Towards critical literacy?
A national test and prescribed classroom preparations

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Abstract
This study focuses, from a bilingual perspective, on how a Swedish national test is intended to promote critical literacy and language development in line with related aims in syllabuses for Swedish and Swedish as a second language. The material consists of reading and writing assignments and prescribed classroom preparations (including inspiration material). The method of analysis is Janks’ model for critical literacy education, focusing on orientations to domination, diversity, access and design. The main findings are that aspirations to critical literacy are lacking in both the reading and writing assignments and in the prescribed classroom preparations. The directions for using the inspiration material do not mention discussing power relations and there are no directions for explicit pedagogy demonstrating how the language of the inspiration story can be analysed as regards power expressions or other word choices suitable for the theme of the writing assignments.

Keywords: critical literacy, syllabuses, national tests with classroom preparations, multicultural and multilingual classrooms, bilingual pupils

Introduction
One task of the Swedish compulsory school is to “promote the all-round personal development of pupils into active, creative, competent and responsible individuals and citizens” (Skolverket 2011:11). Another task is to help pupils develop “their ability to critically examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives” (Skolverket 2011:11). Formulations like these (which are similar in the preceding curriculum I will focus on) support an interpretation that school should aim at developing pupils’ reading and writing ability towards what may be called critical literacy.

Demands for teaching geared to critical literacy were made as early as the start of the 1970s by Freire (1972a,b). Students should learn to read not only the word but also the world in order to open up for changes in power relations. It was not until the 1980s that demands were heard in Europe to develop critical literacy in mother tongue education (Ball 1987). Since the 1990s, similar aims have been found in syllabuses for the subjects Swedish and Swedish as a second language.

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What critical literacy means is usually described in relation to other forms of literacy. Green (1988) distinguishes three dimensions of practice: operational, linked to the decoding of text; cultural, linked to meaning making in different discourses; and critical, which presupposes the ability to recognise text as selective versions of the world and to question the versions (see Janks 2010: 21, Lankshear and Snyder with Green, 2000). Similar thoughts are found in a model called “the four resource model” developed by Freebody and Luke (1990), arising from a repertoire of practices that learners can take part in. Their repertoire of capabilities includes critically analysing and transforming texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral.

The view that critical literacy not only means the ability to read and write critically (with the aim of questioning arguments and conclusions) but is also linked to the analysis of power relations is also fundamental in Janks’ book *Power and Literacy* (2010), which I use as a basis for my interpretation of the formulations about literacy in Swedish syllabuses.

How the goals in the curriculum for the Swedish compulsory school stated by Skolverket (National Agency for Education) should be attained is described and commented upon in syllabuses for the different school subjects (Skolverket 2009, 2011). But the National Agency for Education is also the sender of national tests, which likewise are important steering documents regarding the aims. These can be said not only to interpret the goals pupils should attain but also the targets schools should aim at, by means of concrete directions on how to prepare the assignments through discussions in the classroom. Such directions are in the focus of this article, based on a specific test in reading and writing, intended to meet the goals and aims in the syllabus for the subjects Swedish and Swedish as a second language from 2009 (Skolverket 2009). It may be inferred from this syllabus that the school should aim to develop critical literacy or at least take steps towards developing critical literacy. Explicit connections to power analysis are not found, but the syllabus states that the school should aim at developing pupils’ ability to reflect and evaluate, and to critically scrutinise (with my italics below):

In its teaching of Swedish, the school shall aim to ensure that the pupil:

[...]

develops an ability, in dialogue with others, to express thoughts and emotions aroused by texts with different purposes, and be stimulated to reflect and evaluate

[...]

develop an ability to use different possibilities to acquire information, to assimilate knowledge about the language and function of media, and to develop the ability to interpret, critically scrutinise and evaluate different sources and messages [...]. (Skolverket 2009: 27 and 34 f).

The above examples of syllabus goals that the school is supposed to aim for are shared by the subjects Swedish and Swedish as a second language. But certain differences emerge. The syllabus for Swedish says that literature should have an important role
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in the work of developing pupils’ democratic values, in a formulation that hints at an orientation towards critical literacy:

Literature, film and theatre give opportunities to show empathy and understanding for others and for what is different, and to reappraise values and attitudes. This enables the formation of counters to, for example, racism, extremism, stereotyped gender roles and undemocratic conditions (Skolverket 2009: 29).

