Deconstructing binary oppositions in literacy discourse and pedagogy

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Abstract

This critical exposition challenges three binary oppositions within literacy education in Australian primary schools from the 1950s to the present: the skills-based versus whole language debate, the exclusively print-based approach versus multiliteracies, and the opposition between cultural heritage and critical literacy models. The six literacy approaches are briefly described, and significant criticisms raised by their detractors are argued with justification of claims. The tensions raised by each binary opposition are reconciled and reframed. The article concludes with a call for pedagogical transformation to meet the constantly changing technologically, culturally and linguistically diverse textual practices required in the twenty-first century

This is my personal position statement in an attempt to reconcile three salient polarities within the field of literacy learning throughout the latter half of the twentieth century to the present. While I am an Australian educator, these key debates are also important in New Zealand, USA and the UK. These three fundamental binary oppositions are the 'skills based' versus 'whole language' approaches, 'print-based literacy' versus 'multiliteracies', and the 'cultural heritage' versus 'critical literacy' perspectives. The dogmatism of these polarised literacy pedagogies cannot provide dialectic resolution, that is, a solution brought about through continuous dialogue, to the shifting sands of language and learning in the context of a literate, postmodern society. The assumptions underlying these competing models will be described and 'constructively deconstructed' and the tensions reframed for future literacy discourse and practice.

This personal position statement must be interpreted within my personal educational journey which has been impinged upon in many ways by the aforementioned literacy polarities. I am a tertiary literacy educator with previous teaching experience in private Queensland primary schools. My professional practice reflects a selection of pedagogical principles from skills-based, whole language, the genre-based or functional approach, and more recently, multiliteracies and critical literacy perspectives. My practices, like many teachers, are grounded in principles of ever-widening critical and scholarly educational research. However, as a seemingly

powerless figure beneath the shadow of educational bureaucracy, my voyage has been a struggle of contesting the imposition of prescriptive and often exclusively skills- and print-based approaches to literacy curricula and methodology by school-based administrators. I have consistently sought to honour the voice of the teacher within, contesting threats to my integrity as a literacy educator and welcoming only what affirmed it. It is only in this way that '... teaching can come from the depths of truth, and the truth that is within my students has a chance to respond in kind' (Palmer, 1988, p. 31). The following statement of position has been formulated through the dialogue between literacy research and my own educational practice.

Deconstruction of skills versus whole language debate

One of the most contentious debates that have continued to impinge on literacy pedagogy is the skills versus whole language debate. The traditional, compartmentalised, skills-based ideology of literacy has persisted since the 1960s. While it historically represents the earliest research into literacy learning, its tenets still dictate educational pedagogy both implicitly and explicitly (Ediger, 2001, p. 24). Advocates of this approach perceive literacy as something merely technical to be acquired, as a neutral set of skills that remain constant irrespective of the manner in which they are acquired or used. From this perspective, reading is described as a combination of visual and perceptual skills, sight vocabulary, word attack skills and comprehension (Anstey & Bull, 2003, pp. 67–70). Reading is practiced in such a way that the context of the literature is implicitly regarded as either immaterial to the learning of reading, or ideologically benign (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 191). Associated with the skills-based approach is a false distinction between the literate who possess these skills and the illiterate who do not (Street, 1995, p. 19). Yet such practices often have little affiliation with literacy in use, either in community, occupational or subsequent academic experiences (West, 1992, p. 8).

