



Peer - reviewed Paper

Should Critical Literacy be a Part of Early Childhood Education in New Zealand?

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This paper examines what critical literacy is and how a sociocultural approach to literacy may provide a basis for the inclusion of critical literacy practices in early childhood education in New Zealand. What critical literacy in early childhood education might look like is then examined, along with some of the tensions that may arise when considering the implementation of critical literacy with very young children. Finally, the extent to which critical literacy has a place in early childhood education within New Zealand is explored. This includes an assessment of the potential of the early childhood curriculum - *Te Whāriki* - to accommodate a critical literacy component, what critical literacy in early childhood may look like and whether the early childhood profession is ready for critical literacy and the implications for the sector.

Introduction

This paper will explore what critical literacy is, the extent to which it is reflected in the early childhood curriculum and what it might look like in practice. It concludes with a discussion of whether the early childhood profession is ready for critical literacy and implications for the sector.

There is a great deal written about what and how literacy is (or should be) learnt and taught in educational institutions. Much attention and debate has focused on reading standards, the process of reading acquisition, and how best to teach beginning reading. However, according to Luke (2003), too much emphasis has been placed on these reading debates, the result of which has seen a “dumbing down” of the school curriculum (p. 62). Luke (2003) argues that where the aim of curriculum is to achieve basic literacy standards, the result will be children who only learn basic literacy skills. In order to prepare children for life in tomorrow’s world, literacy education needs to also include critical literacy practices. Harwood (2008) supports this view, noting that:

Preparing young children to be literate in their fast-paced technological and multiple text world requires educators to reflect upon and challenge their own beliefs of literacy. The learning of functional literacy skills is important but it cannot overshadow the opportunities presented from incorporating critical literacy pedagogy. (p. 9)



The New Zealand Government's goal for a 'knowledge economy' has seen an increasing emphasis placed on literacy learning and teaching across all sectors of the education system including early childhood education. It is tempting for early childhood teachers to respond to this increased pressure by focusing on literacy skills such as comprehension and letter recognition. However, if Luke's (2003) concerns are to be considered seriously, it is important that the early childhood education sector takes the time to consider what kinds of literacy practices will best serve the children they teach. Therefore it is perhaps timely to examine critical literacy and what it looks like in early childhood education and whether New Zealand is now ready to, or should, include critical literacy in early childhood education practice.

What is critical literacy?

Critical literacy has its roots in critical theory and the "belief that there is a measure of injustice and asymmetrical power relations in society, and that this situation is ethically indefensible" (Wandel, 2001, p. 381). Critical literacy places language and literacy as central in the creation and continuation of such power relations. Critical literacy also positions reading as more than just the decoding and comprehension of texts, but as a "critical social practice" (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 191). Put more simply, critical literacy is based on the concept that through language and literacy we construct, understand and express world-views of ourselves and of others (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Such world-views, often referred to as ideologies (Knobel & Healey, 1998) or discourses (Gee, 1997), can be described as "socially constructed and recognised ways of being in the world, which integrate and regulate ways of acting, thinking, feeling, using language, believing, and valuing" (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997, p. 96). Because there are many different groups with diverse social and cultural experiences, there are also multiple views of the world. However not all world-views are voiced equally and it is the views of those groups in society who hold more power that are seen to dominate.

Critical literacy highlights the significant role that literacy plays in the extent to which different world-views are heard and strengthened, ignored or silenced. As Luke and Freebody (1997) explains: "institutionally purpose-built repertoires of 'selves' are represented to us either explicitly or otherwise in all of the texts we read and write" (p. 194). It should be noted that critical literacy experts use the term 'text' to refer to a wide range of expressive media, including books, drama, corporate media, websites, posters and so on (Harwood, 2008). When read uncritically, the dominant world-views presented in texts come to be seen as right, natural and good while the views of minority or less powerful groups are either ignored or presented as wrong, unnatural or bad. In this way language and literacy are seen to further increase the dominance of certain groups and alienate or disempower others (Bertanees & Thornley, 2001).

