In Scottish education, *A Curriculum for Excellence* emphasises “critical literacy” as an essential tool required by learners to meet the demands of their everyday lives (2009a: 2). However, issues arising from a group discussion among trainee teachers during a critical literacy workshop raised concerns of approaches to teaching critical literacy. Teachers’ perceptions may be at odds with critical literacy’s potential for social justice. A review of literature reveals conflicting schools operating under the name of critical literacy. Drawing on these findings and analysis of questionnaires distributed in two Edinburgh Secondary English Departments, this investigation will evaluate perceptions and practice of critical literacy by professional teachers. The discourse of *A Curriculum for Excellence* is also examined in order to reveal which school of critical literacy is being promoted in policy. Findings reveal that teachers and policy documents emphasise a *deconstructive* stage of critical literacy without explicit reference being made to a productive *reconstructive* stage. Such approaches have drawn criticism from educational theorists for promoting “inaction” on issues of social justice (e.g. Morgan 1997; McLaren and Lankshear 1993). Where teachers and policy do make implicit reference to a *reconstructive* stage, *persuasive skills* are most often viewed as the productive outcome of critical literacy in learners, as opposed to the promotion of social justice. This paper suggests that teacher training and *A Curriculum for Excellence* should clarify the concept, pedagogy and outcomes of critical literacy in order to make perceptions and practice of this complex skill more consistent and effective.

“Critical literacy” describes an analytical skill, but is a term which is less often analysed itself. As Cervetti, Pardales, and Damico emphasise, analysis of “critical literacy” is necessary to avoid the term being misappropriated by educators, curriculum developers and policy makers in inconsistent and antithetical ways (2001: para. 46). With Scotland’s *A Curriculum for Excellence* placing new emphasis on critical literacy as the responsibility of all practitioners, it is important to establish *which* appropriation of critical literacy this curriculum promotes. Drawing on existing literature, questionnaires and policy documents, this paper will examine to what extent critical literacy is understood and practised in two Edinburgh Secondary School English departments and *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

Many popular perceptions of Critical Literacy concern themselves with “gaps and silences” – awareness of what the omissions and assumptions of a text reveal about the attitudes of its creators. This paper will concern itself with the assumptions and implications of perhaps varying definitions of “Critical Literacy” itself, but must also
concern itself with its own gaps and silences. A study of two Secondary Schools is, self-evidently, not exhaustive, and any results will hence never be definitive. Therefore, it is important to frame the results of this limited study as pointing towards a conceptual issue, rather than describing a definitive problem.

Awareness of one’s own cultural situation is essential to such a discussion of Critical Literacy. The focus for this study arose from my own relative situation, in Edinburgh, Scotland, as a Postgraduate student of Secondary English, as a participant in a group discussion during a critical literacy workshop. It was here that I observed concerns in trainee secondary teachers about teaching critical literacy. This became the stimulus for my investigation.

In reaction to this observation, I conducted a small-scale written survey asking the question: “What, if any, concerns do you have about teaching critical literacy in the classroom?” One response seemed to capture the sentiment of this concern: “Destroying the trust of learners by turning them into cynics”. This negative conception seemed at radical odds with the benefits for social justice and citizenship education associated with critical literacy (OSDE, 2010; DfES, 2007). Therefore, this study undertook to investigate the reasons behind conflicting attitudes towards critical literacy.

The first stage of the investigation examined the literature of critical literacy to establish whether there were conflicting mainstream definitions of critical literacy which might account for the contradiction between trainee teachers and citizenship resources of the outcomes of critical literacy. This gave rise to my first research question: “What are the differences between the definitions of critical literacy?”

If it was found to be the case that there were conflicting definitions, this could account for the concerns of student teachers. As variants of critical literacy could produce different pedagogical outcomes, different perceptions of critical literacy could exist among professional teachers which could produce inconsistent outcomes for learners. It was therefore decided to investigate the perceptions that fully-qualified teachers held of critical literacy to answer the research question: “What are the perceptions of critical literacy in practising teachers?” To answer this, questionnaires were to be distributed to English departments in one independent and one community high school in Edinburgh in February of 2009, to provide written responses to stimulus questions. Responses to the questionnaires would be analysed to investigate the extent to which fully-qualified teachers shared the concerns of student teachers; and investigate the extent to which fully-qualified teachers’ perceptions of critical literacy aligned themselves with the definitions given in the literature.

