

Bibliometric Analysis of Critical Literacy Studies

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Abstract

This study presents a bibliometric analysis that systematically examines the scientific literature published in the field of critical literacy (CL). Although research on critical literacy has evolved along three main axes—its theoretical frameworks, pedagogical practices, and social justice perspectives—these dimensions have rarely been analyzed using bibliometric methods. This gap has limited the visibility of academic trends and research voids within the field. The primary aim of the study is to map the development of CL research through seven specific questions concerning publication years, journals, countries, institutional collaborations, citation impacts, and key concepts. Bibliometric analysis was adopted as the research method, and data were retrieved in June 2025 from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection using the search term “critical literacy.” After filtering for English-language journal articles within the “Education Educational Research” category, a total of 1,033 studies were included in the analysis. The VOSviewer software was used to perform network and co-occurrence analyses. Findings revealed comprehensive patterns related to trends, regional and institutional differences, conceptual frameworks, and highly cited works in CL research. The results contribute to the literature by providing a holistic view of the field’s intellectual structure and evolution. The study concludes that future directions of critical literacy are likely to expand toward themes such as digital media, artificial intelligence, social inequalities, and refugee education. It emphasizes that systematic analyses of this nature are vital not only for advancing academic knowledge production but also for informing educational policies, and it recommends promoting interdisciplinary approaches in the field.

Keywords: Children’s literature; values education; Turkey’s Century Education Model; illustrated children’s books; Feridun Oral

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Introduction

In the contemporary global and digital era, mere access to information is inadequate; what truly matters is the ability to question, analyze, and reshape information as a means of fostering democratic engagement and social empowerment. *Critical literacy*, as a theoretical and pedagogical orientation, extends beyond traditional literacy practices by encouraging individuals not only to read texts, but to deconstruct them, question their ideological assumptions, and reconstruct alternative meanings (Luke, 2000; Rogers, 2014). This approach foregrounds the role of the reader as an active agent who interrogates authorial intent, discursive power, and the socio-political implications embedded in language use (Alvermann, 2002). It emphasizes that texts are never neutral and that language operates as a vehicle for both maintaining and challenging systems of power (Janks, 2000). Critical literacy thus encompasses a political commitment—it acknowledges that literacy can be used either as a tool for liberation or as a mechanism of domination.

Building on Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *critical pedagogy*, critical literacy is not merely a set of cognitive skills but a means of developing consciousness and agency. Freire conceptualized literacy as a dialogic and transformative process through which individuals critically perceive their realities and take action to reshape them. From this perspective, education becomes a practice of freedom, enabling learners to transcend passive roles and engage as active agents of social change. The significance of critical literacy transcends individual intellectual development; it is intricately linked to broader issues of equity, justice, and participation. For marginalized groups in particular, critical literacy facilitates the recognition and contestation of structural inequities. It is central to addressing issues such as educational inequality, gender norms, media manipulation, and civic disempowerment (Rogers, 2014).

In today's algorithmic age, where artificial intelligence facilitates the rapid production and manipulation of content, the importance of critical reading practices has grown exponentially (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). While digital access has democratized information flow, it has also amplified the risks of misinformation and ideological polarization. In this context, critical literacy is not just a theoretical imperative but a pedagogical necessity.

Scholarly interest in critical literacy has expanded significantly over the past two decades. However, this expansion has yet to be accompanied by a systematic synthesis of research trends, influential contributors, and conceptual trajectories within the field. Existing studies tend to cluster around three core domains:

- (1) theoretical frameworks and definitions (Luke, 2000; Janks, 2010),
- (2) pedagogical applications and curriculum development (Alvermann, 2002; Lewison et al., 2002; Vasquez, 2004),
- (3) social justice and transformative educational perspectives (Freire, 1970; Morrell, 2008).

