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Democratic citizenship, critical literacy and educational policy in England: a conceptual paradox?

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies a conceptual paradox between recent educational policy in England and a social-democratic understanding of critical literacy. Recent political events including Brexit, the 2020 U. S. Presidential Election, and the Coronavirus Pandemic reiterate the need for pedagogies that equip students to critique information circulated online. After setting out critical literacy's genealogy as a democratic educational model, the authors situate these theoretical approaches within the context of English secondary education reform. The article then draws on teacher agency research to consider the practical barriers to implementing a critical literacy pedagogy capable of navigating the present political landscape. Addressing gaps within literary education and digital media research, the overall argument is that educational policy in England since 2010 has served the priorities of a neoliberal state system. In this context, enacting the democratic, social-justice orientated critical literacy demanded by the challenges of communicating in the twenty-first-century is both daunting and urgent.

Introduction

In September 2020, the Department of Education (DfE) issued guidance for school leaders and teachers demanding that schools in England do not teach material that might be seen to express a desire to end capitalism (DfE, 2020). Considered an 'extreme political stance', the guidance appeared to equate anti-capitalism with the opposition of free speech, illegal activity and 'the desire to overthrow democracy' altogether (Department for Education, 2020). Though the guidance pertained to the teaching of health, sex and relationships in schools in England, the recommendations have broader pedagogical implications beyond this subject. One such approach might be critical literacy – that is, the skills to analyse and critique multi-media forms and their relationship to the social and political systems governing everyday life (Luke, 2012, p. 6). Given the term's Marxist cultural roots, and recognition as an 'emancipatory project' (Janks, Comber, Janks, & Hruby, 2019, p. 36), how might such an educational model – informed by notions of critique, resistance and democratic participation – operate within these parameters? Does such governmental prescriptivism signal the end of critical literacy

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pedagogies as a precursor of social justice? Or, rather, make Allan Luke's definition of the term as 'about who in the modern state will have a privileged position in specifying what will count as literacy' (Luke, 1997, p. 310) all the more relevant?

If we accept that schools themselves are public spheres and that democracy is an educational process, constituted through deliberative debate (Dewey, 1922 [1916]),the opposition of anti-capitalist perspectives and democracy begs the question of the kind of civic participation on offer in the sphere of the school and the national public. Democracy, whether conceived in participatory, deliberative or agonistic terms, recognises the importance of plurality and contestation, 'the presence of different views or arguments, which are able to be negotiated, or put against each other in argumentation' (Englund, 2000, p. 311). Yet the role of the education system in cultivating students' democratic capacities of communicative power and critical reflexivity appears increasingly deprivileged in favour of forms of knowledge acquisition that are in keeping with the status quo. As we shall see throughout this article, this government recommendation is suggestive of a recent educational trend since, in which critical literacy as a precursor for an egalitarian democracy is under threat at a curricular level.

A further stimulus for our paper is the misinformation surrounding the global Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), prompting a renewed interest in critical media literacy. In 2020, the World Health Organisation declared an 'infodemic' of misinformation on online platforms, especially that concerning the causes and treatment of the virus. (World Health Organisation, 2020) Scholars and commentators have been quick to attend to social media's role in circulating these false claims and the failure of platforms to mitigate against them (see Cinelli et al., 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020; Mian & Khan, 2020). In the UK, the media regulator, Ofcom, produced a set of resources for 'cutting through the COVID-19 confusion' (Ofcom, 2020b) following their commission of an ongoing weekly online survey of how young people between 12–15 are receiving and acting on information during the pandemic, including which sources they trust most. But it is notable that awareness of the bias and non-regulated information circulating on online platforms has failed to keep pace with the proportion of individuals using them, with 52% of the young people who responded agreeing that they 'find it hard to know what is true and what is false about Coronavirus' (Ofcom, 2020a).[1]

