Investigating understandings of critical literacies among Finnish and Canadian teachers

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Critical literacy has been defined as the use of analog and digital materials towards questioning and deconstructing problematic and oppressive societal norms and further reconstructing more socially just narratives. Even though critical literacy is a well-known concept in many English-speaking countries, its application and significance in Europe have not been sufficiently investigated. As a result, this dissimilar study of the concept can be reflected in teachers' understandings of it in theory and in practice. This contribution focuses on exploring and reconstructing teachers' perspectives of critical literacies comparatively. More specifically, the article highlights similarities and differences in the way teachers from Canada and Finland think of the definition and implementation of critical literacies in their own situated, socio-cultural and socio-educational contexts. The study is based on theory-generating expert interviews and a comparative case study design, and the analysis of the data follows a grounded theory framework. The main results show a considerable convergence in perspectives; while Canadian teachers explored connections of critical literacies with social justice education, Finnish teachers rather highlighted ideas of information management and multiliteracies. Nevertheless, there were noticeable connections among these perceptions which are relevant for the development of the field and are further explored in the discussion part of this article.

Keywords: critical literacies, social justice education, comparative education, teachers' perspectives

1 Introduction

In the past decade, the world has undergone significant changes which have had an immediate effect on how societies and cultures are being (re-)shaped in everyday life. Not only have the digital uprising and the establishment of social media in our lives had an influence on how people communicate and think of the world, but the outbreak of a global pandemic has also forced us to think of the ways we function, understand each other and take action all together globally.

This global era is urging for a (re-)introduction of a similarly global education, which will align its goals and objectives with those of Social Justice Education (SJE), or in other words, the development of an educational environment that will "enable individuals to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand the structural features of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems" (Bell, 2007, p. 4). Following the need for SJE, the concept has been (re-)introduced in many English-speaking countries in combination with other

sociocultural and sociopolitical theories such as Global Citizenship Education, Critical Race Theory, Poststructuralism and Postcolonialism, Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy.

Critical literacy, in particularly, has been discussed as part of SJE in the English-speaking world. In this context, critical literacy is usually defined as "the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life" (Luke, 2014, p. 21). However, this definition, which clearly gives a sociopolitical orientation to critical literacy, has not necessarily been adopted (or adapted) intrinsically by a variety of (global) educational contexts. In the European context, for instance, critical literacy has previously been discussed as equivalent to critical thinking, giving a direction to the concept that is related to high-order thinking, making it more relevant to more advanced audiences, such as high school or university students. As Vasquez (2017) puts it, "there is still confusion about the difference between 'critical' from the Enlightenment period, which focused on critical thinking and reasoning, and 'critical' from Marx as an analysis of power" (p. 7). Even though critical literacy and critical thinking are neither synonymous nor completely unrelated, these dissimilar interpretations of the concept have naturally resulted in an interesting pool of different perspectives, different visions and different practices in the classroom.

Teachers are one of the most influential actors in identifying these various perspectives, and the ways they are understood and adopted in and out of the classrooms in different contexts. As Yoon (2015) opines, teachers' role is fundamental in helping students develop global perspectives, while teachers' own – critical – reflection and practice are also grounding elements in this process. Hence, one can argue that understanding teachers' own perspectives of critical literacies is an imperative part of understanding critical literacies and further working towards their development. Even though this seems to be quite a self-evident conclusion, there is a considerable research gap as to how teachers understand, define, and implement critical literacies, specifically in a comparative education context. Mayes (2006) concludes that "the voice of the classroom teacher has at times been underrepresented in the critical literacy debate" (p. 1).

Drawing from data collected as part of a larger PhD project (Louloudi, in preparation), this paper will focus on exploring critical literacy perspectives of teachers from Canada and Finland. The first section will explore some fundamental theoretical elements of critical literacies and different existing interpretations of the concept in Canada and in Finland, as well as its connection to other, country-specific, theories. Following, the second section will serve as an introduction to the methodological approach and tools used in the research process. The main part will be built around reconstructing teachers' perspectives from the collected interview data, highlighting various themes and categories relevant to each country, while the conclusions will elaborate on possible connections and divergences and possible lessons learned from each context.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Critical literacy: Its definition and characteristics

Critical literacy is a rather established concept in the English-speaking world, which originated in the foundations of Freirean critical pedagogy. This already

puts the concept in the spectrum of a sociopolitical orientation to education, which sees learning as being unconfined by the "fear of freedom" (Freire, 1970) and directed towards understanding and dealing with societal injustices and power relations continually.

Even though having been given numerous definitions and having undergone apparent transformation, critical literacy approaches tend to be directed towards two sub-classifications: seeing critical literacy as closely linked to critical pedagogy, or as rather closer to critical text analysis (Luke, 2019, p. 352). The first approach focuses on the interrelation and activation of sociocultural and sociopolitical theories such as postcolonial and critical race theory as well as pragmatics (Luke, 2019, p. 355), while also emphasising "critiquing on the political economy to examine everyday practices of patriarchy, racism and sexism" (Luke, 2019, p. 356). This understanding is built upon fostering "self-determination, agency and social activism" which (can and should) derive from classroom practices based on "enhancement of voice, speaking position and standpoint" as well as "translanguaging" (Luke, 2019, p. 356).