In the syllabus for Swedish as a second language there is no formulation corresponding to this, but comments about the need to consider the gender perspective in teaching can perhaps be interpreted as a certain orientation towards critical literacy (Skolverket 2009: 35). This syllabus also has a stronger emphasis on the role of reading literature for developing the pupils’ language, especially their Swedish vocabulary:

Reading literature helps pupils to formulate thoughts and emotions that they recognise, but for which they lack words in their new language. [...] Reading literature gives greater knowledge of the surrounding world and serves as a foundation for learning words and concepts in meaningful contexts. Working with well-chosen literary texts gives opportunities for all-round training in the language (Skolverket 2009: 37).

As mentioned, the goals stated above are targets towards which school is supposed to aim. The syllabus also specifies goals that pupils should achieve in different years. For younger pupils in particular these are much lower than the general school goals, and in reading and writing assignments for year 3 (which is in focus here) one can scarcely expect demands for critical literacy. But in the tests considered here, the assignments are accompanied by a literary text which serves as a foundation for the reading comprehension test and which is also supposed to give inspiration for the writing assignment and directions on how to prepare for the test, which includes conversations about the inspiration text and two freestanding pictures. These directions could, on the other hand, be expected to reflect the goal of critical literacy that is mentioned in the syllabuses.

Against this background, the present study seeks to illuminate how a specific test in the subjects of Swedish and Swedish as a second language relates to the aim of critical literacy. The analysis focuses especially on the multicultural classroom and the situation of pupils with a mother tongue other than Swedish, as they have been found to have greater difficulty achieving the school’s goals (PISA 2006), which can be partly explained by the fact that the teaching is often dominated by monocultural aspects and therefore does not generate sufficient engagement (Cummins 2000). Other explanations focus on language: bilingual pupils can have gaps in their Swedish vocabulary, especially in certain domains (Ernström 2004). Vocabulary is regarded as the single most important factor to acquire in subject teaching in school (Viberg 1993), and gaps in vocabulary can make it harder to understand certain texts and thus cause greater difficulty in critically reading them. Another reason for the focus here
on bilingual pupils is that the use of tests constructed on the basis of the dominant group’s language and culture can be envisaged as leading to discrimination against minority groups (Cummins 1994), which can also apply to inspiration material and prescribed preparatory conversations.

For the analysis I have chosen the 2009 national test in Swedish and Swedish as a second language for grade 3 (for pupils aged nine and ten), but I have restricted myself to assignments C and E, which are intended to measure reading comprehension and written narrative skills (see Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010). The test has been evaluated by the test designers themselves (Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010), although the evaluation did not cover the questions I consider here. There are several reasons for the choice of this particular test. First, the assignments come with very detailed directions about conversations, some of them free, some of them in connection with pictures, and some in connection with a literary text intended both to serve as a foundation for testing reading comprehension and to give stimulation for the writing assignment. The test should be incorporated in a calm and permissive environment that is familiar to the pupils, where the teacher, through various types of introductory conversations and other meaning-making activities, can notice whether the pupils need more pre-understanding or clarification to make it easier to carry out the test (Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010:8).

The degree of detail in the directions for the preparatory conversations is partly due to the fact that the test was designed to fill both a formative and a summative assessment function (Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010:8). This makes the test extra interesting because summative assessment dominates in international contexts, being used, for example, in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA (CERI 2008:1). For a description of all parts of the test and the directions, see Hagberg-Persson et al. (2010:8).

Second, the test assignments, inspiration texts and directions are intended for both pupils with Swedish as their first language and for pupils with Swedish as their second language, and this choice has the consequence that the design has to take into account that bilingual pupils may need support in various forms (Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010). Third, the fact that the inspiration material partly consists of a literary text makes it especially rewarding to study since the syllabus for Swedish, as we have seen, emphasises the significance of reading literature as a way to provide counter-images to undemocratic values, and the subject of Swedish as a second language stresses the importance of reading literature for the development of bilingual pupils’ second-language development (see above). Fourth, the test was designed relatively recently and, since it has mostly been favourably evaluated, it can be expected to serve as a model for subsequent tests (Preface in Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010).

