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Exploring Critical Literacy in Swedish Education

– Introductory Notes

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The thematic section in this issue of *Education Inquiry* has its background in the need for research interpreting literacy from a critical perspective. Teaching literacy is not solely about technical reading skills but is also about understanding and the making of meaning. From that point of view, teaching must also consider the use of language, the context within which language is used, and issues of power. The thematic section includes five articles about critical literacy in Swedish education. The contributions were developed after a workshop conducted by Professor Hilary Janks, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She introduces the framework of a critical literacy theory in the first article of the issue. Further, the contributions of Swedish scholars are united in their interest in applying a model of critical literacy designed by Janks to different practices, sites and speech-events, for example policy documents, home reading, teaching and learning practices. The articles offer a wide perspective of critical literacy in education and further understanding of the complex processes in teaching.

At the beginning of November 2012, Janks was invited to Umeå University by Dr Berit Lundgren. Janks lectured, supervised and motivated PhD students as well as research fellows within the literacy field in Sweden. The seminars and workshops took place at the Department of Language Studies of the University. Around 20 researchers from the literacy and language academic discipline from different universities in Sweden contributed to the workshop. The workshop aimed to grant participants the opportunity of enriching their knowledge of a critical literacy framework, challenging the literacy paradigm and paving the way for studies from a critical literacy perspective. During the workshop, the participants concurred that the (then) dominant literacy perspective used, for example, by Barton (1994) did not represent the complexities of literacy education by neglecting the importance of awareness and reflection in a changing literate society.

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The event was underpinned by Janks' socio-cultural approach to literacy and language research. Her special research area is critical literacy which considers the relationship between language and power. She is conversant with the field of New Literacy Studies (Gee 1996, 2012; Barton 1994; Street 1984) which is based on Freire's (1972b) *Pedagogy for Oppressed* and *Language and Power* (Fairclough 1989) which are set in a social-cultural theoretical approach. As a democratic society is presumed to be built on engagement, knowledge and education, literacy competence is a pre-condition of participation and analysis of the contemporary written world (Dewey 1999).

From reading and writing to critical literacy

In recent decades studies around the world have shown that literacy includes not just phonological awareness and skills, as was thought in previous decades, but also a widened perspective of literacy. Previously, the acts of decoding, reading and writing skills were regarded as adequate competence for being fully literate. Teaching reading and writing, with the focus on "phonic" principles (Chall 1967), had been criticised and the focus had turned towards "reading for meaning" (Street 1984). The significance of literacy today lies in its relationship to the cultural, historical and social practice in which it is situated (Gee 2000; Kress 2003; Barton 1994). This movement ought to be seen within a larger shift of theoretical perspectives, from the Enlightenment – which deemed literacy the property of conservatives and textual expert authorities – to structuralism, modernism, post-modernism and post-structuralism (Purcell-Gates ed. 2007). Influenced by ideas from the post-structuralist perspective, literacy development was opened up to individual agency.

Consequently, literacy has moved from an "autonomous" perspective to an "ideological" perspective which reflects that literacy is embedded in a social context and is socially constructed (Street 1984). The paradigm shift from an "autonomous" to an "ideological" model has changed the concept of *literacy*. The ideological perspective deals with *what people do with literacy* in situated, economic and political respects, as opposed to a perspective where *what literacy can do for people* is emphasised (Street 1984; Barton 1994).

The influence of Street's paradigm-shifting work on literacy has been widespread, but it is still a challenge to raise questions about literacy in the globalised world (Street 2009; Barton 1994). Further, an important task of literacy is to make the complexity of everyday literacy visible (Lundgren 2012; Barton 1994). Some research has been done from an ethnographic perspective to understand the local practice of literacy, the use of reading and writing in daily life, the function of literacy, the feeling of being literate, as well as the history of literacy where researchers have looked at the economic and political changes in learning literacy. In education, teachers have applied current knowledge about what it means to be a skilled reader and writer to their literacy practice. Moreover, in many school classes the teachers are inspired by 'genre-theory' and trying to provide students with the tools necessary to read and write

in different genres in order to give them access to language and text (Martin 1989). Yet the genre perspective has been criticised as it seems to maintain contemporary society's specific language and literacy use (Street 2009).

