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Other people's stories:

**What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting
in Aotearoa New Zealand**

A thesis
submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Education
at
The University of Waikato
by
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Abstract

This study explores what critical literacy could look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, it explores the work of a teacher-researcher and a small group of pre-school children carrying out critical literacy activities over a defined period of time.

The research data was gathered using qualitative methodological approaches. Qualitative data was collected by videotaping the research activities, and by the teacher-researcher actively reflecting on those activities. Additional perspectives were provided by a critical friend, and by interviews with some of the parents of the child participants.

The major findings from this study indicate that critical literacy learning with preschool children is possible. Additional findings of this research indicate that the use of multimodal literacies supported critical literacy learning, by creating opportunities for children to interact meaningfully with texts. The third finding of significance was that children were more engaged with critical literacy learning when they cared about the text being used.

The study implies that critical literacy work with preschool children is possible. This work could inform other early childhood teachers either considering a critical literacy approach, or already involved in critical literacy teaching.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Critical literacy has had little adoption in the early childhood sector, both in New Zealand and internationally. For this reason there is little research, literature, or resources available for any educator wishing to implement critical literacy as part of their teaching practice, as I wished to do. Accordingly, the purpose of my research was to study my own practice as I implemented a critical literacy programme.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Section 1.1 provides my rationale for this study. Section 1.2 outlines the context of the study, as located within the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education system. Section 1.3 provides information about me, while section 1.4 sets out the research questions and provides a brief overview of the intervention. Lastly, section 1.5 sets out the chapters of this study.

1.1: Rationale: An evolution of thought and practice

I have had a long involvement with critical literacy learning; I just did not realise it at the time.

In 1986, aged 12 and in Intermediate School, I was fortunate enough to have had two teachers who valued thinking enough to practice it with us. My favourite memories were the afternoons one of them would take a seat at the front of the room, and proceed to read a carefully chosen short story. There was rapt silence

amongst my classmates as we soaked up the ideas of the story, already preparing ourselves for the discussion we knew would follow. At the end, a moment of silence. Then the questions would start.

The questions my teachers asked were never about tone, theme, setting or character description. Instead, our teachers used texts as sounding boards for us to bounce our own thinking off. What did we think of the characters' choices? Why do we think they acted that way? What would we have done in the same situation? Could our society ever look like that? In the process of answering these (and other) questions we made our thinking visible, both to ourselves and to others. Some of our discussions grew quite heated as we shared conflicting opinions and ideas. Our teachers became educators and mediators on these occasions, supporting us to hear perspectives that differed from our own, and teaching us how to moderate and frame our own reactions. These were satisfying discussions for me. They stimulated my mind, sparking connections with perspectives I had not considered.

These experiences also irrevocably altered the way I viewed texts. I no longer saw a book as something static. Yes, I could still read for pleasure as well as for knowledge. But now I knew I could also read into a text to question its ideas, and read around a text to explore its context. I could ask questions about the characters and challenge their decisions. I entered high school the following year with the idea sown in my brain that texts were negotiable.

Fast-forward about thirty-five years to my postgraduate studies in Education at the University of Waikato. I was a teacher by this point, although I taught in the early childhood sector, and my students were aged between two to five. As part of my studies I took a paper called *Developing the critically literate English/literacy teacher*. Module two of this paper focused on critique in the context of classroom practice, and discussed different ways of implementing critical literacy within the classroom. I was excited and invigorated by this teaching approach, and my

immediate thoughts centered on how I could bring this into my own classroom. At the same time something about it was also feeling rather familiar. Eventually I remembered 1986. I had done something like this before as a student, and I had loved it.

In many ways critical literacy had come full-circle for me, and this knowledge fuelled my desire to successfully implement critical literacy into my own teaching practice. I was simultaneously captivated and intimidated by the idea of adopting such a stance with pre-school children, knowing I faced a few challenges because of the young age group I worked with. However, I believed the effort would be worthwhile. One of my passions as an early childhood educator is supporting and facilitating the thinking of preschool children, especially in the context of our text-rich world. I considered the ability of preschool children to analyse these texts, rather than simply consume them (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Vasquez, 2007) as both valuable and empowering for them, as it had been for me. With these interests in mind critical literacy felt like a natural progression for me to make.

I started with a few attempts to implement critical literacy activities in my teaching practice. Many of these either fell flat, or never even made it out of my head as I wrestled with sensitive topics such as war play. However, this period did yield one important revelation: I began to see the potential for critical literacy everywhere. For example, when the children developed an interest in wolves I noticed that the wolf was always the “bad guy”, and that every story in our library regarding wolves also positioned the wolf as bad. A critical literacy stance would provide the opportunity to name these discourses and explore them.

Many other examples arose, but even though I was linking critical literacy with the children’s interests, the question remained of how to take the next step. The same challenges with implementation kept recurring. How would I engage preschool children with this kind of thinking? What kind of language did I need to use to facilitate their learning? How would this teaching fit into the centre’s

open-ended play philosophy, and with the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996)? And how did I work with critical literacy when none of the preschool children could read? There were so many questions I was not even sure where to begin finding answers.

For these reasons this was not just a matter of adapting the approaches used for older children, although many of these were very helpful in terms of understanding the different ways that critical literacy can be approached (for example, Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Locke & Cleary, 2010; Sturgess & Locke, 2009; Vasquez, 2003). I realised that I had to find my own way into this field, although the multiplicity of entry points was extremely encouraging.

The appropriateness of a critical literacy stance to the Aotearoa New Zealand situation sparked inquiry into the potential compatibility of the same with *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the curriculum that all Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood educators are guided by.

No one has yet inquired in a research study about the compatibility of *Te Whāriki* with critical literacy. However, it is my position that *Te Whāriki* has space for such an approach. For example, the essential critical literacy concept of understanding another's position (Janks, 2010) is supported in varying ways by the five strands, which are Well-Being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration (Ministry of Education, 1996). In different ways, each strand also promotes fairness, responsibility, and respect, as well as dealing with discriminatory practices. These ideals are different aspects of developing a moral perspective (Morgan, 1996), and this idea is consistent with a critical literacy perspective (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2007). Based on these points, the argument can be made that critical literacy as a teaching approach can realise some of the intended outcomes of *Te Whāriki*.

This period of study yielded another realization of significance. There was very little critical literacy research for preschool children, with Vasquez (2010) and Davies (1989) being the two primary examples. However, both of these studies worked out of frames I struggled with. Davies (1989) used texts to explore children's ideas about gender construction and never shifted from this perspective, although I found some resonance with the questioning approach she used to explore each text. Vasquez (2004) had an open-ended approach that appealed, but her work stemmed from the children's questions, and I had no idea how to either support the children to generate such questions, or to extend them even if they did. Neither study was located within the Aotearoa New Zealand setting.

Even though the existing literature was both excellent and helpful, I particularly wanted material that would address the specific concerns I faced as a teacher of preschool children in this country. Having realised this, I realised I had found something else - questions that could not be answered by books alone. It is for this reason that I decided to explore critical literacy within the context of my own teaching practice. Formal research was the most appropriate way to conduct this inquiry.

1.2: The study in context: early childhood education under *Te Whāriki*

Aotearoa New Zealand is a modern, multicultural, Westernised, democracy. Like many other Western nations, early education is important here, and codified through the internationally recognised curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The curriculum is "an official description of young learners with an explicit view about the nation in which they will become citizens" (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 12).

Te Whāriki means “the mat” (Carr & May, 1999). This metaphor recognizes that just as there are many ways to weave a mat, “different programmes, philosophies, structures, and environments will contribute to the distinctive patterns of the Whāriki” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11). This is a curriculum that embraces diversity, celebrates difference, and enables a wide variety of educational philosophies and teaching approaches to be used.

Within early childhood education, it can be broadly stated that there is an emphasis on dispositional learning (Carr, 1997), where the focus is on developing the whole child to be a lifelong learner. Instead of skills, the emphasis is on developing “habits of mind” or “patterns of learning” (Carr, 1999, p. 2) which are composed of inclination, skills, and a sensitivity to opportunities that may present themselves (Lee et al., 2013, p. 65).

Rather than being prescriptive *Te Whāriki* establishes principles and strands that early childhood education services must demonstrate through implementation. Some have also described the implementation of *Te Whāriki* through a weaving metaphor that applies not only to the five strands, but also to teaching and learning in the goals, documentation and assessment, and planning (Lee et al., 2013, p. 107). In the fullest sense of the word *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is a holistic curriculum that addresses emotional awareness, social consciousness, and self-care in addition to traditional curriculum topics such as literacy, mathematics and science.

Te Whāriki is widely interpreted as a play-based curriculum (Carr & May, 1999), in which teachers use play as a vehicle to build upon and stimulate learning opportunities. This approach also draws on Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, which focuses on identifying when a child is ready to learn, and capitalizing on that moment with thoughtful intervention (Berk & Winsler, 1995). In addition, many centers are also emergent-based, meaning that the children select topics for study based on the interests they have demonstrated through play

and conversation. A play-based emergent approach sees skills integrated into meaningful context, and knowledge constructed more powerfully through play, contribution, and interaction (Lee et al., 2013)

1.3: About the teacher-researcher

At the time I commenced this study I was 38 years old, and had been teaching early childhood for a year and a half. I was still a provisionally registered teacher at that point, working towards obtaining full registration. My qualifications included a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Early Childhood Education) and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (Language and Literacy), both from the University of Waikato. In addition to my teaching qualifications I also hold a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Waikato. Work related to this field comprised my prior working life.

While I am new to the teaching profession, I have been working with children for most of my life. As the oldest of seven children, I helped my parents care for my youngest siblings. I later married, and my husband and I subsequently had six children of our own.

1.4: The study

I approached this study as a teacher-researcher, and focused my work on answering the following questions.

- I. What might critical literacy look like in a New Zealand early childhood setting in terms of:

- a. Teaching spaces?
 - b. The kinds of activities involved?
 - c. Compatibility and integration with other learning?
- II. What teacher language might be used in order to support and develop critical literacy in young children?
- III. What learnings do a group of young children appear to take from a sustained critical literacy teaching sequence in an early childhood setting?

These questions were written from my perspective as an emergent critical literacy educator. This study investigates the various approaches I used and challenges I faced as a first-time user of a complex and challenging teaching stance. It explores my work with the children, and uses their responses as a way of gauging the effectiveness of the various activities, as well as their general interest in and responsiveness towards critical literacy approaches. This study was a preliminary step towards developing ongoing and sustainable teaching practices in this area.

Through the study I developed a dimensional picture of how critical literacy could look for this age group. This picture has constructively informed my continuing work as a critical literacy practitioner.

1.5: Overview of this study

The five subsequent chapters set out the detail of this study. Chapter Two reviews the literature regarding critical literacy, with particular attention paid to explaining critical literacy, exploring studies of critical literacy with preschool children, and considering the potential compatibility of critical literacy with *Te Whāriki*. Chapter Three sets out the methodology of the study, including the research design, the methods used in the research, the approach to analysis, and

consideration of ethical issues. Chapters Four and Five convey the findings of this work by chronologically following the movement of the action research cycles. Chapter Four relates the work of Phase 1, while Chapter Five covers Phase 2. Chapter Six discusses the conclusions of this study with reference to the research questions, and indicates identified implications for practice. The study concludes in Chapter Six with a final reflection.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the scholarship of critical literacy theory and practice. The review commences with a discussion of the changing conceptions of literacy itself, as a precursor to canvassing theoretical models outlining what critical literacy can be. It also explores the key elements of critical literacy practice, and in doing so, establishes a foundation from which to then discuss classroom approaches to critical literacy. Mention is also made of critical literacy work in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the potential compatibility of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* with a critical literacy approach is examined at length. The final section of this review explores critical literacy work undertaken with preschool children with focus on the two primary studies in this area.

2.1: Changing conceptions of literacy

In Western thinking, a straightforward definition of literacy can be seen as the ability to read and write (Makin, Diaz, & McLachlan, 2007). These abilities are usually conceptualized as useful skills, sometimes even as commodities (Vasquez, 2004a). However, since the 1990s there has been a body of theory and research which has taken issue with this straightforward and apparently common-sense definition.

This alternate body of theory instead views literacy as a socially constructed and socially maintained phenomenon (Cook-Gumperz, 2006). Social constructionism theory sees literacy as more than an asocial or purely cognitive skill (Gee, 2012). Instead, it is described as a set of practices and prescriptions that a society has

about using knowledge, of which reading and writing are a part (Makin et al., 2007).

Social constructionism recognizes that literacy is “always situated within a context that shapes what is appropriate and what is possible” (Makin et al., 2007, p. 23). The context in which literacy practices are situated can be described as whole webs of social practices that constitute the lived reality of the participants - practices that are mediated by and accessed through language (Morgan, 1996).

This alternate perspective makes visible the power wielded by literacy, as literacy propagates the values and priorities of ideologies, cultures and societies (Gee, 2012). These understandings have led Luke and Freebody (1999) to describe literacy as “an issue of economic and social access” as the values and priorities of a society ultimately privilege particular forms of literacy along with the particular kinds of people versed in those forms (Gee, 2012).

Recognition that literacy practices are complex and interwoven has seen some theorists posit models that demonstrate the dimensions of literacy practice. Rather than being definitive or prescriptive about matters such as assessment, pedagogy or curriculum (Freebody & Luke, 2003), a sociocultural literacy model provides a ‘broad and flexible repertoire of practices’ (Freebody & Luke, 2003, p. 56).

This repertoire of practice approach better captures the depth and sophistication of actual literacy practices, providing intellectual dimension and situated responsiveness over stilted and limited definition (Sandretto, 2011). Importantly, a literacy model is not supposed to be seen as a developmental trajectory (Sandretto, 2011). Instead, it can be seen as a responsive paradigm (Freebody & Luke, 2003), where mastery of a previous dimension is not a necessary prerequisite for the development of another set of practices (Sandretto, 2011).

One of the most referenced of these literacy models is the four resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1999). As the name suggests, there are four areas of practice in this model. These areas are code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text critic (Luke & Freebody, 1999), and will be briefly summarised next.

The first practice, that of coding competence, focuses on breaking the code of written texts (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Coding competence involves recognition and use of the essential features of language, including the alphabet, spelling, structural conventions, and patterns (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The second practice, identified as meaning maker, addresses semantic competence through the ability to both compose and understand “meaningful written, visual and spoken texts” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The third practice, called pragmatic competence, involves the functional use of texts within their relevant contexts, such as the workplace, school, or for social purposes (Luke & Freebody, 1999). A text user understands that the function of a text shapes its structure, tone, level of formality, and sequence of components (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

The final practice, that of text analyst, is concerned with critical competence (Luke & Freebody, 1999). A text analyst is concerned with the critique and transformation of texts, knowing that while texts are neither natural nor neutral, they can also be disrupted and redesigned in a myriad of ways (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

All four dimensions are perceived as necessary to develop the literate citizen of a post-modern, text-based culture (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The model adopts the stance “that effective literacy draws from a repertoire of practices that allow learners ... to participate in various families of literate practices” (Vasquez, 2003, p. 14). Rather than seeking the “holy grail” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, para. 25) of a single literacy pedagogy, the resources model suggests that differential approaches, utilised as required for the benefit of diverse learners, is a more effective way to work with texts (Luke & Freebody, 1999),

Another sociocultural model is Janks' synthesis model, noted here because of Janks' additional significance as a prominent critical literacy theorist. The Janks synthesis model (2010) is titled thus due to its referencing of and subsequent synthesis of prior literacy models, including the four resources model. This model covers three areas of literacy practice. The first is, decoding the text (Janks, 2010). This is the popular understanding of what reading is – recognising words and what they refer to. Secondly, a reader needs to make meaning from the text, by engaging with the writer's meanings (Janks, 2010). Janks makes the point here that reading is an "active process" that requires utilising one's own background as part of meaning-making (Janks, 2010). Thirdly, a reader needs to "interrogate the text" (Janks, 2010, p. 21). This is the part of the model where critical literacy operates, since it entails, for example, questioning the version of reality a particular text offers a reader.

Both models adopt similar approaches. They both identify reading and writing as components of literacy, but then expand on these practices to push thinking inside the text through analysis, as well as outward from it through critique. The two models also have their own ways of delineating how these various ideas are represented. This study has adopted the Janks synthesis model, preferring to view analysis as part of critique, and part of meaning-making.

In establishing dimensions of practice, sociocultural literacy models also create a space for critical literacy practice, through their acknowledgement of the need for critique. However, before discussing the critical aspects of these two models, it is worthwhile to discuss critical literacy practice in broad terms and its relationship to critical theory.

2.2: Conceptions of critical literacy

The critical tradition can be conceptualised as identifying and resisting ideological hegemonies of all kinds. While definition can bring a form of security critical theorists note that definition is not necessarily an accurate reflection of realities that are perceived as constantly moving, and continually being renegotiated (Morgan, 1996). The critical approach can be seen as inherently fluid, a point noted by Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), who state

(a) there are many critical theories, not just one; (b) the critical tradition is always changing and evolving; and (c) critical theory attempts to avoid too much specificity, as there is room for disagreement among critical theorists (p. 303).

Critical literacy theory can be seen as inheriting this fluidity of approach. Lankshear states that “there is no ultimate paradigm – no final orthodoxy – of critical literacy waiting to be uncovered” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Others note that there is no definitive critical literacy or one way of doing it (Morgan, 1996; Vasquez, 2007), while Sandretto (2011) likens the myriad of critical literacy perspectives on offer to trying to choose a tube of toothpaste from the multitude of brands.

Critical literacy has been broadly described as involving “an infinitely complex network of intertextual relationships” (Locke & Cleary, 2010, p. 121). Understanding this complexity is about comprehending more than words. It is also about understanding the wider contexts in which words exist, and where meanings are created and given value. This complexity both reflects and changes “the reality we live in and how we understand that reality to be” (Morgan, 1996, p. 9). It is about understanding the world and the ways it is constructed in texts.

These statements indicate the variety of possible approaches and theoretical positions available – recognition that critical literacy should not be boxed in or too tightly defined (Temple, 2005). The very nature of its inquiry-based focus means that critical literacy seeks to be responsive and adaptive rather than static and prescriptive. Critical literacy starts out as it means to go on: open-ended, contextual, specific, and personal. Bearing all this in mind, there are notable critical literacy theorists who have created theoretical models or definitions that conceptualise their belief of what critical literacy practice can be. These conceptualisations will be discussed next.

2.2.1: The literacy models

The four resources and Janks synthesis models have already had some discussion as a means of conceptualising literacy practice as plural. This discussion focuses on the dimension of both of these models that positions critical literacy as one of the resources of literacy practice. Within each model, critical literacy is described.

In the four resources model, texts of all modalities are “human technologies for representing and reshaping possible worlds” (Luke & Dooley, 2011, p. 856). The text analyst both analyses and transforms texts, working from the view that texts are neither natural nor neutral (Luke & Freebody, 1999). However, through critique, the designs and discourses of texts can be uncovered, while through redesign, texts can be reformed to reflect alternative perspectives (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

Janks’ (2010) model describes the aspects of her model as “orientations”, and describes the critical literacy orientation as interrogating the text. In doing so, a text user will examine the assumptions of a text, including its values and positions. Janks (2010) notes, “readers need to understand what the text is doing

to them and whose positions are being served by the positions that are on offer” (p. 21). As text users learn to see texts through new frames, they also have the opportunity to imagine other ways the texts could be, thus producing resistant readings that become the foundation for redesign (Janks, 2010).

Commonalities between these models include a requirement for critical investigation by the text, the positioned nature of texts, and the potential for redevelopment of the text. These theorists recognize critical literacy as an equal dimension of broad literacy practice. This puts critical literacy on an equal footing with other forms of literacy that historically have received more attention, thereby providing educators with a position from which to justify adopting a critical literacy stance. This is particularly important for those working with young children where the emphasis is often exclusively focused on reading and writing (decoding and encoding).

2.2.2: Janks (2010)

Janks’ work on her synthesis model laid the foundation for the four orientations that outline her approach to critical literacy. These orientations are domination, access, diversity and design (Janks, 2010).

Domination takes the view that language, including symbolic forms and discourse, is a powerful means of perpetuating hegemonic relationships (Janks, 2010). Discovering the ways in which such relationships are sustained through language can see the use of approaches such as critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness.

Access addresses the challenge of how teachers provide access to the dominant and powerful forms of language while still respecting the home language and

original discourses of their students (Janks, 1993). She indicates these dominant forms as including languages, varieties, discourses, literacies, knowledges, genres, modes of visual representation, and a range of cultural practices related to social interaction (Janks, 2010).

Diversity notes the importance of difference or ‘otherness’ as “a central resource for changing consciousness” (Janks, 2010, p. 24). Janks states how encountering difference in others, or entering into new discourses, provides us with opportunity to reflect on our own ways of being, with the potential to use this as a stimulus for change (Janks, 2010).

Finally, *design* rounds out Janks conception of critical literacy. She defines design as creative reconstruction, the point where the text analyst reengages with or reforms the text in some way to represent their current thinking (Janks, 2010).

In concluding her discussion of the four orientations, Janks (2010) takes the position that they are “crucially interdependent” (p. 26), with imbalance between them being problematic. For example, where *domination* practices exist without an understanding of *diversity*, then no alternate discourse exists from which to stimulate challenge or change (Janks, 2010). However, where immersion in *diversity* prevails without exploration of *domination*, diversity may be celebrated, but without the recognition that difference itself exists because it has been positioned outside of dominant ideals (Janks, 2010). Potential problems of imbalance are likewise explained for the remainder of the orientations (Janks, 2010, p. 26).

Janks demonstrates a clear understanding of how power and language operate together. Her case is compelling in its depth and detail, and attempts by others to discuss power relations seem almost tokenistic in comparison (for example, Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008).

2.2.3: Sandretto (2011)

Sandretto (2011) takes a different approach to describing critical literacy, by suggesting that the various approaches undertaken by teachers are underpinned by ideological philosophies she entitles ‘theoretical perspectives’. Sandretto identifies (2011) three theoretical perspectives as relevant to the work of critical literacy, identifying them as critical theory, postmodern theory, and her own synthesis, postmodern critical.

Critical theory can be broadly described as a democratic vision (Sandretto, 2011). This theory promotes social justice aims of equality and fairness by identifying and revealing the complex interplay of power with society’s various structures by naming and describing what is found (Sandretto, 2011).

Postmodern theory can be described as a way of challenging things we have come to take for granted, and highlighting the complexity and diversity of the world (Sandretto, 2011). Sandretto (2011) describes this as a questioning stance. This theory emphasises multiple meanings, making the invisible visible, and giving voice to the disaffected and disadvantaged. This makes knowledge highly contextual, personal, and subjective.

The third perspective Sandretto (2011) discusses is a synthesis of the above two, called postmodern critical. This combines the social goals of critical theory with the questioning approach of postmodernism. As Sandretto states,

Critical postmodernism maintains a normative vision of a better society while making use of poststructural tools of analysis to critique micro and macro workings of power (2011, p. 35).

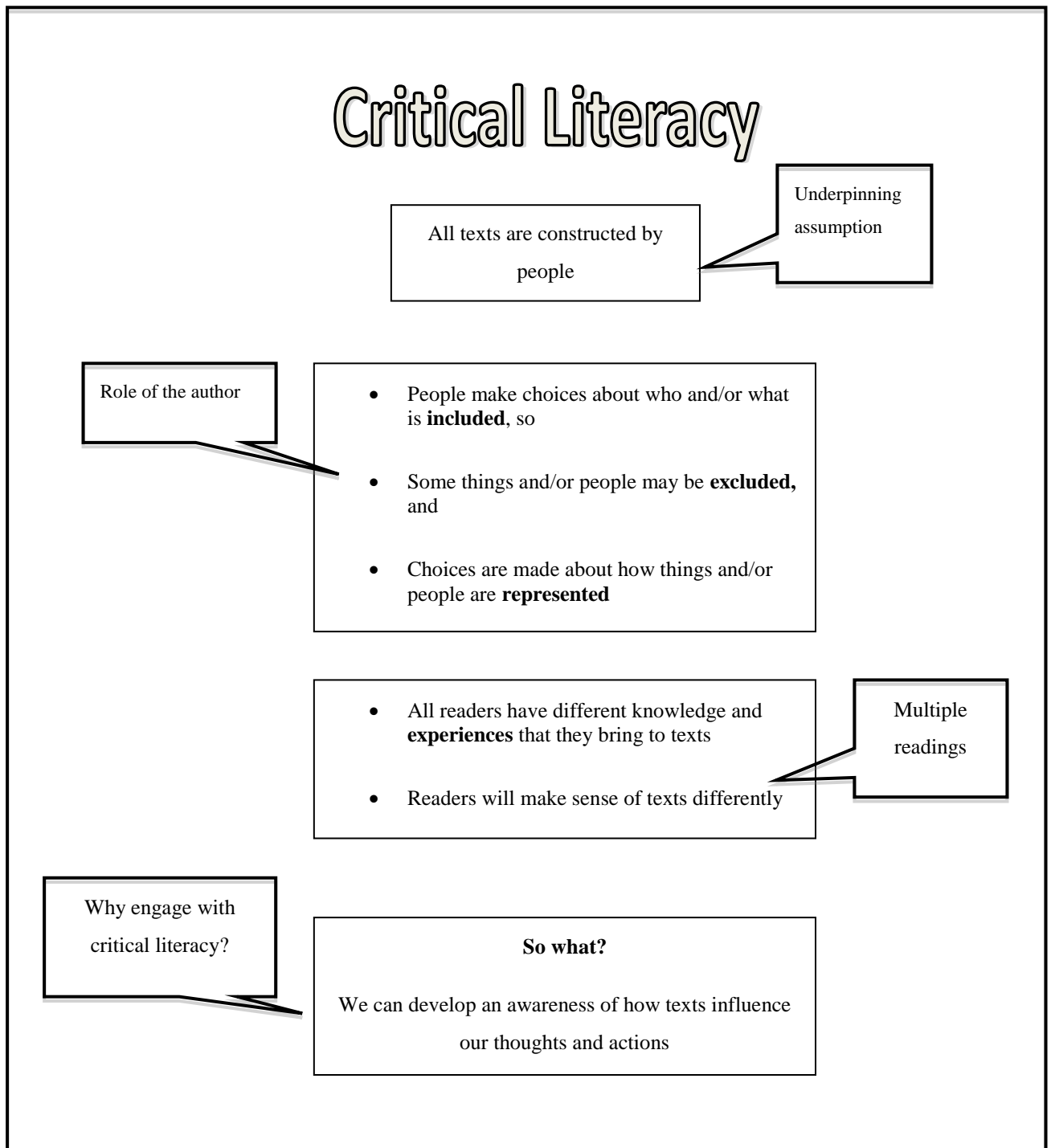
The theoretical underpinnings expressed do explain why there appear to be two differing thrusts within critical literacy theory in general, one aimed at democratic

equality and liberation (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2007), the other aimed at questioning, comparison and the exploration of issues raised through texts (Locke & Cleary, 2010; Sturges & Locke, 2009). Understanding the differing schools of thought that can influence approach is a helpful way to frame teaching approaches.