Arguments against the choice of this test could be that it is intended for younger pupils for whom the aspiration to critical literacy could be considered far too ambi-
tious, but the syllabus implies that work to that end can be started even among “small children.” At any rate, the syllabus advocates reflection and discussion based, among other things, on literature:

Even small children argue and discuss [...] Even small children can take part in conversations about literary experiences and about specific features of literature (Skolverket 2009: 28).

My study thus concerns assignments and directions from a single test, and it is not intended as a basis for general conclusions. Since the questions I have asked have not been explored in previous studies of national tests in Swedish (Gruppen för nationella prov i svenska och svenska som andraspråk: Forskning och publikationer 2012), I have not made any comparisons either. The overall intention of this analysis is instead to provide a foundation for future comparisons, national or international. The study also aims to arouse thoughts about how national tests, via concrete directions, can contribute to critical literacy and particularly further bilingual pupils’ development of their second language, an issue that ought to hold both national and international relevance.

Since my focus is on critical literacy, with a particular concern for the situation in multicultural and multilingual classrooms, my theory and methodology chiefly proceed from the model for critical literacy education developed by Hilary Janks (2010) on the basis of multilingual conditions in South Africa. The model can be used for designing education and teaching, and also for analysing this, and it can be applied to both written texts and interaction.

Looking at previous research, Janks distinguishes four approaches to critical literacy: domination, access, diversity and design. In Janks’ model these are interdependent; in education and teaching they have to be balanced against each other, although different orientations need not be considered simultaneously.

The orientation to domination has been central primarily in critical discourse analysis and has led to a pedagogy known as Critical Language Awareness, associated chiefly with Clark et al. (1987) and Fairclough (e.g. 1989), which Fairclough regards as especially important in multilingual classrooms where many pupils come from disadvantaged sections of society. Fairclough’s critical linguistics is influenced by Halliday and his systemic functional grammar (1994). A bearing idea is that texts are constructed and are the result of a choice among alternative linguistic forms, and that they can be deconstructed with respect to the way they favour or conserve existing power positions. It must be mentioned, however, that Fairclough’s analyses do not stop at the text itself. He also examines how social practices are discursively shaped, which also requires analysing processes (how it is produced or received) and the socio-historical and contextual conditions which govern the processes.

An orientation to access is prominent among advocates of an explicit pedagogy intended to help underprivileged groups in particular. This includes representatives of the “genre school” (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis 1993, Kress 1999, Martin et al. 1987, Martin & Rose, 2005, 2007), developed in Sydney on the basis of Halliday’s grammar, whose
main impact has been on second language teaching. The focus is in large measure on the development of academic literacy through a pedagogical circle model with ample room for exploratory comparisons between different language alternatives in the classroom (see Martin & Rose 2005), which in itself can be viewed as a step on the way to critical literacy.

Orientation to diversity means that cultural and linguistic differences in classrooms are highlighted and viewed as resources, partly with the vision that pupils with a different first language or a different cultural background from that of the school will feel more included and competent. With this orientation, it is crucial to use diversity to develop critical literacy. This orientation was represented early on by Heath (1983) and has been further developed, for instance, in New Literacy Studies (Gee 1994, Street 1984, 1996).

Orientation to design means that the analysis of power and possibility for changes in power presupposes the development of students’ creative ability in different semiotic systems. The New London Group (1996) developed a pedagogy that uses multiliteracy approaches to pedagogy to enable students to achieve two goals for literacy learning. One is creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, while the other is fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success by obtaining employment.

The model is applied to my material so that I have discerned three kinds of ‘texts’ in the test, consisting of reading and writing assignments, inspiration material, and directions for classroom discussions to precede the reading and writing assignments. They are presented and analysed below in this order.

The reading and writing assignments

It is in the nature of things that the assignments in a national test are largely characterised by domination. The sender of the test is an authority, the National Agency for Education, and even if the tests are compiled by designers in collaboration with teachers and pupils the pupils who have to complete the test are relatively powerless. For example, the time allotted for the test is regulated from above. It is implicitly evident that the assignments are to be done individually. To demonstrate writing ability, of course, writing has to be used (and the marking instructions make it clear that the pupils have to demonstrate elementary skills in orthography and punctuation). The pupils must use the Swedish language, obviously in view of the nature of the test. The choice of language is based on the fact that Swedish is the majority language in Sweden, which helps explain why all pupils, for democratic and other reasons, must learn Swedish in speech, reading and writing.

