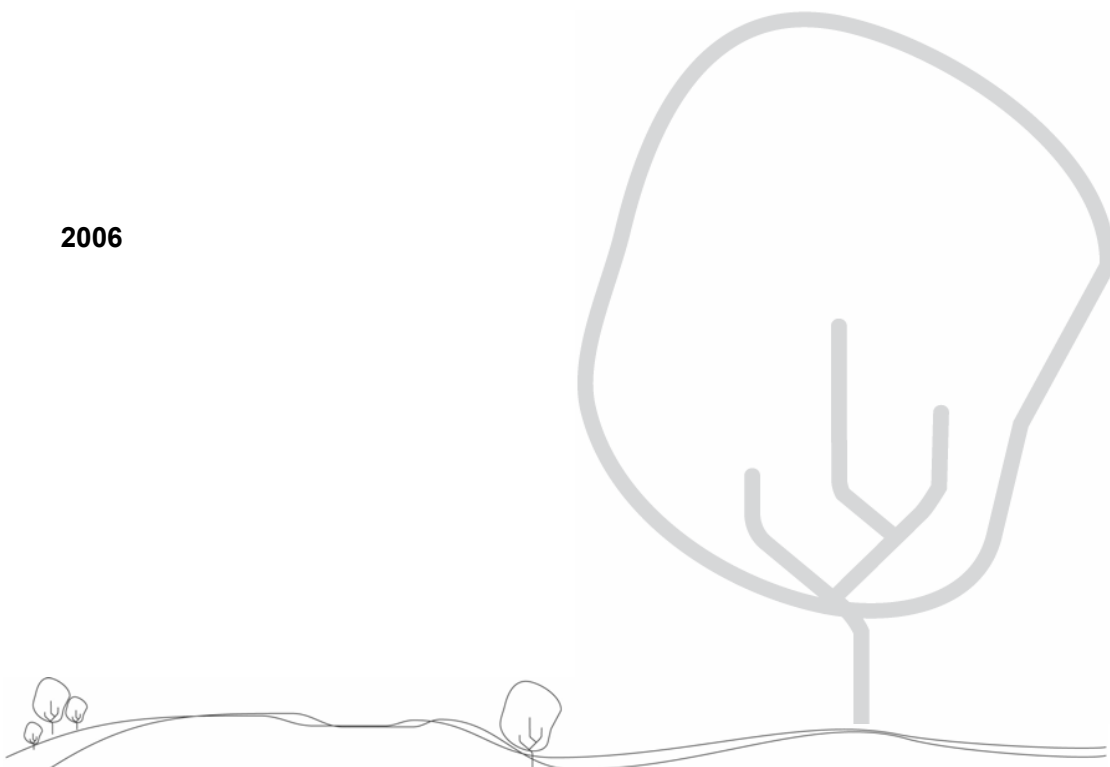# A collaborative self-study into the development of critical-literacy practices: a pilot study

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# Acknowledgements

# 1. Introduction

In preparing current students for the workplace of tomorrow, we are preparing them for the unknown. The rapid advance of science and technology makes it more difficult to define the knowledge that students will need in the future, as what is new today becomes obsolete tomorrow. 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). In other words:

> Learning will increasingly be about creating a kind of person, with kinds of dispositions and orientations to the world, and not just persons who are in command of a body of knowledge. These persons will be able to navigate change and diversity, learn-as-they-go, solve problems, collaborate and be flexible and creative. Promoting these qualities, however, requires significant change to both assessment and curriculum regimes. (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvery, 2003, p. 23)

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. In a digital age, where more and more people have access to the means of producing and authoring texts (for example, online journal writing or blogging), it becomes increasingly important that students are able to consider the effects of texts (Bearne, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

The students who are currently in New Zealand schools will need multiple literacies in order to be successful global citizens in this rapidly changing world (Carrington & Marsh, 2005; The New London Group, 1996). Thus, "[t]he power to synthesise and analyse will be crucial" (Newby, 2005, p. 299) and should be developed in our students. This is where the practice of critical literacy becomes important. By supporting students to become critically literate we are supporting them to go beyond the face value of texts to examine how they are constructed and to consider their effects.

The research team uses the term "critical literacy" to describe ways in which teachers and students can deconstruct traditionally taken-for-granted texts (Lankshear, 1994). From our 2005 research, we 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, 2004a; Vasquez, 2001). Ira Shor (1993) describes critical literacy as:

> Analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context. (p. 32)

Thus, for the 2005 research team, critical literacy involves a focus on the power and complexity of texts.

Research recognises that current teaching practices typically treat texts as unproblematic. This often leads students to taking "an overly-deferent" stance toward texts (Wallace, 1992, p. 62), or accepting texts at face value. The shift in practice in this research project asked students to "resist certain kinds of assaults presented by written texts; to challenge … particular ways of talking about persons, places and events and phenomena and ways of talking to the reader" (Wallace, 1992, p. 61).

During the course of the research, students in participating classes were introduced to critical-literacy strategies that required them to question the purposes of texts, investigate gaps and silences in texts, examine representations in texts, and consider multiple interpretations of texts.

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

# 2. Aims and objectives of the research

This pilot project consisted of collaborative self-study research within the development of critical-literacy practices in primary schools. Two teachers from each of two primary schools in the Dunedin area developed a project 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 commenting 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 that the pilot could be expanded and enhanced in a future research study.

In this research, the participating teachers implemented critical-literacy strategies within guided reading. Guided reading forms an important component of classroom reading programmes (Ministry of Education, 2003). Guided reading lessons consist of teachers working with small groups of students to provide focused instruction in "decoding, making meaning, and thinking critically" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 96). 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, particularly 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 how 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. 131–34). 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 within literacy handbooks for teachers, or examined in traditional standardised tests of comprehension.

## Research questions

This project investigated the following research questions with regard to the implementation of critical-literacy strategies, anticipated growth in students' reading comprehension, and the development of the research process:

- What critical-literacy strategies can be most effectively integrated 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 process of collaborative self-study research?

# 3. Research design

## Overview

An important consideration during the development of the research design, as articulated by the participating teachers, was to avoid adding significantly to their workload (the timeline of the project is given in Table 1). 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 teaching episodes, 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 (by utilising teacher release time).

The data-gathering methods contributed to the findings for each research question (the questions and their associated data sources are listed in Table 2). A complete list of the transcripts generated by the project is given in Appendix 8.

Pre-intervention data were collected from:

- all students, through the methods commonly used by the teachers to gauge reading comprehension; and
- one small group per teacher, through videotaped guided reading lessons.

Because of the size of the project, the same small group from each teacher was observed and videotaped for the remainder of the research project (however, the teacher implemented critical-literacy strategies with *all* the students in the class).

In the small groups, three guided reading lessons per teacher, using critical-literacy strategies, were videotaped during the course of the research. Transcripts of these short lessons (15–25 minutes) were prepared to aid collaborative analysis.

Table 1 **Project timeline**

| TERM 1 | TERM 2 | TERM 3 | TERM 4 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2–3 March<br><br>2-day planning and preparation session with entire research team, consisting of:<br>- individual interviews with teachers<br>- engagement with literature<br>- development of teaching strategies using New Zealand resources | Teachers begin to implement critical-literacy strategies within guided reading lessons with all students | 5 August<br><br>Session with entire research team to:<br>- discuss ongoing development of critical-literacy strategies<br>- revisit group definition of critical literacy<br>- review conference proposals & presentations<br>- schedule final videotaping and working days | 19, 20, 25 & 26 October<br><br>1 videotaped guided reading lesson with a critical-literacy strand per teacher |
| Pre-intervention data collected on all students' reading comprehension | Researchers visit participating teachers regularly to assist with implementation of critical-literacy practices | 14–15 September<br>1 videotaped guided reading lessons with a critical-literacy strand per teacher | Post-intervention data collected on *all* students' reading comprehension |
| 23 & 31 March | 15 & 21 June | 14 October | 17, 18, 23, 24 & 25 November |

| TERM 1 | TERM 2 | TERM 3 | TERM 4 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 videotaped guided reading lesson per teacher | 1 videotaped guided reading lesson with a critical-literacy strand per teacher | Research day for analysis of videos | 5-day session with entire research team to:<br>• collaboratively analyse final videos and stimulated recall interview transcripts<br>• examine pre- and post-intervention data on student comprehension<br>• begin to theorise the results<br>• draft reports of results<br>• discuss the research process and their understandings of critical literacy<br>• conduct exit interviews |
| 14–15 April<br>2-day session with entire research team to:<br>• collaboratively analyse pre-intervention lessons<br>• select teaching strategies<br>• prepare for integration within long-term planning | 1 July<br>Research day to analyse videos and prepare conference presentations | | |

Table 2 **Research questions and associated data sources**

| RESEARCH QUESTION | DATA SOURCE |
|---|---|
| What critical -literacy strategies are able to be most effectively integrated within guided reading lessons in the New Zealand context? | Scrapbooks<br>Videotaped lessons<br>Researcher journals |
| What changes can be found in students' ability to relate texts to their lives? | Pre- and post-intervention measures of reading comprehension (running records)<br>Scrapbooks<br>Videotaped lessons<br>Stimulated recall interviews |
| What changes are evident in students' comprehension of texts? | Pre- and post-intervention measures of reading comprehension<br>Scrapbooks<br>Videotaped lessons |
| What are the teachers' experiences of the collaborative self-study research process? | Pre- and post-intervention interviews<br>Audiotaped discussions of research team working days |

The scrapbooks were a data-gathering method suggested by the participating teachers. During the guided reading lessons they used A3-sized scrapbooks to record some of the students' comments made in discussion and brainstorming, thus capturing material that otherwise would be written on a whiteboard and later rubbed off.