One of the key criticisms of the skills-based approach is that literate practice is regarded as a fixed, static body of decontextualised skills, rather than a dynamic, social semiotic practice varying across cultures, time and space (Behrman, 2002, p. 27; Macken-Horarik, 1997, p. 305). It also conceals the way in which literacy is linked to the agendas and power relations of institutions and communities – it is not neutral (Gee, 2000, pp.195–207; Lave, 1996, pp. 149–164; Luke, 1992, p. 3). Skills-based approaches ignore that literacy constitutes patterned forms of context- dependent social systems of meaning, necessitating complex interrelationships between social demands and individual competencies (Murphy, 1991, p. 7). Furthermore, reading cannot be adequately described as an internal psychological response (Behrman, 2002, p. 26). Interpreting textual meaning includes a comprehensive consideration of the

overarching functional frame or cultural context, and the immediate situational or social context (Murphy, 1991, pp. 8–9). Most importantly, the situated practice required for students to transfer literacy practice to genuine literacy situations outside the classroom is absent in the skills- based approach (Putnam & Borko, 2000, pp. 4–15).

Literacy theorists now recognise that readers require knowledge that transcends simple sound-letter relationships. Phonological information alone is not a sufficient resource for readers. A reader must know how to apply this information in relation to multiple spelling choices for varying word contexts, with attention to digraphs, blends, diphthongs, prefixes, suffixes, word roots, and syllabification. Furthermore, the reader must respond to semantic, syntactic, orthographic, visual, directional, spatial, and redundancy cues embedded in texts (Anstey & Bull, 2003, p. 69; Clay, 1993, p. 290).

Since the 1980s, the pedagogical pendulum moved from behaviourist, skills-based approaches towards a focus on the semantics of whole texts (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2002, p. 1). Bartlett, Goodman, Smith, Pearson and Johnson, Cambourne, and Turbill, advocated top-down and whole language approaches to reading (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 95; Richardson, 1991, p. 171). Psycholinguistic reading research from which these approaches emerged, acknowledged the significance of the reader 's prior knowledge as a factor influencing success in deriving meaning from texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997, p. 2). It was observed that different text types and reading tasks require differing fields of prior knowledge (Coles & Hall, 2002, p. 106). Furthermore, whole language and process models rightly emphasised the semantic features of literacy experiences within real-world literacy situations that skills-based approaches had tended to disregard (Ediger, 2001, p. 23). However, the pedagogy of whole language also became a subject of controversy and critique among linguistic educators such as Christie, Rothery, Martin, Painter, Gray, and Gilbert (Levine, 1994, pp. 1–8). The whole language approach is based on the key assumption that the written modes of language can be successfully taught through the reproduction of the conditions in which children acquire oral language (Cambourne, 1988, p. 30). Critics have contended that this principle is inadequate for several reasons.

This principle fails to acknowledge that oral language acquisition and formal literacy learning are two distinct processes. The rules of interaction and attendant power relations for some speech situations are known intuitively (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 36–72). However, written language is a social technology entailing a set of historically evolving techniques for inscription. Luke stated: 'The lexico-grammatical structures of written language are different from those of speech' (Luke, 1992, p. 25). Furthermore, the functions and uses of literacy vary greatly across literate cultures and historical epochs. Many extant tribal cultures do not operate with writing systems, and without

instruction children will not necessarily develop or invent reading and writing skills spontaneously (Murphy, 1991, p. 34).

Cambourne's Conditions of Learning theory has also been criticised for its failure to acknowledge the cultural and linguistically diverse textual practices and conditions for early language acquisition across homes (Anstey & Bull, 2003, p. 170; Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 46). Cambourne's theory ignores research such as the landmark ethnographic studies by Chall and Snow (1982) and Heath (1983), who examined a wide range of family literacy practices within and across social classes. Both studies showed that the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which each community and their respective histories structured their families, their roles in the community, their distinct patterns of face-to-face interaction, and how concepts of childhood were played out to guide child socialisation (Heath, 1983; Snow & Chall, 1982). Heath's research also showed that children whose home literacy practices most resembled those of the school were more successful in school. Cambourne's assumption that there are universal principles shaping oral language acquisition is not consistent with this research. Indeed, recreating the conditions of learning found in Anglo-Saxon homes will privilege children from the dominant culture. Educators need to acknowledge and value the diverse cultural and linguistic resources that children bring to classrooms (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p. 35).

