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Thinking critically in the land of princesses and giants: The affordances and challenges of critical approaches in the early years

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Introduction

During the last four decades, educators have created a range of approaches for developing critical literacies for different contexts, including compulsory schooling (Luke & Woods, 2009) and second language education (Luke & Dooley, 2011). Despite inspirational examples of critical work with young students (e.g., O'Brien, 1994; Vasquez, 1994), Comber (2012) laments the persistent myth that approaches for developing critical literacies are not viable in the early years. Assumptions about childhood innocence and the priorities of the back-to-basics movement seem to limit the possibilities for literacy teaching and learning in the early years. Yet, teachers of young students need not face an either/or choice between the basic and critical dimensions of literacies. Systematic ways of treating literacy in all its complexity exist. We argue that the integrative imperative is especially important in schools that are under pressure to improve technical literacy outcomes. In this chapter, we document how approaches to critical literacies were addressed in a fairytales unit taught to 4.5 - 5.5 year olds in a high-diversity, high-poverty Australian school. We analyze the affordances and challenges of these different approaches to critical literacies, concluding they are complementary rather than competing sources of possibility. Furthermore, we make the case for turning familiar classroom activities to critical ends.

In the Australia context, versions of critical literacies taken up in the compulsory and post-compulsory school years under the banner of text analytic approaches are genre pedagogy, critical language awareness, and poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist deconstruction. Genre pedagogy is derived from systemic functional linguistics and seeks to equip students with mastery of educationally and socially powerful textual genres. The intent is that students will be able to turn their technical mastery to self-generated critical ends (e.g., Martin, 1999). At one end of the continuum, the robotic posturing of genre pedagogy is entrenched in Australian schools, and since 2008 has featured in the stimulus-response tasks of national literacy benchmarking tests throughout the years of schooling. In contrast, critical language awareness equips students more directly for critical work. It shows how language works to naturalise ideology to the advantage of some over others (e.g., Janks, 1993). Deconstructive approaches likewise foreground critical moves. They focus not so much on the syntax of grammar, but on the work of representation in excluding, omitting and silencing perspectives (e.g., O'Brien, 1994).

Text analytic critical literacies were enshrined in curriculum in Queensland, Australia, the state from which we write, through a Years 1-10 English syllabus in the mid-1990s. This was consistent with developments across the nation. The text analytic approaches taken up at that time were notable for addressing two key issues that were not tackled by critical pedagogic approaches: (1) developmental aspects of the acquisition of critical capabilities; and (2) ways of engaging systematically with the features of texts (Luke & Woods, 2009). Two decades on, the roll-out of Australia's first national curriculum, the *Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012), offers new possibilities for critical literacies (Exley & Dooley, in press), but it also brings new pedagogic challenges. Specifically, formal study of grammar was not previously expected of 4.5 - 5.5 year olds yet

it is the foundation for knowledge about language in the new curriculum. There is little in the way of research illustrating how to use functional systemic linguistic understandings to critical ends in the early years. In contrast, deconstructive pedagogy for young readers of fairy tales has been documented (Bourke, 2008). That work came out of a situation where children loved traditional fairy tale books – a point of difference from the unit we describe throughout this chapter.