The teachers were released from their classrooms for 14 days during the course of the research project to engage in collaborative:

- planning sessions;
- data analysis (using a theoretical framework developed by the research team) of the videotaped guiding reading lessons, both pre-intervention and during the implementation of the critical-literacy strategies;
- examinations of pre- and post-intervention data collected on student comprehension;
- theorising of the results (e.g., Thornley, Parker, Read, & Eason, 2004); and
- drafting of papers for conferences and publication.

Stimulated recall interviews were conducted with the small student groups (Wear & Harris, 1994). These interviews were both audiotaped and videotaped. During the interviews the students had an opportunity to comment on how particular critical-literacy strategies helped or not helped them to engage with the texts in more personal and questioning ways. They were then asked to comment on the strategies used by the teachers, indicate which strategies helped them better understand the texts, and make suggestions on ways that the teachers could further enhance their learning. While stimulated recall interviews have been used in research with teachers (e.g., Calderhead, 1981), their use with student focus groups represented an innovative method in literacy research (see Knobel & Lankshear, 1999, for a discussion of other literacy research methods). Post-intervention data were collected to document the reading comprehension of all students, using the same methods as at the beginning of the project.

At the end of the project the teachers used the final release day to discuss the research process and design, make recommendations for expansion of the project, discuss their understandings of critical literacy and critical-literacy strategies at the end of the project, and chronicle the benefits and challenges of participation in teacher research.

## Relationship development

The researchers, along with the participating teachers, used a number of activities to build and maintain relationships during the course of the project.

Parent information meetings were held at each school early in Term 1. While these meetings were primarily part of the ethical consent process for the project, they also served an important function in establishing relationships with parents and whānau at each school. A babysitter was provided free of charge to look after children so that more parents might be supported to attend. While there no parents actually used this service, the research team has continued the practice into the 2006–2007 project. The information evenings provided a venue for parents to come and meet the researchers, find out about their child's potential involvement in the project, and ask questions.

In the middle of the year the researchers presented a seminar on the project at a staff meeting at each school. These seminars provided an opportunity to update each school on the progress of the research and invite them to participate in the development of a proposal to the TLRI for funding for a 2-year project. These invitations were taken up and the proposal for the 2006–2007 project was successful. Three of the four teachers from the 2005 project have continued into 2006 and five additional teachers have elected to participate from the two schools that took part in the project in 2005.

An important aspect of the research design, which also enhanced the development and maintenance of relationships, was the allocation of working days for the research team. Typically, these days were held in a seminar room close to the university. The project provided morning tea and lunch. The seminar room was comfortable and held all the equipment that the research team needed to work together. The food was delicious and the coffee plentiful. These creature comforts helped create an atmosphere that was conducive to focusing on the work.

## Ethical issues

Ethical consent was obtained through the University of Otago in November of 2004 (reference number 04/180). One advantage of knowing before the end of 2004 that we had been successful in gaining TLRI funding was that we were able to complete the university's ethical approval process before the onset of the project in January 2005 and be ready to begin the research at the beginning of the school year. This enabled the research team to hit the ground running.

The teachers selected a focus group for videotaping, as it was logistically impossible to videotape each reading group for each teacher and then analyse each tape. One child in one of the reading groups was willing to participate in the research, but did not want to be videotaped. We were able to accommodate this by having the student sit out for the lessons that were videotaped. The student concerned was satisfied with this solution.

One difficult ethical issue that we encountered was the University Ethics Committee's emphasis on anonymity, for the participating teacher-researchers in particular. To ensure the anonymity of research participants is a common stipulation in research projects. However, it is particularly difficult to achieve in a research project in which participants are also co-researchers studying their own professional practices (Zeni, 2001). As the participating teacher-researchers are publishing and presenting along with the researchers, they are of course not anonymous; nor are their schools. We have sought to ensure the anonymity of the participating students by removing identifying details, including the name of the teacher, from any excerpts of data presented. In addition, copies of research outputs have been made available at each school. Summaries of research findings have been included in each school's newsletter and the executive summary of this report will be sent home with all participating students in the form of a pamphlet.

# 4.  Findings

## Introduction

One of the key tasks for the research team at the onset of the project was to develop a working definition of critical literacy that could inform the implementation of critical-literacy strategies into guided reading lessons (for a critique of definition, see Sandretto et al., 2006). As Allan Luke (2000) cautions, "It is dangerous to generalise any educational approach from one national/regional and cultural context to another" (p. 449). The research team went through several versions of a definition, and view the definition given below as a work in progress that will continue to grow and evolve with the expanded project in 2006 and 2007. The definition developed out of explicit team discussions during working days, engagement with critical-literacy research and theory, and analysis of the videotaped guided reading lessons. The research team referred to this definition as the "adult" version, as it contained language that we ourselves had struggled to understand.

### Adult definition of critical literacy

At this stage our group's definition of critical literacy is:

We believe that critical literacy for classroom practice involves supporting students to become aware that:

- texts are social constructions;
- texts are not neutral;
- authors draw upon particular discourses (often majority discourses) and assume that readers will be able to draw upon them as well;
- authors make certain conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts, which means that all texts have gaps or silences and particular representations within them; and
- texts then have consequences for how we make sense of ourselves, others, and the world.

For us, another important aspect of critical literacy is supporting students in making connections between texts and their lived experiences.

Teachers and students have particular roles when engaging in the classroom practice of critical literacy. Teachers are responsible for setting up and maintaining a caring and supportive environment in which students respect each other's responses and experiences and can develop greater empathy for others. Teachers are also responsible for modelling a questioning stance towards texts. Students are responsible for contributing to discussions with the understanding that ideas are under consideration, but that critical literacy does not mean critiquing people. Teachers are responsible for assisting students to consider multiple interpretations and readings of texts, rather than to search for the one "right" reading. Finally, teachers are responsible for co-constructing understandings with students by developing a metalanguage of critical literacy.

This definition underpinned the work of the research team as we sought to implement critical-literacy strategies into guided reading lessons.
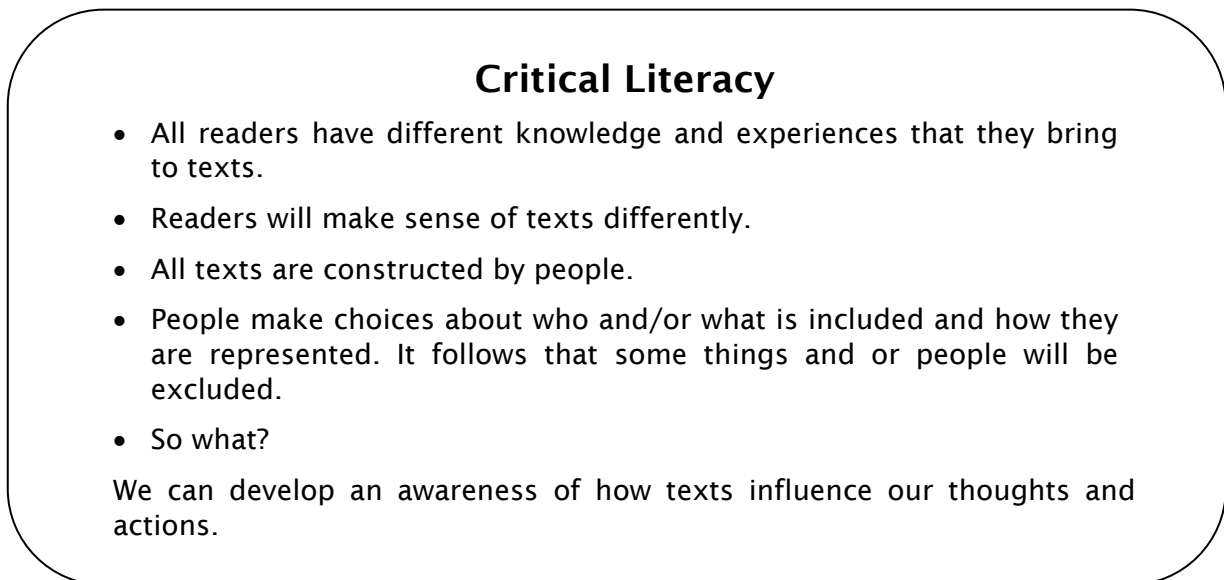
## The research questions

This section discusses the findings in terms of the research questions.

## 1. What critical-literacy strategies are able to be most effectively integrated within guided reading lessons in the New Zealand context?

*Direct teaching of metalanguage*

The challenge raised by the adult definition of critical literacy was to develop a students' version that would be more accessible or "kid friendly" (see Figure 1). The student version was produced as a poster that teachers could use as a teaching resource, to prompt more explicit teaching of metalanguage (a language we can use to talk about critical literacy).

Figure 1    **Student poster for critical literacy**

# Critical Literacy

- All readers have different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts.

- Readers will make sense of texts differently.

- All texts are constructed by people.

- People make choices about who and/or what is included and how they are represented. It follows that some things and or people will be excluded.

- So what?

We can develop an awareness of how texts influence our thoughts and actions.