Parallels can be drawn between governmental limitations on teaching political perspectives, COVID-19 misinformation and the so-called 'post-truth' era. The Presidential Election of Donald Trump in the US and the UK's Brexit referendum saw 'fake news' harnessed as a rhetorical buzzword within a political arena clouded by misinformation and undemocratic campaign strategies, heralding our entrance into an era of 'post-truth' (Hodges, 2018; Mair, Clark, Snoddy, & Tait, 2017; Suiter, 2016). As many commentators have noted, misinformation and fake news are not new phenomena, but technological developments have 'allowed modern forms of fake news to be created, targeted, consumed and spread with unprecedented ease and speed' (National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 5). Amid these concerns, the responsibility of global media organisations to police the content they publish in the 'post-truth' era is often highlighted alongside the need for children and young people to be taught critical literacy skills suitable for the twenty-first century (Chichester in Halliday, 2017; Scheicher in Siddique, 2017). These global technological

and political shifts reveal an ongoing need for an increase in young people's ability to discern reputable information, decode hidden biases and political agendas, and critically appraise information and how it is constructed, presented and circulated as active citizens.

This political context instigated interest in whether children are equipped to assess the credibility of news sources they encounter online (see Bonnet & Rosenbaum, 2020; Notley & Dezuanni, 2019; Ricoy, Sánchez-Martínez, & Feliz-Murias, 2019). Technological developments have shaped the changing nature of critical literacies for the twenty-first century (Durham & Kellner, 2012; Fleming, 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005; Snyder, 2005) and there are now questions surrounding the purchase of critical literacy as a tool against the ideologies of the present (Bonnet & Rosenbaum, 2020; Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2013; Kellner & Share, 2005). Robin Alexander identifies a 'widening gulf between discourse and values, within the classroom and outside it, and the particular challenge to both language and democracy of a currently corrosive alliance of digital technology and "post-truth" political rhetoric' (Alexander, 2019, p. 5). Similarly, Gianfranco Polizzi proposes that liberal democracy has been 'undermined over the decades by citizens' participation deficit in institutional politics and distrust of institutions and the media', and advocates a dialogue between critical digital literacies and information literacy (Polizzi, 2019, p. 1). These academic developments are paralleled by national educational organisations in England, with the National Literacy Trust advocating for an updated framing of critical literacy skills to reflect the changing digital landscape (National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 16). These global political trends emphasise both the ongoing relevance of critical media – or digital – literacies within a specific context of new forms of civic participation that encompass the internet as a democratic public sphere. This context indicates the need for a renewed conceptualisation of critical literacy education that reflects the changing socio-political landscape and the redefinition of civic political life to include the internet as a site of democratic participation and contestation.

In what follows, we identify a conceptual paradox between governmental approaches to the curriculum for England and the theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy as a condition of civic agency and democratic participation. After setting out critical literacy's theoretical interdisciplinary genealogy as a democratic ideal associated with social justice, this article situates these theoretical approaches within England's educational context to identify a disjuncture between twenty-first-century educational policy and the ideas of democratic citizenship underpinning critical literacy. It then draws on teacher agency research to identify the barriers in the English education system that must be overcome before critical literacies can be reconfigured as meaningful skillsets for navigating the twenty-first-century socio-political condition. Addressing gaps within literacy education and digital media research, the central argument of this article is that twenty-first-century educational policy in England has served the priorities of a highly centralised and unequal neoliberal state system, and has foreclosed a new democratic, and social justice-orientated, conceptualisation of critical media literacy.[2]

Democracy and critical literacy

Despite a long-standing interest in the relationship between democracy and education since the emergence of Deweyan pragmatism and critical literacy studies, the two are rarely put into conversation with one another. Tomas Englund (2000) advocates for neo-pragmatism as a democratically enabling pedagogical approach, but does not directly consider how the democratic thrust of Deweyan thinking – primarily, understanding and respecting a plurality of perspectives, embracing the rationality of collective decision making, and developing the communicative and deliberative skills for political participation and constructive agency (see also Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 361) – lays theoretically at the core of critical literacy. Peter Dahlgren briefly touches on this linkage in his essay on the internet and forms of democratic participation:

> Some degree of literacy is essential (for democratic participation in civic culture); people must be able to make sense of that which circulates in the public sphere and to understand the world they live in. They also must have the ability to express their own ideas if they are to partake in the public sphere's processes of opinion formation and/or engage in other political activities; communicative competencies are indispensable for a democratic citizenry. (Dahlgren, 2000, p. 337)