This ideology ultimately culminates in the critical literacy poster, replicated in Figure 1 overleaf (Sandretto, 2011, p. 37), which sets out a critical literacy approach. The contents of this poster are not explained in anywhere near the depth of the preceding ideologies. Discourse, position and textual silences are only mentioned. While the simplicity of the poster makes it a useful reference, more elaboration on the separate areas of the poster would have been useful.

The primary strength of Sandretto's (2011) work is its practical discussion of classroom implementation for the teacher. Much of the literature in the critical literacy field focuses on explaining the approach, and detailing various examples of its implementation in the classroom. Sandretto's work stands out as a resource for teachers working with critical literacy, with its focus on the specific techniques and methods that afford effective teaching. While written particularly for the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this study has value for any teacher entering critical literacy practice. Even though her work seemed geared towards teachers of older children, this material has much for a teacher of any age group.

Figure 1: The critical literacy poster.



(Sandretto, 2011, p. 37). Used with permission.

2.2.4: Lewison, Leland and Harste (2008)

Lewison, Leland and Harste (2008) are responsible for an instructional model of critical literacy. In their work they acknowledge the models of Luke and Freebody (1999), Janks (2010), and another model that one of the authors worked on previously, the four dimensions model (Lewison, Seely Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). However, it is their opinion that none of these models sufficiently represents the complexity of working with critical literacy in the classroom (Lewison et al., 2008). The instructional model is designed to address this perceived shortcoming. In doing so, the authors acknowledge that this model has itself been through several revisions, and represents “our best thinking at this time” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. xxiii).

The instructional model identifies four specific elements, which are represented diagrammatically as a series of concentric rings. The outermost ring represents the personal and cultural resources of both teachers and students (Lewison et al., 2008). These resources include experiences, and cultural and linguistic resources (Lewison et al., 2008). By consciously acknowledging students as capable, and employing resources that resonate with them, teachers create a curriculum that is relevant to their students (Lewison et al., 2008).

The second ring of the model is critical social practice, which is defined by the authors as “the specific social practices in which students and teachers engage as they create critical curricula” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. xxv). These social practices are “1) disrupting the commonplace; 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints; 3) focusing on socio-political issues; and 4) taking action to promote social justice” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. xxv). These specific social practices draw on the earlier work of Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002).

The third, central ring of the model is critical stance. Critical stance is composed of “the attitudes and dispositions we take on that enable us to become critically literate beings” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. xxvii). The authors further articulate this

through four dimensions of critical stance. These dimensions are listed as: firstly, consciously engaging, secondly, entertaining alternate ways of being, thirdly, taking responsibility to inquire, and fourthly, being reflexive.

The fourth element of the instructional model is the educational context the critical literacy work takes place in, and this is represented by a box that encompasses the circles (Lewison et al., 2008). This idea references the school setting in all its complexity, including politics, culture, and curriculum mandates, among other things (Lewison et al., 2008). Other elements in the model indicate how the various rings interact with each other, and with the context in which they are situated (Lewison et al., 2008).

This model was easily the most detailed of all the ones canvassed in this study. It had a number of elements, and dimensions within elements. The detail of this model, marked by its inclusion of the majority of ideas currently circulating in critical literacy was simultaneously illuminating and complicated. However, one benefit of this approach is that it brings together a number of critical literacy perspectives, exposing or perhaps reminding practitioners of the variety of available approaches. That said, this level of complication could potentially be a deterrent to wide adoption by teachers. However, as critical literacy can be a reasonably complex approach itself, whether or not this complication is perceived as a flaw might depend on the practitioner.

Questions can also be raised about the way power is represented in this model. Janks (2010) demonstrates how insidious and interwoven issues of power can be within societal systems. The instructional model does address power issues as part of ‘critical social practice’, and in doing so directly references Janks (Lewison et al., 2008). However, in paraphrasing Janks, much of the potency of that author’s work about power is diluted. Also, the authors do not address Janks’ important point about providing a balanced critical literacy programme (Janks, 2010).

This model could also be seen as incorporating the theoretical perspectives outlined above by Sandretto (2011). It incorporates postmodern perspectives such as disrupting the commonplace and interrogating multiple viewpoints, as well as critical theory perspectives of focusing on socio-political issues, and taking action to promote social justice. With dimensions representing both of the theoretical perspectives, it is possible that this model could be one way to represent the postmodern critical synthesis that Sandretto (2011) advocates.

2.2.5: A synthesis

These various theoretical perspectives and models of critical literacy provide guidance to teachers. However, as discussed in the preceding review, no one model has everything a teacher may need. At the same time, none of the models directly contradict each other. Instead they work from different places, perhaps focus on different aspects, but ultimately are still related. For this reason I have adopted a synthesis approach in determining what I will draw on to form my own theoretical underpinnings. In an echo of an earlier set of authors, this position represents my current thinking on the matter (Lewison et al., 2008).

Despite its complication, my preference is for the instructional model (Lewison et al., 2008), but combined with Janks' orientations to literacy. Part of the preference for this model must include its representation of the two ideological positions set out by Sandretto. This synthesis provides access to the multiplicity of approaches used in the instructional model, but also draws on the more comprehensive understanding of power relationships set out by Janks. These models are not incompatible. As noted previously, the instructional model references Janks work. However, I prefer Janks' position of power relationships as pervasive, invisible, and always present within texts.

Approaching critical literacy in this way provides for the rich mix of possibilities inherent in classroom life. While detailed, this model is also expansive, encompassing a variety of theoretical positions. I find this expansiveness empowering as a teacher, as conceiving of critical literacy in multiple ways enables me to be responsive to my students by being able to support and extend their natural interests, wherever they may lie and whatever they may be.

2.3: Elements of critical literacy

In addition to discussing some of the models of critical literacy, it is also worthwhile to elaborate on some of the key elements that underlie the approach. Discourse, power, position, and making the invisible visible are recurrent and important critical literacy concepts, and a deeper understanding of each enhances an understanding of the approach itself. Each will be reviewed in turn.

2.3.1: Discourse

Discourse is often considered a central concept of critical literacy (Sturges & Locke, 2009), as it embodies the way people make sense of the world, including how they represent it, signify it, constitute it, and construct it in meaning (Locke, 2004). At its most simple, discourse can be described as “ways of being” (Gee, 2012, p. 152). As elaborated by Gee,

A Discourse ... is composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognisable activities. (Gee, 2012, p. 152)

Locke suggests a simpler word for discourse, that of “story” (Locke, 2004). In the context of discourse, “the sense is of a story that is ready-made – something pre-existent and seemingly waiting for them to take up in the service of their meaning-making” (Locke, 2004, p. 5). Rather than stories we tell others, discourse stories are stories that we embody, which for the most part are subsumed within our identity, rather than overtly and consciously acknowledged (Locke, 2004). As Sturges and Locke note, “We no longer tell stories; we live out stories that we subconsciously subscribe to” (2009, p. 381).

Discourses vary according to the society, community, group, ethnicity or even circle of friends a person has. Critical self-reflexivity has the potential to provide reflection and insight into our own behaviour, and the discourses we have internalised (Janks, 2010). But just as often discursive subscription has the potential for domination and conflict (Janks, 2010).

2.3.2: Power

Critical literacy makes a strong case not only for identifying the operation of power in all its forms, but also understanding why this identification is important. Morgan commences this argument by stating “there can be little doubt that power matters, both to people who have it and to those who do not” (Morgan, 1996, p. 2).

The reason power is such an important issue is because it, and its concomitant effects then create privilege and disadvantage, visibility or invisibility, foregrounding or backgrounding. As Morgan (1996) notes, “there are top dogs and underdogs” (p. 2) and who (or what) gets to be which is determined by the values of the dominant group, society, or community. There is often no valid reason for societal value systems that prioritise, for example, discourses of race,

gender and class. This value system is perpetuated through language in all its multiliterate forms (Morgan, 1996). Thinking along the same lines, Janks (2010) notes that because power is perpetuated by language, then language also matters.

For these reasons, the case can be made that critical literacy is about the relationship between language and power and all other considerations are either subsets of it, or heavily intertwined with it (Janks, 2010; Morgan, 1996). For example, while a discourse may not itself be about power, the strength of a discourse, including the acceptance and perpetuation of it, *is* about power (Gee, 2012).

That said, Sandretto (2011), drawing on Foucault, makes the important point that power is not an exclusively negative concept because there are positive and productive conceptions of power as well. An inability to see this side of the coin prevents considerations of power as enabling knowledge or facilitating open dialogue (Sandretto, 2011). Sandretto (2011) argues that one can never remove issues of power from dialogue. However, while power relationships are never straightforward, the possibility remains for power relationships to work both positively and negatively. When reflectively addressed, such relations have the ability to enhance learning rather than simply be an impediment (Sandretto, 2011).

2.3.3: Position

Many critical literacy theorists maintain that all texts are both positioned, and positioning (Janks, 2010; Locke & Cleary, 2010; Sandretto, 2011). This perspective argues that texts are not neutral, but rather seeking to position their reader according to the perspective of the writer, by convincing the reader to accept the meaning of the text (Janks, 2010). Janks (2010) makes her case against the neutrality of texts by point out that the texts “are designed to convey particular

meanings in particular ways and to have particular effects. Moreover, they are designed to be believed” (p. 61). Rather than an incontestable truth, through critical literacy analysis texts can be repositioned as a version of reality, a set of perspectives on the world, a representative construct (Janks, 2010).

2.3.4: Making the invisible, visible

The concept of invisibility describes inherent ways of being that are so ingrained they have been naturalised to the point where they are enforced and defended without people even realising it (Gee, 2012). Naturalised thinking positions people to believe that their way of doing things is the status quo, or even more insidiously, the way things *should* be done (Locke, 2004). Where this happens and goes unchallenged, these dominant normalities are reproduced and perpetuated (Gee, 2012; Locke, 2004). The longer the normality is perpetuated, the stronger it becomes.

These are not obvious relationships, hence the entire point of critical literacy. These concepts can be both implied and assumed, embedded in our many social institutions, and complex instantiations of identity (Janks, 2010). Critical literacy pays attention to the relationship between the word and power (Morgan, 1996), and to the word and discourse (Locke, 2004), with the aim of making visible these complex hegemonic relationships.

2.3.5: Taking action

Taking action refers to the process of taking some kind of action as a result of textual or discourse analysis (Sandretto, 2011). It has also been described as the way we choose to represent meaning to others (Makin et al., 2007). Friere described this process as “praxis”, which can in turn be construed as the synthesis

of action and reflection (Roberts, 2003), while Janks called it design, where symbol forms are used to take some kind of action (Janks, 2010).

Sandretto (2011) discusses how for some theorists and practitioners, action is considered of primary importance, adding that some even have the opinion that a critical literacy approach does not count without some component of social action. Morgan (1996) agrees, noting that reconstruction is essential, lest students be reduced to cynical disillusionment.

After the initial experience of a text and its subsequent deconstruction, taking action becomes a counterbalance that establishes space for a different kind of experience, one that has the potential to empower learners (Sandretto, 2011). The ability to re-imagine and re-conceive the world becomes an act of power in its own right, enabling those engaging in textual criticality not only to transform and reconstruct, but also to create a position to speak from (Janks, 2010).

This action can take a variety of forms. It can be a challenge to the status quo, as in the case of the young children who prepared a petition to question why they had been excluded from an activity at their school (Vasquez, 2007). It can be a disruption, as in the young people writing their own versions of fairy tales to challenge stereotypes (Sturges & Locke, 2009). It can be powerful social action, as the Hurricane Group showed through their project to collect books for victims of Hurricane Katrina (Silvers, Shorey & Crafton, 2010).

These are big ideas, and as Sandretto (2011) notes, not always achievable. In her research she proposes alternative ways of looking at social action, based on the idea of a continuum (Sandretto, 2011). This continuum could start with consideration of the alternative viewpoints of a text at one end of the spectrum (Sandretto, 2011). Such action at this point could even take the form of interior action, occurring exclusively within the mind of a learner as ideas are seeded for a

student's future self (Sandretto, 2011). The continuum could progress with actions such as encouraging the reconstruction of texts or making personal changes in thinking and behaviour (Sandretto, 2011). At the far end of the spectrum are the big ideas, where taking action is enacted in some global way (Sandretto, 2011).

2.4: Critical literacy practices in the classroom

Up to this point, this review has discussed critical literacy from a theoretical perspective. In this section, the literature regarding classroom practices of critical literacy will be discussed. This section does not purport to cover every aspect of critical literacy practice in the classroom. Rather, by providing some of the approaches that emerge frequently from the literature, it is hoped to shed some light on critical literacy in practice. This section draws on the dimensions of critical social practice in the instructional model (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 7)

Critical literacy can look like *consciously engaging*. Lewison et al (2008), referencing the work of Friere, note that one way to start the process of consciously engaging is by naming the world around us, particularly by articulating thoughts, concepts and ideas .that stand apart from normative discourses (Lewison et al., 2008). The authors point out that this process of naming is not easy, as it draws on unconscious and frequently unacknowledged discourses that frame how we see the world, discourses that are affected by our personal context (Lewison et al., 2008). The same authors note:

Without conscious engagement, we simply respond to events using our unconscious, commonsense frames, which make it challenging to assume a critical stance. Reframing is difficult. It requires bringing our conscious frames into awareness and then using new language and new points of view to modify our cultural models (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 15).

Gee makes a similar point, noting that a critical reading of a text is only possible where one is able to access more than one discourse, or more than one way of thinking about the world (Gee, 1990).

Disrupting the commonplace (Lewison et al., 2008; Sturges & Locke, 2009) can be described as contesting “routines, habits, beliefs and theories about how the world works” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 7). These routines and habits could also be called discursive practices (Gee, 2012) or lived stories (Locke, 2004). Disrupting the commonplace can be a valuable way to identify the constructed, sometimes invisible self-determining one’s experience of the world. One way to do this is through naming (Lewison et al., 2008), which allows the invisible to be seen, and creates opportunity for disruption and interrogation.

Another approach to disruption can also be problematising a text (Vasquez, 2003). Situating a text within the context of a problem, or as a challenge that runs contrary to current thinking, can be an additional way that the invisible can be made visible. Davies (1989) applied this method, using feminist texts as way of stimulating the thinking of children and inviting them to develop alternative discourses about gender.

The work of Sturges and Locke (2009) in deconstructing fairy tales serves as a good illustration of one way that textual disruption can be used. Here, students were encouraged to articulate the stereotypes of the typical fairytale prince and princess. These stereotypes were then compared and contrasted against a disruptive text, the movie *Shrek*. This comparison enabled the students to create descriptions of the characters that highlighted the disruption by way of contrast. This work laid the foundation for further disruptions, as the students found fairytales from other cultures to compare to what they had uncovered.

Interrogating multiple perspectives (Lewison et al., 2008; Locke & Cleary, 2010) can be articulated as working to appreciate realities other than our own by asking students to concurrently consider various views on the same subject (Lewison et al., 2008). These various views may be juxtaposed and even contradictory (Lewison et al., 2008), with some authors noting that incorporating thematically related texts is advantageous for students (Locke & Cleary, 2010).

Understanding multiple perspectives requires students to understand how texts position readers to adopt their particular construction of reality, or accept their representation of truth (Locke & Cleary, 2010). Another function of working with multiple perspectives is learning to identify “gaps, silences or elisions” (Locke & Cleary, 2010, p. 126) within respective accounts, and in doing so, moving towards understanding the partiality of texts (Locke & Cleary, 2010).

The work of Locke and Cleary (2010) illustrates how this approach can work. In this instance students read texts that gave different accounts of a person convicted with a crime. Each text provided different information, attempting to respectively convince the reader of the person’s innocence or guilt. As the texts were introduced one at a time, this gave the students time to digest and respond to each, changing their own opinions as they received new information. A subsequent study by the same students into organ transplants drew on a diverse range of texts, and allowed many different perspectives to be considered. The authors note the significant engagement of the students, and their increasing abilities to reference intertextually and to understand the partiality of texts through comparing and contrasting them with each other.

When students are guided to *focus on the socio-political* (Janks, 2010; Lewison et al., 2008), they are being guided to understand the ways that power affects their lives, and assisted to learn tools that help them deconstruct those power relationships in order to understand and confront them.

Vaquez (2004b) relates how children in her kindergarten class realised that all the kindergarten classes had been excluded from a school activity. She guided the children to formulate a response to this exclusion, by conducting a survey amongst all the kindergarten classes, asking who had wished to attend this activity. After the results of this survey were returned affirmatively for participation, Vasquez then taught the class about petitions as a method of making their collective voices heard. The children wrote and organised the signing of a petition amongst the kindergarten classes, and this petition was delivered to school personnel in charge of the event.

2.5: Critical literacy practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

Critical literacy practice in New Zealand is growing. Courses such as the University of Waikato's postgraduate paper on *Developing the critically literacy English/literacy teacher* helps to increase the pool of critical literacy practitioners by providing a sound understanding of the approach. The work of the Critical Literacy Research Team (Sandretto et al., 2006) has researched and supported New Zealand teachers implementing critical literacy work into their teaching. Studies such as Locke and Cleary (2010) and Sturges and Locke (2009) have demonstrated how individual teachers have successfully applied a critical literacy approach in their classrooms, although these can be considered comparatively isolated instances.

The adoption of critical literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand is far from universal, with Locke and Cleary (2010) noting "critical literacy is not an established discourse in New Zealand secondary English classrooms" (p. 123). It is not normally taught in undergraduate teacher training programmes and remains something of an unconventional approach. This is especially true of early childhood education.

2.6: Critical literacy approaches with young children

The literature on critical literacy approaches with young children is not extensive, and essentially comes from two theorists, Davies (1989) and Vasquez (2004b). As there are only two studies, this review is able to compare and contrast them at length.

Vasquez (2004b) was a Canadian teacher researcher who worked with children aged 3-5. Her students came from a multiethnic, middle-class neighbourhood, and were in the Kindergarten programme. At the time of her study, she had already made forays into critical literacy teaching. However, these had been isolated incidents, while her goal was to teach a sustained programme of critical literacy. This study was her third into applying critical literacy to practice.

Vasquez collected data for one year across her class of 16 children. Her approach took a definite social justice and equity stance, but at the same time her work was child-initiated and open-ended. Avoidance of a prepackaged curriculum meant that the work was responsive to the children, and the depth of their engagement can be considered an indicator of the success of this approach.

Davies' (1989) study focused on a researcher exploring a particular idea, rather than a teacher exploring his/her own practice. Her work was not explicitly identified as critical literacy. However, the argument can be made for inclusion because of the study's emphasis on the social equity topic of gendered identity. This topic was explored through texts, language and observation.

Davies set out to understand more about young children's understanding and construction of gender, and gendered identity. This was a research project that consisted of two stages. In the first stage, Davies spent hundreds of hours reading

feminist stories with eight children from varied backgrounds, and talked with them about the story to determine the way in which they were making sense of what they heard. In stage 2, in addition to the stories, she spent time in four preschools observing children playing. The size of this group was more than 40 children. She collected data for two years.

The first comparison to note between the two studies is the position of the various researchers. Vasquez was a teacher researcher, and as such, was with her class for the entire duration of the study. Davies was an external researcher who would engage with the children for designated periods of time. These positions had an effect not only on the type of study conducted by each, but also on their interactions with the children, and the power relationships established between them.

The question each study explored is another important comparison. Vasquez was specifically focused on critical literacy, and on using that teaching approach with young children. This focus, as opposed to exploring a specific issue, meant her teaching could be open-ended and child-initiated, and her work seems to have benefited from this. For Davies however, her specific question meant a tighter focus in terms of activities. However, within the scope her question allowed she made some efforts to equalize the power between herself and the children. In Stage 1 of her research she would let the child determine how their mornings together would go, while in Stage 2, in addition to observation, she would sometimes play with the children, consciously refusing to assert any kind of adult authority (Davies, 1989).

Another significant difference between the two studies was who initiated the learning. In Vasquez's work, the children initiated the learning on every occasion. Vasquez (2004b) emphasized the importance of avoiding a prepackaged or preplanned curriculum at the beginning of her work and this was evident in her practice. This approach meant that the learning was not only

responsive to the children, but also engaging for them. In Davies study, the activities were pre-planned. The researcher chose the books, and the process of questioning was one of ask-and-respond, with the adult researcher doing the asking. However, that said, Davies was not trying to implement a critical literacy programme in a classroom, or to integrate this work into any curriculum. She was investigating a question, and that investigation required targeted activities.

Both studies were concerned to some extent with social justice and equity. Davies' study focused on one aspect of this, by concentrating on gender. While some of the work was about exploring gender ideas with the children, the observation and play portions were less about what the children learned/experienced, and more about what the researcher learned from observing them. This is in contrast to the approach of Vasquez, who was committed to helping children become text analysts in their own right, and to this end she empowered her children with the skills they needed to formulate their own questions and process their own ideas. Again though, this comes down to a difference of purpose: Davies was not trying to teach children to become text analysts any more than Vasquez was trying to understand in detail the way children constructed gender identity.

Contrasting the work of both these scholars in detail provided a valuable dimension for this study as these two very different approaches provided a continuum of sorts, with Vasquez at the open-ended, child-initiated end of the spectrum, and Davies covering the other pole position of researcher and observer. Locating this study in the critical literacy landscape became realisable when there were clearly identifiable positions to measure oneself against.

2.7: Critical literacy and *Te Whāriki*

A review of the literature must necessarily include *Te Whāriki*, as a way of understanding the “space” an approach like critical literacy has to operate in. Relating the approach to the curriculum is also part of the case for its ecological validity. As any practice of critical literacy in this country must take place under the broad wings of *Te Whāriki*, it is worthwhile considering in detail how this curriculum could support a critical literacy approach.

Within *Te Whāriki* there is no specific mandate for critical literacy, as the particular term critical literacy is never used. However, since the curriculum does not name or specify any approach, philosophy or method of any kind within its pages this omission is hardly surprising. However, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is characterised by a strong emphasis on multiliteracies and sociocultural learning. The inclusion of these forms of learning leads naturally to the support of social justice and social equity ideas, which underlie critical literacy practice.

An analysis of *Te Whāriki* shows that it supports a critical literacy approach in four ways. These ways are: caring for self, others and the world; relationships with self and others; understanding diversity; and critical and creative skills.

2.7.1: Caring for self, others and the world

The word “caring” in this context encompasses the key ideas of responsibility, respect, rules, rights and fairness. This is relevant to critical literacy because the approach firmly embraces a moral viewpoint (Morgan, 1996).

2.7.2: Relationships with self and others

Relationships focuses on the key ideas of understanding emotions, different points of view, and pro-social skills such as turn-taking. This is relevant to critical literacy because being able to understand that others may feel differently is part of developing alternative perspectives or discourses (Gee, 2012). Here, the emphasis is on learning to identify one's own feelings as well as the feelings of others, thus developing the understanding that a person cannot assume somebody else feels as he or she does.

2.7.3: Understanding diversity

Diversity supports teaching and learning around the key ideas of difference and diversity. The strands of *Te Whāriki* support the understanding of physical and environmental differences, through ideas such as gender, ethnicity, language and discrimination – things that make people look, sound and act differently. Understanding diversity becomes a way to access new discourses and new social identities, as texts become “a central resource for changing consciousness” (Janks, 2010, p. 24).

2.7.4: Critical and creative skills

Critical and creative thinking contribute significantly to the practice of critical literacy. Open-ended experiences, complexity, the preference of strategies over skills, and attitudes of experimenting and exploring promote the thinking child, rather than the trained child.

As mentioned, *Te Whāriki* does not endorse any approach or method in particular, but rather provides terms of reference in the form of the Principles, and the Strands and their goals. From the analysis, there is nothing within the curriculum to suggest that critical literacy is not appropriate. Rather, there is much to endorse

such an approach, as contributing to the achievement of many of the learning outcomes. For these reasons, I believe there is definitely space in this curriculum for a critical literacy approach.