The second approach highlights the need to "identify and theorize the rules of exchange that enable symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1991, as cited in Luke 2019, p. 357). Therefore, in this case, there is an underlying importance put on the employment and interactions students have with texts or other text-centric means of communication and, more specifically, the analysis, critique and deconstruction of the "ideological and hegemonic functions of texts" (Luke, 2019, p. 358). This, evidently, draws from critical pedagogy — however, as Luke (2019) puts it, additionally to questioning how texts represent the readers' own life situation, this approach "might also engage in dialogue about how the *structure of specific clauses and sentences* attempts to define the world and situate the reader in relation to that definition" (p. 358, emphasis added).

Both approaches seem to highlight the relation of critical educational practices with social justice. This is a common and fundamental characteristic of critical literacy — its alignment with the overarching goals of social justice. Even though this sounds like a straightforward goal, the various – contextual – understandings of what social justice is and might look like in different environments can make the conceptualisation of critical literacy practices — and their interpretation — challenging yet thought-provoking. Pennycook (2021) characterises social justice as "a rather vague term whose lineage is principally in liberal democratic principles", with its general framework to be appealing "in a broad way to a sense of fairness" (p. 53). Naturally, this can relate to a very radical perspective of fairness or a general "liberal moral" interpretation (Pennycook, 2021). There can be, however, different (macro and micro) levels within the same interpretations; Luke (2014), for instance, discusses Fraser's (2009) model of social justice, and its three characteristics — redistributive, recognitive and representative — as related to the framing of literacy (practices). Redistributive social justice refers to an unbiased and "more equitable distribution" (Luke, 2014, p. 21) and application of literate practices, which consists of "class inequalities as well as status hierarchies" (Fraser, 2009, p. 3). Recognitive negotiates the inclusion of texts from a wider sociocultural context, specifically by marginalised and disenfranchised communities, whilst representative emphasises on the uses of literacy from a personalised point of view, including one's own sociocultural views, ethics, and pursuits in response to globalisation (Fraser, 2009, pp. 3–4).

This personalised but not individualistic view is one of critical literacy characteristics. In other words, critical literacy practices focus on the investigation

and inclusion of multiple (sociocultural and sociopolitical) perspectives. This multiperspectivity is in response to regarding materials, and the world in general, as not neutral. As Flint and Laman (2014) note, "in conceptualising critical literacy . . ., language and literacy are not neutral acts, but rather are situated in personal, social, historical, and political relationships." (p. 75). This viewpoint directly negotiates the Freirean idea of "reading the word for reading the world" —in other words, when one engages with materials, they also engage with the situated, contextual perspectives they bring with them.

At the core of this, is seeing critical literacy as centered around student-oriented practices. Naturally, within such practices, students are seen as active participants, while teachers are called to abandon their role as knowledge keepers and become part of the learning journey. Critical literacy practices strive to put students in the center of the lesson, because they do not focus solely on the acquisition of information and knowledge, but particularly on questioning, challenging and deconstructing the inherent 'truth' that is concealed within them.

Finally, critical literacy practices do not only aim to identify and deconstruct potential bias, but to go a step further to reconstructing the narrative (Janks 2018, p. 29). This idea is indubitably connected to critical literacy's transformative character. Namely, the focus is not only put on questioning and critiquing injustice, but also on the ways to take action against it. For this to happen, such practices should be thought as continuum practices that embrace constant unlearning and relearning and are not thought as "isolated learning incidents" (Vasquez, 2004, p. 2).

2.2 Critical literacy in Canada

Canada has long been considered a pioneer in critical literacy theory and research. In the Canadian context, critical literacy has often been discussed in connection to other theories such as SJE, postcolonial theory, advocacy education, global citizenship etc.[1], which negotiate the country's unique historical connections with multiculturalism, diversity, and (settler) colonialism.

In the Canadian academic landscape, critical literacy is oftentimes connected to SJE; Burke et al. (2017), for example, define critical literacy after Paulo Freire as a negotiation of "a fundamentally different view of knowledge and learning than has been seen in the past. Textual meaning is understood in the context of social, historic, and power relations" (Naqvi, 2015, as cited in Burke et al., 2017, p. 4). This understanding connects the incorporation of critical literacy practices into the classroom with the very goal of education being directed towards developing "justice-oriented citizenry" (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 8). In other words, this "fundamental different view" is not only related to the way literacy is perceived but also to the ways education is understood by teachers and students. As Banks (2003) argues, "a literacy education that focuses on social justice educates both the heads and hearts of students and helps them to become thoughtful, committed and active citizens" (p. 18).

In the educational landscape, these views translate into educational policy and curriculum development. Even though Canada does not have a federal department of education and, therefore, also not a nationally operated educational system, critical literacy approaches and elements are identifiable in most of the provinces and territories' curricula. Ontario's curricula, for instance, seem to reflect a similar, social-justice-oriented perspective of critical literacy[2], where the concept is

clearly connected to recognising analyzing and critiquing bias, power relations and, in general, authority in materials, not only with the goal to understand those, but also in terms of taking possible steps towards reconstructing their problematic. To do so, such practices cannot be seen as one-time practices, but, as the curriculum passage suggests, as "a regular part of classroom practice" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 9)

The Saskatchewan curricula, where the data presented below were collected, seem to follow "critical approaches to literacy without naming critical literacy" (Brownell et al., 2021, p. 144). More specifically, the "critical" is discussed in relation to multiple sociopolitical viewpoints and reflecting on whose viewpoint is represented, as well as to recognising and questioning both discrimination and privilege with regard to "colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or race" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 18). As Brownell et al. (2021) also conclude, "although provinces and territories differ in how they name critical literacy tenets within the curriculum, in nearly all spaces, children and youth are asked to reflect on how language is connected to power, identity, and agency" (p. 144).