Despite this, there is a shortage of empirical research regarding the links between teachers' and students' reflections on consciousness and literacy – what Freire (1972b) called *critical literacy*. The concept of *critical literacy* is wider than literacy. *Critical literacy* is problem-posing through interaction with active participation where the content is based on what preoccupies the learners' everyday lives (Freire 1972a). The critical function of literacy, according to Freire, was partly developed from historical arguments about *critical literacy* and partly as a result of an educational problem concerning the relationship between 'reading the word' and 'reading the world'. With critical language and literacy competence it is possible for people to create knowledge of norms, values and democratic principles of the society in which they live (Freire 1972b; Dewey 1999). Therefore, one may say that the social environment shapes the cognition and emotional dispositions for interacting in society (Barton 1994; Janks 2010). Since the 1970s, the concept of 'reading the world' has grown and been developed internationally by scholars but, to date, not many studies have been carried out in Sweden within a critical literacy framework. Critical literacy is a challenging concept as it threatens existing systems of power and oppression where the written word is used to promote domination by the elites (Janks 2010). Hence, critical literacy might be a tool to assist society in developing reciprocal, mutual communication for understanding and meaning (Janks 2010). But it is also a fact that teaching literacy without a critical perspective gives teachers control of the pedagogical processes and ideological associations being expressed while the critical awareness among students might create radical changes and demands for power. A consequence is that learning through using critical aspects is crucial for constructing processes of cognitive development (Janks 2010).

In the Umeå-based workshop Hilary Janks explored not only how critical literacy emerged from different traditions regarding teaching reading and writing, but also about the impact language use has on literacy knowledge. Therefore, critical literacy also has its base in critical language studies like those of Halliday (1985) and Fairclough (1989, 1995). Language is created in social societies and, conversely, language use shapes the society with norms and values (Fairclough 2012). Words have a variety of values situated in a social context. In language use it is possible to trace situational, institutional and societal levels where power relations might be expressed (Fairclough 1989; 2012). From a critical perspective, students have to develop an awareness of particular aspects of language use that are represented or codified in different societies and social cultures. How others interpret language use depends on social interactions, ideological imprints including power and different ways of conveying meaning with words or other linguistics features.

During the workshop participants discussed current day literacy competence as it has become a major commodity and citizens of all countries need to be well educated and skilled in different literacy practices in order to promote their effective use of information and language in a multimodal world. It was also highlighted that literacy knowledge includes the ability to locate literacy in different social practices as well as in different school practices. Within these environments, teachers and students have to identify and evaluate different language usages. They have to recognise patterns and distinguish events and practices from other events and practices. In addition, they have to deconstruct and compare events. They have to deconstruct a specific text, and thereby enable themselves to synthesise and reconstruct the text by recognising the design and finding alternatives.

Scholars attending the workshop had plenty of newsworthy matters to focus on, including professional development activities for teachers in schools and the need for more studies from a critical literacy perspective. The workshop participants also explored the importance of raising awareness in students and teachers, of the power that might be hidden within language and literacy use across shapes, modes and modalities. An understanding of the impact of language and literacy within teaching practice – including the awareness of power relations and their cultural impact – could lead to the development of a critical thinking approach and a better understanding of language and literacy; it is thus important to emphasise the impact of power relationships and culture. Deploying the new critical literacy framework in schools could enable youth to examine the discourse of literacy and language that shape the dominant school literacy practice. Janks' model is also useful for exploring young people's vernacular literacy practices.

Within her research area Janks (2010) uses certain concepts to describe a Critical Literacy perspective; namely, domination, access, diversity and design. These concepts were discussed and problematised during various workshop activities and are used by the authors in this current thematic issue. The four concepts can briefly be described as follows:

- **Domination** – those socially constructed and situated embedded signs, meanings and representations which dominate a discourse in, for example, a classroom. The concept also includes identifying the persons who are holding the power to determine a discourse.
- **Access** – how people, for example, students gain access to the dominant language and literacy form in various discourses with concomitant signs, meanings and language.
- **Diversity** – refers to the importance of taking the social differences that students bring with them into the classroom seriously. Who is included and who is excluded fundamentally encodes the power relations in society and determines possibilities for access. Difference needs to be worked with as a

resource for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices. The critical literacy classroom has to be inclusive of students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll), values and perspectives including their languages and their diverse identities.