Following these two stages, close examination of the language of A Curriculum for Excellence’s Responsibility of All Practitioners (2009) was to be undertaken to answer the research question: “How is critical literacy presented in A Curriculum for Excellence?” The stage of the investigation would address the possibility that there were contradictions within the document (See Gillies 2006) which presented conceptual
problems for teachers wishing to implement the skills of critical literacy in their classrooms.

Though Cervetti et al. draw attention to the potential for inconsistent and antithetical usage of the term “critical literacy”, this is of course complexly paradoxical. A discussion of the usage of “critical literacy” must necessarily examine competing definitions of the term; and within these “definitions” be aware of simplistic reductionism. However, the assumption of this paper is that we may account for conflicting attitudes about “critical literacy” itself by critically analysing competing definitions of the term, and actively looking for differences in its usages. Cervetti et al. themselves draw distinctions between three main schools of critical literacy. These are: the “Freire” school led by Paulo Freire; secondly, the “Australian” school, associated with writings of Kellner (1989); and thirdly, a “post-structural” school widely written on by Colin Lankshear and MacLaren (1997; 1993). It is important that these three schools are analysed for conceptual gaps which may account for conflicting attitudes to “critical literacy” as a blanket term. The distinctions are as follows.

The “Freire” School

The “Freire” school, as stated, is most widely associated with educator and social activist Paulo Freire (1996). Freire describes the participant of critical literacy as the conscientização (1996: 17): those who learn first to perceive and analyse the presence of oppressive social, political and economic structures within their living situations, and then take political action against these structures. However, Freire refutes criticism that such practice of Critical Literacy challenges the rules of society that maintain order (1996: 17). Rather, this kind of dialogical action is necessary if we wish to become an effective participant in the world in which we live. The conscientização’s existence is dialogically related to the structures which may oppress him or her, and it is hence his or her responsibility to interact with these structures to effect social change.

Morgan highlights the complications of drawing comparisons between a Latin American context, which may have a socially, politically, active cultural tradition (in which Freire worked), and “first world” context, when discussing the potential for critical literacy as a pedagogy for social activism. However, there have been significant implementations by practitioners such as Ira Shor (1980) in “first world” contexts. Perhaps caution should then be exercised if assuming that such a “Freire” school of critical literacy could encourage a social activism in a “first world” country such as Scotland. However, most important is that the empowerment for social justice comes in the structure of this pedagogy: critical literacy in this sense is learning first to critically interrogate the problems which affect one’s life, before taking direct action to reconstruct a fairer society.

The “Australian” School

The Freire school has much in common with the second school of critical literacy, although the latter has been characterised (Cervetti et al., 2001: para. 21-24; Morgan
1997: 2) as more academically confined. The Australian school, as Morgan frames it (1997: 21), involves a critique of the implicit values maintained in generic literary canons, cultural icons and stereotypes, which reflect a dominant and perhaps oppressive culture. This school has been particularly prevalent in Australia where large numbers of EAL (English as an Additional language) learners mean that “competing” cultural backgrounds require constant negotiation (Morgan 1997: 19).

Morgan also highlights criticism of the movement as concerning itself with a linguistic focus which removes the practice of critical literacy away from the material structures of social, political and economic oppression with which Freire most concerned himself: “hence the follow-through of direct action to redress such oppression is almost nowhere visible” (Morgan 1997: 24). It may be that there is a balance to be found then between the Freire and Australian “extremes” of activism. Nevertheless, critical literacy in the Australian school is comparable to the Freire school, in teaching first to “critique” the oppression implicit in the presentations of one’s culture, which can to some extent be “reconstructed”, through language (Cervetti et al., para. 21).

The “post-structural” School

The “post-structural” school of critical literacy differs substantially again from the previous two. This model practises the process of social critique of the Freire and Australian schools, yet holds a “scepticism” (Morgan 1997: 11) towards the authority of the voice “reconstructed” from this analysis. In recognising that the analyst conducting the “deconstruction” will always be biased by their own inherent cultural position, the assumption that critical literacy is a liberatory discourse is impossible, as whatever voice is “reconstructed” will always silence somebody (McLaren & Lankshear 1993: 388).

However, the criticism of post-structuralism as a movement outside of critical literacy is that the school attacks the structures of society, politics and economy yet precludes the validity of the analyst to “reconstruct” a new position (Eagleton 1996: 125). Gee, McLaren and Lankshear (1993; 2002), give a sustained account not just of the deconstructive but also unconstructive elements of the “post-structural” school. Berlin too, criticises the school for being one which practises analysis yet omits the liberatory opportunity of the analyst to reconstruct a fairer representation of society (1993: 256, 266). Critical literacy in this sense is learning to “deconstruct” the structures and roles present throughout society “in such a way that political reform is immobilised” (McLaren & Lankshear 1993: 396).

