

A Critical Analysis of Grade K Early Literacy Curriculum in Prince Edward Island

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Literacy plays a vital role in the twenty-first century. Individuals need a variety of literacies to meet the demand of the ever-increasing complexity of literate environments (Hill, 2019) in the twenty-first century. These multiple literacies, or multiliteracies, empower people to live democratically through better consumption and creation of multimodal information (Albers et al., 2015; Kim, 2016). Therefore, integrating multiliteracies is indispensable to current literacy curriculums and practices (Christison & Murray, 2020). In the same vein, multiliteracies should be embedded in early literacy education. Literacy begins at a young age, in that children are attentive to print and make meaning of the text at an early age (Gillen & Hall, 2013). When immersed in various technologies, young children are agents that can actively create meanings (Christison & Murray, 2020).

Given the significance of multiliteracies in early childhood education, this paper focuses on analyzing Grade K Literacy Curriculum in Prince Edward Island (PEI). According to the PEI Literacy Alliance (2020), PEI is facing a literacy crisis and has been ranked as having one of the lowest literacy levels in Canada. In 2022 nearly 40% of grade K students did not meet the literacy curriculum standards (PEI Literacy Alliance, 2022). In response to this problem, the Department of Education in PEI, in collaboration with the Faculty of Education at the University of PEI, initiated a literacy intervention program for Grade K students in 2022. In July 2022, I was part of this project at its beginning stage.

This study inspects PEI Grade K Literacy Curriculum, a relevant and timely endeavor. I will first demonstrate the theoretical and conceptual framework of multiliteracies (i.e., digital literacy, multicultural literacy, critical literacy, and multimodal literacy) by reviewing pertinent literature. Then, I will introduce the features of the Grade K Literacy Curriculum in PEI. Next, I will present the evidence from the curriculum to demonstrate how it is being actualized. Specifically, this report shows that literacy in the curriculum is traditionally defined as reading and writing print text. The methodology and approaches that actualize the ideology of the curriculum generally aligns with its philosophy and objectives, and the curriculum reflects how multimodality is integrated. However, this curriculum lacks the specification of critical literacy and digital literacy, and multicultural elements are demonstrated in the curriculum objectives but not in methodologies and assessments. Finally, I will discuss the findings and offer recommendations.

Multiliteracies as the Theoretical Foundation

Multiliteracies have been defined as “the process of using reading, writing, and oral language to extract, construct, integrate, and critique meaning through interaction and involvement with multimodal texts in the context of socially situated practices” (Frankel et al., 2016, p. 14). This paper draws from the multiliteracies theory as a critical lens to analyze the early childhood literacy curriculum in PEI. Multiliteracies are relevant and critical to ECE, where literacy emerges in social, cultural, political, and technological contexts at an early age (Gillen & Hall, 2013; Gillen et al., 2018; Kim, 2016; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). Multiliteracies as a theoretical foundation guide my reflective discussions pertinent to the literacy curriculum.

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The old regime of traditional literacy only focuses on text-based reading and writing (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). Such monomodal written literacy limits individuals' access to different modes available in the 21st century, thereby failing to support students' communication (Narey, 2017). To counter the traditionally defined text-based literacy, the New London Group proposed multiliteracies to face the ever-changing social environment (Narey, 2017). Specifically, multiliteracies are conceptualized to integrate multimodality in communication and identify social power throughout the meaning-making discourses (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). The integration of multimodality allows individuals to communicate across time and space (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). Moreover, the agenda of multiliteracies is to reveal the interests hidden in multimodal information (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). Multiliteracies situated in social and cultural contexts can do justice by negotiating multiple practices pertaining to varied texts, contexts and purposes (Christison & Murray, 2020). As such, multiliteracies empower individuals to fully participate in democracy in complex societies (Narey, 2017).

Multiliteracies transition meaning-making from a mono mode to multiple modes (e.g., oral, written, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial), where meaning is "as much a matter of where it is, as what it is" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 20). Given its multimodal feature and emancipatory nature, multiliteracies celebrate the diversity of needs in literacy education, such as individual differences in learning ability, race, culture, and socioeconomic status. In comparison to traditional literacy, multiliteracies encompass four major shifts: (1) literacy is a transactive process that is beyond print-based reading and writing; (2) literacy is bounded in sociocultural and historical contexts; (3) literacy is a discipline-specific practice; (4) multimodalities diversify the possibility and complexity of meaning-making and interpretation (Frankel et al., 2016).

