

# Teachers' Understandings of Critical Literacy:

## An Exploratory International Study

### **The genesis of the research project**

This article grew from a conversation among the three authors, who were brought together through work in Central Asia with the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking project. We were discussing difficulties experienced by our teacher workshop participants in Kazakhstan as they practiced classroom strategies to encourage critical thinking. Sapargul (from Kazakhstan) raised a gentle challenge to Sara (Sally, from the United States) and Angela (from Canada) as North American teacher educators: "How do North American teachers understand and practice critical literacy?" As leaders in a project that advocates democratizing classrooms through critical literacy, all three of us took this question seriously and talked earnestly about how we might best explore teachers' understandings of critical literacy in each of our countries. In keeping with the participatory principles of our inservice project, we chose a qualitative methodology through which teachers' voices and experiences could be recognized.

The three authors gathered data through semistructured, conversational interviews conducted with teachers in our home countries of Kazakhstan, Canada, and the United States. A total of 18 teachers (six from each country) from elementary schools, high schools, universities, and professional development institutes were asked about their training and background in teaching critical thinking and critical literacy. Most of the

interview questions focused on current classroom practices in critical pedagogy, providing the opportunity for teachers to share concrete examples of their successes and struggles.

### **Our own understandings of critical thinking and critical literacy**

In the context of this research, critical literacy is broadly defined as the thinking processes involved when texts are approached with critical analysis of their content, structure, function, and purpose (Green, 2001). According to McCaffery (2000), texts and discourses represent the perspectives of those groups who have the power to determine who has access to the publication process.

To achieve critical literacy, metacognitive and metalinguistic processes must be made explicit (McLaughlin & Vogt, 2001). Through metacognitive processes students become aware of the strategies that they use to make sense of written text and discussions. Students who are accustomed to reading with metacognitive awareness are more likely to connect text with their previous knowledge, and to generate questions which deepen understanding. For both teachers and students, metacognitive development ideally takes place within a community of practice, where the process of learning is emphasized as strongly as the product (Vygotsky, 1978). These concepts of critical thinking and critical literacy are the underpinnings of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking project in which all three authors have been engaged. This project has been informed by definitions of critical thinking that

## Teacher interview questions on critical literacy and critical thinking

- Please tell me about your experience as a teacher
- Training
- Levels at which you have taught, subject area disciplines
- Amount of experience, types of schools
- Geographical location
- How did you come to teach at your current school/university?
- What do you understand by “critical approaches to literacy”?
- Please try to describe a student who is a critical thinker.
- Let’s imagine that you want to teach this piece of text/writing to your students. Talk through the activities you would do based on the text.
- Tell me why you would choose to do the activities this way.
- What would be your goals for teaching the text?
- Why would you choose this text?
- What do you expect students to be able to do when you teach for critical thinking?
- Is it easy or difficult for you to teach in a way that encourages your students to be critical thinkers?
- What characterizes a teacher who is practicing critical thinking methods?
- How did you learn to become a teacher of critical thinking/literacy?
- What help do you need to support you in becoming a better teacher of critical literacy?

focus on its participatory and metacognitive nature. For example, Klooster (2001) describes critical thinking as independent thinking that uses information as the starting point. It may begin with questions, build on reasoned arguments (claim, reasons, evidence), and involve social thinking. Other writers take the view that critical literacy must move beyond individual response and personal discovery to interrogate the curriculum and the everyday world (Cardiero-Kaplan, 2002). The work of Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) describes the role of critical literacy as disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. This theme also underpins the work of critical pedagogues in Australia (for example, Morgan, 1997), who deal explicitly with matters of class, gender, and ethnicity. In the classroom, this approach to critical literacy might involve challenging stereotypes in a given text, or identifying missing perspectives (often those of minority peoples). In approaching critical literacy from a social justice viewpoint, students learn to identify and address issues of power and privilege.

