

2008

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Critical Awareness Expectations in the Revised Ontario Kindergarten Program: Teachers'
Interpretation of New Educational Programming

(Spine title: Critical Awareness in the Ontario Kindergarten Program)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education

School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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London, Ontario
2008

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Abstract

The revised version of the Ontario Ministry of Education document *The Kindergarten Program* (2006) mandates teaching critical awareness to students as young as three years of age, and has been the mandated programming document for publicly-funded Kindergarten programs in Ontario for two school years. This study critically examines the program's expectations in relation to the contents of other Ministry of Education documents for early primary teachers and reports on interviews with kindergarten teachers that explored their interpretations of and thoughts about the new expectations. The research was informed by approaches to discourse analysis, a qualitative research strategy that analyzes "language in use" (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2001, p.3). It analyzed teachers' interpretations and implementation of the mandated expectations and found that respondents re-conceptualized critical awareness to align with their established practices and with the dominant representations of literacy learning present in the Ministry documents.

Keywords: critical awareness, critical literacy, discourse analysis, early childhood education, early literacy, educational policy implementation, educational policy reform, Kindergarten, Ontario Ministry of Education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my thesis supervisor Rosamund Stooke, for all of her advice, guidance, and conversation, and for helping to bring this research project to fruition. I would also like to thank Wayne Martino, my committee member, for his invaluable contribution to this project through his provision of another perspective on the topic.

I would like to thank my classmates and colleagues who, during the course of my master-level studies, supported me by offering different intellectual perspectives, acceptance, and camaraderie.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my family, without whom I would not have been able to begin my master-level studies in education, and whose support continues unstintingly. Without my family, nor without any of the important people mentioned here, this research project would not have been completed. Thanks again!

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Chapter 1

Overview of the Study

In 2006, a revised version of the 1998 Ontario Ministry of Education document entitled “The Kindergarten Program,” hereafter referred to as *the Revised Program*, (Ministry of Education, 2006) was released. *The Revised Program* describes the Ontario Ministry of Education’s mandated programming for Kindergarten classrooms in publicly-funded school boards. By juxtaposing Kindergarten teachers’ interpretations of critical awareness expectations and their accounts of classroom implementation of the new expectations with a critical analysis of *the Revised Program*, this thesis seeks to explicate the discursive organization of critical awareness instruction in early primary education. Specifically, I asked the Kindergarten teachers who participated in the study the following question: How do you interpret the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*? I also asked them: How do you implement the expectations of critical awareness in your classroom? In this chapter, I provide a brief introduction to my research problem, describe my study, and establish its importance for education researchers and for primary teaching practice.

The Research Problem

As of September 2006, Kindergarten teachers in Ontario’s publicly-funded school boards (including publicly-funded Catholic school boards) have had to work from *the Revised Program*, a quasi-policy document which requires Kindergarten students to “demonstrate... critical awareness of a variety of written materials that are read by and with the teacher” as well as “demonstrate...critical awareness of media texts” (p.35). *The*

Revised Program defines critical awareness as “the ability to evaluate something from multiple angles” (p.63). The word “something” in the preceding statement refers to not only print literacy materials such as books, magazines, and pamphlets; but also works of art, television broadcasts, movies, and advertisements of any kind.

The learning expectations of critical awareness are now mandated as “skills” (p.5) that are required to be taught in publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms and as expectations that Kindergarten teachers are required to evaluate as their students learn the skills. Teachers are also required to report on the progress of individual students as they acquire critical awareness, and to deliver progress reports to school administrators and parents¹.

The Revised Program is the sole document that lays out the knowledge and skills that are to be taught, evaluated, and reported upon in publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. However, attendance at school in Ontario is not mandatory until the age of six. The graph below illustrates the proportion of four- and five-year-old children in the province of Ontario who attend a publicly-funded Kindergarten program. The data concerning children who do not attend publicly-funded programs do not differentiate between those children who attend privately-run and privately-funded programs, and those who do not attend school during these years (V. Gray, personal communication, March 7, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2008b; Statistics Canada, 2007). As shown in the graph below, most four- and five-year-old children in Ontario are taught skills and knowledge based on *the Revised Program*. I therefore contend that just as with the 1998 document, “the importance” of this document “cannot be underestimated”

¹ In this research report, ‘parent’ or ‘parents’ will refer to Kindergarten students’ primary caregivers.

(Heydon and Wang, 2006, p.30).

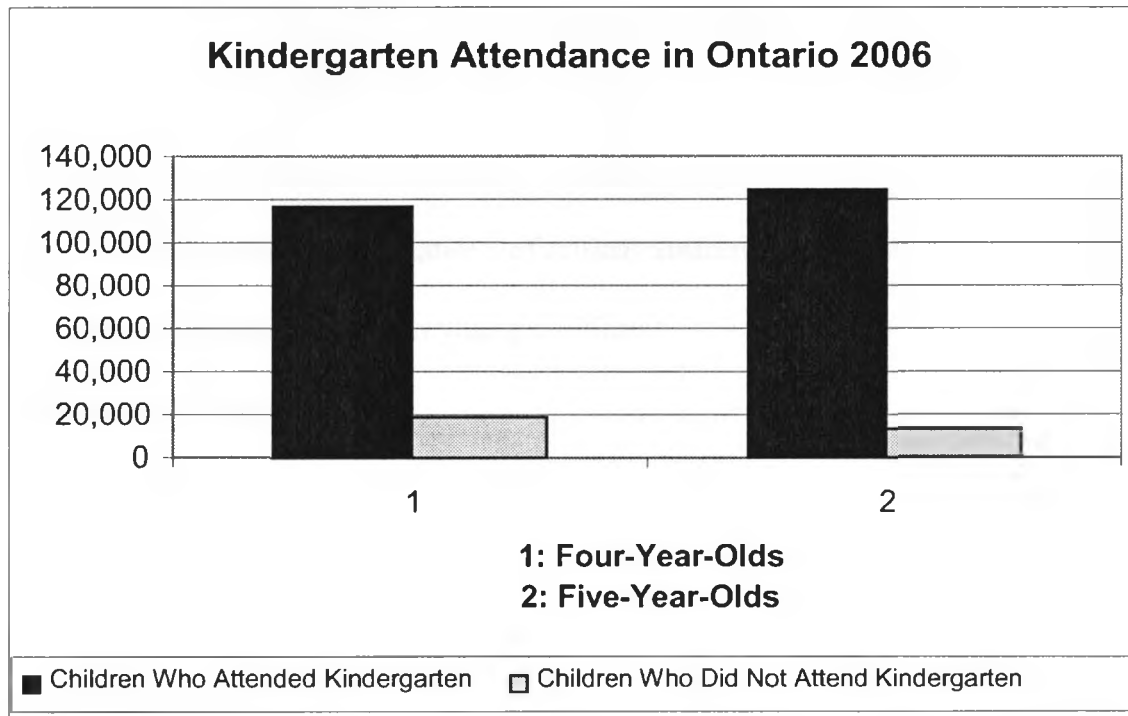


Table 1.1

The Study

The purpose of this study is to uncover how the newly added expectations of “critical awareness” in *the Revised Program* are interpreted by Kindergarten teachers in publicly-funded Ontario schools. Its sources of data were *the Revised Program*, several related support documents and professional literature available to and accessed by Kindergarten teachers working in publicly-funded school boards, an individual interview with one Kindergarten teacher and a focus group interview session with six Kindergarten teachers, all of whom work for the same school board. The interviews were structured to address the question: How do you interpret the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*? The interviews were structured to also address the question: How do you implement the expectations of critical awareness in your classroom? In reviewing my data I employed two analytic strategies. Interviews were analyzed according to themes

aligned with my research questions. Documents and interview transcripts were analyzed using discourse analysis. Although professional resources and research literature on models of literacy that pertain to young children employ the term “critical literacy” rather than “critical awareness,” in collecting and analysing my data, I inferred tensions between participants’ interpretations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program* and their perspectives on literacy in young children.

Coming to the Research

Upon looking at *the Revised Program* and noticing that it contains no theoretical and little practical explanation of critical awareness, my thoughts about the significance of its inclusion in the language learning expectations section of the document were threefold. First, I thought about the constraints on the practice of teaching critical awareness in Ontario’s publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms. In particular, I wondered whether it was possible for young children to be critically aware of the print literacy and media materials that they will come in contact with between the ages of three and six years old. I also thought about the wording of the expectations of critical awareness in conjunction with their inclusion in *the Revised Program*. Although critical thinking and literacy (which are related to, but not synonymous with critical awareness) are highly political issues in education, the way in which critical awareness is presented in *the Revised Program* appears to eliminate all explicit or implicit politically charged language.

Finally, I thought about how *the Revised Program*’s inclusion of critical awareness learning expectations opened possibilities for young children and the potential consequences of including critical awareness instruction in Ontario’s publicly-funded

Kindergarten programs. A child who is between the ages of three and six years old is exposed to myriad influences. Based purely on casual observation, the Kindergarten-aged child is exposed not only to parental and familial influence, but to popular culture, and political, ethical, and religious authoritative voices and most importantly, is a member of a consumer group, the youngest target of blatant and subtle marketing ploys. For instance, a hot air balloon flying over a neighbourhood is a novelty and a source of great amusement for young children, but it also serves another purpose altogether when shaped into the cartoon mascot of a particular brand of food products. Indeed, the influence that marketing has over young children is as intentional as it is pervasive. Young children, marketers are taught, are tomorrow's loyal consumers. As one marketing textbook puts it:

AT&T, who targets children in grade school as future customers has to wait for perhaps twenty years before the children reach its market age. During the waiting period, whatever length it may be, a marketer has to spend money to grow customers from childhood even though there is little if any return. But the ultimate results --- the most basic return --- are theoretically more faithful customers than those switched from competitors. That should mean more satisfaction for both consumer and marketer. (McNeal, 1992, p.91)

An anticipated consequence of critical awareness instruction in the publicly-funded Kindergarten classroom in Ontario is that students will regularly consider the perspective of marketers in designing advertising campaigns aimed at children, and will be therefore cognizant of the motives behind the message with which they are presented, and the positions they are asked to take up in response to advertisements.

I will introduce the example of a chain toy store that has small outlets in shopping malls to make this particular instructional consequence clear. The concept of the store is that a consumer can choose any toy animal he or she wants, and the employees will stuff

and accessorize the animal on-site. Upon first coming across the store, it seemed innocuous enough to me; however, it was not until I entered one of these stores that I realized the tacit principles of consumerism to which the establishment subscribes. Because of the presence of miniature name-brand running shoes and other brand-name accessories with which to adorn the stuffed animals, I henceforth thought of the store as a training facility for future consumers. By choosing a particular brand or a particular colour of running shoe corresponding with the animal's identity, the child/consumer is being apprenticed into a life-long habit of linking consumer choice to personal identity. Running shoe companies that put their names on teddy bears' shoes are "growing" (McNeal, 1992, p.91) loyal customers from a young age.

I mention the example above to illustrate that the endeavour to cultivate young children's awareness of differing perspectives such as the consumer's perspective *and* the perspective of the marketer or for-profit company, is important in the wider context of growing up in modern Ontario.