- **Design** – refers to the product as a multi-modal production that might be transformed to its original shape or reconstructed in a new shape.

The four concepts described above should not be seen in isolation. They illustrate an interdependent model of critical literacy. The intersection of design/redesign, diversity, power, domination and access are crucial for the framework. Taking diversity into consideration in teaching, for example, is a good start but not enough. Students must be given access to design and redesign too as the entry point to literacy. This part will conclude with a quote from Janks: "as a practice, critical literacy is a way of being and doing in the world, underpinned by values that direct us regarding how to achieve a better life for all" (Janks, this issue).

The contributions

Some studies presented in this issue emphasise the significance of critical literacy knowledge as a tool for students to reflect on different ideologies, language usages and how power is reflected in written texts as well as how social and cultural norms are hidden in the text. Five articles in the issue discuss critical literacy in Sweden, utilising the framework for critical literacy understanding developed by Janks (2010) against the background of social and cultural conditions in South Africa. Six contributions are presented below. The first article concerns the model for understanding critical literacy education developed by Hilary Janks. The model can be described as a theoretical framework for approaching and analysing texts. The framework of the contributions is similar in that all consider language and literacy teaching and learning from a critical perspective. Further, the contributions apply qualitative research methods and were conducted within the Swedish school system. Four studies can be categorised as ethnographic because they use observations and interviews. One study is a text analysis of the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school.

In the first article presented in this special thematic issue, Janks reports on her theoretical framework in *Critical Literacy in Teaching and Research*. In the article she applies her framework to various policy documents as well as to an ongoing research project.

Ulla Ekvall's article *Towards Critical Literacy? A National Test and Prescribed Classroom Preparations* is based on an analysis of the 2009 Swedish national test in Swedish as a first language and Swedish as a second language for grade 3. The article is theoretically built on critical literacy discourse. Ekvall presents a brief history of critical literacy since 1970 and explores Freire's approach in terms of which students need to read not only the words but also the world in order to realise power in lan-

guage as well as in relationships. The author's analytical approach applies Janks' theoretical framework for critical literacy to the Swedish national test as a model for understanding critical literacy education. Ekvall explores how the assignment topics and directions are created and what serves as inspiration materials. The analysis shows that critical literacy awareness does not feature greatly in the setting of tests. It is also shown that little attention is given to the impact of gender stereotypes in the tests' design. A positive result was the tendency to give students access to the genre, even though it was more about learning one way of writing within the genre of narratives as opposed to questioning the prevailing genre itself.

Gudrun Svensson's study *Who Owns the Words? Teaching Vocabulary in a Multicultural Class* explores how teachers' attitudes in a multilingual classroom affect pupils' potential to develop semantic and critically reflective competence. Her study shows that critical literacy is mostly invisible in teaching. The study is based on classroom observations in one classroom, audio-recorded discussions between pupils and teachers, and interviews with two teachers among other methods. The study was carried out in a multilingual classroom and the theoretical background therefore focuses on language learning as well as literacy and critical literacy. The analytic tools are Janks' (2010) concepts *domination*, *diversity*, *design* and *access*. What can also be interpreted from the data is that the teachers were unable to help the students understand new words. The lessons illustrated the two teachers' domination through control of the material and discussions, of the learning experience and the students. The diversity among the students and their different needs were not taken into consideration. An interesting conclusion is that, in this case, not even the teachers have access to the classroom agenda. As the teachers cannot find sufficiently good tools to scaffold each student they do not have the possibility to use the diversity of students or materials in the classroom.