Despite this diversity, a comprehensive bibliometric analysis remains absent—an omission that obscures both dominant trends and emerging gaps. A quantitative mapping of the field is therefore crucial to identifying scholarly patterns, recognizing collaborative networks, and highlighting underexplored areas. Furthermore, understanding how critical literacy research has evolved—particularly in response to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of digital disinformation—can generate meaningful insights for future inquiry.

To address these gaps and offer a systematic overview of the field, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the annual distribution of articles published on critical literacy?
2. In which journals are these articles predominantly published?
3. What is the geographical distribution of research outputs (by country)?
4. How do institutions collaborate in critical literacy scholarship?
5. What are the citation patterns and scholarly impact of the publications?
6. Which articles have received the highest number of citations?
7. What are the key concepts and how are they conceptually and thematically interrelated?

By answering these questions, the study aims to map the intellectual landscape of critical literacy research, identify research gaps, and uncover future directions. These insights are expected to inform not only academic scholarship but also contribute to the development of more equitable educational policies and critical pedagogical practices worldwide.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a bibliometric analysis approach to systematically examine the scholarly landscape of critical literacy. The objective is to uncover the structural dynamics, prominent contributors, conceptual evolution, and prevailing research trends in the field. As a quantitative and exploratory method, bibliometric analysis facilitates the identification of patterns across multiple dimensions—such as authorship, publication outlets, countries, institutions, and conceptual keywords—thereby enabling both descriptive and inferential insights into the intellectual architecture of the discipline (Donthu et al., 2021). Beyond mapping the current state of the field, this method also provides a basis for identifying emerging research trajectories and existing knowledge gaps (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Data Collection Procedure

The data were retrieved in June 2025 from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, a multidisciplinary and selective database renowned for its high citation accuracy and indexing rigor (Pranckutė, 2021). The search strategy was constructed using the topic query string “TS = (‘critical literacy’),” supplemented by a variety of relevant terms such as *critical literacy theoretical*

perspectives, literacy and identity, literature-based instruction, and digital critical analysis, to capture a broader conceptual scope.

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

- WoS category: "Education Educational Research,
- Language: English,
- Exclusion: Review articles were omitted to maintain analytical focus.
- Document type: Peer-reviewed journal articles only,

Following the application of these filters, a total of 1,033 articles were identified and included for bibliometric analysis. The entire search and selection process was documented in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure methodological transparency and replicability.

Study Selection and PRISMA Flow

To ensure methodological transparency and replicability, the study selection process was structured in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The PRISMA flow diagram summarizes each phase of the selection pipeline, including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