As a new teacher, I believe I am in an ideal position to analyze the professional language used by Kindergarten teachers in describing their interpretation and implementation of the new learning expectations of critical awareness. I have recently had exposure to the professional language of Kindergarten teachers working in a publicly-funded school board through my practice teaching and occasional teaching experience, but I have not had the extended professional experience required to become seeped in that language to the point where breaking down the meanings of professional terminology becomes difficult. As a teacher who is interested in early childhood education issues, I believe that the impact of this mandated early primary program on the

lives of young children is extremely important. I agree with Heydon and Wang (2006) when they point out that early childhood quasi-policy documents “directly affect [the] identity [of children] and life-course options, as well as quality of life” (p.31). In this way, any reform made to an early childhood educational program is bound to directly affect the children to whom the educational program is delivered. Here, changes made to the Ontario Kindergarten Program (1998, 2006) affect the identity, life-course options and quality of life of every child attending a Junior or Senior Kindergarten program in a publicly-funded school board in Ontario, that is 86% of four-year-old children and 91% of five-year-old children in the province, as illustrated in the graph above.

It is important to consider that the children represented by the numbers above participate in publicly-funded educational systems that are constructed around standardized educational programming. I believe it is very important that children acquire the skill of considering possibilities other than that standard and explore other learning options, so that they can be emancipated from imposed learning limitations that include bullying, discrimination, coercion, and pressure to maintain the status quo. As Arthur (2001) has it, critical awareness challenges “inequalities by identifying ways that texts reproduce disadvantage and marginalise minority groups” (p.184). Critical awareness also makes it possible for students to “empathise with others and to challenge dominant discourses” (p.185), even if the above upshots of critical awareness instruction in publicly-funded Ontario Kindergarten classrooms are not mentioned in *the Revised Program*.

The above reflections on critical awareness expectations in *the Revised Program* originally attracted me to this research project. However, having been a student teacher

under the guidance of one of the authors of the document in the year leading up to its release, I was already very interested in the shape that the new document would take. After learning about the philosophical commitments of *the Program* through observation of practice and examination of the document, I was anticipatory of the philosophical commitments of the new document. The philosophical commitments of the original document included the integration of literacy and numeracy skills, the emphasis on the teaching of basic skills such as phonemic awareness, and the importance and ramifications of learning through play or learning through “doing” (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p.8). Letters of the week, book buddies from other grades, books with patterns and rhymes, and segmenting the phonemes in students’ names were all instructional strategies used by the Kindergarten teacher under whom I studied, and were rooted in theory concerning the nature of childhood development and emergent literacy. In addition to her classroom practice, my supervisor-teacher gave workshops for Kindergarten teachers across her school board about early literacy activities and the integration of literacy and mathematics in the Kindergarten and early primary classroom. All of these workshops and activities were based on the same theories that were cited and endorsed by the Ontario Ministry of Education’s early literacy learning documents.

However, reflecting on the teaching practice that I observed and engaged with as a student teacher, it was also apparent to me that classroom practice reflects the instructional constraints that teachers must work within and the constraints that are placed on learning by mandated program documents. These constraints can play out in classrooms in ways that may or may not have been intended in the writing of educational program documents by the Ontario Ministry of Education. As I will demonstrate in

Chapter five of my study, educational program documents often position Kindergarten teachers and students as powerless, silent, and in need of guidance and even control. Children especially “can feel relatively powerless in their daily lives, regularly confronting the rules and regulations placed on them by parents, schools, and society” (Marsh, 2000, p. 210). However, as a teacher with an interest in young children and their literacy learning, I believe that positioning children and their teachers in such a way does a great disservice to young students. My study is therefore premised on a firm belief that after the first two school years of having critical awareness expectations mandated by *the Revised Program*, it is vital to determine how Kindergarten teachers interpret and implement critical awareness in Kindergarten classrooms.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. In the second chapter I draw on published literature to set out the context and background for the study. The third chapter outlines my theoretical framework and research methods. In the fourth chapter I describe and analyse the Ontario Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents and in the fifth chapter I present and analyse the interview data. The last chapter contains concluding remarks. I also discuss the significance of my study and make suggestions for further studies.

Chapter 2

Background and Context for the Study

In the first chapter of this report I argued that critical awareness is important to the lives of young school-aged children and that the teaching of critical awareness in publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms could open new possibilities for Kindergarten students in Ontario. In this chapter, I draw on published research and professional literature to provide the reader with background in the areas of critical awareness and literacy, and to contextualize my study within a body of literature in the area of policy interpretation.

Definitions

I begin this chapter by defining the terms critical awareness, critical literacy and critical thinking as they appear in the Ontario Ministry of Education's early literacy documents and related research literature. First of all, the term "critical awareness" is unique to *the Revised Program*. The glossary to *the Revised Program* defines critical awareness as "the ability to evaluate something from multiple angles" (p.63). This definition is vague and allows for reader interpretation, especially where it concerns the term "something." The glossary also provides the following example:

Children may begin to respond to a text they have heard from their own point of view, or may connect their thinking to a prior experience or another text that they know. Later, they may see events in the text from another person's point of view.
(p.63)

In this example, "something" refers to a "text." However, the word "text" is also undefined. Since other examples of applied critical awareness throughout the document

refer to various types of texts such as “animated works”, “posters”, and “cereal boxes” (p.39), I will take “texts” to mean not only traditional notions of books and other printed materials, but also “traces of people, contexts and implied practice” that include all materials that use symbol systems (Paul and Rowsell, 2005, p.37-38). I can now reconstruct *the Revised Program’s* definition of critical awareness as “the ability to evaluate, respond to, or connect to a text (including print texts such as books, media texts such as cartoons, posters, or works of art, or non-traditional texts such as advertisements or food packages) from multiple perspectives.”

The differences between critical awareness and critical literacy would be immaterial to this study were it not for the absence of studies that use the term “critical awareness” in discussions of early literacy learning. So far in early childhood education, the focus of published research has been on critical literacy. I found no published research in the literature of early childhood education that uses the term “critical awareness.” Barbara Comber (2003), for example, notes that early childhood research focussed on critical literacy have been undertaken by researchers “for the past two decades” (p.355). It is therefore important to discover what Comber and the other researchers in the area of critical literacy in early childhood education can offer to the understanding of critical awareness instruction for teachers in publicly-funded Ontario Kindergarten classrooms. Whether or not critical awareness has been intentionally or unintentionally introduced in the context of these studies is an interesting question that I explore later in the chapter through an examination of case studies of critical literacy in early primary classrooms.

What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy has four dimensions: by practicing critical literacy, students of any age disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and take action (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, and Henkin, 2002). Comber (2003) presents an excellent overview of the research done in the field of critical literacy in early childhood education. She states that the introduction of critical literacy in education drew on the work of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire worked with rural people in Brazil, teaching them to read by employing a strategy of questioning the circumstances of their lives. The strategy is known as problem posing². Critical literacy is here conceptualized as the practice of becoming aware of those contingent things that are accepted by the students as given, thus allowing the literacy learners to become emancipated from domination by illegitimate sources of power.

Jennifer O'Brien (1994), a teacher-researcher in Australia, had her early primary students ask the following questions of their mothers' junk mail: "Who was this written for? Whose parents are omitted? What is this text trying to do to me?" (cited in Luke, 2000, p.455). Another study of critical literacy focused on the sharing of books by a teacher with her grade one students. These books were filled with "characters [who] were marginalized in some way as a result of the existing systems of power" and thus the books spawned discussion on "what could or should be done differently" (Leland, Harste, and Huber, 2005, p.258). Critical literacy has also been defined as an activity in which students actively participate. For instance, some researchers note that through critical literacy, "as children construct meaning, they analyze texts for hidden biases" (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2000, p.150), effectively learning to comprehend texts by

² For further details, see: Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Herder and Herder. (Original work published 1968)

questioning and challenging their meaning.

From my examination of *the Revised Program*, I concluded that the Ontario Ministry of Education requires Kindergarten students to acquire critical awareness within the context of their literacy activities since the expectations of critical awareness are located in the language section of *the Revised Program*. Critical awareness, as I have mentioned, is the consideration of literary and media materials from different “angles” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63). In instructing students to be critically literate, on the other hand, teachers encourage students to actively analyse and question texts and their worlds and to rewrite texts and their worlds in order to emancipate themselves from any suppressing or oppressing ideologies that may be inherent in those texts or worlds. Critical awareness may be one component of critical literacy, but the two terms should not be conflated. For example, Vasquez’s (2004) work with children focused on critical literacy, and contained elements of critical awareness as it is defined by *the Revised Program*. The inclusion of critical awareness in the language section of *The Revised Program* (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 35) and the glossary definition of critical awareness that focuses on literacy learning, leads me to conclude that critical awareness is taught as a component of critical literacy.

In *the Revised Program*, two literacy expectations contain the term critical awareness. These expectations state that “by the end of Kindergarten, children will: demonstrate understanding and critical awareness of a variety of written materials that are read by and with the teacher” and “demonstrate a beginning understanding and critical awareness of media texts” (p.35). However, there are also specific expectations in *the Revised Program*, which serve to “describe the knowledge and skills in greater detail”

(p.5). These specific expectations also provide guiding examples, some of which implicitly or explicitly refer to critical awareness. For instance, one of the expectations of reading response provides “teacher prompts” as follows: “after reading a book about a forest: ‘How do you think the author feels about forests? How do you think the author wants *us* to feel about forests?’...after reading a book about a social issue relevant to the class: ‘Who is this book written for? What would this story be about from another point of view?’” (p.37). Teacher prompt examples are also given for the expectation that children will respond to media materials: “‘Whom do you think the people who created this cartoon made it for?’ ‘Who do you think likes to watch cartoons or animated works?’ ‘What is it about this cartoon that makes you want to watch it?’” (p.39). Further examples include asking students questions such as “‘Sometimes when you buy cereal, there are toys in the box. Why do you think the people who made the cereal put toys in there?’” (p.39)

The above examples indicate that critical awareness encompasses the skill of identifying perspective in literary and media materials. If one examines an undergraduate-level textbook in critical thinking, critical awareness most resembles the ability to identify “vested interest” (intentional) and “bias” (unintentional) in texts (Murray and Kujundzic, 2005, p.81). However, while critical awareness is applied strictly to print literacy or media materials, the identification of vested interest and bias is meant to be used by students to discern the value of information presented to them across any or all academic disciplines.

Critical Literacy Early Childhood Education Case Studies

Comber (2003) points out that while critical literacy studies with adults and

adolescences are not new, the field of research in early childhood education is both new and sparse (p.355). As mentioned earlier, all of the studies that have been completed thus far have focused on critical literacy, and none have studied critical awareness in Kindergarten or early primary literacy instruction. The case studies that have been undertaken in Kindergarten and early primary classrooms fall roughly into two categories: those that involve teacher-initiated critical literacy, and those that involve child-initiated critical literacy and require the learning interests and motivations of the children themselves in order to fuel the program. Calfee and Wadleigh (1992), for example, start from the child's interest in content areas, allowing "students to explore virtually anything they choose" (p.29). Vasquez's (2004) study in a suburban Toronto Kindergarten classroom would also fit into the latter category. The key to Vasquez's strategy is to begin with issues that are important to her students (p.97), thereby insuring motivation and comprehension. This child-initiated instructional strategy came about as a result of Vasquez's desire that students would learn through social action. However, it was important to Vasquez that the students were not "simply engaging in social action to please their teacher" (Vasquez, 2000, p.11). Because she used child-initiated critical literacy instruction, Vasquez found that "issues raised by the children led to conversations that moved well beyond the traditional topics of study often associated with primary school curriculum" (p.2). She also concluded that "when curriculum is negotiated using the social worlds of children, learning is sustained and generative" (p.138). Indeed, child-initiated programs are favoured by some researchers since students are "more likely to learn to read and write those texts that they see as relevant to their lives" (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener, 2004, p.13).