2.3 Critical literacy in Finland

The Finnish educational system has been often characterised as one of the most progressive, "highly performing education systems" (European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET), 2016, p. 6), not only for its ideas on and application of literacy education, but also for its general direction towards embracing diversity, equality and social justice (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2020; cf. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; cf. Sahlberg, 2014).

Consequently, the development of literacy has been perceived as crucial not only in relation to the cultivation of the educational system, but also to the progression of the nation as a whole; as Itkonen (2018) opines, "for Finland, building up literacy among its citizens, and planning and implementing an entire system of education from the late 1800s onwards, were among the many social and political projects harnessed to support Finland's emergence as a viable nation-state" (p. 6).

Critical literacy research in the Finnish context, in particular, reflects the elements of the broader European context—little research has been conducted that looks into the concept exclusively, or as a primary focus. As Veum et al. (2021) clarify, the very few recent studies published in the field aimed to investigate literacy in general (p. 274). This lack of research has naturally led to vague understandings of the concept, both in theory and in practice. As an example, one of the few studies looking into critical literacy as a concept by Kouki and Virta (2017), discusses critical (reading) skills as linked to students' ability to evaluate information and sources with regard to how reliable and credible they are and their competence in distinguishing between facts and opinions (Kouki & Virta, 2017, p. 35), making a clear connection between these and the Digital.

On an educational policy level, however, critical literacy, as a term, made its appearance in the latest curriculum reform and the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in 2014 (in effect since 2016). More specifically, critical literacy skills were discussed as part of the bigger umbrella concept of multiliteracy:

> Multiliteracy refers to the skills of *interpreting, producing, and assessing texts in different forms and contexts*. Media literacy is part of multiliteracy. Multiliteracy is based on a broad definition of texts according to which texts are entities expressed by systems of verbal,

> visual, auditive, numeric, and kinaesthetic symbols and their combinations. Multiliteracy
> supports *the development of thinking and learning skills as well as advances critical literacy and
> language awareness*
> (Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), 2016, p. 60; emphasis added)

This definition gives a specific – media-oriented – understanding to both concepts—multiliteracy and critical literacy. Many researchers find the emphasis of the curriculum's interpretation to be on the description of the digital turn and the different multimodal materials used nowadays (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2020, p. 8) instead of on interrogating bias and power relations. According to Rasi et al. (2019), this seems to connect the critical to "accuracy, reliability, viewpoints, motives, and values behind the information, copyright and freedom of speech" (p. 103).

Even though critical literacy (and multiliteracy) understandings of the curriculum do not appear to follow the same radical orientation (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2020, p. 8) of the New London Group (1996) and the research originating in English-speaking countries (e.g., Canada, Australia, South Africa), the curriculum itself makes explicit mentions to social justice, in spite of not connecting it to the critical:

> Primary education is built upon respect for life and social justice. Primary education
> strengthens students' ability to defend these values (respect for life, social justice) and the
> aptitude to appreciate the inviolability of human dignity. Primary education also promotes
> well-being, democracy, equality and equity.
> (EDUFI, 2016, Chapter 2.2)

Already from this short passage it becomes visible that there is a direction to the goals of "social justice" proposed by the curriculum and discussed as part of basic education. By the same token, these general social justice-oriented ideas become more concrete in the same curriculum in the way that they are linked to the goals of the multilingual framework, which aims to motivate students to use all their languages in and out of the classroom (Zilliacus et al., 2017, p. 242). Making this perspective more prominent in the revised curriculum has led, as Zilliacus et al. (2017) opine, to progressively overcoming trivial perceptions of multicultural education and working towards "social justice education where multicultural perspectives are an integral part of the curriculum" (p. 231).

These different interpretations of both "the critical" and its connection to social justice are also to be reconstructed in the multifarious perspectives of teachers. In order to make the elements of the comparison more tangible, the following section will look into important methodological tenets of the overall dissertation project and their relevance to this following data analysis.

3 Methodology

The research process was guided by two overarching research questions: a) how do teachers define critical literacy in their own way; and b) how do teachers think they implement critical literacy(ies) in their practices. To explore and reconstruct teachers' perspectives of critical literacies comparatively, a comparative case study design was developed. Comparative case studies (Yin, 2014) are common designs in educational research and are to be applied when the product(s) under

investigation are "bounded systems" or units "around which there are boundaries" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Here, these boundaries were defined by the finite number of teachers that could be interviewed and the finite amount of time that could be spent in the field (one month per case study).

Furthermore, the case studies followed Merriam's quality criteria of design: they were particularistic because they only investigated a specific concept — critical literacy — and with a specific group of people, that is, teachers who had participated in (national) literacy projects in Canada and Finland. Furthermore, they were descriptive, because of their "thick description" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30) that did not only aim to report data but also to interpret events and circumstances and they were also heuristic, because their analysis aimed to elucidate the phenomenon under study.

Next to these criteria, a rationale of comparison was developed, which ensured a like-to-like analysis (Schweisfurth, 2019, p. 262). Three levels were taken into consideration, the functional, the structural and the cultural (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Functionally, literacy projects were selected as entry points to the respective field, which were all national literacy projects, were all applied to all school levels (from primary to high school) and were evaluated in some form[3]. Structurally, the projects had a sociocultural/sociopolitical direction that was respective to each — national, local and communal — context, and culturally, the selected environments were equivalent, without necessarily being identical.