While Dahlgren notes the importance of students' ability to develop 'communicative competencies' to help prepare them for active democratic citizenry, it is worth noting the commonalities between the act of 'making sense of that which circulates in the public sphere' and Paulo Freire's assertion that to 'read the word' is to also 'read the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Indeed, both Freire and Dewey's work strengthened the school's role in enacting democracy. It represents 'not only a development of children and youth but also of the future society of which they will be the constituents' (Dewey, 1922 [1916], p. 92). However, it is also crucial that enacting democracy in education is not reduced to a matter of reconciliation to the limitations of the status quo, but instead to recognise how it is 'a pedagogy of radical longing – faithful to students' imaginations and desires – that should animate contemporary democratic education' (De Lissovoy, 2018, p. 126). Here we would argue for the core tenets of agonistic democracy, including its values of plurality, contestation and non-redemptive tragedy (Wenman, 2013) and the enactment of these values through actions such as 'challenging regimes of intelligibility, speaking truth to power, being receptive to "other" knowledges and beings, and questioning or denying parameters of deep power and authority' (Amsler, 2015, p. 111).

Just as agonistic democracy positions communication as the core of civic life, critical literacy also prioritises an educational process wherein individuals bring different perspectives to an ongoing, mutual communication. Critical literacy's cross-disciplinary genealogy emanates from the neo-Marxist and post-structuralist thinking of Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies, which has been crucial in establishing the relationship between language, text and power. Some of the earliest usages of the term emerged in post-war cultural studies, with Hoggart (1957), Williams (1958, 1961, 1962) and Pierre Bourdieu (1971, 1990, 1998) pioneering the view of literacy as both an exchange of capital and crucial to establishing a potential egalitarian democracy (see especially, Bourdieu, 1998). Both Hoggart and Williams elevated the idea of a common

education system that offered children both a creative and civically oriented life as democratic citizen (Stevenson, 2015, p. 535), leading to a change in pedagogical thinking around literacy.

In terms of critical literacy's potential as a voice for marginalised social groups, post-structuralist models of discourse have also been crucial in the development of critical literacy as a mediator of language and power (see Foucault, 1971, 1975). Michel Foucault's theory of power as a truth-making, discursive formation has proved influential to approaches to critical literacy in cultural studies that view literacy as the means to denaturalise power structures and ideologies that marginalise particular social groups (see Janks, 2009; Luke, 1997; Morrell, 2002). Beyond promoting pupils' critical reading and writing habits, much critical literacy research emphasises links between text and society. Behrman's review of existing approaches to critical literacy pedagogy also indicates this tendency. He outlines six broad categories based on student activities that have emerged from previous research into classroom applications of critical literacy teaching: (1) reading supplementary texts; (2) reading multiple texts; (3) reading from a resistant perspective; (4) producing counter-texts; (5) conducting student-choice research projects; and (6) taking social action (Behrman, 2006, p. 492). Indeed, the latter is undoubtedly crucial as an outcome of an effective critical literacy pedagogy, with social equality remaining a central goal of the concept since the development of Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies during the 1950s and 1960s.

It is therefore important to note that while 'literacy' in the broadest sense is often associated with the study of English, 'critical literacy' cannot be confined by disciplinary boundaries – it is more a theory with implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology (Behrman, 2006, p. 490). Various existing applications of critical literacy have emerged in English, English Language Teaching (Norton & Toohey, 2004), sociology, media and information technologies (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005; Simpson, 2001) special educational needs settings (Nelson, 2018), and, most recently, in science (Scholes, Stahl, Comber, McDonald, & Brownlee, 2021).[3] Indeed, the complexities of critical literacy reside in its interdisciplinary theoretical foundations, drawing from reader-response theory; linguistics; poststructuralism; post-colonial and critical race theory; and cultural and media studies. Freire (1986, Freire & Macedo, 1987) asserted the importance of these theoretical perspectives to literacy in the classroom, utilising literacy as a tool to break 'the culture of silence' of the 'poor and dispossessed' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 52). Notably, Freire advocated for a critical literacy in which learners are not receptors of external knowledge, but actively involved in the deconstruction of ideology through critique and, in turn, the creation of their own learning. It is in ideology critique that the link between critical literacy and deliberative democracy is most explicit. Freire's emphasis on the literacy, active knowledge production and textual deconstruction as a social project during the 1960s and 1970s formed into a broader 'critical pedagogy' which encouraged educators to recognise and address issues of class, racism, gender and sexuality and language, as well as to see the connections between literacy practices and social change (Giroux, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008; Luke & Gore, 2014).[4]