In one paper about the use of critical literacy by a first-grade student, the starting point for critical literacy was not the student's interests, but her need to question and therefore emancipate herself from "inequitable teaching practices" (Norton, 2005, p.119). Pam, the student in question, "reads the presence and actions" of teachers as texts, as well as "reading herself as a text" (p.121). Norton mentions that from a traditional notion of the young child, Pam may be seen as acting out. Indeed, one teacher who interacted with Pam negatively commented that "she always has something to say" (p.121). In thinking about critical awareness, it can be seen that by flouting rules which deny her a sense of her own identity, Pam is considering another perspective from the one presented to her by her teachers.

Some teacher-researchers, for example Kim Huber in Leland et al.'s (2005) study, do not begin from the questions that the children pose in the early primary classroom. While Vasquez (2004) read children's literature and allowed the students to respond to and question the implicit assumptions in the literature, Huber presents critical texts to her grade one students. Critical texts explore difference, give voice to marginalized people or peoples, point toward possible action, and explore taken-for-granted systems of meaning that work to position people in particular ways. Critical texts do not make difference invisible, nor do they provide "happily-ever-after" endings (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, p.388-398). Huber (Leland et al., 2005) presented critical texts to her students that explicitly represented narratives concerned with specific social issues such as homelessness. Like Vasquez, however, she found that the students are consequently motivated to respond to the literature through their art and writing (Leland et al., 2005, p.258). Similarly, the stories that Chafel, Flint, Hammel, and Pomeroy (2007) told their

students concerning social issues such as poverty were used for teacher-initiated critical literacy instruction. The teachers chose the literature and, although they allowed students to ask questions related to the literature, they consequently led the discussions that revolved around social issues. The researchers report that in some cases this approach resulted in class discussions that “remained on the surface” (Chafel et al., 2007, pp.77-78). The discussions did go deeper, however, once discussions moved to the “more immediate and local” (p.78). “In the spirit of critical literacy”, they concluded, “teachers should grant children the freedom to express themselves and weave life experiences into learning, while seriously addressing issues of social justice, equity, and diversity” (p.74). Although moving to the local and immediate in regards to the social issues addressed constitutes a more child-initiated approach, Norton (2005) criticizes this approach as compared to a fully child-initiated form of instruction. She believes that:

This view positions students, especially young children, as beings without knowledge and critical pedagogues as those who are able to fill the vacancies. This focus denies the knowledge and agencies that young children bring with them to negotiate their classrooms. (p.119)

According to both the researchers who studied child-initiated critical literacy and the researchers who studied teacher-initiated critical literacy, engaging with authentic, local, or immediate topics results in more effective critical literacy learning in early childhood classrooms. Even teacher-initiated programs such as a third grade writer’s workshop in which stories gradually went from being about pop culture (Heffernan and Lewison, 2003, p.435) to being about incidents of schoolyard bullying (p.439) can provide a helpful starting point for critical literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms. However, it is child-initiated instruction that best addresses Purcell-Gates et

al.'s (2004) call for *authentic* literacy learning in the classroom. In Purcell-Gates et al.'s framework, critical awareness and critical literacy are both social practices in which literacy is learnt as it is practiced. By critically studying issues that are local and salient to the students, and by taking “up children’s concerns” (p.452), teachers of critical awareness insure that the complexity of students’ reading and writing will increase.

Drawing on their personal theoretical commitments, teacher-researchers such as Vasquez (2004) set up their critical literacy-based curricula and then observe the results, rather than starting from a point of faith in proven best practices. Although none of the researchers claim to have studied *critical awareness* in Kindergarten or early primary instruction, I inferred that the assumption underlying their work is that children as young as three years of age are intellectually *ready* for exposure to critical literacy. The teacher-researchers who study critical literacy in the early childhood classroom undertake their studies before such contemplation, and present the intellectual work done by the students as results of their studies. Vasquez, for example, “takes her Kindergarten children far past what most expect these young learners can comprehend” (Maxson, 2005, p.96). Similarly, Calfee and Wadleigh (1992) insist that “the structures and strategies of critical literacy work equally well in Kindergarten or in 6th grade, in peer coaching or in faculty meetings” (p.28).

Positioning Kindergarten or early primary students as not yet ready for the questions they can pose when provided with opportunities to pursue critical literacy or to engage with the topics dealt with through critical literacy means that much of those children’s intellectual prowess remains untapped. First grade teacher Kim Huber discovered that her students “made stronger connections to these books [that deal with

issues of social justice] than to the ‘happy’ books that she usually read” (Leland et al., 2005, p.258). Huber also found that after implementing a critical literacy program, students “put considerable more effort into their written and artistic responses, took on multiple perspectives, and made lots of intertextual connections” (p.258), which fulfills *the Revised Program’s* expectations of critical awareness.

There is a possibility, as evidenced by the case studies in early childhood critical literacy, that assumptions about the ways in which children think about the world undermine the intellectual resources that children bring to school with them (Vasquez, 2004; Comber, 2001). This is Egan’s point in his 1989 book *Teaching As Storytelling*. In that book, Egan observes that children show their readiness to learn concepts that are abstract or far removed from their own experience through their interest in fantasy and its prevalence in their lives. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that in being critical a child or an adult is drawing on experiences that may not be their own (from “multiple angles” as *the Revised Program* mentions on p.63) and on abstract concepts such as “struggle for freedom against arbitrary violence” or even the struggle for “knowledge against ignorance” (Egan, 1989, p.14), topics that the fantasy genre addresses repeatedly.

During the course of their year-long child-initiated critical literacy program, Vasquez (2004) and her students engaged in critical literacy on a number of topics. They talked about the toys given away with Happy Meals at McDonald’s restaurants, and how these toys are “a way of maintaining child consumers and the gendered way they went about doing this” (p.123). They also engaged with the way in which Kindergarten students, because of their age or developmental characteristics, are excluded from school

events. Vasquez (2001) describes an event called “the French Café.” This event, which included all other grades in Vasquez’s grade one to eight elementary school, excluded only Kindergarten students. When her students discovered their exclusion, they wrote a petition and delivered it to the school administration, successfully campaigning for Kindergarten student inclusion at the same event for the following school year.

Policy Interpretation and Implementation

An important aspect of this study is the discussion of policy interpretation by teachers. Although not a policy document, strictly speaking, *the Revised Program* states the knowledge and skills Kindergarten-aged children in Ontario’s publicly-funded education systems are required to learn and acquire to support their formal entrance into public education in grade one. I studied the interpretation of the two overall expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program* as if together they consisted of a new policy being implemented at a local, classroom level. Research in the field of policy implementation is therefore pertinent to my study.

Much research has been done in the past on policy implementation in general, and on the implementation of new educational policies by teachers specifically. For instance, Spillane, Reiser and Reimer (2002) claim that the way in which policy becomes interpreted, and therefore implemented, relies on three main “dimensions.” These dimensions are “[the] existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), [the] situation [of those who will implement the curriculum], and the policy signals” (p.388). They argue that while older models of policy implementation described policy as the stimulus and policy implementation as the outcome of that stimulus (p.391), they see the situation as much more complex. Prior knowledge, personal interpretations,

biases, and misunderstandings can all have an effect on the way that policy is implemented. Spillane et al. also point out that new policies or new ideas that come up in those policies, such as the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*, can be interpreted as more familiar than the policy writers' original meaning (p.397).

Spillane et al. also point out that local social contexts and local collective funds of knowledge can have profound effects on the interpretation and therefore the meaning of policy (p.404-409). The term "funds of knowledge" was coined by Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti (2005). According to Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky (2008), "funds of knowledge are the various resources students bring with them to school. These resources can be cultural, intellectual, physical, and the like" (p.520). Although it is important to recognize that students bring their own funds of knowledge with them when they enter the classroom, it is most important for the purposes of this thesis to recognize that teachers, as well, bring their own funds of knowledge to their teaching practice. For instance, the particular culture that is set up between and amongst Kindergarten teachers in a school, in a school board, and with teaching and administrative colleagues makes up part of the funds of knowledge teachers bring to the interpretation of educational policy and to their teaching practice.

At a local (i.e. classroom) level, interpretive resources such as collective funds of knowledge come into play to change the meaning and intent of policy (Ball, 1994, p.16). As Ball points out, "state problems...drive and inform policies and produce tensions and incoherences within policy making" (p.4-5). In the course of my analysis in Chapter four, I will explore such tensions produced by a juxtaposition of Kindergarten teachers' funds of knowledge with the Ontario Ministry of Education's early literacy documents. Ball

also mentions that “some of the main thrusts of recent education policy can be related back to or understood in terms of these generic problems” (p.5). As I will demonstrate in Chapter four, an important problem that produces tensions related to the Ministry of Education’s early literacy policy document is “the problem of capital accumulation and economic efficiency” (p.5).

The most important finding from policy research for this study is that individual funds of knowledge, belief and value systems, as well as collective funds of knowledge and social belief and value systems are brought into play during the interpretation of the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. My analysis explores what this means for my Kindergarten teacher participants’ understandings of critical awareness.

Having reviewed the research literature pertinent to the study, I will now move on to discuss my own study. I first set out the theoretical framework that informs my research and explain my research methodology. As noted in the previous chapter, in Chapter four I present the documents I examined and my analysis of those documents, and in Chapter five I explore how critical awareness is interpreted and implemented according to my Kindergarten teacher participants.

Chapter 3

The Study

Introduction

The nature of literacy in young children and how literacy develops over time are subjects of much debate and certain views have dominated and then fallen from prominence. Traces of older perspectives as well as new ideas inform program documents and advice texts for teachers. Moreover, as policy researchers have observed, teachers bring their funds of knowledge to the readings of new texts. I asked of the Kindergarten teachers who participated in the study the following questions: How do you interpret the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*? And how do you implement the expectations of critical awareness in your classroom?

Collectively, perspectives on literacy in young children provide a theoretical framework for my study of teachers' interpretations of critical awareness expectations. By providing an overview of various perspectives that inform the field, I therefore provide the groundwork for understanding the discursive organization of critical awareness as it appears in the *Revised Program*, that is to say ways in which my participants and I talked about critical awareness and the ways in which my participants said they implemented the critical awareness expectations.

The second half of the chapter contains a description of the methods I employed to conduct my research and discusses methodological issues related to the study. In addition to a description of my research activities, the section includes a discussion of a range of methodological approaches associated with discourse analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The theories and perspectives I describe in this chapter situate my study in the field and serve to situate the perspectives on early literacy brought forth by my participants. Following Purcell-Gates et al. (2004), I identify two broad “lenses” (p.87) through which researchers and teachers view literacy learning. The first is the psychological lens, and the second is the sociocultural lens.

Psychological perspectives on literacy learning.

Under the psychological perspective I have grouped maturation theory, cognitive theories, and the biomedical approach to literacy teaching and learning. The common understandings expressed in these theories are that literacy is a *skill* (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.26) that has to develop in some way and that “reading and learning how to read involve the same mental processes for everyone” (p.43).