As a methodological tool to investigate and reconstruct teachers' perspectives, theory-generating expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2018) were conducted as part of research visits realised in Canada (28/09/2018 to 25/10/2018) and Finland (01/03/2019 to 27/03/2019). During this period, five interviews with teachers that participated in the respective national literacy projects were planned per country. All teachers were language teachers, covered a variety of education levels (from primary school to university), and a mix of backgrounds (both rural and urban areas) and ages (from mid-20s to 60s).

The interviews lasted from a minimum of 15´to a maximum of 66´[4]. Following the research questions presented above, an interview guide was developed with open-ended questions to explore and identify teachers' perspectives[5].

At the next level, all transcribed[6] interviews were analyzed in chronological order and on two levels: first initial and then focused coding, after Charmaz (2014). During the initial coding phase, the data were categorised in themes and codes, mostly through segment-to-segment analysis and the use of gerunds[7] to not only identify topics, but also actions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 121). In focused coding, these initial codes formed bigger concepts[8] and were investigated through a cross-analysis lens to identify commonalities and convergences and draw lines among the cases. For this paper, the focus will be on analyzing and reconstructing some of these perspectives with an emphasis on the ways teachers defined critical literacy and the connections they saw between the concept and social justice.

Finally, there were several limitations to this research project. Following a case study design, the study does not allow for any generalisations and does not provide any overview or insight into the work of other groups — even of those from similar backgrounds. Furthermore, limitations are also related to interviewing teachers as experts; even though this method was selected to best answer the research questions, it is clear that "exclusive focus on the knowledge of a specific target group may be too narrow" (Flick, 2011, p. 169). Regarding the investigation of critical literacies, a significant voice to be considered is this of

students. Even though such data were collected during the research visits (e.g., through participant observations), time limitations as well as a necessary PhD focal point made their consideration difficult.

4 Results

This section is dedicated to reconstructing perspectives of the Canadian and Finnish teachers with regard to their definitions of critical literacy and their interpretation of the social as connected to critical literacy; following this, three focused codes, reconstructed by the teachers' interviews in each situated context, have been selected per country and will be further discussed below.

4.1 Canada

4.1.1 Critical literacy as social justice (education)

From the beginning of their interviews, and in their majority, Canadian teachers connected critical literacy to social justice (education):

> I don't think you can separate social justice from critical literacy; so, I think that a big part of it is looking at cultural spaces where people suffer inequity or are disadvantaged because of social class or race or ethnicity or educational experience ahm those kinds of things and what we can do to create a world that is more inclusive and accepting
>
> (Gaby, interview: 5.10.2018)

More specifically, Gaby appears to not only associate the concept of critical literacy with social justice, but to address these two as inseparable. In the second part of her interpretation, Gaby also clarifies what this association is about: "looking at cultural spaces where people suffer inequity or are disadvantaged"; this already connects social justice to identifying inequity; however, not any kind, but in particular, this inequity and these disadvantages that are a result of "social class or race or ethnicity or educational experience". In other words, Gaby here does not only give a sociopolitical understanding to the concept of critical literacy, but also specifies which "cultural spaces" can be these that lead to social inequity and need to be addressed. This addressing does not only happen by "looking at" the inequities, but by promptly discovering "what we can do to create a world that is more inclusive and accepting.".

   In other words, according to Gaby, critical literacy — as inseparable to social justice — alludes to first identifying social injustices and then, finding ways to address and change these. This is also negotiated in the words of Luke (2014) who similarly describes critical literacy as being "focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities." (p. 21); as Luke also continues, this process consists of first analyzing, then deconstructing and ultimately transforming societal norms that are allowing social injustice.

   As part of this process, teachers connected the identification of inequities with the search for bias in materials. Gaby, for instance, mentioned:

> (…) And ahm and then critical literacy ties in by giving readers the tools to look for bias and push back against what they are reading and consider why this viewpoint is being brought forward and how this viewpoint maybe perpetuating existing inequalities or

maybe challenging them . . . I think (it is) helping students understand -and teachers- that everything has a bias and nothing is ever neutral.

(Gaby, interview: 5.10.2018)

It appears that, for Gaby, critical literacy can help see this vague idea of addressing inequities in a more practical and reader-oriented way; having said that, as she mentions, critical literacy can "give readers the tools to look for bias". In other words, analyzing inequities can be translated into looking for bias in the materials and how these can themselves be a commodity of a particular "viewpoint". However, as she also clarified before, it is not only about identifying the problematic, but it is directly about "pushing back against" it; it is not only about investigating the different viewpoints—and their "existing inequalities" — but also about challenging these. That is to say, the focus is put on both the deconstruction and the re-construction of bias. Similar interpretations are reflected in the words of Janks (2018), who emphasises the importance of rewriting the problematic narrative; as she opines, "it is not possible to deconstruct a text without looking backwards to the text and without considering how it could be different, thus also looking forward to redesign" (p. 35).

This perspective is shared by Charlotte, who also sees the importance to be with "pushing back against" the biased narratives:

(…) even today in The Kite Runner, the students -and I tried to help them make that 9.11. connection, but they went further with it – I could tell they were still thinking about it, like 'we've seen this in the news, but this isn't what I expected Afghanistan to be like'. So, like trying to challenge these perceptions (…)

(Charlotte, interview:10.10.2018)

Charlotte connects the "challenging of the perceptions" with "making connections" in class that are different than what students had previously known by "the news", or what their "expectations" were. In other words, in Charlotte's case, "pushing back against" the problematic narrative could mean both bringing in different (authentic) materials—such as *The Kite Runner*—and assisting students in "going further with it" to making their own life connections. Charlotte argues that reading *The Kite Runner*, as a story by the Afghan-American author Khaled Hossein, has helped the students identify their own preconceptions about Afghanistan, which they developed through engaging with "the news". Hence, including authentic literary stories, such as *The Kite Runner*, can help students identify and challenge their perceptions; in a way this relates both to the content of these preconceptions (about Afghanistan) and the medium itself (the news) that helped establish these. Pushing back against those relates, for Charlotte, to both the authentic content of the story and the literary medium (the book) as a contrast to "the news".

