Critical literacy

in support of critical-citizenship education in social studies

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KEY POINTS

- Critical-literacy approaches support justice-oriented, critical-citizenship education in social studies.
- Developing learner criticality involves analysis of texts, including exploration of author viewpoints, assumptions made, matters of inclusion, and learner responses to social issues and how they are represented in texts.
- Taking a critical literacy approach to support critical citizenship involves re-thinking how students in social studies engage with media sources.
- Critical literacy aids informed decision-making on social issues.

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How might social-studies teachers enact critical forms of citizenship education in classrooms and what pedagogies support this? This question is explored in relation to literature about critical citizenship and critical literacy. Also, possibilities for practice are considered and two approaches for critical literacy in social studies are presented: a) using critical questions to engage with texts; and b) focusing on media literacy in relation to current events. It is argued that critical literacy offers a collection of approaches that support justice-oriented, critical-citizenship education in social studies.

Introduction

The aim of this article is twofold: first, to briefly explore some contested views of citizenship education and to consider the aims and foundations of critical literacy as a collection of pedagogical approaches that supports critical-citizenship education; and, secondly, to imagine possibilities for practice that are based on critical literacy and support critical-citizenship education in social-studies teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand. While not the same as political literacy, which focuses on how communities make decisions (New Zealand Political Studies Association, n.d.), critical literacy supports critical thinking and informed decision making by individuals and communities, through critical engagement with texts and sources of information relating to social issues.

As a teacher educator, my work centres on teacher preparation and issues of practice and enactment. Questions of practice surface for me in my work. One such question is: how might social studies teachers enact critical forms of citizenship education in classrooms and what pedagogies support this? *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (*NZC*) includes a vision that young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are connected members of communities and international citizens. The *future focus* principle in the curriculum is articulated in relation to exploration of future-focused issues, including citizenship. Learning in the social sciences is explicitly framed as being "about how societies work and how people can participate as critical, active, informed, and responsible citizens" (*NZC*, p. 17). Citizenship, then, is both a broad educational goal and a potential topic or concept to be learnt about. And social studies, as a core subject in Years 1 to 10, is a key site for citizenship education.

Methodologically, this article presents a literature-based, small-scale practitioner inquiry relating to challenges in supporting citizenship teaching and learning in social studies. At its core is a commitment to informing practice (Cochrane-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009).

Citizenship education

Whereas some countries have specific courses in civics or citizenship as compulsory curriculum, in Aotearoa New Zealand primary responsibility for citizenship education has historically rested with social studies. A view of citizenship education has been taken in successive curricula since the 1940s that goes beyond a narrow focus on knowledge of, and participation in, processes of civic life, including voting, to include thinking about social problems and questions of social justice and increased attention to notions of critical and active citizenship (Wood & Milligan, 2016). Citizenship education in Aotearoa New Zealand may be more understated than in contexts where there is explicit teaching through civics or citizenship courses, but citizenship goals are nonetheless a feature of curriculum.

In the most recent curriculum iteration, citizenship goals relating to the development of critical, active, informed, and responsible citizens are embedded in the essence statement for the Social Science learning area. Citizenship education, though, is not confined to social sciences. Learning in science, for example, is presented in relation to developing science capabilities for citizenship, whereby students are ready, willing and able to use their science knowledge (Science Online, 2016). In recent years, the concept of "digital citizenship" has emerged to guide responsible use of information and communication technologies and online interactions

(Te Kete Ipurangi, 2016a). Drawing on a range of research literature and policy documents, Wood and Milligan (2016) argue that across the decades there has been a persistent "tension between the cultivation of independent thought and socialisation through the transmission of citizenship virtues" (p. 67). The different forms of citizenship reflected in various learning contexts can be seen to reflect this ongoing tension between notions of citizenship that encourage challenges to ideas or institutions and conformity to norms of responsibility.

Notwithstanding the statements of positive intent that are articulated in a range of curriculum documents, the notion of citizenship is problematic. There are competing notions of citizenship and the "good" citizen (see, for example, Kymlicka & Norman, 2000; Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2007; Wood, 2012). A distinction can be made between personally responsive, participatory, and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Within Westheimer and Kahne's conceptual framework, the "personally responsive" citizen is virtuous and generally conforming—he or she does the "right thing" by helping others, working hard, and acting responsibly. The "participatory citizen" is emotionally connected and participates actively in community organisations and local and national democratic political processes—he or she contributes to the organisation of community initiatives. The "justice-oriented" citizen may be actively involved, but is simultaneously concerned with the root causes of social injustice—he or she is critically conscious of the actions and institutions of the state, social tensions and inequities in culturally pluralistic societies, and the hegemonic economics of citizenship. The justice-oriented citizen is a critical citizen. For the critical citizen, being a "good" citizen is not the same as being deferential or conformist (Castro, 2014; Kymlicka & Norman, 2000; Zembylas, 2015).