The idea that “maturation is the precondition of reading readiness” (Mason and Sinha, 1993, p.139) has had a long legacy in educational thought. Mason and Sinha observe that readiness has an “emphasis on ‘waiting’ until the child is ready to learn to read” (p.139). Although the instructional strategy associated with this theory, namely that of delaying “reading instruction until a child is ‘ready’ to read” (p.139) has been abandoned by the Ontario Ministry of Education and by teachers of early literacy, the idea that children need to possess “some prerequisite skills” (p.139) in order to learn to read *effectively* is still prevalent in the Ministry’s early literacy program documents (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2006, p.17). I therefore inferred that readiness continues to be an influential notion for teachers of Kindergarten in publicly-funded Ontario schools. The maturation theory of learning and development was popular among educators prior to and

in some cases after the introduction of whole language approaches (Gillen and Hall, 2003, p.4). Maturationists held that maturity was “the most important factor in learning to read” (Mandel Morrow and Tracey, 2006, p.79). Reading instruction was thus “ignored or avoided” (p.79) by teachers of young children. Maturation theory also stressed a child’s individual development: “the child literacy learner is positioned as a maturing individual – a biological subject – who grows and blossoms with the right conditions and support” (Comber, 2003, p.355). It is also apparent that proponents of the maturation theory considered that play was the primary vehicle for learning, and that they considered play time the most important part of a Kindergarten student’s day. It is worth noting, however, that the maturationist view was contested, even during its dominant years. In “Toward a Theory of Instruction”, Jerome Bruner (1966) states that the idea of reading readiness “is a mischievous half-truth largely because it turns out that one *teaches* readiness...one does not simply wait for it” (p.29).

Maturation theories inform teachers’ perspectives toward critical awareness instruction insofar as teachers begin to teach critical awareness based on their beliefs about when students are ready to learn. However, the original maturation theorists did not make clear when students would be ready for formal instruction in interpretive skills such as critical awareness. The maturation theory has largely been discredited by researchers, but I will provide evidence that it continues to be influential in the way literacy learning is approached by the Ontario Ministry of Education and by some of my participants.

Cognitive theories about literacy learning emerged as an alternative to earlier behaviourist theories of learning which were popular in the 1960s, and in response to the rise of computer models of human thought and learning (Davis and Gardner, 1993,

p.193). Proponents of cognitive developmental theories view literacy learning as a process involving “stages of skill learning” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.42), but differ from the maturationists in that they consider “whether children who had all these complex [literacy] abilities [such as cognitive perception] were applying them to comprehending and making print long before they moved into formal schooling” (Gillen and Hall, 2003, p.5).

An example of research underpinned by cognitive approaches is that of Ashby and Rayner (2006), who were interested in the question of how skilled literacy evolves out of early literacy. According to Ashby and Rayner, skilled literacy must be supported by and preceded by certain important steps: “reading words quickly and accurately is a necessary step in becoming a skilled reader” (Ashby and Rayner, 2006, p.52-53). According to other proponents of this perspective such as Chall (1983), “each [developmental stage] must be completed before the learner progresses to the next” (cited in Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.44). Many other researchers studying early literacy adhere to cognitive theories. Some researchers assert that “the most important acquisitions at the start [of reading instruction] are phonemic awareness and letter knowledge” (Ehri and Roberts, 2006, p.113). These skills are comprised of sub-skills such as isolating, blending, recognizing, segmenting, and removing. Biemiller (2006), on the other hand, insists that in order for children to successfully read in later grades, they “require *both* fluent word recognition skills *and* an average or above-average vocabulary” (p.41). Biemiller clearly puts the emphasis onto those skill and knowledge requirements needed for literacy learning to occur.

According to cognitive perspectives, complex interpretive skills such as critical

literacy cannot be achieved until students have accumulated the amount of general knowledge that high school or college students possess. According to Chall (1983), critical literacy is “seen to correspond with the increased maturity and experience that high school and college students bring with them. In these stages, students are able to understand and critically analyze points of view different from their own” (cited in Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.60). Most literature related to critical literacy positions these skills as “most appropriate for older or more advanced students” (Comber, 2003, p.355).

According to Heydon and Iannacci (2005), the biomedical approach to literacy learning and teaching is a relatively new approach taken by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and is “a hegemonic innovation in literacy education and research” (p.2). By the biomedical approach, “the shape of early literacy curricula and literacy difficulties are problems to be worked out through biomedical science by ‘scientists.’” (p.7). The biomedical approach has come to the forefront of early literacy learning program documents due to politically-funded documents such as *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study Final Report* (McCain and Mustard, 1999). In an analysis of McCain and Mustard’s final report, it is stated that the final report is based on “taken-for-granted representations of...child development as a combination of exclusively biological processes” (Stooke, 2003, p.91). Biomedical approaches assume that “science can provide the solution to social problems” (p.96). As Stooke states, “[T]he authors perpetuate the myth of progress and mistakenly suggest that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ scientific solution can ameliorate a complex set of social problems. To assume that science can deliver a fairy tale ending,” Stooke says, “is arrogant” (p.98). Despite this, the Ministry’s early literacy documents are heavily influenced and reference (e.g., Ministry of

Education, 2005, p.3.3 and p.3.30) *the Early Years Study* and the concept of literacy therein described.

In using terminology associated with the biomedical approach to literacy learning, it is as if the Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards are making an analogy between literacy skills and a limb or organ that must develop in a normative way in order to function in a normative way. Critiques of the biomedical approach include that the use of medicinal or scientific language pathologizes non-normative students and reduces them to traits (Kumar and Mitchell, 2004, p.133). Such constructions help to establish the ideological and contingent biomedical approach as common sense or as a “given” in the Discourse of publicly-funded education. As MacLure (2003) states, “texts are often at their most persuasive when they don’t seem at all rhetorical, but rather pass themselves off as fact or realistic description” (pp. 80-81).

A problematic consequence related to the psychological perspective is the assertion that best practices come out of scientific research based on evidence (Ministry of Education, 2003b, p.3). The psychological perspective endorses research that is “conducted in research labs where conditions could be controlled” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.45) rather than in naturalistic settings, but as Heydon and Iannacci (2005) point out, “labs are not classrooms” (p.12). Gee (1992) states that “research that looks at ‘best practices’ without detailing the prevailing socio-political conditions participates in attempts to depoliticize something that is inherently political” (cited in Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.66). Indeed, such neglect means that many students who are becoming literate receive an education that includes “filling in blanks, copying letters or words” and phonemes rather than the “production, analysis, and response” (Leland et al., 2005,

p.259) of and to literacy materials. This approach to literacy, which favours the teaching of arbitrary bits of language based on best practices worries researchers such as Leland et al., who believe that it starts the literacy learner off with a “dysfunctional view of what literacy is for and what it can do in the world” (p.259). However, Kindergarten teachers such as the participants in this study often strive to implement best practices since they are mandated to do so by the authoritative texts made accessible by their school boards.

Another theory on literacy learning is known as emergent literacy. This theory came about as a response to “both behaviorist theory and the notion of neural ripening” (Mason and Sinha, 1993, p.141) which underpin the idea of reading readiness. It emerged as a field of study in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Gillen and Hall, 2003, p.5), when the study of how some (exceptional) children came to school knowing how to read slowly transitioned to the study of how *all* children have this capacity. Researchers such as Marie Clay (1969) began to observe children’s behaviours while they engaged with print in order to uncover the strategies that children employ to make sense of that omnipresent print (Gillen and Hall, 2003, p.5-6). The ideas presented by this theory are that:

- Literacy emerges before children are formally taught to read.
- Literacy is defined to encompass the whole act of reading, not merely decoding.
- The child’s point of view and active involvement with emerging literacy constructs is featured.
- The social setting for literacy learning is not ignored. (Mason and Sinha, 1993, p.141)

Researchers with an interest in emergent literacy study “directionality, reading print in

context, the ability to distinguish print from other graphic forms, understanding the function of print and that the print has meaning, pretend or invented reading or writing, and shared reading and writing” (p.141). These are all elements of literacy learning that the Ministry of Education has included in its early literacy documents (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2003a). The importance of social context to literacy learning is recognized in the emergent literacy theory (Mason and Sinha, 1993, p.141). However, the emergent literacy theory still directs teachers’ attention to school-like literacy skill development and to the development of print literacy in the individual child.

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy learning.

The major difference between the psychological perspective and the sociocultural perspective is that proponents of psychological perspectives think of literacy as a *skill* or set of skills and sub-skills, and proponents of sociocultural perspectives think of literacy (or literacies) as a group of social practices (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.26). Vygotsky (1978) is considered the grandfather of the sociocultural perspective on literacy learning because of his “recognition of the role of culture in learning” (Gillen and Hall, 2003, p.6). Most teachers are familiar with Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development that emphasizes the social nature of learning and the importance of scaffolding new skills for young students.

Other proponents of the sociocultural perspective assert that “*literacy practices* are larger than acts of print-based reading and writing. Literacy practices are the socioculturally related ways of using written language, and they involve values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and social relationships” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.32). Many proponents of the sociocultural perspective therefore argue against teaching literacy “in

schools as if it were acontextual” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.66).

Gillen and Hall (2003) describe the most recent perspective on literacy in young children. “Early childhood literacy” (p.9) is a perspective on “young children’s relationship with written language” (p.3) that has been influenced by older perspectives. In particular, it has been influenced by studies of “the nature of literacy outside of schooling” (p.6), and the belief that the cultural context, family context, and the context of literacy within language are important. Studies of the interplay of identity and literacy learning are also important especially the shift from studying print literacy exclusively to studying “the ways in which meaning is made in social contexts” (p.8). Gillen and Hall also claim that early childhood literacy is most importantly concerned with childhood as a literate state in and of itself rather than a state of emergent literacy, or as “a stage on a path to some future literate state” (p.10). Early childhood literacy, according to these authors, is also a non-static perspective, which will continue to be influenced by myriad other research disciplines and perspectives.

Proponents of the psychological perspective do not allow that there might exist a difference in *kind* of literacy interaction, rather than a difference in *degree* or frequency of literacy interaction. By contrast, proponents of sociocultural perspectives explain the range of developmental levels among children by pointing out that some “children...have limited access to the informal informational lessons that can be transmitted through day-to-day interactions” (Neuman, 2001, p.30). Proponents of the sociocultural perspective look to sociocultural factors outside formal instruction for explanation of individual literacy differences, rather than faulting bad instruction or a deficit in the learner (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.73).

A recent addition to the sociocultural perspective is a group of approaches known by the umbrella term New Literacy Studies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Pahl and Rowsell write that New Literacy Studies widens the definition of literacy to include studies of multimodal literacy, for example the ability to work with materials such as web pages, advertisements, artwork, and videogames, local and personal texts and the interplay between literacy practices and students' identities. Pahl and Rowsell provide an excellent overview of the New Literacy Studies, and explain that proponents of the New Literacy Studies do not consider "the acquisition of literacy as a set of skills" (p.1). Rather, *literacies* are social practices that take place through "literacy events" (p.9) such as composing a dual-language book using pictures and words (p.8). The New Literacy Studies emerged out of challenges to "traditional phonics, whole language, and, even, balanced literacy models of literacy" (p.4).

Proponents of sociocultural perspectives have been accused of narrowing their focus to a single small group and of neglecting individual development needs (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.80), developmental difficulties (p.77), and the developmental subskills that many learners need to be explicitly taught in order to become literate (p.75). Purcell-Gates and her colleagues point out that if we take the literacy learning of our students to heart, we cannot ignore these aspects of that learning. By ignoring the psychological perspective on literacy in favour of a solely sociocultural perspective, teacher-researchers do no favours to students' print literacy development (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.75).

