developmentally over time (see Figure 1). Learners move on from spotting the difference between facts and opinions in the First level, to recognizing persuasive techniques and a text's reliability in the middle years of secondary schooling (Fourth level). Yet, it is dispiriting to note that children in the Early stage (usually aged between 3-6 years) are not expected to demonstrate any sort of analytical skills or understanding, given that the box is left entirely blank.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

As Comber and O'Brien have observed, treating critical literacy as a "developmental phenomenon" reserved for the oldest or most able learners is dangerous (2000: 157) because it positions the youngest learners as passive at a time when they are learning to become literate. A growing body of research shows that very young children can negotiate the complexities of critical and analytical practices in the early years of schooling (O'Brien 1994; Vasquez 1994, 2009; Leland *et al* 2005). Treating critical literacy developmentally also negates the fact that power relations are already an integral part of many young children's everyday lives, given that most come to school with complex and sophisticated understandings of "what's fair and what isn't" (Comber 2001: 170) drawn from the dynamics of their home lives and cultural experiences, including popular culture. By ignoring this existing knowledge and by denying the youngest learners the opportunity to explore how language intersects with power from the outset of their formal schooling, the CfE appears to offer its youngest learners a "simplistic and reductive" (Comber 2001: 177) experience of literacy, including critical literacy, despite the policy rhetoric that appears to suggest otherwise.

Critical literacy is explicitly mentioned again in a paragraph that is repeated in both of the Principles and Practice papers (Scottish Government 2009 b, c). Here, the reader is directed towards the 'finding and using information' sub-section of the Literacy and English Experiences and Outcomes for reading, where it is said the "critical literacy skills" can be found:

the sections on *finding and using information* include, in reading, critical literacy skills; while the *understanding, analysing and evaluating* statements encourage progression in understanding of texts, developing not only literal understanding but also the higher order skills. (Scottish Government 2009c: 2)

As this indicates, critical literacy is explicitly linked with the skills developed under the *finding and using information* outcomes for learning rather than those for *understanding, analysing and evaluating*. This does seem like an unusual match, given critical literacy's aim to position children as text analysts and critics (Freebody and Luke 1999; Comber 2001), and not forgetting the CfE's own position, already discussed above, that relates progression in critical literacy to learners' increasing proficiency in textual analysis and evaluation. While it could be argued that the language used here is vague enough for this not to matter - for surely an individual needs to be able to *find and use information* in order to *understand, evaluate and analyse* - the poor quality of the signposting deployed within curricular materials obfuscates the meaning of critical literacy even further.

This is further illustrated when the reader turns, as instructed, to the *finding and using information* sub-section of the Experiences and Outcomes for reading (Scottish Government 2009d: 8), to discover the outcomes shown below in Figure 2. The 'skills' highlighted as 'critical literacy' by this section require learners to demonstrate they can use their developing knowledge of different text types to help them collect, sort and use information for different purposes, including note taking (see Figure 2).

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

While these skills might support the development of learners' critically literate attitudes in a broad sense, they do not 'stand out' as core critically literate or even analytical attributes. Indeed, it is the next sub-section of the Experiences and Outcomes table, *understanding, analysing and evaluating,* (which can be found directly below f*inding and using information*), that seems to contain many - if not all - of the attributes that were identified as relating to 'critical literacy' in the Principles and Practice document (Scottish Government 2009c: 2). As Figure 3 illustrates, these include the recognition of facts and opinions, the use of language to persuade or influence and the ability to assess a source's reliability.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

It is both curious and frustrating to find no explicit connection between the literacy competencies promoted in the *understanding, arguing and evaluating* section and "the important skills of critical literacy" (Scottish Government 2009b: 2), regardless of whether they can actually be described as 'critical literacy' or not. There are only two more references to the term 'critical literacy' within the *Principles and Practice: Literacy and English* document, both of which occur within the same paragraph under the sub-heading: "Links with other areas of the curriculum" (Scottish Government 2009c). The reader is told:

> there are close links between the expressive arts and creative writing, and social studies
> and critical literacy… In numeracy, information handling outcomes link clearly to *the*
> *critical literacy outcomes* where learners are asked to assess the reliability of information
> (Scottish Government 2009c: 4, italics added).