A further criticism is that the whole language emphasis on acquisition has lead to implicit rather than explicit teaching practices. Delpit argues that children who are not from the dominant culture benefit from explicit teaching methods and language. Rather than 'acquiring' the dominant discourse of the classroom 'naturally', minority students require clearly communicated expectations regarding the rules for cultural forms of behaviour in the classroom (Delpit, 1988). Whole language methods that rely on implicit teaching practices advantages the dominant cultural group over minority ethnic groups and social classes (Anstey & Bull, 2003, pp. 130, 170). This serves to exclude the marginalised outsider while enhancing the status of powerful insiders. The teacher and the dominant, middle class Anglo-Saxon students are native members, while the culturally and linguistically diverse children are treated as immigrants, therefore highlighting the problematic nature of 'natural learning' (Bernhard et al., 1998; Bourdieu, 1977; Gallas, 1997; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Heath, 1983; Soler-Gallart ,1998; Soto, 1997; Street, 1984). Richardson argues provocatively that with its '... refusal to be explicit ... it is promoting a situation in which only the brightest, middle class children can succeed' (Richardson, 1991, p. 174).

The binary opposition between skills-based and whole language pedagogy can 70 be reframed through Gee's helpful distinction between acquisition and learning (Ediger,

2001, p. 26). Gee defined acquisition as '… a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, which happens naturally and functionally' (Gee, 2000, pp. 113–114). In contrast, he defined learning as '… a conscious process gained through teaching and in more formal contexts requiring reflection and analysis' (Gee, 2000, pp. 113–114).

While certain literacy elements are acquired subconsciously through practice, literacy learning also involves the explication of a meta-language or form-focused direct instruction to describe the conventions or rule-governed systems of communication (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2002, p. 1; Unsworth, 2002, p. 71). The pragmatics of literacy in public life requires an instructional model that shifts between doing and analysis, between acquisition and learning (Baker, 1997, p. 209). The debate should no longer be framed as 'either or' but 'when' and 'for which students'.

Deconstruction of print-based versus multiliteracies practice

A controversial binary opposition that has arisen more recently concerns exclusively print-based literacy practice versus multiliteracies practice. Multiliteracies is a word coined by the New London Group in 1996 to describe two key arguments in relation to literacy pedagogy in the face of rapid, global change (New London Group, 1996). One argument is that there is an increasing array of communications channels and multi-modal, semiotic (meaning-making) systems. This argument emphasises that multiliteracies extends, rather than replaces, understandings of literacy previously associated with print. It extends literacies as writing and speech to include audio (sound), visual (images), gestural (body language), and spatial (use of space) modes of communication and multi-modal combinations of these elements. The second argument of multiliteracies is that the scope of literacy pedagogy needs to be extended to account for cultural and linguistic diversity. This is a response to global changes resulting in firstly, the interrelation of cultures, and secondly, the wider circulation and variety of texts. While society is becoming more globally connected, diversity within local contexts is increasing.

The current educational context, both in Australia and internationally, is one in which the integration of multiliteracies in the English curriculum is now a policy requirement. Systemic educational policy is beginning to alert Australian teachers to the urgent need to reconsider what is most indispensable to literacy curricula, including the new basics of today that are expected to continually change and become more diverse in our multicultural society. Literacy educators must respond to constantly changing

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forms of multimedia communications channels, cultural and linguistically diverse texts and contexts in schools, and engage with state-of-the-art multiliteracies pedagogy,

curriculum and assessment (EQ, 1999, p. 10).

For example, in Queensland Literate Futures emphasises the need to equip students with the multiliteracies skills necessary to be active and informed citizens in a changing world (Anstey, 2002). This educational initiative emphasises multiliteracies in three dimensions: multimedia and technology, cultural and linguistic diversity, and critical literacy. A strong case is argued for the centrality of multiliteracies in Australian society and literacy education. In a publication entitled 2010 Queensland State Education proposals were made for multiliteracies (EQ, 1999). This became the catalyst for a significant initiative – New Basics (EQ, 2002). New Basics has four clusters of essential practices or curriculum organisers, one of which is multiliteracies and communications media. This futures-oriented curriculum emphasises students' abilities to communicate using languages and intercultural understandings by blending traditional and new communications media (EQ, 2001). It emphasises concerns of culturally inclusive practices and the recognition of student diversity.