2.8: Summary

This review of the literature sets out conceptions of what critical literacy is, exploring key elements of this literacy approach, and examining their application in the context of classroom approaches. In establishing a body of literature to both explain and justify critical literacy work, this review further demonstrates the validity of this approach as a potential vehicle for assisting young children to become text analysts. Such an acknowledgement recognizes the context of the *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) curriculum, which appears to support a critical literacy approach in terms of compatible outcomes.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study was designed to support a teacher-researcher in the development and implementation of a critical literacy programme for preschool children. Section 3.1 articulates the aims of this study, detailing them through three research questions before setting out the structure of the study and its activities. The context of the study, with relevance to the participant children, and the early childhood centre the study was conducted in, is also discussed. Section 3.2 sets out the methodological approaches of teacher research and action research, which were used in this study to respectively justify the dual role of me as teacher-researcher, and to provide a mechanism for reflective implementation of a critical literacy approach.

Section 3.3 establishes the methods of data collection used, which methods were selected by drawing on those appropriate for the methodological approaches. These methods used video recording and observation to record the activities as they were conducted in the classroom. Feedback from a critical friend, and parent interviews provided additional perspectives to the research. Section 3.4 sets out the stages of data analysis. This analysis happened in two stages, the first of which occurred during the research in the reflection component of the action research cycle. The second stage of analysis was thematic, and occurred post-data collection. Section 3.5 discusses the ethical considerations of the study with particular attention paid to the consent of parents, and the assent of children. Finally, section 3.6 discusses how the requirements of validity were met within this study.

3.1: Outline of the study

The primary aim of this study was to develop a dimensional understanding of critical literacy teaching and learning within the context of my early childhood education classroom. The questions of the study further elaborate those dimensions considered relevant.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- I. What might critical literacy look like in a New Zealand early childhood setting in terms of:
 - a. Teaching spaces?
 - b. The kinds of activities involved?
 - c. Compatibility and integration with other learning?
- II. What teacher language might be used in order to support and develop critical literacy in young children?
- III. What learnings do a group of young children appear to take from a sustained critical literacy teaching sequence in an early childhood setting?

3.1.1: The teaching intervention

I sought to answer these questions by researching my own teaching practice. Because I had never taught critical literacy before, I implemented a teaching intervention with a selected group of children in the centre where I worked as an early childhood teacher. This intervention was comprised of sixteen action research cycles, with each cycle focused on the teaching of a different critical literacy activity.

These activities were separated into two phases of four weeks duration, with a two-week break between phases. Phase one followed the topic of heroes, while phase two focused on the topics of bravery and stickers. Table 1 overleaf sets out the structure and activities of the intervention.

Table 1: The structure and activities of the intervention

Week	Date	Phase	Activity	Description
1	12/09/2012	1	1	Naming a child's conception of what a "hero" is.
	14/09/2012		2	Discussing and comparing the children's "hero" ideas as a group.
2	19/09/2012		3	Deconstructing the story of <i>Captain Awesome and Amy</i> .
	21/09/2012		4	Expanding on the concept of "strong".
3	26/09/2012		5	Making the "costume" discourse visible through picture texts .
	28/09/2012		6	Deconstructing and analysing the story "Captain Awesome and Amy" with regards to costume.
4	02/10/2012		7	Reforming the <i>Captain Awesome</i> story in the children's words.
	03/10 - 05/10, 2012		8	Visiting the conception of "hero"
5-6	08/10 - 19/10, 2012	<i>Break</i>		
7	24/10/2012	2	9	Problematising a picture and contrasting with a disruptive text.
	26/10/2012		10	Verbalising children's conceptions of what "brave" is.
8	31/10/2012		11	Exploring conceptions of gender using resources to represent "girl" and "boy" things in the playroom.
9	06/11/2012		12	Sharing our conceptions of "brave" by making a video about our ideas.
	07/11/2012		13	Using stickers to explore ideas about "boy" and "girl" things.
	09/11/2012		14	Exploring "brave" through questions.
10	14/11/2012		15	Extending our ideas about "boy" and "girl" things using stickers.
	06/11/2012		16	Asking the children's feedback on the study.

3.1.2: The setting of the intervention

The intervention was conducted in its entirety at my workplace, the Little Paws Tree Street centre, referred to hereafter as Tree Street. This section establishes the context for Tree Street in terms of its organizational structure, student demographic, and educational philosophy.

There are three Little Paws centres, all located in Hamilton, New Zealand. The centres are privately owned by a professional couple, and managed on their behalf by an Auckland company. Tree Street is located in an inner-city suburb and is licensed for twenty-seven children per session. It provides care for children aged two to five years, and draws from a diverse social mix that includes middle class, working class and beneficiary families. At the time of data collection the children were predominantly either Māori or Pākehā. Three children were identified by their parents respectively as Filipino, Samoan, and Burmese.

While the centre offers its services from 8.00 am – 4.30 pm there is little demand for all-day care at Tree Street. Most children attend either a morning or afternoon session with many parents utilizing the Aotearoa New Zealand Government's provision of 20 hours of early childhood education (ECE). This 20 hours is a higher rate of funding that

enables ECE services to provide early childhood education to three-year-olds, four-year-olds and five-year-olds for up to a maximum of six hours per day for 20 hours per week per child without charging fees (Ministry of Education, 2013 para. 1).

The educational philosophy of Tree Street is dedicated to open play, and is emergent based, meaning that the topics for study are selected from the emerging interests of the children. Each session is designed to provide children with uninterrupted time to pursue their activities and projects. There is a short mat time midway through each session, followed immediately by fruit time. Children

are also gathered together for ten minutes the end of each session, to facilitate safe transition back into their parents/caregivers care.

The Tree Street teaching team has three full-time and qualified early childhood teachers including me. At the time of the data collection, three student teachers were also training with us. Teaching at Tree Street is team-based, and the supervisor of Tree Street also supports teacher autonomy. Accordingly, each member of the team has considerable leeway to pursue curriculum passions, utilize different teaching approaches, and even to experiment. Our team views mistakes as learning experiences, both for ourselves and for the children.

3.1.3: The participant children

The selection of the potential participant group took place before both the consent and assent processes. Only children attending the Tree Street centre were considered for the study.

The children in the prospective participant group all met the following criteria:

- They attended the same session
- They were aged between 3.5 – 4.9 years old at the commencement of the study
- They had good oral language skills
- They were highly likely to remain at the center and in their current session for the duration of the study
- Their parents were willing to participate in an interview at the end of the data collection period
- The parents agreed they would not be present during any of the teaching activities

The participant group was restricted to eight children or less, and I pre-selected them before approaching their parents to seek consent. There were two reasons for adopting this approach. Firstly, pre-selection was deemed more effective than inviting parents to give consent and then choosing from those who did so. Such a process had the potential to offend by drawing attention to a group from which some children would necessarily be omitted.

Secondly, because Tree Street is a small centre, the pool of participants who met the selection criteria was correspondingly small. The limited numbers of suitable participants meant that realistically, the challenge was more about finding enough suitable children.

Parents of non-participating children were sent an information letter (See Appendix 9) which set out, among other things, my intention to incorporate a critical literacy stance into my normal teaching practice at a later date, thus benefitting those children who were unable to be in the participant group at that time. As some time has passed since the data collection period, I have indeed recommenced using a critical literacy approach with my students.

Characteristics and parental occupations of the participating children are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Age, place in family and parental occupations of participating children

Pseudonyms of children	Age (at start of research)	Place in family	Occupation of father	Occupation of mother
<i>Austin</i>	4	2 nd of 3 children	Teacher	Homemaker
<i>David</i>	4	2 nd of 2 children	Builder	Homebased childcare
<i>Grace</i>	4	2 nd of 2 children	Lawyer	Teacher
<i>Maya</i>	4	3 rd of 3 children	Engineer	University student
<i>Olivia</i>	4	3 rd of 3 children	Builder	Bank teller
<i>Pania</i>	4	2 nd of 4 children	Teacher	Homemaker
<i>Zach</i>	4	2 nd of 2 children	Sales person	Homebased childcare

3.2: Methodological approaches

This section discusses the methodological approaches underpinning the intervention. I have drawn on two such approaches, teacher research and action research. The theoretical underpinnings of each methodological approach will be considered in turn, accompanied by a discussion of how each contributes to the overall design of the study and to the advancement of the research questions.

3.2.1: Teacher research

Teacher research provided justification for me as a teacher to research my own practice in my own classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Practitioner or teacher research can be defined as a “systematic, intentional inquiry” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 5), where teachers actively engage “in the reflective investigation and critical evaluation of their own practice” (Henson, 2001, p. 820).

Establishing this justification was important. In professional contexts, such as the classroom, teachers are considered experts. However, this expertise can be downplayed in academic settings, where academic theory can be perceived as superior to practitioner knowledge (Gravani, 2008), thereby isolating teachers from the development of very theories intended for their use (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In response, teacher research legitimises professional expertise as theoretical knowledge in action, where “teacher researchers are both users and generators of theory” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 17). This conception shifts the boundaries between practice and theory (Gravani, 2008) and creates space for teachers to enter the sphere of theorist as peers with something valuable to contribute (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Locke, 2009).

Teacher research became a sphere where I could theorise about my teaching practice. A whole new perspective beckoned, as I realised that other teachers had encountered challenges in the classroom that they could not solve by reading books or attending courses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The idea of using a systematic approach to achieve this shift in my practice was challenging, yet simultaneously something of a relief because it provided a way forward. Without a plan, I would probably still be at the ‘thinking about it’ stage.

3.2.2: Action research

Having found a basis from which to proceed, I then required a process that would help me investigate my teaching practices, critically examine these, and implement and evaluate changes aimed at enhancing critical literacy. Action research suited all these purposes.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe action research as “an approach to *improving education by changing* it and learning from the consequences of changes” (p. 22, original emphasis). Thus, action research becomes a process for investigating ideas in the context of practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This investigation process results in a methodology for expanding knowledge about learning, teaching and curriculum (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research also provides a crucial connection between theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), a point of similarity between this approach and teacher research.

McNiff (2002) describes the knowledge base of action research as living theory, stating

Knowing becomes a holistic practice; the boundaries between theory and practice dissolve and fade away, because theory is lived in practice and practice becomes a form of living theory (p. 35).

The action research approach does not separate the different kinds of knowledge a practitioner may have, but instead integrates them holistically into practice (McNiff, 2002).

In an educational context, action research is committed to the challenge of implementing curriculum amidst the uncertainty and complexity of human interaction (McIntosh, 2010). This implementation of curriculum is one of the reasons this approach is so important, connecting with the justifications

mentioned above in teacher research, which acknowledge the need for ‘theoretical knowledge in action’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

While there are many action research models, I chose Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) process of plan, act and observe, reflect, revise the plan, with the cycle repeated as needed. As a teacher already in the habit of actively reflecting on my practice, this model was compatible with my own work and teaching style. The idea of situating my reflections within a model that used the same to extend and develop my teaching in a systematic way was empowering. This model showed me how I could move from thinking about teaching critical literacy, to actually understanding and implementing a critical literacy programme.

I used Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) cycle to develop my own “living theories” (McNiff, 2002) about critical literacy. That process is outlined next.

The plan

The planning component of the action research cycle must be forward-looking (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The process of the cycle kept me moving forward, with the planning component used to revisit previous work and refine my thinking, ideas and approach for the next activity. As a result I was able to implement worthwhile changes (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) that were responsive to context and to the participants, ultimately benefitting the progression of the study.

The inherent flexibility of action research was also invaluable (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 2002). This flexibility recognises that interaction is unpredictable and often requires adaptation on implementation. I was constantly

adjusting my teaching plans, sometimes right up until I taught them, and frequently, even while I was teaching.

Action

The action stage of the cycle is the planned change of practice is carried out (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This change should be “a careful and thoughtful variation of practice” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 12). I worked hard to make the change in the action both careful and thoughtful. However, this was no guarantee of success. Sometimes my thinking was misinformed, as where I set about teaching an abstract idea (“strong”) by using a concrete method (having the children draw representations of strong), a mismatch that was pointed out months later. Sometimes my ideas were inappropriate for the age group, as with the critical literacy toolkit. Fortunately action research is kind to error, situating it as an opportunity to learn rather than a mortal blow to progress. My research was about finding what worked, and each time I taught an activity I learnt something new about the approach I was trying to implement, about my teaching style, and about me.

This was indeed living theory (McNiff, 2002), and theory in action. Finding how to make the two of these work together was occasionally challenging. Here the process of action research provided reassurance. Having a system for working out a new way of teaching meant I had a position to retreat to. When an activity did go badly, in the back of my mind I would remind me that I could check the tape later to work out why. Where an activity went well, I could do exactly the same thing. Rather than simply abandoning trying to teach in a new way because I encountered obstacles, the action research process empowered me to keep trying, to notice, to build on my small victories, and to learn from my errors.

Observation

Observation involved documenting the effects of the planned action. Like the action, this too must be carefully planned to allow for “the constraints of reality” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 13). I documented the planned action by videoing each activity. The filming was occasionally tricky as I was both camera operator and teacher, but creating videos of the teaching sessions were essential. With so much going on around me, and inside my head, I could not count on noticing or remembering everything that happened. When revisiting the videos in phase one I realised one child was consistently leaving the activities about five minutes after they started. Observing this challenged me to find solutions to sustain his interest.

Observation provided the basis for reflection, having enough scope to capture anything unanticipated while providing sufficient flexibility to respond to the events of the day (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The video recordings became the basis for revisiting and observing my teaching on repeat occasions, as I sought to both problem-solve from previous sessions, and plan ahead for upcoming ones. There were many times when I could not find the words I wanted in the moment I wanted them, and these are all captured in awkward permanence on film. However, revisiting my struggles became a key part of preparing more thoroughly for future activities.

Reflection

Reflection was sense-making, whether for problems, processes, issues, or other relevant matters to the research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). At this stage, I revisited the action, reconstructing it through evaluative frames (Cardno, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The reflection is not purely retrospective; the purpose of this undertaking is to understand what happened and why in order to provide a rationale for the next stage of action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

I used reflection extensively in this research, and it was sense-making and revelatory. Reflecting through writing about it proved an effective way for me to revisit a teaching activity as researcher, particularly regarding problems I had encountered during the “action” part of the cycle.

Action research as complex

The process of action research can seem straightforward on paper, but in reality it can be problematic and complex (McNiff, 2002). Rather than a “mechanical process” (Simonsen et al., 2010, p. 7), action research can be thought of as “fluid”, with stages that overlap, and original plans that become obsolete in the light of new learning gained from experience in the cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563). I found this to be true. While the process seems linear, there were many moments of revisiting and rethinking, particularly as I considered how to proceed next. Frequently these considerations would see me return to other steps in the cycle, such as observation, or I would re-read my reflections. Sometimes I stepped away from the research altogether to return to the theory that had inspired me to undertake this project in the first place. Sometimes I sought out new theory to supplant ideas that were not working.

With this fluidity in mind, it is important to consider what constitutes a valid adoption of the action research approach. As noted by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005),

The criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully but rather whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *situations* in which they practice (p. 563).

This statement went to the heart of my approach to action research. The priority in my study lay with actual growth and continuing professional reflexivity, rather

than rigid adherence to a research cycle. That is not to say that rigor was abandoned at the expense of practice, but rather that the objective of the action/reflection process was to progressively evolve my teaching practice through reflexive experience (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). If this core concept had failed, even meticulous rigor could not have supplanted the shortfall.

3.3: Methods of data collection

This section discusses the methods of data collection employed, with reference to the theoretical underpinnings of the particular method used, and the justification for the same in light of the research questions.

3.3.1: Video recordings

The first method of data collection was video recordings. With only one exception, due to camera failure, every activity of the intervention was video recorded “as a tool for reflecting and re-searching classrooms” (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001, p. 60).) As teacher and researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), a video recording was the best way for me to revisit the activities, as it was not possible to obtain another perspective while I was immersed in the teaching activities.

The videos provided an opportunity for me to stand apart from the moment when I was teaching, and to enter again at another point in time through the frame of researcher. The videos also allowed another person, my critical friend, to enter the research with me. (The role of the critical friend is discussed later in this section at 3.3.6). Lankshear and Knobel refer to these re-entry points as ‘freeze frames’ (2004, p. 194).

Utilising these frames as entry points meant I could focus on a different aspects of the data. For example, while working on my second section regarding teacher language, my critical friend helped me realise I was asking a lot of leading questions. Revisiting my earlier work helped me understand that this was not an isolated incident. Watching me use leading questions on the videos through a series of activities became a powerful motivator to change this aspect of my practice.

Video recordings have the additional advantage of placing spoken language in context (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004), something that has been crucial to understanding the flow of conversation in the group dynamic. Video also captures gesture, non-verbal cues such as expression and posture, physical dynamics like position of participants in relation to each other, and other situational information that become valuable in terms of interpreting the data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). For example, in activity one, David described the superpower of flying through sound and gesture, but without verbal reference. In activity five, many of the children used crosses and ticks to select pictures, a process that is not always verbally elaborated but is still part of our meaning making.

3.3.2: Reflective journal

The second method of data collection was a reflective journal. Many teachers are familiar with reflective practice, which can be defined as “thinking about how you teach and refining your teaching practice according to those thoughts” (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002 , p. 11). Similarly, Dewey (cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) noted the importance of teachers reflecting on their practice and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning.

In documenting my reflections, I used the approach of reflection-on-action (Del Carlo, Hinkhouse, & Isbell, 2010). This approach specifically focuses on “the thinking and reflecting that occurs after a lesson, class or event” (Del Carlo et al., 2010, p. 59). I reflected extensively after each activity, including a detailed evaluation of what had happened. Frequently I re-read previous entries. The actions of documenting and revisiting resulted in reflections that helped me understand the evolution of my own thinking, and the way that thinking was affecting my practice.

Reflection-on-action has the additional benefit of tending to change the plan of action for the next time the activity is carried out (Del Carlo et al., 2010), making this approach an ideal fit with reflection component of an action research cycle. This process was crucial in terms of understanding what had and had not worked in the teaching process.

In addition to being an expression of the teacher’s experience, and situated knowledge, reflection-on-action is also value-laden (Del Carlo et al., 2010). Acknowledging the value-situated nature of my work allowed my reflections to serve another important purpose: the revelation of my own biases, values and dispositions in the data collection. By actively creating and revisiting my reflections, I used “the documentation of the self as a key fieldwork tool” (McIntosh, 2010, p. 50). Having a process to reveal my subjective self in the research was particularly important for me, given that all the data was collected and also analysed by me, thus raising distinct possibilities of bias and inaccuracy. By using active reflection in this way I was able to show the decision-making processes contained within my research endeavours, and reveal my own presence as researcher and teacher (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012).

3.3.3: Artifacts

The third method of collecting data was artifacts. These can be described as the

physical ‘props’ people use to get things done within the contexts of their daily lives ... Collecting artifacts provides important contextual details to the data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 235)

In all occasions where an artifact was copied, it was intentionally generated as part of the research process (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). In my study artifacts primarily took the form of the children’s work from the intervention activities, usually a picture they had drawn. Sometimes artifacts took the form of items chosen which were preserved as a photograph.

3.3.4: Interview

The fourth method was parent interviews. Interviews enabled additional interpretations of the children’s work (Burnaford et al., 2001). The parents of four of the participant children were available to be interviewed, and an additional parent was later able to provide informal feedback on the process. These interviews were not video or audio recorded, however comprehensive notes were taken.

These interviews were open-ended, with questions framed broadly to allow parents considerable scope to respond (Mertler, 2009). Because of my relationship with parents the interviews were a two-way dialogue and many of them asked questions of me as well. The interviews were crucial to understanding the context for some of the children’s remarks, as well as exploring whether any of the learning had travelled home with the children. Parents were provided with my list of questions in advance (See Appendix 12), and copies of the interview notes for their validation after the interview had concluded.

3.3.5: Observation

Observation was the fifth method of data collection. My role as teacher meant I had opportunities outside of the intervention to observe and record anything that seemed related to the study. The candid nature of these observations meant there

was no systematic schedule for carrying out observations. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) refer to this kind of observation as “going with the flow” (p. 222). These observations, while not heavily relied on, did provide valuable insight to me. They let me see how and where children chose to revisit our learning – if indeed they did so at all.

3.3.6: Critical friend feedback

Feedback from my critical friend was the sixth and final method of data collection. A critical friend is a trusted colleague who provides another voice – a balance – to that of the teacher-researcher, and in this instance that voice was provided via written feedback (Samaras, 2011). My critical friend was an early childhood academic from the University of Waikato, and an experienced conversational analyst. I felt her feedback would be particularly valuable regarding my teacher language, and the interactions with the children. I provided a brief template that set out some of the areas I felt would be helpful, but included an invitation to provide any other information she deemed necessary (Appendices 14 and 15).

The feedback provided by my critical friend was incredibly valuable and helped me identify several points that greatly benefited not only the study, but also my teaching practice as a whole. This included my tendency to use leading questions, and to respond to children with closed statements, rather than by extending their thinking (See Appendix 14).

3.3.7: Summary of data collection methods

The selection of data collection methods proved more important than I originally realised, and the very act of going through the data collection process was stimulating. Burnaford (2001) notes

How can we study the other without studying ourselves? Most teacher researchers would say we cannot. We study the other to learn about ourselves. Sometimes the methods we choose as part of our research design begin that process of self-revelation (p. 60).

This proved to be the case. The methods utilised were revealing, sometimes uncomfortably so, but simultaneously provided opportunities for development and change. In this sense, the data collected became a self-initiated invitation to dialogue about practice, and from my perspective that was a dialogue worth having.

3.4: Data analysis

Ezzy (2002) notes that “qualitative data analysis is an *interpretive* task. Interpretations are not found – rather they are made, actively constructed through social processes” (p. 73). In approaching data analysis, I actively constructed processes that would incorporate data analysis into the design of my research project in ways that were both formative and summative (Cardno, 2003). The design of the research project also set out the two stages of analysis, and the different analysis approaches used within each.

Stage One

Action research necessarily requires formative analysis for the operation of the research cycle (Cardno, 2003). As Ezzy notes,

The integration and interpenetration of data collection and data analysis is practiced by a number of qualitative research traditions, including action research (2002, p. 61)

Within the action research model, the reflection component of the cycle also functioned as the analysis (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This approach is endorsed by Ezzy, who states that journaling and memos “are a systematic attempt to facilitate the interpretive process that is at the heart of qualitative research” (2002, p. 71).

I wrote a number of reflections, all in narrative form, as my process of in-data analysis during the course of action research cycles. Sixteen of these reflections were direct products of the action research cycles, and included an evaluation of the cycle immediately preceding, as well as informed planning for the next cycle. Additional reflections were written to analyse other events that occurred during the data collection, events that I needed to make sense of. These events included activities or observations outside the structured activities of the intervention, as well as reflections on the memos from my critical friend. I also wrote reflections at the end of Phases 1 and 2, comparing my work to that point against my research questions,. This ongoing process of active reflection kept me engaged with my research, and consciously evaluating my emerging understandings of the data (Ezzy, 2002).

Stage Two

After the data collection was completed, I commenced the summative data analysis using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis can be described as “the process of identifying themes or concepts that are in the data” (Ezzy, 2002). This process of analysis suited my open-ended research questions. Additionally, the inductive nature of thematic analysis allowed categories and themes to emerge naturally from the data through open-coding, rather than according to a pre-determined structure (Ezzy, 2002). This aspect of unrestricted coding was important to me, as I wanted to ensure that in the process of answering the questions I did not miss unexpected themes or ideas because I was

not looking for them. An open-coded thematic analysis provided the opportunity for the data to speak for itself, without restriction.

Transcription

Each activity session was taped and transcribed, with the exception of Activity 10 where the camera malfunctioned. Due to the volume of data, particularly in the first phase, I enlisted two transcribers. We discussed confidentiality and both signed a confidentiality form (See Appendix 16). On receiving the transcripts I read them, and in some cases utilised the original recordings to clarify or amend anything that seemed unclear in the transcribed text.

3.5: Ethical considerations

My study required working with young children. Working with children and young people always creates ethical obligations for the researcher to honourably discharge, and the younger the child, the more stringent the criteria for doing so (Loveridge, 2010). As a teacher researcher I felt an additional commitment to ethical practice, due to my relationships with children and their families, relationships that would continue once the research had concluded (Zeni, 2001).

This section details my assent and consent process, which began with the organisation I worked for, and then continued with the parents and children of the participation group. These processes are discussed next.

3.5.1: Consent from Little Paws

I sought consent from the Little Paws owners, via their manager, by letter (See Appendix 1). This permission was formalised by the owners of Little Paws by a signed letter of consent (See Appendix 2). The other teachers at Tree Street, including our student teachers, were also informed of the study via letter (See Appendix 3).

Once I had the signed consent letter from the owners, I sought the consent of the parents of the intended participation group.

3.5.2: Consent from critical friend

My critical friend also received an information letter (See Appendix 4) setting out the study, and the tasks I needed her to perform in relation to it. She also signed a consent form (See Appendix 5) authorizing me to use the feedback she returned.

3.5.3: Consent from parents

Consent can be either active or passive (Loveridge, 2010). Active consent requires every parent to return a form, even if their child is not permitted to participate (Esbensen, Melde, Taylor, & Peterson, 2008; Loveridge, 2010). Passive consent only requires a response if parents do not want their child to participate (Loveridge, 2010). I used both types of consent in my research. Active consent was used for those in the nominated participation group via an information letter (See Appendix 6) and parental consent form (See Appendix 7), while passive consent was used for the remainder of the children in that session, also conveyed by a letter that had a small tear-away portion if parents wished to refuse consent (See Appendix 9).