Multiliteracies as the Conceptual Foundation

In this particular study, four key themes relevant to early childhood literacy curriculum frame my analysis: multicultural literacy, digital literacy, multimodal literacy, and critical literacy (see Figure 1).

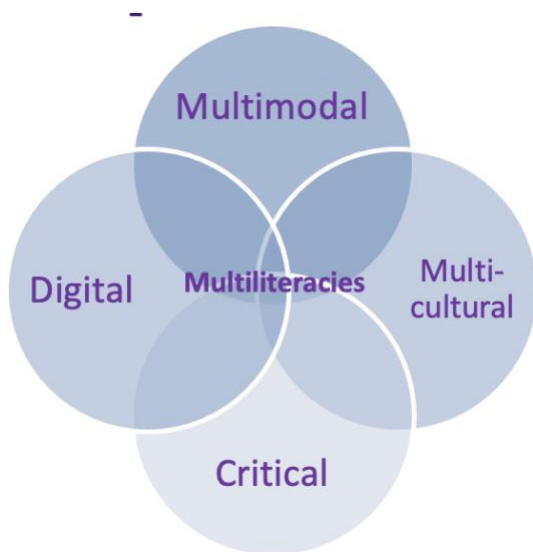


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

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In this paper, I define the key terms in the conceptual framework as follows:

- Multicultural literacy: children identify the underlying knowledge, assumptions and interests embedded in diverse ethnic and cultural practices (Lecorchick et al., 2020).
- Digital literacy: children's use of digital tools (e.g., tablets, mobile phones, and robots) to make sense of and interpret meaning (Neumann et al., 2017).
- Multimodal literacy: children make meaning with and interpret the meaning of representations with signs, symbols, sounds, videos, and other modes (Gillen & Hall, 2013).
- Critical literacy: children's consciousness and action of analyzing and transforming normalized and marginalized social discourses (e.g., spoken conversations, written essays, speeches, or any other means of conveying information and ideas) (Luke, 2012).

The above concepts (i.e., multicultural literacy, digital literacy, multimodal literacy, and critical literacy) intertwine in several ways. Multiliteracies is contextualized in sociocultural contexts (i.e., the interconnected web of social norms, cultural values, and shared practices that shape how individuals perceive, interact with, and make sense of the world), embrace multimodality mediated by digital tools, and promote democracy in the 21st century (Belshaw, 2011; Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). I adopted the conceptual framework to guide an analysis of the Grade K Literacy Curriculum in PEI, thereby allowing me to explore ethics evolved over time and in different social and cultural contexts, especially when using digital tools to communicate. Meanwhile, framing key terms in multiliteracies in this paper is not to suggest that multiliteracies is a fixed and static concept. Instead, this paper aligns with Gillan and Hall's (2013) argument that multiliteracies are dynamic, evolving, and everchanging concepts rooted in sociocultural contexts. I will now introduce the key features of the Grade K Literacy Curriculum in PEI.

Grade K Literacy Curriculum in PEI

This paper defines curriculum as a provincial policy that outlines philosophy, objectives, methodologies, and assessments of teaching and learning (Eisner, 2002; Tyler, 2013). Developed in 2008, PEI's Grade K Literacy Curriculum has three main features: student-centered philosophy, multi-facets development, and integrated curriculum. First, the curriculum explicitly states the student-centered philosophy as "Kindergarten is a child-centred, developmentally appropriate, early childhood program" (Department of Education, 2008, p. 5). Second, the curriculum covers different perspectives of children's development, including creativity, body, social emotion, intelligence, language and literacy, and numeracy. The primary focus of this paper is the scope of literacy presented in the grade K literacy curriculum. Finally, the curriculum integrates various disciplines, methods, and activities. Next, I will critically discuss the findings regarding the actualization of the curriculum based on the conceptual framework.

Critical Reflections on the Curriculum

So far, I have presented multiliteracies as the theoretical and conceptual framework and key features of the curriculum. Next, I will share the key findings regarding how literacy is defined and actualized in the curriculum and reflects the critical concepts of multiliteracies in the conceptual framework. Meanwhile, I will critically reflect on the findings referring to the multiliteracies theory.