Critical literacy emphasises the importance of viewing all texts as fundamentally biased. As Luke and Freebody (1997) explain: "all texts are motivated – there is no neutral position from which a text can be read or written" (p. 193). An important aspect of being literate involves being able to critically analyse texts in order to identify the world-views presented and those that are ignored and to consider the impact this has on oneself and others. Critical literacy is "grounded in the belief that readers should be encouraged to critique and challenge



through in-depth analysis and investigation, the ways in which language and texts function to advantage or marginalise social groups” (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; cited in Bertanees & Thornley, 2001, p. 5). Such understanding can serve to empower individuals to change their own lives and the lives of others. In this way, critical literacy emphasises social change through “*transforming* taken-for-granted social and language practices or assumptions for the good of as many people as possible” (Freire, 1972; cited in Knobel & Healey, 1998, p. 4, original emphasis).

What is the relationship between critical literacy and sociocultural theory?

According to Knobel and Healey (1998), critical literacy is founded on sociocultural theory as “both are based on an understanding of the inter-relationship between language, culture, social practice and learning” (Barratt-Pugh, Rivalland, Hamer & Adams, 2006, p. 18). Sociocultural theory, as with critical literacy, is underpinned by the view that language is a social practice through which we both understand and construct our world (Knobel & Healey, 1998). It is valuable at this point to briefly examine a sociocultural approach to literacy in early childhood education and consider how this approach might support the inclusion of critical literacy in early childhood education practice.

A sociocultural approach to literacy in early childhood education views literacy as a social practice that children learn about through their active participation in a range of contexts. The most influential context will be their home, community and educational settings. Each context reflects its own literacy related *funds of knowledge* specific to that context, which may or may not be similar to or valued by other contexts (Harwood, 2008; Reid & Comber, 2002; Williams-Kennedy, 2009). As an example the practice of watching television and the cultural practices and norms associated with this will differ between the child’s home and their early childhood education setting. While television watching may be a highly valued and regular family practice, it may not be valued or practiced at all in the early childhood setting. A sociocultural approach to literacy learning recognises and builds on each child’s own funds of literacy knowledge and uses this knowledge as a bridge to the literacy knowledge and practices. As McNaughton (2002, cited in Hill & Nichols, 2009) explains, rather than viewing diversity as something that needs to be *got rid of* or *coped with*, a sociocultural approach, supports “incorporating diversity to the advantage of effective pedagogy” (p. 183).

A sociocultural approach to literacy in early childhood also views literacy as socially constructed (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2006). As children engage with others within their immediate contexts, they observe, explore and co-construct literacy skills, meanings and understandings with those around them. In this way, a sociocultural approach to literacy “values the knowledge the child possesses and creates spaces for the construction of new meanings and understandings” (Harwood, 2008, p. 4).

Critical literacy, however, moves beyond this to recognize that the meanings children create within a social context will also include “stereotypical knowledge and understanding” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, p. 153). As Kincheloe (2005, cited in McNaughton, 2009) points out, meanings that we (including children) construct



“most often reflect the meanings of those who have the most power within our culture to articulate and circulate meanings” (p. 56). A critical approach to literacy asks teachers to acknowledge diversity and “examine the way patterns of inequality are constructed and maintained and explore(s) ways of teaching literacy which expose and challenge this inequality, as part of children’s developing literacy competence” (Barratt-Pugh, 2000, p. 4). Therefore, while sociocultural theory provides a valuable base from which critical literacy practices can then develop, an understanding of sociocultural theory in itself is not a sufficient basis on which to incorporate critical literacy into early childhood education.

What place does critical literacy have in Te Whāriki?