These are local examples of how multiliteracies are increasingly becoming a curricular and professional development concern for Australian teachers. Past conceptions of exclusively print-based, monomodal literacy [using only one mode; namely, linguistics] need to be reconceptualised to account for the increasing range of textual practices that now count as literacy in the new times (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). There are five key arguments posed by internationally recognised literacy educators and researchers which provide further impetus for multiliteracies: multiple modes of communication, multiple cultures in local educational contexts, continually emerging forms of digital communication, multiple Discourses needed in society, and the multiple identities of the students we teach. Each of these important arguments will be examined here.

The multiliteracies argument draws attention to the proliferation of multimodal textual designs in society. Multimodal texts use more than one mode of meaning-making, such as a combination of linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural or spatial modes. 'Purely' linguistic forms of textual production are diminishing, and there is a heightening of combining modes of communication in society. Present semiotic theories are inadequate because they are founded on an understanding of one mode – linguistics. The making of multimodal meaning involves processes of integration as the reader is required to move alternately between various modes. These modes form a network of interlocking resources for making signs, and at the heart of this process is the multifaceted and holistic nature of human expression and perception. Human semiosis relies on the five senses, our biological means of perception. Each sense is attuned in a unique way to the environment, providing highly differentiated information. In this   72

respect, linguistics does not embrace the full richness of semiotics (Kress, 2000, pp. 62, 21; Kress et al., 2001, pp. 2, 153).

Of no lesser importance is the argument that multiliteracies are tied to the plurality and multicultural nature of local educational contexts, and of language and literacies as a consequence of cultural globalisation (Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995). Cultural globalisation includes the changing relationships between languages and the growing importance of a few major international languages (Lash & Urry, 1994). At the heart of multiliteracies is the understanding that language is polymorphous, that is, language has a multiplicity of purposes and the repertoires of linguistic resources available to different cultures also varies (Cazden, 1972, p. xxii). The scale of human movement across nations has made multiculturalism and the multiple variations of English an unprecedented global phenomenon. The social context, previously defined by relatively homogeneous majority populations, has become heterogeneous collections of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. In this respect, English is now better described as 'Englishes' (Lo Bianco, 2000, pp. 93, 105). These factors complicate access to literacies, particularly as both dominant and marginalised cultures find themselves needing the competences to work with others harmoniously in locally diverse learning environments and work places. The challenge for educators is to create places for community where divergent words of individual experience can thrive. In the multiliteracies classroom, cultural differences are considered a resource for literacy pedagogy. This is a necessary response to cultural and linguistic plurality and the new demands it places on literacy education (Cazden, 2000, pp. 254–255; Cope, 2000, pp. 230–233; Kalantzis & Cope, 1999; New London Group, 1996; New London Group, 2000).

Computer-based technologies also change earlier understandings of literacy, curriculum and literacy research (Bigum & Green, 1993, p. 20). It is not simply that the tools of literacy have changed; rather, the nature of texts, language, and literacy itself are undergoing crucial transformations (Dyrud, 1995; Green, 1997a, p. 4; Leu, 1996; Reinking, 1997). The technical convergence of digital literacy tools allows text, image and sound to form hybrid literacies, transforming the traditional quartet of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Peters & Lankshear, 1995, p. 57; Tyner, 1998, p. 57). Microcomputers amalgamate a rich set of modes for learning to read and write, creating a fusion of linguistic, audio, iconic, spatial, and gestural modes (Delany & Landow, 1993).