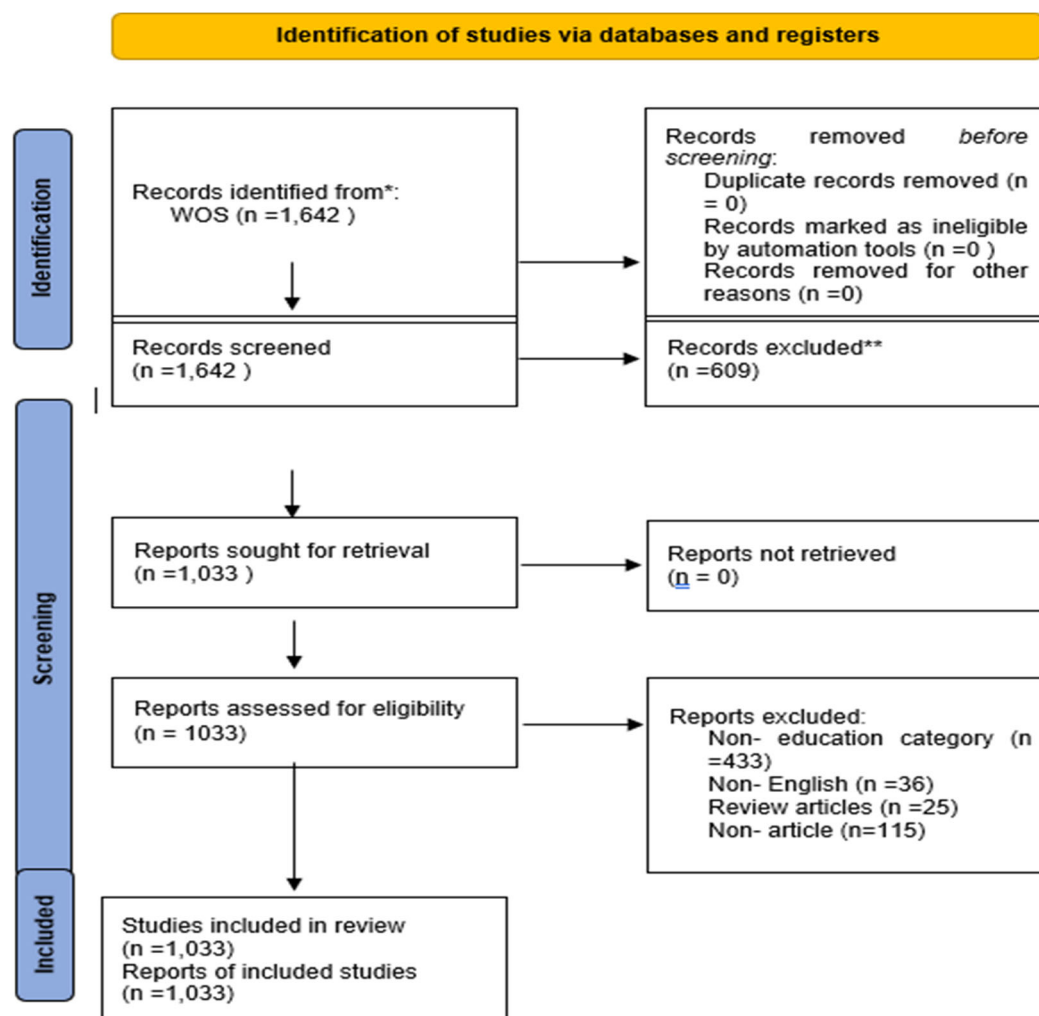


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

Specifically, 1,642 records were initially retrieved from WoS. After excluding non-English records, review articles, items outside the education research category, and documents not classified as journal articles, a total of 1,033 articles remained. No duplicates or automation-based exclusions were recorded. All articles were retrieved and reviewed in full text, with no additional exclusions at the eligibility stage.

Data Analysis Procedure

All identified records were exported from WoS as “Plain Text Files” and imported into VOSviewer, a robust bibliometric mapping tool designed for constructing and visualizing co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence, and citation linkages in large datasets. VOSviewer has been extensively used in bibliometric studies due to its capacity to generate intuitive and meaningful visualizations of scholarly patterns.

The analysis focused on the following dimensions:

- Temporal distribution of publications by year,
- Journal-wise publication distribution,
- Geographical distribution by country,
- Institutional collaboration networks,
- Citation impact and scholarly influence,
- Identification of most highly cited articles,
- Mapping of key concepts and their interrelations

Findings

Temporal Trends in Critical Literacy Research

Figure 1 displays the annual progression of publication frequency in the field, providing insights into key periods of growth and stagnation.

