The Recursive Process In and Of Critical Literacy:
Action Research in an Urban Elementary School

Karyn Cooper

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Robert E. White

St. Francis Xavier University

Author's Note

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the recursive process of initiating an action research project on literacy for students-at-risk in a Canadian urban elementary school. As this paper demonstrates, this requires development of a school-wide framework, which frames the action research project and desired outcomes, and a shared ownership of this vision by school community and staff. Preliminary understandings provide information and considerations that serve to inform discussions about school/curriculum reform and related concerns about critical literacy.

Résumé

Cet article apporte un aperçu du processus récursif de l'initiation d'un projet de recherche-action en littératie pour des élèves à risque, dans une école élémentaire canadienne en ville. Comme le montre cet article, cela nécessite le développement d'un dispositif à l'échelle de l'école entière, qui encadre le projet de recherche-action et les résultats souhaités, ainsi qu'une appropriation de cette vision par la communauté scolaire et le personnel. Les interprétations préliminaires fournissent des informations et des pistes de réflexion qui servent à renseigner les discussions sur les réformes concernant l'école ou/et les programmes, et les préoccupations connexes au sujet de la littératie critique.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the process of initiating an action research project on critical literacy for students in a Canadian urban elementary school, Sir Simon George Elementary School. In an effort to address the literacy challenges of its students, the school decided to incorporate an action research project. This project was designed to identify critical thinking skills and to investigate what critical literacy skills would look like in a classroom with students determined to be at-risk. Critical thinking and critical literacy are complex terms that often are used interchangeably. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) recognized over a decade ago that critical thinking and critical literacy are conflated on a regular basis. The words *critical thinking* and *critical literacy* may mean different things for different educators with different worldviews and it is clear that they may still do (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), depending on whether one subscribes to a psychological or a sociological theoretical model.

In situating this notion sociologically, Luke (1997) notes that critical approaches to literacy involve "a shift away from psychological and individualistic models of reading and writing towards those approaches that use sociological, cultural, and discourse theory to reconceptualise the literate subject, textual practices, and classroom pedagogy"(143). This definition of critical literacy is supported by Gee (1996) and Edelsky and Cherland (2006). Luke goes on to state that:

> Critical approaches are characterized by a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economics and cultures. (Luke, 1997, p.143)

It is not surprising that, for the research team and its teachers, one of the first issues that arose was the need to operationalize these two terms. However, it was not until very close to the implementation phase of the individual work of the teachers that these terms became more clearly defined in their own minds and practices. This points to the recursive nature of these terms in action.

What follows is an examination of the background of the decision to incorporate an action research project on critical literacy for students-at-risk, the theoretical framework under-girding the project's form and purposes, a description of the initial phase of the project, including establishing a school-wide vision and framework for critical literacy, and some implications for future directions of this research.

The Theoretical Framework

Reading failure leads to poor overall academic performance, immense loss of self-esteem, and an eventual lack of the basic literacy skills that are needed for self-support and for making an economic contribution to society. Literacy and educational change are inextricably intertwined (Statistics Canada, 2006). In order to address literacy for learners-at-risk, a prime place to begin is in the arena of educational reform.

Locally, education has undergone profound changes in the past few years as ministries of education, faculties of education, and school boards prepare teachers to respond to the needs of all children. In the province of Ontario, Canada, for example, all Grade 3 students now participate in the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Standardized tests. As well, a public school board in Ontario has begun compiling a *Learning Opportunities Index* (Toronto District School Board, 2001) intended to indicate *relative level of need* for its approximately 450 elementary schools. This *Learning Opportunities Index* correlates with the literacy scores from EQAO Tests to reveal low literacy levels for early learners from urban schools (Brown, 2001). Despite significant public expenditure on education, the reality is that many Ontario children in lower socio-economic areas are not part of the reading world. Although these particular learners are some of the students-at-risk, their situation has global parallels. In literacy education, Comber (2006), Cooper and White (2006), Janks (2000), Luke (1997), and Pahl and Rowsell (2005), to mention only a few researchers, suggest that, around the world, literacy requires a re-imaging in this era of reconstruction and development. This problem, then, is an international one: how can elementary teachers in urban schools around the world best help learners-at-risk in literacy education and thus improve their chances for future success in education and life?