Discussion

In comparison, all three schools share a practice of what we could call “deconstruction” – the interrogation of assumptions of a cultural text in revelation of implicit oppression. Both the “Freire” and “Australian” schools also share similarities in an additional stage which attempts to “reconstruct” fairer narratives and cultural representations. Cervetti et al. acknowledge as much: “Both critical social theory [the Australian school] and Freirean pedagogy involve a commitment to justice and equality, and both promote
critique of texts and the world as an important (initial) mechanism for social change” (Cervetti et al., 2001: para. 29). However, an important distinction may be revealed in the gaps and silences of Cervetti et al.’s omission of the “post-structural” school from this comparison.

In summary: the first school of critical literacy describes a practice where students are taught first to deconstruct oppression confronting them in their immediate society and are then taught to reconstruct new structures to overcome this oppression. In the second school of critical literacy, students are taught first to deconstruct received representations of culture within society, and are then taught to reconstruct fairer representations of that culture. In the third school of critical literacy, students are taught to deconstruct the inherent bias which is always present in the texts that they interrogate and that they themselves hold in interaction with those texts.

Therefore, there is a far greater emphasis on “deconstructive” skills in one school of critical literacy, while two others hold a subsequent stage, of teaching the skills to take “reconstructive” action based on the premises of this “deconstruction”, as intrinsic. Such “reconstruction” may, for example, involve letter-writing, petitioning, boycotting, fundraising and other forms of social action designed to take real measures to act on the newly informed opinions for a fairer society (For “reconstruction”, see Morgan (1997: 30, 33, 38, 43, 45, 51); Vasquez (2004: 59, 64, 67-69); and Department of Education, Tasmania (2007). If the first two schools are aligned into one type, then there is a distinction in the literature between one type of critical literacy which practises only the “deconstruction” stage of critical literacy, and another where the “deconstruction” is directly tied to a subsequent “reconstruction” stage. The two distinctly different types, however, remain under the one term of “critical literacy” in wider fields of reference.

Thus, an early conclusion was drawn to form a research question for stage two of this investigation: that the disparity between perceptions of critical literacy creating “cynics”, and a perception of critical literacy promoting social justice, may be accounted for in that there is more than one type of critical literacy referred to under the same term. Much of the literature criticises the “post-structural” school for an emphasis on “deconstruction” which begets “sceptical” inaction. However, it seems that by omission or over-simplification alone, definitions of critical literacy can align themselves with a school which has drawn criticism for inaction on issues of social justice. Therefore, teacher perceptions of critical literacy as the skill of “deconstruction” alone may explain perceptions of “cynicism” if a subsequent stage of teaching which stresses the importance of “reconstructing” fairer representations that are based on this “deconstruction” is not made explicit.

Practicing teachers’ perceptions of critical literacy

As has been presented by the literature review definitions of the three schools, each advocates a “deconstructive” stage of critical literacy. However, it may be argued that when this stage becomes too dominant in defining critical literacy, then the outcome of
the practice becomes more aligned with the “post-structural” school, which has been criticised for inaction, rather than the Freire and Australian schools, which also advocate a subsequent pedagogical stage where fairer situations and representations of social justice are “reconstructed”. Therefore, a further research aspect of this project became to assess to what extent fully-qualified teachers recognised to these two stages equally. To investigate these perceptions, questionnaires were distributed to English departments in one co-ed, 500-pupil Edinburgh community secondary school; and one all-boys, 730-pupil Edinburgh independent secondary school. Although this study was constantly aware of those “gaps and silences” which might be created by its focus, English departments were focussed on, as the discipline most often associated with critical literacy in Scottish education.

Participants were aged between 27 and 36, evenly split between male and female, having trained in various schools of education across Great Britain. Between the two departments, 6 questionnaires were returned. The limitations of these results are thus fully acknowledged. However, as this article has been framed: these findings are emphatically of a preliminary study; and insofar as this article claims only to point towards the possibility of inconsistencies of critical literacy as a conceptual issue, the data reveals several relevant findings. Questionnaires were designed to explore perceptions of critical literacy by use of open-response questions. To avoid “leading questions”, a balance of positive and negative language was used in similarly worded questions. These were:

Q1. What is “critical literacy”?
Q2. How do you plan to teach this skill in the classroom?
Q3. What are the positives of teaching this skill in the classroom?
Q4. What are the negatives to teaching this skill?
Q5. Do you think these skills could be positive or negative effect on citizenship education?