In order to determine whether critical literacy has a place in early childhood education within New Zealand, it is important to first look at the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Te Whāriki* draws on the metaphor of a woven mat (see diagram 1 below), which refers to the way in which the four principles and five strands are interwoven to form the basis of an holistic care and education environment for children from birth to five years. While there is no explicit curriculum content presented in this document, curriculum content is implied in the eighteen goals that underpin the strands (Cullen, 2003).

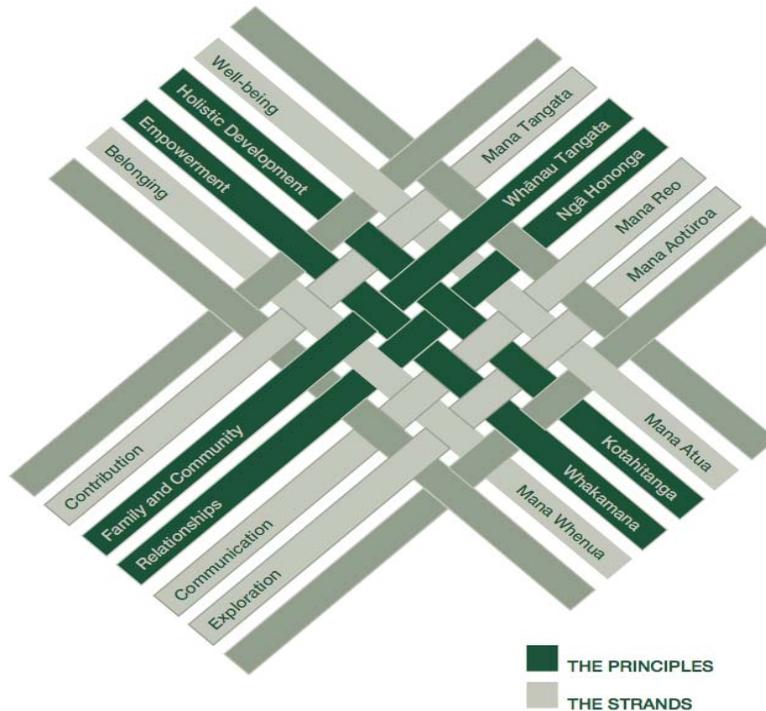


Diagram 1: *Te Whāriki* – woven mat (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 13)

The following examination considers whether or not critical literacy is already evident in *Te Whāriki* and the extent to which there is potential for critical literacy



to be incorporated (or woven) into the early childhood curriculum. A cursory examination of *Te Whāriki* reveals no direct support for the inclusion of critical literacy practices and no mention of any form of critical literacy in the Communication strand, where literacy largely sits. However, *Te Whāriki* is a broad curriculum that is open to interpretation (Brostrom, 2003). Because of this, a closer examination of the *potential* for critical literacy to find a place in *Te Whāriki* is warranted.

The founding aspiration of *Te Whāriki* is for children:

to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

The accompanying explanation of this aspirational statement hints at the possibility of supporting a critical literacy focus by emphasising the provision of opportunities for children to “make connections across time and place; establish different kinds of relationship; and encounter different points of view” not only in order to enrich the lives of children but to provide them with the ability to “tackle new challenges” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). Other statements throughout the document highlight both awareness and acceptance of difference and hint at some form of activism. In relation to increasing cultural diversity in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* states: “the early childhood curriculum actively contributes towards countering racism and other forms of prejudice” (p. 18).

How are these hints of a critical pedagogy actually played out within the principles and strands of the curriculum document? It is difficult to identify any clear indication in the four principles of *Te Whāriki* that a critical literacy approach is supported. The principle of Empowerment emphasises empowering the individual child to “learn and grow” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40) however this largely focuses on ensuring children’s *individual* rights are upheld and supporting children to develop increasing autonomy over their own lives. There are elements of these principles that do offer some unambiguous support for a critical literacy approach. The Family and Community principle embeds “the wider world of family and community” (p. 42) within the early childhood curriculum and highlights the relationship between culture and learning, emphasizing the importance of recognising that different cultures have different beliefs, values, and ways of doing things. Launder (2003), highlights that the Relationships principle emphasises “the importance of connections with the child’s world” (p. 6). Finally, the Holistic Development principle emphasises the interconnectedness and continuity of learning and the importance of teachers helping “children to make meaning of the discontinuities in their experience or world” (Launder, 2003, p. 6).