In the context of multiple, social literacies, technological developments and the rise of social media led to the increase in critical literacy pedagogies that incorporate critical 'media literacy', focusing on the analysis of popular cultural texts, social media and online

news sources (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Avila & Pandya, 2012; Share, 2015). As we have already seen, critical literacy is key to the ability to discriminate and evaluate multi-media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media (Kellner & Share, 2009, p. 284). The ability to critically analyse the news content is an essential component of contemporary citizenship (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2016). Here, critical media pedagogy aims to develop the media's role in fostering engaged citizens who have the skills to use new media technologies as tools in the struggle for social and educational justice (Morrell, 2008, p. 158).

Existing information literary research, however, offers a relatively narrow view of what constitutes political engagement. Polizzi (2019) explores why critical digital literacy matters for democracy and civic and political engagement, drawing links between critical literary pedagogy, new literacy studies and the discipline of information literacy. Polizzi argues that 'citizens' political literacy needs to intersect with critical digital literacy including 'reflecting on issues of access and security affecting the possibility of gathering information, exchanging opinions or collaboratively preparing a policy document' (Polizzi, 2019, p. 15). While Polizzi is right to point out inequalities in access and participation in online communication, a focus on policy documentation, information and exchanging opinions represents a narrow view of what constitutes democratic engagement; it elides the informal ways in which spaces of the internet shape and develop individuals' awareness of themselves as citizens. Elsewhere, information literary research has tended to focus on engagement with institutional or governmental forms of civic engagement, including government websites and seeking, sharing and commenting on civic and political content, to signing a petition, using alternative media and participating in a demonstration (Polizzi, 2019, p. 3).

These existing scholarly approaches demonstrate the difficulty of arriving at a singular definition of critical media literacy that reflects its interdisciplinary theoretical scope and is appropriate for navigating these digital times. This article utilises a broad definition of critical literacy which encompasses all forms of multi-media as 'text'; it is rooted in the project of social justice, in which both the internet and the institution of the school are crucial sites of discursive hegemony and potential counter-hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) as well spaces of 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1996) and radical democratic engagement (Amsler, 2015). Our understanding of critical media literacy can thus be read in the spirit of Luke's definition as 'the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyse, critique and transform the norms, rule systems and practices governing the social fields of everyday life' (Luke, 2012, p. 6).

Curriculum limitations

There are several governmental, institutional and cultural obstacles to effective critical literacy application in England. These issues are not mutually exclusive. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition of 2010 marked a watershed moment in twenty-first-century educational reform, demonstrating an explicit commitment to the pursuit of neoliberal and neoconservative policies that positioned education as a cultural investment resulting in economic return (Allen, 2013; Finn, 2015; Stevenson, 2015). Michael Gove's highly controversial review of the National

Curriculum was heavily influenced by E.D. Hirsch's core knowledge movement (Hirsh, 1987) and saw a move from a curriculum emphasis on 'Key Concepts' and 'Key Processes' to knowledge recall. As Gove himself promised, 'Our new curriculum affirms – at every point – the critical importance of knowledge acquisition' (Gove in Coughlan, 2013).

This shift to knowledge acquisition was explicitly framed in market discourse and justified as a response to Britain's 'sinking' in international league tables resulting from a 'substandard' curriculum that fails to match the 'pace of economic and technological change' elsewhere (Gove, 2011). Gove's rhetoric betrayed how 'the contemporary political economy of education in Britain constructs the priorities of the education agenda, elucidated in the life of the coalition government through a vocabulary of "competitiveness" in a "global race"' (Finn, 2015, p. 2). This explicit promotion of 'education to economy', and the insistence on a content-driven curriculum, effectively foreclosed the potential for critical literacy in schools. Gove's refusal to 'surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools' (Gove, 2013) was certainly evidence of an educational policy whose priorities would not align with the critical thinking emerging from proponents of Left Culturalism, Dewey and others.

