Theme 02: Defining the Research Problem

**Critical Reading 1**

**There are a number of ways in which you can demonstrate that you have critically evaluated a study. You can focus on:**

* possible weaknesses in the methodology e.g. small sample, sampling method, poorly designed instrument, lack of control group, etc.
* possible flaws in the data analysis used
* areas which have not been examined, i.e. a ‘gap’ in the literature
* possible faulty logic, e.g. the claims made are not based on the results
* lack of relevance to your own project, e.g. of time, place, methods used, focus of study, etc.

**However, remember that being critical does not necessarily mean highlighting weaknesses in a study. You can also focus on:**

* strengths in the research design or data analysis
* the new, original contribution this study makes to the academic discipline
* relevance of the study to your own research e.g. because it is similar in scale, focus, the participants, research context or design of the research
* theories or ideas which may be particularly useful to your own research, e.g. in the questionnaire

**TASK 1**

Look at the following extract from a fictional academic article written by a researcher called Browning. It refers to a study where some children were taught to read using **phonics** (which focuses on teaching students the sounds of groups of letters) while others were taught using the **whole word method** (which focuses on teaching students to recognise and pronounce whole words).

In the reading test, the five children who were taught to read using phonics performed better overall than the five children who were taught to read using the whole word method. This shows that the phonics method is a better choice for schools.

(Browning, 2005: 89)

Do you agree with the claim made by Browning? What questions about the study could a sceptical, critical reader ask?

**TASK 2**

A critical reader can ask a number of questions about this study. Read the questions below and decide whether they refer to methodology (M), data analysis (DA) or issues with the conclusions drawn (C):

1. Is a study of ten children sufficient to draw such strong conclusions?
2. What does ‘performed better overall’ mean?
3. How big were the differences between the two groups? Were they big enough to be repeated if the experiment was conducted again with different subjects?
4. What was the reading text exactly? Could it possibly be biased in favour of the students in the phonics group (i.e. be easier for them to do)?
5. Is there any way the children could have been influenced externally, e.g. by parents helping them at home?
6. Were the two groups of children similar in terms of intelligence, age, gender etc.?
7. Is it reasonable to assume that what works well in a small-scale project would also work in a school environment?
8. How does Browning envisage phonics being used in schools? Would there still be a place for the whole word method?

**TASK 3**

Obviously, many of these questions might be answered somewhere in the rest of the article. However, there may still be some questions which are not answered. These areas could be highlighted in your annotated bibliography or literature review as weaknesses of the study.

Read the paragraph below and highlight where the writer critically evaluates:

1. The methods used in the study

2. The sample (e.g. characteristics, size and sampling method)

3. The way data was analysed

4. Claims made by the author

Browning (2005) found that children taught to read using phonics did better in a reading test than children taught using the whole word method. However, the study was small, the test rather limited, and the subjects were not closely matched either for age or gender. A further limitation was that there was no pre-test to determine participants’ existing skills. An examination of Browning’s test scores reveals that, although the mean score of the phonics group was higher, two of the highest scorers in the test were whole word learners. Since this indicates that the whole word method is effective for some learners at least, Browning is perhaps over ambitious in his claim that ‘the phonics method is better for schools’ (89).

**Note:** the level of detail given here would only be given if the study was central to your own research. Normally, only one or two limitations would be pointed out.

Adapted from: Wallace, M. and Wray, A. (2011). *Critical writing and reading for postgraduates.* London: Sage.