As the research progressed, the research team realised that direct modelling and teaching of some of that metalanguage was vitally important as the students were clearly not picking up on it through the guided reading lessons. As one of the teachers noted during a research team working day: "We've done it the other way around with the kids and it doesn't seem to be working" (Working day, 5/08/05, p. 23). This refers to our earlier attempts to gently question the students in an attempt to elicit issues of representation or stereotyping that could be called forth by some readings of some of the texts. At the beginning of this working day a teacher described her frustration and concern after completing a critical-literacy lesson using community texts:

> Well, I will [come out] and say I don't think it's going very well for me. I'm really … I've got some quite significant concerns … I did a whole class thing with small community texts last week … and I mean the kids had a lot of fun with it, they looked at all the flyers … they just sat there enjoying looking at ads and toys and things and we did all the discussion, but overall the impression I got was of well, you know, if this is consumerism bring it on, you know [laughter, all talking]. And I just … I don't know how to tap in to the resources to get the kids to really start thinking in that critical-literacy way. I just feel like I don't know where to go. (Working day, 5/08/05, p. 1)

With reflection and discussion we came to the understanding that we needed to do some direct, explicit teaching of some of the language that students would need to use to discuss and understand some of the critical-literacy concepts.

Direct teaching of the metalanguage associated with critical literacy is supported by research into reading comprehension that urges direct teaching of comprehension strategies (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pardo, 2004; Pressley & Block, 2002). In addition, teachers regularly teach the metalanguage associated with other subject areas as a means of supporting student learning (in science, for example, we directly teach students the particular language associated with meteorology). Barbara Comber (2001) also recommends the direct

teaching of the metalanguage associated with critical literacy: "The task for teachers is to help children to develop a meta-awareness and a meta-language for what they can already do and to assist them in applying these resources to the texts and situations of school life" (p. 171).

## Questioning

A key strategy utilised by the teachers was that of questioning, which is a common strategy used in the critical-literacy literature (e.g., Brown, 1997; Knobel & Healy, 1998; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b). Discussions prompted by the teachers' questions also supported student growth in comprehension (Ketch, 2005). In addition, questioning forms a regular component of guided reading lessons (Thompson, 2002, 2005). The teachers asked qualitatively different questions as a result of the emphasis on critical literacy. For example, in one lesson the students read the poem "Uncle Andy's singlet" (Cowley, 2003). The teacher wanted to draw attention to the ways in which both the written and visual text were constructed, so the students read only the text of the poem in the first instance and then compared the text with the illustrator's representations of Uncle Andy. To prompt the discussion the teacher asked the students: "Why do you think the illustrator chose to make Uncle Andy fat and always smiling?" (Guided reading lesson, 21/06/05, p. 7).

In another lesson the teacher and the students compared and contrasted the representations of elderly people in "Looking after Grandpa" (Brooker, 1995), "The ultra-mega-awesome surprise" (Bartlett, 1996), and "Zoe visits Yiayia" (Viatos, 1997). She asked the students: "What does this writer suggest about Grandpa and old age? Is this always what being old is like?" The students were able to contrast the representations in the stories with elderly people they knew. The teacher summarised the lesson:

> So we've been, we've had three days of reading three different journals where in each of the journals the people have been sick, and old, and tired. But we've just shared that this, this doesn't have to be [like that]. So we've got here … old people who forget things [in these stories] … but we know that this doesn't have to be [what being old is] about. (Guided reading lesson, 15/09/05, p. 5)

The teacher invited the researchers to comment to the group at the conclusion of the lesson, and one of the researchers added: "That links to [the lesson] because what you've seen, of course, is that you all [students] know things about old people that the authors haven't chosen to put in their stories" (Guided reading lesson, 15/09/05, p. 5).

## Text selection

The importance of selecting appropriate texts for the guided reading lessons became apparent very early in the project (also see Section 5, Limitations). Not only did the teachers need to find texts that were at the appropriate level for the students, they also needed to find some that would lend themselves to critical questioning. Initially the research team used themes as one way to select a text that would lend itself to critical-literacy questioning (see Figure 2). The themes provided a way for the teachers to consider issues of representation, inclusion, exclusion, and so on. As the student posters were developed, these themes became less important in text selection and the teachers found that they could use a broader range of texts for the lessons. As discussed during one of the research team working days:

> *Researcher:* One final question for you, do you think having the definition has now broadened the texts that you can use to do that work, that it's made more texts [suitable]?
>
> *Teacher:* Well, I think you can use that definition with any text now … Well, that was what I, I … I was feeling like [before, like] I was beating my head against a brick wall trying to go and find a book that has [critical-literacy themes] in and so on but I think that definition gives you the [focus needed]. (Working day, 14/10/05, p. 13)

Figure 2    **Critical literacy themes**
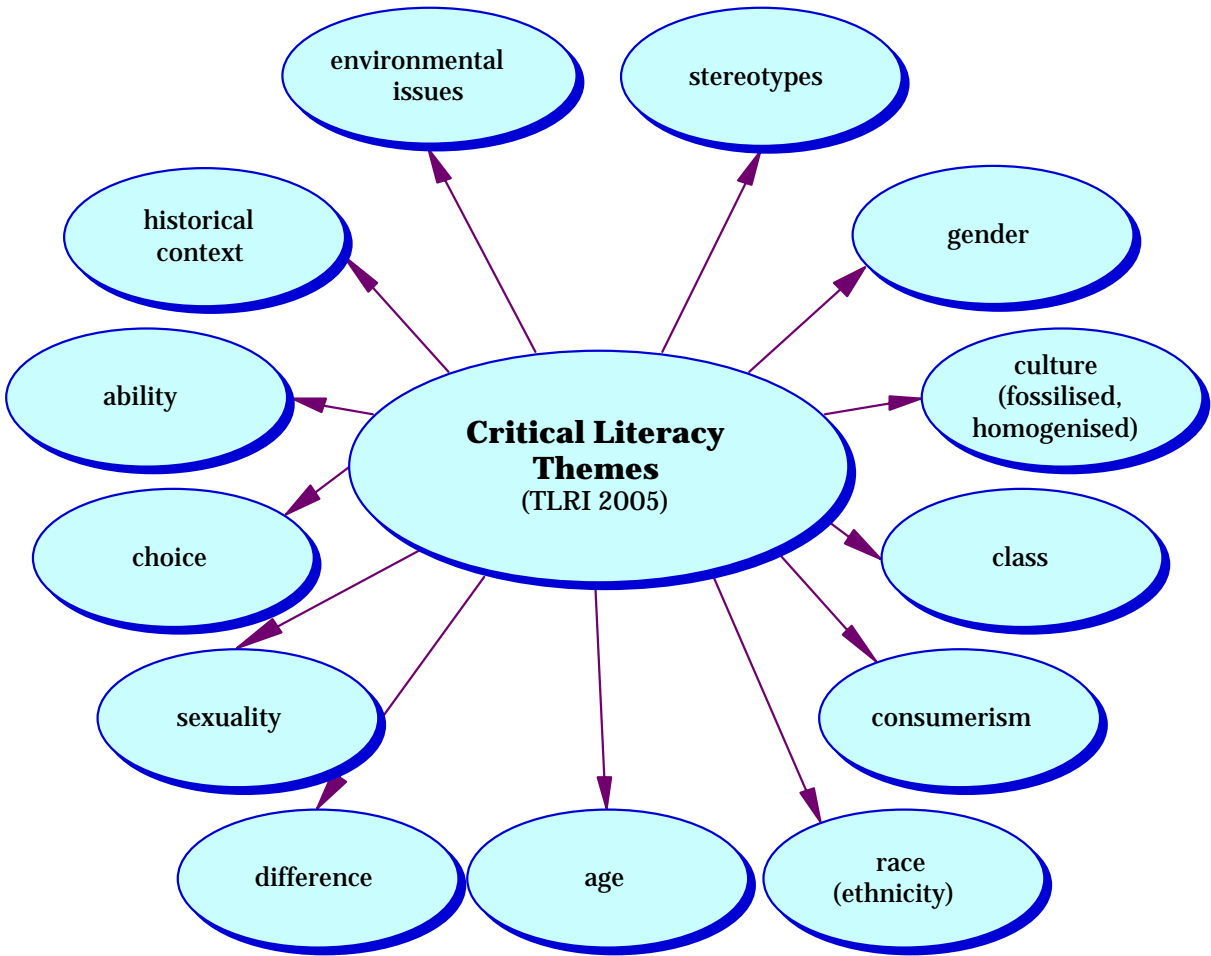


*(Re)structuring guided reading lessons*

The final strategy discussed here concerns the structuring of the guided reading lessons themselves. It is common practice for teachers to use a new text each time they teach a guided reading lesson with students. Although it is not prescribed—"Guided reading therefore gives learners the essential, confidence-building experience of overcoming challenges in text that they are seeing *(usually)* for the first time" (Thompson, 2002, p. 5, emphasis added)— it is nonetheless sufficiently common that students and parents comment to the teacher when texts are revisited. As the research progressed, the team found that the most effective way to locate the critical-literacy questions in a guided reading was on the second reading of any given text. So the teachers would do what we called a "traditional" guided reading lesson (Thompson, 2002, 2005) with students on a text. The next time that they met with that group they would quickly review the text and then go into the critical-literacy questions and discussion. While this represents a small shift in the structure of guided reading lessons, it was nevertheless commented on by some students: "Miss, are we actually going to read a book or not?" (Guided reading lesson, 15/06/05, p. 12). This question was repeated by the same student four times during the course of the lesson. In this structure for guided reading, students had multiple opportunities to engage with texts and increase their comprehension, while the lessons maintained a manageable length that would not compromise students' attention spans or motivation.