The consent process was conducted over the period of a week. I discreetly hand-delivered the letters (See Appendix 6) and forms (See Appendix 7) to the parents of prospective participants when they were present in the centre. This delivery also provided the opportunity to explain the study and provide invitation to the information evening. All of the parents invited to consent did so, although one child was withdrawn from Tree Street the day the data collection commenced for family reasons. This withdrawal necessitated his removal from the participant group, and he was not replaced.

Parents of the participating children were also informed about the process of seeking assent from their children (Dockett, Main, & Kelly, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2011; Loveridge, 2010). This meant that where any child refused to participate in the study, or in all or part of any research activity, that position was respected (Dockett & Perry, 2011).

Because of my ongoing relationship with children and their families, there was a risk of parents feeling obliged to consent. To minimize that risk I ensured parents had time to read the letter and consider the matter of participation. I observed their body language closely to see whether they exhibited any signs of disinterest or dissent. I only followed up with parents who had not responded after a week, reiterating the option of non-involvement. This was only necessary in one instance, and the delay appeared to relate to her commitments as the mother of four young children, as opposed to any concerns about the study.

All other families with non-participant children were informed of the study via an information letter (See Appendix 9) in their wall pocket, this being the center equivalent of a mailbox for each family. The purpose of this consent was primarily aimed at accidental information capture, for example, a child wandering into the videotaping of the participant group. This letter included a cut-off segment that could be returned if there was an objection; otherwise consent would be assumed. This group also received an invitation to the information evening. I did not receive any objections, and none of the parents from this group attended

the information evening. However, four of these parents subsequently engaged me in friendly conversation regarding my studies.

3.5.4: Seeking assent from children

Assent is a distinct process from consent, and captures the child's right to be informed about the research and asked whether or not they want to participate (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009). The active assent process took place after the active consent process with the parents, and was sought from each child in the participant group prior to the commencement of the study (Dockett & Perry, 2011). By conducting this process I sought to respect the rights of the children to make their own choice about being involved, through making the research visible to them, rather than just conducting research on them (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2010; Mason & Danby, 2011).

Based on the work of Dockett, Main and Kelly (2011) I designed an assent process for the children that included a pictorial information letter (see Appendix 10), which I explained to them individually, and a personalized pictorial assent form (see Appendix 11) containing their picture, with a space for them to write their name. This process included a short powerpoint presentation that explained how I was at school, and wanted to do some of my school work with them.

I focused on ensuring each child understood that this was my schoolwork, and when I undertook these activities I was not just being their teacher. We discussed how I would video record our work. As per my ethics submission, I also indicated I would wear a funny hat for each activity to differentiate from my normal teaching activities, as well as display a copy of the assent letter they had each being given. The children appeared excited about my schoolwork. I did not pressure any child or provide any incentive to secure their assent, although I concede the special assent form with their picture on it may have appeared as an inducement of sorts.

No informed assent process was carried out for children outside of the participant group. However, they were given the same access to the presentation viewed by the participant group during one of the sessions.

I also saw assent as a continuous process rather than a singular event. This concept ensures children have multiple opportunities to either confirm or withdraw from the research (Loveridge, 2010). Indicators for refusal are acknowledged as including body language, physically moving away, verbal refusal, or general disinterest (Dockett et al., 2011 provides excellent examples of this in practice). In the study assent became something we renegotiated each time we undertook an activity. I would let the children know it was time for our “schoolwork”, as they called it, and they would either come or not.

3.5.5: The information evening

The information evening was for all parents/caregivers at the centre. It was designed to broadly canvas the study and provide the opportunity for questions and answers, discussion of key ethical aspects, and the process for providing feedback to children and parents during the study and at its conclusion.

Three parents, all with children in the intended participant group, attended this evening although two of those parents were caregivers of the same child. All three of these parents engaged in a thoughtful dialogue about the research topic and their children and asked a number of questions. I prepared a written summary of our conversations after the information evening and distributed these to the remainder of the parents in the group who had been unable to attend.

I kept parents of the participant children informed throughout the study by sending out newsletters every two weeks. These provided a summary of our activities to date, and confirmed the dates for the next activities.

3.5.6: Continual access

Due to my dual role as teacher and researcher, I had continual access to the child participants. This meant that children needed to be able to clearly distinguish when I was being a teacher as opposed to when I was carrying out my research. For this reason, I undertook three measures to achieve that end. Firstly, I provided a verbal reminder to children at the commencement of each activity stating that this is part of my schoolwork, and different from my normal teaching. Secondly, I used a blank copy of the children's assent form (See Appendix 11), laminated and positioned near the activity as a visual reminder of the same. Thirdly, I wore a large, and distinctive jester's hat during each activity. The latter proved to be the most effective indicator which the children quickly came to associate with my schoolwork and our special activities. Often they came running when they saw the hat, whether it was on my head or not, and whether I was ready or not.

3.5.7: Confidentiality

There were two issues with confidentiality. The first was protecting the identity of the children involved. This was resolved by using pseudonyms for the organisation, the center, and also the children themselves in all aspects of this study. The second issue revolved around the release of photographic and video data to the children's parents, for transcription of the video, and for providing video footage to my critical friend. This issue was addressed through the use of confidentiality forms, one for parents of participant children (See Appendix 8) and one for my critical friend (See Appendix 5). These forms set out the conditions the video data was provided under.

3.6: Validity

The methodological approaches of teacher research and action research encounter the same challenge: validity. This stems from their qualitative nature, coupled with long-standing academic traditions that favour positivist approaches (McNiff, 2002; Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011; Yin, 2009). While it is important that research practitioners making claims are able to provide supporting evidence for the same, it is equally true that where this evidence is provided, qualitative research approaches should be endorsed as valid (McNiff, 2002). Qualitative data does not mean sloppy data; rather adherence to sound and verifiable research practice can produce a disciplined and systematic enquiry (McNiff, 2002).

This research strives to establish internal validity (Cardno, 2003), which is described as

a concern with the design and implementation of all stages of the project, to ensure that the way the data is gathered, analysed and presented meshes with their [the researcher's] commitment to what is intended and what is important (p. 54).

I sought to promote this validity by revisiting the research questions on a regular basis, to ensure that data collection, the activities of the intervention, and the subsequent analysis and conclusions remained consistent with the original intention of the study. The research questions are used to frame the selection of the methodological approaches, which in turn determine which data collection methods will be used. The research questions are also revisited through reflection halfway through the data collection, and again at the end. This sequencing provided opportunity to regularly monitor progress against the original intent of the study.

Internal validity is also concerned with whether the action taken, in this case through a teaching intervention, makes a difference, or whether the difference perceived can be attributed to other factors (Burns, 1994). In the instance of this study, no critical literacy teaching had taken place at the Tree Street centre prior to research commencing. Critical literacy is not a well-known or widely adopted approach, and was not practiced by either of my colleagues, or even by me before the first activity of the intervention. The parents of the participant children were also asked to refrain from conducting any critical literacy activities or teaching of their own during the intervention. However, the parents were able to respond to anything their child might raise. Each parent agreed to this condition before the study commenced. Parents were not provided of advance notice regarding the content of each activity to further avoid the possibility of coached responses.

The feedback of the critical friend has already been discussed as part of method, however, the rationale for having one also contributes directly to validity as a critical friend provides external perspective (McNiff, 2002) by offering advice and providing constructive feedback (Samaras, 2011). In order to be constructive such a friend needed to be involved throughout, and while being supportive, remain able to point out matters that need attention (McNiff, 2002)

My critical friend agreed to observe and give feedback (Appendices 14 and 15) on two of my teaching sessions via two unedited tapes. My reason for doing this by video rather than direct observation, was twofold: firstly, to limit the time commitment required of my critical friend thus making it easier to secure one, and secondly, to avoid the children acting differently, and me being thrown off, by the direct presence an observer. When I sent the second tape I also sent the two reflections for that activity to provide context and some insight into my own rationale.

Another factor in establishing the credibility of this research has been verifying the interviews with the parents concerned (Menter et al., 2011). In each case, I

typed the notes from each interview and made a copy available to each parent involved with two weeks to review it and make any changes. This provided the parent participants with the opportunity to ensure their comments were interpreted correctly (Menter et al., 2011).

Finally, methodological triangulation has enabled the research information to be measured in different ways (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Triangulation allowed verification of study's findings by using two or more methods of data collection to support the points made (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Collecting data by various kinds of method provided different perspectives on that information (Burns, 1994). The use of multiple methods of data collection in this study provided the ability to support the findings from two points or more.

3.7: Summary

In this chapter I have explained the methodological approaches and research methods used to conduct this study. This explanation has included the rationale for using dual methodological approaches of teacher research and action research. In addition to the ethical matter of confidentiality, particular attention has been paid to the consent process for parents of the participant children, as well as an ethically sound assent process for the preschool children directly involved in this study. The process of analysis, incorporating the action research cycles as well as thematic analysis, has also been disclosed. This chapter has concluded with a discussion on the validity of the study.

Chapter Four: Findings of Phase 1

The findings of this research are presented in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 recounts Phase 1 of the research, and follows Activities 1-9 chronologically through their respective action research cycles. Each activity is recounted as a section of the chapter, and begins with a small header setting out the children that actually participated, and whether the activity was held with a group or individuals. The chapter concludes with a reflection on Phase 1.

Phase One was my point of entry into critical literacy work with the children and represented my first attempts at actually incorporating this approach into my teaching. It would be fair to say I was somewhat anxious, and this is reflected in my writings of that period.

I am pretty nervous. I'm getting to the business end of things now, and it's time for the biggest question of all: can I get any affirmative result out of this study? Admittedly, even a negative answer would still be data, but I really really want it to work, and the very real possibility that it won't is freaking me out. There, I said it, I'm afraid. (Reflective Journal, 27 August, 2012)

Such questions and anxieties are realistic concerns for a teacher-researcher (Zeni, 2001), but they were new to me. The tremendous territory of the unexplored lay before me, but as I put on my ethically required research hat, thus signifying the official commencement of our work, I could not stop the doubts. However, there was nothing for it but to get under way.

4.1: Activity 1

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked individually with children

Activity 1 was designed to explore each child's individual conception of what a hero was. This conception also served as a baseline for each child's current thinking on the topic. I asked each child to draw a picture of what they thought a hero was, deliberately avoiding any prior definition of what a hero might be, as I did not want to influence their ideas. I accepted whatever explanation a child gave me without question, and then explored their responses through a series of open-ended questions designed to draw out their thinking. The variety of the children's answers was a pleasant surprise.

Austin related how his older sister was a hero for helping him when he got hurt, later clarifying that a hero's job was "to help who is in trouble".

Pania told how she helped her family do the cleaning, and this made her happy – and made her the hero of her story. She also stated that I could be a hero if I would do the cleaning up as well.

Maya focused the majority of her comments on the importance of study, particularly learning to write her name. I had not known of Maya's interest in writing, and was intrigued to learn how significant this was to her.

Olivia had the most fluid definition of hero. Her conceptions moved back and forth between several ideas: a superhero, complete with super cape and the ability

to fly using a belt, a football, a warrior, a football warrior, a football coach, a big girl (both in terms of size and age), and a sheep. Olivia never committed to one idea of what she thought a hero was hence my original description of her position as fluid. However, the conversation was interesting and lots of fun. The last part of our dialogue on saw her happily joking and laughing.

Zach was the only child who directly mentioned and maintained focus on the discourse of super heroes. He informed me that a costume was essential to the super hero job, and so was rescuing people. Zach has been a huge superhero fan for a long time, so it was no surprise he drew on this story to represent his understanding.

David's hero conception was similar to Zach's, except that at no point did he use the term "superhero", preferring "hero". In the interview with David's mother at the end of the data collection, she explained to me that prior to the research, David had not used the word "superhero" at home. However, like Zach, David mentioned costumes, saving or helping people, and superpowers – even though when asked he could not really explain what a superpower was.

Grace was in the mood to draw, but not to talk. She mentioned that she was drawing a bee, but did not want to clarify whether this was what she thought a hero was. I made a few more attempts at engaging Grace in conversation, but finally took the hint and let her draw in peace.

As I gathered up my sprawl of drawing implements and stowed my hat, I felt good about this first session. For the most part the children had appeared engaged. Their responses were more diverse than I had expected, and provided some interesting insights into the children's worlds. I spent that evening fine-tuning the lesson plan for the next day, where I planned to use the pictures from this activity to explore the many facets of what a hero could be.

4.2: Activity 2

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach
Type of interaction: Worked as a group

After the encouraging responses of the first session I was looking forward to using the children's pictures to explore and extend their ideas about heroes. I had the pictures ready, and I had a lesson plan. I had a list of questions that even now, seem reasonably open-ended. On paper it all looked good.

Following my lesson plan, I commenced the activity by presenting the pictures drawn the previous day along with the children's explanations. My objective was to reach a point where we could compare and contrast the children's differing ideas about heroes. I quickly encountered two major obstacles to this activity: firstly, my explanations of the respective hero conceptions took so long that the children began to lose interest. Secondly, I lacked the language necessary to facilitate a constructive comparative discussion with young children.

Even though the questions I had prepared were open-ended, the children struggled to respond to them. In desperation, I resorted to asking leading questions, which had the counter effect of soliciting some very lacklustre responses from the children. Eventually I suggested we draw hero pictures, which drew the most enthusiasm from the children for that entire session.

From my perspective this whole activity felt laboured and fell flat. The children were not misbehaving in any way, but they seemed off-task, and as the lesson progressed, I watched my lesson plan disintegrate. My perceived failure in this lesson would stay with me a long time. After reflecting extensively, I decided

that the lesson plan had been both too ambitious and too complex, drawing on language the children did not yet have. I decided a change of approach was necessary.

4.3: Activity 3

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked individually with children

In the wake of Activity 2, I conducted some extensive reflection and made a number of changes. My first change in approach was to stop following the lesson plans designed in the pre-data collection period as part of my planning. I still referred to these plans periodically for ideas, but realised that in order to progress I needed to put the action research process to work so I could be more responsive to the learning in each activity.

The second change I made was to use the ideas the children had shared in Activity 1 to write a short story about heroes. This was an effort to secure the interest of the children by representing their own discourses about heroes back to them. Not only would this put their ideas at the heart of our work, but it would deliver them in a potentially more engaging fashion than my previous effort in Activity 2. The story was titled *Captain Awesome and Amy* (See Appendix 13) and formed the basis for the remainder of our work in Phase 1.

Briefly recounted, the story starts with Amy and her younger brother John, busy cleaning their house. When John falls and injures himself and two costumed men fly into the room and offer to save John, with the bigger of the two men introducing himself as Captain Amy, and the other man as his presumed sidekick

Wayne. Amy indignantly tells both would-be heroes that she is capable of helping her own brother, and does so. Somewhat miffed, Captain Awesome asks what he is supposed to do now with nobody to save. Amy suggests there are more people to save, but somewhere else – they need to leave her home. The heroes leave, and the siblings return to their cleaning.

The story never uses the word hero or superhero, although that interpretation is likely given the pictures used to illustrate the story. These pictures were found on the internet, and chosen to represent generic ideas about superheroes and children. The superheroes were both white, male, adult, and wear costumes and capes. The children were younger, also white, and dressed in casual clothing, with Amy the older and taller of the two.

With the story in place, my third change focused on finding a better way for me to talk with the children about the story. To make the process of deconstruction more accessible to the children I designed a “toolkit”. The whole point of designing the toolkit was to give children something tangible to use in their analysis of stories. This kit consisted of five laminated pictures that represented what I considered to be key points of investigation. As standalone pictures, the tools were designed to be placed on top of a character in the story in order to represent a particular way of thinking about that character. The rationale behind the tools was loosely based on Janks’ (1993) approach of identifying position and power within a text. I developed a theory and rationale for each tool.

Tool one: *Strong*

I used a picture of barbell weights to represent strength. The word “strong” was intended to be a potentially child-friendly substitute for the Janks (1993) concept of “power” and in doing so, provide a frame for understanding which characters operated as powerful, and why. In hindsight this rationale was somewhat flawed, as “strong” ultimately proved to be a more dimensional word that I realised, as per the learning in Activity 4. Making a physical tool to represent an abstract concept

was also problematic. However to echo an sentiment from Lewison et al (2008), it represented my best thinking at the time.

Tool two: *Weak*

I created the “weak” tool to provide a contrast to the “strong” tool. I had toyed with different words to represent the abstract concept of weak, such as delicate, vulnerable and fragile. However, the meanings of these words were just not accurate. I wanted a word to juxtapose strength and “weak” was the best fit. Finding a picture that illustrated weakness was similarly tricky. In the end, I went with a stick-figure illustration trying – but failing – to lift weights. The name of this tool, and the image chosen to represent it seem a bad fit now. At the time I decided to try it anyway and see how the tool faired on its test run.

Tool three: *Voice*

This tool was designed to identify who had a voice in the story – in other words, identifying which characters did the talking. I used the image of an open mouth with notes coming out to signify a person speaking. This tool felt like the best match between question and representative picture, probably because it was one of the few concepts that could be accurately represented in a visual way.

Tool four: *Silence*

The silence tool was a face with a finger held over the lips in a “ssssh” motion. This tool was designed as a counterpoint to the voice tool, and used to identify who was not speaking. Like the voice tool, this one felt like a reasonably accurate match with its accompanying picture.

Tool five: *Invisible*

This was potentially the trickiest of the tools, because how could you identify what you could not see? Essentially with this tool I was asking the children to identify something they could see. Even though making the invisible, visible is an

important critical literacy concept explaining this idea to children, yet alone coming up with a picture to represent it, was problematic. Months later I am surprised I went through with this tool, but acknowledge it was part of my own learning process at the time. The picture chosen to represent invisibility was a hat and gloves arranged to represent a body, and was probably as good a picture as I could get, given the concept.

Tool six: *The hidden story*

I used the phrase “hidden story” to signify what we would be looking for. The word story was a substitute for discourse, and this was a word I was confident about, mainly because it came from the work of Locke (2004). The addition of “hidden” was my idea, and was intended to signal that we would be searching for something in the story, something that would take some effort to find. I used a magnifying glass to accompany the hidden story concept.

With the tools prepared, I was ready to see how the children responded to them. My apprehension from the apparent failure of Activity 2 influenced my decision to work individually with each child in this lesson. While I acknowledged that one-on-one teaching was not a sustainable teaching approach for the long-term, the immediate benefits of being able to concentrate on one child at a time were considerable, particularly since I also had much to learn regarding this approach.

The activity consisted of me telling the story to each child in turn. Then I would bring out the toolkit, and we would use each tool as a different frame to view the text through.

David was first. He seemed to like the story, and was interested in the tools. I ran into my first problem with the toolkit when we used the strong tool, which David immediately put over Captain Awesome. This was not the outcome I was looking for, as in the story Captain Awesome actually did not do anything – Amy was the

one who took action, making her strong by my interpretation. I did not realise that my conception of strong was different to David's. Fortunately, I let his interpretation stand and we moved on.

David also had trouble with the weak tool, which he also wanted to allocate to Captain Awesome. Due to the trouble with some of the other tools, I never bothered bringing out the invisible tool, which I was rapidly losing confidence in. However, the voice tool – and its counterpart the silence tool – were able to be used by David without trouble. He also enjoyed using the magnifying glass to point to different characters in the story.

When I worked with Olivia, she used the voice tool easily. In addition to giving the character Amy the voice tool, she also wanted to allocate the same tool to Captain Awesome. This seemed fair, as he had been an active participant in the conversation. Olivia also used the strong tool to identify Amy, suggesting she did see strong in a way similar to me. When using the silence tool, she realised that neither John nor Wayne had said anything. We did not use the weak tool or invisible tool.

Austin, like Olivia, seemed to have a good understanding of the tools such as voice, silence and strong. He could also apply them accurately, remembering relevant details of the story to help him, such as who spoke, and who acted. Like Olivia he also had an abstract understanding of the word strong, realizing that Amy had acted strong, while Captain Awesome looked strong.

As I progressed to working with Zach, accompanied by Grace, we used the tools that had proved most effective with the other children. These tools were the voice tool, the silence tool, and the strong tool. Zach had some trouble applying these tools to the story, and frequently appeared to be guessing who the tools should be applied too. Grace was on the periphery of the activity, and never really had the

chance to fully interact with the toolkit, although she seemed interested in the story as I told it. Later, when I worked with Pania, her reaction to the tools was similar to Zach's, in that she also seemed to be guessing about where they should do and what they should do.

On completion, I felt significantly better about this activity than Activity 2. I could see the children really trying to think and process, and they were very responsive to the toolkit, enjoying both the tactile and visual aspects of it despite the actual tools being somewhat problematic. A few of the tools, particularly the “weak” tool and the “invisible” tool, were really hard for the children to comprehend. The children used the “strong” tool, but recognition of physical strength remained the predominant choice. Despite my best efforts to make the tools concrete, when it came to implementation I was able to see that some of the tools relied on abstract language and concepts more than I had thought. I realised that the tools would require continued refining and rethinking on my part.

That said, I could still see emergent signs of the children learning to contrast information and ideas, although that process still required significant scaffolding from me. For example, David and Austin were both able to identify who had no voice in the story, while Austin and Olivia both saw Amy as the strong character. Although the toolkit remained firmly in the trial stage, I was encouraged enough by the preliminary results to continue working with it for now.

4.4: A comparative activity

Between activities three and four I also shared the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story (See Appendix 13) and accompanying toolkit with my twelve-year-old son, who had expressed interested in what I was doing. We had an engaging discussion that lasted for over thirty minutes that traversed a variety of elements in

the story, some of which he identified, and some of which came from me. When we finished, he asked if I could write more stories like that.

This was an interesting contrast to my work in Activity 3 with the kindergarten children. As an older child, my son had a better grasp of the complexities of language. The concepts that the four year olds struggled with were a minimal challenge for him, allowing for a much higher level of engagement and a very lively discussion.

One of his comments was particularly useful in terms of what I was doing at work. We were using the 'strong' tool, and he made the differentiation that one character was physically strong, while another was “strong with her words”. I liked this language as I thought it was a clear way to explain a different way that a person could be strong. Through his feedback I saw I had been using the ‘strong’ tool in a more abstract way than I had realised. I could see now how the children had been using it in a concrete way – to identify physical strength. I needed to more specific development for that tool that addressed the different ways a person could be strong, in order for that tool to be effective.

4.5: Activity 4

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked as a group

As I considered what form Activity 4 should take, I found me thinking about the strong tool, and the literal way the participant children had implemented it in Activity 3. Although a few in the group had interpreted Amy as strong because of her actions and choices, most of the children selected the two male figures in

costumes as strong because of their physical appearance. When my twelve-year-old son used the strong tool, he likewise selected Captain Awesome as strong, although he subsequently selected Amy as well. When I inquired into the reasons for his choices, he stated that Captain Awesome was strong because he was physically strong, but Amy was “strong with her words”. This last statement was illuminating, helping me to identify language that would articulate “strong” in a more dimensional way.

I focused Activity 4 on developing the “strong” tool. I hoped this specific focus would increase the children’s understanding of the many qualities of strong, particularly if I adopted the wording my son had used.

For this activity we drew pictures to set out each person’s idea of what strong was, discussing what strong might mean. . Only through later feedback did I realise the limitation of using drawing – a concrete form – to explore the more abstract aspects of what strong is. Olivia described strong as “Dad’s muscles”, while Austin drew a big rock. Zach and David drew superheroes, with Zach describing his hero as having muscles, and implying the hero was strong enough to lift houses. David said his hero was a “huge, heavy superhero”. Pania and Grace both drew people, with Pania describing hers as “a strong person”. Maya drew a super mountain. All of these ideas drew on ideas of physical strength. Regretfully I failed to really capitalise on the excellent ideas the children shared here

The children and I then discussed strength, and I drew comparisons between physical strength as being strong in our bodies, and being strong in our minds through making choices, using our words to stand up for ourselves. One of the children made the excellent point that we could be strong by saying sorry, which I commended. I retold the story, but by that point everybody was fidgeting. We concluded the lesson shortly thereafter.

I had mixed feelings about this activity but I could not quite identify why. I felt the lesson went better than Activity 2, our only other group activity to date, but at the same time something about this activity had been amiss. Perhaps it was the format, which felt very classroom-like, a clear break from my preference for scaffolding the children's interests. Perhaps it was the topic, which was focused on what I thought the children needed to learn, and the very classroom-like way I went about the teaching. It is also possible my discomfort was due to being far out of my comfort zone, both in terms of being a teacher-researcher as well as the challenges of trying to implement a new way of teaching. There was also a lot of sitting in this activity, whereas I know this age group enjoys the opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways. As part of my post-lesson analysis, I considered whether I should have taught this lesson in a different way, such as through some kind of game or activity. I even debated whether it was worthwhile continuing with the toolkit, wondering if perhaps this was an idea better suited to older children.

Perhaps because I was uncertain about the path we were taking, I revisited the previous activities by reading my reflections. As I did so, I began to see the reoccurring discourse of the superhero costume. Even my 12-year-old son had struggled with the power of the costume. I had shown him photographs of people dressed as superheroes. These individuals were of large girth, and featured in settings that suggested they were fans at comic conventions. Despite it being obvious – to me – that these were ordinary people dressing up, my son had insisted that they were superheroes by virtue of the costumes they were wearing. This idea of a costume making somebody “super” was similarly pervasive amongst many of the children. I remembered Zach saying how even I could be a superhero if I wore a costume. I realised that the costume was something worth exploring, and decided to shift our focus to the discourse of costumes. For now I put the toolkit aside, allowing me more time to reflect on its usefulness.