Given the histories of many of the post-Soviet countries in which it is operating, the RWCT project has tended to focus on opening up participation and respectful dialogue within classrooms. This is in accord with the views of The New London Group (1996), who note, “We cannot remake the world through schooling, but we can instantiate a vision through pedagogy that creates in microcosm a transformed set of relationships and possibilities for social futures, a vision that is lived in schools” (p. 72). In North America there have been “waves” of understanding of critical thinking, beginning in the 1970s with an emphasis on the theory of logic and techniques of argument, and becoming more diffuse in the 1980s (Unrau, 1997). Current approaches combine close scrutiny of thought and text with broad inclusiveness. This range of critical perspectives means that our understanding of critical literacy is provisional and incomplete (Morgan, 1997).

We used core questions in interviewing teachers in each country (see sidebar), but of course the geographical and educational contexts vary. As interviewers, we tried to be responsive to our teacher participants, so we engaged them in conversations tempered by our own knowledge of their educational and cultural backgrounds. In the following sections, the interview findings from each country are introduced by a brief discussion of their contexts.

## **Kazakhstan: Sapargul Mirseitova**

Kazakhstan is a large country, with a rich and diverse landscape. It can take three days to travel across the country by train, from mountain settings through orchards, desert, steppe, birch forests, and oil fields. Like Canada and the United States, Kazakhstan is a multicultural country, but it has the recent additional challenge of negotiating its place in a rapidly changing world. While in the curricula of Western countries critical thinking is a key element, in Kazakhstan we have just begun to argue that critical thinking should be an explicit part of our curriculum. In Soviet culture we were accustomed to reading the text without taking into account the social and cultural contexts in which the texts were constructed (McCaffery, 2000). For example, for their exams my students at the University could retell word for word what was given in the book. But when I asked, "What do you think about it?" there was surprise in their eyes. They were likely to say, "Why should I think? The information is given in the book!" Similarly, at first the participants in the RWCT project were very quick to develop literal questions, but they were less comfortable with building their own knowledge from workshop experiences. The participants assumed that workshop leaders had important information, which could be directly passed on to them.

Traditional Kazakh culture emphasizes the authority of elders and teachers. Historically, this attitude has meant that students were not supposed to express their own opinions in front of older people, teachers, and professors, or even to share original ideas about books written by respected authors. There are many positives in such an attitude—for instance, a deep respect for elders, who have lived longer and gained wisdom, is in stark contrast to North American youth-oriented culture. However, it makes it difficult for teachers from Kazakh-speaking schools to accept that their students might have opinions that contradict their own.

In the early stages of the RWCT project, participating teachers struggled with different notions of *critical*, interpreting the word in the context of their prior experiences of being criticized by

administrators, rather than seeing it as a form of reflective practice. Now, five years after the RWCT project began, their understandings have changed, and teachers have become more reflective. At first they found that working together in seminars and visiting each others' classrooms was a challenge; it took several years before teachers were able to listen to varying points of view without searching for the "correct" one. Similarly, at first teachers in Kazakhstan wanted to be told exactly what was wrong or right with their implementation of particular teaching strategies. However, through ongoing professional networks, many teachers in Kazakhstan have learned to take responsibility for their own learning and to share their ideas with each other, and have thus become more comfortable with ambiguity.

## **Backgrounds of the Kazakhstani teachers in the study**

The six teachers in the study come from a range of backgrounds: Two teachers with Russian backgrounds and two with Kazakh backgrounds were educated totally in Russian schools. The other two Kazakh teachers received entirely Kazakh educations. They come from different regions of the country. All the teachers had backgrounds in pedagogy, and one university teacher has a doctorate. They have between 16 and 45 years of teaching experience, all are currently teaching in urban environments (although four have previously had experiences in rural schools).

One of the things that unites them is that they have all been associated with Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking from its inception in Kazakhstan. All have been recognized by their peers at National Reading Conferences in Kazakhstan as outstanding among the 50 other RWCT trainers. They have all have chosen this profession because they have been "teaching" since childhood; and they all like teaching, schools, and children.

## **How the Kazakhstani teachers understood "critical approaches to literacy"**

The teachers interviewed for this study understood critical approaches to literacy differently according to their teaching

levels. Elementary teachers focused on affective aspects of the classroom environment. They recognized critical thinking through students' social interactions with each other and their teachers.