Balanced literacy.

The term "balanced literacy," according to Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky

(2008), becomes problematic when attempts are made to define it. Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky put forth a concept of balanced literacy in which teachers balance components of literacy instruction according to Cambourne's (2002) conditions for literacy learning. These conditions include engagement, immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, use, approximation, and response (cited in Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky, 2008, p.23). For the purposes of my thesis, I adopt the above conception of balanced literacy. My participants did name the same instructional components of balanced literacy as the authors of *Constructing Meaning*, including "interactive language experiences", "interactive read-alouds", "shared reading", "guided reading", "independent reading", "reader response activities", and "sound study and word study" (p.27-28), but it is important to recognize that they may not have conceptualized balanced literacy in the same way.

The four resources model of literacy.

Luke and Freebody (1999) formulated the four resources of literacy in 1990. The model consists of four roles that are necessary but not sufficient for learners to take on in relation to literacy. The four roles are: "code breaker", "meaning maker", "text user", and "text critic" (n.p.). This model has a role to play in any discussion of critical literacy since it is normative in nature and encompasses the ways in which students can learn how to be in relation to texts. The role of text critic is especially salient to my study. By taking on the role of text critic, students:

critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral -- that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people's ideas -- and that their designs and

discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways. (n.p.)

Luke and Freebody's four resources model is also important for this thesis since, as I will demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, each of the necessary but not sufficient roles is not addressed in traditional notions of literacy in young children or by the Ontario Ministry of Education's documents pertaining to literacy in young children.

The perspective taken by critical literacy researchers in early literacy.

Learning, according to the sociocultural perspective, is not the acquisition of discrete skills or sub-skills and pieces of knowledge, but is rather the coming into *ways of knowing* in which "learners move from legitimate peripheral participation [in a group or community] to expertise or central participation as they learn" (Moje and Lewis, 2007, p.16). It is this perspective that researchers in the field of critical literacy in early years take towards literacy learning. Psychological perspectives on literacy learning do not figure in their work. Calfee and Wadleigh (1992), for example, explain that their project READ incurs "a shift from [a focus on] basic skills to *critical literacy*" (p.28, emphasis original)

Critical literacy researchers deem that young children are ready for critical literacy since critical literacy is just another "dimension of the practice" (Comber, 2001, p.169). Rather than being a next step or a higher thinking skill, critical literacy is a dimension of literacy at any stage. Comber points out that due to the intrinsic attribute that language has for dealing with power, "children come to school with rich resources for critical analysis" (p.170). Arthur (2001) also states that "young children are very aware of issues of language and power, which is evident as they play, talk about and dramatise their understandings of their social worlds" (p.184). Vasquez (2004)

constructed her critical literacy curriculum from the perspective that “youngsters enter school with a unique and developed language and a wealth of knowledge” (Maxson, 2005, p.96). Vasquez (2004) explains that “children who learn using a curriculum that is based on what matters to them are more likely to feel that what they are learning is important to their lives” (p.141). While according to Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) literacy development may follow a predictable path, judging readiness by specific testable markers ignores the myriad literacy skills and strengths that children already possess (Comber, 2001, p.169).

Sinclair (2005) echoes this point, adding that children “in every economic class” (p.15) are exposed to myriad forms of narrative before they enter school, thus being well prepared to analyse narrative forms. However, Sinclair also accounts for the fact that critical literacy has not been well dealt with by early years teachers and early literacy researchers because of the need to “preserve the view of the young child as innocent, naïve and in need of protection” (Comber, 2001, p.169).

Teachers are also constrained by traditional thinking about literacy learning. Critical literacy is often conceptualized as exposing children to “inappropriate” (Leland et al., 2005, p.266) topics and discussions that are “too abstract for [young students] to understand” (p.267). Kim Huber, for example, felt that she must “choose ‘happy’ books to read at story time and to focus book discussions more on story elements like beginning, middle, and end than on more abstract topics like equity and social justice” (p.257-258). Vasquez (2004) observed that critical literacy is “associated with cynicism and unpleasurable work,” (p.30). Vasquez goes on to say that critical literacy “does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance; rather, it means looking at an issue or topic

in different ways, analysing it, and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement” (p.30).

The purpose of my study was to explicate or map (Campbell and Gregor, 2002) the discursive organization of critical awareness instruction in early primary education. I undertook two kinds of data collection and analysis, one textual and one based on interviews with the teachers whose roles mandate the use of the texts. In the second half of this chapter I discuss my study, how I conducted the research and the assumptions that informed my actions.

The Study

In this section I outline my research methodology and the specific methods I used to recruit participants, collect data, and analyze the data. I also explain the ways in which research issues such as rigor, validity, and generalizability are addressed in my study.

The analytic strategies employed in the study are thematic coding and qualitative discourse analysis. Colloquially, the term discourse usually refers to “an organized system of statements” (Wetherell, 2001, p.23). Discourse, spelled with a lower case ‘d,’ is defined by Gee (1992, 1999) as the words as they are actually spoken. Lower case ‘d’ discourse can therefore be thought of as “language-in-use” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, p.17). In contrast to discourse, Discourse spelled with a capital ‘D’ connotes for Gee (1999) the “language, bodies, heads, and various props in the world” that serve to “apprentice new members” into the Discourse, to “form folk theories”, and to keep “everyone’s mental networks alike” if they are to be included in the Discourse (pp. 87-88). Discourse can therefore be thought of as “language-in-use plus other stuff” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, p.17). Discourses can also be thought of as “clubs” (Gee, 1999, p.143):

they are combinations of diverse components of a particular social world, its members and its material props such as pieces of literature. In poststructural analyses of discourse, discourse is also construed as more than just language. Post structuralism asserts that there is no universal truth or objective knowledge; rather there is only situated truth and partial knowledge. Post structuralists argue that “subjects are constituted within discourses that establish what it is possible (and impossible) to be” (MacLure, 2003, p.175).

I explored a post structural perspective on discourse and will distinguish discourse from Discourse by following Gee and adopting lower case “d” and capital D versions of the term. Because Discourses have been shown to give rise to norms that effect the interpretation and practice of its members (Gee, 1999, p.104), my study is concerned with the identification of Discourses as well as the analysis of discourse. I examined and applied discourse analysis strategies to my reading of *the Revised Program* and other Ontario Ministry of Education documents that address literacy curriculum for primary grades. I also identified themes in the interview data and noted the Discourses referenced in the interview data.

The Documents

The first phase of my study comprised the identification, collection, and analysis of key professional and quasi-policy documents that inform and mandate the work of Kindergarten teachers in Ontario’s publicly-funded school boards.

Discourse analysis.

The ideological nature of Discourses makes analysis by members themselves a difficult undertaking, a characteristic referred to as “opacity” (Fairclough, 2001, p.33).

Insight into any particular Discourse is available only to those who are “maladjusted” (Gee, 1992, p.151) to that Discourse. Here, the word “maladjusted” should not be read with its colloquial negative connotation, but with a rough translation to ‘being able to render the meaning of the discourse transparent’ that may be opaque to a fully-adjusted member of the Discourse. This characteristic of Discourse means that the data collected for my study are most easily analyzed by someone who, like myself, has been apprenticed into the Kindergarten teacher Discourse, but who is not necessarily a full member of that Discourse. I am not teaching full-time in a Kindergarten classroom, but occupy a “maladjusted” position of occasional elementary teacher and full-time scholar and novice researcher in education.

For critically oriented and poststructural researchers such as Gee, Norman Fairclough (2001) and Allan Luke (1996), Discourses are closely related to issues of power. This view of Discourse draws on Foucault’s philosophy which states that “discourses are inextricably linked to *institutions*...and to the *disciplines* that regularize and normalize the conduct of those who are brought within the ambit of those institutions” (MacLure, 2003, p.176, original emphasis). Language cannot be underestimated in the legitimization of power sources and the acceptance of the contingent as given (Fairclough, 2001, p.1). It is the goal of Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis to uncover these social functions, such as the legitimization of power sources and of power relations, in order to emancipate those who have been repressed by certain powerful Discourses.

Critical discourse analysis informs my analysis of early literacy learning professional resources and program documents for teachers. Specifically, I examined a

number of the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents and explored how the descriptions of critical awareness, students, teachers, and parents legitimize certain sources of power (Gee, 1992) and represent certain views as common sense (Fairclough, 2001, p.28). Where critical discourse analysis was employed, my research study became "a project of resistance to the institutionalized forgetting that takes place when matters attain the status of common sense, in educational policy, pedagogy and research itself" (MacLure, 2003, p.179), since "what passes as common-sense may not be in the best interest of students" (Heydon, 2005, p.386).

Informed by poststructural ideas, my approach to discourse analysis "acknowledge[s] the material world while calling attention to its shifting nature" (Heydon and Wang, 2006, p.31). I assumed that "truths are textual; that the way we see the world is 'always already' infected by language" (McLure, 2003, p.4). The analysis of the transcripts has, at times, characteristics of linguistic discourse analysis. However, I was not only interested in the linguistic details of my data, but also in the Discourse within which the discourse was affected and created its effects (McLure, 2003, p.186). I put aside the presumed incommensurability (McLure, 2003, p.23) of poststructural discourse analysis with linguistic discourse analysis in order to achieve the goals of discourse analysis posited by MacLure:

Discourse analysis needs to do two, virtually incompatible things. First, it needs to stick close to the details of particular texts..., worrying away at the word-y fabric out of which arguments are woven. But, secondly, analysis is also a matter of moving *away* from the details of the specific text---of moving back and forwards through other texts, of other times, to try to glimpse the vastly bigger fabric of intertextual associations within which each particular text is suspended. (p.23)

I employed linguistic and poststructural discourse analysis in examining the transcripts from the focus group and individual interview sessions in order to analyze the language used by the participants as professionals within a certain institution (education) and in an instantiation of that institution (publicly-funded early childhood education in Ontario) and as an interpretation of the critical awareness expectations within the document in question (p.176). By asking participants to articulate the meanings that they each attribute to the expectations of critical awareness, I produced analyses pertaining to not only critical awareness, but also the representation and positioning of students, teachers, and home-school communication in publicly-funded Kindergarten programs in Ontario. I determined the positions of children, teachers, home-school communication, and critical awareness by attending to the specific language used to talk about critical awareness, and by attending to the ways in which the participants positioned themselves and the ways that they could be in relation to critical awareness. I then analyzed the positions in which children, teachers, home-school communication, and critical awareness were placed by my participants to determine the meanings of the new program expectations of critical awareness at a local, classroom level.

In order to situate members in their Discourse, Gee (1999) advises researchers to ask themselves ““what must I assume this person (consciously or unconsciously) believes in order to make deep sense of what they are saying?”” (p.72) MacLure (2003) points out that, in order to do discourse analysis the researcher must “*suspend your belief in the innocence of words and the transparency of language as a window on an objectively graspable reality*” (p.12, original emphasis). By critically examining the interview transcripts and the Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents, I gained insights

into the ways in which the new program expectations of critical awareness were interpreted by the Kindergarten teachers who participated in my study. However, by undertaking this research study and performing my analysis of the set of interview transcripts, I meant not only to examine the language as it pertains to the profession of teaching Kindergarten and the institution of public education in Ontario, but also to give the participant teachers a forum in which to voice their opinion on the process of educational program design and implementation in publicly-funded Ontario school boards.