The topic of the writing assignment – in this case fear – is likewise determined from above. But fear is an existential phenomenon that can arise in many different situations, partly culture-bound, and in this way the choice of topic opens for diversity. Yet the choice of topic is relatively problematic in that children perhaps do not wish
or dare to write about what they are most afraid of, especially not in a test situation in school. It is clear from the instructions that the pupils should preferably write on the basis of their own experience, but they are also allowed to use their imagination.

The genre is likewise predetermined. The text the pupils have to write is a story. The marking instructions state that the pupils have to be able to retell a chronological course of events with a clear plot. This indicates the structure of ‘simple’ narratives, as is common in Western cultures. These often consist of an orientation phase, a complication phase that reaches a climax, and a resolution. If evaluations are included, a story of this kind is usually called a “narrative”, but without evaluations it is a “recount” (see e.g. Rothery & Stenglin 1997). The fact that it is the basic Western structure that is expected could be viewed as an expression of domination, but it could also be regarded as an adaptation to the experiences of literacy that virtually all pupils have had. Nearly all pupils in Sweden, in preschool and/or during their first school years, have listened to fairytales and stories with the typical features of a narrative, and they have also tried to produce these on their own, orally or in writing, or both. Many pupils have probably received explicit instruction in school about the basic structure of a narrative as the syllabus states that pupils in year 3 should be able to write narrative texts with a clear plot. I therefore interpret the choice of a narrative as an expression of access.

The instructions do not state who is the supposed receiver of the pupils’ text; it may be assumed that it is the National Agency for Education and the pupils’ teacher. Yet these are not expected to read the texts primarily for the content. The aim of the task is that the text should provide material for assessment and comparison. This could be unfair to bilingual pupils in particular. At any rate, Cummins (2000) says that an authentic audience is especially important for them.

To demonstrate their reading ability, pupils have to read a fictional text about fear in Swedish and answer some multiple-choice questions. These can require either localising answers, such as “Who is Sam?” or interpreting and integrating information, such as “Why does Sam talk in such a terrible voice when he tells about the deserted house?”. The questions can be said to require cultural literacy (see Lankshear et al. 2000).

All in all, the analysis of the assignments demonstrates that it is characterised by domination (so that the pupils can be assessed on equal terms) but that it is also designed with some consideration of both diversity and access (through the choice of genre and topic). The assignments do not require any form of critical literacy but, on the other hand, are designed to assess only those goals to be attained according to the syllabus for year 3.

The inspiration material
In preparation for the writing assignment, the fictional story used in the reading assignment should be highlighted again as an inspiration text. Another ‘text’ for in-
The inspiration story consists of two pictures (with no connection to the story), presented to the whole class as overheads, and in individually distributed picture booklets.

The inspiration story

The inspiration story is written in the third person. The main characters are the children Teo and Tania, who have the same home. In the pictures they appear to be of the same age. Teo and Tania set off to pick apples in the garden of an abandoned house. Near it they meet an older boy, Sam, of whom they are afraid. Sam frightens them away by telling them that the house is frequented by a group known as the Blood Gang. Teo and Tania run away but then they hide in a ditch and see Sam entering the house. Soon, however, he comes running out with blood flowing down his leg. He calls for help. Teo and Tania come out of their hiding place. Sam tells them that he was lying about the Blood Gang. He just happened to cut his leg with his knife when carving. Teo ties his sweater around Sam’s leg to stop the flow of blood and Tania holds his hand. They accompany him home. Sam’s mother is horrified and says that they must go to the hospital. In the evening Sam comes home to Teo and Tania. He tells them about his visit to the hospital and says the doctor told him it was good that Teo tied his sweater over the wound. To thank them for their help, he gives them each a bar of chocolate.

With this brief summary of the story as a background, I show below how it has been analysed with regard to domination, access, diversity and design.

Domination

The story may be said to be about power and shifts in power. The greatest power is assigned to the doctor in that he deprives Sam of some of his power. The doctor says that it was good that Teo tied the sweater round his leg, as a result of which Sam has to admit that Teo is competent and deserves thanks for the help he provided. Sam’s mother has power, as shown in the way she decides they have to go to hospital. She decides through expressions of ‘coercive’ modality: they ‘must’ go, as they indeed do. Sam’s power is shown in the way he manages to frighten off Teo and Tania.