As suggested by the Ontario Language Curriculum (1997) for Grades 1-8:

> Students in schools across Ontario require consistent, challenging programs that will capture their interest and prepare them for a lifetime of learning. They require knowledge and skills that will help them compete in a global economy and allow them to lead lives of integrity and satisfaction, both as citizens and individuals. (p.3)

Sir Simon George Elementary School—which achieved poorly, relative to the Board's average on the district *Learning Opportunities Index*—has over 650 students from K-5, 48% female and 52 % male, with 12% born outside of Canada and 66% for whom English is not their primary language. Recently, the staff at Sir Simon George Elementary School has begun to see a new vision for this school to address the literacy challenges of its students. Having the courage to stand up for this vision, the school staff put in place several important changes with the hopes of improving critical thinking and critical literacy capacities for teachers and, by extension, for their students.

To begin with, in the early stages of the project, one tangible, if not significant, change was the hiring of a Reading Recovery Teacher to work with Grade 1 students, specifically those identified as being at-risk. Another change was the in-servicing of classroom teachers on administering the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). By utilizing this assessment procedure, the school planned to obtain literacy baseline scores for all of its students. Still further, the new administration, in concert with a Literacy Early Years Instructional Leader, designated a school-wide, daily, two-hour time block for an early literacy program.

Literacy research is replete with accounts indicating that early intervention with students-at-risk can effectively increase levels of literacy skills and comprehension (Clay, 1979). Although research waxes ambivalent on the topic of early intervention (Luke, 1997; Stanovich, 2000), a number of researchers (Anyon, 1980; Gunning, 2000; Slavin, 1998) suggest that a key to successful intervention is providing students with programs that emphasize higher level thinking strategies. This action research project, with its early focus on higher-level thinking strategies, was initiated as a result of the visioning and collaborative efforts of the staff of Sir Simon George Elementary School. While critical thinking was the initial focus of the project,

critical literacy was the end result. This transition to a new focus on critical literacy took place as a result of teachers' professional development, as teachers began to understand the complex relationship between language and power.

In other words, this shift to a focus on critical literacy developed as a direct result of the recursive nature of the project and emerged as the research team delved more deeply into the research on early intervention and the action research process. Research indicates that teacher-generated research offers teachers a strong feeling of ownership of both the process and results, thus increasing their own professional development (Hannay, 1989, 1995; McNiff, 1993; Porter, 2005). Despite all the attention given to strategic skill development for learners-at-risk and attention given to the ways in which teachers acquire their professional knowledge, teachers' reflections upon the teaching and the learning process has received little attention.

Action research is teacher-driven; it is "systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counsellors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment" (Mills, 2000, p. 6). Action researchers are concerned with more than just reporting their findings and conclusions to others: "They are committed to *taking action* and *effecting positive educational change* based on their findings" (Mills, 2000, p. 4). Educators indicate that teacher-generated research, such as action research, provides teachers with ownership of both process and product, thus increasing the sense of esteem and agency for both students and teachers (Barth, 2002; Cooper, Peterson, & Broad, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1998). A great deal of research points to this same conclusion that the critical factor in effective instruction is the teacher (Allington, 1998; Bond & Dykstra, 1967, 1997; Leithwood & Aitken, 1995; Pearson, 1984; Short, 1999; Wragg, Wragg, Haynes, & Chamberlin, 1998). The literature resounds with accounts of how action research has promoted teacher growth and increased ownership of change initiatives by increasing teachers' willingness to invest time in addressing such issues (Church 1999; Edelsky, 1999; Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 1993; Wells, 1994). Current research suggests that almost all successful changes are teacher-initiated and result from working from the "inside-out" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Together, elements of school change such as the introduction of new personnel, literature study, and action research within the context of literacy from local and global perspectives created the theoretical framework around which the practical aspects of improvement materialized.

The Research Team

Further to realizing their vision, the staff of Sir Simon George Elementary School decided to address some of these gaps and silences. Having met the research team while they were supervising student teachers, the vice-principal of Sir Simon George approached them to collaborate on a proposed action research project involving the school's initiatives.