Additionally, Activity 4 was also the session that would be sent to my critical friend for feedback. I did not feel this was the best teaching tape to send to my

critical friend, but at the same time I knew the feedback of a detached person was important to the improvement of my practice. Sending off the tape highlighted the vulnerability I felt as a teacher-researcher.

4.6: Activity 5

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked individually with children

In order to explore the discourse of costumes I devised an activity that I hoped would help us explore the difference between costumes and normal clothing. I laid six pictures side by side on the table in no particular order. Three contained pictures of ordinary people dressed as superheroes, while the other three were pictures of people dressed in tidy casual clothing. As I met with each child I asked them to look at the pictures and select those they thought represented heroes.

The superhero pictures included an aged superhero sitting in his house peeling an orange, a large-girthed man wearing a batman suit and carrying shopping bags, and another large girthed man wearing a spider man suit and posing in what appeared to be his living room. While these pictures showed people wearing superhero costumes all three had disruptive elements that included age, physical condition, and the kinds of tasks superheroes do. The pictures of the three normal people were chosen because they fitted ideas of what a superhero could look like without a costume. All three were young, fit, neat in appearance, and dressed as urban professionals. One was female.

The responses of the children illustrated how varied their individual interpretation of the costume idea could be.

Pania and Olivia made similar selections but for different reasons. Pania picked the three costumed pictures “because they do lots and lots of saving”, and “because they do good stuff”. It did not seem to matter that the costume-wearers were doing very ordinary things in the pictures, or seemed the wrong shape or age for superheroes. Olivia also selected the three super hero pictures as heroes “because they look like heroes!” The other three were not heroes “cause they not, none super clothes”. Even though clothes seem to have influenced Pania’s decision, due to her eliminating the other normally dressed figures, she described her selection of heroes as based on their actions of saving others and going good. Olivia’s selection seemed to be based on what each person is wearing.

Zach, a big super hero fan, nominated all six pictures as being superheroes. When I pointed out that one of his selected people was costume-less, Zach simply noted “he taked it off”, a point he reaffirmed later when talking about all the superheroes.

David excluded all the non-costumed people because of their lack of costume. It did not matter that the would-be heroes were doing ordinary things because their costumes made them super. Like Zach, David showed belief that the costume would enable various superpowers, particularly flying (for Batman) and webbing (for Spiderman).

By contrast, Austin omitted one of the costumed pictures. When I asked why he had done so, Austin cited the silver skeleton on the person’s costume (which he did not recognise) and also the lack of a cape. Interestingly, the age of this hero was not considered important by Austin, while the absence of the cape was, with Austin indicating that people without capes could not be heroes.

Maya selected all of the pictures as heroes. Her ideas about heroes changed depending on which picture we were looking at. As we went through the various

pictures, Maya said that heroes cleaned up, took care of their bodies, went to see their mothers, cooked food, and “looked in the books ... some passwords too and notes”. This conversation saw a return to a powerful person theme for Maya, that of studying and learning.

Grace had the least references to superheroes of any of the children in the Participation Group, as Grace’s mother had previously said the family did not watch television. I asked Grace what she thought a costume was, and she responded “a tutu ballet”. I knew Grace had an interest in ballet, and this answer made sense for her. The only other photo Grace remarked on was that of the girl, specifically noting her black skirt and that “she’s got a nice shirt like me”.

All the children knew that costumes signified something, even if they could not consciously acknowledge what that something was. On this last point I was unable to decide: Does seeing the discourse and giving it a name count as critical literacy? I felt like we needed to take one more step. However, I was just not sure what that step should be, or which direction it should be in.

Overall, this lesson felt like it went well. The children’s level of engagement was particularly encouraging, given that each child spent around ten minutes working with me. The children’s answers had been interesting and frequently unexpected, such as Zach’s idea that the people in normal clothing were simply superheroes who had removed their costumes, or Grace’s statement about relating costumes to ballet.

I also revisited the images selected for the lesson. Having carried out the activity I could now see the flaws in the way I had selected the images. I had focused on choosing images that I viewed as disruptive in two ways, firstly by virtue of physical attributes, and secondly because of the activities the photographed person was carrying out. From one perspective, having two kinds of disruption present in

the picture potentially increased the ability of the child to deselect it as heroic. However, as I found during implementation, having so many potential avenues of disruption to explore was garbled any message the pictures might have given. While the activity was interesting for the children, the approach would have benefitted greatly from simplification. There were so many things to look at in the pictures, as well as a substantial number of pictures to look at. In the future, an activity of this kind would benefit from a simpler approach with fewer images.

As part of my continuing process to improve my work, I had also been revisiting Vasquez's (2007) work, trying to understand how she achieved so much in her classroom. Vasquez's work revolved around social justice, and I was wondering if that focus was more relatable to the children, because the discourses of fairness and equity were something they could reference from their own experience. Should we be doing more in the social justice area, or do I need to find a way to incorporate ideas of fairness into what we were currently doing? There were no solid answers at this point but I felt that it was a worthwhile point to keep considering.

4.7: Activity 6

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked as a group

In Activity 6 we furthered our exploration of the super hero costume with three alternative ways to illustrate the characters. These alternative illustrations were designed to disrupt the original *Captain Awesome and Amy* (See Appendix 13) story and consisted of the following:

- Captain Awesome and Wayne (his supposed sidekick) dressed as normal people;

- Amy and John (the two children) dressed as superheroes, while Captain Awesome and Wayne remain dressed normally;
- All characters dressed as superheroes.

I told the children the story using the substituted characters. Thereafter we made comparisons between my alternative illustrations, and the originals. I also reintroduced the critical literacy toolkit with some minor alternations, dropping the “invisible” tool and instead adding a “light bulb” tool to indicate a good idea.

There were some wonderful moments during this session. The children were identifying the significance of the costume more quickly now, using it to easily differentiate between a normal state and a special state. Their clear preference was the special state of superhero. The illustration of costumed Amy was particularly popular with Olivia and Maya, who made an agreement to share the figure of hero Amy for play after the lesson had concluded.

When using the toolkit, Olivia responded with confidence. She was able to identify that the character Wayne had no voice in the story, while the character John did not contribute to solving the problem. Additionally, David was able to name the hidden story at the end of the activity, saying “that them has ... costumes”.

This was the first group lesson I actually felt good about. The definite high point was the lively and engaged discussion by the group, a dynamic that was constructive. However, when later replaying the session video, I noticed that the story pictures and toolkit pictures were a distraction for the children. Visual distraction becomes another factor to consider when evaluating the usefulness of the critical literacy toolkit. Also, Austin said almost nothing, something I only caught on reviewing the tape. Grace also fell out of frame early on. These two were the quieter children in the group, and facilitating their participation in the larger group, especially when that group was as energetic as it was in this lesson,

had been problematic. That said, Zach stayed for the whole session, and he was a frequent early leaver.

While reviewing the footage, I found me considering the pictures. The substituted images were not the exact physical counterparts of the original images due to my reliance on the internet for sourcing, and this potentially rendered part of the exercise invalid. For example, when I use the substituted image during my first retelling of the story, Olivia responded with “that’s not him, eh”. This was a fair enough comment, as I had changed more than the costume. Fortunately, I did not stay with this line of questioning long.

As I continued this work, and had experiences like Olivia’s comment above, I slowly began to see what I needed to do when I selected a text or texts. There are subtleties that must be considered, such as consistency amongst images, and clarity – particularly for me – regarding any discourses we are seeking to explore. There are practical matters to consider, such as having too many visual aids, or too many texts to practically work with. I had hoped to gain some mastery of critical literacy during this study, but I am beginning to see that the more realistic option is probably that I will gain a clearer understanding of the level I need to pitch this work at, and some increased ability to do so effectively. However, those are significant steps, and well worth the effort, I think.

4.8: Critical friend feedback

Shortly after Activity 6 I received feedback from my critical friend (See Appendix 14). After reflecting on the contents, I was able to confront some things about my teaching that required more work. While this reflection was not an easy process to go through it was both valuable and timely, and provided new frames for thinking about the way I teach.

Firstly, I had to acknowledge that I was rushing the teaching of these activities. Part of this pressure was actual time constraint, and part of it was the pressure I put on me to succeed in the intervention activities. Keeping the interest of the children was also a concern, and I belatedly realised I was equating speed with engagement. This feedback was the first occasion I had been able to see my own pressures clearly enough to acknowledge the negative impact they were having on my teaching.

Secondly, I realised that my teacher language was not all it could be. The list of improvements was extensive. I had failed to extend interesting and important comments the children had made, primarily because these comments did not obviously align with my lesson plan. My own voice had dominated the activities, asking all the questions, doing a lot of the talking and explaining. I was trying to model the process of thinking, to “think aloud” (Silvers et al., 2010) but the net effect meant there were just too many words for this age-group. Sometimes I imagined I saw a glazed look in the children’s eyes. My questions were not open enough and I used a lot of leading questions, as well as far more abstract language than I had realised.

Thirdly, I realised how many distractions there were in my teaching sessions, particularly when we were working outside. Some of the distractions I could deal with, although doing so did take me out of the teaching moment, and were unfair to the child or children I was working with at the time. Maya in Activity 3 was the best example of this unfairness, as during the 9.46 minutes of activity time with her, there were ten interruptions. While this rate is particularly high, it is indicative of how disruptive interruptions could be. I decided it would be necessary to solicit the help of my colleagues to manage interruptions.

Now that I could see all these things, I wanted to take them into account and change something for the better. The only activity where I really heard the voices of the children was the first one. How did I get back to that? Was this more

about providing a some kind of idea or stimulation and then responding to that? I also wondered if I would listen more without a lesson plan to worry about. I know that in some of the videos my eye contact with children was lost because I was busy consulting the plan. Was it time to throw the lesson plan away, and return to my teaching strengths? When I started this study I felt like I needed the structure of a lesson plan to fall back on. But now I suspected that this might have been a double-edged sword, as this structure also tended to produce inflexibility, and too much complexity. As I reviewed my lesson plans, I saw that I was trying to do too much.

I was wondering if the next day, I should just put out some of the resources we had already used, and see what the children wanted to tell me. Perhaps this would give them back their voices, and facilitate a structure for mutual discussion between us.

That said, in our activities so far the children appeared to be enjoying our sessions together. Even with all my mistakes, they seemed to like what we were doing. In the previous couple of weeks, three or four of them would ask if we were doing our special activities that day, and for the most recent session they came running before I was even ready. This had not been my most outstanding teaching, so I wondered - what had kept them coming back? This was something for later consideration.

4.9: Activity 7

Participants: David, Maya, Olivia, Zach

Type of interaction: Worked individually with children

I decided to proceed as my previous reflection indicated, and so commenced the lesson by making all the pictures from the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story (See Appendix 13) available. I suggested to the children that they could pick whichever pictures they wanted, and tell me a story. This was an individual activity.

Olivia was first. My goal in this lesson was to shift the power from me back to Olivia, by opening up the activity to take any direction she wished. This both worked and did not work. On the positive side, Olivia had her voice back, and I heard lots from her. On the challenging side, Olivia's lively conversation diverted many times from the hero topic. I did not keep refocusing her, as I would have done previously. Rather, I let her talk and then, after a while, introduced the story resources as an impetus to bring her back to the topic. This did prompt Olivia to talk briefly about the topic before leaving it permanently.

David was next. For the whole time, around fifteen minutes, he remained focused on pictures of the heroes, and told me stories about them. Perhaps that was an important reason for the difference between his session and Olivia's; he has been really engaged with costumes and superheroes, whereas Olivia was only marginally interested. This caused me to wonder what would have sparked engagement for her in a similar way.

Then it was Zach's turn. In selecting his characters he did not select either of the girls, even though one of them was in costume. I asked him about the girls, and he started to put them with the others. When I said he did not have to use them, he put them aside. This was something to think about. Did he consider and then discard the girls' pictures purely on my suggestion, or did he think he *had* to use them, then realised after I spoke that he could put them aside? I was not certain, and wondered if in the future I should assume a child *does* weigh all the options.

Maya was last. She had returned to her original idea about heroes from Activity 1, which focused on writing her name and studying. Like Olivia, Maya never really engaged with the hero work. Studying was obviously a strong and important story for her. I hope we can explore this more together in the future.

This lesson felt more natural in terms of the way I like to teach, although the kinds of language I needed in order to scaffold children properly was still developing. Knowing what to say when I need to say it is always a challenge for me when developing a new teaching approach, and subtleties of teaching a critical literacy approach have been no exception. There were several moments in these videos where I could see me struggling to find what to say next, but I am proud of that struggle, because I know I was making the effort to break away from restrictive questioning techniques.

4.10: Activity 8

Participants:	Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach
Type of interaction:	Conducted individual sessions with Maya and Olivia, and later a small group session with Austin, David and Zach

This was the last data collection session for Phase 1. I was somewhat relieved, as the feedback from my critical friend (See Appendix 14) had caused me to re-evaluate several aspects of my approach to critical literacy learning, as well as my teaching practice in general. I wanted time to reflect on what I had learnt, and consider what might need changing for Phase 2.

Activity 8 was very similar to Activity 1 in terms of approach. I asked the children to tell me about heroes, and recorded their responses. Originally this

activity was supposed to help me understand whether the children's thinking had changed during the course of the phase. However, as I conducted the activity I decided that change was not what I should be looking for. Rather, I should be looking for thoughtful and responsive connection to the topic. That seemed a more genuine expression of the child's engagement with this work than trying to engineer their learning.

Olivia was one of the first to complete this activity, as she was going on vacation. Her responses were playful, much like the first activity, and apart from some quick responses regarding heroes, she was anxious to return to her play, so we concluded quickly.

Maya also completed the activity early, as she was also going on holiday. Maya has consistently talked about letters and study during this topic, so she surprised me in this activity by talking about something new – new for her, that is. She started by mentioning comic book superheroes such as Superman and Batman, and mentioned them saving the super children. She followed this comment up by pointing to something on the wall. I missed her gesture at the time, which is unfortunate, because it turned out to be relevant.

She was pointing to a wall display of the 2012 Olympics, showing photographs of the country's top athletes competing, as well as pictures of the kindergarten children taken during our centre's Olympic celebrations. In connection with the gesture she added the comment "all some strong and all some guys", which tantalisingly alludes to some kind of connection with the display. Having missed the gesture I also failed to follow up the comment, so it is impossible now to reconstruct her intention at the time. However, I can observe that Maya introduced new topics into her speech here, and seemed to make a connection of some kind between the comic heroes she mentioned, and the pictures on the wall. While her actual connection cannot be recovered, it still looks like new thinking of some kind for Maya.

On the actual day of the activity, Austin, David and Zach did the activity as a small group. Zach drew a Santa for fun, then a Spiderman, explaining that Spiderman “webs” before losing interest and leaving. David drew a star. Austin combined hero ideas with one of his favourite drawing themes, that of families. He drew a family of superheroes, then told me “this one’s a real one, this one’s a pretend one”, respectively indicating a large hero and a small hero. When I sought to clarify why the smaller hero was pretend, Austin explained, “‘cause he’s a kid”. When he later drew a baby superhero, but said it was a real hero, I asked if he could explain why the baby was real, but the child was a pretend hero. Austin promptly replied that the baby was from a different family. Our conversation continued, with Austin creating more figures, which he also explained in terms of relationships.

Austin’s dialogue seemed filled with discourses about families. I did not understand all his comments, but I did see a pattern in his ideas over the course of this phase. He would create a character, situate it within a family, then create some kind of story around that character that explained its relationship to the people around it. Hero topics were only briefly touched on. As I thought about it, I realised that many of Austin’s responses had been contextualised within families.

4.11: Reflection on Phase 1

With Phase 1 over, it seemed important to revisit the data through the frame of the research questions.

Pieces of this phase amazed me. The children’s ideas about costumes – and how prevalent the power of the costume is – were intriguing. I had no idea how strong the idea of the costume was for them. Each child had a slightly different take on

what a costume was, too. It was a reminder that even though I work with children every day, I really am separate to them by virtue of my age. I have known many of these children for eighteen months to a year, and yet I am only just learning how separate my world is from theirs. This reflection continues by addressing the research questions in turn.

Space

Finding “space” can mean many things, but at this point in the study I was thinking about it in two ways: space as physical location to conduct the activities, and space as finding time in the morning schedule.

Physical location proved problematic. All of the data collection activities took place within the Tree Street centre, which has a very open-plan design. This design meant that the activities were frequently interrupted. Table 3 below sets out where each of the activities for Phase 1 took place.

Table 3: Physical locations of the activities of Phase 1

Activity	Activity Type	Space
Activity 1	Individual	Inside, playroom activity table
Activity 2	Group	Outside, carpentry corner
Activity 3	Individual	Outside, carpentry corner
Activity 4	Group	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 5	Individual	Inside, art activity table
Activity 6	Group	Inside, playroom activity table
Activity 7	Individual	Outside, carpentry corner
Activity 8	Individual	Inside and outside (with different individual children)

Three of the locations, the playroom activity table, art activity table, and carpentry corner were high-traffic areas, and we were frequently interrupted in all these areas. In Activity 3, working with Maya, we were interrupted ten times. I am amazed that Maya stayed with the activity as long as she did, given the level of disruption.

The only space to afford minimal disruption was the sleep corner, which was walled on three sides. However, it was small and somewhat cramped, a point noted by my critical friend who stated “the children seem to be a little distracted from the topic at hand because of the space limitations” (See Appendix 14) and subsequently noting that children needed a comfortable environment to learn effectively. This was a valid point.

The time during which the critical literacy activities were held was suitable. The activities were held in the later part of the morning, after fruit time, which allowed the children time to play and engage with the other activities available that day. By the time we got to the critical literacy activities most of the children were ready to come and participate. The only problem with this timeslot is the individual sessions, where we have occasionally run short of time. This was particularly noticeable in Activity 5. The group activities have never incurred this problem.

Activities

The eight activities in this phase signified my first efforts to teach critical literacy. I was pleasantly surprised by the kinds of activities I could adapt from critical literacy practices in the literature. This statement comes with a significant caveat: not all of the activities were well received by the children. However, there are many variables that contribute to the reception of an activity, including the emergent skill of the teacher.

To this point, our activities have been based on classroom practices such as naming (Lewison et al., 2008), as the process of consciously naming ideas and articulating thinking, to make these things visible to self and to others. This practice was particularly used in Activities 1 and 6, to firstly articulate what a hero was, and secondly, to name the hero discourse of costume.

Our activities also included the practice of comparing and contrasting multiple texts. We started using multiple texts in Activity 2, with picture texts drawn by the children, and continued with this activity in Activities 5 and 6, where multiple texts were used to compare and contrast different ideas about heroes.

We also used activities based on practices that aimed to actively disrupt the thinking of children. In Activity 5, this was done by contesting the idea of the perfect physical specimen as superhero. In Activity 6, this was done by changing the illustrations used for the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story (See Appendix 13), to images that contradicted the idea of the hero. While I suspect the thinking behind the image selection could have been simplified, and the execution refined, the interest of the children in these two particular lessons was significant. Showing them something they did not expect to see seemed an effective way to engage their thinking. The children who participated in these two activities were enthusiastic, and stayed for longer than usual.

Compatibility and integration

In Phase 1, the critical literacy activities were not particularly integrated into other classroom activities or learning as they remained contained within the programme of study, and within the participation group. As a result the learning experiences of the participant children during the study stood in contrast to their normal learning as the study activities were pre-planned, structured, and teacher led. These factors kept the learning tightly focused on critical literacy and the various

modes of literate expression, for example oral language, books and stories, and pictures. It was only towards the end of the phase that the structure started to change, as based on feedback from my critical friend, I sought to make the critical literacy teaching more responsive to the children.

That said, critical literacy work had some compatibility with normal classroom life at Tree Street. The critical literacy activities were not intrusive to other children, although they were popular, and the activities fitted into the morning schedule without any discernable trouble.

Teacher language

In investigating the way I used teacher language I developed a new understanding of me as a teacher. I have learned that the way I ask questions was closed. During the first phase of the research my critical friend pointed out my tendency to use a closed model of questioning, known as initiation-response-evaluation (See Appendix 14). She noted that this way of asking questions “tends to put the teacher in control of the initiating and evaluation where the child has to give ‘the right answer’ in their response” (See Appendix 14). On reviewing my work, I found this pattern of questioning particularly prevalent in Activities 3, 4, 5 and 6. During subsequent reading suggested by my critical friend, I also realised the difficulty of using the question “why”. This question can often sound interrogative and its use has been identified as problematic, with negative connotations such as criticizing (Bolden & Robinson, 2011). This most likely explains why I sometimes felt like I was interrogating the children in our work, rather than dialoging with them.

To combat such patterns, I began to study strategies such as authentic questioning (Sandretto, 2011), with an authentic question being one where the asker does not

already know the answer. I also began to consider the work of Bateman (2012) regarding prosocial conversations with preschool children, as a different perspective on trying to dialogue authentically with them. Knowing what to do, and doing it, are two different matters. Changing my questioning patterns remains a work in progress.

Children's learning

I am still trying to understand what children's learning from our critical literacy work might look like. My provisional findings here are the instances where I could see the child make a connection with something in the critical literacy work. For example, in Activity 3 I saw the children conduct a supported analysis of a picture text using tools from the critical literacy toolkit I designed. I have seen the children respond in thoughtful and meaningful ways to disrupted texts, giving answers that are original, yet maintain connection to the topic, such as Zack's interpretation of the hero pictures in Activity 5. I have seen children identify and name discourses that they previously took for granted, such as David, Olivia and Austin, who could see the discourse of costume as contributing to the idea of superheroes.

Learning to see the children's learning is something I continue to observe. As I look for connections between the children, and the subject material, I hope to develop a fuller picture of what critical literacy learning might look like for young children.

Summary

The work in this phase has intrigued me. I have faced challenges in implementing a critical literacy approach, as well as challenges to the way I teach. This process of understanding has not been pleasant or easy, but at the same time, I feel like my feet are on a good path and I am moving forward, albeit slowly. I look forward to the next phase, with the hope of continued progress.

Chapter Five: Findings of Phase 2

Chapter Five presents the findings of Phase 2 of my research, following Activities 9 to 16 of the intervention in chronological order. As with Phase 1, all these activities were implemented through action research cycles. The chapter concludes with a reflection on Phase 2 that references the research questions.

Reflecting on Phase 1 helped me to identify changes to my approach for Phase 2. Firstly, I simplified the work as much as I could. This simplification started with dropping the critical literacy toolkit from my approach. Because the toolkit could only be used with significant support from me, not only was it unsustainable, but also most likely inappropriate for the children's ages. I had to acknowledge that it was not working, and best set aside.

I also realised that I needed to simplify the language I was using with children. As part of understanding my new approach to questioning I had been reading Zwiers' (2008) book on *Building Academic Language*. I became particularly interested in the approach of scaffolding thinking and language, as opposed to linguistic enabling. Scaffolding thinking and language focuses on apprentice-like support for children "to internalize the thinking and language patterns of more proficient speakers" (Zwiers, 2008, p. 48). Scaffolding is a prominent theory in early childhood so I was no stranger to it; however, I had not considered using it for thinking and language patterns.

Linguistic enabling, on the other hand, is what happens when teachers overuse scaffolding, and begin feeding answers to children. This seemed like familiar territory – was this where I was going wrong? Zwiers (2008) noted that teachers enable for several reasons, including not wanting to discourage or offend children,

wanting to move the class along, and focusing on content. However, he makes the point that “language *is* content. We need to find the balance between just enough academic language and not too much” (Zwiers, 2008, p. 51). I began to understand where my problem lay. I was not scaffolding the children – I was enabling them.

My second intended change was to continue changing the way I ask questions, the problem identified during Phase 1. I embarked on my own process of “making visible” by focusing on questions during my lesson preparation, as well being more conscious about the kinds of questions and responses I was using in my dialogue with the children.

My third change was to move exclusively to group work. Having reviewed and transcribed my previous data, I could see how much extra time individual sessions were taking. Additionally, I knew that one-on-one critical literacy activities were not a realistic approach for a classroom teacher. This change was a step towards integrating critical literacy work with my normal teaching practice. All activities from this point onward were group activities. The section headers from this point on record only the participants, as all activities are group ones.

5.1.: Activity 9

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

This activity was the expansion of an idea that came from reading the book *A Colour of Their Own* (Linonni, 1975) with Maya and Olivia. The book made the broad statement that pigs were pink. I wondered aloud, “Are all pigs pink?” I thought the girls seemed interested in the question because they were watching me intently, so I suggested we find a picture of pigs to compare to the one in the

book. They agreed, and leaned forward to see the picture that came up on my iPhone. “They’re not pink,” Olivia said, further noting that the pigs in the picture were black and white. I observed aloud that the book’s statement was not accurate, as it appeared pigs could be many colours. Olivia additionally added that pigs could be red, blue and yellow, which had all of us giggling.

Even though I had planned to start on the topic of bravery in Activity 9, I realised this book was an opportunity to work immediately with a text we had just read. Since the activity with the girls had seemed effective, I decided to repeat it with the larger group and see how they responded to it.

Following a format similar to the work with the girls, I placed a printed photo of pigs next to the illustration in the book. The children were interested in the pictures, and when I asked them about the colour of the pigs, they immediately began to contribute some very inventive pig colours such as blue (Olivia) and yellow (Zack), as well as some actual pig colours like black (Maya). This was encouraging; I was hearing the children’s voices again, and they were responding creatively. Some of the children realised that the statement in the book was inaccurate and some did not. The outcome was not the priority; I was trying to model questioning about things we read.