At the beginning, Teo and Tania are lowest of all on the power scale but, by helping Sam when he is in need, the power balance between them and Sam changes. Sam’s power is not entirely broken, however. In the evening he calls them “snotty brats” (skitungar) as he thanks them, although he is possibly being jocular. Teo and Tania do not make any protest about this. All in all, the text conveys an image that expertise and age give power, but that competence in some sphere can change power positions. Power in the story is not linked to ethnicity but seems to be linked to gender. The only examples of young people with power are boys. One is Sam, who belongs to a group of older boys who are said to be nasty to younger children. The other is Teo, who seems to be assigned a little more power than Tania by being given properties such as acting resolutely and being competent in first aid. The comment that Teo bandages
Sam’s leg “without a word” arouses associations of manliness; it implies that there is no unnecessary pampering! He also seems cleverer than Tania since he sees through Sam’s lie. Tania shows the most fear. “Let’s run away,” she says, and she also displays ‘feminine’ empathy and caring: “We’ll take you home,’ says Tania, taking Sam by the hand”. The closing picture shows Sam addressing Teo when he hands over the bar of chocolate, while Tania stands behind him with her hands almost behind her back. Sam’s mother likewise appears ‘typically’ feminine in that her reaction is easy to read and intense: she becomes “quite terrified” (cf. Wilshire 1989).

**Access**

The choice of the narrative genre for the inspiration text may in itself seem like an expression of access since the text demonstrates a useful structure to follow. The text also offers words and phrases that are useful for other situations of fear. Among expressions of fear and how it can be experienced we find förskräckt (terrified), pirrigt (jittery), har aldrig vågat (has never dared), and de blir alldeles stela (they turn quite stiff). The fear felt by the characters is also implicit from many verbs, such as smyger (sneak), sticker (run away), rusar (hurry), springer allt vad de orkar (run for all they are worth). Some of the exclamations also imply fear, such as “It’s Sam!”, “Blood!”, “The Blood Gang”, and “Help!”

The text is also relatively easy to decode. The sentences are short, most of them consisting solely of main clauses. The longest sentence has just 18 words. The words too are all quite short. However, there are some longer words, for example, in the form of compounds such as fönsterrutorna (the window panes), sönderslagen (smashed to pieces), and chokladkaka (bar of chocolate). The majority of the words are common in everyday use, but the text also has some uncommon words that may be particularly difficult for pupils whose first language is not Swedish, such as ödehus (deserted house), husknut (corner of a house), bandage (bandage), väser (hisses), spanar (keeps watch), haltar (limps), and tälja (whittle).

**Diversity**

The choice of the names of the characters in the story could perhaps reflect some diversity. Names like Sam, Teo and Tania can at any rate seem more international and including than traditional Swedish personal names like Sven, Tore and Åsa (although many traditional Swedish names also have a foreign origin). The fact that the story shows different situations of fear can perhaps be also regarded as an expression of diversity since the possibility of recognition in different events increases.

**Design**

The fact that the chosen story for inspiration consists of both words and pictures indicates an awareness of the significance of multimodality that may stimulate pupils’ creativity, although the assignment only requires writing. The pictures are placed...
beside the text (making the adjacent lines shorter) or in spaces between paragraphs, which indicates that the content is closely related to the text and may be the same.

One picture shows Teo and Tania when they become afraid after meeting Sam, in another we see Teo and Tania in a ditch outside a deserted house out of which Sam comes running, and a third picture shows Sam at the door of Teo and Tania’s home, handing over two bars of chocolate. The cover sheet also has a picture showing a branch with an apple and a bat hanging from it. Under the branch are the words The Blood Gang in relief letters. The letter “o” is pierced by a knife which seems to have been thrown through the air. The heading and the pictures indicate a thrilling story.

As described above, the pictures have largely the same content as the words, but no apple trees or apples are visible in the garden, despite the fact that it is the hunt for apples that drives Teo and Tania there. In contrast, several bats are seen flying round the text, although there is no mention of them in it and their presence may therefore be hard to interpret. Such discrepancies may make reading comprehension more difficult, especially for bilingual pupils who often have gaps in their vocabulary and may not be familiar with either apple trees or bats.

The freestanding pictures
The inspiration material also contains two freestanding pictures illustrating fearful situations, which in itself can be said to strengthen diversity. The pictures have the headings Three boys watching television and Frightened girl in bed.