## 2. What changes were found in students' ability to relate texts to their lives?

New Zealand teachers are accustomed to drawing upon students' experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, to introduce texts (Ministry of Education, 1996) and assist in developing greater comprehension

of them (Ministry of Education, 2005). Teachers ask students to make connections to prior knowledge or experience, before, during, and after engaging with texts, an important aspect of reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

In this project, the students were asked to use their experience as a means to question and challenge texts. They were asked to consider what were the effects of the choices that authors made when constructing texts. For example, in the Junior Journal story "Chas and His Dogs" (Ross, 2002), students read about a farmer and the work he did around his farm with the help of his dogs. The following discussion was captured during a guided reading lesson:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | Does he [farmer] work on his own? |
| *Student:* | No, has his dogs. |
| *Teacher:* | Could a woman do his job? |
| *Students 1 & 2:* | Yes. |
| *Student 3:* | No. |
| *Teacher:* | Why not? |
| *Student 3:* | Might make mistakes shearing. |
| *Student 4:* | Yes. |
| *Student 5:* | Yes. No. Don't know. |
| *Student 4:* | But my dad makes mistakes. |
| *Teacher:* | Would you do this job? |
| *Students:* | Yes. (Except for one who was scared of the motorbike [farm bike].) |

(Scrapbook entry, 05/05)

In this brief conversation, we contend that one of the students in this reading group used prior knowledge of farming and the jobs men and women can do around the farm as a means to challenge one reading that was promoted by the text; i.e., that only a man and his dogs can do the work around the farm. When one student supported this reading, another student quietly challenged it. By encouraging students to use their own experiences to consider multiple readings of texts, teachers could support students to go beyond the face value of texts and consider the potential outcomes of the choices that authors make.

In another example, captured on audiotape by one of the participating teachers during the post-intervention running records, a student drew upon experience to challenge the gender representations in three texts about soccer:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | … so I've got three books here and they're all on soccer and it would be easy to look at these three books and to decide that after reading and looking at these books that only boys can really play soccer. Now what do you think about that, only boys play soccer? |
| *Student:* | Well … not just boys play soccer, some girls play soccer as well. |
| *Teacher:* | In … teams, OK. |
| *Student:* | Yeah. |
| *Teacher:* | So, so, so you know that girls are included? |
| *Student:* | 'Cause, yeah, 'cause there's girls' soccer and boys' soccer. |
| *Teacher* | Ah OK, OK. |
| *Student:* | 'Cause, 'cause we've um I played a game with [student] and [student] and stuff and um we scored four goals. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | Ah, nice one [student]. So, so you know that there are teams out there, that the people do have girls' teams and boys' teams playing soccer … and girls are included in it. |
| *Student:* | Yeah. |
| *Teacher:* | OK, fine, because someone looking at these pictures, especially this picture here, might be reading these kinds of books … they might think that soccer is really just for boys but um but you know that it isn't [true]. |

<div align="right">(Running record discussion, 14/11/05, p. 1)</div>

In this excerpt, the teacher emphasises that the collective weight of three separate texts portraying children playing soccer, in which the authors have chosen to represent only boys, could lead readers to believe that only boys play soccer. Yet, the female student can draw upon her own experience as a soccer player to challenge the lack of representation of girls in the texts. A male student commented:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Student:* | Girls can play soccer. |
| *Teacher:* | OK, how … but these books kind of seem to be saying that girls can't play soccer. Do you know that girls can play soccer? Mmm, how do you know that, [student]? |
| *Student:* | Ah, because my friend [student], she used to play soccer. |
| *Teacher:* | She was in a soccer team, OK was it a mixed soccer team? |
| *Student:* | Yeah. |
| *Teacher:* | OK … well, what would be a better way for these writers to show a fairer … thing that girls could play soccer? What … would these … writers and picture makers do? |
| *Student:* | Fix up teams for girl and boy team. |

<div align="right">(Running record discussion, 14/11/05, p. 2)</div>

Again, a student was able to challenge the representation of gender in the texts by drawing upon personal experience. In addition, the student was able to propose more just representations in future texts that could depict boys' teams and girls' teams.

Of course, there are limitations in drawing upon experience to challenge representations in texts. What if you do not have the requisite experience to question or challenge a particular text? In this excerpt, the student did not have any personal experience to draw upon to challenge the gender representation in the texts under consideration:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | I've got three books here and they're all on soccer, well, it would be easy to look at these three books and decide after looking and reading the books that only boys can play soccer. What do you think [student]? |
| *Student:* | Yeah. |
| *Teacher:* | You think that only boys can play soccer, OK. Because, I mean, if we look at the pictures in these books, that really seems to be what their kind of showing, isn't it? And here we've got Rachel's [character] kind of not allowed in, they won't let [her] in the game. Do you think that's fair? |
| *Student:* | Nah. |
| *Teacher:* | You don't think that's fair, OK, what would be fair, then? |
| *Student:* | Letting her join in. |
| *Teacher:* | To include them too. Ok are there any other sports that you know where only boys can play? |
| *Student:* | [Pauses.] Rugby. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | Rugby, yes, that often is a man's team, are there any sports where only the women play? |
| *Student:* | [Pauses.] |
| *Teacher:* | No, OK, all right. So are you involved in any sports teams, [student]? |
| *Student:* | No, I only go to gym. |

<div align="right">(Running record discussion, 14/11/05, p. 2)</div>

In this excerpt, we wish to emphasise that drawing upon experience to challenge particular representations in texts has its limitations. There will be occasions where students do not have personal experiences they can use to foster multiple readings of texts, and a lesson that asks them to do some may serve to further highlight ways that they themselves are excluded from texts. Thus, while the research team believes that an important aspect of this work is to support students to make connections between texts and their own lives, we also have developed an awareness of the potential limitations of such an approach.

## 3. What changes were evident in students' comprehension of texts?

This pilot research project explored ways in which critical-literacy strategies could 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).

Reading comprehension involves multiple processes that include information retrieval, the making of inferences, the interpretation and integration of ideas and information, and the examination and evaluation of various elements of texts (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004).

In developing critical literacy strategies this research project focused on the fourth aspect. "The process of examining and evaluating content, language and textual elements requires the students to move from constructing meaning to *critically considering the text itself*" (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004, p. 5, emphasis added). Thinking critically "involves reading and writing beyond a literal, factual level. It involves analysing meanings, responding critically to texts when reading … It also involves responding to texts at a personal level" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 24). This process of reading comprehension also requires students to "use their own background knowledge and experience to critically evaluate the text" (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004, p. 5)—an important aspect of the research team's definition of critical literacy. Ministry of Education (1994) documents also call for students to "reflect on the different social assumptions, judgements, and beliefs which are embedded in texts" (p. 12)—an important aspect of examining and evaluating texts.

To measure reading comprehension, the research team made use of the measures that the participating teachers regularly used to assess their students' reading ability and growth. These included running records from Handy Resources, PM Benchmarks, and PROBE (Parkin, Parkin, & Pool, 2002). It became evident that the team was pursuing a moving target with regard to our growing understandings of critical literacy and its links to reading comprehension.

At the beginning of the project the teachers collected their initial measurements of students' reading ability and comprehension (largely through the use of running records). During the first videotaped guided reading lessons the teachers questioned the students, using some critical-literacy questions that reflected our understandings of critical literacy at that time. Now at the end of the project the teachers would ask different questions to gauge the students' comprehension and grasp of critical literacy.

Nonetheless, the transcripts from the first guided reading lessons, in which the students were asked critical literacy questions "cold"—that is, without any prior instruction in critical literacy strategies—gave us some insight into their ability to comprehend the text at a deeper level. When these were compared with the audiotaped critical-literacy questions that the teachers asked of each focus group student in Term 4 as part of their post-reading comprehension assessment, we could see growth in the depth of comprehension for some of the students.

In the following excerpt the students read the story "Super Strawberries" (Hammonds, 2003), a non-fiction text that describes strawberry plants, their uses, and how to grow them. In the discussion that followed, the teacher asked the students to consider the author's purpose for writing, and how the story might have been written differently:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | Now tell me, why do you think the author of this book, Heather Hammonds, why do you think she wrote this story? |
| *Student:* | Because she thought it could be interesting for the people. |
| *Student:* | To help people learn about strawberries? … |
| *Teacher:* | How else do you think the author, Heather Hammonds, could have written this report? |
| *Student:* | Ahh, well. |
| *Teacher:* | How else? Is there any other way she could have written it? |
| *Student:* | No. |
| *Student:* | She could have tried her best to write it. |
| *Student:* | Um. |

(Guided reading lesson, 23/03/05, A, pp. 7–8)

It was clear in the videotaped lesson from the students' body language and their hesitant answers that they were not accustomed to this type of questioning. In another, initial guided reading lesson the students read the non-fiction text *Inside the Maize Maze* (Holt, 2004). The teacher asked the students to consider what kinds of knowledge they needed to bring to their readings of the text in order to be able to make sense of it the way the author intended, and what other ways the text could have been written:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Teacher:* | Tell me, when we were reading through this, what's some of the things that you might have needed to have known to be able to understand the things in this book? What were some things that you needed, what did we need to talk about, so that you would be able to understand what was happening in the book? |
| *Student:* | Making a maze … |
| *Student:* | Um to know what a maze is … |
| *Teacher:* | … how else could this have been written about the maze? How else could it have been written? |
| *Student:* | What? |
| *Teacher:* | How else could this have been written? |
| *Student:* | Ummmm, ah, I don't know really. |
| *Student:* | I don't have any idea. |
| *Teacher:* | No idea, [student]? What do you think? How else could it have been written, [student]? How else could this story have been written, this book been written? |
| *Student:* | I don't know. |
| *Teacher:* | [student]? [student]? |

| *Student:* | I don't know, really. |

In this discussion some of the students grasped the concept that authors assume readers will bring certain knowledge and experiences to the reading of texts, although in this case the author did not assume that all students would have experiences of mazes and introduced the text by explaining what they are. The students had difficulty, however, when asked to consider how else the text might have been written. They had not yet been asked to examine texts to consider whose point of view might be excluded.