As a result, in the fall of 2001, Sir Simon George Elementary School staff invited the research team to participate in a multi-year action research project, the focus of which was school-wide literacy improvement. The research team consisted of the co-authors, a graduate research assistant, a school literacy co-ordinator, and a school district primary literacy consultant. The role of this research team was to act as facilitators to work together with teachers to develop critical literacy capacity among the teachers and the entire research team. After the initial staff meeting in which the research team was introduced and the project was addressed, the non-school-based researchers worked together with teachers to design the process. From this, in conjunction with the school district primary literacy consultant, two Grade 3 teachers initially volunteered to design and incorporate lesson plans to address issues of critical literacy in their

Grade 3 classrooms. The result of that first meeting was a school-initiated collaborative research project undertaken with the teachers in selecting and implementing strategies for teaching critical thinking skills at Sir Simon George Elementary School.

The Project's Form and Purposes
      With the conceptual frame and justification for action research in place, the research team then began working with the project stakeholders to frame an action research plan for this project. Together these stakeholders—the teachers, the school administration, the Sir Simon George in-school Literacy Co-ordinator, the Literacy Early Years Instructional Leader and the research team—began to define purposes, articulate objectives, and eventually develop a three-year project plan.
      The initial purposes of this project were to:

- design a Steps to Action Plan (Mills, 2000) enabling them to effect positive educational change in the form of critical literacy strategies;
- assess the effects of teaching the students critical thinking strategies on student literacy levels; and
- evaluate the effects of an action research strategy on teacher learning and professional development.

      As a corollary to the purposes of the project, the staff and administration, in conjunction with the research team, determined the initial objectives for this project as being:

- to develop critical thinking strategies for both early learners-at-risk and their teachers;
- to improve literacy teachers' professional judgment;
- to implement, assess, and evaluate specific strategies of literacy teaching; and
- to enhance elementary in-service teacher training to support school-wide literacy improvement, critical thinking strategies, and life-long learning.

      The significance of this study lies not only in its school-initiated origins, but also in its potential to contribute to two interrelated areas:

- critical thinking strategies, by accounting for what critical thinking means and looks like in an actual classroom for children at-risk, and
- action research, particularly as an in-depth look at one school's effort to improve early literacy for students-at-risk.

      With purposes and objectives in place, this project team turned to the questions of method and implementation. At the school level, all research members participated in sessions to decide upon the foundations for the research project. The project was based on suitable and appropriate practices for building literacy capacities relating to urban students and their teachers (see Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Short, 1999).
      At the same time, at the classroom level, the research team worked in-depth with two Grade 3 teachers whose action plan focused on understanding critical thinking strategies as related to the notion of critical literacy. This plan was developed by consensus through a review of literature on critical literacy. Learning strategies such as Tompkins' (1998) K-W-L (what we

KNOW—what we WANT to learn—what we have LEARNED) strategy for critical/reflective thinking and other reflective critical practices taken from socio-cultural perspectives in critical literacy were considered and endorsed. They also chose the action research methodology loop of "act-reflect-revise" (Hannay, 1995), which would allow them to observe and to assist the classroom teachers as they engaged in action research to select and implement three important strategies for teaching critical literacy—text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (Miller, 2002).

Continuing their collaborative efforts, the research team continued to develop their three-year research plan, which eventually included two Grade 3 teachers[1]. The three-year longitudinal study was justified by the need to track, over time, the results of implementing critical thinking skills for critical literacy learning. By the end of the third year, anticipations were that student test scores would not only increase but that students and teachers would look beyond the text in front of them to understand the personal impact of the text as well as the wider impact the text has regarding the world community. It was also hoped that the quality of teacher educational planning would improve, and the nature of in-service training would change to an on-going teacher-centred process. Through involvement in the action research cycle, researchers and participating teachers will hopefully continue to build relationships and to familiarize the participants with the K-W-L strategy.