The classroom context

Ms. Sue Porter (pseudonym), an experienced early years teacher, teaches a Preparatory (Prep) class in a mid-sized government (public) school serving the linguistically and culturally diverse population of a high-poverty outer suburban area. Prep is officially a non-compulsory year of education offered to all children in the state of Queensland prior to the first year of compulsory schooling. However, over the past few years the Prep curriculum has been brought under the umbrella of the “early years phase” of schooling. Since the implementation of the Australian Curriculum began in Queensland in 2012, Prep has been governed by the Foundation-Year 10 Australian Curriculum documents. In Ms. Porter’s class, as throughout the school, approximately 15 per cent of the students identify as Indigenousⁱ and approximately 10 per cent live in homes where English is an additional language. Moreover, the level of significant educational problems, including difficulties with receptive and expressive language, is high in comparison to other schools (Luke, Dooley & Woods, 2011). This is the type of school where pedagogy is being most impacted by current literacy reform in Australia. Since the imposition of a high stakes national testing program, and provision of special Federal Government funding to “Close the Gap”, Ms. Porter and her colleagues have been under considerable pressure to improve the literacy outcomes promoted by successive rounds of education policy-making. As in many other schools in receipt of “equity funding”, the press for achievement has prompted increased instruction in phonics, comprehension strategies, knowledge of parts of speech, and on-demand composition. Additionally, in 2012 the State Government Education System which controls Ms. Porter’s school introduced a new set of resources as part of their response to the Australian Curriculum known as *C2C* or *Curriculum to the Classroom*. The *C2C* resources provide unit content, including dialogue, worksheets and flashcards for individual lessons and assessment items for formative and summative assessment for each 5 week unit. Thus, in many early childhood classrooms in Queensland, these resources have become the privileged texts. This is not the case in Ms. Porter’s class. She believes in providing access to a great variety of texts, modes, ways of working and a full and varied curriculum while improving technical literacy outcomes. As opposed to what is commonly described as narrowing of the curriculum, over the past 5 years that we have been working collaboratively with Ms. Porter her approach to literacy teaching and learning has become both broader and more critical. Crucially, the outcomes of her students have improved over this time and expectations of student achievement are much higher across the school than was evidenced in the past.

Given the student population, Ms. Porter sought to ameliorate the mismatch between the language of the home and that of the school (Heath, 1983) by promoting talk as a means for developing understanding (Vygotsky, 1962). In addition, she took up some tenets of multiliteracies education (New London Group, 1996), in particular the need to overtly explore the design elements of multimodal text. Ms. Porter immersed students in a range of texts with linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial, gestural and multimodal design elements. Further, over this time, we were able to document how she drew on a technical metalanguage

or grammar for describing textual designs (although students were not required to use the technical metalanguage) and infuse various units of work with text analysis skills.

In the next three sections, we trial and document three approaches to the development of critical literacies in the early years, noting the affordances and challenges of each:

- *Approach 1: Business as usual* – Exploring generic structure of traditional fairy tales and exploring identity and reading ‘others’ in reinterpreted fairy tales;
- *Approach 2: Shifting the pedagogical strategy* – Using process drama to develop critical language awareness; and
- *Approach 3: Returning to the known to investigate new ways of thinking* – Using standard early childhood literacy strategies to get students thinking differently.

Analysing the research data

In analysing these three approaches we draw on Bernstein’s (1996) notions of the classification and framing of pedagogic discourse. Pedagogic discourse is the embedding of an instructional discourse of skills and knowledge within a regulative discourse of character, manner, behaviour and so forth. Pedagogic discourse entails relations of power and control. “Power” refers to the classification of categories. Classification is stronger when category boundaries are strongly bounded, for example, when there is little connection between what is learnt at home and in school. “Control” refers to the framing of pedagogic discourse. Framing is stronger when the teacher overtly controls the selection, organisation and evaluative criteria of knowledge and skill. In developing critical literacies, educators continually weave a range of stronger and weaker classification and framing values to achieve different learning outcomes. For example, classification between home and school is often weakened to legitimise the knowledge within students’ life worlds, whilst framing is also weakened to enable a degree of student control, an oft-used strategy for re/connecting disconnected students (e.g., Exley & Luke, 2010; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011).

Approach 1: Business as usual – learning about fairytales and looking for resistant readings

The original plans for the unit were developed by Ms. Porter and her Prep colleagues. This was usual practice in the school and a deliberate strategy for improving curriculum and pedagogy. It involved teachers working across the same year level collaborating on term-long curriculum plans and then producing weekly and daily plans to fit the needs of their individual classes. As planned by the teachers, the unit focused on generic knowledge of fairytales, comprehension of particular fairytales, and deconstruction of perspectives carried by fairytales. The lesson sequence made use of both traditional fairytale picture books and picture books that “twist” and re-interpret the original. In tailoring the unit to her class, Ms. Porter began from her students’ knowledge of Walt Disney DVDs. In doing so, she blurred the boundaries between home and school knowledge. This weaker classification of knowledge is a common move of critical educators and is usually accompanied by relatively weaker framing of the teacher-student relation as students are granted some control of the instructional and regulative discourse at the outset (e.g., Martin, 1999).