Participants were first asked to give a definition of critical literacy in order to examine the extent to which both “deconstructive” and “reconstructive” stages of critical literacy were equally recognised. Q3, Q4 and Q5 were designed to prompt further opportunities to demonstrate recognition of a “reconstruction” stage. Where this was not given explicitly, or answers were ambiguous, Q2 was analysed for evidence or correlation of a “reconstruction” stage of critical literacy in practice.

Results

Open-response questionnaires are inevitably more problematic in the analysis stage than structured questions. However, two things became clear from teachers’ responses. Firstly, the fully-qualified teachers did not align themselves with the concerns expressed by some trainee teachers, in that no responses expressed similar concerns about the negative impact of teaching critical literacy. Rather, the constraints of “time” posed by exams and lesson preparation were cited by every respondent as the only negative aspect of accommodating critical literacy.
More importantly from the results was that definitions given from the six teachers gave a distinctly greater emphasis to the “deconstruction” stage of critical literacy than the subsequent “reconstruction” stage.

**Deconstruction and Reconstruction**

All respondents highlighted the “deconstruction” skills of critical literacy in their definitions, though perhaps conceived of in different contexts. Respondent A’s definition conceived of critical literacy as the skill in the pupil to challenge “what is being learned” (Italics in this section represent participants’ written responses). However, no explicit definition was given to a “reconstruction” stage of critical literacy in response to Q1. In such instances, evidence was looked for in response to Q2 for classroom practice that reflected an explicit stage of “reconstruction”. Here, “Research” and “persuasive writing” were given. As such, no explicit explanation was given as to how dialogic skills would be taught past the “deconstruction” stage. “Research”, however, could imply a subsequent productive stage for which the research (“deconstruction”) is used to make informed decisions on issues of social justice, though this was not made explicit. “Persuasive writing” suggests taking the skill to recognise persuasion in receptive skills and applying the skill of persuasion in one’s own writing.

Respondent B’s definition was significant in defining “scepticism” as a positive aspect of critical literacy: somewhat the opposite of student teacher concerns. Again, no explicit reference was made to a “reconstruction” stage in Q1, so evidence was looked for in response to Q2. Here again, a productive stage emphasised the students using the language of “persuasion” themselves, in a marketing campaign.

Respondent C gave “to analyse different forms of text” in their definition of Critical Literacy, but no explicit reference was made to a “reconstruction” stage, other than “discussion” and “writing” in response to Q2. Although no explicit reference was made to a “reconstruction” stage, results were inconclusive as to the full nature of the production activities. Respondent D’s definition again defined critical literacy in terms of “analysis” (“deconstruction”). No explicit reference was made to a “reconstruction” stage, although “empowers the reader/consumer” was given in response to Q5. This suggested understanding of either the Freire or Australian school of critical literacy, so Q2 was looked to for evidence of either in practice. Here again, the word “research” suggested a reconstruction stage as respondent A, and “persuasive” language was suggested in the writing of speeches.

Respondent E saw strong benefits for citizenship education in Q5, and saw the benefits of critical literacy extending outside of the classroom: “Also become better at reading situations – social + communication skills etc”, though it was the “dissecting” (“deconstruction”) stage mentioned in response to Q2 as how critical literacy would be taught in the classroom – not explicitly a “reconstruction” stage. Respondent F gave familiar definitions of critical literacy which heavily emphasised the “deconstruction” stage. However, this was the most explicit teacher in expressing a “reconstruction” stage, in response to Q3: “In terms of my work with debates it is obviously crucial.
Without critical thinking at any rate it would be impossible for those involved to formulate an argument, exemplify + analyse or to rebut the ideas of others”. Although this teacher was the most explicit in highlighting the production stage of critical literacy a stage as equally important as the analytical stage, this “reconstruction” stage is associated again with “persuasion” through debating.