The Initial Phase of the Project

The vision for this research project found its source in theories of school leadership, improvement, and reform. As Michael Fullan, in Pervin, (2005, p. 40) notes, action research projects show us that improvements occur and school staff members take pride in the results because changes are not forced on them. In discussing visions of educational reform, Barth (1990, 2002) introduces the concept of dialogic exchange as an instrument of relational understanding in the process of educational reform. This exchange in turn produces a dialogic "community of learners" (Barth, 2002, p. 9), a community emerging from and reinforcing "a healthy school culture that inspires lifelong learning among [both] students and adults" (Barth, 2002, p. 6). The school staff believed that improvement and reform need dialogic conversations on professional development; these conversations need to include all voices. Like all other aspects of development, these dialogic exchanges for community development require time, resources, and shared dialogue. Barth's vision of educational reform highlights the importance of continued engagement in the messy, unpredictable, non-linear process of learning, and of the importance of engaging all individuals, adult and child, in a community of learners where a multiplicity of perspectives is the catalyst that generates effective change and exchange.

Leadership and shared learning, as defined by Barth (2002), were very much in evidence throughout the project timeframe. For example, the research team honoured the question with which a Grade 3 teacher, Jamilla, began the discussion around what the word *critical* meant. This key question prompted a movement away from the technical side of critical thinking towards the political, sociological side of critical literacy. This process not only spoke to the recursive nature of the project, but also to the non-linear way that learning takes place. As such, the research process was closely coherent with Barth's analysis of the process of learning.

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[1] Due to the transfer of one of the Grade 3 teachers in this study, the research team eventually included one Grade 3 teacher.

Focusing more on the practicality of school improvement, Chernow (2000) concludes that only those schools that "continually challenge their practices" are likely to improve student achievement in a sustainable manner. The aim of Sir Simon George Elementary School was to direct research towards exploring new ways of meeting the needs of its educational stakeholders: teachers, students, and their families. Hargreaves (1997) believes that the central task for implementing educational change is developing more collaborative working relationships between principal and teachers, as well as between teachers and teachers. Following in this vein, the principal of Sir Simon George Elementary School assisted in initiating the research project by working in collaboration with teachers to frame the coming school year with professional development that paved the way for full implementation of the action research project the following year. This action research project strived for research that was well-grounded in theory, developed through collaborative efforts, and anchored in everyday practice.

Working with the Sir Simon George Community, the principal drafted a *Commitment to Literacy* (2001) which addresses the question of how does this community "ensure that our students reach high levels of achievement in literacy?" This document lists actions and responsibilities for all stakeholders, from the principals to the teachers to the students to the parents to the whole community. Overshadowing all of these is the school's Values/Mission Statement:

> We believe that each individual can grow and learn and that literacy is essential to participate fully in society and develop personal fulfillment. We will each commit to build and celebrate literacy for self and others and to be accountable for achievements of higher levels of literacy (Sir Simon George, *Commitment to Literacy,* 2001).

Such a school-wide literacy program requires planning, a collaborative effort and, perhaps most significantly, teachers with a firm commitment to *making it happen*. To initiate this action research project, a professional development workshop was planned and initiated with the teachers. This workshop was designed to provide teachers with conceptual structures for action research and critical thinking skills, and to frame the professional development format for the coming school year. The plan for the preliminary work in the upcoming school year consisted of the following 15 key aspects[2]:

1. The vision. Why literacy as a school-wide focus? The task of literacy instruction is not one exclusively for the Kindergarten or Grade 1 teachers. Rather, literacy should be a school-wide focus. To accomplish this, *all* teachers needed to share in this vision, a vision of their school as literacy community (e.g., Barth, 1990).

2. Getting community onside. The collective research team felt that community commitment was crucial to achieving success. In order to involve the community with literacy initiatives, the key was to *take it slow*. The team believed that for reform to be lasting, it must be implemented slowly, methodically, and with the cooperation and collaboration of all involved. Even so, there were *pioneers* who forged ahead and blazed trails for those to come. For example, two Grade 3 teachers, as part of the research team, initiated their own classroom research on an in-depth look at the concept of critical thinking skills as related to critical literacy practice.

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[2] The authors would like to acknowledge the school staff and the administration the efforts for developing this list.