In another class the students completed a text sleuthing exercise where they examined copies of the *School Journal* from the 1960s and early 1970s for representation of Māori. They found about 14 representations of Māori in the 420 stories and articles that they examined. They grouped the types of representation into four categories: traditional Māori stories, historical, cultural artefacts, and stories where a Māori person was the main character. The students each presented examples of what they had found and discussed them in their groups. They discussed issues of stereotyping and what some representations might mean. They also discussed the concept of "point of view" and considered what it might mean if alternative points of view were not taken into account. At the end of the year students from this class commented in the stimulated recall interview:

| *Researcher 1:* | What do you actually think about critical literacy yourselves now? What do you think about it? It's a skill that you've now got, you've developed it. |
| *Student 1:* | Ahh, that it's a bit strange looking at books in a different way. |
| *Researcher 1:* | Can you tell us? |
| *Student 1:* | If someone else might think about it. |
| *Researcher 1:* | How someone else might think about it? |
| *Student 1:* | Like I've always just taken in, that's how I understand, I don't know if that's how someone else would understand it, like if they're from a different country. |
| *Researcher 1:* | Mmm hmm. [student?] |
| *Student 2:* | Or the Māori thinking that they're getting a bad representing. |
| *Researcher 2:* | That they're not being represented fairly? |
| *Student 2:* | Yeah. |

[….]

| *Researcher 1:* | Do you think critical literacy's given you more power over text? |
| *Student 1:* | A bit. |
| *Student 2:* | Not really. |
| *Researcher 1:* | A bit? How? |
| *Student 1:* | Like um of, like being able to think differently about how the book actually is and like how someone else would think of the book. |

[….]

| *Researcher 2:* | You said something earlier about just thinking about the story from other people's point of view. |
| *Student 1:* | Yeah, it means you get to think like um I had a friend that was Māori um and if I showed him the book he might um [interrupted] |
| *Student 1:* | You might think about it to um to make sure he wouldn't be offended by it. You'd not show a book to him that um would be totally offended and he wouldn't like you much any more. |

*Researcher 2:* So it just makes you think about how other people might [read a book]?

*Researcher 1:* But if your friend knows that you know it's offensive, then that's a big step forward, isn't it, with your friend, do you know what I mean, that they, they are aware that you find it offensive as well.

*Student 1:* Yeah.

(Stimulated recall interview, 19/10/05, pp. 8–11)

The critical-literacy work that these students had engaged in during the year had encouraged them to look at books differently and consider alternative readings. The students had also been encouraged to consider how the people who were being represented in texts might read those representations. In addition, it was a way for students to develop greater empathy for others as they considered the outcomes or consequences of texts and representation.

While these may seem like small shifts, the team considered that a great deal of the work they did during the year was to "plant seeds":

*Teacher:* I wonder if we just we're sowing the seeds at the moment and we're also hoping to see these guys change their view maybe and that may not happen for years, you know, it may not be until they're in high school or it may not be until they're an adult and something happens and they think 'ahh, hang on a tick'.

(Working day, 1/09/05, p. 22)

In this way we did not expect to see "earth-shattering" (Exit interview A, 25/11/05, p. 6) changes in the ways students viewed texts, but rather hoped that this work was "planting seeds [and] the first seed might germinate just a little bit of recognition" (Working day, 1/09/05, p. 39).

The difficulty with measuring the students' growth in reading comprehension as related to their increasing development of critical-literacy skills was the lack of any standardised measures of reading comprehension that ask the kinds of questions that we were asking students. The most commonly used tool, running records, typically asks recall and inferential-type comprehension questions. A limitation of the project (see also see Section 5, Limitations) was that the teachers used different resources to track students' reading achievement, according to the level (junior or senior) and the school. Some schools used different resources at the beginning and the end of the year. The original proposal had endeavoured to not add to the participating teachers' workloads, by using the assessment tools teachers were already using. However, we found that the variety of tools used made it difficult to draw conclusions. This limitation has been addressed in the 2006–2007 project.

We can, however, draw some tentative conclusions. Each teacher examined the pre- and post-reading comprehension data for their students, with particular attention to the focus groups that were selected for filming. Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 give the focus group results as analysed and discussed by the participating teachers.

Table 3 **Teacher 1: running record analysis (focus group)**

| STUDENT | READING AGE | ACCURACY | COMPREHENSION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 (7 years) | Increased reading age: 1 year (Level 15–19) | Increased accuracy | No change |
| 2 (6 years 8 months) | Increased reading age: 1½ years (Level 15–20) | Increased accuracy | No change |
| 3 (6 years 7 months) | Increased reading age-:1–1½ years (Level 15–20) | Increased accuracy | No change |
| 4 (7 years 7 months) | Increased reading age:1 year (Level 15–19) | Increased accuracy | Decrease |

In summary, for this particular focus group, all children have increased their reading age by 1–1½ years. All the children increased in accuracy. Three out of four children's comprehension remained the same. The fourth child's comprehension decreased.

Table 4 **Teacher 2: running record analysis (focus group)**

| STUDENT | READING LEVEL | ACCURACY | COMPREHENSION |
|---------|---------------|----------|---------------|
| 1 (7 years 6 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | Decrease (100%–40%) |
| 2 (7 years 11 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | Incomplete (Not at school–60%) |
| 3 (8 years 4 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | Decrease (100%–80%) |
| 4 (7 years 11 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | Decrease (100%–80%) |
| 5 (7 years 11 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | Decrease (100%–20%) |
| 6 (7 years 7 months) | Increased reading level (Level 22–26) | Increased accuracy | No change (100%–100%) |

In summary, all the children in this group increased their reading level and their accuracy. Four students showed a decrease in reading comprehension and one showed no change. However, as texts became more complex and questions moved from literal to inferential, student's scores shifted from high (i.e., 5/5) to less than 5/5.

Table 5 **Teacher 3: running record analysis (focus group)**

| STUDENT | READING AGE | RETELLING | COMPREHENSION |
|---------|-------------|-----------|---------------|
| 1 | Increased reading age:1 year | Increased retelling (50%–78%) | Increase (82.5%–95%) |
| 2 | No increase in reading age | Increased retelling (39%–67%) | No change (95%–95%) |
| 3 | Increased reading age: 2 years | Decreased retelling (72%–50%) | Decrease (92.5%–90%) |
| 4 | Increased reading age: 2 years | No change (50%–50%) | Increase (75%–90%) |

These children were all highly competent readers, reading at between 2 and 5 years above their chronological age at the start of the year. Thus comparison of their reading age is not very significant, since they were all such advanced readers anyway.

Of more interest is their comprehension result. For three of the children the test level they were able to complete was higher in November than at the start of the year. For one child it was the same. Children's ability to retell the story was the same or higher in November, except for one of the children, whose retelling dropped. However, his test level in November test was 3 years higher than the level of the test in February.

In overall comprehension, which combines the retelling score with additional questions (including inferential questions), all percentages either remained the same or rose by up to 15 percent. This represents quite a large growth, given that the reading levels of the test materials were in most cases more difficult.

Table 6 **Teacher 4: running record analysis (focus group)**

| STUDENT | READING LEVEL | ACCURACY | COMPREHENSION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 (8 years 6 months) | Increased reading level, from 7-8 to 8–9 | Increased accuracy | Increase (32%–56%) |
| 2 (9 years 1 month) | No change in reading level: 7–8 | Increased accuracy | Increase (30%–81%) |
| 3 (9 years 1 month) | Increased reading level, from 7-8 to 8–9 | Increased accuracy | Increase (80%–93%) |
| 4 (8 years 9 months) | Increased reading level, from 7-8 to 8–9 | Increased accuracy | Increase (20%–31%) |
| 5 (8 years 3 months) | Increased reading level, from 7-8 to 8–9 | Increased accuracy | No change in comprehension (50%) |

For this focus group, four out of the five children increased in reading age. The one child that did not increase in reading age increased comprehension from 30–81 percent. All of the students increased in accuracy. Four out of five children's comprehension increased. The other child's comprehension remained stable, but there was an increase in reading age.

Overall, when we examined the assessment data to consider whether or not the critical-literacy strategies increased the reading comprehension of the participating children, the results were mixed. Most children increased their reading accuracy and their reading age, and many increased their comprehension. All the participating children increased their critical-literacy skills and developed some associated metalanguage, to varying levels. Unfortunately, the research team cannot claim that the growth in reading comprehension experienced by some students is directly attributable to the implementation of critical-literacy strategies. As highlighted by this project, there is an urgent need to develop standardised assessment tools that will enable teachers to chart student growth in critical-literacy skills and reading comprehension in detailed ways (see also the recommendations for future research at the end of this section).