4.1.2 Critical literacy as both a milieu and a continuum

Bringing in literature to support social justice learning was at the core of the Canadian teachers' perspectives. Notwithstanding, the focus of the teachers was not only on the type of literature to be used in critical literacy practices, but on the ways to do so to support a social justice-oriented environment. More specifically, Sara mentioned:

(…) we started to NAME social justice education and you know bring in the words like oppression and racism, and stereotypes and discrimination and counter narratives and reading why this is important and what role do we play in uncovering social justice issues ahm through literature ahm…I could see the students changing so that's kinda how it came about.

(Sara, interview: 11.10.2018)

Here, Sara describes a process or a series of steps to be taken; she clarifies that, for SJE, students should be first introduced to the necessary vocabulary, naming "the words like oppression and racism"; then reflecting on the respective topic's importance and being able to connect it to their own lives and how they can actively "play a role in uncovering social justice issues". Doing so in the classroom, as Sara continues, helped her "see her students changing". What Sara describes appears to be an environment in which students work together with her ("we") towards personal and collective change. This idea reflects other researchers' description of critical literacy practices as not "isolated learning incidents" (Vasquez, 2004, p. 2), but as educational milieus (Stribling, 2014).

This series of steps that Sara notes are also negotiated by a variety of critical literacy frameworks. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), for instance, proposed a critical literacy framework of practice according to which critical literacy practices can follow four steps: a) engaging students' thinking by introducing the materials; b) guiding students' thinking by asking problem-posing questions (such as "for whom is this important?"); c) extending students' thinking by making personal connections and re-designing the (problematic) narrative (e.g., by creating alternative endings to a story) and finally, d) by (praxis-) reflecting with them and thinking of ways to take action towards change. These steps seem to follow the procedure Sara also describes above and aim to embrace sustainable, long-term change ("I could see them changing") and not one-time interventions.

Furthermore, teachers did not only address critical literacy (and SJE) as a milieu, but also as an intended pedagogical continuum. Charlotte, in particular, noted:

One of my best friends is a grade one teacher (…); She teaches so much social justice stuff. I think some teachers in elementary, are like 'they can't handle it yet, they are too young', but Mina teaches residential school stories and she just talks about like to learn, like what would it be to learn in desks all day – cause they are not in desks in grade 1- what would it be like if you had to leave your family for a year, would it be sad, or stuff like that, without you know, destroying kids (laughing), but like opening them up to the idea. I ABSOLUTELY think you should start young (…)

(Charlotte, interview: 10.10.2018)

Here, the idea of "starting young" is being elaborated on by Charlotte, who argues for an early engagement with social justice topics, giving an example of a friend of hers who teaches grade one students. More specifically, Charlotte clarifies what this can look like with grade one students, namely "opening them up to the idea" can be the goal of social justice-centered lesson for younger audiences. "Opening students up" to the respective topic, such as "residential schools" can translate into helping students put themselves in somebody else's shoes ("what would it be like"), make personal connections and explore their feelings ("would it be sad") about the given situation. This idea of "absolutely starting young" speaks for a sense of continuum, from primary school (as Charlotte mentions) to high school (Charlotte's students) then to university (Gaby's students) and back. This is not

only negotiated in the words of the teachers, but seems to be reflected in their everyday practices as well (see Louloudi et al., 2021). Building a continuum of critical literacy milieus seems to be at the core of their understandings of the concept.

4.1.3 Teaching social justice: A journey of discomfort

In their interviews, Canadian teachers talked in their majority about teaching for social justice as "inseparable" to critical literacy. To understand their perspectives on critical literacy, therefore, it is crucial to also address the ways they described what teaching for "social justice" can translate into for them. As discussed in the theoretical input before, social justice, as a concept, can partake many interpretations; even though the Canadian teachers seem to have an orientation to a sociopolitical, rather radical, understanding of social justice, they have interestingly connected this interpretation to a necessary emotional development for them as teachers and for their students. In other words, they addressed social justice learning as linked to stirring emotions and questioning those altogether. One of these interpretations considered social justice learning as "sitting in discomfort":

> (…) teaching social justice isn't easy, you just have to like sit in that discomfort, to be ok with it, and being ok with learning alongside them and not be the knowledge-keeper, like, as I mentioned book clubs…I learned so much from them in those meetings, so many things that I didn't think about before, so (…)
>
> (Charlotte, interview: 10.10.2018)

Charlotte describes "teaching social justice" as a journey that she has to take herself as the teacher and "learn alongside" her students. To do so, as she mentions, she needs to abandon her (traditional) role of being the "knowledge-keeper", while "sitting in that discomfort" of social justice learning and "being ok with it". It appears that Charlotte connects her letting go of her "knowledge-keeper" role with being able to show discomforting emotions and accept this as part of the learning journey. Hence, it is not only about students showing their emotions to (difficult) social justice topics, but it is also about the teacher losing part of their control in order to learn and grow alongside their students. This perspective is reflected in the Boler and Zembylas (2003) ideas of a pedagogy of discomfort, according to whom, part of critical inquiry is both "embrac[ing] ambiguity" in oftentimes heteronormative educational settings and welcoming "feelings of anger, grief, disappointment, and resistance" for both teachers and students (pp. 116–117). This seems to be at the core of Charlotte's argument; not only does she identify feelings of discomfort as connected to social justice learning but she argues for "sitting" in these feelings and, in a sense, embracing them to help create an atmosphere where she learns "alongside" her students and, hence, allowing for a deconstruction of the traditional teacher role.