3. <u>Making sure everyone is on the train</u>. School-wide efforts could only succeed when the staff became aware of what was negotiable and what was not, and when all staff members agreed to share the vision and to participate. Just as the administration encouraged pioneers, so, too, did they seek those staff members who were not *on* and not willing to get *on the train* of school reform. A few teachers who were not willing to get on board for the ride were encouraged to find new stations; some did choose to request a transfer to another school. In this large urban school board, such a transfer was possible.

4. <u>Focusing on the foundation pieces first</u>. The role of the Literacy Early Years Instructional Leader, as part of the research team, was to present foundational elements and strategies to assist teachers in their daily literacy efforts.

5. <u>Providing support along the way</u>. Throughout the year, the research team met to support the teachers who were part of the classroom-based research project with additional classroom and reading materials resources. As well, these teachers visited other classrooms and schools to increase their professional development in the areas of literacy instruction and action research.

6. <u>Timetable and staffing</u>. The school timetable for the year was arranged to create a *Literacy Block*. Staffing was organized to support this block. Additional support people were available through the areas of English as a Second Language, Reading Recovery, the Special Education resource teacher, educational assistants, the librarian, and principal and vice-principal. These personnel allowed teachers time for in-school professional development, review, and reflection.

7. <u>Ongoing process of review</u>. Through the year, research team members employed the *stop—start—continue* method in an ongoing review of the research process.

8. <u>Listening to the staff</u>. Part of the on-going review included a commitment by the administration to listen to the staff and to follow through on staff needs.

9. <u>The data-driven program</u>. As part of the action research loop, data drove the research. Data for this research came from various sources: Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), running records, report cards, the EQAO test results, and Guided Reading Inventories.

10. <u>Implementation processes</u>. Once the initial fascination and inertia have passed, enthusiasm and results are likely to *dip*. Implementation plans, processes, and procedures that were put into place early on in the project safeguarded against changes in procedures, policies, and leadership.

11. <u>Review</u>. After this preliminary year of professional development, the school-wide focus on literacy was reviewed. Teachers again looked at the DRA scores as a base line for beginning to incorporate critical thinking strategies.

12. <u>Positives</u>. This work made a noticeable and immediate difference. The administration and the teaching staff were enthusiastic and determined: "There is an urgency in the building for literacy now!"

13. <u>Challenges</u>. Other issues, which needed to be faced, were how to manage curriculum, assessment, and evaluation, especially given that these concepts are being renegotiated through the action research process.

14. <u>The future</u>. Issues and considerations for the future included how to continue to support the literacy project next year and in subsequent years, and how to internalize a critical literacy approach to teaching.

15. <u>We have only just begun</u>. The preliminary work being done: the actual research commenced. At the request of the teachers about what this would look like in their classrooms, the Literacy Early Years Instructional Leader from the school board conducted in-service workshops with a view to sharing practicalities and logistics of the vision of school reform through literacy action research.

Sharing the Initial Vision of Reform

In profiling the action research project, the research team eventually determined the need to define a working definition of the term *critical*. It was found that the research participants at the school-wide level held differing concepts of what critical thinking meant. The Grade 3 teachers who formed part of the research team were also having similar discussions around critical thinking as it relates to the concept of critical literacy practices. A search of Ontario Curriculum (1997) documents in Language Arts revealed that, although *critical thinking* was used under literacy, the term continues to be used in a technical manner rather than with a sociological perspective. The limitations of this concept were not lost on the research team and the classroom teachers. This was a significant observation, as teachers came to an understanding that critical thinking is a precursor to critical literacy. Therefore to ensure a shared comprehension of the term and the project itself, the following chart (Riehl, 2002) was compiled:

What Can Critical Thinking Look Like?	What Can Critical Thinking Sound Like?
Reading	Talking
Writing	Questioning
Drawing	Comparing
Illustrating	Analyzing
Mapping	Rhythmic
Diagrams	Connecting
Constructing	Comprehending
Building	Describing
Creating	Listening
Painting	Expressing
Singing	Retelling
Moving	Predicting
Role-playing	Judging
Dramatizing	Evaluating
Photographing	Distinguishing
Publishing	Drawing conclusions
Presenting	Forming opinions
Self-evaluation	Listening to another point of view