Recent research indicates that new skills are required for competent reading and writing in multi-modal, digital contexts. First, there is a need for literacy curricula to incorporate the plethora of digital text types with their less visible boundaries of 73

generic structure. New digitally based discourses exclusive to the digital landscape have arisen and the convergence of linguistic and iconic codes has prompted textual theorists

to examine these elements of meaning making (Healy, 1999; Kalantzis, Cope & Fehring, 2002, pp. 1–2). Second, technological multiliteracies require a new meta-language for teaching the elements of hypertextual communication to complement linguistic grammar as meaning making resources (New London Group, 2000, p. 24). Third, electronic environments challenge conventional notions of reading. The physical non-linearity of electronic texts involves increasingly sophisticated navigational skills and search capabilities (Burbules & Callister, 1996, pp. 25–36; Green & Bigum, 2003; Snyder, 1998, p. 126). Fourth, there are changes in the production, processing and transmission of virtual text. Electronic text is replicable, distributable, modifiable, programmable, linkable, searchable, collaborative and able to be stored and retrieved with ease. Functions such as saving and converting virtual text to print are new components of screen-based writing (Hannon, 2000; Snyder, 1999). Fifth, there is a demand for increased critical literacy skills to challenge, critique, and evaluate partial and distorted textual meaning and the vested interests served by networked communication systems (Burbules & Callister, 1996, p. 49; Soloway, 2000). While there has always been a need to critically interrogate texts, there is heightened moral concern as students access a deluge of texts from powerful, unrestrained and potentially harmful Internet sources purporting to offer factual information.

Also central to the multiliteracies argument is the multiplicity of Discourses needed to participate in the differing institutions and domains of society. Multiliteracies is an acknowledgement of the innumerable Discourses in modern society, each composed of some set of related social practices, identities or positions. Discourse refers to socially accepted ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group (Fairclough, 1989). James Gee, an original contributor to the New London Group, calls this an 'identity kit' (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996, p. 10). It is because of the presence of multiple Discourses and their associated identities in the lives of individuals in society that literacy is pluralised. In life, we shift from one Discourse to another as we present our various selves to others in recognisable ways. Many schools teach the decontextalised, rule-governed Discourse of the formal written text, defined by a narrow conception of literacy. This is not adequately equipping students to master a variety of Discourses for the roles and identities that are already required of them in the twenty-first century (Fairclough, 2000).

The final argument for multiliteracies is that students' identities are changing in classrooms today. Contemporary youth formation is intimately connected to techno-literacy and popular multiliteracies. Students are in the middle of complexity, uncertainty and change more dramatically so than any other generation

(Green & Bigum, 1993, p. 127; Green, Fitzclarence & Bigum, 1994, p. 2). Students today are surrounded in a multiliterate, multimediated, multicultural environment and they will

enter a different job market and economy that is becoming globalised (Luke, 1994, p. 45). There is a major cultural shift, not only from a culture of literature to popular culture, but from print culture to visual culture or image-making, characteristic of the postmodern turn. 'Subjectivity' or the 'self' is formed out of specific sets of social relations and social practices, aided by new, powerful technologies that have become a resource for student's own self-production (Green, 1993, p. 10; Green & Bigum, 1993, pp. 127, 130). The effects of media convergence, cultural and sub-cultural diversity on student identity suggest that it matters considerably if these multiliteracies are acknowledged in the literacy curriculum and in literacy research (Fitzclarence, Green & Bigum, 1994, p. 12; Green, Fitzclarence & Bigum, 1994, p. 1; New London Group, 2000).

In summary, the dominance of print-based reading and writing practice in school literacy programs at the exclusion or expense of the technologically, culturally and linguistically diverse textual practice of the new literacy spectrum used in society outside of schools is clearly a situation that needs to be tempered. With regard to the technology aspects of new multiliteracies, educators must not assume that students are competent in techno-literacy practices because of access in informal social contexts, while access to screen-based discourses in formal educational sites remains unconsidered (Barnitz & Speaker, 1999; Healy, 1999, p. 1; Kling, 1983). These arguments demonstrate that there is a need for multiliteracies to extend, but not replace, print-based literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Durrant & Green, 2000, p. 12; Unsworth, 2002, p. 63).