As regards domination, these pictures imply gender power relations similar to those in the story. The pictures show four ‘characters’, all depicting children. In one picture we see only boys. They are sitting or lying together in front of a television set and look frightened. But they do not seem powerless because they can be assumed to have chosen to watch a frightening programme and thus may be said to be challenging their own fear. The other picture shows a lone girl. She is sitting in her bed and looks frightened. Behind her is a circular picture that seems to be projected on the wall. In the circle we see the silhouette of an animal with a big mouth. The girl’s fear does not seem to be self-chosen, and therefore she seems to be in a more vulnerable position. Through these pictures, as in the text for inspiration, boys are given properties that can be more easily linked to courage and resolute action – properties that are considered masculine and are highly valued.

As regards access, the picture of the girl can raise questions, for example, how to interpret the circular image with the animal silhouette projected on the wall behind her. It is difficult to understand how the actual projection has been done, and the picture should probably be interpreted as a concrete representation of the girl’s fantasies or nightmares.

The pictures do not seem to have been chosen to highlight diversity, apart from the fact that both boys and girls are shown.
Altogether, the analysis of the material for inspiration shows that the content of both the story and the freestanding pictures supports traditional gender roles in which men have greater power. This is a surprising result as the syllabus states that literature, film etc. can create counters to stereotyped gender roles and other prejudices. Both the text and pictures also leave little scope for diversity. As regards design, the relation between the text and pictures in the story is somewhat problematic and one of the freestanding pictures is also a little hard to interpret. This, together with the use of uncommon words, may make it harder for bilingual pupils to access the content.

The finding that the material for inspiration shows a power imbalance and may partly be hard to interpret is not necessarily a problem in the situation, however. The inspiration material is to be discussed in the classroom, according to the directions. Power relations could thus be analysed and discussed, as well as the pictures and the relations between the text and pictures (for example, in line with Kress och van Leeuwen 2006). Words could be explained. To what extent this is suggested in the prescribed directions for preparation will be analysed and discussed below.

**Directions for classroom discussions to precede the reading and writing assignments**

The directions for preparing the reading and writing assignments include concrete suggestions for discussion topics and questions to put to the pupils. Some suggestions are given before the reading assignment and others before the writing assignment. Some suggestions are directly linked to the texts for inspiration, while others are more loosely tied to the topic of the writing assignment.

**Domination**

The directions may be said to presuppose that the teacher has a power position and is the person who leads the discussion in the class. This form of domination is probably considered natural in the context of a test. But domination can also be said to find expression in the way that the majority of the questions suggested for teachers to ask are geared to a literal or cultural dimension of literacy (see Lankshear, Snyder with Green). Suggested questions about the story concern what happened and what made the characters so frightened. There are no attempts to encourage a re-reading of the text to promote critical literacy. For example, there are no suggestions about questioning the relationship between power and gender shown in the story and the pictures. The idea that older boys especially can be a threat to children is thus allowed to pass without challenge, like the other gender roles and power perspectives presented in the text. This can be interpreted to mean that the power positions displayed are regarded as normal and natural. The directions can be said, in somewhat extreme terms, to help maintain these power positions and perhaps also to affect the girls and boys in their choice of which events to retell.
There is either no suggested discussion of, say, which characters are given a voice or how they express themselves. Aspects like these would be interesting from a power perspective. A comparison of direct speech, for example (cf. Janks 2010: 75), shows that Sam is the one who is heard the most. This is because the perspective is that of Teo and Tania, and it is Sam who is the threat to them. Sam’s statements show that Teo and Tania have a reason to be afraid. The reporting verbs indicate that Sam alternately “whispers”, “shouts”, and “hisses at them in a terrible voice”. He gives them orders in imperative form: “Stay away from this place!” and asks questions to make them feel insecure: “Where are you going?”, “Have you heard tell of the Blood Gang?”. A discussion of the way the characters talk could have been appropriate in view of the fact that many pupils (including younger ones) tend to use direct speech in their writing. The suggested questions thus seem insufficient for encouraging critical literacy in line with the goals that schools are supposed to aim at according to the syllabus.

Access
The directions state that pupils should be given explanations of uncommon words before reading the inspiration story. This may help especially those pupils whose first language is not Swedish as their success in school is closely associated with the development of their Swedish vocabulary (Lindberg 2006, Viberg 1993). The directions list 14 words that are specifically to be written on the blackboard, explained and put in a context. Teachers and pupils are free to bring up other words. The focus on explanations seems primarily intended to facilitate the pupils’ reading comprehension and promote a cultural reading.