Traditional fairytale picture books such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* were then introduced into the classroom. Reading and writing activities involving these books targeted both technical and critical outcomes. Ms. Porter built students’ decoding and

comprehension skills, as well as their knowledge of generic structure. In dealing with the structure of the texts, Ms. Porter strengthened the classification of school knowledge through the use of a grammatical metalanguage focused on the staging features of genre (e.g., “orientation”, “complication”, “resolution”). Framing was also strengthened as Ms. Porter assumed more control of the activities in order to build and transmit the technical metalanguage. These classification and framing values are typical of genre pedagogy (Martin, 1999). One of our observations about the lessons was that the critical possibilities of text analysis were somewhat lost to the focus on development of the technical metalanguage. This constraint on realization of the critical potential of genre pedagogy was identified by early proponents of critical literacies and, as noted by Luke and Dooley (2011), remains unresolved in practice.

[INSERT FIGURE 4.1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

Overtly critical lessons began when Ms. Porter provided sentence-starter worksheets focusing on the identity stereotypes common in fairytales (see Figure 4.1). This activity exposed textual ideologies and required students to second-guess and reconstruct the versions of the world presented in the traditional fairytale picture books (see Shor, 1987). Reinterpreted fairytale picture books were then introduced. Because these books rely heavily on intermodal coupling (Exley & Mills, 2012; Exley & Cottrell, 2012) of written and visual text, time was spent building multimodal comprehension skills. These were applied to develop understanding of the ways that perspectives within the original texts had been reconstructed and reshaped in non-normative ways. Ms. Porter elicited discussion from the students about the interests served and consequences for individuals and communities. Other lessons looked at (i) who wrote and illustrated the texts; (ii) why the author/illustrator wanted to reinterpret the original fairytale; and (iii) what information remained the same or was changed (see McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The stronger framing typically involved in these types of activities has been a point of dialogue amongst critical educators of different persuasions (Martin, 1999) and taps into longstanding concerns about inadvertent imposition of textual interpretations on students. Given the pressures on Ms. Porter and her colleagues, what we’ve called the “business as usual” approach represented a significant achievement. However, in planning meetings with us, Ms. Porter expressed her desire to exploit the critical potential of the new Australian Curriculum. Accordingly, Ms. Porter and her Prep class engaged in two more rounds of curriculum development with two of us taking turns to lead the teaching through approaches two and three respectively. The next two sections document these trials.

Approach 2: Shifting the pedagogical strategy – Using process drama to develop critical language awareness

At Ms. Porter’s request, one of us collaborated with her to trial five lessons employing process drama (see Exley & Dooley, in press). The aim was to explore critical language awareness activities appropriate for Prep students. The lessons were built around the post-modern picture book, *Beware of the Bear*, written by Alan MacDonald and illustrated by Gwyneth Williamson (MacDonald, 2004). Much of the pleasure of this book arises from the way it extends Southey’s (n.d.) original *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. As is typical of postmodern picture books, the ending is left open, thereby requiring the reader to complete the story by drawing on visuals and inter-textual knowledge (Anstey, 2002). We selected process drama as a vehicle for the lessons because of its potential to redress the problems of the stronger framing mentioned above. Process drama helps transform school from a place where teachers tell students what to think to a place where students are able to experience

thinking (Heller, 1995). Furthermore, by allowing students to play out unfamiliar experiences, it enables entry into new subject positions and experiences of sub-texts. The classification between student experience and textual contents were thus once again weakened in an attempt to make textual meanings more accessible to the students. We note, however, that framing moved from relatively weak to relatively strong throughout the range of lessons.

The first two of the lessons deepened student knowledge of the traditional version of *Goldilocks*. Students completed an oral cloze by adding an adjective to a noun group (e.g., “a _____ Goldilocks”) and worked in small groups to mould a peer into a Goldilocks sculpture and completing the following oral cloze: “Goldilocks is...” (focusing on action verbs) and “Goldilocks is saying...” (focusing on saying verbs). The aim was to develop an appreciation of the multiple functions of language, not to skill and drill students’ knowledge of a grammatical metalanguage. Our aim was to avoid subordinating the critical to the technical – one of the limitations of the first approach. In theoretical terms, a weaker classification of knowledge and framing of pedagogy were instituted.