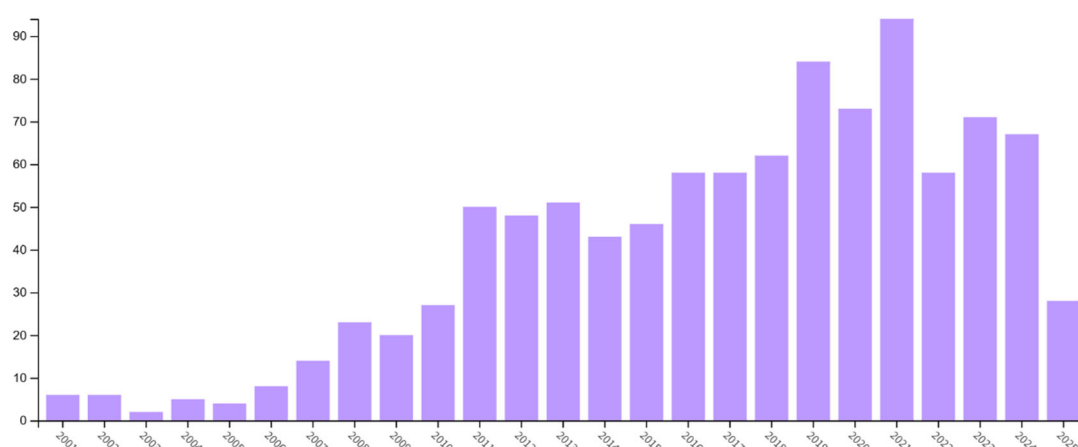


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of publications on critical literacy (Web of Science, June 2025)

The temporal distribution of critical literacy publications illustrates notable shifts in scholarly engagement over time. As depicted in Figure 1, the period between 2006 and 2008 saw a near doubling of publication output, suggesting an emergent momentum in the field. This was followed by a brief decline in 2009, and then a sharp spike in 2011, marking a critical expansion phase. From 2011 to 2019, the number of publications increased at a steady pace, reflecting sustained academic interest and institutional investment in the topic.

However, beginning in 2020, the publication trend became more irregular and unstable, potentially influenced by external factors such as global shifts in educational priorities and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These temporal fluctuations may indicate a reorientation of research focus within the broader critical literacy discourse.

Journal Distribution of Publications

Analysis of journal-level contributions to the field of critical literacy indicates that the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* emerges as the most prominent outlet, publishing 120 articles that have collectively received 1,498 citations, suggesting both high productivity and substantial scholarly impact. The second most influential journal is *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, with 94 publications and 766 citations (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Top Journals Publishing on Critical Literacy and Their Citation Metrics

Journal	Article Count	Citation Count	Total Link Strength
Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy	120	1498	13932
English Teaching-Practice and Critique	94	766	15620
Reading Teacher	43	421	5241
Literacy	26	180	5191
Journal of Literacy Research	21	361	5269

These results, presented in Table 1, highlight the central role of literacy-focused and English education journals in shaping the discourse around critical literacy.

The analysis of inter-journal linkages demonstrates that journals specializing in literacy, critical pedagogy, language and reading education, general pedagogy, and international cultural studies are densely interconnected within the critical literacy research landscape (*Figure 2*).