The Interviews

The second phase of the study was comprised of a focus group session and an individual interview session with Kindergarten teacher participants. The participants in the study were a group of seven Kindergarten teachers who work in a publicly-funded school board in southwestern Ontario. Their levels of professional experience ranged from approximately seven to over twenty years teaching Kindergarten children from ages three to six years old. The following pseudonyms are used in this study to protect the confidentiality of participants: Wendy, Brenda, Bernice, Margaret, Jane, Sophia, and Danielle.

Six of the participants met me for a focus group interview, while another teacher requested to meet with me for an individual interview. The focus group, which was set up as a professional discussion between colleagues concerning the new program expectations of critical awareness included in *the Revised Program*, was an extension of an informal discussion group that met on a sporadic basis to discuss various professional matters of interest. Many of the members of this regular discussion group also met with

me for the focus group session, and so members had an existing professional rapport with each other prior to the session. There already existed, therefore, an emerging Discourse community amongst my participants. The prior existence of a Discourse community, furthermore, resulted in greater richness of data collected through the focus group interview session. The discussion group took place at a discussion group member's place of residence, and the individual interview took place in the participant's classroom. Participants were invited to describe their interpretations of the program expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*, and how their interpretations affected and/or resulted from their practice. Both focus group and individual interview sessions were audio recorded, and I took notes during the interview sessions. The sessions were then transcribed and analyzed for recurring issues, questions, and themes. The major thematic categories used to analyze the focus group data were the ways in which Kindergarten teachers, Kindergarten students, and critical awareness were represented and positioned by the participants in this study.

The focus group interview session proceeded as an informal discussion. The questions I aimed to address during the session were as follows, but these served only as prompts where necessary:

- What does the term critical awareness mean to you?
- What are your overall impressions of these expectations of critical awareness and their explanations in *the Revised Program*?
- Have you encountered any confusion about these expectations?
- Have you been provided with any formal professional development related to these expectations, or did you informally experience any professional

development related to these expectations?

- Have you discussed these expectations in the context of this professional discussion group before? If so, what conclusions did you come to?
- How have you implemented these expectations in your classroom?
- How have you evaluated these expectations?
- Is there anything you would have done differently or like to have seen done differently in relation to the introduction of these expectations?

To begin the focus group session, I had each of the six participants write down how they defined critical awareness before they shared their definitions with the group. I did this since some of the participants were more familiar with the concept of critical awareness than others, and so that ideas about critical awareness would not change if more experienced participants spoke first.

In the focus group interview session, I handed my participants a sheet with all the *Revised Program's* overall expectations, specific expectations, and examples of critical awareness as well as the glossary definition of critical awareness from that document (as per Table 4.1). I distributed the reference sheet so that my participants would have an easy reference to aid their discussion, and I explained this purpose of the sheet. I then informed my participants that I envisioned the session as a “free-flowing” discussion, and that any topic related to critical awareness, early literacy, or Kindergarten teaching practice in general was open to discussion. However, I began the session by asking, “What are your overall impressions of [what] these expectations...would look like in your classroom?”

The individual interview was also an important part of my data collection. I began the individual interview by informing my participant that she could “share anything” in relation to the two critical awareness expectations in *the Revised Program* even if it did not relate to the questions being asked at the time. I also informed the interview participant that if she did not have any answers for the questions I posed to her, she should “feel free to say so because that’s also data for this project.” I brought my own copy of *the Revised Program* to the interview session for our joint perusal.

Because the interview consisted of one participant teacher and myself, my questions took on greater importance than in the focus group session. However, I attempted to be as conversational as possible in the interview. Because of the ways in which my participant answered my intended questions, the questions I asked during the individual interview session differed slightly from those above:

- What are your personal impressions of the expectations in terms of the wording of them?
- Have you encountered confusions about these expectations and have you taken any recourse to remedy these confusions?
- Have you been provided with or have you obtained any formal or informal professional development in relation to these expectations?
- How have you implemented these expectations in your classroom?
- How have you evaluated these expectations?
- Is there anything you would have done differently or liked to have seen done differently in relation to these expectations?

Ethical issues.

I recruited my participants through a professional third party within the school board who was not in a position of professional authority over participants. Teachers who may have been interested in individual interviews were first contacted by the third party. Then a Kindergarten teacher who was a member of the informal discussion group, mentioned in the previous section, offered to organize a group session around my topic of professional interest. Teacher participants in the discussion group were presented with a letter of information and consent in order to acquaint them with the research project. Invitees to the interview and focus group were assured that they were not obliged to participate and that there was no risk to their employment associated with participation or non-participation, since I have no affiliation with the school board.

The maintenance of confidentiality within the focus group was a risk to participants. Namely, there may have been an emotional risk associated with sharing views on personal interpretation of professional materials with a group of professional peers. The participants were asked, in the information and consent letter, to consider all conversation that took place during the focus group interview as confidential. In particular, participants were asked to keep personal information including names, identifying descriptions, and positions and locales of employment of their fellow participants confidential.

An anticipated benefit for participants in this study was that the interview sessions might serve as professional development and collaborative inquiry sessions. Kindergarten teachers who participated in the study had the opportunity to reflect on and to take greater ownership of their practice. I also hoped that any enriched teaching and learning that resulted in my participants' classrooms could extend to other Kindergarten classrooms.

Trustworthiness.

Through this research study, I aimed to discover how my participants used language to make sense of their professional world and their experience with the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. I chose to use interviews because an interview has been found to be an effective data collection tool for understanding “how the interviewee utilizes varied frameworks of knowledge and language to make sense of, and to account for, his or her world and experience” (Tierney and Dilley, 2002, p.460). My study was rigorous due not only to the richness of data collected through the focus group and individual interview sessions, but also due to the triangulation of data through the two interview sessions and an examination of documents concerning early literacy and critical awareness.

I abandoned the pursuit of objective truths or an untainted description of reality. “The text, and the truth that is folded into it, bear the traces of the interests, biases and vanities of the person who produced it” (MacLure, 2003, p.152). My abandonment of the pursuit of objective truths, however, brings up important questions about the nature of this research. The most important of these questions is that of validity which is described as a tangled issue for all qualitative research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p.10) and in discourse analysis “is a matter of how the transcript works together with all the other elements of the analysis to create a ‘trustworthy’ analysis” (Gee, 1999, p.89). Validity in my study is addressed through the warrants of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, here, is not a matter “accurately reflecting reality” (Gee, 1999, p.94); but of complying to certain constraints such as the convergence of answers to the questions posed above, agreement among qualitative researchers about the meanings of

terms used and the researcher's commitment to stay true to the linguistic functions of excerpts from the transcripts (p.95). The most important goal is to look "for patterns and links within and across utterances in order to form a hypothesis about how meaning is being constructed and organized" (p.99).

Coverage is a means of promoting trustworthiness in discourse analyses.

Coverage means that an example of discourse analysis is rendered valid through its applicability to other components of the study. In my study coverage means that the discourse analysis is applicable to the interviews with Kindergarten teachers and that it deals with the same constructs.

Generalizability is another concern that is often raised in relation to educational research. Generalizability, however, is quantitative in nature, referring to the extent to which the conclusions of the study could apply to other contexts. I am more concerned with the qualitative analysis and description of the particular case examined.

Generalizability is a structural concern inherited from the Enlightenment (MacLure, 2003, p.172) and I do not attempt to generalize my findings. However, I would claim that due to the detail I provide about my participants and data collection, transferability applies to this thesis. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability of qualitative studies can apply when sufficient detail is provided about the case, "so that readers can engage in reasonable but modest speculation about whether findings are applicable to other cases with similar circumstances" (Schwandt, 2001, p.107). For my purposes, since *the Revised Program* is mandated for use in every publicly-funded Kindergarten classroom in Ontario, such speculation can be undertaken in order to apply transferability to other school boards, and the Kindergarten classrooms therein, in the province.

My discussion now turns to the data I collected and analyzed. Having described the theories that inform literacy educators' understandings of critical awareness and the methods I used in order to discover how my participants interpret the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*, I present my analysis of the early literacy documents I examined. A separate chapter focuses on my interview and focus group data and my analysis of the transcripts. Finally, in Chapter six I present the conclusions I have drawn from this data and its analysis, and the implications of my findings for further research on the topic.

Chapter 4

The Documents

The Revised Program begins by stating the Ministry’s rationale for its Kindergarten program. It describes children’s pre-Kindergarten experiences as important to the learning they do in the context of formal public education.

Children’s early learning experiences have a profound effect on their development. These early interactions directly affect the way connections are made in the brain. Early learning experiences are crucial to the future well-being of children, and establish the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will affect later learning and behaviour. Before they go to school, children have been learning in a variety of environments – in their homes and in childcare and community settings. (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.1)

In order to give critical awareness a context within *the Revised Program*, the table below lists references to critical awareness in that document:

Overall Expectations: (p.35)

By the end of Kindergarten, children will:

- B. demonstrate understanding and critical awareness of a variety of written materials that are read by and with the teacher;
- E. demonstrate a beginning understanding and critical awareness of media texts.

Specific Expectations:

As children progress through the Kindergarten years, they:

Reading: (p.37)

14. respond to a variety of materials read aloud to them.

Teacher Prompts: After reading a book about a forest: “How do you think the author feels about forests? How do you think the author wants *us* to feel about forests?”...After reading a book about a social issue relevant to the class: “Who is this book written for? What would this story be about from another point of view?”

Understanding of Media Materials: (p.39)

29. begin to respond critically to animated works.

Teacher Prompts: “Whom do you think the people who created this cartoon made it for?” “Who do you think likes to watch cartoons or animated works?” “What is it about this cartoon that makes you want to watch it?”

31. view and listen to a variety of media materials...and respond critically to them.

Teacher Prompts: “Someone made this poster. Whom do you think he or she wanted to look at it? Why?” “Sometimes when you buy cereal, there are toys in the box. Why do you think the people who made the cereal put toys in there?”

From the glossary: (p.63)

Critical awareness. The ability to evaluate something from multiple angles. For example, children may begin to respond to a text they have heard from their own point of view, or may connect their thinking to a prior experience another text they know. Later, they may see events in the text from another person’s point of view. A child may begin to demonstrate critical awareness after it is modelled by the teacher.

Table 4.1

It is worth noting that critical literacy has an important status in the Ministry’s literacy education documents. In their new document, “Literacy in the 21st Century”

(Ministry of Education, 2008a) The Ministry of Education has defined literacy as:

The ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, view, represent, and think critically about ideas. It...includes critical thinking and reasoning to solve problems and make decisions related to issues of fairness, equity, and social justice. Literacy connects individuals and communities and is an essential tool for personal growth and active participation in a cohesive, democratic society (p.6).