In the third lesson, *Beware of the Bears* (MacDonald, 2004) was then read with attention to the comprehension strategies of text-to-self connections and to concepts of viewing angle, color and focus required for decoding textual images. This story begins with a visual of the bear family arriving home to find the carnage inflicted during Goldilocks’ unauthorised visit. Deciding to seek revenge, the bears wait for Goldilocks to leave her home, enter and wreak havoc. When Goldilocks returns home, she nonchalantly exclaims that it’s not her house but the site of another unauthorised visit. A double page wordless spread is devoted to an image of the bear family exiting through the back door whilst a wolf enters through the front door. The wolf’s incredulous reaction is captured in a wordless double page spread on the last page. The researcher, in the role of teacher, set stronger boundaries around the content knowledge and the pacing and sequencing of pedagogical relations throughout the reading in an attempt to ramp up reading and viewing comprehension skills. For example, in instances of triadic dialogue, the researcher asked students to make predictions on the basis of the book’s cover and as the story reached a climax. When reading the predictable refrains in the text, for example, “But these Puffo Pops were just right”, the researcher deliberately stretched out the sentence beginning, then faded away to allow the students to chant the oral cloze.

The final two activities targeted speaking positions. Students formed freeze frames of scenes from the book and, when tapped on the shoulder, spoke on behalf of the character or prop they were representing. The final activity, “conscience alley”, required students to take a position on the moral dilemma besetting the wolf, that of seeking revenge. A wolf puppet was introduced and students were asked to commit to a speaking position, either that of supporting the wolf in seeking revenge by standing along the left hand side of the alley way, or talking back to the wolf’s desire to seek revenge and standing along the right hand side of the alley way. These latter activities once again offered a weakened classification of content knowledge vis-à-vis outside of school knowledge and a stronger framing of pedagogy as the researcher qua teacher directed the students’ turn of talk as a strategy to obligate all students to participate, albeit for a single turn of talk. This seemed especially important in this class where some students were particularly enthusiastic contributors to teacher-lead class discussion whilst others used it as an opportunity to opt out of participating in oral dialogue. As it transpired, both of these activities made new instructional and regulative demands of these young students and when Ms. Porter identified that some students were not able to “read” the weakly framed pedagogic text, she ramped up the framing by calling on each student individually and holding them accountable for making an oral contribution to each of

these activities. Strengthening the control over the organization and evaluative criteria of knowledge and skill is a move sometimes made in order to complete an activity that is beyond the students (e.g., Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Our reflections now raise the matter of whether this heightened level of control is counter-productive to criticality.

Approach 3: Returning to the known to investigate new ways of thinking – Using standard early childhood literacy strategies to get students thinking differently

We continued planning with Ms. Porter and another of the researchers took the lead in teaching the sequence for approach three. The focus this time, in response to our reflections on the enablements and constraints of the process drama sequence, was to investigate the possibilities of pursuing critical ways of being and doing by adapting literacy activities with which the students and Ms. Porter were familiar. The lesson sequence for approach three drew on strategies commonly used to teach comprehension and genres in many early childhood classrooms. There was an oral reading of the focus text, *Into the forest* by Anthony Browne (2005), and then the class discussed the story and how it related to other traditional and reinterpreted fairy tales as well as other examples of children's literature. In the story, Little Red Riding Hood travels through the woods with a cake for her Grandma. Along the way she meets numerous other fairytale characters, including Jack who has a cow to sell, Goldilocks, and Hansel and Gretel who are starving because they have been left to fend for themselves by the adults who were responsible for their care. Each character makes a case about why Little Red Riding Hood should give them the cake rather than proceeding to Grandma's house. The story ends with Little Red and Grandma eating the cake.