Incorporated into this activity was another impromptu critical literacy exploration, using the actions of one child as a text for exploring fairness. This boy tried to take the picture of the pigs and met with resistance from others in the group. I responded by suggesting we all put our hands on the picture, as he had done. Everyone was happy to do this. I asked if this was now fair, and the children agreed. The only problem was that now none of us could see the picture. I first suggested removing one hand, which they all did, then creeping the fingers of the second hand back to the edges, then finally, relinquishing contact altogether. The picture was now back in the middle, untouched.

The young man could not resist though, and grabbed the picture again. This required a restatement about fairness from me. Eventually, we settled on the solution of everyone in the group taking turns to hold the picture. When the same child immediately grabbed the picture back after the hands-on-picture exercise I thought our prior effort had been pointless. However, when I later revisited the video, I realised that it was the picture-grabbing child who actually came up with the final solution, which was to share the picture. Here, the text of a child's actions became a way of exploring what fairness looked like with all the group. They children were able to see for themselves what did and did not work, and somewhat to my surprise, an acceptable outcome was negotiated amongst the children.

This diversion was a distraction from the intended lesson, but I went with it because, firstly, the children had identified it as important through their immediate responses, and secondly, because, as Janks (2010) notes, power is a central idea to the operation of critical literacy. Supporting and extending children's thinking as we discussed the effects of power and made fairness visible felt like a natural progression to make.

In this activity we explored two texts, one a conventional book, and the second, the actions of a child in the group. Neither of these had been subjected to much, if any, planning, and both arose from interactions with the children that day. This work felt responsive and exciting, and the approach had more in common with the way I normally teach and felt more natural to me. I saw potential in these ideas for my future practice.

5.2: Impromptu observations

Shortly after Activity 9, Zach asked if we, meaning him and I, could do my schoolwork. This was a personal invitation to work with him directly. When he asked, it occurred to me that in order to realign our power relationship it was only fair to conduct activities when he wanted to, not just when I had scheduled them. So we read a book together, and I asked questions about the main characters' actions. His short interest in our brief exercise helped me realise he wasn't very interested in the book.

Zack's interest, while initially high, faded quickly. On reflection I realised I should have taken empowerment one step further and asked him what he had wanted to do; who knows where that could have gone. I started my response well, but the follow-through was weak.

Part of the reason I was trying to recognise, and where possible, record these impromptu moments was because I think that the ability to notice, recognise and respond in the moment could be a good option for critical literacy practice in early childhood education. Just as importantly, I was trying to get in there and work in that teachable moment, where the child is already interested and engaged. The next challenge was making sure I had the right response. I cannot say I was completely comfortable with the language needed to properly scaffold these experiences, but the language was not feeling as laboured as it did a month before. I felt like I was progressing.

5.3: Activity 10

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Activity 10 marked the start of our work on “brave”. As with “heroes”, I commenced by asking the children to record their ideas of what “brave” meant to them in picture form. I was very intrigued by the children's responses, which for the most part they told to me as stories.

Zach and Olivia both related that superheros were brave, while Austin told me a story. He said, “The bug is walking to me to show me where my house is ... I’m not even scared when it’s so dark.” He had additional elements that included a bear, a cave and walking home. It is possible that this alludes to the story *Bears in the Night*, which had been very popular lately at Tree Street.

David, Grace and Pania all told stories that touched on losing teeth. This was started by Pania, who stated how her older sister was brave because she lost a tooth. When David and Grace started talking about teeth too, I thought it was because they had heard Pania mention it, and were parroting her idea. This turned out to be a mistaken interpretation.

When I later talked to both children’s parents, David’s mother immediately read David’s picture, which he captioned as “that’s my teeth”, as referring to the time he had his front teeth knocked out in an accident, requiring urgent surgery. He had been very brave indeed. Grace had explained her picture as “brave bones and because of teeth,” adding the word “skeleton”. Grace had also suffered an injury to her teeth, and as part of treating Hannah, the dentist had explained her injury in the context of her skull, bones and teeth – her skeleton. She had also been very brave.

I realised that both children had been referencing very brave moments, but at the time I had failed to inquire further, thinking they were repeating the first child’s

idea. In retrospect, the more likely explanation is that the first child's idea sparked memories about their own experiences. While the opportunity to expand on these children's experiences with their teeth was lost, the lesson learnt was not. The best I could do was pay this forward into my teaching practice, remembering to ask more questions even when the answers seemed obvious.

Maya was the exception to the stories about bravery; rather than talk about being brave, she showed bravery during the activity. She was busily drawing her letters when her picture got ripped accidentally by another child in the group. Maya did not cry or get upset. She simply did the picture again. I pointed out to the group that this behaviour was brave.

After the lesson concluded, I found myself considering how best to move forward with the bravery topic. These ideas included taking a couple of the children's ideas and expanding them into a story, as I had done in the first phase. I also considered working with the children to create a character for each idea and seeing if we could tell a story using all those characters. I thought of simple storytelling forms, using a basic structure such as "I am brave when...". This last idea seemed like a good candidate for a multimedia presentation of some kind.

5.4: Activity 11

Participants:

Austin, David, Maya, Olivia, Zach

Activity 11 began our work on things boys could choose and things girls could choose. This topic stemmed from a videotext I captured of Olivia and Maya at the end of Activity 9, sharing their ideas about boy and girl stickers. This text was a reaction to David wanting a princess sticker. The two girls had stated he could not have one because a princess sticker was a girl sticker, while he was a boy. Since I had been able to capture their comments on video, that conversation became our text for exploring boy and girl constructions in this lesson.

I divided the children in a boy group and a girl group, to provide both groups an opportunity to have their voices heard on the topic. As we started, I suddenly questioned whether the activity of choosing resources was sufficiently related to what the girls originally identified regarding the stickers. My original rationale for the activity had taken the position that identifying male and female resources was another way of making visible their discourses about male/female constructions. That rationale had seemed sound enough prior to commencement, but on the day I wondered if I had moved a step too far from the children's original interest – the stickers. I made a mental note to locate our next activity on this topic firmly around stickers.

I moved on with the activity. Working first with the girls, then the boys, we started by watching the video text and talking about boy and girl things. Then I separately asked each group to move around the centre and find things that they considered to be boy things, or girl things. There were no surprises. The girls selected books with flowers for girls, and books with pirates and trucks for boys. Later in the family corner, they selected the plastic food and a pink giraffe as girl things, but did not select anything else as overtly male. The boys selected toy cars as boy things, and later, capes and hero costumes as also belonging to boys, while a dress was considered a girl costume. Both groups showed some preference for their own gender by making at least two selections for their own gender, but only making one selection for the opposite gender.

This session helped me to see how critical literacy activities can move from always sitting and talking to moving and doing. The approach of this session provided opportunities to interact with the centre environment, an approach not previously explored during this study. The physical movement and use of objects also meant this activity was not as language-heavy as some of our previous work, and provided the children with more scope to play. This activity was also more open-ended, as the children had freedom to make their own choices.

The primary disadvantage of this approach was that all of the children got a little distracted as we moved through different parts of the centre. However, this disadvantage seemed acceptable to me, when weighed against the benefits.

5.5: Activity 12

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

In Activity 12 we continued our work on the topic of “brave”. I encouraged the children to tell me a very simple story in their own words, which we captured as a short movie. While I had recorded most of the previous activities that had been for data collection purposes. This was the first instance of intentionally making a film with the children. I was encouraged by the children’s response to Activity 11, which had shown me the benefits of incorporating different kinds of activity, rather than our frequent default to drawing.

I used my computer to record the film. The recording process was a playful time the children seemed to enjoy, although being able to see themselves in the screen caused some playful distraction as they made faces and noises into the camera and enjoyed seeing those images play out on the screen. One of my goals in this phase had been about getting more fun into our activities, and using the computer to film the children helped to accomplish this.

I provided a prompting statement of “I feel brave when...”, and left the statement open for each child to answer as they chose. Most of the children were enthusiastic contributors, with only Maya declining to have a turn, although she stayed for the whole activity. When we were done we watched our film back.

This was a naming activity (Lewison et al., 2008). We were making visible our individual discourses of “brave”; this was an articulation of individual experience. Making that statement was still a step for these children. Articulating one’s position on cue is a valid challenge in critical literacy work, even for older children (Lewison et al., 2008).

This was also the session taped to send to my critical friend. Knowing someone will watch your work is always unnerving. While I think I had made progress since the last session she saw, I knew there was still considerable room for improvement. I continued to work on asking better questions that extended children’s thinking, and on avoiding closed statements.

5.6: Activity 13

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Activity 13 saw a return to the stickers. This time I used the stickers directly to engage the children in exploring their ideas about gendered choices. I framed six stickers on separate squares of white paper. For our activity, I held up each sticker square in turn, and asked the children who they thought could pick that sticker.

Olivia, Maya and Zack had very definite ideas about what kinds of stickers they liked, and why they liked them. Olivia and Maya refused a sticker of male cartoon hero *Ben 10*, with Maya noting, “that’s not a girl, that’s a boy”. Later, they refused a Sponge Bob sticker, even though their subsequent comments indicated that they probably watched the show – they certainly knew a lot about the programme. Zack quickly refused a sticker because it had swirls on it, although he did not say why the swirls were unacceptable. He rejected another

sticker because it had a flower on it, even though the flower was a very small detail.

David showed signs of engaging with both male and female discourses. These signs were far from conclusive, but enough to give small indications. He was quick to like *Ben 10* and *Sponge Bob*. However, in explaining why he liked another sticker, he noted, “it’s a flower there”. He rejected a princess sticker even though his initial reaction was to smile at it.

The children were engaged in this activity and the discussion was lively. I think the re-introduction of the stickers as a text was significant. They were already interested in stickers, so I did not have to secure their attention. I saw a higher level of detail in their responses than in our previous work. Noticing this interest on this occasion made me reflect on why the children were so interested in Phase 1, where the activities were very static and language-heavy. I wondered if it was the story about *Captain Awesome* that had captured their attention.

I paid particular attention to keeping the lesson plan simple. I had noticed in previous videos how my attention was diverted away from the children when I stopped to refer to notes or a lesson plan. Instead, I prepared two open-ended questions on a piece of card, and stuck them to the wall in plain sight. This process made me focus on the questions, and work hard to make them simple yet specific to the discourse being explored.

Dropping the lesson plan and using the question card was an important change to the way I had been teaching critical literacy. The question card meant I had an easy point to look to for prompting, but at the same time there was no more fumbling with papers or looking away from the children while I consulted the lesson plan. Eliminating the lesson plan also helped me to be more responsive in

the activity. With only two questions to ask I had less to think about, making more space in my head to really hear what the children were saying.

One of my concerns with my approach during the intervention was the amount of time spent on making thinking visible. I had been hoping for wonderful, detailed, thoughtful explorations, but instead the discussions focused on articulating what the children thought about something. I was uncertain: is this where critical literacy starts for young children? Is this something we have to go through? Articulating what they actually thought and felt remained a challenge for them.

5.7: Activity 14

Participants: David, Maya, Olivia, Zach

This lesson saw a return to the idea of “brave”. We were off to a rocky start from the beginning when three of the children were just not in the mood to participate. The four who did attend were restless, and Zach left after a few minutes. We just did not get any traction in today’s lesson, and eventually, I decided to let it go and move on.

What we were supposed to be doing was exploring the wider concept of “brave”: What does a brave person look like? What does a brave person do? Who can a brave person be? In approaching these complex tasks I made a conscious effort to keep the questions short and simple. It did not matter in this session.

Despite the simplicity, this activity lacked the visual appeal and connection of the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story (See Appendix 13), or the stickers. The children had nothing to hang their ideas on. Of course, there is seldom just one reason

why something fails and I suspected the vibe was just all wrong on this occasion. However I reflected that this lesson demonstrated, at least in part, the importance of a text that promotes learner engagement because the children had no buy-in to this lesson. There was no story, no activity (other than drawing), and no personal investment (unlike the stickers).

I was the one who learnt from this activity. Despite my reflection in the previous activity on the importance of securing a child's engagement, I failed to secure anything here except my own disappointment.

5.8: Activity 15

Participants: Austin, David, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

Having spent time encouraging the children to make their thinking visible, I wanted to extend their thinking by getting them to consider another child's preferences. In this activity, I suggested the children choose stickers for each other. As each child made selections for another nominated child, I asked them why they thought that child would like the selected sticker. Then I would check with the recipient and see whether they actually did like the sticker chosen for them.

The children gave some similar responses to our previous sticker work in Activity 13, noting the importance of choosing girl things for girls and boy things for boys. For example, Zack selected princess stickers for Maya and Olivia because the princesses were girls, and Maya and Olivia were girls. I introduced a disruption into the activity by asking if I could have a boy sticker. Zack stated, "No. 'Cause you're a girl." Later I restated my request to the group, asking if I could have a boy sticker because I really wanted one. There was some uncertainty in the

children's responses, but this question was a challenge to their way of thinking. While many of them reiterated the requirement for me to choose girl things, they were not as certain in their responses as Zack had been the first time. Now they hesitated in their replies. I like to think that this hesitation showed the start of their thinking about what they were saying.

This felt like an effective activity. The children were interested – they liked the stickers. I could see the children making real efforts to articulate their choices, which has been a challenge in the past. Just as the previous activity demonstrated how problematic a lack of personal investment can be at this age, this lesson showed how buy-in can be positive and sustain engagement.

5.9: Activity 16

Participants: Austin, David, Grace, Maya, Olivia, Pania, Zach

By Activity 16, I felt like we had done all we could both with stickers, and with the “brave” topic, certainly with the amount of teacher skill I possessed at that point. Rather than any kind of lesson, our last activity was a simple survey with only a few questions. Its aim was to see what, if anything, the children had enjoyed about our work, and whether they would like to keep doing these kinds of activities.

On this particular day the children were unsettled and getting their attention was difficult. Three of the four children who chose to respond mentioned the stickers, although regretfully I did not clarify whether they liked getting stickers, whether they liked the sticker unit, or both. All four of the children responded with comments that were somewhat off topic, and it did not take long to see that these questions were not going to work today. There was no point trying to go any

further. With some relief I stopped the last activity and retreated to collate and analyse the data.

5.10: Reflection on Phase 2

I was relieved to reach the end of this phase. I started data collection with feelings of nervousness, but as I ended this period, I found I was somewhat tired. This study had meant learning many new things as well as trying many new things in my teaching practice. I looked forward to revisiting my data in the near future, and seeing what deeper analysis revealed. For the time being, I recorded my reflections on Phase 2, with relevance to the research questions.

Space

Most of Phase 2 was conducted in the sleep corner, the most secure location in the centre. While this did not completely remove the challenge of interruptions, they were minimized. This helped the lesson delivery, since with external disruptions at a minimum I was able to focus better on our activities. Table 4 below sets out where each activity took place.

Table 4: Physical locations of the activities of Phase 2

Activity	Space
Activity 9	Inside, activity table (kitchen)
Activity 10	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 11	Inside and on deck, following children
Activity 12	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 13	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 14	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 15	Inside, sleep corner
Activity 16	Outside, carpentry area and playground

Eliminating all one-on-one activities and moving to group sessions also resolved my concerns with running over time. Group work roughly averaged fifteen minutes per session, giving me plenty of time to conduct our activities without impinging on any other aspect of the Tree Street schedule.

Activities

The critical literacy activities in this phase continued to be adaptations of activities used with older children. We revisited naming activities again in Activities 10 and 12 with our work on the topic of “brave”. As with Activity 1, this articulation again proved an effective way to begin the exploration of a new topic.

In this phase we also continued to work with multiple texts. The work on pigs in Activity 9, and the sticker topic in Activities 13 and 15 were examples of this. While Phase 1 also used multiple texts, some of those ideas were the product of garbled thinking. A simplified approach, and concerted effort on my part to focus the ideas we were exploring, made multiple text comparison much more effective in this phase.

Compatibility and integration

I felt like this phase was more integrated with my normal teaching practice. I had worked on making the activities more open-ended, as I would for any other early childhood activity. Similarly, I worked on supporting the voice of the child. I had tried to move from dialogue-heavy interactions to including more movement and providing more opportunities for interaction with other members of the group.

Regarding compatibility, the activities remained in harmony with normal classroom life at Tree Street. The critical literacy activities were not intrusive to other children, and the shift to group work ensured we always had plenty of time to complete our activities during the morning schedule.

Teacher language

I felt I made progress with my teacher language in this phase. In particular, I worked on the way I asked questions, as well as the way I responded to children's answers. This effort saw the dialogue exchanges between myself and the children become more balanced. For example, in Activity 3, most of the dialogue was mine. I would speak for a series of sentences, then the child would give a one line response. Then I would speak again for a lengthy period, followed by another brief response from the child. By Activity 15, the dialogue looked conversational. I would speak a line; a child would respond with a line. There were no more lengthy blocks of text from me, and the nature of the dialogue between myself and the children showed an exchange of ideas and engaged interaction between us, rather than the somewhat stiff ask-and-respond model followed in the first phase.

Designing authentic questions to use in our critical literacy work was a challenge, and this remains an area for improvement. However, I felt I had improved in this area also.

Children's learning

During Phase 1, I identified children's learning as those instances where I could see a child make a connection with critical literacy work. I continued to use that definition. I felt there was more connection with learning in this phase than in the previous one.

In Activity 9, our discussion regarding fairness over one child's behaviour enabled the children to reach their own resolution. In that same activity we also made connections with pictorial texts, where the children made observations about the comparative pig pictures. Our work with bravery, in Activities 10 and 12, also saw the children talk about their experiences and connect those with the abstract concept of brave. Lastly, the sticker topic of Activities 13 and 15 saw the

children isolate details that helped make some of their thinking about gender visible.

Learning to see the children's learning is something I continue to work at. As I continue to reflect on our work, I hope to develop a fuller picture of what critical literacy learning might look like for young children.

Chapter Six: Conclusions, discussion and implications for practice

Sandretto notes that “theory gives us alternate angles from which to look at our teaching practice and reflect on it” (2011, p. 9). I agree. In many ways this study was an experiment, not in the laboratory sense, but in the exploratory sense. I wanted to explore what critical literacy could be, and that required experimentation as I tried out theories and tested ideas to see how they might align with my teaching practice – or how my teaching practice might be modified on the basis of ongoing reflection.

From this reflection, three conclusions have been made, based on my analysis of a range of data. These conclusions are followed by four implications for practice that are a response to the research questions. This chapter will conclude with a final reflection on my work, including how this research has affected my current teaching practice.

6.1: Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from this study are that:

- 6.1.1: Critical literacy learning with preschool children is possible;
- 6.1.2: Multimodal literacies facilitated the children’s access to critical literacy;
- 6.1.3: Children were more engaged with critical literacy learning when they cared about the text we were using.

6.1.1: Critical literacy learning with preschool children is possible

The first point of conclusion is that this study does show that a critical literacy programme is possible with young children. In this study, a critical literacy programme was implemented for a ten-week period. During this time, the children were responsive to different critical literacy activities, frequently displaying enthusiasm for our “schoolwork”, or excitedly gathering their friends to come and participate when an activity commenced. This positive conclusion is consistent with the work of Vasquez (2007), who similarly found that a critical literacy approach was not only possible with, but empowering and relevant for her preschool children.

I concede there are many possibilities for critical literacy practice; therefore the picture described in this study is considered illustrative, rather than any kind of best practice model. Critical literacy theory itself does not mandate or specify best practice, instead acknowledging there are many ways to work with this approach (Sandretto, 2011). This idea of multiple approaches is likewise compatible with the curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), which itself is a metaphor for diversity of approach that recognizes just as there are many ways to weave a whāriki, or mat, there are many ways to weave learning experiences together.

The conclusions and implications for practice resulting from this research show my own efforts to weave a whāriki from critical literacy teaching and learning. I readily concede there are numerous other ways to do so. However, I hope I have been able to demonstrate that such a mat can indeed be woven.

6.1.2: Multimodal literacies facilitated the children's access to critical literacy

The children were not limited in their critical literacy work by their inability to read print. Instead, by situating the concept of “text” within multimodality theory, a variety of communication forms were then able to be utilised as texts which the children could “read” for critical literacy purposes. Multimodality in relation to critical literacy has been considered by Sandretto (2011), who notes that conceptualizing texts in broad terms to include a variety of modalities extends the possibilities for critical literacy in a classroom. This statement is especially true of the early childhood classroom, where focusing on those texts that young children are conversant in allows for their involvement in critical literacy learning.

Mode was defined as the various forms through which meaning is made, as well as communicated, with different modes facilitating different kinds of affordances for children (Simonsen et al., 2010). This idea of “reading” non-print materials is also supported by Goal 3 of the Communication strand of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), which states “that symbols can be “read” by others and that thoughts, experiences and ideas can be represented through words, pictures, print, numbers, sounds, shapes, models and photographs” (p. 78).

In this study, the texts used included pictures and photographs, resources such as stickers and toys, oral language, video, and on one occasion, even the resource-grabbing behaviour of another child. All these things were used as texts that the children read, made meaning from, and responded critically to.

The last example in the above list, regarding the resource-grabbing behaviour, pushes the boundaries of what a text can be. The study of Simonsen et al (2010) regarding multimodal literacies and pre-school children in Aotearoa New Zealand also documents an occasion where a particular modality challenged the researchers’ conception of a text. In that study, by allowing the boundaries of text definition to include the child’s spatial motoric competence, understanding of the

child's specific ways of knowing and communication were afforded (Simonsen et al., 2010). In this instance, the child who grabbed the resource could be considered using a gestural text, whereby positioning and movement created a powerful text of control. Critical literacy afforded the ability to respond, also through the mode of gesture, thus creating a powerful counter-text as we all placed our hands on the picture as well.

6.1.3: Children were more engaged with critical literacy learning when they cared about the text we were using

As a result of the study I discovered that if I wanted the children to respond meaningfully to a text, then I had to use a text they cared about in some way. This understanding emerged as I tried to understand why the children had responded well to some lessons, but not others. The data seemed to indicate that while the children had barely engaged with the “brave” topic in Phase 2, they had responded well to the sticker unit in the same phase, and to the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story in Phase 1, which had encompassed eight lessons.

When I analysed the activities that the children had responded well to, I realised that in both cases the text was one that the children had connected with. In Phase 1, this was the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story. Because the children liked this text, and the accompanying character pictures, they were happy to talk about superhero and costume discourses. This engagement was in spite of the teething troubles I encountered as a new teacher of critical literacy. In the sticker unit, the stickers themselves were a powerful text that the children valued. This sense of value already existed due to the pre-existing idea of a sticker as something they could choose, for example, as an incentive or reward.

This importance of a child's interest in the text for critical literacy work is supported by a classroom example discussed in Lewison et al (2008). Here, a

teacher tried to implement a critical literacy programme with her new class based on topics that had held her previous class captivated. However, her class did not respond and seemed bored by the work. After studying the children carefully to find out what was important to them, the teacher introduced a series of popular dolls as the text to be studied. The children were immediately responsive, and the work progressed with enthusiasm.

While the children in this example were older than my group, I find a parallel between her work and mine. I am not the only one who has found that children respond better to texts that matter to them. When I used texts the children cared about, the children demonstrated thoughtful and sustained engagement. When I failed to identify such a text, the activities suffered.

6.2: Implications for practice

The implications for practice drawn from this study are as follows:

6.2.1: Space for critical literacy learning can be created for children;

6.2.2: In this study, critical literacy theory was used to inform the activities undertaken;

6.2.3: The way I used language as a teacher had an impact on the teaching and learning of critical literacy;

6.2.4: Young children can be interested in critical literacy activities, engage in critical dialogue, and develop critical perspectives.

These implications are discussed below.

6.2.1: Space for critical literacy learning can be created for children

In this study space and time were initially viewed in practical ways related to the teaching of critical literacy activities, for example, finding the best physical location for our activities, or the optimal time in the morning schedule to work in. My reflections at the end of Phase 1 and 2 reflect such thinking. However, as the study progressed, I came to realise that a more important use of space was how it could provide opportunities for children to interact with critical topics on their own terms and in their own way. As noted in the literature, “learners need distinct spaces for acquiring and practicing these [literacy resource] domains” (Luke & Freebody, 1999, para. 21). None of the teacher-initiated learning spaces in this study were ones that children could use independently. This realization about the necessity of children having their own learning spaces came from making comparisons between the rather structured activities of Phase 1, and the opportunities the children began to seek for their own learning in Phase 2.

Some of the children in the study actively created their own learning spaces. Through observing this effort, I gradually realised that the children were most likely creating something they needed as part of exploring their own ideas or interests in ways that made sense to them. David, Maya Olivia and Zach all sought engagement with critical literacy activities outside of the study. David, Maya and Zach sought this additional engagement with me, while Olivia engaged with her mother, who later shared their conversation with me. These instances, while supported by me as teacher, or in Olivia’s case, by her mother, did not take place within any of the teacher-made frames and were initiated solely by the child. David, Maya and Olivia used these spaces to conduct critical conversations on their own terms, while Zach invited me to work with him to do some of my “schoolwork”. These self-initiated instances provide support for the importance of finding ways to create, support, or extend child-owned spaces in a critical curriculum.

Through understanding space better, I came to realise I had missed opportunities to create children’s spaces. Vasquez discusses one option for creating such a

space in her work, through an audit or learning wall (Vasquez, 2008). Being more thoughtful about the spaces that were accessible to children, or using alternative forms of display, would have enabled spaces to afford learning opportunities for children to carry out their own revisiting, thinking and practising of critical literacy ideas, had they wished.