As the notion of the "good" citizen is disputed, so is citizenship education a contested field. Motivations for citizenship education may include the preparation of local and global citizens with knowledge and capabilities that enable participation in a competitive workforce, in support of national economic goals and neoliberal policy agendas, and a potentially contradictory goal relating to the creation of more socially just societies.

Critical literacy and the justice-oriented citizen

For educators interested in critical citizenship, a key question relating to practice is: What does it mean educationally to instil criticality in learners' understandings and feeling about citizenship (Zembylas, 2015), and how might this be achieved? Westheimer and Kahne (2004) contend that educating for justice-oriented citizenship requires that students are engaged in informed analysis and discussion about social, political, and economic structures and that that they "consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems" (p. 243). So, how might such analysis and discussion be framed?

Critical literacy provides a way of instilling criticality and framing informed analysis and discussion relating to social issues. Critical thinking is part of the vision for learning articulated in the *NZC* and a means for instilling values of innovation, inquiry, and curiosity, although the concept of critical thinking is not elaborated in detail, not beyond articulation of the "thinking" key competency which emphasises the use of critical processes and importance of asking questions and challenging the basis of assumptions (Ministry of Education, 2007). Critical thinking, though, clearly involves questioning and challenging ideas and the authority of claims. Sandretto (2006) describes critical literacy as "a critical thinking tool that encourages readers to question the construction and production of texts" (p. 23). This involves questions of representation, inclusion and exclusion, and consideration of the effects of texts and how texts relate to readers' own lives. Critical literacy thus presents a means of enacting criticality.

Rather than being a specific technique, critical literacy represents an orientation to learning and a collection of teaching and learning strategies. Strategies used might include taking different reading positions, contesting texts from everyday life, juxtaposing texts and reading different accounts of the same event, focusing on word choice and portrayals, and engaging in debate (Luke, 2012; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Critical literacy is closely entwined with critical citizenship, in the Freirean sense that engagement with various texts supports students to engage with issues of social justice in their own communities, question historically created power relations and institutions, and develop agency to challenge those institutions (Freebody, Muspratt & Dwyer, 2012; Luke, 2012). Critical engagement with texts provides a foundation for engaging with social issues, considering the actions of social and political institutions in framing events and, ultimately, for making informed decisions about social action.

There are multiple critical literacies, including critical media literacy (relating to media sources and representations of news) and critical information literacy (relating to digital information sources). In common with each other, though, critical literacies view language and texts as principal means for representing and reshaping possible worlds, and the development of critical literacy "entails an understanding of how texts and discourses

can be manipulated to represent and, indeed, alter the world" (Luke, 2012, p. 9). Teaching for critical literacy is focused on the development of learner criticality, through engagement with and questioning of the authority, perspectives and biases of texts and information sources. News media, the internet, and a range of sources, including primary and secondary historical sources and textbooks, help shape understandings about the social world and social issues, so engaging critically with these sources is central to learning in social studies and the social sciences more broadly.

With a focus on learning about social issues, it can be argued that social studies classrooms and the content of social studies is the best context within which to teach students how to question truths, sources and evidence, to be critical consumers of information, and to make sense of social issues and associated impacts on their own lives (see, for example, Bell Soares & Wood, 2010). Critical literacy, while often described in the context of teaching literacy and English education (because of the "literacy" element), is consistent with the aims for learning in social studies that are espoused in *NZC*; specifically, the aims that students develop the knowledge and skills to engage critically with societal issues, to understand how societies are organised and work, and how perspectives, values, and viewpoints shape social interactions and responses. Also, critical literacy is complementary to ways of knowing in senior social sciences subjects, including history and geography, where critical thinking is emphasised. For example, within the senior secondary curriculum guide for history, emphasis is placed on learning in history that encourages students "to question accepted interpretations of the past and to consider contesting theories of historians and commentators" (Te Kete Ipurangi [TKI], 2016b, para. 6). The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) achievement standards for national assessment relating to source interpretation and analysis require students to engage with perspectives, limitations of evidence, reliability and bias, intent and motivations, and the influence and significance of sources (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2016a). This invites critical engagement with historical texts. Similarly and in another subject example, the geography achievement standards that relate to the exploration of New Zealand geographical issues emphasise understanding of viewpoints on issues, which is unpacked to mean engaging with beliefs, values and perspectives and using specific information (NZQA, 2016b). This means engaging with texts that reveal viewpoints or positions taken on social issues, to consider the underlying values and different perspectives on these matters. This engagement is a form of critical literacy, undertaken in subject context and drawing on disciplinary knowledge (Sheehan & Howson, 2012) to make sense of what is read and the social issues in question.