4.2 Finland

4.2.1 Critical literacy as part of multiliteracy

Finnish teachers, in the majority of their interviews, linked the concept of critical literacy to this of multiliteracy. Saana, for instance, reflected on their connection:

> (…) they are talking about it being everything and it being hard and why don't we just talk about critical literacy and digital literacy and all those things separately, why do we talk about multiliteracy, which is like an umbrella, which takes everything underneath it and it's just not reading, it is all the maps and social experiences and everything (…)
>
> (Saana, interview: 20.3.2019)

Saana sees multiliteracy as "an umbrella" term that "takes everything underneath". Some of this "everything" regards "critical literacy" and "digital literacy"; in other words, critical literacy is understood as a piece to the bigger puzzle of multiliteracy, which, according to Saana, consists of other "separate" concepts, but it has a clear direction to "not just reading", but "all the maps and social experiences and everything". Saana elaborates on her understanding of these matters further:

> (…) when multiliteracy came, I think teachers began to think that every student doesn't have to do the same things, they don't have to read the same book and the same classic book from Finland, which is very boring, they could read different books, different types and they could choose their own ways of reading; they could read together, they could choose smaller texts, some boys usually like fact-texts, not fiction; so that you had multiple possibilities, you could choose your own way and that's not always reading, you could also write and express yourself in a way that's good for you; you could choose; so I think that can bring also the social part of the reading higher (…)
>
> (Saana, interview: 20.3.2019)

It appears that "social experiences" in this case relate to students "choosing their own ways of reading" and further "expressing themselves". Having said that, Saana connects multiliteracy with a multimodal understanding to reading and writing (diverse books, diverse texts etc.) that embrace children becoming their own actors of learning and finding their voice of expression within the different types of possibilities. One could argue that this perspective does not touch on reading and writing as an end-in-itself, but as individual, multifaceted opportunities for self-expression and communication. This is, according to Saana, also the "social part of reading" —finding yourself in your own learning. This understanding seems to reflect the definition of multiliteracies in the National Core Curriculum (2014); as Kumpulainen and Sefton-Green (2020) opine, "on this broader definition, multiliteracy takes more account of agency, identity, and citizenship" (p. 11) —the interconnection of agency and identity through the embracing of multimodal learning seems to be at the core of Saana's perspective.

4.2.2 Critical literacy as information (management and) assessment

Next to multiliteracy, one of the most common topics among the Finnish teachers was this of information management and its assessment as part of critical literacy. More specifically, teachers addressed critical literacy as connected to managing the information students come across in their everyday life, whether this is about the ways they seek information, the ways they evaluate it or if they trust it. Maria mentioned, for example:

> (…) so critical literacy, from that perspective, relates to that understanding and the assessment part, in my opinion, the assessment part of information literacy, but it has different, it is wider than that (…) you have to be able to, when you encounter information from whatever source you have to be able to assess its quality and its reliability and how it is, maybe, to look deeper to how it was produced, for what purpose and how is the

person or the community who is delivering that information or sharing it with you, how are they using it, for what kind of purposes of their own they are using it, and to be able to understand if someone is trying to manipulate you, if somebody is delivering something that is totally false information or the false truth – all that discussion that is going on now, that is strong at the moment- and so, that's the information literacy's assessment part and it is very important.

(Maria, interview: 14.3.2019)

In her words, Maria links critical literacy to "the assessment part of information literacy", but further specifies that it is actually "wider than that". She then goes on to clarify what she understands as "assessing information" and that is evaluation its "quality and reliability"; to do so, there are specific steps to be taken and these are centered around investigating 1) "deeper" "how it was produced", 2) "for what purpose" it was produced, 3) how it is being "delivered" or "shared" and 4) for what personal reason of the producer it is being used". Looking into the source's ulterior motives and potential "manipulation" is further associated with seeing "the truth" out of the information. In other words, for Maria, assessing information means that one investigates its reliability with regard to how "false" it can be and how it can promote the "false truth", aiming to "manipulate" the audience. Looking into the difference between right "truth/true information" and "false", or "wrong" information as part of critical literacy was discussed by all teachers. Tuula, for instance, commented:

At least one part of it is that when you need to find information from the internet that we try to teach children to recognise where this information comes from – that everything is not true (…) and also this, to read pictures….because we have the screens here, where children can see how easy it is to manipulate pictures; it is really easy (…) this is something for our teachers to pay attention to, because quite small children are on the internet and on the social media, more than we realise.

(Tuula, interview: 4.3.2019)

Tuula, like Maria, also finds "one part" of critical literacy to be about "recognising where the information comes from", or, in other words, its source. Tuula also connects the assessment of the source with whether it is truthful or not ("everything is not true") and if it seeks to "manipulate". However, she specifically makes mention to "information from the internet" and "social media" as well as "pictures" on the screens, giving a media-oriented understanding to critical literacy. She also defines the role of the teacher in this process to protect "small children" from this type of (social) media manipulation. This understanding of critical literacy is reflected in work of many researchers. Johnson and Vasudevan (2014) mention "identifying and deconstructing the media's manipulative machinations are commonplace critical literacy practices" (p. 100). In the Finnish context, this idea is also reflected in work of Kouki and Virta (2017) who similarly discuss the acquisition of critical literacy skills as linked to working towards identifying and assessing the source of information as well as how reliable and credible this is, emphasising the need of doing so with a variety of—analog and digital—materials.