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s goals for literacy learning are also clearly outlined in their definition of literacy. As stated in *the Reading Instruction Guide*, literacy is:

The ability to read and write at a level that allows one to competently deal with information related to the demands of the workplace and day-to-day life. The

goals of literacy instruction include the ability to understand texts and the ability to clearly express ideas through writing. (Ministry of Education, 2003a, p.GL.7)

In this earlier definition, the Ontario Ministry of Education makes it clear that it has a specific end state in mind for children obtaining a public education. I inferred that the goals set out by the Ministry of Education continue to inform the ways in which Kindergarten teachers conceptualize and teach literacy. I also inferred that Kindergarten teachers' ideas about critical awareness could have been informed by a range of documents. Each of the documents I surveyed for this study addresses issues pertaining to literacy teaching and learning in young children. The documents thus inform teachers' understandings of critical awareness and they inform my analysis of the interview and focus group data. The documents are listed below according to their importance to this research study and in order of greatest to least support that they provide to *the Revised Program*. Three of the documents, *The Program*, *Me Read*, and *the Early Years Study* have been critiqued in the research literature by Heydon and Wang (2006), Martino and Kehler (2007), and Stooke (2003), respectively. Where I refer to those documents I rely on the existing analyses to support my comments about the various tensions or contradictions. The last document on the list was a government-commissioned report, rather than a document authored by the Ministry of Education.

The Revised Program is the central document to my analysis, but the other documents inform teachers' understandings and interpretations of the learning expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. The quasi-policy and professional resource documents surveyed as part of this research study include:

- The Revised Kindergarten Program (Ministry of Education, 2006).

- Early Reading Strategy: the Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2003, hereafter referred to as *the Expert Panel Report*).
- A Guide to Effective Instruction in Reading: Kindergarten to Grade 3 (Ministry of Education, 2005, hereafter referred to as *The Reading Instruction Guide*).
- A Guide to Effective Instruction in Writing: Kindergarten to Grade 3 (Ministry of Education, 2005, hereafter referred to as *The Writing Instruction Guide*).
- Supporting English Language Learners in Kindergarten: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators (Ministry of Education, 2007, hereafter referred to as *Supporting ELLs*).
- The Kindergarten Program (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, hereafter referred to as *The Program*).
- Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills (Ministry of Education, 2004, hereafter referred to as *Me Read*).
- Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study, Final Report (McCain and Mustard, 1999, hereafter referred to as *the Early Years Study*).

Analysis

The goal of the first phase of my study was to critically examine any Ontario Ministry of Education document that might illuminate the government's perspective toward literacy in young children. I followed researchers such as Stooke (2003), Heydon and Wang (2006), and Martino and Kehler (2007) by keeping certain questions in mind throughout the analysis. I asked the following questions: how are children positioned by the documents in question? How are teachers positioned by the documents? How is the

positioning of children and teachers related to representations of critical awareness in the documents? The purpose of the analysis was to make “explicit the ways that the texts have been constructed for ideological purposes” (Arthur, 2001, p.184), to ascertain the boundaries of the Ministry of Education’s literacy Discourse and to contextualize what participants told me during interview sessions.

My analysis identified a group of tensions or contradictions in the instructional mandates and instructional advice that the provincial government of Ontario has presented to Kindergarten teachers. The tensions are foundation versus transition, print literacy versus the new literacy studies, and authentic versus inauthentic learning. My identification of these tensions helped to uncover the ideological and often hegemonic ways in which the Ontario Ministry of Education represents and positions children, teachers, and critical awareness. Since it is difficult to determine the ways in which children and teachers are represented and positioned by the Ministry without referring to the tensions, I set up the following section around the tensions.

Foundation versus transition.

The Revised Program starts off by doing much representational work in order to establish the Ministry’s position on Kindergarten and, by extension, childhood:

Children’s early learning experiences have a profound effect on their development. These early interactions directly affect the way connections are made in the brain. Early learning experiences are crucial to the future well-being of children, and establish the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will affect later learning and behaviour. Before they go to school, children have been learning in a variety of environments – in their homes and in childcare and community settings. (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.1)

One tension that presents itself in the Ministry of Ontario’s early literacy literature

is the tension between the positioning of Kindergarten as the *foundation* of a child's intellectual development versus positioning the Kindergarten years as a *transition* between formal or informal preschool educational experiences to publicly-funded education. In reading *the Revised Program*, I became cognizant that the Kindergarten program is positioned as “the foundation” (p.1) of development, during which the early stages of literacy learning occur. *The Revised Program* states that “Kindergarten programs are critical in laying the foundations for success in learning” (p.1).

A representation of children and childhood can be read out of *the Revised Program*. It positions children as passive receptacles of knowledge-building experiences and passively developing biological beings whose brains will respond in positive ways towards positive early experiences, and negatively to negative early experiences. However, as Smith (2003, p.11) has argued, “to say the brain ‘looks’, ‘thinks’ or ‘remembers’ is about as appropriate as saying that the stomach enjoys a good meal” (cited in Heydon and Iannacci, 2005, p.16).

Thus, in the first paragraph of the first page of the document at the centre of this analysis, a certain perspective about literacy, the *biomedical approach*, is introduced. Rather than engaging with the research literature related to “the *psychological approach to reading* and the *socio-cultural approach to literacies*” (Heydon and Iannacci, 2005, p.1, emphasis original), Ontario Ministry of Education early literacy documents such as *the Revised Program* adopt the biomedical approach. Many of the early literacy documents produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education, including *the Expert Panel Report*, heavily emphasize the importance of basing literacy instruction in Kindergarten

and early primary classrooms on the research done by “the scientific community” (Ministry of Education, 2003b, p.3).

The privileging of scientific knowledge in the Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents causes the silencing of dissenting voices “by asserting that the theory upon which it is based is the *only* means of coming to know anything” (Heydon and Iannacci, 2005, p.15, emphasis original). This means that the Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents rely heavily on hegemonic phrases to describe early literacy learning. *The Expert Panel Report* especially insists that the conclusions drawn by the report are based on “evidence” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.1) and is careful to assert that “research has shown” (p.23) that their statements about literacy learning are facts.

The Expert Panel Report also includes the statement that “a broad consensus now exists among researchers and educators regarding the knowledge and skills that children need in order to read, the experience that influences the development of such knowledge and skills, and the basic components of reading instruction” (Ministry of Education, 2003b, p.1). However, considering not only the over-emphasis of the psychological perspective in the choice of panel members’ research agendas (pp.5-6), but also in the literature cited, this statement is over-ambitious. Policy makers and researchers who in the words of *the Expert Panel Report* have come to “a broad consensus” (p.1) that supports the psychological perspective on or biomedical approach to literacy learning help to preserve the view of Kindergarten students’ intellectual capacities as underdeveloped and their social concepts as naïve. *The Expert Panel Report* mentions that reading research done within the framework of the psychological perspective on literacy learning uncovers the “best” way to teach literacy (p.4). However, while these

documents focus on advising teachers on how to integrate “the newest best practices” (Norton, 2005, p.123) into their teaching practice, the Ministry does not recognize that “children are as much owners and shapers of their classroom as any teacher” (p.123).

The Revised Program is based on the psychological perspective, which endorses the idea of developmental *readiness*, or “a yardstick by which some children are judged as ready to come to school and/or ready for reading and others not” (Comber, 2003, p.355). The positioning of young children as “beings without knowledge” and the “privileging [of] adult age and educator status” only serves to further “silence” children (Norton, 2005, p.119-120). As Norton points out, “age has been and still is used to prevent early childhood and elementary students from talking about issues that impact their realities” (p.125).

In subsuming critical awareness within the psychological perspective, construing it as a skill that must develop or a skill which students must be ready for or made ready for, *the Revised Program* and the supporting early literacy documents may be discounting the knowledge and perspectives with which students come to school. Furthermore, the documents here analyzed are constraining Kindergarten teachers’ conceptual possibilities with respect to their students’ prior knowledge, life experiences, and perspectives. As teacher-researchers in the area of critical literacy have mentioned, children *can* partake of critical literacy in Kindergarten and in the early primary classroom if given the chance³.

Print literacy versus the new literacy studies.

³ Vasquez, 2000, 2003, 2004; Singer and Singer, 1998; Norton, 2005; Leland, Haste and Huber, 2005; Heffernan and Lewison, 2003; Comber, Thomson and Wells, 2001; Comber, 2001, 2003, 2005; Chafel, Flint, Hammel and Pomeroy, 2007; Calfee and Wadleigh, 1992; Arthur, 2001.

The definition of literacy and the goals for literacy instruction in *the Reading Instruction Guide*, which are related to the “problems of the state” (Ball, 1994, p.5), specifically to “the problem of capital accumulation and economic efficiency” (p.5), differ markedly from the definition put forth by proponents of the New Literacy Studies. Proponents of the New Literacy Studies conceptualize literacies as multiple, as social practices (Paul and Rowsell, 2005, p.3) and as tools “for re-mediating one’s relation to the global flows of capital and information” (p.115). The Ministry of Education adopted a commitment to the instruction of *print* literacy for reasons related to social problems such as the growth of the economy, assuming that such problems can be solved through literacy learning. Because the New Literacy Studies’ concept of literacies is excluded from the Ministry’s documents, the emphasis placed upon *print* literacy is apparent.

And because it is print literacy that these documents focus on, and because Kindergarten is positioned as the foundation of a continuum of development, Kindergarten students are represented by the Ministry as being *not yet literate*. In the Ministry of Education’s curriculum documents for literacy and language learning in grades one to twelve, the term “critical literacy” is used in lieu of “critical awareness” (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2006, p.35, 2007a, p.43). However, the overall and specific expectations related to critical literacy in the language curricula for grades one to twelve are not worded differently than the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. The expectations of critical literacy require students in grades one to twelve to identify perspective and bias in literary and media materials (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.43). The replacement of the word literacy with the word awareness in *the*

Revised Program is another way that age is used as a construct to silence young children (Norton, 2005).

Whatever the reasons are for positioning Kindergarten students as not yet literate, they do not necessitate that this is the *only* way in which it is possible to conceptualize children and literacy. In order to position children as capable of critical literacy, teacher-researchers working in the area of critical literacy in early childhood also position children as being literate before they enter formal schooling. The Ministry of Education's early literacy documents, in utilizing scientific language in order to establish *print* literacy as the dominant conceptualization of literacy, promotes the hegemonic ideologies inherent to the Ministry's early literacy documents.

The implications for critical awareness: Authentic versus inauthentic learning.

When the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents present examples of authentic learning opportunities, they do not seem to involve the local, immediate community concerns that Vasquez's students explored. For instance, in order to work on writing skills, the *Supporting ELLs* document suggests that children "write a note to the other class that they share the room with, asking, *How did you make the house in the block centre?*" (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.57, original emphasis). As compared to the petition that Vasquez's Kindergarten students wrote to their school administrators protesting their exclusion from the French Café (Vasquez, 2005), the authentic writing activity presented in the *Supporting ELLs* document seems *inauthentic*. It certainly does not position writing as a powerful activity through which change can be initiated, and it does not position Kindergarten students as agents of that change in the same way that Vasquez's literacy program had. Furthermore, in reading the version of critical thinking

in *Literacy in the 21st Century*, I agree with Martino and Kehler (2007) when they state that “the problem, however, is that such conceptualizations of critical literacy are discordant with the pedagogical strategies that are advocated throughout” (p.421) the Ministry’s early literacy corpus.

The Revised Program does not specifically address the question of developmental readiness in regard to critical awareness. It makes the statement that all overall expectations, including those two involving critical awareness, are to be achieved by the end of Senior Kindergarten, but makes no mention of its position as to whether or not three to six year old children are ready to do this intellectual work. *The Revised Program* is therefore in line with the views of teacher-researchers who have undertaken early primary programs that have a basis in critical literacy. By ignoring the question of readiness in regards to critical awareness, *the Revised Program* has separated critical awareness from other literacy skills such as reading, and is thus identifying critical awareness as something altogether apart, not relying on intellectual readiness in the same way that other literacy skills do.