When examining the five strands of *Te Whāriki* and their related goals, as noted above, it is particularly noticeable that the communication strand, in which the literacy focus largely resides, makes no mention of any analysis of texts, critical or otherwise. There is the suggestion that symbols (including written texts) represent “thoughts, experiences and ideas” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 78), which is an essential element of a critical literacy approach. Yet there is no suggestion that the basis of such “thoughts, experiences and ideas” should be explored at all. What is interesting is that the Contribution strand of *Te Whāriki*



does include much more of an emphasis on examining the “relationships between language, social groups, social practices and power” (Knobel & Healey, 1998, p. 4). While the concept of contribution in this strand is largely focused on children developing relationships with others, it also acknowledges “that each child has the right to active and equitable participation in the community” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 64). This strand emphasises children learning to “take another’s point of view, to empathise with others ... to see themselves as a help for others” and to discuss or explain their ideas to others (p. 64). Learning outcomes (although indicative only) include: developing an understanding of their own and others’ rights, recognising and responding appropriately to discriminatory behaviours, developing “some early concepts of the value of appreciating diversity and fairness” (p. 66), developing positive judgements on their own and others’ gender and ethnicity and developing respect for those who are different from themselves.

Another indication that *Te Whāriki* is able to support critical literacy can be found in *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning*, the early childhood assessment exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2009). Book 17 of this series focuses specifically on oral, visual, and written literacy, and “critically questioning or transforming” as one of the repertoire of literacy practices examined. This includes:

- critiquing oral, visual, and written accounts, formats, stories, symbols, and books
- inventing oral, visual, and written accounts, stories, symbols, and books
- choosing from a range of possible and appropriate tools
- questioning conventions or suggesting alternatives. (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6)

This provides a clear signal that the Ministry of Education has now moved to recognise the value of a critical approach to literacy in early childhood education within New Zealand.

Te Whāriki then, does include support for children developing an increasing awareness of diverse social groups and social practices and of inequitable power relations between social groups. It also supports, to some degree, the concept of active citizenship, in terms of helping others and responding to discriminatory behaviours. While the role of literacy in this process is not highlighted within *Te Whāriki*, the relatively flexible and woven nature of *Te Whāriki* offers the potential for a critical literacy path to be woven through early childhood education programmes, an approach supported within the literacy exemplars.

What might critical literacy look like in New Zealand early childhood education?

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the inclusion of critical literacy into Australian school curricula that has had a flow-on influence on early childhood education curriculum and practices there. This influence can be seen in publications such as Makin, Jones Diaz and McLachlan (2007), Comber (2003) and Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2000). Such publications provide a valuable basis from which to examine the kinds of critical literacy practices that



could be implemented in New Zealand early childhood settings, as well as some of the issues surrounding the implementation of critical literacy in early childhood education.

All children are embedded in their social world and continually exposed to the significant influence of multiple texts, and the world-views they present. The messages constructed within these texts will not always reflect the experiences of children and their families or their ways of seeing the world. This is most often the case for children from minority groups (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2006). As Carmen Luke (1997) highlights: “from infancy, children are indeed immersed in the texts of popular culture, and their understanding of narrative, of good versus evil, of heroes and heroines, gender, race, and social power, is learned from those texts” (p. 29). Critical literacy practices in early childhood education can support young children to understand that texts can carry a number of messages that may or may not present a true picture of the world. As Barratt-Pugh et al. (2006) note, the inclusion of critical literacy in early childhood education can “support young children to develop the expectation that texts can (and should) be critically examined along with some of the skills to begin doing this” (p. 33).