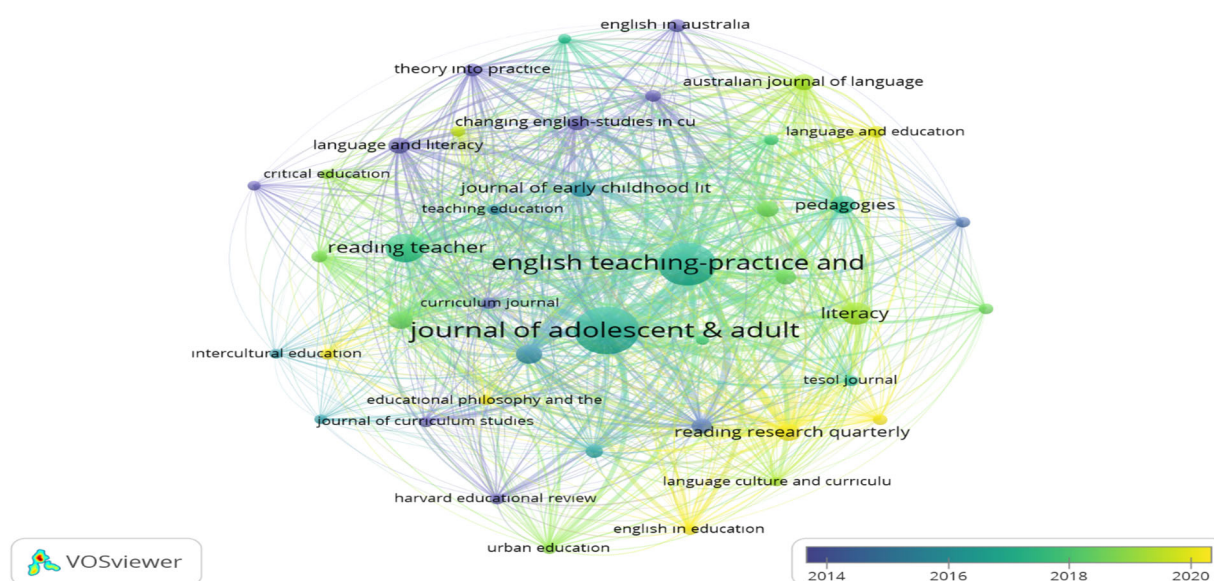


Figure 2. Journal-level co-linkages among critical literacy publications

As visualized in Figure 2, these thematic clusters suggest a high degree of interdisciplinary convergence, reinforcing the notion that critical literacy operates at the intersection of multiple educational and sociocultural domains.

Author and Country Distribution

A review of the most prolific authors and their affiliated countries reveals a concentration of critical literacy scholarship in Australia, South Africa, and the United States. These authors have made substantial contributions in terms of both publication output and citation impact, indicating their centrality in the academic discourse surrounding critical literacy (see Table 2).

Table 2. Leading authors by country, publication, citation count, and link strength

Country	Author	Articles	Citations	Link Strength
Australia	Comber, Barbara	6	147	3
South Africa	Janks, Hilary	10	142	3
USA	Jones, Stephanie	6	134	1
USA	Rogers, Rebecca	12	107	5
USA	Johnson, Elisabeth	6	87	1
Taiwan	Huang, Shin-Ying	6	78	2

These figures underscore the geographic concentration of influential scholars, with the USA leading in author representation, followed by Australia and South Africa.

Institutional Distribution and Citation Impact

The institutional analysis of article and citation distribution shows that universities in Australia, the United States, South Africa, and Canada dominate scholarly output in the field. As shown in Table 3, institutions such as the *Queensland University of Technology*, *University of Georgia*, and *University of Witwatersrand* are among the top contributors in terms of both productivity and impact.

Table 3. Top contributing institutions by country, article count, citations, and link strength

Institution	Country	Articles	Citations	Link Strength
Queensland University of Technology	Australia	17	672	8
The University of Georgia	USA	21	458	9
University of Witwatersrand	South Africa	19	411	4
Columbia University	USA	16	398	11
The University of Texas at Austin	USA	14	230	16
University of California, Los Angeles	USA	8	230	8
University of Missouri	USA	19	227	8
University of Toronto	Canada	14	210	6
The Ohio State University	USA	13	200	12
Monash University	Australia	8	181	1
Indiana University	USA	16	176	10
University of Massachusetts	USA	10	167	5

This institutional clustering suggests that critical literacy research is predominantly concentrated in Anglophone academic systems, particularly in North America and Oceania.

Country-Level Publication and Citation Analysis

A macro-level country analysis reveals that the **United States** leads the field in terms of publication output and total citations, followed by **Australia**, **Canada**, **the United Kingdom**, and **South Africa** (see **Table 4**). This distribution reflects the geopolitical landscape of English-language research on critical literacy.

Table 4. Country-level distribution of articles, citations, and link strength

Country	Articles	Citations	Link Strength
USA	548	5388	550

Australia	93	1527	298
Canada	75	842	181
United Kingdom	40	653	60
South Africa	39	451	144

The results point to the dominance of Western academic contexts in shaping the critical literacy discourse, although emerging contributions from the Global South—particularly South Africa—are also evident and noteworthy.