The above chart proved to be a useful tool for fleshing out examples of critical thinking in action. While critical thinking does not mean the same thing as critical literacy, thinking about critical thinking was a logical place for the team to start thinking about critical literacy. By acknowledging this idea, the research team was able to move beyond the initial phase and into the project itself. For example, in exploring the purpose of reading with their students, the two Grade 3 teachers began with the premise that the starting point of the project must be at the students' curriculum level and in September, in order to progress to critical literacy from the vantage-point of thinking critically, the following questions were asked of the Grade 3 students, the teachers of whom were now part of the research team: "Why do people read?," "What do you see readers doing?," "Where do you see people reading?," and "Do people all over the world have the same chance to learn to read?"

Responding to the first question entailed brainstorming with the Grade 3 students and recording their thinking. In this way, the project began to be outlined with the Grade 3 students by the primary literacy consultant in collaboration with the Grade 3 teachers and the research team. These questions, which framed the beginning work with the students, not only revealed much about the children's perspectives about reading but also assisted in the selection of relevant teaching materials. For example, in response to the question, "Do people all over the world have the same chance to learn to read?," the students responded with the following insights:

- Some people are too poor ("When my Mom was in her country, she had to leave school in Grade 3 to go to work.").
- Some countries don't have schools built for the children.
- Sometimes wars stop children from going to school.
- Some countries don't have enough books and that does not seem fair.

These questions and others were used to establish some connections with these urban students' lives and to develop, not only a greater understanding of their own reading worlds, but also an understanding of global access to literacy education.

Future Directions

The purpose of this article has been to provide a description of the preparatory stages of an action research project on critical literacy for students-at-risk in an urban K-5 school. This article may be useful to teachers, administrators, and scholars interested in planning and initiating an action research project for the purpose of developing research at the grassroots level and to assist individuals interested in understanding the recursive nature of learning, as represented through this project. A list of your implications based on this initial action research project follows.

After examining the efforts of the school administration to initiate this project, a number of implications appeared evident. One was the lengthy amount of time needed to initiate such an action research project. This included not only time spent in collaborative planning for the research, but also the entire year spent in professional development to ensure that all those involved shared in the vision.

In addition to the time required for preliminary preparation for the research project, the second implication concerned the groundwork itself. The vice principal and others on the administrative team, as well as the Literacy Early Years Instructional Leader, searched for, acquired, and distributed resources. They also taught alongside the teachers in order to get an understanding of what critical thinking and ultimately critical literacy *looks like*, *sounds like*, and *means* in practice.

A third implication centred upon professional development. While the administrative team spoke with individual teachers and others, all in an effort to create a positive and nurturing environment for the coming research project and school improvement plan, not all teachers were keen to take on their own in-service training on an on-going basis. There were, however, a number of teachers who shared varying degrees of interest in the school-wide action research focus. Having had dialogues around such issues as school-wide timetabling for literacy blocks proved to be valuable. It was through such dialogues as these that the two Grade 3 teachers decided to pioneer their own action research plan, in concert with other members of the research team, and to develop their own in-service training on an on-going basis.

Additionally, an important implication surfaced regarding the need to carefully define the meaning of critical thinking and critical literacy for urban students. This arose from conversations at the general school level and also within the Grade 3 action research project which focused on critical literacy: "As a research team we realized early on that we needed to unravel our understanding of the term critical literacy." The research team's first discussions regarding preconceptions of what critical literacy means were timely, given Edelsky and Cherland's (2006) concern about the popularization and appropriation of the term *critical* and the tendency to trivialize what critical literacy—and critical pedagogy—really means.

A brief snippet from a research conversation with the Grade 3 teachers helped to illuminate this understanding from the first meeting's discussion of preconceptions about the meaning of critical literacy is as follows:

Jamilla: Whatever we are doing needs to be important to us and our belief structures. Otherwise, what are we doing it for? There needs to be some connection to ourselves for it to be meaningful practice.