Deconstruction of cultural heritage versus critical literacy

The third significant polarisation in literacy education is the cultural heritage versus critical literacy divide. Historically, cultural heritage advocates have appealed to the unchanging merit and meaning in historically ratified texts, and the implicit affirmations of fictionally encoded values in the conservative systems of belief represented (Hollingdale ,1995, p. 249). On the other side of the debate, critical literacy educators emphasise the need to develop alternative reading positions and practices for questioning and critiquing texts – their affiliated social formations and cultural assumptions (Durrant & Green, 2000, p. 133; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 96; West, 1992, p. 16). Reading is seen as critical social practice rather than cultural transmission.

While the historically validated and cultural purposes of the cultural heritage position are legitimate outcomes of literacy instruction, they exclude a consideration of how text and textual practice work in the construction of subjectivity and production of culture (Anstey & Bull, 2003, p. 199–205). Critical literacy advocates challenge these conservative presuppositions on a number of issues. The cultural heritage model seeks the reproduction of dominant cultural values of the past, and compliance with the

literacy tastes of the most powerful (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 297). Additionally, arbitrary market decisions play a role in this selective tradition, often resulting in only successful authors being recognised, producing an excessively derivative and homogenised canon of literature (Anstey & Bull, 2003, p. 204). The inter-textual establishment of a dominant literary tradition is inequitable, since minority and indigenous communities also have a stake in literacy practice in a multicultural society (Baker, 1997, p. 192). Arbitrary value should not be given to historically ratified, Anglo-Saxon cultural texts because judgments about quality and inclusiveness must be interrogated in the interests of marginalised groups, and of the diverse purposes of literacy in society today (Hollingdale, 1995, p. 249; West, 1992, p. 8).

Furthermore, historically valued texts are not representative of the kaleidoscopic encounter with a variety of discourses and literacies that children require in society. For example, certain genres such as picture books, popular texts, romance and science fiction are often systematically obscured from the valued literature canon (Wyatt-Smith, 2000, p. 73). Ignoring the pervasiveness of popular culture leaves a significant number of gendered representations and stereotypes unopposed and unquestioned (Singh, 1997, p. 81). More importantly, silencing popular culture disenfranchises many minority ethnic groups and negates valuable opportunities to capitalise on children's interests (Arthur, 2001, p. 187). The cultural heritage advocates need to acknowledge that their criteria for judging the quality of literature reflects the dominant cultural interests and ideologies. Even the selection of children's picture books must be seen as a culturally and politically complex act. Knobel and Healy (1998) argued:

> Through the selection of textbooks, genres, children's literature, media, literate tastes and practices, dominant mainstream cultures are assembled, presented and taught as culture. In this way, a selective tradition of culture is naturalised as the way things are … [universally] (Knobel & Healy, 1998, p. 3).

The choice of literature in schools is ideologically value laden and the criteria for judging the quality of school text are shifting in the context of society and culture (Macken-Horarik, 1997, p. 305). School texts are best seen as key sites where cultural discourses, political ideologies and economic interests should be contested rather than unquestioningly transmitted (Baker, 1997, p. 150).

On the other hand, critical literacy perspectives should not be exempt from   76 interrogation and critique. The strength of critical literacy is its attention to the social and cultural nature of literacy in which materially and symbolically unequal

relationships of power are often implicated and constructed (Green, 1997b, p. 234). However, West censured:

> *It is when we come to the claims for critical literacy that the real difficulties begin. The history of literacy is littered with broken promises. Literacy, the ability to read and*

> *write, is no guarantee of either freedom for the individual or economic prosperity for the nation (West, 1992, p. 12).*