Elementary teachers believed that students should feel that they are important and should be confident in expressing their own thoughts. Their goals were to have students understand content, be able to compare previous and new knowledge, and to recognize literary and moral elements in what they read. Elementary teachers saw their role as preparing their students for life in the community. "Critical thinking should become their habit in everyday life," as one teacher said.

Secondary teachers wanted their students to express opinions and facilitated this by motivating their students to read texts more deeply, question their reading, and engage in discussions with each other. Active learning and response to text were seen as especially important. Secondary teachers expected that their students would become thoughtful readers, be able to evaluate information, and be courageous in expressing their own thoughts.

Study participants teaching at pedagogical institutes focused on self-evaluation and self-direction from the inservice teachers they taught, and they looked for them to accept a range of possibilities: "They should not see it as only white and black." Teachers at the inservice level were particularly concerned with building on their students' previous experiences and knowledge. They wanted the teachers with whom they work to change their attitudes toward the process of learning, and to transform the relationship between teacher and student. They also hoped that the teachers would gain skills of self-observation and not consider themselves as the only source of information.

### **Reflections on the Kazakhstani interviews**

When the teachers we interviewed were invited to take RWCT courses five years ago, as the first generation in Kazakhstan, they were all ready for change. Alexandra, who has 45 years of teaching experience behind her, noted, "What we had before RWCT did not satisfy me, it was formulaic. Elementary

teachers took a positive view toward the process of changing their teaching role, because the young children they taught were enthusiastic about more active learning methods." One of the elementary teachers remarked, "It is exciting to watch them be flexible in their learning." Secondary teachers saw the change as involving more work for them, especially in planning: "It is creative work, it can't be easy." Inservice teachers also recognized the amount of work involved but saw it becoming easier as participants grasped active teaching principles.

The six project teachers' personal theories about education are based mostly on the philosophy of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking project, emphasizing active learning and critical engagement with text. Each teacher's understanding of the notion of critical thinking was not by the book—it was a personal approach based on classroom practices and his or her own experience of implementing the RWCT philosophy and strategies. Though at the beginning I was really concerned that they might not define critical literacy as it is described in the research literature, by the end of the study I came to realize that the teachers I interviewed have begun to construct their own understandings of critical literacy in the context of Kazakhstan.

### **Canada: Angela Ward**

Canada is a federation of regions, and on the national scale it is a multicultural country. There are significant geographical and demographic contrasts between regions. The Canadian province where this study took place has a sparsely distributed population of one million people. The small towns where the interviews were conducted are in transition from farming communities to more urban environments.

In Canadian school curricula, critical thinking is, theoretically at least, woven as a strand into all subject areas, but in reality it is considered marginal by many teachers and rarely planned for or evaluated. The most specific references to critical thinking and critical literacy in curricula are found in objectives for the elementary and secondary humanities areas.





### Backgrounds of Canadian teachers in the study

The six teachers who participated are all from English-speaking backgrounds and have taught mostly in western Canada. The university teachers were the most experienced, with 30-year teaching careers, while the elementary and secondary teachers had from five to 20 years of experience. For the two elementary teachers in the study, teaching was their first “professional” career. Interestingly, four of the six participants came from families in which one or both of the parents were teachers. Several credited their own family backgrounds with encouraging their growth as critical thinkers, citing such family activities as discussions about the newspaper, or listening to a grandfather’s sermons in church. In general, the Canadian teachers did not feel that their own schooling had prepared them to be critical thinkers, although several mentioned individual teachers (usually at the secondary or university level) who had inspired them. Several teachers noted that there had been far too much memorization required of them in their university classes. Many of the Canadians interviewed viewed their own university education and teacher-training classes as a disappointment, so they did not see their postsecondary education as helpful in their development into thoughtful teachers. Critical and creative teachers existed but seemed to be idiosyncratic occurrences. Betty recalled a drama teacher who encouraged students to

rewrite plays from the perspective of minor characters; Ruth, now a university teacher, spent a year teaching overseas as a high school teacher before becoming officially “qualified,” and came to believe that “you learn to teach by teaching.” (We have used pseudonyms for all teachers’ names.)