## 4. What were the teachers' experiences of the collaborative self-study research process?

With the aims and principles of the TLRI in mind, we negotiated a series of interview questions with the teachers at the very onset of the research journey (see Appendices 6 and 7). The teachers interviewed each other in pairs and not only collected data for this project but were able to sharpen interviewing skills that will be of use in other research projects. Interviews were undertaken at the beginning and end of the year-long process. They have provided us with a window into many aspects of the teachers' journey, in particular their expectations of involvement, their growth as researchers, and the collaborative nature of the project. In this section we examine the teachers' experiences of the project in chronological order, starting with their concerns and expectations at the beginning of the project and concluding with their observations at the end.

At the beginning of the year the participating teachers expressed excitement and some anxiety at the thought of the year-long journey they were about to undertake:

> I'm just really very keen to do a research project in conjunction with the university people because I think that teachers just about need to become researchers in order to keep up with what's currently going on … [with] the theoretical side [of research] under normal teacher circumstances we simply don't have access to, or time to [laughs] to indulge in. (Initial interview A 2/03/05, p. 1)

> I hope to gain some insight at least into the skills of doing adult level research … because I think we are, as teachers we all have ideas and … things that we'd really like to pursue but we really don't know how to go about that necessarily, we're not trained

researchers or theorists and so, no, that's it's kind of a side issue, but I really hope to become a little stronger about what it is to be a researcher. (Initial interview A, 2/03/05, p. 2)

[A]nd also [I am] just hoping that I can do the things that I need to be doing with my, the children in the class and keeping up with it all really, is my thought. (Initial interview A, 2/03/05, p. 1)

When the research team prepared the original proposal, we stated in the partnership agreement:

The participating teachers are responsible for implementing the collaboratively developed critical-literacy strategies within the guided reading lessons, critically reflecting on their professional practice, gathering assessment data on students, and contributing to the collaborative research design, data analysis, theorising, and writing of the research findings, according to their levels of comfort and expertise.

We wanted to ensure that different team members had the freedom to contribute to the project in different ways. Thus, each teacher's level of participation in producing public conference presentations, writing reports, and writing journal articles was to be negotiated according to their ease and availability to do so. Nonetheless, their expectations at the onset of the year were high:

I'm interested in helping to write the end of the proposal, not the proposal, the research at the end. Again, I'm unsure of how much work that will entail and I'm always wary of taking on too much and not being able to do it properly [agreement] and I'm perfectly happy to present whatever we've been doing if and at conferences and that sort of stuff because if that can help other teachers go this way and if it feels like it's the right way, then I think it's really important to do that. (Initial interview B, 2/03/05, p. 1)

During the year many disseminated outcomes arose from the work, with a number already being planned for 2006 (see Appendix 9). This has been achieved in a collaborative way, with teachers able to contribute to the writing of conference presentations during the teacher release days as part of the work in progress. It is of note that two teachers were able to independently prepare and give presentations at the miniconference of a local branch of the New Zealand Reading Association in April 2006. Both teachers derived real personal satisfaction at being able to comfortably share their understandings of critical-literacy strategies with colleagues (Upton & Hill, 2006).

In keeping with the collaborative nature of the project, one of the initial interview questions asked: "Can you think of any ways of facilitating the collaborative nature of the research project?" This was a key aspect of the project and one that all the teachers looked forward to:

I'm really, I think really interested in working with colleagues because I haven't done much work with other people, so that's kind of probably be my big, big hopes, that I'll be able to broaden myself a bit there. (Initial interview B, 2/03/05, p. 1)

I'm really looking forward to working with other, other teachers and experts and because I haven't really done very much of that, you know, I've really pretty much done a lot of my teaching just by myself in my own little single cell, so it's great to be able to share with colleagues. (Initial interview B, 2/03/05, p. 2)

Active ways of facilitating collaboration were suggested by the teachers: establishing email contact, sharing ideas and possible resources between the two schools, having time to share and listen to insights from each other, sharing and celebrating each other's successes, and providing a safe environment for any criticism. All of these were woven into the yearlong journey.

In the exit interview the teachers described their thoughts at the end of the research project:

[It] has been a wonderful overall package.

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

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.

The joy of just doing it and being involved with a wonderful group of women.

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 working in a professional space.

Found it really helpful having the chart to refer to.

I do personally feel I have an understanding of critical literacy.

To see us moving forward [in 2006, Phase 2] with the whole class in a wider way than guided reading is exciting.

With regard to participation in conference presentations and the preparation of further papers for publication, all the teachers involved, bar one who had exited the project at the end of the year, were keen to keep up with their involvement in further dissemination of the results of the project. Some were very keen to become involved in writing "maybe for a smaller publication or for a presentation or school". (Exit interview A, 25/11/05, pp. 1–2).

For three of the four teachers, their involvement in the American Educational Research Association's conference in San Francisco in April 2006 was a highly unexpected and exciting development that further focused their desire to disseminate the findings of this project to increasingly wider audiences (Sandretto et al., 2006). In addition, preparing this paper for the conference motivated the teachers to request a reading list so that they could develop greater understandings on a broader theoretical base than that of critical literacy, and to develop understandings about post-structuralism, which was the theoretical lens underpinning the project.

The level of their participation in dissemination resulted from the highly collaborative ways in which conference presentations and publications were put together. During project working days the research team literally constructed conference presentations, using theoretical readings and insights from their own classroom practices and with all voices valued. For journal publication, a draft of ideas was put to the team for discussion. One of the university researchers then constructed a further draft for comment, and did the final editing. It must be noted that, realistically, many teachers in schools do not have all the required skills (knowledge of referencing, and so on) to construct theorised academic writing independently.

In the exit interview the teachers stressed how highly they had valued the genuine collaborative nature of the project:

*Teacher 1:*    That's right and I mean if they've, yeah, they've never once made us feel like, you know, only teachers.

*Teacher 2:*    Small or little, or, no, no.

*Teacher 1:*    Only primary school teachers.

*Teacher 2:*    It hasn't been the academic …

*Teacher 1:*    Ah, no.

*Teacher 2:*    There hasn't been any you-or-us division.

*Teacher 1:*    Yeah, and from what we've read that can happen in some situations. It certainly hasn't here, I've always felt equal with everyone in the project.

*Teacher 1:*    And valued and valued and respected, yes, at every juncture.

(Exit interview B, 25/11/05, p. 3)

In a similar vein, the other pair of teachers commented in their exit interview:

> [The researchers] definitely have been wonderful guiding people, they haven't been leaders as such. I wouldn't call them leaders or even facilitators, they've guided us, guided the conversations in some shape or form and their expertise has come through or their knowledge I guess has come through but … they've also been learning along, you can tell they've been learning from us along the way as well. So I think that … my original expectation was that they were the experts and to a certain extent they, they are, but we've become part of them. (Exit interview A, 25/11/05, p. 2)

As the university researchers first designed and crafted the original research proposal, such concerns had been paramount. The project sought to overcome dominant academic discourses that may seek to position teachers as "passive recipients of others' expert knowledge, rather than as knowers in … [their] own right" (Luna et al., 2004, p. 69). It is heartening to see that the highly collaborative nature of this project has meant that such concerns were overcome.

## Strategic value of the research

### Reducing inequalities

This pilot project was aimed at reducing disparity and inequalities in literacy achievement within the primary sector of New Zealand. Current research indicates that such disparity in achievement exists (Flockton & Crooks, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2003; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001; Pitches, Thomson, & Watson, 2002). For example, "Research has shown that some students have not been well served by conventional literacy practices…. Māori children, Pasifika children whose language is not English, children in low decile schools achieve, on average, at a lower level than other children" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 10). These disparities have been described as "the most urgent challenge facing the profession" (Comber, 2001, p. 174). The good news from a recent report released on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is that, overall, Year 5 New Zealand students' "mean reading achievement was significantly higher than the international mean" (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004, p. 9). The finding that does cause concern, however, is that "the means for Māori and Pasifika students were found to be significantly below the international mean" (p. 26) and "Furthermore, while around three-quarters of Pakeha/European students … achieved above the international mean of 500, less than half of Māori and Pasifika students achieved a score above this point" (p. 27).

Ultimately, the intention of this project was to raise student achievement. Wallace (1992) argues that critical reading has two senses: "In its narrower sense critical reading is about responding to particular texts. More widely, however, it involves awareness … of what reading itself is" (p. 61). "The trouble with much—if not most—literacy teaching is that critical reading has not generally been encouraged … regardless of whether the learners have very limited English language proficiency or are quite advanced learners of English" (Lankshear, 1994, p. 13). This project sought to raise achievement for all students, regardless of their current reading abilities or cultural, social, or linguistic backgrounds. The project used critical-literacy strategies to assist students to develop a deeper comprehension of texts. The research team was able to chart growth in reading comprehension for most students, and development of critical-literacy skills for all students. However, one of the limitations of the project was that the assessment tools used to track growth in reading comprehension did not allow the team to attribute that growth directly to the critical-literacy intervention (see the discussion of the findings around research questions 3 and 4 above). This limitation is being addressed in the 2006–2007 project.

### Addressing diversity

This pilot project situated critical-literacy practices within two schools (deciles 4 and 9) in the primary sector and with Years 3–6 students. It sought to establish that such different textual practices would enable *all* students to relate texts richly to their personal lives, with an increased awareness and depth of comprehension (this finding is presented in the discussion of the findings of research question 2). The

project team found the critical-literacy strategies did support all students to engage with texts in more personal ways.