Nowhere was this more evident than in GCSE preparation. Gove wanted to implement a new curriculum focused on 'core knowledge' for all pupils (Gove in Coughlan, 2013, February 6). Before becoming Education Secretary, Gove criticised the Qualification and Curriculum Development Agency on the grounds that it 'does not make its principal aim a guarantee – entitlement if you prefer – that each pupil will have access to a body of knowledge' (Gove, 2009, p. 6). Curricular emphasis on knowledge retention, memorisation, and, as some have argued, rote learning (Young, 2011, p. 267), does little to encourage an attitude of critical literacy centred on self-reflexivity, debate and evaluative critique, and appears far from the 'social process' (Dewey, 1922 [1916], p. 112) Dewey imagined. The focus on consuming – rather than actively *producing* – knowledge exists in tension with the civic-democratic thrust of critical literacy, which questions whose knowledge is being presented, contests the power structures it (explicitly or implicitly) constructs through participatory dialogue. The pedagogical implications of Gove's curriculum reform served as a bulwark for highly prescriptive education models that rely on a hierarchy between student (as a vessel to be filled with new knowledge) and teacher (viewed from below as expert). This 'curriculum based on compliance' (Young, 2010, p. 22) treats education as external to learners, further limiting critical debate in the classroom and 'active learning' approaches in which students are co-creators of their own knowledge.

Changes to curriculum content augmented this educational traditionalism. A month before the General Election Gove declared himself 'an unashamed curriculum traditionalist', who believed that most parents wanted their children 'to sit in rows, learn about Kings and Queens, read great works, do proper mental arithmetic, start algebra by 11 and learn foreign languages' (Gove, 2009). Gove's propensity for anachronism emblematises a wider Conservative stance towards the curriculum that was, somewhat ironically, intended to prepare students with the essential knowledge they needed for the 'modern world' (Gove, 2009). Accordingly, Gove's traditionalist outlook and curriculum reforms have been criticised by teachers and researchers (Allen, 2013; Stevenson, 2015; Wright, 2012 ; Young, 2011) as representing 'a step backwards' (Allen, 2013, p. 371) and

a narrowing of subjects with perceived curricular value. Gove's systematically prioritised STEM subjects appeared to be more readily based on 'core sets of information' (Gove in Coughlan, 2013, February 6). For instance, Gove promised to

> focus central government support on strategic curriculum subjects, particularly mathematics and science. We will continue to provide additional support for the uptake of mathematics and the sciences. A strong national base of technological and scientific skills is essential to growth and employers continue to report shortages of these skills. (Gove, 2011)

Gove's rhetoric betrays a neoliberal logic in which the goal of education is to address a perceived 'shortages of skills' in the economic market. Such a prioritisation of 'technological and scientific skills' overlooks the role of digital media literacy to these industries and the importance of equipping students with the necessary analytical skills to be active participants in a world that is increasingly experienced online.

Despite this focus on technological progress, the reformed secondary English curriculum also elides the importance of developing students' capabilities to engage with multi-media texts from the safety of the classroom. Because the internet enables users to consume, share and produce content, it has been celebrated for its potential to decentralise politics, allow marginalised groups to engage politically, and facilitate a deliberative democracy where citizens participate in decision making (Polizzi, 2019, p. 4). But critically, users must know *how* to contribute and discern ideological bias through the capability to separate reputable sources from opinion; we also need to recognise the internet's darker dimensions and its entanglements with panoptic forms of corporate power (Zuboff, 2019). As we noted earlier, the ability to dissect forms of 'text' and reflect critically on dominant representations are fundamental to informed civic engagement. So, while both digital media and critical literacy scholars have argued that analysing multi-media content is essential to twenty-first-century democracy, the focus of the English curriculum remains staunchly on technological development.

Similar changes also occurred within the Arts and Humanities, where debate and critical reflection were – and remain – marginalised in favour of technical skills and 'essential knowledge' (DfE, 2010). The 2010 White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, proposed that, in English, there will be more clarity on spelling, punctuation and grammar, as well as 'a new emphasis on the great works of the literary canon' – while in foreign languages 'there'll be a new stress on learning proper grammatical structures and practising translation' (Department for Education, 2010).[5] Contrary to Gove's prioritisation of grammatical and translation skills, Luke advocated for critical literacy as a *practice*, proposing that questions addressed within critical literacy are questions about pedagogy and teaching,

> about which modes of information and cognitive scripts, which designs and genres shall be deemed worth learning, what kinds of tool use with reading and writing will be taught, for what social and cultural purposes and interests. (Luke, 2012, p. 5)