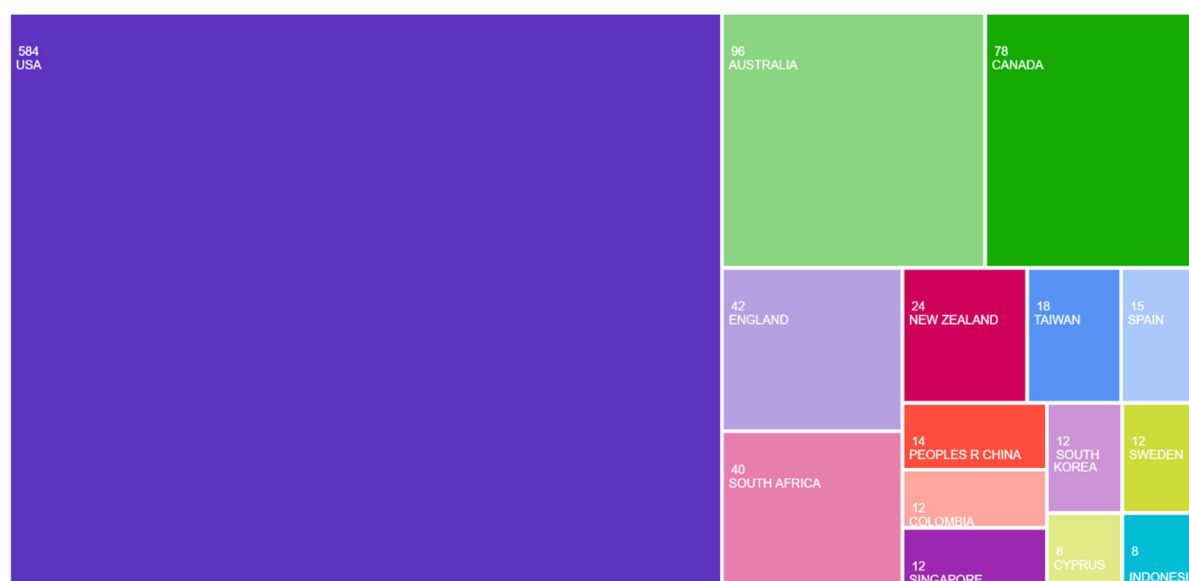


Figure 3. Number of Publications by Country

Most Cited Articles

An examination of the five most cited articles in the field of critical literacy reveals that the most frequently cited scholars are Allan Luke and Luciana Pangrazio from Australia, and Hilary Janks from South Africa. Another highly cited author is Donna E. Alvermann from the United States.

Table 5. The Most Cited Articles in the Field of Critical Literacy

Article	Citations
Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. <i>Theory into practice</i> , 51(1), 4-11.	264
Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. <i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> , 43(5). (pp. 448-461).	229
Janks, H. (2000). Domination, access, diversity and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education. <i>Educational review</i> , 52(2), 175-186.	202

Pangrazio, L. (2016). Reconceptualising critical digital literacy. <i>Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education</i> , 37(2), 163-174.	156
Alvermann, D. E. (2002). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents. <i>Journal of literacy Research</i> , 34(2), 189-208.	137

Frequently Used Keywords

An analysis of the published studies on critical literacy revealed a total of 2,125 unique keywords. When a minimum occurrence threshold of 20 was applied, 20 keywords met this criterion. At this stage, three keyword clusters were identified, and the analysis focused on the years 2016 to 2020, during which these keywords were most frequently used.