### How the Canadian teachers understood “critical approaches to literacy”

There was a strong sense among these teachers that teaching for critical thinking involved more than strategies and techniques. As Luke noted,

“Technique is much lower than it’s cracked up to be. Without technique, of course, no one gets anywhere, but the rest of it is transformative. You can educate people to be teachers, and it seems that a person can become a satisfactory teacher and learn techniques, read books, and practice the appropriate practices. And I think that’s really important.... But you walk down the hall of any school and there will be, in any group of 25, maybe five with that transformative quality.”

Ruth saw herself as helping her university students understand social inequities: “I think that what you do when you come to an understanding of the injustice of the unequal power relations in the world permeates your whole life.”

None of the teachers interviewed could readily name particular teaching strategies and methodologies. However, all of the teachers engaged their students in active learning, often favoring a specific approach. One elementary teacher had

become expert at using literature circles. Betty, a secondary teacher, preferred to use drama and writing activities that required students to take on different perspectives. University teachers placed great value on working with text in their English classes. Both school teachers and university professors involved in the study used various forms of student discussion (e.g., cooperative learning, “think/pair/share”), and described student engagement as a major goal.

### **Reflections on the Canadian teacher interviews**

For the Canadian teachers in the study, being a critically literate teacher was more complex than merely learning teaching techniques and strategies. Building community and responsiveness was at the heart of these teachers’ experiences. Their responses showed an emphasis on personality and disposition, and on informal educational experiences rather than on specific techniques. Their own upbringing played a powerful role in teachers’ views of themselves as critical pedagogues. They described reading extensively as children and young adults, as well as having reflective conversations with family and peers. As a professor of education, I was intrigued by the passion for teaching demonstrated by liberal arts university professors in the study. In general, participants in the Canadian group are still “writing the word rather than the world,” i.e., engaging their students in active learning and reading beyond assigned texts to challenge assumptions, but not obviously setting out to transform the world beyond the classroom.

### **United States: Sara Ann Beach**

The United States is a diverse federation of states, and although English is the primary language, immigrants have brought a myriad of other languages to the country and its school systems. The U.S. teachers interviewed all taught in a state located in the center of the country. This state was originally set aside for the specific use of Native American tribes, but was opened to white settlers in the late 19th century. The state has two large metropolitan areas, but the bulk of the population lives in medium-sized towns

or rural communities. Education policies here are “populist,” with a large number of public universities to enable as many students as possible to go to a university near their home. The curriculum for the schools is built around so-called Priority Academic Skills, a list of curriculum standards in all disciplines. Critical literacy is specifically listed in the literacy standards but is addressed only briefly. The literacy standards form the basis for standardized high-stakes testing at several grade levels, which provides a measure of school effectiveness (as required by federal law) and also determines high school graduation.

### **Backgrounds of U.S. teachers in the study**

The U.S. teachers all taught either in a rural community in the central part of the state or in a large university nearby. They had a wide range of teaching experience, ranging from three to 29 years. Both of the elementary teachers taught all subject areas, while the secondary and university teachers taught either literacy or social studies (history, government, economics).

### **How U.S. teachers understood “critical approaches to literacy”**

While their personal definitions were different, all the teachers viewed critical literacy as a way of thinking that goes beyond the literal and helps students make life decisions. Both the elementary and secondary teachers emphasized the importance of making connections, including connections from the text to the real world, and connections from text to text and situation to situation. Elizabeth, for example, described critical literacy as knowing how to learn; and John stated, “It’s helping them transfer knowledge from one situation to another, looking beyond the simplistic to understand why.” The university professors, however, went beyond the idea of making connections to include the notions of questioning, wondering, and analyzing. All the teachers viewed their role as one that supported thinking, decision making, and making connections, and they stressed the importance of helping students apply ideas to new situations. Holly, a grade 3 teacher, talked about helping children know

"how events, decisions, and other people's lives have brought us to where we are...to insist that a child be responsible for their own choices and know there is a consequence for those choices...every time you make a child responsible for what they choose, they're having to think critically about that choice."