In addition, increased attention to and valuing of the links between students' lives and texts provided opportunities for students to increase their comprehension of texts. As noted by Dawnene Hammerberg (2004), an important aspect of supporting students to deepen their comprehension of texts is to "include discussions about the multiple answers, perspectives, and interpretations possible" (p. 655). We contend that creating spaces for students to make links between their lives and texts is one means of doing so.

## Understanding the processes of teaching and learning

In self-study research, practitioners investigate their own professional practice with a view to enhancing both their own practice and that of others (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004). Reflexive inquiry into one's own practice can act as a vehicle for professional development, as well as improving student learning outcomes (Cole & Knowles, 2000). The research team gained a greater understanding of effective critical-literacy strategies for the New Zealand context that in turn will inform the practice of others, and subsequently contribute to enhanced teaching and learning in schools (see Comber & Kamler, 2004; see also the discussion of research questions 1, 2, and 3). For example, the enhanced awareness of the strengths and limitations of asking students to make connections between their lives and texts is an important development in relation to contributing to a greater understanding of the processes of teaching and learning (see the discussion of research question 2).

## Exploring future possibilities

This research project was framed as a pilot project. One of the outcomes has been to identify ways forward for the 2006–2007 project. As noted during the following working day discussion:

*Teacher 1:* Because the other thing that comes out of [watching that video is that I've] just really sort of come to a realisation of about the children respecting each other … I haven't had any discussion, I've had individuals responding to a question to you and then I've given another question, I hadn't once, I think, had a child picking up on something that another kid has said and going with it and I don't think it's ever occurred to me to say, 'Well, what do you think about that?' And I think next year that's going to, I'm going to have to really look at that in terms of trying to get the kids talking the way we do [during these working days], they don't have that skill [agreement], they don't do that stuff, they just answer a question and wait for the next one, you know?

*Teacher 2:* Yes, yes.

*Teacher 1:* And it's only just occurred to me through seeing that they, it's not a matter of not respecting each other's viewpoints it's about totally ignoring them. They you, know, ah thank God that wasn't my question, I don't have to worry about that, and there's no way they'd …

*Teacher 3:* To get them to respond to each other's ideas.

*Teacher 2:* And so the teacher's role is and the skill that the teacher needs to bring in to that is to be like a facilitator [agreement] and open up open up that cross, you know, I've done exactly the same thing, mine's been question, answer, question, answer, question, and not that business of but, but you had it happening in your …

*Teacher 1:* I did have a little bit those guys [we watched] who at one stage one of them sort of got, you know, we were talking about women working on the farm or something like that and one of them said, 'But no, that's not true, because this [interrupted] happens'…

(Working day, 17/11/05, pp. 17-18)

One area that will be explored in the 2006–2007 project is ways in which the teachers can facilitate more student-to-student dialogue, rather than teacher-directed questioning.

## Practice value

### Likely impact on practice

New Zealand educational researchers and teachers have long known how research and theory can inform and enhance teaching practice: "Practice, not theory is the larger notion ...while theory and knowledge can help us criticise and develop practice, they must always be criticised finally in terms of practice" (Warnock, 1996, p. 31). New Zealand teachers are constantly looking to enhance their teaching practice. Critical-literacy strategies offer innovative methods of enriching students' engagement with text and in so doing have the potential to enhance children's learning.

In the exit interviews, the teachers discussed the ways in which the project had impacted on their practice. This also led to discussion of where they wanted to head next:

> I'm trying hard to do more listening to the children I think I mean I think I've always tried to listen to the children a bit but I've been more inclined to sort of override them if I really disagreed with them but you know they have a right to have their voice heard as well. And I think the critical literacy questions are hard, they're big questions, they stretch us all I'm trying to do that thing of giving the child time to answer even if there's dead silence for quite some time but it's hard.... It's hard because at the same time I want the children to start responding to each other, we've talked about this how that still hasn't really happened, that they're still doing the questioning, the teacher asks the questions and the child answers them and they're not bouncing off each other at all and I want them to start doing that but I also want them to give each other time to reflect before they answer so that that's a balance of I haven't managed to make yet but it's a goal to have. (Exit interview B, 25/11/05, p. 8)

One teacher explained: "I guess it's given me license to talk with the kids" (Exit interview A, 25/11/05, p. 3). And another teacher commented:

> I was just going to say that you don't feel bad about taking time or spending another day or longer with the kids [on one text], you sort of think, well yeah, it's going to benefit the children and they shouldn't be having ten books in two weeks' time … They've still got to have a chance to discuss and understand and get into the text further, rather than just learning the words. (Exit interview A, 25/11/05, p. 3)

As noted in the discussion of research question 1, one of the changes to teacher practice was a shift in the traditional guided reading structure to allow students and teachers to revisit known texts using critical-literacy questioning.

### Relevance to practitioners

The participating teachers had an opportunity to explore their understandings of critical literacy and enhance the strategies used to incorporate it within their guided reading lessons, which allowed them to extend and challenge students. During the course of the research, the research team explored and negotiated the development of specific strategies to incorporate critical-literacy practices within guided reading lessons (see the discussion of research question 3). As reading is woven across many essential learning areas, it is anticipated that the benefits of the project will have an impact across the curriculum (e.g., Wolk, 2003). These benefits will be explored in greater detail in the 2006–2007 research.

### Transfer to the learning environment

Why engage in critical literacy? What are the perceived benefits for students? Kathy Hall (1998) explains: "Children have to be code breakers (how do I crack this?) text participants (what does this mean?) text users (what do I do with this here and now?) and text analysts (what does all this mean to me?)" (p. 190) (see also Luke & Freebody, 1999). This study demonstrated that students increased their repertoire of ways to engage with texts.

In one of the exit interviews, the teachers explained how the yearlong journey of collaborative research enabled them to implement the critical-literacy strategies. However, they expressed doubt whether others would be able to implement these strategies without similar levels of reflection and support:

*Teacher 1:* [S]o I think like we found you can't do this in a half an hour workshop and explain to people how to do it and to understand critical literacy, you do need to do what we have done, you need to go on a big journey because it is difficult to understand and everyone has their own understanding of it and how they can do it and what it means I think.

*Teacher 2:* … I suppose thinking at conference and stuff people were they showed sort of some real interest in some of the things we had to show but then they won't go away and implement it in the class because they haven't been through the journey we've been through.

(Exit interview A, 25/11/05, p. 9)

## Potential benefits to students, parents, teachers, and communities

As described in the introduction to this report, the critical-thinking skills developed through critical literacy are lifelong skills that are ultimately transferable to any context. These skills have not been regularly taught 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 that we continue to explore ways to implement critical-literacy skills into classroom practice, and looks forward to the 2006–2007 project.

# Recommendations for future research

The findings from this pilot research project have highlighted the need for future research into several areas. First, additional research is needed into the links between reading comprehension and the development of critical-literacy skills. Although some researchers have made implicit links (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a, 2004b), there is a need for further research that will explore the explicit links. Following on from this recommendation is the need to develop standardised tools for teachers to use in the New Zealand context that will enable them to chart the student growth in critical-literacy skills *and* reading comprehension in detailed ways (see the discussion of research question 3) without tying students down to one correct answer.

# 5. Limitations

As noted in the findings the research team found that the commonly used assessment tools of running records did not allow teachers to capture the growth in the depth of comprehension that we anticipated from the students' engagement with the critical-literacy strategies. Typically, running records ask literal recall and inferential-type comprehension questions, only two aspects of reading comprehension (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004). As a result, the research team found that the assessment tools used to track growth in reading comprehension did not allow them to attribute that growth directly to the critical-literacy intervention.

Another limitation of the project was locating the critical-literacy strategies solely in guided reading lessons. The research team found that the posters (Appendices 1 and 2) were most useful when introduced and reviewed through shared reading lessons (Ministry of Education, 2003). Shared reading lessons allowed the teachers to use texts that the students might not be able to access themselves, and scaffold the introduction of the critical-literacy metalanguage.

Finally, a limitation of the project was the lack of available texts that were at the appropriate level *and* allowed for critical literacy discussions for the teachers to use with all the guided reading groups. It became apparent that different schools had different resources available for the teachers and that some schools would need to consider resource budgets in order to support further critical-literacy work in the classrooms.

# 6. Capability and capacity building

Funding from the TLRI enabled our research team to undertake collaborative classroom-based research o current Ministry of Education initiatives in the priority area of literacy development. It represented a reciprocal project in which researchers were able to engage deeply with teachers' current practices. Ultimately, the whole team was able to engage with research literature and develop a New Zealand classroom-based research model of critical literacy. The pilot research project was collaborative in that all involved had the opportunity to contribute to all phases of the research (including the development of the research design, data gathering, data analysis, theorising, and writing up the results) according to their levels of comfort and expertise (Hansen, Ramstead, Richer, Smith, & Stratton, 2001). The project has strengthened partnerships between the schools and the university. In 2006, three of the participating teachers from this pilot project have University of Otago Bachelor of Teaching (BTch) students in their classrooms. In one of the schools, a number of teachers are hosting BTch students for the first time.

As discussed in the Findings, under research question 4, the project fostered greater research capabilities for all the participants. During one of the working days, one of the teachers reflected on her research journey:

> Because I must admit I had reservations at first because I'd never enjoyed my time at university when I had to do the uni[versity] papers, that I much preferred the college style of things and I thought, 'Ah, I don't know if this is going to be for me, I'm not sure we'll try it'. But you know … I've never felt at any stage that you guys were, you know, there and we were here … although you've got the knowledge of the research and all that sort of stuff, never ever felt that you were academic compared to us as … you've encouraged us to do our own reading, our own looking, our own finding out, and you haven't ever delivered a lecture or [agreement] you know, it's been a genuine dialogue. (Working day, 23/25/11/05, p. 20)

At the time of writing this report, the participating teachers had been involved in contributing to or co-presenting four conference presentations and one workshop (see Appendix 9). They had contributed to the development of one full paper and this final report. Further papers and presentations from the 2005 research are planned.