Luke testifies to how critical literacy is an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. Here it is worth noting that education is always already political and that to reject the political in education is a political act. In terms of competing forms of

cultural knowledge, beginning in the 1990s with the work of cultural reactionaries such as Alan Bloom and Hirsh, and particularly since 2010 in the UK with the ascendancy of the Conservative Party, there has been an inward cultural turn in the study of English towards a national canon of historical texts. This renewed focus on 'English Literary Heritage', with its emphasis on canonical works, perpetuates the view that certain forms of knowledge (often those emanating from 'high culture') are more valuable than others (often 'popular culture'), thereby creating a hierarchy between those who produce knowledge and those who consume it, while simultaneously fostering a narrow cultural awareness centred on British homogeneity and empire.[6]

The implications of such a curriculum were bolstered by the post-2010 move to linear GCSE examinations that placed greater emphasis on the memorisation of core sets of information. Again, this shift has been criticised by both academics and teachers. Mary Bousted, of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, has condemned how '[e]nd-of-course exams on a single-day test recall and memory rather than the range of skills that young people need in the 21st century' (Bousted in Adams, 2013). If critical literacy can be regarded as a 'semiotic tool kit' (Luke, 2000) that can be used in educational, occupational and civic life, then it cannot be found in the reformed secondary curriculum. Further, there is also the risk of combining a content-driven curriculum and linear examination structure fostering a school approach centred on 'teaching to the exam' in an increasingly competitive landscape of league tables and performance-based pay scales. The *White Paper* outlined plans for schools to be ranked on the proportion of their students who achieve what is known as the 'EBacc' or English Baccalaureate (Department for Education, 2010); this requires passes at grades A–C in 'traditional subjects', including a foreign language, history or geography, as well as in English, maths and science. The English Baccalaureate thus reflected a wider neoliberal-Conservative education reform whose deprivileging of communication, self-reflexivity and knowledge co-creation augmented an educational system which was already fundamentally at odds with critical literacy pedagogy. The combination of a content-driven curriculum, an emphasis on 'traditionalist' academic disciplines and STEM subjects, and a simultaneous movement to linear examinations and EBacc made implementing critical literacy – a set of skills that do not explicitly feature in the curriculum – extremely difficult.

The politics of teacher agency

The neoliberalisation of education had ramifications for the teaching profession, resulting in a culture of increased managerialism, audit and accountability that manifested inline with teacher standardisation. This is ironic, given neoliberalism's supposed commitment to individual self-ownership. The move to Academies and Free Schools under the Coalition exemplified the paradoxes of neoliberal education reform, with the conversion seen as a key driver of results. However, the high level of autonomy promised to schools was matched by an equally high degree of hierarchical accountability. The greatest of these policy tensions occurred between the stated intention to give schools more autonomy, and the reality, where performance tables were used to drive practice in much the same way as state regulation had done in the past.

The introduction of Teachers' Professional Standards raises similar issues of teacher agency. Though intended to improve teaching practice and teacher education across the sector collectively, the Teachers' Professional Standards placed limits on individual freedom. This focus on teachers' ability to display certain skills, accompanied by the curricular emphasis on knowledge acquisition, can be viewed as part of a wider neoliberal shift away from the critical in education policy. As Matthew Clarke and Anne Phelan explain:

> The technical turn in education is particularly evident in the prominent role of teacher professional standards, a global phenomenon in Western contexts in recent years, insofar as these standards are often focused on the skills and behaviours that teachers need to perform rather than the intellectual or ethical dispositions teachers should cultivate. As the term perhaps implies – for, above all, standards tend to standardise – the spread of professional standards reflects the increasing acceptance of neo-liberal emphases on depersonalised regulation in the name of accountability at the expense of the critical or creative, the personal or situated. (Clarke & Phelan, 2017, p. 60)

While Clarke and Phelan do not explicitly mention critical *literacy* here, 'the critical or creative' and 'the personal or situated' are precisely where questions central to critical literacies emerge. If we return to Luke's (2012, p. 2) idea that questions of critical literacy are 'are curriculum questions: about whose version of culture, history and everyday life will count as official knowledge', then these questions are at odds with a standardised profession that actively elides teachers' 'intellectual or ethical dispositions'. Just as critical literacy encourages students to be critical citizens, teachers must also be permitted the time and space to be critical thinkers and practitioners. There is, then, a need for a 'critical teacher agency', that encompasses 'the capacity to act in ways that provide opportunities for all learners to participate and self-identify with the subject' (King & Nomikou, 2018, p. 100) and maximise teachers' feelings of autonomy and competence (Brady & Wilson, 2021).