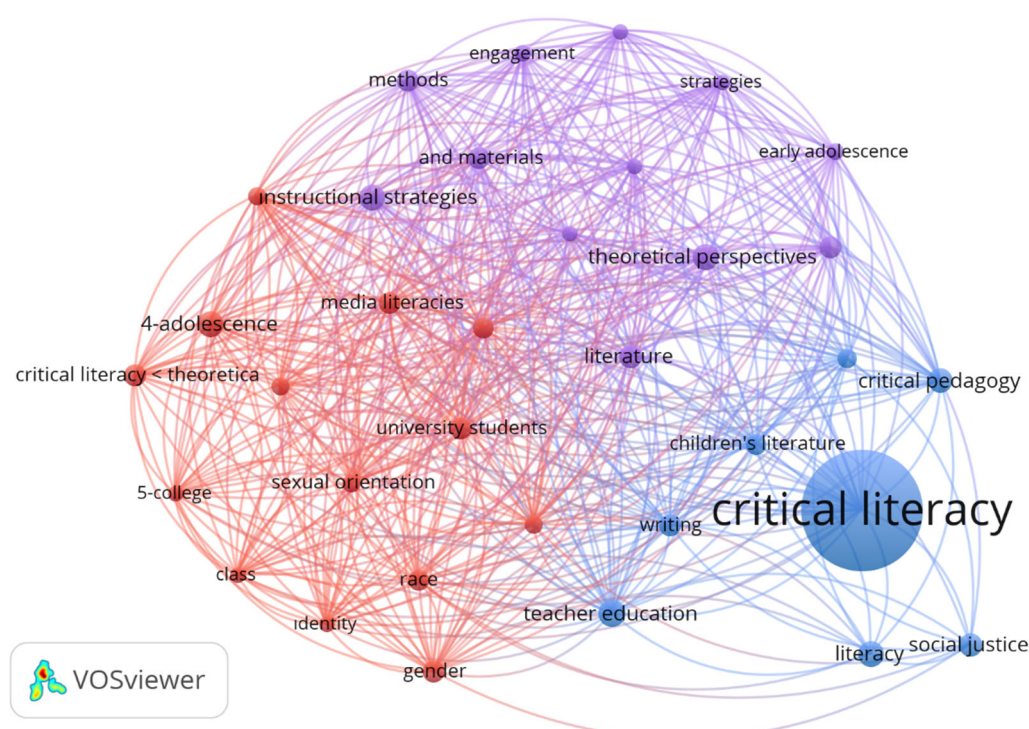


Figure 4. Keywords and Their Prominent Years of Usage

When the clusters are examined, it is seen that the most frequently used words are ‘critical literacy (488), teacher education (49), adolescence (46), literacy (45), instructional strategies (45), critical pedagogy (43), social justice (37)’.

When the clusters are examined:

- The blue cluster, which appears to be the largest, includes terms such as *critical literacy*, *critical pedagogy*, *teacher education*, *social justice*, *children’s literature*, *critical theory*, and *writing*. These terms represent the most extensively studied conceptual domains in critical literacy research.

- The purple cluster, which has a dense appearance, comprises keywords such as *early adolescence*, *participation*, *instructional strategies*, *literature*, *materials*, *methods*, *method* and *material*, *motivation*, and *research methodology*. This cluster appears to provide insights into the methodological aspects of the field.
- The red cluster, which is smaller in size, contains terms such as *adolescence*, *adulthood*, *classroom*, *university*, *university students*, *language learners*, *race*, *gender*, *identity*, and *sexual orientation*. These keywords reflect the demographic and identity-related characteristics of the study populations in critical literacy research.

Discussion and Conclusion

An analysis of publication trends reveals a consistent increase in scholarly work on critical literacy since 2005. This growth appears to correspond with the expansion of digital technologies in education. As digital access to information becomes more widespread, the demand for learners to critically evaluate, interrogate, and transform this information also intensifies. In this context, critical consciousness has become increasingly essential, highlighting the growing relevance of critical literacy (Zawacki-Richter & Latchem, 2018). This aligns with findings showing that journals like *Computers & Education* have seen a steady rise in critical literacy-related publications, particularly after 2001.