Alignment of Curriculum with Traditionally Defined Literacy

There is an alignment between curriculum objectives, methodologies, and assessments in the current curriculum. As stated in the objective of reading, for example, reading should be “sources of interest, enjoyment, and information” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 65). The suggested teaching methodology should be “read to children and share the enjoyment of reading daily” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 65), which acknowledges early literacy emergence and engages children with valuable literacy activities (Gillen & Hall, 2013). The curriculum integrates numerous methods, such as “read-alouds, shared reading, modeled and shared writing, and small-group activities” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 44), which is conducive to children's literacy development (Hall, 2013). To assess students’ interests in reading, the curriculum recommends that teachers observe students’ behaviours, such as “listening with interest during read-alouds,” “sharing ideas during book talks and other discussions about texts (e.g., books, videos, TV programs, pictures),” and “participating in shared reading” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 67). The child-centered philosophy is demonstrated by the focus on students’ reading interests.

Moreover, language and literacy are combined as one strand in the curriculum, reflecting the intertwined relationship between language and literacy (Gillen & Hall, 2013). Concerning language and literacy development, the curriculum indicates that “language and literacy development is best accomplished through meaningful learning experiences that balance and integrate the language processes (speaking and listening, reading and viewing, writing and representing)” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 44). The curriculum highlights meaningful experiences through “authentic reading and writing situations” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 46) in line with Gillen and Hall’s (2013) recommendations.

Albeit not overtly defined, literacy is discussed as only reading and writing in the curriculum. According to Department of Education in PEI (2008), effective literacy instruction concerns understanding and developing written texts:

Reading & Viewing

An active process of understanding written text.

Components include

- Read-alouds
- Shared reading
- Guided reading
- Independent reading

Writing & Representing

The ability to put thoughts into print.

Components include

- Modeled writing
- Shared writing
- Guided writing
- Independent writing (p. 118)

Such didactic and prescribed literacy pedagogy is an administrative device of the old regime, which systematizes inequity through standardized assessment of reading and writing printed text (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). As such, the curriculum fails to balance coding the text through using phonics and the authentic purposes of literacy embedded in students’ social practices (Hall, 2013).

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The assessment sheds light on reading habits (e.g., reading from left to right), an understanding based on visual cues, and word study (e.g., sight words). For example, the curriculum includes critical questions for teachers to check students' reading comprehension, such as "Do children ask questions that may help them better understand the story? Do children ask questions about the character(s), setting, storyline, etc., to confirm comprehension? Do the questions make sense and relate to the story?" (Department of Education, 2008, p. 79). As a result, reading assessment focuses on the rigid understanding of meaning created by the authors without offering space for students' interpretation of the story (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015).

Lack of Actualization Regarding Multicultural literacy

The Grade K Literacy Curriculum delineates multicultural literacy in the theoretical foundation section as "social and cultural diversity is a resource for expanding and enriching the learning experiences of all children...They should allow children to make meaningful connections between what they are learning and their own backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles" (Department of Education, 2008, p. 28). However, there are no specified learning objectives or methods in the literacy section. For example, PEI recognizes the importance of Island studies, showcasing how Canadian curriculum is bounded by locality and land (Sumara et al., 2001). In contrast, the literacy section does not contain a relevant portion of Island Studies. Moreover, the curriculum does not specify home literacy. As a cultural construct, literacy is relevant to children's communities, whereby families play an important role in emergent literacy development (Gillen & Hall, 2013). In cultural contexts, children make meaning relevant to their cultural discourses, broadening their literacy practices (Gillen & Hall, 2013).