Despite the limitations imposed on teachers' freedom, they are undoubtedly central to the fortunes of contemporary critical literacies. In the wake of new forms of curricular policy in many parts of the world, teachers are increasingly required to act as agents of change (Hadar & Benish-Weisman 2019; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). This 'critical teacher agency' does not appear to be reflected in requirements for Initial Teacher Education. Instead, there remains an emphasis on teacher's 'expert' knowledge that is reinforced by the requirement to pass Professional Skills Tests even before commencing Initial Teacher Education, and, in recent years, government emphasis on school-centred training programmes. These policies speak to broader governmental priorities whose emphasis on knowledge as a product is 'part of an ideologically driven process of education reform' in which 'teaching and teacher education have been refashioned as technical processes at the expense of richer notions of ethical and political practice' (Clarke & Phelan, 2017, p. 60).

Further to a politically and ethically orientated teacher training programme that fosters 'critical teacher agency', then, schools and teachers must be given the time and resources to focus on critical literacy within their respective subject areas:

> The barriers that teachers face are a lack of resources and time. Schools are asked to do far too much, teachers are stretched too thinly, and they don't have enough funding for additional resources or training. Instead of giving teachers a new thing to do, we should give them the time and resources to do more of, and develop in, what they're already doing. (Economist Educational Foundation in National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 23)

While part of the importance of critical literacy resides in its multidisciplinarity, this also presents drawbacks regarding its implementation in the classroom. This difficulty has primarily been due to locating where it fits within the school curriculum (Behrman, 2006, p. 490; Janks, 2000; Kunnath and Jackson, 2019, p. 54). In the US, Kellner and Share likewise identify the curriculum as a major challenge to developing critical media literacy, citing that it is not a pedagogy in the traditional sense, with firmly established principles, a canon of texts, and tried-and-true teaching procedures. It requires a democratic pedagogy which involves 'teachers sharing power with students as they join together in the process of unveiling myths and challenging hegemony' (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 373).

Given the unrelenting emphasis on content-focused curriculum at all key stages in England, one might ask where critical literacy fit best? Luke's notion of critical literacy as a 'theoretical and practical "attitude"' (Luke, 2000, p. 7) rather than a subject, might provide a useful starting point for considering this question. The National Literacy Trust recently suggested that encouraging critical questioning of all texts across all subjects is an effective way to embed critical literacy practices across the curriculum, concluding that it is difficult to see how improved critical thinking would not improve engagement with almost any school subject (National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 19). Similarly, the Economist Educational Foundation suggests the importance of curriculum integration, rather than trying to 'tack on' critical news literacy as something new (Economist Educational Foundation in National Literacy Trust, 2018, p. 22). Previous studies also approach critical literacy as a 'lens for learning' (UKLA), suggesting that critical literacy can be integrated into the curriculum teaching to be developed alongside the subject knowledge in all classrooms (Hague & Payton, 2010). As OECD Director Andreas Schleicher argues, teaching critical literacy is 'not a matter of schools teaching a new but of building skills to help discern the truth into all lessons, from science to history' (Siddique, 2017, March 18). So, whilst there are already different kinds of literacy practices in many classrooms, a whole-school approach is required to prevent overlap and contradiction, and to ensure that a rich and multidisciplinary critical literacy is being truly fostered.

