Literature Review: Use Of Multi-perspective Picture-books Tool In Promoting Critical Literacy

Literature Review

Critical literacy has featured heavily in much of the educational literature in recent years, with an upsurge in research into this topic (Luke, 2014 ; Rogers and Daniels, 2015, citied in Stone, 2019). The aim of this literature review is to establish what critical literacy looks likes in an upper primary setting and the extent to which multi-perspective picture-books can be used as an effective tool in promoting critical literacy. The first section of the review will briefly look at 21st-century literacy [and what it now means to be literate], then move on to the theory of critical literacy, refereeing to various theorists and researchers to review its importance in primary education. The second section will look at specific studies that have been carried out, thus taking the topic of critical literacy from theory into practice. Lastly, the literature review will focus on the pedagogy of multi-perspective picture-books and the evidence that discusses their effectiveness as a tool for promoting critical literacy in upper primary education.

21st-century literacy

The term ‘literacy’ is scattered liberally throughout educational literature and research, with many opposing definitions and teaching approaches (Harris & Hodges, 1995 ; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001 ; Janks, 2010). Many of these definitions have focused on being literate as having “the ability to read and write at an appropriate level of fluency” (Blake & Hanley, 1995, p 89). More recently, social theorists and literacy educators have argued that literacy can no longer be defined as this way and that our definition must also incorporate the rapid growth of new technologies, students’ differing linguistics and the diversity of life experiences and knowledge they possess (Comber, Janks & Vasquez, 2019). Unsworth et al (2002) argues that before they begin their school journey, children have already “critically and functionally” (Unsworth, 2002 p ; Mackey 1994; Smith et al. 1996) engaged with electronic and conventional texts, thus bringing to the classroom varying and diverse levels of social and cultural capital as discussed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1995, cited in Jordan et. al., 2007) and what Thomson refers to as their “virtual schoolbags” (Thomson, 2002, p 1). Unsworth further claims that, as educators, we must pay attention to how children interact with literacy on a daily basis and consider the skills and knowledge they bring to the classroom. Where they come from and the values, they hold can have an influence on how they read texts in all aspects of their life (Unsworth, 2001). Anstey discusses how literacy educators have created the term ‘multiliteracies’ as a way of addressing the rapid growth of technology, the diverse society in which we live and ultimately the globalisation of the transforming world before us (Anstey, 2001, p 446). Rini echoes, that as educators we have the responsibility to primary children to give them the tools to be “active recipients” (Rini, 2018, p 234) in analysing and questioning information in order to negotiate the world around them. Freire was one of the first scholars to dispute literacy as simply being the teaching of a skill set required to be able to read (Janks, 2010) ; he advocated for a more critical reflection on this process, emphasising that “reading the word and reading the world” cannot be separated. By reading the words one is in fact reading different versions of the world and by doing this are subconsciously analysing one’s

own place within it (Freire, 1985, p 18). In recent years, there is a move to understand literacy in holistic terms where literacy is seen as 'a social, critical and interpretive process rather than a skill or a set of skills' (Wallace, 2003, p 4).

Critical literacy: What is it and why do we need it?

Educational researchers and much of the literature discuss teaching critical literacy as a theory or perspective that involves teaching students to identify biases, inequalities and power dynamics in the texts they engage with (Stevens & Bean, 2007; Reisboard, 2013; Skerrett, 2014; Stone, 2017). Simply put, McDaniel argues the critical literacy can be defined as “questioning the status quo” (McDaniels, 2006, p 5) Critical literacy theory recognises that texts are formed through cultural and political influences and, therefore never contain neutral facts or ideas: there is always someone’s perspective being delivered, expressing their own beliefs regarding issues such as power, gender, race (Behrman, 2006; Reisboard, 2013, p 469; Rini, 2018). A critical literacy approach calls for questioning and critical assessment of the relationships between language use, social systems and power; and when readers take this stance they develop a critical consciousness that allows them to read the meaning behind the text (Stevens & Bean, 2007; Farrar & Stone 2019). Being faced with new texts or contradictory information allows children to become more conscious of their own place in the world and “confronting their own values in the production and reception of language” (Behrman, 2006, p 1) helps foster a search for justice and equity. Stone believes that critical literacy is “transformative” and is essential in allowing children to become agents of change in an “unjust and unfair” world (Stone, 2017, p 1). Hall echoes this claim, stating that “to become ever more critically aware of one’s own world leads to one’s greater control over it” (Hall, ????). Hall & Piazza emphasise the importance of empowering children to take a critical stance when reading texts and agree that giving them the tools to do so has become a fundamental part of literacy education (Hall & Piazza, 2008).