Strong Emphasis on Multimodality with Little Emphasis on Using Technologies

To enhance creative meaning-making, the curriculum integrates different modes, such as arts, movement, texts, music, and drama. According to the PEI integrated curriculum document, the teacher:

- provides a variety of drawing, painting, and construction supplies and invites children to express themselves creatively.
- displays children's creations along with other works of art, photographs, and paintings.
- provides opportunities for creative movement, dance, and other responses to music and rhythm.
- provides opportunities for children to dramatize their favourite books, poems, or songs, as well as to create their own role-plays. (Department of Education, 2008, p. 11)

From a semiotic perspective, early childhood literacy is a multimodal process (Hill, 2019), which shapes children's identities as readers and writers through narratives and drama (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015). On the one hand, multimodality encompasses our daily life (i.e., we communicate through more than one mode, such as speaking, listening, gestures) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). Therefore, a semiotic view of literacy allows children to fully participate in the modern society. On the other hand, multimodality reinforces children's rights and freedom of communication through connecting with their interests, motivation and identity (Heydon, 2013). Nonetheless, literacy from the semiotic perspective entails a much broader range of modes in traditional and digital representations (Hill, 2019). The curriculum does not highlight the use of digital modes through technology integration, such as the use of E-books, apps, and tablets.

Limited Exposure to technologies with No Activities Concerning Digital Literacy

The curriculum does not include any objectives regarding digital literacy. Given the publication year of this document, there is a need for an update. The document only involves traditional forms of technology, namely “a variety of media such as audio recordings, educational films, artwork, informative books, posters, poems, etc.” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 19). In the era of digital technologies, the concept of literacy needs to go beyond traditional reading and writing. According to Narey (2017), schools implement digital literacy by exposing students to varied technologies (e.g., iPads and 3D printers), new media, and technological skills. Digital literacy discussed in this paper highlights not only technical skills and using software, but also critical thinking skills and creativity in interpreting and making meaning (Christison & Murray, 2020). Missing the critical component of digital literacy in the curriculum fails to do justice through de-skilling students to fully participate in the digitalized society (Narey, 2017).

No Specified Critical Literacy and Relevant Activities

In the curriculum, the only relevant statement about critical literacy was to “[e]ncourage discussion and value critical thinking about texts” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 76). The curriculum suggests that teachers should “[m]odel using personal experience to ask questions about a text” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 76). A sample question is also included, namely, “I wonder why the author made that pig purple - my father’s pigs aren’t purple” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 76). Although questioning strategies may engage students with active thinking processes, such a statement is far from the agenda of critical literacy, which aims to reveal the truth underlying the representation of information and social discourses (Luck, 2012). Specifically, the curriculum should focus on students’ agentic role of investigating the interests and voices represented in the dominant culture, history, and everyday practices (Luke, 2012). In this curriculum, students are not provided opportunities to ask critical questions, such as questioning the status quo and critiquing the texts, re-examining social issues concerning race, gender, and economic status (Kim, 2016). For example, Wargo (2021) highlighted young children can effectively utilize digital media to engage with and address social injustices, fostering their critical thinking skills and empowering them to voice their perspectives on civic and historical matters. The curriculum falls short in preparing students to become critical citizens who can engage effectively with democracy worldwide (Kim, 2016). To put it differently, the curriculum neglects the importance of social justice for marginalized communities by overlooking the political aspects of linguistic, social, and cultural content (Luke, 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

After critically examining the Grade K Literacy Curriculum in PEI, I am offering the following three suggestions to actualize multiliteracies and transform students to participate democratically in the world. First, it is necessary to redefine literacy using a didactic approach to an interpretive approach (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). As Gillen and Hall (2013) suggest, the concept of literacy should celebrate multiple aspects of literacies that are critical and relevant to young children, such as exposure to media, use of multimodality, students’ linguistic and cultural knowledge, and scrutiny of the underlying positions and interests. The conceptual framework in

this paper may act as a tool for integrating multiliteracies in the early childhood literacy curriculum.

Second, the curriculum should offer students opportunities to “examine the ideologies of texts by asking critical questions” (Kim, 2016, p. 384) in the process of using multiple media and modalities (Christison, & Murray, 2020; Gillan & Hall, 2013). That said, teachers should not only engage students with multiple sources of information (e.g., digital games, social media, and electronic books) (Christison & Murray, 2020), but also create spaces where children can make meaning of the information in terms of power, equity, and social justice (Kim, 2016). For instance, African American children were empowered to challenging deficit thinking and stereotypes of race and digital divide through using digital counter-storytelling (Ellison & Solomon, 2019).

Finally, the curriculum should engage children with relevant cultural discourses (Gillan & Hall, 2013). Multiliteracies should move beyond school settings and be extended to their homes and communities, such as acknowledging children’s interests in popular culture transcending the boundaries between offline and online realms and various forms of media. (Gillan & Hall, 2013).

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