Taking the latter part of this extract first, the somewhat buried reference to "critical literacy outcomes" is indeed welcome in that it foregrounds the fact that a critically literate stance can be used to inform the interpretation of any text, including those involving numerical information. Yet, once again, there is little detail offered other than that both can involve the assessment of a text or source for its reliability – the limited view also offered elsewhere. As for the suggested inter-curricular link between critical literacy and social studies, there are no reciprocal references in the Social Studies Principles and Practice paper or

Experiences and Outcomes, with the same true of Numeracy and Mathematics. Some subject areas identify the development of *critical thinking* as a desirable outcome [see Social Studies (Scottish Government 2009f) and Science (Scottish Government 2009g)] but *critical literacy* seems to be a term used only inside the literacy-related documentation.

Conclusions and implications

Overall, this analysis has raised several key issues. At best, it suggests that the phrase 'critical literacy' has been haphazardly or incorrectly applied as collective term - a sort of a metaphorical 'catch-all' - for the analytical competences and critical reading skills deemed necessary for readers in 21st century by the anonymous authors of Scotland's policy documents. After all, it is common for the words 'literacy' or 'literate' to be used to indicate competence or knowledge within a certain field, such as when someone claims to be 'computer literate', by which they mean able to operate aspects of technology with reasonable levels of proficiency, so could a similar logic have been applied to literacy? Perhaps this reading reflects our shared experiences of the CfE as text, or, to use Ball's words, how we have *coped* with policy imposed from top down (2015: 307), both as teachers and teacher educators. To assume that the incoherent presentation of critical literacy in the CfE is the result of a mistake or a simple lack of understanding might help to explain - or excuse – the confusing effects of policy upon an individual's practice, but it also ignores the ideological power structures at work.

To take up Ball's *policy as discourse* position (2015), it is necessary to not only reflect on how the CfE constructs critical literacy, but how teachers (and learners) are constructed in relation to it also. Characterized by obfuscation, conflation and dead ends, the CfE's presentation of critical literacy bears little resemblance to the concept that many readers of this journal will recognize. It is not rooted in critical social theory; is not focused on ideology critique, nor is it committed to an exploration of the power relations that are embedded in language and become operationalized by its use. The only point in common is the name – and even that is used inconsistently. As this analysis has shown, what counts as 'critical literacy' can be more accurately described as critical reading or thinking. This calls to mind Priestley and Humes's earlier critique of the CfE's design as a "mastery curriculum dressed up in the language of a process model" (Priestley & Humes 2010: 357), given that here we find psychological and skills-based constructions of

literacy "dressed up" in the metalanguage of critical literacy. Such internal inconsistencies could suggest policy authors' lack of attention to detail, but they could also be read as duplicitous, as the 'passing off' of one concept as another so that practitioners believe they are practicing critical literacy if they follow the curriculum. As a related aside, both authors have separately engaged in discussions with class teachers who claim to "do" critical literacy because they "do Bloom's". By conflating skills-based and psychological constructions of literacy with critical literacy, policy authors have effectively promoted a far less problematic – a less critical – set of practices *as* critical literacy. Under the view of criticality promoted by the CfE, inquiries remain centered at the level of the text and the individual, focusing on the learner's ability to identity aspects of language use, such as bias or persuasive language. Under a critically literate view, learners are encouraged to look at the text but also beyond it, to engage with the social, cultural and political conditions of its production, the perspectives it conveys, as well as those it silences, and to imagine its reconstruction. The neutered view of critical literacy presented in the CfE means that learners and teachers are not encouraged to ask hard questions about ideology and power, possibly because of the destabilizing effect they have on the status quo. By failing to encourage such practices, the CfE also fails to provide learners with powerful opportunities to fully develop as responsible citizens who might be able to contribute effectively to some of the urgent social issues facing our planet and communities "in powerful and pleasurable ways and creating spaces to achieve a better life for all" (Vasquez, Janks and Comber 2019: 308).

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