In the article *Literacy Teaching, Genres and Power*, Eva Hultin and Maria Westman present a study based on children's written texts from a theoretical framework based on genres and critical literacy where genres are the key concepts. The article aims to contribute to the understanding of text genres as a power-embedded practice. The study presented here is part of a research project where the implications of digitalisation for teaching and learning are studied. The study shows that, when writing on a computer, the most common genre is factual reports which differ from what has been found in most traditional primary schools, where narratives are most common. Data for this article were collected from two grade 1 classes in two different schools. Hultin and Westman conducted observations in classrooms, carried out interviews with students and teachers and collected all digitally written texts from 12 students. The analysis was done in four stages, categorised in typical school genres with sub-genres. Only one genre is represented in this article, namely the report. Sub-genres are personal reports, reports on animals and reports on seasons and seasonal feasts. The analysis also shows that teachers prescribe how and what

to write from a dominant position. Most students take the position of being a good student by doing what they are told to. This can, according to Hultin and Westman, be interpreted as a continuation of power relations in the classroom where students are supposed to learn and behave well. However, some examples are given in the study when students gain agency by not doing what is demanded.

Catharina Schmidt's contribution *The Question of Access and Design – Elin and Hassan Walk the Line of the Four Resources Model* gives another example of how critical literacy concepts together with Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model for reading events can be used as analytical tools. Schmidt's article reveals findings on how literacy education strongly supports coding and that there is a wide gap between the school's textbooks focusing on spelling and grammar and texts that create meaning and understanding. Schmidt's study focuses on the school's dominant literacy practice as well as the students' vernacular literacy. In this article she describes two children's literacy practices which differ inside and outside school. A conclusion she draws is that literacy education needs more dialogue and interaction to create meaning making through reading texts and students' access to various genres and modes.

In the last contribution in this thematic issue Berit Lundgren presents a study conducted in grade 6 of compulsory school in Sweden. In the article *Bridging Discourses in a Writing Classroom* Lundgren goes about showing the writing discourse in one classroom and how students learn through studying a topic, and scrutinising the teaching of writing persuasive texts. She explores how critical literacy can be vital in research within in a sociocultural framework. The empirical sources consist of mainly non-participative observations, the teacher's lesson plan and 11 students' written texts. The study was conducted in one grade 6 class and both processes (teaching) and products (students' texts) were studied. The study's main finding shows that students gain access to a dominant genre structure through dialogues, feedback and own reflections. The teacher deconstructs the genre, a letter to the editor of a newspaper, by showing the students the distinguishing structure of this genre. Despite teaching the structure, not all students were capable of reconstructing a letter to an editor.

This paragraph concludes the introductory notes and marks the commencement of an in-depth presentation of various studies applying Janks' critical literacy theoretical framework in educational research. These studies offer possibilities of what teaching could be like. The contributions, briefly introduced, reveal that teaching is often uncritical, unreflective and sometimes even unconscious. Yet this does not imply that teachers do not adhere to professional standards. When teaching is uncritical it might, as Janks argues, follow the dominating mainstream educational discourse unquestioningly. When debating this issue, it is important to appreciate that teaching is closely influenced by policy documents, social norms and values, and cultural models. The articles show that teachers are not sensitised to the value of asking themselves and their students questions such as: which values are conveyed by words;

what are the sources that legitimate language use in texts; and how is it possible to deconstruct the meaning of the content? What is also presented is that teachers use a variety of methods to teach literacy and this, in turn, sustains diversity in learning styles. No teaching model is universally and exclusively correct since teaching from a sociocultural and critical literacy perspective depends on the characteristics of the people, schools and societies involved – factors that, at times, have an imperceptible, but real, influence on the teaching process. As has been seen, in attempting to show the dynamic nature of teaching from a critical literacy perspective, the workshop highlighted that a constantly developing world needs new ways of communicating, teaching and learning. In concluding, the scholars attending the workshop together raised questions about the values, norms, patterns and processes included in language and literacy use, as well as the ways that individuals, students, might be empowered in relation to literacy in a school and teaching context. The workshop and the writing took us all on a journey to reflect on teaching and learning, on the ways in which teachers encounter students and texts.

Berit Lundgren is doctor in Educational work at Umea University, Department of Language Studies. Her research fields are language and literacy from an educational perspective. Currently she is conducting research in compulsory schools in Sweden as well as in multilingual schools in South Africa. She has published articles, for example about literacy teaching, *Bridging discourses in a writing classroom*, Student Teachers' narratives, *Reading events from child to student* and young students' vernacular literacy, *Elvaåringars textbruk till vardags och i skolan*.

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