6.2.2: In this study, documented critical literacy classroom practice was used to inform the activities undertaken

Critical literacy activities for young children were based on critical literacy classroom practices from the literature.

The first classroom practice used in this study was that of “naming”. This practice has its origins in the Freirean concept of naming the world to reveal it (Lewison et al., 2008). Naming can be described “as articulating thoughts that are outside of commonplace notions of what is natural” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 13). The same authors also note that naming is a good starting point in critical literacy work (Lewison et al., 2008). Activities 1, 10 and 12 focused specifically on using naming to articulate thinking around our topic ideas. Activities 5 and 6 incorporated naming with regard to identifying the discourse of costume, while Activities 13 and 15 used naming to articulate the reasons for each child’s sticker collection. Naming remained one of our most used approaches. The children responded to this classroom practice because it called for their voices to be heard.

Another classroom practice that we used extensively was that of thematically related texts, adapted from the work of Locke and Cleary (2010). These authors make the point that all texts try to position us to take their particular view of reality (Locke & Cleary, 2010, p. 124). By accessing texts with different perspectives, children have the opportunity to develop their own positions in relation to a topic, something the same authors refer to as a “resistant” reading

(Locke & Cleary, 2010, p. 127). In this study I found visual picture texts that took different positions on a topic. For example, in Activity 6, I prepared three different versions of hero pictures to accompany the *Captain Awesome* story. The children used these different versions to discuss the forms they thought the characters in the story should take. Again, in Activity 15, I used a variety of stickers to provide alternative texts that challenged the children's idea of what boy and girl "things" were. Some stickers were easy to assign to a gendered role, such as car stickers for boys and princess stickers for girls. Other stickers provided more of a challenge, such as stickers with food or animals. By my providing thematically related texts, the children were nudged into thought, and the discussions in both instances were energetic as the children shared their thinking about their own positions.

During our activities, we problematised texts, a classroom practice used by Vasquez (2004b). This approach sees the text, or an idea in a text, framed as a problem that others in the group are invited to solve. Vasquez used this practice when interrogating a poster for the Canadian Mountie service. In our work, on a somewhat smaller scale, we problematised the text "pigs are pink". In the same activity, we also problematised the behaviour of one of the children who insisted on grabbing a resource.

By situating the idea as a problem, the children could be invited to think of solutions and respond with their ideas. This proved to be an effective approach for young children, as the problem provided a clear entry point into the discussion. The children were familiar with problem-solving talk and were able to draw on those skills to talk through the two sets of ideas in this activity.

The last classroom practice used in our activities was reconstructing a text to reflect the child's own position. This approach was followed in Locke and Sturges (2009), where high-school students were encouraged to write a fairy tale that disrupted conventional ideas about princes and princesses. Vasquez (2004b)

also used this practice in her classroom, through the rainforest play that her children created. In this study, the children used the picture characters from the *Captain Awesome and Amy* story (See Appendix 13) to tell their own version of the story, from their own position. Each version was different, and reflected the child's own position on heroes. In future work, I hope to experiment more with this aspect of classroom practice.

6.2.3: The way I used language as a teacher had an impact on the teaching and learning of critical literacy

As a teacher, I had to pay careful attention to way I used and formulated questions and responses. Sandretto (2011) notes that “questioning and the dialogue that follows it constitute the key pedagogical tools for critical literacy instruction” (p. 82). I started the study unconsciously using the IRE pattern of teacher initiated questions, child response, and then teacher evaluation of the response (Sandretto, 2011). IRE questioning is problematic in critical literacy because it discourages deeper thinking and critical engagement due to its focus on transmitting knowledge to children (Sandretto, 2011). Instead, the literature notes the importance of authentic questioning in critical literacy, where definitive answers are avoided and differing interpretations are supported by teachers (Sandretto, 2011).

My critical friend identified this pattern in my own work (See Appendix 14). However, moving away from the internalised IRE pattern was a challenge. This transition to more authentic questioning was progressed through planning that focused on creating one or two authentic questions for each activity. In this planning stage, one of the important considerations was ensuring the language used was age-appropriate. I had to find concrete words rather than abstract ones, use short sentences, and select clear simple and clear language. In Activity 15, examples of more authentic questions included, “What would you pick?” (from a

number of sticker books) or, in response to a child who had labeled a sticker as being a boy sticker, “Can you tell me why these are boy stickers?”

Authentic questions also contributed to more equitable dialogue between the children and me. In Activities 3 and 4, whole blocks of the transcribed dialogue belonged to me as I explained, prompted and led the children through our conversations. By Activities 13 and 15, a more equitable dialogue had emerged, as I would contribute a sentence, a child would respond with a sentence, and so forth. There were no more long stretches of teacher discourse, and more evidence of authentic questioning.

Going into this study I had intended to work on meta-language. Sandretto (2011) discusses the importance of this, noting that without the language of a text-analyst, it becomes difficult for children to move beyond the surface of a text. I encountered this difficulty me, as noted in my reflection for Activity 5, where I wondered if a child had to see a discourse *as* a discourse in order for it to really count as critical literacy learning. From this incident in particular, I came to understand the importance of meta-language in critical literacy work, as this meta-language provides children with a common language to use as they work towards unpacking texts (Sandretto, 2011).

Tying to teach pre-school children metalanguage was problematic, although not entirely without progress. While the teaching and use of metalanguage remains a work in progress, some of the experiences of this study suggest that developing a metalanguage with young children is possible.

One of these metalinguistic attempts involved the critical literacy toolkit. This was my most systematic effort to develop a metalanguage with the children. I had hoped that creating the critical literacy toolkit might be a good way to help the children develop language to deconstruct the story. My initial attempts were of

limited success, so I eventually set that approach aside. Later during analysis, I was able to see that one of those tools, the voice tool, was actually used effectively by five out of the seven children in Activity 3. In Activity 6, David remembered about the voice tool as we were using the other tools in the kit, and accordingly pointed out the two relevant figures who had been verbal in the story, noting “And she did lots of talking ... and he did lots of talking.” In using the word “talking”, he was substituting the word he and I started using for the voice tool during Activity 3. The language he used is something useful to remember for future work in this area.

The children were also responsive to the word “story” in Activity 7, where I asked them to “pick a couple of the characters and tell me a story about them today”. All four children who participated used the character figures to give their own interpretation of who those characters were, and what they did. Like the voice tool, there was minimal explanation of the word “story”. However, also like the voice tool, I think that revisiting its implementation could be beneficial, and has potential for future development.

At the end of Phase 1 in the intervention, I had retired the toolkit, believing it was inappropriately pitched for the age-group of my children. However, analysis has since shown that it was not completely ineffective. While I believe the toolkit would benefit from some robust revision, such a revision might be worthwhile. Having taught a number of critical literacy activities without a cohesive metalanguage, I can appreciate for me why having one is important. Progressing the thinking of children is difficult without a common understanding of certain metalinguistic concepts (Sandretto, 2011).

6.2.4: Young children can be interested in critical literacy activities, engage in critical dialogue, and develop critical perspectives.

During this study, various children demonstrated critical literacy learning in different ways. The three broad categories of learning were: being interested in critical literacy activities, holding critical conversations, and developing critical perspectives. These three learning areas were derived from analysis of the children's work. While frames for gauging a child's learning exist, such as the critical stance cycle in the instructional model (Lewison et al., 2008), those frames were designed with older children in mind. Rather than impose a framework over the learning experiences of pre-school children, this study sought to let the learning emerge from the data collected, and then see what that looked like. This section is not intended to be an assessment. Rather, it is hoped that by conveying some of the perceived learning of the children, some justification might be made for implementing this approach in practice.

All the participant children showed interest in the critical literacy activities, although the level of that interest varied greatly. Some of the children never really engaged fully with the topics, even if they seemed to enjoy the activities themselves. Other children engaged with only some of the topics, a fair response given that not every topic would interest everybody. A few of the children engaged reasonably well with all of the topics. I think this study goes some small way towards indicating that young children can respond positively towards, and even enjoy critical literacy activities.

In addition to participating in the activities, some of the children also engaged in critical dialogue. David engaged in critical dialogue during our work on the costume discourse, and did so on two different occasions. In Activity 5, David drew a clear distinction between costumed and non-costumed figures, nominating the costume as the reason for his selection. Later, in Activity 6, while using the critical literacy toolkit, I asked if anyone could identify the hidden message in our story. Without prompting, David responded "them has costumes". At this point, David was seeing the costume clearly enough to name it, and in doing so, was

also showing his emerging ability to consciously engage with the discourse of superheroes. To an older person, David may seem to be stating the obvious. However, only one other child in the study was able to overtly name the costume as he did, suggesting that doing so was a challenge. The literature supports the idea of naming as difficult, noting that “humans think using unconscious frames” (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 13).

Olivia was another child who engaged in critical dialogue. When asked why she had selected particular costumed figures in Activity 5, Olivia responded “cause they look like heroes!” As the conversation continued she was additionally able to express her knowledge that dressing up was pretending, something that the other children were unable to distinguish. When I asked, “How do you know he’s pretending?” Olivia said, “Cause he’s wearing a costume!” Olivia’s dialogue demonstrated some consciousness not only of the costume’s function, but also of its limitations.

Zach had his own way of thinking about heroes, and this was what he expressed in his dialogue. In Activity 5, Zach showed his ability to think about the text through the frame of the costume. Rather than using the costume as a way to differentiate between the pictures, as David and Olivia did above, he used it to unify the pictures through the provision of his own explanation for why all the pictures he was shown were, in his eyes, superheroes. His explanation was that the pictures of normally dressed people represented the alter egos of the superheroes, an explanation that was accompanied through gesture, as he matched up each superhero picture with somebody dressed normally. The level of thought Zach devoted to his responses and his logical constructions showed that he was thinking about the subject and reformulating it to meet goals that were important to him.

Critical dialogue with the children continued, with the children learning to isolate and identify the reasons behind their choices. This can be seen as a more detailed

version of naming. Here, rather than naming the discourse, the children were encouraged to identify and articulate the reasons for their choices, thereby making them visible.

The first of these articulations were broad references to gender. In Activity 13, when I asked the two of the girls why they did not like the sticker that showed a cartoon hero, Maya pointed to the male protagonist on the sticker and explained, “That’s not a girl, that’s a boy.” Maya indicated that the gender of a character was important to her by actively rejecting a boy character as not being female like her. In the same activity, Olivia stated that she liked another of the sticker examples “because it looks pretty, it looks like ... a girl sticker.” Olivia defined her own sticker preference in terms of its prettiness, seeming to suggest that pretty things were girl things. In all these examples the girls were verbalising their ideas about gender as they talked about what makes something female and, therefore, acceptable to them.

In the same activity Zach also made decisions that he consciously ascribed to gender. When I asked him if he could tell me why a particular sticker was a boy sticker he said, “’cause them all has boys on them.” Shortly thereafter I asked him if I could have a boy sticker, and he said, “No. Cause you’re a girl.” Here Zach was not only articulating his reasons for his decisions, he was also using those reasons to draw boundaries for me. While his identifying of relevant detail contributes towards critical dialogue, his return to gender-based, decision-making suggests that even if he could see gendered thinking, it had not caused him to think any differently. However, changing thinking is not necessarily what critical literacy is about. Some construct the learning journey as extending an invitation, beginning a dialogue, starting a journey, or planting seeds (Sandretto, 2011).

In addition to naming broad categories, the children also began to articulate specific details that contributed to gender positioning. In Activity 15 Maya mentioned liking one sticker “’cause that’s a high heel [shoe].” Zach, Activity 13,

disliked a sticker “‘cause it’s got a flower!” The flower on this sticker was very small, and sat on the hat of a cartoon bug. I was interested he had noticed this small detail which, despite its comparatively small size, was the primary reason he rejected it. Through these examples, I could see the children’s level of detail increasing. From macro arguments of “boy thing” or “girl thing” they were now looking at particular isolated details to support their position.

Through these examples I saw the children learning to give reasons for their position. These reasons were based on gender differences, which the children were identifying in some form by naming gender in their responses. In making these statements, the children were projecting their own thinking outwards, making it visible, and in doing so showing their increasing ability to engage in critical dialogue.

The last way the children I worked with showed their learning was through the development of a critical perspective. This perspective could be described as the conscious revisiting or rethinking of a topic, or perhaps even as having conversations that matter, whether because of the child’s progressing their thinking, the subject matter as being a real-world topic, or both. Critical conversations need not result in any appreciable outward change in the child’s thinking (Sandretto, 2011). It is the process of thinking something through, and understanding that ideas can be disrupted, renegotiated, or interrogated, that is important.

Critical perspective has some relationship to the critical stance of taking responsibility to inquire, from the instructional model (Lewison et al., 2008), and includes interrogating commonplace practices, and learning to view language as something fluid and changeable (Lewison et al., 2008). Olivia showed some development of critical perspective through a conversation that mattered. This conversation was related by her mother during our interview at the conclusion of data collection. Olivia had raised the issue of gendered choices with her mother,

by asking who could wear blue and who could wear pink. Her mother had asked if Olivia, as a girl, could wear blue. Olivia had responded yes, she could. However, when her mother asked if boys could wear pink, Olivia had said no. Olivia's mother had considered this conversation unusual at the time, and had wondered if it had something to do with our work at kindergarten. The timeframe that Olivia's mother provided for the conversation placed Olivia's conversation in the midst of our work on stickers. Lewison et al. (2008) indicate that asking questions that make a difference is one way of showing the critical stance of inquiry. This questioning appears to be what Olivia was doing here as she extended her thinking about boy and girl things to clothing.

During our work on stickers, which discussed boy and girl things, Olivia also showed some ability to pick a third position. During one of our activities on stickers, the children had found a Christmas card. On a whim I had asked them if it was a boy or girl "thing". Olivia responded that it was something that could be for boys and girls. She later made a similar decision about a cupcake sticker. Both times I asked the question in the boy or girl form, and both times it was Olivia who nominated, without prompting, that the item could be used by both genders. Olivia seemed to be doing more than responding to the text in this activity. I had never mentioned another possibility outside of boy and girl things, yet she realised that other options existed and created a third position. This thinking seemed to show some awareness of the text that goes beyond mere comprehension, as Olivia responded in sophisticated ways.

Maya was the other child who found ways to critically apply her learning in the sticker topic, and by doing so, showed her developing critical perspective. During the time period of our work with stickers, but outside of the official activities, Maya initiated a conversation with me about who could have stickers. Like Olivia's experience with her mother, this was an unanticipated conversation. Maya gave clear indications of her shifting thinking, saying, "David likes boy stickers but girls can like boy stickers, David likes, um, girl stickers" (Maya). She immediately had my attention, as this statement was in contradiction to her

original position, at the start of the sticker topic, regarding who could have a girl sticker. Here, Maya seemed to be rethinking that position, at least to the point where she indicated some acceptance of David's preferences, whatever they might be. Our conversation continued:

Maya: David can like the stickers, 'cause you give David a sticker, a girl sticker.

Me: Well, he liked a girl sticker.

Maya: Yeah. He can have girl stuff, David.

Here Maya seems to be doing what Lewison et al (2008) calls entertaining multiple ways of being. She shows some recognition that David has a perspective, and indicates some respect for that position by stating he can indeed have girl stuff, as he had once wanted. This generosity did not stop with David. As our conversation continued, I asked more questions about her new position.

Me: So, who could have a princess sticker?

Maya: Boys can

Me: Wow, cool. Who else could have a princess sticker?

Maya: Zach.

Maya's acceptance of David's position has not stopped with David. Here, her thinking seems to have been extended to all boys, not just to David. I see evidence of Maya's growing ability to inquire as she accepted a viewpoint other than her own, a viewpoint she had originally opposed. This conversation did not mean that Maya's thinking about gendered choices was settled, but the fact that she could contest in some way the boy and girl discourses was a big step. That she voluntarily opted to talk about these discourses in a sense-making way was also significant. Clearly she had been thinking about it, and had something to say.

6.3: A final reflection

As I reflect one last time on the work of this study, I find me considering a number of points in relation to my own journey. As a teacher-researcher who has spent much time reflecting throughout this study, it seems appropriate to end with a final reflection that expresses these points.

Regarding critical literacy theory

At the start of this study I wondered how significant knowledge of critical literacy theory would be to me as a teacher. As the study progressed, I came to rely on that knowledge to not only implement my work, but also to identify critical literacy opportunities as they arose. Given the ability of critical literacy to be so many things, I realised that a sound theoretical knowledge of the approach was important. Indeed, drawing on this theoretical knowledge helped me identify critical literacy opportunities, including the “pigs are pink” work in Activity 9, the sharing incident in the same activity, and realizing that the sticker conversation between Maya and Olivia needed to be taped. Without a developed knowledge of what critical literacy could be, how it could look, and what could be considered a text, some of these opportunities would have been missed.

That said, the acquisition of the theoretical knowledge did not come easily. Critical literacy theory was often confusing for me and did not lend itself to convenient, packaged definitions. I took a postgraduate paper at University, read a number of books and articles, and did a great deal of thinking as part of my preparation for this study, and I still feel I would struggle to give a simple explanation about what critical literacy is.

In short, it took conscious, focused work over time to understand, then design and implement critical literacy into my practice. Not all teachers have the time or inclination to do so. I think there are clear reasons for wanting to foster critical literacy learning in the early childhood classroom, but at the same time I think

critical literacy theory remains a barrier to entry for any teacher wishing to use this approach.

Regarding my teaching practice

I commenced this study for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to learn how to implement critical literacy as an early childhood teacher. As somebody who had personally benefitted from critical literacy teaching, I saw a critical literacy approach as a way to expand the children's thinking beyond the confines of their immediate discourses. I believed, and still believe, that this approach is of benefit to preschool children. I wanted that thinking, or at least its seeds, sown in the minds of children, a potential gift to their possible selves (Lee et al., 2013). Secondly, I commenced this study because I wanted to be a better teacher. Having taught for only two years, I felt it would be constructive to look at my teaching in a different way, and see what could be gleaned from the effort.

In both instances, the journey has been informative. I have had occasions where I despaired, particularly in Phase 1, where there were so many things to learn and to remember, and where most of that learning and remembering was about me as a teacher. On occasions I have rejoiced, where a child has said or done something that has sparked in my mind the thought that "they get it!"

There are three particular learnings from this critical literacy study that have benefitted my teaching practice in general. The first of these is establishing dialogue (Sandretto, 2011). By breaking the IRE pattern of initiation-response-evaluation, a pattern I did not even know I was perpetuating, I have discovered a gateway to a new world of meaningful, thoughtful interaction with children. My dialogue with children is more sustained now, because it is real conversation. I listen more intently to what the children are saying so that I can respond with genuine interest. I have had wonderful conversations that are centered on the child and what is important to them in their world.

The second thing I learnt was the power of authentic questioning (Sandretto, 2011). I have found this new practice immensely beneficial. Instead of asking children questions about things we are learning, or small-talk questions such as “What are you doing”, I am asking them questions that matter. There are no preconceived answers, just space for them to take the conversation wherever they will. My first experience with this was somewhat accidental, when I asked the children about heroes in Phase 1 and their responses helped me understand the significance and power of costume in their world. Now, I can see how the right questions can take you anywhere a child wants to go. Being open to that possibility is an exciting thing indeed.

When I asked the right questions, I was rewarded with wonderful insights into their personal worlds. I had spent a lot of time with these children, knowing some of them since they started at Tree Street. And yet, as I moved through the study, I realised I did not really know them at all. There was a lot I had missed, and this caused me to ask another question: What else have I missed? I am still finding answers to that, but I now see the importance itself of asking the question in the first place.

Recently I had a conversation with a four-year-old girl that embodied both extended dialogue and authentic questioning. This conversation helped me see the presence of both these new practices in my teaching. I began by asking the girl an open question based on a particular behaviour she was exhibiting. Her answers, building on my continued questions, were so interesting that I wrote them down. She watched me intently as we spoke, then asked if she could have a turn “interviewing” me. I enthusiastically agreed, and was amazed when she proceeded to interview me, asking thoughtful questions about my family and my job, and using my clipboard (which she had asked to borrow) to make her own notes – just as she had seen me do. Six months ago, this kind of conversation would have been pure chance. Now it is something I can stimulate readily, because I am more aware of how to initiate and enter into this kind of exchange.

The third thing I have paid forward into my teaching is using texts the children care about. Knowing this one, powerful thing has changed the way I use texts in the classroom. I still read with the children for pleasure, but I am also reading with them to find out what they like, and to try and understand why they are responding to a particular text.

Revisiting the teaching of critical literacy

Through applying learning gained from this study, I have begun to revisit critical literacy teaching. This revisiting began one mat time, just before lunch, when I read a story to the children about a boy saving a whale. Normally this mat time is a restless time as it is a transition period. However, on this occasion the children were unusually silent and attentive. I studied their faces as I read, and realised they were following the pictures and spoken text with rapt attention. They liked this book. At subsequent mat times, I began to introduce more whale texts. Next was the Māori legend of Tinirau and the whale, where the ungrateful Kai cuts off part of Tinirau's whale for food, and Tinirau comes to save the whale and punish Kai. The children responded really well to this story too. We began to explore the roles out of both stories by acting them out. As our whale work continued, I realised that not all whale stories captured the children. They liked the stories where the whale was being saved, and were lukewarm about others that simply had a whale as a character.

To support our role-play, I made a large rubber whale as a prop, and this became a symbol around which whale play focused. I would leave the whale out as a resource, and found a number of the children would use it to initiate their own role-play, such as saving the whale, or acting out the story of Tinirau. The prop became a tangible symbol the children could use to revisit or explore ideas about the saving of whales in their own way – it was a space within which they could conduct their own learning. An additional learning space for children was created when I photocopied and laminated several pages of one of the books, and

displayed the pages at child height on the storyboard. This interactive display became a focal point for engagement for several children, who used the pictures to revisit the story, often removing them from the board and touching the images that meant the most to them in the story. Sometimes they talked to me about the story, and one of these child-initiated conversations resulted in a lengthy discussion with a three-year-old boy who wanted to discuss the treatment of the whale in great depth. After I used the language of fairness to explain why Tinirau was upset at the whale's injury, the child also began to use the language of fairness to form his own frames for understanding what had happened to the whale, and what that meant to him.

From our whale work, the children began to ask critical questions, which was something I had seen from the work of Vasquez, and had been waiting for during the whole data collection period. One boy wanted to know why the whale was food, which created the space for us to have a discussion about how a whale could be a resource. Another boy, having studied whale families through a YouTube clip, wanted to know how whales talked to each other. I asked him what a whale might say if it could speak, and we then spent time listening to whale songs and imagining what they might be saying.

While it is regrettable that the whale learning did not happen within the data collection period, it would not have happened at all if I had not gone through those first crucial phases. The work of the study did not answer all my questions or challenges about critical literacy work with this age-group, but it has laid enough of a foundation for me to get under way. For that progress I am very grateful, as it has made the study and its attendant sacrifices worth it.

Regarding action research

Action research was a sword that cut two ways. On the one hand, it required me to confront my own teaching in ways that were revelatory and not always pleasant. On the other hand, it became an empowering process that pushed me to

try and overcome challenges and to be a better teacher. Each of these is discussed in turn.

Action research places the teacher-researcher at the centre of their study: accountable, responsible, visible – and from my own experience, vulnerable. I experienced this vulnerability first hand as I revisited my teaching tapes, cringing on occasion as I witnessed my own mistakes, my oversights, my stumblings – in summary, my shortcomings as a teacher. Looking into that mirror was highly unpleasant and left me feeling exposed, not as a fraud, but rather as one laid bare before the world.

These experiences also left me wondering about my abilities as a teacher. Prior to the study, I would have described me as a good teacher. After revisiting my teaching tapes, I felt a questionmark. Part of me rationalised that these shortcomings had a lot to do with the pressure I felt in the study to make things work, although this was largely pressure I put on me. This pressure was evidenced not only in my reflections, but also in my teaching, where I could see me zealously pursuing something that should have been abandoned long before.

That vulnerability must be contrasted against what I gained from the action research process. Critical literacy is not the only new thing I have tried to implement in my teaching, but it was certainly the hardest. However, prior to this study, I had a tendency to give up on any new idea if it did not work on the first attempt.

What changed on this occasion was having a way to study my attempts at implementation, with the aim of learning from those attempts rather than simply viewing them as a failure. That way was action research, and it became a compass I used to negotiate my progress through an uncertain and variable landscape. Through using action research I gained confidence as a teacher to try new things because I finally had a process that would help me help me when I got stuck. This confidence was somewhat ironic given how exposed I generally felt.

However, over time, this tension between confidence and vulnerability became something I could hold in productive balance. Vulnerability kept me asking questions and reflecting actively, even brutally. Confidence kept me trying, reminding me that a way could be found if I was willing to look hard enough for it. Difficulties became things I worked to understand and negotiate, rather than obstacles that stopped me dead. Through action research I had a way forward, one that I will continue to use for as long as I teach because it brings more than knowledge about teaching – it brings understanding.

In summary

I still think there is a question mark at the end of my “good teacher” conception, but now I frame the question differently. Instead of asking, “Am I a good teacher?” I have moved to “Who makes a good teacher?” Prior to the study I would have said it was about skill sets, theoretical knowledge, strategies, listening and responding, and of course, a love of children. Now I am wondering if it is somebody who never stops learning, not just about teaching and learning, but also about themselves. Somebody who always has a question mark regarding their own practice, and is actively striving to find pathways through the challenges they face in the classroom. If that is the case, then maybe I am in with a shot after all.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Manager/Owner Information Letter

Dear _____,

I am writing to seek consent to conduct the research for my Masters thesis at the centre where I work, Paddingtons, Rimu Street, Hamilton. My research is titled “*Other people’s stories: What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand*”. Critical literacy is a branch of critical thinking, but one that focuses specifically on analysis and critique of texts through learning to identify and examine the subtext. Because of the age of my students, we will focus on multi-modal and multi-literate texts. Not a lot of research has been done on pre-school children and critical literacy, particularly in New Zealand, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity.