4.2.3 Social (justice) as equal access to self-expression

As the teachers from Canada, the Finnish teachers also addressed and elaborated on their understandings of "the social" —and to a further extend, also social

justice. As Saana did in the aforementioned interview excerpt, most of the teachers connected their definition of "social" to literacy in general, and to multiliteracy and critical literacy in particular. These interpretations were either connected to the sense of finding one's own voice (as Saana explained), but many times they were also linked to other concepts, such as equality and how this is achieved in the classroom and outside of it. Maria, for instance, connected the "social" to the goals of equality also outside of the classroom:

> (…) the library law in Finland has recently changed and it emphasises the social role of libraries in a very strong way, and it didn't do that before; so, it means that actually libraries should be able to promote, in a stronger way that before, equality in Finland. (…) the libraries should be open places for all types of people to entertain themselves and to be able to enjoy all things that society can provide for them and Oodi is an example of that – and it is an amazing place (…) it is the impact of this beautiful building and what it is and what it has and it's free for everyone and you can walk in and you can do there whatever you want.
>
> (Maria, interview: 14.3.2019)

Maria explains that "the social role of libraries" are "to promote equality" and then continues with clarifying what this means to her: "open places for all types of people". In other words, equality as a social concept is associated with providing access to everyone in the first place. She then elaborates on the type of access, characterising it as "free" — therefore, social equality is not only about the access being given to "all" people, but specifically about this access being also "free for everyone". This type of equality would also support everyone to "entertain themselves" — this idea negotiates the understanding of "social" provided by Saana; the free access can embrace people finding their own voice to "do whatever they want". One could argue that both ideas promote a process of self-empowerment, where social contexts, such as libraries (Maria) or schools (Saana) allow for self-exploration and self-expression. From that perspective, equality can be interpreted as all people being given the same free opportunities to become who they want to be individually. This perspective does not only reflect a context-specific understanding of "social", but also negotiates the fundamental principle of Finnish education: "to provide free access to quality education for all" (Veum et al., 2021, p. 273).

5 Discussion and conclusions

From the analysis of some of the most shared themes among teachers' perspectives on critical literacy(ies), one can identify a variety of commonalities as well as divergences. Canadian teachers referred to critical literacy as connected to social justice, defining this relation as "inseparable". As an example of how these two connect, they alluded to the investigation of bias, the analysis of different (sociopolitical) viewpoints and the necessity to make personal connections between the social justice topics and the students. Furthermore, they specified that for such practices to work, there is a series of steps — a process — to be taken which negotiates the establishment of a critical literacy milieu, as opposed to a one-time lesson. These steps can also be thought as part of a bigger continuum of practice, where students are confronted with social justice topics (e.g., Indigenous People and Reconciliation) from the beginning of their school education, in an age-

appropriate way. To build upon such a continuum and a milieu, teachers referred to their role as less knowledge-oriented and more emotion-supporting. In other words, social justice learning consists of moments of discomfort, where teachers and students are called to embrace their (sometimes uncomfortable) feelings in order to not only deconstruct the problematic narrative, but also to be able to redesign a new perspective and take action towards societal change.

These viewpoints appear to negotiate the ideas presented in the Canadian curricula as well as the definition of critical literacy proposed there. In both situations, the focus is put on sociocultural, historic, and power relations with the aim of questioning these and "pushing back against" their problematic. Emphasis is also put on the uses of (critical) literacy for social justice in "disadvantaged" or marginalised communities, with a particular focus on decolonisation (Louloudi, in preparation), which is crucially relevant to the contextual knowledge, not only at a national (Canada), but also at a local level (the rural city where data were collected), which is a similarly prominent in the academic context in Canada[9].

By the same token, Finnish teachers addressed critical literacy as part of information literacy and, in particular, the ways information is being gathered and evaluated by students. In this context, critical literacy was discussed as a way to determine one source's reliability and "truthfulness", with the final goal to be aimed at identifying possible means of manipulation. This idea was particularly discussed as media-oriented, or, in other words, with relation to how different internet and social media sources might be promoting fake news, or the "false truth". Finally, teachers also reflected on critical literacy as linked to the wider, "umbrella" term of multiliteracy; this idea was further associated with the "social part" of critical literacy (and multiliteracy). More specifically, the definition of the "social" — and, to a further extent, also of "equality" — were connected to one's one self-empowerment through learning. Finding ways to express oneself is also dependent on the access to "equal" "free" opportunities "for all people". In other words, "social" in this case relates to being provided access to learning, services and communal structures that embrace one's own self-exploration and self-voicing.

The perspectives to critical literacy seem to be similarly negotiated by Finland's National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, both as related to multiliteracy and to the assessment of information (or critical thinking) (cf. EDUFI, 2016; cf. Veum et al., 2021). Similarly, the understanding of the "social" as connected to providing access to (free) learning opportunities for one's own self-expression is also reflected in the very basic idea of the Finnish education "to foster every individual's active participation . . . and growth towards democratic membership in society" (EDUFI, 2016, as cited in Veum et al., 2021, p. 276).