According to the directions, the discussion should also be geared to pupils’ own experiences and observations concerning fear. The teacher, for example, is supposed to raise the question of how one can notice that someone is afraid. Such questions may bring up words that are useful for the writing assignment. But the directions do not state that the inspiration story or the freestanding picture should be studied with such expressions in mind. The text of the inspiration story can, however, suggest some words and expressions, such as that Teo and Tania “hold each other’s hands tightly”, that they “run” away from Sam, that they “sneak” back, and that they “rush” up from the ditch. Some of these expressions are offered as answers in the reading assignment, but the directions do not suggest that these answers should be discussed in the classroom. Discussing these, perhaps together with synonyms, anonyms etc., might have been even more helpful and could also have stimulated pupils to use the texts to develop their vocabulary. The inspiration to discuss how “fear” may be expressed can also be compared to expressions found by Martin and White (2005) within the system for appraisal (under the category Attitude).

The pictures likewise offer a basis for discussing words. One of the pictures, for example, depicts Teo and Tania when they are afraid. Both Teo and Tania have big eyes, suggesting wide-eyed shock. The jagged lines along their arms can be interpreted
to mean that they are shaking with fear. In addition, Tania is holding her hand in front of her mouth.

How the author and illustrator have chosen to express the characters’ feelings thus remains implicit knowledge and, according to representatives of the genre school (e.g. Martin & Rose 2007), this can be a disadvantage for pupils with a different linguistic and cultural background from the majority.

Yet the directions are not restricted to the word and phrase level. They also state that the discussion is supposed to help the pupils understand basic genre requirements for a story. Teachers are expected to inform pupils that their story should have “a beginning, a middle and an end”. But they are not advised to examine and discuss the structure of the inspiration story, although this could give pupils more concrete help in building their structure. A more explicit pedagogy of the kind that genre theorists plead for (e.g. Martin & Rose 2005) might have been more helpful here, too.

**Diversity**

Diversity is seen in the way the teacher, according to the directions, is supposed to talk with the pupils about their experiences of fear. Similar links are to be made when the teacher shows the freestanding pictures on the overhead projector. Suggested questions concern, for example, what the pupils are afraid of and why. They are supposed to be linked to the pupils’ experiences. Taking seriously what pupils have experienced may promote what Cummins (2000) calls *empowering*.

**Design**

According to the directions, the story for inspiration is presented both orally and in writing, which implies a form of multimodality that can be envisaged as fair to bilingual pupils. The significance of multimodality is also seen in the way the classroom discussion is supposed to cover both the story and the freestanding pictures. But there are no explicit suggestions for how the relationship between the text and the pictures in the inspiration story should be dealt with. Such a discussion could have facilitated reading and/or helped pupils to ponder choices in their own writing in other situations.

The directions include explicit suggestions for a discussion of the freestanding pictures. But the pictures can serve as a basis for observations of how fear can be noticed. They imply, for example, that protective stances may signal fear. One boy holds his hand in front of his face and peers out through one eye, another boy has a furrowed brow and is holding his hand in front of his mouth, and a third has his lips pinched together. The girl in the bed is pulling the quilt up over her nose. Her fear is also noticeable in her wide-open eyes. The directions give no suggestions for discussing how the image projected behind the girl in the bed is to be interpreted, although it can surely raise questions. More specific attention to the freestanding pictures could help pupils in developing meaning making from different semiotic resources which, according to the New London Group, is an urgent task.
**Summary and discussion**

In this article I have examined how and to what extent a national test of reading and writing ability in year 3 is geared towards critical literacy, with a particular focus on multicultural and multilingual classrooms. According to the current syllabus, one can expect that the test assignments are geared to reading comprehension and cultural literacy which, according to my analysis, has also proved to be the case. But the directions for the conversation could be expected to be more in line with the goals towards which school is supposed to aim. My analysis shows that, although the directions are oriented towards diversity, they otherwise show little orientation towards critical literacy.

The results derive from an analysis of the three ‘texts’ in the test separately, that is, the assignments, the inspiration texts that serve as a foundation for the reading assignments and conversations and of the recommended classroom preparations. Here the results are summed up more synthetically, based on what the material as a whole can say about how the test is designed with regard to power, diversity, access and design.