As one teacher (who is continuing with the 2006–2007 project) noted in an exit interview:

> I'm very happy to continue at the same level as this year … well, even more actually. I'm actually quite keen to participate in some writing next year as well … but I'm happy to do that and conference presentation, whatever's going, really, (Exit interview B, 25/11/05, p. 2)

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.

Lastly, while the project has been extremely valuable in developing the capacity and capability of the participating teachers as researchers, it has also enhanced them as professionals while proving to be an enjoyable experience:

> … this group has enabled me to trust and to respect, to have respect, and to feel that I've been valued. And as a teacher, that I can take risks and can make mistakes and … that I can learn [from] the mistakes and the risks will enable me to kind of maybe jump, jump to another place, jump to new places. And I've really enjoyed all the learning and all the talk … that's been here in our working days and in the project. (Exit interview B, 25/11/05, p. 6)

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# Appendix 1: Critical literacy poster, version 1



## Critical literacy

- All texts are constructed by people.
- People make choices when constructing texts.
- All readers have different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts.
- Readers will make sense of texts differently.
- So what?  We can develop an awareness of how texts influence our thoughts and actions.

# Appendix 2: Critical literacy poster, version 2

## Critical Literacy

- All readers have different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts.
- Readers will make sense of texts differently.
- All texts are constructed by people.
- People make choices about who and/or what is included and how they are represented.
  It follows that some things and/or people will be excluded.
- So what?
  We can develop an awareness of how texts influence our thoughts and actions.

# Appendix 3: Critical literacy word bank

## Critical Literacy Word Bank

- Texts
- Constructed
- People
- Choices
- Awareness
- Make sense
- Representation

# Appendix 4: Bookmarks

**Developing critical literacy**
Reading with your heart and head

Starter Questions-

- What does the author want us to know about the world and the people in it?
- Does this match with what you know?
- What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?
- How is the reader/viewer positioned in relation to the author of the text?
- Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?
- How else could the text have been written?

**Developing critical literacy**
Reading with your heart and head

Starter Questions-

- What does the author want us to know about the world and the people in it?
- Does this match with what you know?
- What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?
- How is the reader/viewer positioned in relation to the author of the text?
- Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?
- How else could the text have been written?

**Developing critical literacy**
Reading with your heart and head

Starter Questions-

- What does the author want us to know about the world and the people in it?
- Does this match with what you know?
- What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?
- How is the reader/viewer positioned in relation to the author of the text?
- Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?
- How else could the text have been written?

# Appendix 5: Newspaper article

## PORT CHALMERS... a town with a unique character
### GATEWAY TO OTAGO

Star Advertising Feature

### Port Chalmers teachers enthusiastic about literacy strategies programme

# Taking a critical look at reading

**By BRENDA HARWOOD**

TWO teachers at Port Chalmers School are adopting a slightly different method of teaching reading during the next few months, as part of a research project into fostering "critical literacy".

The joint pilot involves Port Chalmers teachers Peta Hill and Jennie Upton, East Taieri School teachers Rae Parker and Rae Howland, and Dr Susan Sandretto and Jane Tilson, of the education department at the University of Otago.

The classroom-based study focuses on the implementation of critical literacy strategies, and the expected growth in pupils' reading comprehension and research skills.

The pupils involved will be from years 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, giving a range of ages and reading abilities.

The results would be documented during the year, and form the basis of a paper, Mrs Hill said.

It may be expanded and enhanced in future research studies and could possibly result in changes to the methods used to teach literacy in New Zealand schools.

The research group has spent the first term developing a firm definition of the concept of "critical literacy", which can most simply be described as "reading with your heart and head".

It had been important for the group to refine a definition, as it was an aim of the project to separate the concept of critical literacy from that of critical thought, Mrs Hill said.

"Many teachers have seen them as linked, but they are two separate things," she said.

During the next few months, the teachers will be supporting their pupils to become aware that texts — which can be written, visual, or aural — are social constructions.

Authors made conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts, and these choices had consequences for how we made sense of ourselves and others, Mrs Hill said.

"It is also important for the children to make connections between the texts and their lives."

Parents have been kept informed about the project, and will be participating by encouraging their children to ask questions in their reading at home.
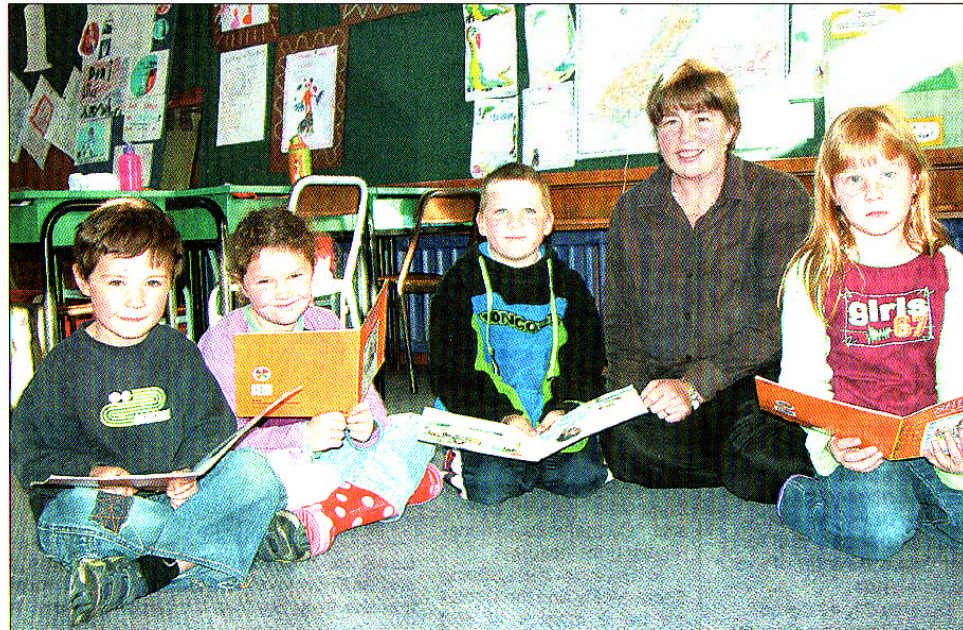
**Reading critically:** Port Chalmers School teacher Peta Hill works with a group of children on their "critical literacy" skills. Pictured are (from left) Samuel Devereux (6), Kate Guthrie (6), Jack Williams (7), Mrs Hill, and Georgia Rhodes (6).

# Appendix 6: Initial interview questions

1. What are your thoughts as you begin this journey?

2. Participation will happen at many different levels. At what level do you wish to participate in this project - classroom based, writing, conferences?

3. What expectations do you have of yourself, each other and from Jane and Susan during this project?

4. What personal growth do you hope to achieve on this journey?

5. What is current understanding of 'critical literacy'?

6. How would you describe key philosophies that underpin your teaching?

7. Can you think of any particular ways of facilitating the 'collaborative nature' of this research project?

8. Do you have any questions or concerns at this stage of the project?

# Appendix 7: Exit interview questions

1. What are your thoughts at this point in the research journey?

2. Participation will happen at many different levels. At what level do you wish to continue to participate in this project- classroom based, writing, conference presentation?

3. How have your expectations been met of yourself, each other and of Jane and Susan during this project?

4. What personal growth have you achieved during this journey?

5. What is your current understanding of 'critical literacy' and associated strategies?

6. How would you describe key philosophies that underpin your teaching?

7. In what ways has your teaching changed as a result of participating in this research project?

8. Reflect on the 'collaborative nature' of this research project.

9. How has your school (principal, colleagues) supported your participation in this project?

10. Do you have any questions or concerns at this stage in the project?

11. Other??

# Appendix 8: List of transcripts

| Date | Transcript type |
| --- | --- |
| 2/03/05 | Initial Interview |
| 2/03/05 | Initial Interview |
| 23/03/05 | Initial guided reading lesson |
| 23/03/05 | Initial guided reading lesson |
| 31/03/05 | Initial guided reading lesson |
| 31/03/05 | Initial guided reading lesson |
| 15/06/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 15/06/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 21/06/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 21/06/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 5/08/05 | Working day discussions |
| 1/09/05 | Working day discussions |
| 2/09/05 | Working day discussions |
| 14/09/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 14/09/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 15/09/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 15/09/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 14/10/05 | Working day discussions |
| 19/10/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 19/10/05 | Stimulate recall interview |
| 20/10/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 20/10/05 | Stimulated recall interview |
| 25/10/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 25/10/05 | Stimulated recall interview |
| 26/10/05 | Guided reading lesson w/ critical literacy focus |
| 26/10/05 | Stimulated recall interview |
| 11/11/05 | Focus group assessment discussions |
| 14/11/05 | Focus group assessment discussions |
| 15/11/05 | Focus group assessment discussions |
| 15–16/11/05 | Focus group assessment discussions |
| 17/11/05 | Working day discussion |
| 18/11/05 | Working day discussion |
| 25/11/05 | Exit interview` |
| 25/11/05 | Exit interview |
| 23–24/11/05 | Working day discussion |

# Appendix 9: Bibliography of research project outputs to date

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