The class worked together to make decisions about the events of the story and the narrative sequence. Utilizing images from the book, students selected particular events and organized and reorganized the pictures until everyone was satisfied that the story board represented the actual story structure. The students and researcher then worked together to produce large print captions for each of the picture display. The students and researcher discussed the merits of each character's claim for the cake in a researcher-led class discussion. Students were asked to decide which fairytale character deserved the cake and to justify the reason why this was as it should be. Students offered a myriad of responses, including that Hansel and Gretel deserved the cake because they were hungry and that Grandma deserved the cake because she was old and sick. The students took the activity seriously and justified their points of view about the "worth" of particular characters over others, once it was made known that having a "who?" answer without a "why?" answer would not fulfill the evaluative criteria of the pedagogic discourse. The students were then set up in mixed ability working groups. Instead of the stronger classification of knowledge and the stronger framing of pedagogical relations in the researcher-led group discussion, control was seemingly handed to the student groups. Each student within the group had to convince their peers to agree with them as only one answer could be forwarded from each group. The final task required the group to decide and record on large sheets of paper which fairytale character would receive the cake and why (see Figure 4.2).

[INSERT FIGURE 4.2 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

During these discussions the students took turns at offering positions on who should be given the cake. Some students were adamant that Grandma should have the cake either because it was originally prepared for her, or because she was sick. Several students were excited by the word "poorly" used in the text to describe Grandma and enthusiastically used the word over

and over as they made their claim for Grandma as the rightful recipient of the cake. Others argued for Hansel and Gretel given that they were starving and needed to be fed. This suggestion was rejected by some students because “Gretel was a whiner and noisy” and so didn’t deserve to be fed. Counter claims were that she had a good reason to cry so should be allowed to eat the cake. One female student argued persistently that Goldilocks should be awarded the cake because she was “pretty and nice”. Others said she was also “naughty and noisy” and had no good reason for this behavior so should not be the recipient of the cake. Finally in one particular group, one child put forward that the notion that each group member should cast a vote in order to make a decision, with the character who most people wanted to win being given the cake. With the weaker classification of knowledge and the weaker framing of pedagogy, the task was no longer about justice and deciding who most deserved the cake; it had moved instead to being about “the Grandma people should get it because there is more of them”. There was some agreement with this point of view, but still others mounted a case that they should all agree before the final decision was made. In the end a consensus was reached where Grandma would be given the cake because she was sick and poorly, but all of the group members would write their own individual votes on the sheet alongside their signatures. The task for all to agree on what was fair and equitable had proven too difficult, but the students were able to articulate their own positions, if unable to convince others to agree. To complete the activity a representative from each group related to the rest of the class which fairytale character would be the recipient of the cake and why. Overall the sequence seemed successful. By asking the students to consider issues of equity and power within familiar literacy activities, the students were freed up to consider the ideological base of the texts they were dealing with. In this way the known provided a fertile space for relaxing the classification of knowledge and the framing of pedagogy so that students could think critically.

One of the students, though, reminded the researcher that by embedding the critical activities back into known literacy teaching and learning approaches the “schoolness” of the activity was placed in stark relief. For at least some of the students this resulted in an awareness that the activity was not in fact about justice and equity, but rather about reading children’s books and successfully “doing” school literacy. As one group reached a stalemate, the researcher started to encourage the students to think about solutions. She asked several students if they thought that cases made by others could change minds so that a single decision could be declared. One student sighed and proceeded with the following dialogue:

<i>Student</i>	<i>I might just go Goldilocks as this is taking too long a time. She (the student who had been demanding that Goldilocks’ looks should be enough to provide her with the prized cake) will never change her mind.</i>
<i>Researcher</i>	<i>That’s interesting. You think we should just get it over with.</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>Yes (nods) [inaudible] it’s just a book.</i>

For this particular student the activity was first and foremost about finishing the required task rather than taking the liberty of relaxing the curriculum knowledge and pedagogical relations. There was no cake that would provide sustenance for a character whether they be old, poorly, hungry or indeed pretty. He had an acute awareness that the task would be completed regardless of the decision made and the fairy tale unit would continue for another day.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the three approaches to the development of critical literacies in Ms. Porter's classroom supports the idea that critical literacies in the early years is not, nor should it be, a single unified method or approach. Instead, it consists of a range of approaches for teaching and learning about cultures, societies, texts and discourses. Each of the enacted approaches demonstrated our shared commitment to the use of literacy for exploring notions of equity and social justice yet each differed in philosophical assumptions as well as the classification of knowledge and the framing of pedagogy. All aimed for nothing less than the students being readers and viewers of a range of fairytales who have cogent, articulated and relevant understandings of texts, their techniques, their investments, and their consequences, and who are able to use these understandings and capacities to act mindfully and justly to impact their worlds.