One of the claims of critical literacy is that literacy is expediently instrumental to competent social performance, knowledge and power (Hollingdale, 1995, p. 307). Critical literacy aims to oppose the prevailing structures that limit the access, entitlement and empowerment of those marginalised by racial, class, gender, or occupational status. However, mastery of high levels of literacy does not automatically ensure that social class and power structures are transcended by the individual. Furthermore, low levels of literacy should not be used as the scapegoat for economic downturns, unemployment and poverty (West, 1992, pp. 9, 16). This perspective will perpetuate the 'literacy crisis' myth that has eroded public confidence in teachers (Comber, 1997, p. 27). Comber warned:

> *Despite the contemporary claims of critical literacy, we need to ask for the evidence that supports how literacy solves poverty and crime, and challenges the existing social structures and class distinctions (Comber, 1997, p. 25).*

To promise that critical literacy means future employment is unconvincing to children who have witnessed the long-term unemployment of literate parents (Hollingdale, 1995, p. 307). Research indicates that multiple social, political and economic factors influence those who are at risk in society (Auerbach, 1989, pp. 172–175).

Furthermore, the claims for critical literacy are often embedded in pejorative language that militates against its advancement. For example, the 'oppressor' is defined, not on the basis of one's intention or wish to oppress, but upon one's location in an oppressive structure. More specifically, the oppressor is usually defined as a middle class, white male holding a senior position in a hierarchical institution. In discourse with powerful political figures in efforts to reform institutional structures and educational policies, the pejorative nature of the term oppressor renders it difficult to employ (West, 1992, p. 9).

Critical literacy advocates should articulate and critique their own underlying values and socio-political agendas (Knobel & Healy, 1998, p. 5). Teachers need to reflect continuously on how critical literacy is constructed in their classroom, ensuring that they are not engaging in a form of political manipulation and suppression of multiple points of view (Baker, 1997). For example, teachers have traditionally had a propensity to claim a high moral ground based on the negative critique of

children's popular culture (Faraclas, 1997, p. 168). Kenway and Bullen critiqued:

> They offer their teaching as a non-oppressive, enlightened, and empowering alternative to popular pedagogy and the corporate curriculum. This is not necessarily the way it is understood by students who may experience it as authoritarian (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 155).

It is possible that through critical literacy pedagogy, teachers may unwittingly offer students the implicit message that certain popular and pleasurable discourses are not condoned by adults (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 156). Taking a critical literacy stance will not neutralise classroom literacy practice, since it is driven by its own political agenda for social change (Comber, 1997, pp. 10–27). Furthermore, schools play a strong normative role in society and any actions that pose a serious threat to social institutions may involve negative ramifications. It is important to take a critical position with regard to both texts and textual practice in schools, subjecting the critical literacy classroom itself to analysis and critique (Knobel & Healy, 1998, p. 5). Despite its many contributions to education, critical literacy alone is not the panacea to cure the uneven distribution of knowledge and inequalities of power in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Richardson observed: 'Each new wave of educational practice, designed to improve literacy education, has in turn been replaced by something else' (Richardson, 1991, p. 186). Each pedagogy since the 1950s has contributed new understandings of literacy – from skills-based approaches of decoding to progressive models of text meaning, from print-based literacy to multiliteracies, and from preserving culturally valued literature to critical textual practice.

Taken in isolation, none of the aforementioned literacy pedagogies is sufficient for literacy in contemporary culture. Teachers should evaluate these competing ideologies and utilise effective literacy practices that are supported by the evolving corpus of literacy research. We need to deconstruct polarisations of literacy pedagogies, considering when and why various teaching techniques are preferable in relation to the site-specific needs of our local teaching contexts and the unique needs of our diverse students (Anstey & Bull, 2003, p. 141). Teachers need to see themselves as 'artful intermediaries' negotiating the transition between residual, dominant, and emergent textual cultures (Durrant & Green, 2000, p. 106). We need to continue this dialogue, as we go beyond the central binary oppositions of past pedagogies, transforming these to reframe innovative and relevant literacy pedagogy for the changing times.

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