Karyn: Critical literacy is a way to view the world. It's a key to a democratic education. It's basic in terms of being critical, oneself.

Jamilla: We all have different ideas of things in our own heads ... We might think that we are talking about the same thing, but we're talking about different things altogether.

Dianne: ...sharing ownership and trusting...and trusting the students to be able to be responsible and to think.

Suzanne: If teachers don't ask themselves why, then how do they expect students to ask why? Many of the students in this particular situation are ESL students. We have had Grade 3 students whom teachers were bringing forth as having difficulties. They were Canadian-born but were receiving ESL instruction and couldn't be considered ESL students any more. We're masking a problem that could be deeper than we realize.

This brief excerpt taken from this first discussion concerned the need to define the notion of critical literacy and perhaps points to the idea that *critical literacy* needs to be understood in terms of the dynamics of identity, context, and teaching practices employed.

It was only at this point in the research project that the notion of critical thinking could be separated from the notion of critical literacy (Luke, 1997). Although critical thinking and critical literacy are not the same thing, Luke (1997) suggests that "shared across contemporary approaches to critical literacy is an emphasis on the need for literates to take an interventionist approach to texts and discourses of all media" (critical literacy) and also requires "a commitment to the capacity to critique, transform and reconstruct dominant modes of information" (critical thinking) (p. 150). Through the definition of terms such as these, the teachers and researchers in this project *began* to understand the complex and recursive relationship between language and power evidenced in the twin processes of critical thinking and critical literacy.

As an example of the deeper evolution of the complex and recursive relationship between language and power, Jamilla acknowledged how one's own belief structures are connected to classroom practice. In speaking about her own identity as a young black teacher, she began to see traces of her identity rooted in and through her literacy teaching practices in both explicit and implicit ways. Dianne connected this thought to the all-important roles that teachers play in helping to construct their students' identities through the beliefs they carry with them about who the students are and what they believe the students are capable of as literate beings. Suzanne reminded us of the need to understand the politics of the *local* literacy context when she stated, "Many of our students in this particular situation are ESL students." Suzanne is speaking to the idea that the cultural and political run deep in literacy and that teachers need to be aware of these factors, particularly if they are concerned with all students, including minority students, gaining a chance to define themselves. Through this discussion, the team began to consider more deeply just how literacy practices used in educational settings serve to affirm or disaffirm a student's sense of identity and ultimately students' chances for success in society.

In essence, perhaps this initial discussion revealed an important question relevant to one's critical literacy stance: How do we, as teachers, learn to become more experienced so that we

might learn to step outside of ourselves and our own identities to allow multiple identities in? Perhaps this entails the commitment to be continually vigilant concerning what conditions truly support literacy, particularly for children of poverty or for those who have been labeled 'at-risk.' These are of course ideological considerations and cannot be dealt with in short order. However, through beginning with one's own teaching practices, and acting locally, perhaps one might move from a local position to a more global position that addresses issues relevant in literacy education today.

Summary

This article has presented an examination of the background and context to the Sir Simon George School's decision to implement an action research project on critical literacy as an attempt at school improvement. The article further framed that decision within the theoretical structure which under-girds the project's aim and forms. In its description of the initiation phase of the project, this article presented an example of a practical working-out of theory. The next question, "Where do we go from here?" is related to the clarification of the concept of critical thinking and critical literacy as applied to and appropriate for this intended school improvement project. Assumptions about these concepts and their manifestations in the classroom need to be identified and addressed in order to ensure a shared understanding and a continued shared vision for this project and this school.

This preliminary research chronicles the recursive nature of the process of initiating an action research project, including describing the background of the decision to initiate an action research project; examining the theoretical framework under-girding the project's aims and forms; framing the objectives; describing the initial phase of the project, including establishing a school-wide vision and framework for critical literacy; and some implications for future directions of this research.

Future directions of this project are to design critical literacy strategies, and to assess and evaluate the effects of the project. The research team found numerous strategies that appeared to be promising in looking at critical literacy in action, such as the construct of text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world and the K-W-L process. Such efforts to improve literacy teachers' professional judgment serve as a venue for teachers to have their insights and voices valued and heard.

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