Jones Diaz, Beecher and Arthur (2007) examine some of the kinds of critical literacy practices that can be included in early childhood education. One such practice is to encourage children to consider the positions that texts (including those from popular media) ask them to take and to consider the possibility of other positions. Harwood (2008) suggests: “traditional fairytales such as Cinderella can ‘invite conversations’ with young children about gender roles for example, about how males and females are positioned within texts” (p. 5). Harwood (2008) goes on to suggest that by comparing traditional stories with alternative versions or examining gender stereotyping evident in books, magazines and media advertising, “discussions can be generated about how children’s gender roles are constructed within the dominant culture” (p. 5). Useful strategies that teachers can draw on include: co-construction, which involves the joint negotiation of the meanings within various texts; deconstruction, in which the meanings in texts are pulled apart to better understand the perspectives and assumptions that underpin them; and problematising, which involves questioning and exploring texts in order to examine the “meanings and messages inherent in stories in more depth” (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2006, p. 83).

Children’s dramatic play can also provide a context for critical literacy practices to occur. Teachers can support children to explore different social roles and characters represented in texts and encourage them to negotiate and question the basis of their assumptions about these characters (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2006; Harwood, 2008). Harwood (2008) notes: “the narratives that evolve from children’s imaginative play may provide interesting social dilemmas for educators and groups of children to deconstruct and analyse using questions such as, ‘Why do only girls play in the doll corner?’ or ‘What makes an action-hero a hero?’” (p. 7). For infants and toddlers, modelling of critical literacy practices can support them to develop the expectation that texts should be questioned. So introducing literacy experiences that differ from the norm, can challenge the child’s current understandings or expectations about those texts (Jones Diaz, Beecher & Arthur, 2007).



The inclusion of critical literacy practices in early childhood education is certainly feasible, particularly in relation to developing critical responses to text emphasising social change (Knobel & Healey, 1998; Luke & Freebody, 1997). There are a number of ways in which this element of critical literacy can be incorporated into early childhood educational practice. Children can be actively involved in certain forms of civil action, by negotiating change within the early childhood setting. On a more fundamental level, we can encourage children to challenge the ideologies presented in texts, which is a transformative action placing children in the position of actively questioning their own lives and the lives of others.

The vision of social change that is fundamental to critical literacy raises some considerable ethical issues when working with young children. In particular, it is important to consider the position young children hold in society. Children, and very young children especially, are dependant on their families, not only for their physical care but also for their sense of security and identity. As Siraj-Blatchford (2009) explains, young children are vulnerable to “the power that every adult has to affect (for good or bad) the self-identity, behaviour, actions, intentions, understandings and beliefs of the children they interact with” (p. 153).

Care needs to be taken that young children are not placed in a position of conflict with their own families and the communities in which they are embedded. For example, a critical literacy practice of encouraging young children to question gender stereotyping in popular texts may result in young children beginning to actively question their own current and future gender roles. This may place a child in direct conflict with his or her parents’ beliefs and gender expectations for their child. As Knobel and Healey (1998) emphasise, it is important for teachers implementing critical literacy to avoid promoting their own uncritical views of what is important and avoid causing tension in a children’s home lives that may ultimately disadvantage the child. This concern highlights the need for the full involvement of the children’s family and community if early childhood education services are to include critical literacy practices into their programmes.

Is the New Zealand early childhood education sector ready for critical literacy yet?

While there appears to be the potential for inclusion of critical literacy into the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, it is important to consider whether the sector in New Zealand is ready for such a move. As discussed already, a sociocultural approach to literacy in early childhood provides a valuable base from which to develop critical practice. As Luke and Freebody (1999; cited in Harwood, 2008) note, sociocultural approaches to literacy emphasise the “fostering of children’s competence as *literary users* and analyzers of a multitude of literacy texts” (p. 4, original emphasis).