Critical literacy in social studies, then, while integral to learning in Years 1 to 10 social studies and beneficial for that alone, also supports critical thinking in senior social sciences. It is complementary to disciplinary thinking in history and geography that questions accepted interpretations of events and social issues.

Possibilities for practice

In looking at possibilities for practice in social studies, I focus on elements that support critical thinking in relation to text analysis. This critical thinking provides a foundation for social action, but possibilities for engagement in social action are canvassed elsewhere in this issue. The use of critical literacy strategies in social studies is consistent with a social inquiry pedagogy, as articulated in the learning area statement for Social Science in *NZC*, which supports the development of topics or units of work that focus on social issues. A social-inquiry approach supports learners to engage with different viewpoints and explore different values and perspectives on issues of interest and relevance to them, and consider how people make decisions and possibilities for social action.

In the context of social inquiry, the texts that learners may engage with are many and varied. They include:

- written texts (e.g., textbooks, written stories, letters, diaries, news articles, blog posts, Wikipedia entries)
- visual texts (e.g., photographs, movies, TV programs, YouTube clips, posters, advertisements, diagrams, maps, website pages)
- aural texts (e.g., interviews, radio reports, songs, speeches)

Texts may be accessed in hard copy or, increasingly, in digital form. Authors of texts include writers, image makers, interviewers, television presenters (or directors), webpage creators and others.

In what ways, then, might students of social studies be supported to engage critically with different texts? How might they simultaneously be assisted to think about social challenges and inequities in their worlds? The following are two selected and interrelated approaches that support the enactment of criticality in social studies.

Approach 1: Using critical questions to engage with texts

Central to critical literacy development are the questions that teachers ask, which help learners to engage in critical practices. Questions are used to guide reading and discussion of text. The following broadly framed

questions support critical literacy in social studies. They are derived from Luke and Freebody's (1997) "critical practices" and variations on these described by Sandretto (2006), Sandretto and Tilson (2014) and Bell Soares and Wood (2010). The questions are grouped to support exploration of author viewpoint, assumptions made, matters of inclusion, and to support learners to find their own authentic voice through opportunities to challenge the narrative that is presented.

Author viewpoint and values

- Whose opinion is reported?
- What position or viewpoint does the author take on the particular social issue?
- What view of the world is this text presenting? Whose interests is the author serving? What values does the author appear to hold?
- What does the author want me to know about the social issue? How does the author want to influence my thinking about the event, situation or issue?

Assumptions and stereotypes

- What assumptions are being made about people or groups? On what grounds (e.g., race, age, gender, socio economic position, religion, clothing, education, politics, language, where people live)?
- What stereotypes do these assumptions support?
- What judgements are made about the situation or people?

Inclusion and exclusion

- Were all people's experiences of the event or situation the same? Why/why not?
- Whose views are considered? Whose views are not considered, or whose voice is missing?
- How or where might the voices of those who are silenced be heard?

Personal voice

- How do I feel about this situation or social issue? Do I think that the assumptions made are fair? What makes me feel that way?
- What viewpoints or values do I hold that are similar or different to the author? How did I develop this viewpoint or set of values relating to this social issue?
- What do I think about the way the ideas are presented, or the alternatives that are suggested? What would I say to respond to this argument? What might I do to address the situation (individually, or together with others)?

These questions are not fixed but can (and should) be selected, adjusted and made specific to particular texts, learning level, and social or community issue.

Questions such as these support explicit teaching of critical text analysis and the development of criticality in social studies, as part of guided reading and discussion. They invite multiple readings of texts, where the same text may be returned to and read again to respond to critical questions, and provide a jumping-off point to other texts that provide different perspectives on the social issue. Such questioning encourages "wide awakeness" (Green, quoted in Bell Soares & Wood, 2012) in recognition that individuals view the world, people, and events from varied and multiple perspectives.