The distribution of publications across journals shows that *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* and *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* stand out in terms of both volume and impact. This underscores the strong connection between critical literacy, language education, and adolescent literacy development. Co-citation and bibliometric network analyses further reveal that publications in this field often intersect with discourses on critical pedagogy, social justice, and discourse analysis. As Luke (2018) and Rogers (2014) argue, critical literacy is not merely a set of cognitive skills, but a pedagogical and sociopolitical practice that enables individuals to question and reshape dominant ideologies.

The prominence of Australia as one of the most productive countries in this area is noteworthy. Luke's (2000) seminal work explains that in Australia, critical literacy is valued not only as an individual competence but as a political instrument to support cultural diversity and minority rights. The country's multicultural structure and commitment to social justice in education have directly shaped the development of the field (MFA, 2024).

Similarly, the high research output from South Africa and the United States is intertwined with their sociopolitical histories. In the U.S., critical literacy appears integrated into the education system as part of pluralistic and rights-based approaches (Rao et al., 2024). It encourages not only critical reading but also the development of resistance against dominant ideologies (Luke, 2012). In the case of South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and systemic exclusion of Black citizens from the education system rendered critical literacy an instrument of resistance and transformation. As Janks (2000) argues, critical literacy in South Africa emerged not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a

liberatory movement, designed to help individuals recognize suppressed identities and question structural inequalities through four core principles: domination, access, diversity, and design.

South Africa's multilingual and multicultural fabric has amplified demands for equitable education, reinforcing the view of literacy as an ideological rather than a neutral practice. In post-colonial settings, critical literacy has played a crucial role in reconstructing identities, confronting historical trauma, and empowering younger generations. Thus, the country's prolific output reflects both academic and historical necessity.

Institutional analysis highlights Queensland University of Technology, the University of Georgia, and Columbia University as top contributors. These institutions seem to embrace socially oriented research agendas and pedagogical innovation. Collaboration among affiliated researchers is also visible in co-authorship networks, reinforcing the idea of institutional synergy in advancing critical literacy research.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis revealed three distinct clusters, each illuminating a different thematic domain within critical literacy research. These clusters respectively represent: (1) the theoretical and ideological foundations of the field, (2) applied methodologies and pedagogical practices, and (3) the intersectional and sociocultural dimensions of literacy. This thematic diversity underscores that critical literacy is not confined to abstract theorization but is deeply rooted in practice and methodological plurality. The first cluster includes terms such as *critical literacy*, *critical pedagogy*, *teacher education*, and *social justice*, reflecting a commitment to education as a transformative act (Luke, 2012; Freire, 1970; Liu et al., 2022). The second cluster consists of terms like *instructional strategies*, *materials*, *methods*, and *motivation*, highlighting a growing orientation toward classroom-level implementation and pedagogical design (Pandya & Ávila, 2014). The third cluster encompasses terms such as *adolescents*, *university students*, *race*, *gender*, and *identity*, emphasizing the field's sustained attention to intersectionality and identity formation in diverse learning contexts (Janks, 2010; Alvermann, 2002; Vasquez et al., 2019). Together, these clusters illustrate that critical literacy is both a conceptual framework and an applied educational movement, responsive to sociopolitical dynamics and committed to equity-driven inquiry.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive map of the structural, thematic, and institutional contours of critical literacy scholarship. It highlights the field's evolution from text-based critique to a broader emancipatory and interdisciplinary movement. Future research directions may include emerging topics such as digital disinformation, artificial intelligence, refugee education, and ecological literacy. Bibliometric studies of this nature not only trace academic influence but also inform educational policy by identifying key areas of need and opportunity. It is therefore crucial that forthcoming work in critical literacy prioritizes content depth, contextual diversity, and global collaboration through interdisciplinary perspectives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Ethical Statement

I hereby declare that the data, information, and documents presented in this article were obtained and used in accordance with academic and ethical standards. All information, documents, analyses, and results have been presented in line with the principles of scientific integrity. All works used in the article have been properly cited and referenced. No changes have been made to the original data, and the study presented in this article is original.

Credit Author Statement

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing.

Author 2: Supervision, Project Administration, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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