A critical literacy approach encourages readers to look deeper into a text through a more critical lens and to examine its social and cultural implications by asking questions such as ‘Whose interests are served by this text?’, ‘Whose voice is not being heard ?’, ‘What view of the world is this text representing?’ (Janks et al., 2013, p 8). Janks additionally claims that because the injustices we face in society are not “predetermined” (Janks, 2014., p 349), but are however, the consequence of our mutual actions or lack of actions, this highlights the importance of children to taking a critical approach and understanding that “practices can be transformed”, in however small a way (Janks. 2014, p349). Janks argues, that critiquing the text should not be the conclusion, but merely the starting point that leads to “reconstruction and redesign” (Janks, 2014, p349) whether it be inside the classroom walls or beyond.

Vasquez maintains that critical literacy does not necessarily consist of taking a negative standpoint and that the word ‘critical’ is concerned with merely looking at a topic or issue through a different lens or from differing perspectives (Vasquez, 2013). Janks agrees and claims that raising human consciousness is the fundamental aspect of critical literacy, but further states that this is the key to allowing children to “interrogate our practices in order to change them” (Janks, 2010, p 349).

Although Critical literacy seems to be a common phrase and widely acknowledged as a crucial component of 21st Century literacies, some of the research has recognised and documented

this effort to be “artificial”(Dixson & Dingus, 2007; Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). One reason for this assertion is that teachers do not feel prepared or confident enough to educate children on how to navigate or indeed connect with strategies and resources in this area (Crawford et al, 2019). In order to give educators more confidence and experience, Ibrahim believes that more training is required for both student teachers as well as in-service teachers (Ibrahim, 2016). Interestingly, within the curriculum for excellence, critical literacy is addressed as being an important skill that children must acquire within the curriculum (Education Scotland, 2004). However, the GTCS have raised concerns at the lack of knowledge and understanding of critical literacy in Scotland and that it is not clearly ‘explained or theorised’ for practitioners (Scottish Government, 2004). Stone further argues that

The literature also highlights that some teacher educators are using an “add-on approach” (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005) to their literacy practice. Vasquez argues that critical literacy should not be seen as an “add-on” or a subject that we chose to learn for a set period but a conscious stance that is embedded into daily practice (Vasquez, 2000, p14). If we encourage children to read the world through the everyday texts they come across, we will inspire them to “read their world with a critical eye” (Comber, Janks, Vasquez, 2019, p 306).

Luke believes that critical literacy should be an attitude or disposition as opposed to a set criterion of skills or techniques, and at the core of critical literacy is understanding relationships between representation and reality. In a world of conflicting sources and various textual versions and representations, critical literacy needs to be the catalyst for developing curious and sceptical minds (Luke, 2012).

Critical Literacy from Theory to Practice

A variety of classroom-based studies have been carried out in schools on the effectiveness of critical literacy (Farrar, 2017). According to Comber and Cormack critical literacy should be formed differently depending on the classroom setting in which it is taking place (Comber & Cormack, ????). The diversity of life experiences and the real issues in the classroom and beyond are what should influence critical literacy practice. Further emphasising that “critical literacy should look, feel and sound different in different contexts.” (Vasquez, Janks & Comber, 2019, p 300). Luke argued that it is not only important to focus on the socio-political and cultural features of a text but also provide the “technical resources for analysing how texts work” (Luke, 2013, p 145). There are also a number of frameworks available that describe critical literacy: Luke and Freebody’s (1999) is one model that outlines a framework for the teaching of reading from a critical literacy perspective using four key parts (Navander, 2019). Comber believes that this model has played an active role in promoting critical literacy in many educational establishments worldwide (Comber et al, 2019), However, Vasquez argues that although educators are reasonably effective is supporting children as code breakers, text participants and text users it is the forth role as a text analyst that is has been less effective (Vasquez, 2000). Vasquez asserts that critical literacy should be “constructed organically” (Vazques, et al, 2019) by using the “critical incidents” that happen in the daily life of the class. She used an example of her class questioning why a vegetarian option was not being served for school lunches when one of the children in the class was indeed a vegetarian. They consequently wrote a letter to the school canteen inquiring why this was the case and subsequently the actions of the children resulted in an addition of a vegetarian option (Vasques, 2000). O’Neil supports this organic approach and claims that “at the heart of social justice is the realization that things do not have

to continue as they are but can be changed” (O’Neil, 2010). Jones argues that children must be empowered to build upon “deconstruction and reconstruction” to connect to issues of social justice and become agents of change (Jones, 2006). At classroom level, from teachers to weave critical questioning and inclusive learning interactions into the fabric of everyday life (Sandretto & Klenner, 2011).