John, a grade 8 teacher, went further, emphasizing that it is important for a teacher to help students learn how to use what they know to become involved in the life of the community. Neil, a university professor, summed up his view in his statement:

"There's a sort of dimension of keeping it up and passing it on...keeping it up is how do you continue to be a critical person in a society that doesn't necessarily support critical thinking...and then passing it on is the idea that...what we need to do is...try to promote or support the development of a critical orientation in our children."

The strategies the teachers used to accomplish these goals for their students included the use of writing, group discussion, and art or drama. They all maintained the importance of using multiple texts and making explicit connections to their students' lives.

### **Reflections on the U.S. teacher interviews**

In contrast to the Canadian teachers interviewed, these U.S. teachers did not describe family environment as crucial to their development as critical thinkers. Instead, most identified a professor from their own college careers who had questioned, challenged, and pushed them to think beyond the literal. They all felt that immersion in that academic context, a context that demanded they be thoughtful and critical, had been key to their own belief in the importance of critical literacy. Unfortunately, none of them associated such contexts with their regular schooling or their teacher education courses. While each teacher could talk about critical thinking, several had difficulty defining critical literacy, and none of their descriptions matched those found in the literature. In spite of not being able to name what they were doing, they could describe key components of a classroom environment necessary to develop critical literacy. These components included providing students with choice; creating opportunities for

students to make connections between texts, situations, and ideas; stressing the importance of listening to the perspectives of others; and ensuring that students take ownership of ideas. While all the teachers' descriptions of their own lessons and classrooms had aspects of each component, those with more experience in teaching were better able to discuss the reasons why they did what they did and its relationship to life outside of the classroom.

### **Summary of the data: Themes across all teacher interviews**

Teachers' experiences of critical thinking and literacy appeared to be heavily context dependent. In North America, the teachers with whom we spoke believed they became critical thinkers through family experiences and the inspiration of individual role models, rather than through formal preservice and inservice training. Betty said,

There are many teachers who have influenced me immensely, and there are many teachers who have brought me to these wonderful ideas, given me places to jump from. I think that, for the most part in my career, I've been the learner from these people. It's just recently that I've started to give back.

Given the strong emphasis on individual learning and responsibility in both the United States and Canada, it is not surprising that teachers from these countries attributed their ability to take critical stances to their own predispositions and their family experiences. In Kazakhstan, where critical thinking was not previously encouraged by the state or the educational system, teachers saw their development as teachers of critical literacy to be more closely connected to recent, shared professional experiences. Teachers there were likely to attribute their understanding of critical pedagogy to involvement in the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking project. Kazakhstani teachers also described their classroom practices in terms of strategies and techniques learned through their association with RWCT. However, from previous informal conversations with Kazakhstani teachers and frequent observations in their classrooms, it is clear that many teachers attracted to the

RWCT project were already teaching in a more critical way than their colleagues.

North American teachers had incorporated critical literacy teaching strategies from varied sources and did not use a common vocabulary in describing classroom practice. Indeed, their professional experiences seemed somewhat unplanned and haphazard. Teachers in Canada and the United States used drama, debates, and a wide variety of strategies based on literature to enhance active learning and critical thinking. It seems likely that teachers who have participated in the RWCT project in Eastern Europe and Central Asia will adapt and invent their own critical literacy strategies as they become more comfortable with their guiding principles. In reflecting on support for their practice as teachers of critical literacy, some study participants commented that it was easier to win over administrators than their own teaching colleagues, who were often threatened by new ideas. The constraints of time and curriculum demands also made it a challenge for all participants to implement creative ideas in their classrooms.

## Conclusion

All teachers in the study engaged in practices congruent with critical literacy as described in the educational literature. Metacognitive strategies were widely used to engage students in active learning. Teachers reported implementing small-group discussions, think/pair/share, writing across the curriculum, and writers' and readers' workshops. A few teachers, mainly North Americans, used critical literacy in a social justice framework, encouraging students to challenge their worlds as well as written ideas.

Teachers in all three countries clearly expressed shared dreams for their students. All teachers with whom we spoke want students in their classrooms to become engaged, active learners who question as they read. While their understandings of critical literacy do not necessarily reflect the terminology found in the research literature, teachers in our study from Kazakhstan, Canada, and the United States all demonstrated a passionate desire to support their students' development as thoughtful readers and independent thinkers.

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