My research will be a practitioner study, carried out over a ten-week period where I implement specific critical literacy activities with a selected group of children (“the Intervention”). This would take place during my working hours, be integrated into my regular teaching practice, and last for a total of ten weeks, with two teaching sessions per week and a two-week break in the middle.

I will conduct the Intervention with a small group comprised of 6-8 children, whom I will choose (“the Participant Group”). Once selected, I will undertake a consent process with their parents, an assent process with the Participant Group, and inform the parents of all other children at the centre of the study.

Data to be collected from the Participant Group includes video footage of the teaching sessions, making an audit trail with the children to track our work, helping them make

their own journals, and creating various literacy artefacts such as narrated art, photographic stories, multimedia stories, and using drama and music. I will conclude the data collection by interviewing the parents of the Participant Group. The privacy and wellbeing of the children involved is of paramount importance to me. All data gathered will remain confidential, and the names of children and the centre will be altered to ensure anonymity.

If you wish to view my additional documentation, such as the parent information sheet, consent letter, the assent form for children, and my ethics application, I can email these to you.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact one of my supervisors, either Professor Terry Locke, (07 8384466 ext 7780; locketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz), both of the University of Waikato.

Yours sincerely,

Raella Kahuroa

62b Dromara Drive

RD 9, Rotokauri 3289

Hamilton

021-723567 or work 8477979

Appendix 2: Manager/Owner Consent Form

- ☐ I have read and understood what the research project is about, and I agree to Raella Kahuroa conducting the research for her Master's thesis at Paddingtons Rimu Street.
- ☐ This consent is given on the following understandings:
- That Raella will carry out the Intervention component of her Masters at the centre, and collect data from the same.
 - That this will not interfere with the children's learning or Raella's teaching, but rather, contribute constructively to both
 - That this will not require financial support from Paddingtons. Raella will use her own time and leave to write up her data, and purchase her own consumable resources.
 - That Raella will work with parents, and secure their consent before approaching the children.
 - That this process will be safe and ethical for children. Their information will be kept confidential and secure. Their real names will not be used, and neither will the name of the centre, to protect the anonymity of the child participants.
 - That this process will be respectful of children by working collaboratively with them.
- ☐ I understand that copyright and ownership for the thesis, the thesis research other than the children's work, and any additional papers or presentations resulting from the thesis study, belongs to Raella.
- ☐ I understand that if I have any concerns about the project that I do not wish to discuss with Raella, I can contact her either of her supervisors, Professor Terry Locke, (07 8384466, ext 7780; loketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz), both of the University of Waikato.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____

Position in the Organisation:

Appendix 3: Team Information Letter

Dear _____,

This letter is to provide some information about the research project for my Masters thesis that I want to carry out at our centre. The title of my thesis is “*Other people’s stories: What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand*”. Critical literacy is a branch of critical thinking, but one that focuses specifically on analysis and critique of texts through learning to identify and examine the subtext. Because of the age of my students, we will focus on multi-modal and multi-literate texts. Not a lot of research has been done on pre-school children and critical literacy, particularly in New Zealand, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity.

My research will be a practitioner study, carried out over a ten-week period where I implement specific critical literacy activities with a selected group of children (“the Intervention”). This would take place during my working hours, be integrated into my regular teaching practice, and last for a total of ten weeks, with two teaching sessions per week and a two-week break in the middle from _____ to _____.

I will conduct the Intervention with a small group comprised of 6-8 children, whom I will choose (“the Participant Group”). Once selected, I will undertake a consent process with their parents, an assent process with the Participant Group, and inform the parents of all other children at the centre of the study.

Data to be collected from the Participant Group includes video footage of the teaching sessions, making an audit trail with the children to track our work, helping them make their own journals, and creating various literacy artefacts such as narrated art, photographic stories, multimedia stories, and using drama and music. I will conclude the data collection by interviewing the parents of the Participant Group.

The privacy and wellbeing of the children involved is of paramount importance to me. All data gathered will remain confidential, and the names of children and the centre will be altered to ensure anonymity.

If you wish to view my additional documentation, such as the parent information sheet, consent letter, the assent form for children, and my ethics application, I can email these to you.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact one of my supervisors, either Professor Terry Locke, (07 8384466 ext 7780; loketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz), both of the University of Waikato.

Yours sincerely,

Raella Kahuroa

Appendix 4: Critical Friend Information Letter

Dear Dr Bateman,

Thank you very much for consenting to be my critical friend during my Master's thesis. This letter sets out a small amount about my project. My research is titled "*Other people's stories: What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand*". Critical literacy is a branch of critical thinking, but one that focuses specifically on analysis and critique of texts through learning to identify and examine the subtext. Because of the age of my students, we will focus on multi-modal and multi-literate texts. Not a lot of research has been done on pre-school children and critical literacy, particularly in New Zealand, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity.

My research will be a practitioner study, carried out over a ten-week period from _____ to _____ where I implement specific critical literacy activities with a selected group of children ("the Intervention"). This would take place during my working hours, be integrated into my regular teaching practice, and last for a total of ten weeks, with two teaching sessions per week and a two week break in the middle.

I will conduct the Intervention with a small group comprised of 6-8 children, whom I will choose ("the Participant Group"). Data to be collected from the Participant Group includes video footage of the teaching sessions, which is where I require your help. It would be very useful to me to have the feedback of an experienced individual outside of my teaching setting to provide critical reflection on what I am doing.

To gain this feedback, I will provide you with two uncut videotapes of two of the teaching activities, Activity 4 and Activity 12, as these are respectively halfway through Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Intervention. I will also provide a template indicating what kinds of feedback would be useful to me, although you should not consider yourself constrained to these areas if additional ideas occur to you. If at all possible, it would be useful to have your feedback within 1-2 weeks of you receiving it, as I can then feed what I have learned from you into my subsequent teaching.

To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the children's information, I have attached a consent and confidentiality form for you to sign. If at any time you have questions or concerns about the research you can contact one of my supervisors, either Professor Terry Locke, (07 8384466 ext 7780; loketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz).

Yours sincerely,

Raella Kahuroa

62b Dromara Drive, RD 9, Rotokauri 3289, Hamilton, 021-723567 or work 8477979

Appendix 5: Critical Friend Consent and Confidentiality Form

I _____
consent to acting as a critical friend for Raella Kahuroa during her
Masters thesis. I understand that this involves

- ☐ Viewing an unedited video of two of her teaching sessions, one during Phase 1 and one during Phase 2 of the Intervention
- ☐ Where it is practical, to provide that critical feedback on that teaching to Raella within 1-2 weeks of receiving it

I agree that by being a critical friend to Raella, I will

- ☐ Keep the video secure while I am watching and analysing it
- ☐ Destroy the video when I am finished analysing it
- ☐ Use the information on the video solely for the purpose of providing feedback as a critical friend
- ☐ Not disclose the information on the video to any third party

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6: Parent/Caregiver of Prospective Participant Child Information Letter

Dear _____,

I am conducting a research project for my Masters thesis which is titled “*Other people’s stories: What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand*”. Critical literacy is a branch of critical thinking, but one that focuses specifically on analysis and critique of texts through learning to identify and examine the subtext, with a focus on multi-modal and multi-literacy texts. Not a lot of research has been done with pre-school children and critical literacy, particularly in New Zealand, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity.

My research will be a practitioner study, carried out over a ten-week period from _____ to _____ where I implement specific critical literacy activities with a selected group of children (“the Intervention”). I have identified a group of 6-8 children whom I would like to work with as the Participant Group in this study. I would very much like for your child to be one of these. You are in no way obligated to consent to their participation in the study, however, if you are happy for them to work with me on this project, you must sign the attached consent form. You have until two weeks after the commencement of the Intervention period to withdraw your consent. After that, it is expected that your child will see the Intervention through.

Data to be collected from the Participant Group includes video footage of the teaching sessions, and copies of anything the children might create as part of our work, such as artwork, photographs, or multimedia stories. We will also be carrying out various projects to display our learning to others in the centre, and keeping individual records of each child’s work.

What participation involves for you and your child:

- Your child needs to attend their regular session as consistently as possible during the Intervention period. Sickness and family emergency are obvious exceptions to this.
- You agree that you will not directly observe the research teaching sessions, as this can be adversely distracting to me and the children. However, you are welcome to view the videos.
- At the end of the Intervention, I would like to conduct an interview and feedback session with one or both parents/caregivers, as you decide. I will provide you with a copy of the

questions and the child's journal a week in advance, and after the interview you will be provided with a transcript of this interview to check.

- Children may be offered stickers or hand stamps as small incentives at the conclusion of each teaching activity.

The privacy and wellbeing of your child is of paramount importance to me. All data gathered will remain confidential, and the names of children and the centre will be altered to ensure anonymity. In addition, you can keep track of what we are doing by reading the audit trail book that will be displayed near the centre diary. This will contain a record of our activities for you to read whenever you want.

I will be holding an information evening on _____ to provide more information about the study, and you are invited to attend.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact my supervisors, either Terry Locke, (07 8384466 ext 7780; loketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz), both of the University of Waikato.

Yours sincerely,

Raella Kahuroa

Appendix 7: Parent/Caregiver of Prospective Participant Child

Consent Form

- ☐ I _____, parent/caregiver of _____ understand what the research project is about, and I agree to allow my child to be a member of the Participant Group as requested by the researcher.
- ☐ My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions or discuss any related matter with the researcher at any time.
- ☐ I understand that my child's participation is voluntary. I may withdraw my consent for them to participate for up to two weeks into the Intervention. I also understand that despite my consent, my child may refuse to participate in any activity or the research project as a whole. The researcher will honour any such refusals.
- ☐ I understand that because this is a research project, data of my child will be collected that will include audio, video, or photographic data, and may also include any artefacts my child may create, for example, pictures or stories. I will have the opportunity to obtain copies of this data at the conclusion of the data collection.
- ☐ I understand that the data collected will be analysed and used in the researcher's thesis. If the researcher wishes to use any data that was created by my child, or may identify them (such as their image) for any purpose other than the thesis, she will consult with me first and obtain my written consent before doing so.
- ☐ I understand that my child's identity and the name of the kindergarten will be kept anonymous, and that any information gathered will be kept safely and confidentially.
- ☐ I understand that if I have any concerns about the project that I do not wish to discuss with the researcher, I can contact her supervisors, either Professor Terry Locke (07 8384466 ext 7780; locketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz), both of the University of Waikato.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 8: Parent of Participant Child Video Release Form

Digital copies of video and photographs are provided to parents/caregivers as part of the record of your child's learning during this study. The images contained will frequently contain those of other people's children as well as those of your own child, including identifying information such as names. In order to protect the privacy and safety of all children who participated in the study, we require you to sign a release form before taking your copy of the data.

Please note: this DVD only documents the learning journey of the participant child during the study. Any other video taken to capture your child's normal (non-research) learning, or the learning of any sibling(s) also enrolled at the centre will not be included with this record. You are welcome to ask Raella about obtaining copies of the same.

By accepting this copy of the data, I _____ agree to the following conditions:

- ☐ I will not post nor allow anyone else to post this data on the internet in any way
- ☐ I will not distribute or share this data electronically
- ☐ I will respect the images of other people's children contained in this data
- ☐ I will use this data for family purposes and not for anything commercial, or in any public forum
- ☐ I will ensure that all those coming into contact with this data will abide by these conditions

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 9: Parent of Non-Participant Child Information Letter and Non-Consent Slip

Dear _____,

This letter is to inform you that for a ten-week period from _____ to _____ I will be carrying out research for my Masters degree with a specific group of Children at Paddingtons.

You are receiving this letter because your child attends the session the research will be conducted in, and it is possible their image may be captured on video, in photographs, or their voice recorded. The privacy and wellbeing of your child is of paramount importance to me. If any data containing your child is gathered it will remain confidential.

If you do not wish your child to have any involvement with this study, please complete and return the form below. If I do not hear from you by _____ regarding this, I will assume that any involvement they may choose to have is acceptable. If you choose to return the form I will accept it without question.

Let me share with you what I am doing. My thesis is a practitioner study titled "*Other people's stories: What critical literacy might look like in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand*". Critical literacy is a branch of critical thinking, but one that focuses specifically on analysis and critique of texts through learning to identify and examine the subtext, with a focus on multi-modal and multi-literacy texts. If you wish to know more, I am holding an information evening on _____ and you are welcome to attend.

Not a lot of research has been done with pre-school children and critical literacy, including in New Zealand. My purpose in conducting this research is to understand how I can teach critical literacy for this age group. It is my intention to take what I learn from this study and create a critical literacy program that can be adapted for all the children at

the centre. I will seek to implement the same during early 2013 based on what I learn during this study, most likely using the activities from this research that showed the most promise.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact my supervisors, either Professor Terry Locke, (07 8384466 ext 7780; loketj@waikato.ac.nz) or Associate Professor Linda Mitchell (07 8384466 ext 7734; lindamit@waikato.ac.nz).

Yours sincerely,

Raella

Kahuroa

I **do not** want my child _____ to be involved with the Raella's Masters research project in any way. Please ensure their image is not recorded, and they do not participate in any of the activities.

Signed:

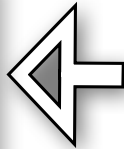
Appendix 10: Prospective Participant Child Information Letter

WHAT IS RAEELLA DOING AT KINDY?



Appendix 11: Participant Child's Consent Form

in raella's study i can...



*Insert each prospective
participant Child's
picture here*

*... choose whether I work
with Raella in her study or not*

if i do work with raella...



*... what I do
will be recorded*



*...I can leave if I
want*



*... all my information
will be safe and secure*

If I agree, I can sign my name here!

Appendix 12: Parent Interview Questions

1. Questions Regarding Interpretation of the Journal Data:

Questions for each page of the journal:

- Can you provide any additional information about what your child has drawn/written here?
- Do you know what this means / Can you tell me more about this? (a question for objects/ideas/words that I specifically want to know more about, or am unsure about)

General questions about journal:

- Has your child talked about or referenced any of the things mentioned in the journal?
- Have they talked about or referenced any of the activities in the study?
- Can you tell me what they have said?

2. Questions Regarding the Intervention in General:

Has your child done or said anything at home that seems related to the activities in the journal?

Have you noticed anything related to the study in your child's conversations or play?

If so, are you able to tell me what?

3. Questions Regarding Critical Literacy

What did you think about critical literacy at the start of the study?

Has your opinion of critical literacy changed at all during the study?

Are you able to tell me what has changed for you over this time?

Appendix 13: Captain Awesome and Amy

A story developed with the children

Amy and her little brother John were busy cleaning the lounge. Amy was vacuuming, because she was older and bigger. John was putting the toys away in the cupboard when suddenly, he slipped and fell over. Several toys fell on top of his head, and he began to cry. Amy turned off the vacuum and hurried over.

“Don’t worry John!” she said. “I’ll help you.”

There was a sudden WHOOSH and a bang, and to Amy and John’s great amazement, two people they didn’t know flew into their living room. Yes – they flew! They wore costumes, and brightly coloured capes. Because they could fly they didn’t stand on the floor, but instead, hovered above it. John was so startled he forgot to cry.

“I am Captain Awesome,” said the first person. “And this is Wayne,” he continued, gesturing to the other person. “Don’t cry little boy. We are here to save you.”

“Um, excuse me,” said Amy, “But who invited you in? And my brother doesn’t need saving, he just needs a little bit of help!”

“Captain Awesome will go anywhere he is needed!” the Captain said, looking slightly put out. “And when I heard this little boy crying with my super hearing, I knew I was needed and flew here straight away!”

“No, you’re not needed!” said Amy, who was getting cross by this time. “I can help my brother me!”

“You’re just a child,” said Captain Awesome. “Now stand aside, and let me do my job.”

“I’m not just a child,” Amy told him. “I’m also his sister. And I know exactly what to do!”

And she reached down, wiped away her brother’s tears, and helped him get up. Then she gave him a big hug. John was happy. He didn’t cry anymore.

Captain Awesome looked annoyed.

“What good is being able to fly if you can’t save people?” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Amy replied. “The world is a big place. I’m sure you’ll find somebody to save!”

Captain Awesome thought about this. “I suppose you’re right,” he said sadly. “Come on,” he said to Wayne. “Let’s fly away!” They raised their fists to the ceiling and flew out the window.

“Goodbye,” said Amy. And the children went back to their cleaning.

Appendix 14: Critical friend feedback form 1

Feedback Form for Raella Kahuroa

Date Footage Recorded: Friday 21 September 2012

Session: P1-A4

Duration of Recording: 15.09 minutes

Critical Friend: Dr Amanda Bateman

SCAFFOLDING

How could I improve my scaffolding of the concept that I am trying to teach? (the concept is a more diversified understanding of the idea 'strong')

My impressions are that moving from a physical understanding of what constitutes as being 'strong' to an abstract understanding of being emotionally strong is quite a big task for the children and one that might not necessarily be achieved in 15 minutes.

The interactions seemed quite rushed and I'm not sure that the children really understood the abstract idea of strong in the end. Maybe you and the children would have benefited from longer pauses (I feel that a pause following a question may possibly be the physical space where scaffolded thinking happens as I have shown you in the handout I gave you). More time to listen and follow the child's line of enquiry or thought could have possibly facilitated the complex thinking a little more.

Is anything detracting from my attempts to teach the concept of 'strong'?

Reference to giving a sticker quite a bit towards the end and that you are nearly finished a couple of times. This indicates your awareness that the children are starting to wane a little, but it also sets the scene as a task which needs to be completed, it is a means to an end rather than a meaningful discussion about a topic. This can detract away from the topic as you move in and out of the discussion.

Other interruptions such as moving the camera and waving to people out of the window would also work towards downgrading the importance of being involved in a focused topic discussion.

RESPONDING TO CHILDREN

Am I noticing everything I should be responding too? What am I missing?

Occasionally the children will present their ideas to you and these will not be responded to in a way which could extend the child's learning of the topic through their contribution. An example of this is available at 2mins and 50 seconds where Alice shows you her picture and you give an assessment and an immediate closing of the interaction 'that's cool Alice, have a sit down'. However, you then go back to Alice when you are looking around at the pictures and she gets to tell you that the picture was of her Dad's muscles. Later (5mins) another child shows you his picture of his Dad's muscles but this is also responded to with an assessment and a closing 'I love Dad's muscles. Right. Let me just make sure I've got names on everything'. I wondered if these presentations were not really responded to in their full potential because they were physical representations of 'strong' and you wanted the children to think of abstract things which were strong? This could also link back to the time factor where the 'lesson' is somewhat rushed and so does not give you the full potential to really relax and be open to noticing what could be responded to?

Am I responding appropriately to children's ideas?

In teaching research there has long been the 'initiation, response, evaluation' (IRE) or 'initiation, response, follow-up/feedback' (IRF). It is quite a formal way of teaching as it tends to put the teacher in control of the initiating and evaluation where the child has to give 'the right answer' in their response. It may be a good idea to mobilise a problem or noticing about something which is on topic and then see where the children want to take it? This would ensure that you are responding to the child's ideas, but could also be about the topic?

CHILD ENGAGEMENT

How engaged do the children seem with the session in general?

From the start until 5mins 50 seconds the children appear very engaged and demonstrate their willingness to be involved by responding to your initiation of tasks promptly and with no marked verbal or non-verbal dispreferred response (such as moving away from you, or saying 'no' or groaning).

When you attend to the moving of the camera (5mins 50 seconds) this is responded to by one of the children who also moves off the topic at hand. Although this will not be a regular occurrence, as I believe there is usually someone filming, this is a good indication that when the teacher is not engaged with the topic it will prompt a sequential action for the children to not be engaged. This also happens at about 10 minutes when you wave at somebody outside of the classroom.

How engaged do they seem with the concept I am trying to teach?

When discussing the concept of being physically strong the children have grasped this very well and offer you some good perspectives of the predicates and attributes of what it means to 'be strong'. When it moves towards a more abstract 'strong' the children don't seem to get it and still refer to the physical attributed of being strong.

What could I do to promote and sustain their engagement with the session? With the concept in particular?

Possibly through:

Not being so rushed – more time

Not so many assessments followed by closings - trying to follow the child's interest with regard to the topic

TEACHER LANGUAGE

How could my language as a teacher change so I could better:

-scaffold children's learning

When you move the children on from talking about physical strength to try to discuss other abstract forms of strength one of the girls tries to align with your reference to a bridge (an environmental object) by also making reference to an environmental object (a pond) (7mins 10 seconds). You follow this suggestion with a series of 'why' questions. These 'why' questions have been found to be more difficult to answer than other forms of questions – rather than go into here I will email you a copy of an article which demonstrates this. The flow of a general conversation discussing these ideas could possibly help sustain the conversation and afford more opportunity for scaffolding at the children's levels.

-respond to children in the moment

Sometimes there is a premature closing of the interaction where the children's ideas could have been explored in more depth. Time for pauses and listening would be good as the children will need time to think.

Is my teacher language appropriately pitched for the age group? How could I improve this?

Rather than 'why' questions maybe you could try to elicit a longer flow of conversation which maybe asks the children about their own experiences of being strong – when they have seen a character on TV or film being strong? Maybe tell them about a time when you felt you were strong, or you saw someone being strong (in the abstract sense). This storying is a useful way of changing the status in the interaction from teacher directed learning where clear roles of teacher-student are apparent (eg, implemented through IRE talk) to a group of people who have experiences of abstract strength.

I also notice body language – sitting on a chair and children on the floor probably reinforces clear teacher/child relationship so it may be better to all sit around a table or all on the floor?

Appendix 15: Critical friend feedback form 2

Feedback Form for Raella Kahuroa

Date Footage Recorded: Friday 21 September 2012

Session: P1-A4

Duration of Recording: 15.09 minutes

Critical Friend: Dr Amanda Bateman

SCAFFOLDING

How could I improve my scaffolding of the concept that I am trying to teach? (the concept is a more diversified understanding of the idea 'strong')

The angle on the concept of being emotionally strong seemed to be better understood by the children this time. I think that this could be in part due to you replacing the word 'strong' with the word 'brave'; this worked well. You also ask the children about their own experiences of feeling brave which also works well; as they are the experts of their own knowledge they will find it easy to talk about the things they know about.

Is anything detracting from my attempts to teach the concept of 'strong'?

There seem to be some issues with physical space. Although you handle this very well, the children seem to be a little distracted from the topic at hand because of the space limitations. A comfortable environment is important for children's learning, so this may have been the main distraction.

RESPONDING TO CHILDREN

Am I noticing everything I should be responding too? What am I missing?

The use of pauses are much more noticeable and there is no longer a sense of the interaction being rushed.

The responses could be facilitated a little better as was evident last time. Maybe it is helpful to be aware that turns of talk need to be discriminately related to each other in the process of building a conversation. This means that, in an ongoing conversation between people, each person's turn at speaking will build on the prior person's utterance. Out of a single utterance, there is usually one part of that utterance which is picked up on by the next person to speak and this makes the 2 utterances connect to each other. So, if someone is talking about buying a cake, the person who they are talking to might respond to their sentence by either sequentially talking about the cake (by saying something like 'what type of cake is it?') or by responding to the location of the shop (by saying something like 'which shop did you buy it from?'). Either way, one point in the prior sentence is responded to. Your interactions can sometimes follow the pattern of – your question-child's answer-your evaluation of the answer-next question to another child and so on. This misses out the usual conversational responses in everyday conversation which I have just pointed out in the cake example.

Am I responding appropriately to children's ideas?

You respond well to a girl at about 8mins 26secs where she comes to sit in front of the camera – you ask a question, she answers and you pick up on her answer to expand her thinking on this topic – great! You'll see that you respond to her contribution much better this way.

With the next girl you do the same – but when she says she is brave for eating her lunch and going to kindergarten, you respond with 'because you have to be away from mum'. This response offers your own ideas of why she is being brave and is not directly responding to what she has just said; maybe she felt she was being brave for another reason. By linking onto something the child actually says you can make sure that you are responding to their actual utterances accurately.

To improve responses, once the children have given an idea of how they are brave you could pick up on this a little more by relating your next turn at talk to directly connect to some aspect of the child's prior utterance.

CHILD ENGAGEMENT

How engaged do the children seem with the session in general?

I think they seem much more interested in the talking about their experiences in this session, although there are still a couple of distractions.

How engaged do they seem with the concept I am trying to teach?

Engagement can be seen through joint attention, so when there are a couple of turns of talk between you and a child there appears to be a good level of engagement.

What could I do to promote and sustain their engagement with the session? With the concept in particular?

Responding to the children's utterances in an ongoing way, as explained above, will ensure that the conversation flows and this process will demonstrate engagement.

TEACHER LANGUAGE

How could my language as a teacher change so I could better:

-scaffold children's learning

Through your replacing of the word 'strong' with the word 'brave' the concept is better understood by the children. Your language here is at a better level for the children's thinking and they respond well to your questions about being brave.

-respond to children in the moment

As I have stated above, by using a formulation of the children's answer you will be directly responding to their prior utterance rather than guessing their intentions, or stating your perspective of what you think they mean.

Is my teacher language appropriately pitched for the age group? How could I improve this?

Yes, these interactions seemed to explore the children's ideas at a level which they were able to talk to you comfortably.