Over the last few decades there has been an increasing emphasis on sociocultural theory in the New Zealand early childhood education, reflecting a move away from the previously dominant influence of developmental theory. As Launder (2003) explains, this developmental approach has tended to result in early childhood teachers making “judgements about a child’s learning without



reference to the child's world, family, culture, values, interests or the diversity of children's learning processes" (p.3). Critical literacy requires teachers to have an in-depth understanding of the existence and validity of diversity. This shift towards sociocultural theory is supported by the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Cullen (2003) highlights that while *Te Whāriki* reflects a diversity of theoretical perspectives, "academic and professional debate is currently foregrounding its socio-cultural and postmodern ethos" (p. 271). In particular, there is an increasing emphasis on authentic, socially constructed learning. Cullen (2003) adds that while such movement looks positive, actual practice in many New Zealand early childhood education settings appear to have changed little over the last decade, with practices based on developmental theory alone still evident. Studies by Foote, Smith and Ellis (2004), and McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour and Kumar (2006) reflect this concern.

A closer examination of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki* reveals no mention of critical literacy, although the Contribution strand does include an emphasis on children developing an awareness of diversity and inequality. A critical approach to literacy is now also clearly signalled in the early childhood assessment exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2009). Although, a fundamental basis of critical literacy is the idea of transformation and as Brostrom (2003) highlights, *Te Whāriki's* aspiration statement for children is one of social reproduction rather than of social change:

What does it mean to "make a valued contribution to society?" if we have not discussed at a societal level how we understand and define "the future citizen in the future society", then we have no chance of incorporating such a vision in the activities we create with children.(Brostrom, 2003, p. 236)

While *Te Whāriki* has potential for critical literacy to be woven into early childhood education in New Zealand, this potential is somewhat muted by its overarching aspiration statement. If early childhood education in New Zealand is to implement critical literacy in ways that truly embrace its fundamental goal of social change, simply adding it onto current practice is not sufficient. The first step towards moving to a critical literacy approach is for the early childhood sector, the families, communities, early childhood services and society as a whole, to rethink the nature and purpose of early childhood education, from one that focuses on social *reproduction* to one focused on social *change*.

Conclusion

Critical literacy moves beyond basic literacy skills and examines the underlying nature and purposes of literacy. Literacy is seen as a means of expressing different world-views and acts as a medium through which literacy can exert and maintain power. Sociocultural theory, like critical literacy, is socially based and allowing different groups to hold diverse but equally valid, world-views and funds of knowledge. A sociocultural approach to literacy offers a basis from which critical literacy practice can develop. With an underlying tension between the social reproduction focus of sociocultural approaches and the emphasis on social change underpinning critical literacy, means that a sociocultural approach on its own is not a sufficient basis for the inclusion of critical literacy practices.



When examining the extent to which early childhood education in New Zealand is capable and ready to include a critical literacy focus, a number of possibilities as well as challenges arise. On the surface, the early childhood curriculum does not mention critical literacy yet despite this the flexible and integrated nature of this document along with the inclusion of a critical approach to literacy in the early childhood exemplars does suggest a critical approach to literacy could be woven into early childhood programmes.

In the literature in which critical literacy could be applied in early childhood education the implications of the transformational elements of critical literacy when working with very young children have to be ethically managed. These issues highlight the importance of teachers critically debating with families and community the purpose of including critical literacy into their practice along with the wider questions about the underlying purposes of early childhood education.

Before teachers implement critical literacy into early childhood education in New Zealand, it is important that they have a clear understanding of what critical literacy is and that they examine why they may want to include it as well as whether they have the mandate to do so. The underlying emphasis of critical literacy on social change requires the early childhood setting, along with the families and communities they serve, to re-evaluate the purposes of early childhood education and their aspirations for children. To be truly effective, such a debate needs to also occur on a societal level, and consider not only early childhood education but education in general.

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