Discussion

As has been acknowledged, there are limitations to this investigation – not least that a subsequent research stage of semi-structured interviews would have allayed some ambiguity of the extent to which respondents recognised a “reconstruction” stage with the words “research”, “writing”, “discussion”, etc. As such, less would have had to have been read in to the “gaps and silences” of respondents. However, the investigation was successful in that teachers were given ample opportunity to demonstrate the extent to which they recognised the “two stages” of critical literacy. It should be emphasised that the “gaps and silences” of textual responses are not presumed to indicate a gap of understanding in the teacher concerning critical literacy. Rather, responses are to be taken as evidence that a “reconstruction” stage is often not made explicit in definitions of critical literacy, and by omission or oversimplification alone these definitions align themselves with a school of critical literacy which has drawn criticism for inaction.

Results showed two points of interest. These were: firstly, in defining critical literacy, a clear majority of teachers weighted their definitions more heavily to the “deconstruction” stage of the practice. In doing so, their definitions align themselves more with the post-structural school of critical literacy than the Freire or Australian schools. Secondly, where teachers expressed a subsequent “reconstruction” stage of critical literacy, strong emphasis was placed on teaching pupils the language to “persuade” in writing and discussion.

In order to assess the extent to which these competing discourses of critical literacy are recognised in policy itself, this investigation further looked to the explicit definition of critical literacy in A Curriculum for Excellence, Literacy across learning: Principles and Practice, to examine to what extent its definition recognised the “deconstructive” and “reconstructive” stages of critical literacy. This is given on page 2 of the document:

In particular, the experiences and outcomes address the important skills of critical literacy. Children and young people not only need to be able to read for information: they also need to be able to work out what trust they should place on the information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them. (2009b: 2)

In this explicit definition of critical literacy, only the “deconstructive” stage of critical literacy is used in its definition – no mention is made of the importance of a “reconstructive” stage. Similarly to the teachers, the document also places an emphasis on the language of “persuasion”, which is continued throughout the
**Conclusion**

This investigation into critical literacy concludes several findings. Firstly, there are (at least) three schools of critical literacy; each producing different pedagogical outcomes. It has been argued that if critical literacy is perceived as an analytical skill alone, as in the post-structural school, then this may lead to inaction on issues of social justice in learners. However, a different type of critical literacy emphasises a second, productive stage where the analysis is used to take action on issues of social justice. Therefore, if critical literacy is to be used for the promotion of social justice, consistency in definitions which emphasise a second productive stage may be essential in using critical literacy to educate Responsible Citizens. “Responsible Citizens” are defined explicitly in Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence* as having the qualities of ‘respect for others’ and ‘commitment to participate in political, economic, social and cultural life’; and ability to develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland’s place in it’, ‘understand different beliefs and cultures’, make informed choices and decisions, ‘evaluate environmental, scientific and technological issues’, and ‘develop informed, ethical views of complex issues’ (*The Purpose of the Curriculum*). Variations in definitions seem to account for the concern in student teachers observed in the initial stages of this investigation.

Further findings are that the perceptions and practice of two Edinburgh secondary English departments, and *A Curriculum for Excellence* policy characterise critical literacy as primarily an act of “deconstruction”; thereby aligning themselves with a “post-structural” definitions of critical literacy which have often drawn criticism for inaction on issues of social justice. It may be important that teachers and policy-makers wishing to promote critical literacy as a tool for citizenship education become more aware that by omission and over-simplification, their presentations of critical literacy can align themselves with a school which has drawn criticism for inaction. CPD (Continuing Professional Development training) may be required in order to clarify the pedagogy of critical literacy once a consistent definition is made explicit by policy-makers.

Regarding which appropriation of critical literacy the curriculum and practising teachers promote, a trend was identified in “persuasive” skills as the most dominant outcome of critical literacy being promoted, as opposed to any explicit reference to promotion of social justice. It can therefore be argued from the research gathered in this investigation that there is little evidence to suggest that critical literacy, as currently presented in practice and policy, is being realised in such a way that explicitly promotes social justice.

It is suggested that future research be both more widespread of perceptions and practice of critical literacy in fully-qualified teachers through similar questionnaires, and that questionnaires be followed up by an interview stage where participants are able to clarify their responses. Further, as critical literacy is to be the responsibility of all
practitioners, future studies should also look to examine perceptions and practice across curricular areas other than English. However, the reason this is an issue at all is concern of the effects of teaching critical literacy on learners. Therefore, further research projects should assess the impact of the teaching of conflicting critical literacies on learners themselves.

It is also put forward that if the *Curriculum for Excellence* wishes to promote critical literacy as a means of creating Effective Contributors towards social justice, then its current definition, given above, must be expanded upon to include explicit recognition of critical literacy as a productive democratic skill.

**References**