Approach 2: Focusing on media literacy in social studies

The study of social issues is central to teaching and learning in social studies. The media is a key source of information about social issues, and screen media culture is integral to student culture in the twenty-first century. There is a shift in thinking about how learners in social studies should engage with media. Drawing on a United States National Council for the Social Studies Position Statement on Media Literacy, Mason and Metzger (2012) maintain that student engagement with media needs to go beyond online participation and consumption of media sources to viewing the media not only as a source of transmission of information, but also as a space where meaning is constructed. Democratic citizenship is inextricably linked to media education, which involves students in analysing and critiquing media messages as well as producing media.

Similarly, but in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, Tallon (2013) advocates for critical engagement with media sources in social studies. She argues that critical literacy offers a way ahead for teaching and learning in relation to current affairs, by widening the scope and shifting the focus of teaching and learning to the cultural uptake of media texts and how these texts don't merely report on events but create ways of thinking and perceiving events, people and issues. It is important for learners to understand that news is a social product that can be scrutinised in relation to its power and influence and its political influencers. Adopting a critical literacy approach means reframing current events teaching and learning in social studies to focus on critical questions in relation to media and news reporting.

Figure 1 presents an example of questions and responses relating to a particular media report. These questions are illustrative only of the types of questions that might support criticality in engagement with media reports in social studies. Students would likely engage with a variety of media and reports on a social issue in order to explore different perspectives, arguments and possibilities for addressing social concerns.

When adopting a critical media literacy pedagogy in social studies, learning about current events and exploring

SOCIAL ISSUE: HOUSING SHORTAGE IN AUCKLAND		
Title: Auckland marae to house homeless	Author: Diana Vezich	
Source: Newshub	Date: Friday 20 May, 2016	URL: http://www.newshub.co.nz/nznews/auckland-marae-to-house-homeless-2016052015#axzz4Dxvv17gx
About the source or publisher		
What do I know about the source? Is it an individual or an agency? Who owns it? Is it likely to have bias?	MediaWorks—an independent broadcaster that includes TV, radio and digital platforms (including TV3, Bravo, Newshub, The Edge, More FM, The Rock, Mai). Owned by an American company. A commercial enterprise that needs to sell advertising, so it may have a bias towards stories with popular interest.	
About the media report or article		
What sort of report is this? E.g. a news report, editorial, blog. Is it factual or an opinion piece?	News report—reports facts and opinion	
What viewpoint does the author take? E.g. For, against, sympathetic to a particular group or	The author doesn't take a particular position by arguing for or against the marae action, but the article seems to be sympathetic to what the marae is doing.	
Whose views are being reported? Who is quoted? Whose views are not included?	The views of Tuku Morgan, marae spokesperson, are reported. The views of any people who do not think the marae should help are not included.	
Does this report reinforce or challenge any assumptions or stereotypes about people?	In the video clip Morgan says "need is need" and "poverty is colour blind." This might challenge an assumption that marae only help Māori.	
About the issue		
What factual information do I get about the issue?	Te Puea Marae at Mangere Bridge, South Auckland, is offering to house homeless people. The marae has had a number of inquiries from homeless families already. It can feed 400–500 people for events, but that would be hard to do for an extended time. The marae is working with other social-service providers who have offered help.	
What are some different viewpoints or opinions of different people on the issue? What do these people or groups value?	Just one viewpoint is reported in this article, that of the marae (through its spokesperson). The marae thinks it is important to help people who are homeless, regardless of race or creed. The marae values manaakitanga.	
What do I think about this? What do I already know about this issue and how does this influence my understanding?	I think that the people of the marae are doing something good. I don't know much about the housing shortage in Auckland, but from seeing some TV news reports I know that there is a problem with housing and that some people, including families with children, are living in cars. I think that no one should have to live in a car.	
Where else might I go to get more information or a different perspective on this issue?	Other news reports, blogs, government media releases, statements from opposition parties, social agencies, community groups, reports about housing shortages in different parts of the country.	

FIGURE 1. ENGAGING CRITICALLY WITH A MEDIA REPORT: AN EXAMPLE

media reports on social issues is less about acceptance at face value of reported events and more about understanding different media sources, how news stories are created, whose views or perspectives they represent, and whose interests they may serve.

How might social-studies teachers enact critical forms of citizenship education in classrooms and what pedagogies support this?

Responding to the question posed at the beginning of this article, I contend that critical literacy offers a collection of approaches that support citizenship education in social studies, through an emphasis on critical thinking in relation to text and media analysis. A variety of critical literacy strategies, when used in combination and infused across teaching and learning programmes and topics, contribute to the enactment of criticality and engagement with social issues in social studies.

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