The entire test situation can be said to bear the imprint of power, which can be explained in terms of the expectations that pupils should be assessed equally. What the assignments require is decided from above, as is the choice of inspiration material and how the preparatory classroom discussion should be performed.

What is more surprising is that both types of inspiration material, as regards power, display stereotyped gender roles and that this state of affairs is not suggested as a discussion topic, whether in the obligatory conversations about the literary story or about the freestanding pictures. There are no questions inviting any challenge to the content, and therefore no questions about how power can be constructed linguistically, for example through an analysis of direct speech (cf. Janks 2010:75). My interpretation of this is that the directions are in conflict with the statement in the syllabus that literature can provide counters to stereotyped gender roles (Skolverket 2009: 29). Persson (2012) claims, however, that Swedish syllabuses do not emphasise a critical reading of literature, instead reflecting the view that the literature to be treated in the classroom should display “good” examples. Based on his outlook, it is rather the choice of inspiration material that conflicts with the syllabuses.

An orientation to diversity can mainly be seen in the choice of the theme for the writing assignment – fear – which is an existential feeling, and in the prescribed questions about the pupils’ earlier experiences. Such interaction may also create engagement, pointed out by Cummins (2000) as being very important for bilingual pupils.

The test shows a weak orientation towards design, which goes well together with the fact that the writing assignment does not require multimodality. The story that serves as a basis for the reading comprehension does have pictures, however, and pupils are also given freestanding pictures before the writing assignment. The test may thus be said to presuppose an ability to interpret pictures and to perceive associations between
the pictures and the text. Yet in the directions there are no suggestions for questions to be asked about the pictures, which could help pupils to develop multiliteracies.

Orientation to access is more clearly visible as a whole. It is seen in the writing assignment in the choice of a genre that all pupils can be expected to be familiar with. In the inspiration story it can be detected through an easily accessible graphic design and simple language with mostly everyday words and short sentences. Moreover, the directions show that the explanation of difficult words is an important part of the preparations for the pupils’ individual reading. In contrast, there is no suggestion that the inspiration text should be used as a source for developing the pupils’ vocabulary in preparation for the written assignment, even though it offers many expressions for fear and many descriptions of how fear can be experienced or observed. Nor do the directions suggest that the inspiration text should be studied for its structure, only that the pupils’ own texts should have an introduction, a middle and a conclusion. Compared, say, with the model that genre pedagogy (e.g. Martin & Rose 2007) holds up as important, the inspiration text is not used to the full. This is also true of the pictures and their relationship to the story and the inspiration pictures, for which no explicit questions are suggested.

Overall, the result can also be summed up thus: the reading and writing assignments are in line with the goals but the directions only partly exploit the potential of the inspiration material for the development of (especially bilingual) pupils’ language. Nor is there any suggestion that they should be used to stimulate the development of critical literacy. It could of course be claimed that the directions are adapted to a test situation and that conversations about power relations or detailed studies of the inspiration story could divert the focus from the test assignment. On the other hand, it is not assumed that all the preparation for the test should be done in one given lesson and, since many teachers think that the assessment of the test is highly time-consuming (Hagberg-Persson et al. 2010:70), I consider it reasonable that a lot of time is devoted to the preparations so that the learning potential can be as high as possible. It is important that the directions for the national test should be provided with such support given that many teachers feel inadequately trained to promote the linguistic development of bilingual pupils (May 1999).

In addition, the responsibility of the subject of Swedish for developing critical literacy seems as weak in the most recent syllabus from 2011, where literature is more downgraded (Liberg et al. 2012), and the significance of reading literature as a counter to undemocratic ideas is less prominent. Instead there is talk of how narrative and poetic texts provide insight into people’s experiences, and illustrate the human condition and questions of identity and life (Skolverket 2011:212f). This can be said to stimulate questions about power relations more implicitly. From that perspective it is even more important that the directions for how to prepare for national tests should be exemplary.
Notes
1 Mother tongue education in Sweden today means tuition in some mother tongue other than Swedish. It used to be that the mother tongue was the subject that is today called Swedish.
2 The expression “bilingual” in this article also includes pupils with more than two languages, in Swedish called “multilingual”.

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Towards critical literacy?

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