Conclusion

A further question to be resolved is how we might move critical literacy beyond the arts, humanities and social sciences, or what the curriculum terms PSHE (personal, social and health education). Indeed, Behrman's question in 2006 remains insufficiently answered in 2021: 'What would it mean and what would it look like to be critically scientific, critically mathematical, or critically vocational?' (Behrman, 2006, p. 496). Curricular dialogue between critical media literacy and subjects such as maths and science is crucial in the UK education context, in which STEM and the arts and humanities are increasingly pitted against one another in terms of competing notions of 'value'. The Conservative government have recently announced the cutting of all postgraduate teacher training bursaries for arts and humanities subjects – apart from Classics – in England from 2021, retaining government support of up to £24,000 for languages, maths and STEM subjects only (Department for Education, 2020). This shift is a further iteration of the state-led, widescale denouncement of communicative critique, analytical skills and self-reflexivity within education. As we have already seen, the foundations of critical literacy are interdisciplinary, so future practical approaches to embedding critical

literacy within the curriculum must focus on how its principles may be utilised beyond the arts and humanities. Yet, critical literacy's interdisciplinarity presents a potential obstacle in a knowledge-focused curriculum with subject siloes and increasing pressures on the time constraints of teachers and school performance metrics. The current agenda governing educational reform in England continues to provide evidence of an altered relationship between the individual, the school as a state institution and civic participation. At the time of writing, the prospect of a democratic critical literacy for both teachers and students in England appears a virtual impossibility.

But schools should not be left to 'do' critical literacy alone; it is widely acknowledged that teaching critical literacies should be a participatory, collaborative project (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 373). For contemporary critical literacies to meaningfully emerge, we need a professional methodology to close the gap between academic research, policy developments, whole school agendas and teachers' classroom practice on the ground. If we look across the border, new forms of partnership between universities, schools and local authorities are being developed to implement Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (see Drew, Priestley, & Michael, 2016). Here, there has been a resurgence of interest in the methodology of collaborative professional enquiry (see General Teaching Council for Scotland 2012, Education Scotland 2013 in Drew et al., 2016). In this context, *Teaching Scotland's Future* is part of a policy shift towards collaborative professional enquiry that foregrounds the need for teachers to be reflective and enquiring and key actors in shaping educational change (Drew et al., 2016, p. 19). These inquiry-based approaches offer promising alternatives to top-down dissemination and narrow implementation of educational policy. Yet, while ongoing teacher professional development is surely crucial in bringing about educational change, these arrangements rely upon an educational leadership context that is open to – and actively enables – professional alliances in a landscape increasingly dominated by competition and punitive performance metrics. What is clear, is that the cultivation of effective critical literacies must not only emerge from the grassroots upwards, but be attuned to the digital landscape and global shifts of the twenty-first century. It remains the task of educational practitioners and researchers to locate a socially democratic critical literacy praxis that can simultaneously operate within, and enable students to challenge, the structures governing their everyday lives.

Notes

1. There is also a socio-economic contingent to note, with children from the ABC1 socio-economic group more likely than children from the C2DE group to say they disagree that they are confused about what they should be doing (59% ABC1 vs. 47% C2DE). See Ofcom, 2020, p. 2.
2. Neoliberalism is used here in a broad sense to refer to the 'political economic practices that propose[s] that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In an educational context, the term describes the ways in which the purpose of education in England has increasingly shifted to 'the production of "human capital", "adding value", and meeting the needs of the economy, rather than civic or democratic purposes such as serving the social good or meeting the collective needs of communities' (Au & Ferrare, 2015, p. 6).

3. In Australia, the work of Peter Freebody and Allan Luke provide powerful examples of the application of new theoretical perspectives on literacy, including NLS, to education, especially work on curriculum and assessment in Queensland (c.f. Luke and Carrington, 2002; Freebody and Luke, 1990).

4. Such a critical pedagogy was crucial to the development of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which approached literacy not as a set of skills, but as social practices that vary from one context to another. NLS represented a new approach to the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on skill acquisition, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice – this is what Street describes as 'social literacies' (Street, 1995, p. 2).

5. This curricular depriveleging of analytical skills associated with critical literacy recently re-emerged in adjustments to the study of GCSE English Literature during COVID-19. Pupils taking English literature in 2021 will be able to sit exams in just three areas of the course, rather than four. While pupils must answer a question on a Shakespeare play, they can choose to answer from two of the three remaining content areas: poetry; the nineteenth-century novel; and post-1914 fiction or drama – reflecting Gove's prioritisation of knowledge acquisition and Shakespeare as the figurehead of English literary heritage. See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53,645,824

6. This shift was reinforced by disciplinary adjustments in History, where the most controversial reforms took place. Here, curricular prescriptivism and Anglo-centric bias was heavily condemned by teachers and the wider public (see Harris & Burn, 2016; and Historical Association, 2013).

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