What is more, seeing access to learning opportunities "to all types of people" through school or community as equality, and, to a further extend, social justice, relates to the specific sociocultural -situated- national (Finland) and local (the rural town where the data were collected) context of these practices. One could argue that this viewpoint reflects and addresses the topic of (ethnic) residential segregation and the social and spatial disadvantage that relates to further "educational disadvantage and lack of equal opportunities" (Bernelius, personal communication June 1, 2021). Taking into consideration the concept of a "geography of education" (Butler & Hamnett, 2007) in the Finnish context, Bernelius et al. (2021) present results on the interconnectedness of urban and educational segregation, coming to the conclusion that in order to address the problem, policies should "support the confidence and identity of pupils" (p. 154),

connecting the provision of access to educational settings to students' self-expression, as teachers did as well.

Consequently, there is a series of topics that both Canadian and Finnish teachers find relevant to critical literacy. The investigation of the source (of information) was addressed in both contexts; one with a focus on the "viewpoint" that is being "brought forward" and the other with an emphasis on the "facts" that are being considered by the source. The first one seems to aim to look into forms of (mis-)representation and bias towards the misrepresented, while the second one appears to be linked to confronting possible manipulation.

One could argue that, in the Canadian context, identifying misrepresentation of (and bias towards) "disadvantaged" groups seems to be understood as part of a postcolonial understanding of (critical) literacy, where the authenticity of the narrative is being examined (cf. Bradford, 2007; cf. Burke et al., 2017) and how (critical) literacy can be understood as "revisiting, remembering and interrogating the colonial past" (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4), as negotiated in the teachers' examples (e.g., *The Kite Runner* (Afghanistan) and residential school stories). In the Finnish context, the investigation of source appears to negotiate elements of accuracy and reliability, without it necessarily being linked to a (radical) sociocultural or sociopolitical context. However, while the intention seems to be different, questioning the source of information was linked to critical literacy in both contexts.

What is more, this was further associated with the various interpretations of "the social" and "social justice". Finnish teachers explored ideas of the "social" that are connected to one's self-improvement, self-expression, and self-empowerment, while Canadian teachers focused on a more collective-oriented approach, and one's role in "uncovering social justice issues" as part of a bigger group (a classroom, a school, a community etc.). The one stresses the need for individuality and custom-made (social) opportunities for each person, while the other emphasises the need for collective action towards injustice. What is noticeable in both cases is that the way "the social" is defined within the different context appears to play a role in the way critical literacy is also perceived—in the Finnish context, rather related to embracing the uniqueness of the individual, and in the Canadian context closely connected to rewriting a problematic unjust narrative collectively.

There seem to be many lessons-learned one could take from both countries. Analyzing and critiquing problematic viewpoints in relation to social disadvantage "because of social class or race or ethnicity or educational experience" with a focus on postcolonial narratives, is necessary in order to be able to first understand social injustice and then take action against it. Even though, in the Finnish context, this was not a central point, there is growing criticism from a variety of scholars who opine that "social justice perspectives need to include an analysis of inequalities based on ethnicity and race, in addition to class and gender" (Keskinen, 2020, online) in a way relevant to the "colonial histories" (Keskinen, 2019, p. 163) of Nordic countries (cf. Ennser-Kananen et al., 2017;) Nevertheless, the point of finding one's own expression through social opportunities, also provided outside of school (e.g., libraries) is also central in a critical, student-oriented, lesson. One could argue that it is both about assisting students in finding mirrors for self-identification and windows to authentic perspectives with opportunities for social action.

Endnotes

[1] E.g., Burke at al., 2017; Vasquez, 2001, 2004; Morgan, 1997; Cherland & Harper, 2007; Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013; Kornelsen et al., 2020.

[2] E.g., a passage from the Ontario Curriculum: "Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking, because it focuses on questions about fairness, equity, and social justice . . . Practising critical literacy encourages students to question the authority of texts and to address issues of bias and perspective. Students learn that texts are not neutral: all texts in some way reflect the choices, positions, and beliefs of their creators, and could be constructed differently to present different understandings. Critical literacy is not a "thing" to be added to the literacy program or something to do each day for ten minutes before lunch. It is a lens or overlay for viewing texts that becomes a regular part of classroom practice. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 9)

[3] Important to be mentioned is that the final product did not aim to compare the projects per se, but to explore and reconstruct perspectives of teachers that participated in them. That is to say, the comparison did not aim to evaluate these perspectives but to study correlations among different levels (Shore & Wright, 1997) and "bring to light new concepts, to stimulate interest in educational issues, to generally deepen understanding of education as a practice and as a social phenomenon" (National Research Council, 2003, p. 21).

[4] The average duration was around 40 minutes per interview.

[5] More specifically, five categories of questions were built: category one focused on background questions (e.g., "Could you please introduce yourself?") that aimed to warm up the conversation but also to set the sociocultural context of the interviewee; category two was built around entry questions about the interviewees participation to the respective project (e.g., "What contributed to you participating in this project?"), while the last three categories focused on "topical and specialist" (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 661) questions following the three topics of the research questions (e.g., category three: "Could you tell me how you define critical literacy in your own way?; category four: "could you describe a typical (critical) lesson hour for you?" and category five: "could you tell me more about the literature choices you made and why you chose them?").

[6] All interviews were transcribed following the transcription guidelines after Kowal and O'Connell (2014) and Langer (2010): Incomprehensible text or word: (inc.); Very short pause: (.); Longer duration: … ; Talk before or after this excerpt: (…); Laughter: (laughing); Loudness: UPPERCASE; Cut words or phrases: I thin/I want;

[7] E.g., "linking actions", "naming examples", "identifying change" etc.

[8] E.g., "critical literacy as social justice education", "social (justice) as equal access" etc.

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