The first section of the unit demonstrated some inspirational possibilities for teachers who work within narrowed curriculums and under heightened back-to-basics pressure. Ms. Porter taught her students about words and sounds – the basics – at the same time as she pushed them to think about how texts represent different people through different structures and in doing so, to different ends. She drew on text analytic traditions to teach sophisticated technical knowledge and skills for critical ends. In so resisting the narrowing of curriculum, Ms. Porter provided a comprehensive and rigorous learning experience. Her students did not stop learning literacy; rather, they learnt much more through a rich sequence of activities that weakened the classification between students' home knowledge and school knowledge and culminated in critical insights into some of the dominant texts of schooled literacy through a more robust classification of knowledge and framing of pedagogy.

The hallmark of approach two was one researcher's attempt to more explicitly tackle the political aspect of critical literacies. The process drama activities were planned to take the class out of their 'normal' and familiar teaching and learning approaches. The lessons provided the students with ways to consider opinions, values and their beliefs, and despite some issues with the regulative discourse, the students took positions on issues related to good and bad, fair and just approaches. However the novelty of the tasks meant that a considerable amount of time, space and classroom discourse had to be given over to regulating behaviours and routines so that the lessons could progress. This raised for us a fundamental question: at what point does regulation become counter-productive to criticality?

Returning to more familiar approaches to teaching and learning in approach three, but expecting the students to take positions on issues of some importance within these familiar sequences, was our final attempt to investigate the possibilities of critical literacies in Ms. Porter's Prep classroom. The approach provided a structure where students seemed able to consider challenging ideas and express opinions on important issues of equity and justice; criticality was clearly not subordinate to regulation. However, one student reminded us that this remained school literacy: the issues of hunger and poverty, consumerism and family were not rendered real in this teaching and learning sequence. In the end the lessons were, for at least some of the children, about 'get[ting] it done so we are finished' and not about explorations of broader social issues of political or ideological importance to them. In other words, the boundary between the (text analytic) literacies of the classroom on the one side/hand and significant student experiences, lifeworlds, real speaking positions and the power of dominant ideology on the other remained strong. This is cause for consideration about the possibilities of critical pedagogy with its emphases on dialogic interaction, self-determination, agency and social movements (Luke & Woods, 2009).

Our investigation provides several points of contention and possibility for introducing critical literacy in the early years. First, we conclude that critical literacy is feasible in early years classrooms, even in challenging contexts such as that presented in Ms. Porter's class. In the words of Janks (1993, p. iii), these 4.5-5.5 year olds worked to "unmake or unpick" the ideological choices of the author and illustrator. Second, each of the three approaches provides different challenges and affordances. The challenge for teachers is to draw on diverse traditions to re-make critical literacies that fit their context.

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¹ In this paper the term Indigenous is used to refer to students who identify as Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Fairy Tales: Critical Literacy



Name JAHZIAH

Date 3.7.11

You may not realise just how much you already know about stories- about what happens in them and about how the characters usually look and behave.

Complete the following sentences with as many ideas as you can think of to do with fairy stories and folk tales.

*Princesses are king's king's

*Old women who live in forests are WILD

*Giants like to eat meat meat

*Princes are king's king's

*Frogs turn into tadpoles tadpoles

*Animals can often walk and eat walk and eat

*Ogres are donkeys donkeys

*Princesses have dresses dresses

*Princes live in a castle in a castle

*Princesses wear crowns crowns

Who will we give
the cake to?



Hansel
and
Gretel



109 mhz
Hanrahk
HANH
A
B
ZAC

We gave the cake
to Hansel and Gretel
because they are very hungry.

HANH
Moeje
na
Jahziqr