It is important to note that, by this analysis, I do not mean to imply that the Ontario government should throw out their early primary literacy documents and start again. The early literacy documents here examined contain advice that has value for many teachers across the province. According to Vasquez (2000, p.9), established or mandated literacy curricula and program or quasi-policy documents already adequately address the literacy learners’ roles of “code breaker (coding competence)” and “meaning maker (semantic competence),” but it is the roles of and “text user (pragmatic competence)” and especially “text analyst (critical competence)” (Luke and Freebody,

1999, n.p.) that early literacy documents such as *the Revised Program* do not address. The latter two roles are not covered by these documents in any practical terms, and are only referred to in vague, general descriptions. Also, the tone that the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents adopt in presenting instructional advice and guidelines is of great concern. For instance, English language learners and other students are described as follows:

Some students come to school from language-impooverished backgrounds; others come from families in which the home language is different from the language of instruction. In both cases, students require instruction to increase their oral English-language abilities so that they are well-prepared to learn to read. (Ministry of Education, 2003a, p.2.8)

That tone, and the language used in its adoption, positions students in ways that undermine the intellectual resources that they bring with them to Kindergarten. Literacy, critical literacy, and critical thinking are also positioned in ways that exclude Kindergarten students from the practice of being critically literate, and critical awareness is represented as a skill to be learnt within the confines of the Kindergarten classroom rather than a practice that can be employed in the context of interaction with print and media materials in the social world. For example, *the Revised Program* states that, "by using their observations, teachers can stimulate children to create, solve problems, and think critically" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.14). The Ontario Ministry of Education, through its early literacy documents, therefore sets up conceptual constraints that potentially influence the ways in which it is possible for teachers to think about themselves, about their students, and about critical awareness in the publicly-funded Kindergarten classroom. The influence that the Ministry Education has over teachers, as I

will demonstrate in the next chapter of this thesis, can be resisted by teachers such as my participants.

In this chapter, I have listed the Ontario Ministry of Education documents that pertain to the education of young children in publicly funded schools and identified excerpts from the *Revised Program* that make reference to critical awareness. I then presented my analysis of the Ontario Ministry of Education's early literacy documents. In the next chapter I draw on this discussion in my analysis of interview data.

Chapter 5

The Interview Data

In this chapter, I present and discuss my interview data. First I summarize the data under the headings critical awareness, students, teachers, and parents. I then present an analysis of the data as they pertain to my research questions. I asked the Kindergarten teachers who participated in the study the following question: How do you interpret the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*? I also asked them: How do you implement the expectations of critical awareness in your classroom?

The Interview Transcripts

As I noted in Chapter three, the individual interview was organized to address a set of interview questions, but my participant was asked to share any information connected to or any of her experiences with the expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. In the focus group interview session, the discussion was less structured and any topic related to critical awareness, early literacy, or Kindergarten teaching practice in general was open to discussion.

Critical awareness.

After I asked the participants in the focus group session to write down what “critical awareness” signified for each of them, I asked them to share what they had written. This section contains my participants’ comments about the nature of critical awareness, how students acquire critical awareness, and the professional development teachers need to implement critical awareness expectations. The definitions of critical awareness to which my participants adhered varied from closely resembling the

definition found in *the Revised Program*, of considering print literacy and media materials from “multiple angles” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63), to being complete departures from that definition. Some of the participants in this study thought of critical awareness as reflective practice, as the skills of application of knowledge or of evaluation of information, and of connecting previously known information or knowledge to newly acquired information or knowledge.

It became clear during the focus group session that participants adhered to different definitions of critical awareness. Brenda began by stating that critical awareness was:

The ability to view the world from various perspectives...its thinking that is not confined to one single point of view, its more flexible thinking...in terms of presenting it to our students we can do that in various formats although its often achieved through collaborative learning experiences more effectively,...the kids must be given opportunities to share their ideas and then revisit them later, so that its not just a one-shot deal, this...allows for modification and changes in their thought process to be made and a greater perspective to be developed. And, it also is something that can develop with age, maturity, and certainly language development. So many times we see that they're not necessarily at a stage where they can actually express those thoughts in a way that would be equal to their thinking in this point in their lives.

Margaret agreed with what Brenda had said. However, Wendy explained that critical awareness, for her, means:

Being able to ask higher-order questions, being able to ask open-ended questions, drawing on prior experience and knowledge...how awareness...overall will effect what kids can produce, too, in terms of oral language, reading, and writing.

Jane, on the other hand, thought that critical awareness was “a reflection on what we say or do” in order to improve those actions. Brenda thought this referred to the “awareness”

aspect of critical awareness, but Jane persisted with the idea that reflection referred to the “critical” aspect of the term critical awareness. Bernice then offered her opinion of what critical awareness means, and related this idea with Brenda’s idea of “flexible thinking.”

She stated that critical awareness consists of:

Making connections to what [the students] know but then taking that in a different direction... [thinking of] what other people say as not being right or wrong, but, being different...we’re allowed to come to a problem from different angles.

Danielle suggested that it is:

The ability to process information and apply their knowledge to different learning situations,...the ability [in students] to communicate what they know.

Margaret said that for her, critical awareness consists of the application of this skill, as well as being “willing to ask questions.”

The participants in this study also discussed the place of critical awareness in their teaching practice. They talked about the questions they would ask Kindergarten students after presenting their students with print literacy or media materials, and they considered whether or not Kindergarten students would be able to answer the critical awareness questions presented in *the Revised Program* (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Margaret offered the suggestion that critical awareness questions would be posed to the children after read-aloud sessions. The questions she would ask, by this account, would be directly related to the contents of the book. Bernice talked about the importance of a teacher’s modeling of literacy skills such as critical awareness before asking the students to exhibit such skills. She gave an example by asking Brenda to relate the question she asked of students after reading the book *The List* (Hutchins and van Lieshout, 2007) aloud to them. She asked: “what kind of food could that be? What are they talking about, food for the mind?” Brenda and Bernice both considered this question

a good example of critical awareness instruction. Margaret suggested that some students might answer “pop” as a type of food for the brain, which began a short discussion on students’ ability to make a connection from literature to their prior knowledge. Danielle also offered an example of a critical awareness question, saying that she asks her students, “How can we exercise our brains?” Danielle commented that her students were successful in answering such questions. Her students offered answers such as “painting, reading,” and “counting;” which Danielle took to signify that students were succeeding in “making connections,” thus demonstrating their developing critical awareness. I inferred from the discussion that the teacher participants believed that students need the following prerequisites in order to be successful at demonstrating critical awareness:

- Prior knowledge: critical awareness is “drawing on prior experience and knowledge.” [Wendy]
- Complex vocabulary: “They have to have knowledge and they have to have the vocabulary” [Danielle] in order to be critically aware.
- Willingness to express ideas in front of the class with confidence: “They have to have the knowledge and have to have the vocabulary to express it and then the willingness to express it in front of the class.” [Sophia]

The teacher participants also mentioned questions that resemble the critical awareness teacher prompts in *the Revised Program*. One of the critical awareness example questions was:

Look at how the author has used all blue...in this picture, I wonder does anyone have any idea why [the author] might do that?

The group also discussed the sorts of questions one could ask after showing movies or clips of movies to Kindergarten students. They asked, "Who could this have been made for?" Danielle mentioned that the primary division teachers in her school did their own work on that front, taping commercials in order to pose questions such as "what are they really trying to sell?" or "how does this make you feel?" Danielle gave the example of a now-renowned Zellers alphabet commercial (YouTube, 2008), and gave some suggestions of literacy activities to go along with the commercial. Bernice asked her what sort of critical awareness questions she could ask in connection with that particular television advertisement, and suggested the question: Who do you think this was made for? Sophia, however, interjected to state that the question was "not at a Kindergarten level." Jane also questioned whether Kindergarten students would be able to answer questions such as "what are they really trying to sell?" asked of a television commercial. Jane concluded by asking of the focus group participants:

Shouldn't we [Kindergarten teachers] be focusing our time on other things which are more appropriate to [the students'] age?

The debate about the questions that Kindergarten students could and could not answer continued while my participants discussed different children's animated films and television shows.

Margaret then related a story that gave the example of two different Kindergarten classes. In one class students tend to give the same answers as the first student who spoke up; in the other they give unique answers to questions:

But I thought it was so interesting because I went twice, and when we went this morning the group, they don't really have a lot of critical awareness, and when she said "what's special about you? What do you do well? Because we're all good at something"...somebody started off "I go to gymnastics," well then every one of

them could “do a back flip good” or they could “do a front flip good”, it was all connected to what that first child said... and the second group, they all had different things like, “I can dance”, “I’m a good reader”, “I know my ABCs”, and...I thought what an interesting...because they were all followers in the morning, and the afternoon like they all had something different to say.

Bernice mentioned that she would have liked it if the Ministry of Education had provided teachers with a list of open-ended questions, especially when it came to media materials. She maintained that when reading a book aloud to a Kindergarten class, she finds it easy to stop and ask questions of her students spontaneously. However, she felt that with movies or pictures, she has to plan questions to ask ahead of time. Jane added that she would like a list of examples of media to use in conjunction with the expectations.

I asked Wendy whether critical awareness was included in the “balanced literacy” focus of the professional development program she described, and she replied that it had been included. It is the balanced literacy approach, most specifically within guided reading, into which critical awareness fits, for Wendy:

Where you’re doing open-ended questions, you’re asking kids for higher-order thinking at that point.

Various other participants described the early literacy professional development session related to *the Early Years Study* mentioned by Wendy, but Bernice said that that professional development occurred mainly before the release of *the Revised Program*. Margaret said she thought that they had received professional development concerning critical awareness, although it may have gone by a different name. I asked whether the group had discussed critical awareness amongst themselves at another discussion group session, or whether they had done any “informal or teacher-initiated professional

development” on the topic of critical awareness. A number of the participants replied that they had not, due to time constraints. Bernice explained that:

And quite honestly, Stephanie, if you put a hundred kindergarten teachers in a room just randomly, I would venture to say that not more than five of them... would have thought of what critical awareness was in relation to the document... because of the hundred teachers in the room, there would be at least ten of them that had not opened the document.

Brenda reminded the group of a professional development session in which the teachers were asked to come up with questions that were worded differently than those involving “who, why, what, where, and how.” Bernice remembered this session and also remembered that there had been a handout from it.

Most of the participants contributed to explaining the early literacy-related professional development that had gone on “for two or three years”:

Danielle: There was money that was channeled specifically for early years because money... hadn’t sort of come our way for a long time and it was great because it was put in towards inservice and [professional development] and it was put towards materials for classrooms... and it was, and it was maybe two, we did inservice for two or three years?

Margaret: Three years.

Danielle: And then the focus of that money moved up into the primary years, so we haven’t been inserviced as a whole group, maybe since this new document came out.

Participants said the last session of that kind was given when *the Revised Program* was released, at the end of the 2005-2006 school year. I asked how much professional development had been provided for that document, and the focus group participants told me that they had had one day of workshops and activities in relation to *the Revised Program*.

Bernice then explained that professional development in relation to Ministry documents does not usually occur in the above manner. She said that usually one teacher becomes an “expert” on a document and provides professional development sessions on that document for other teachers in the school or board. I then made the comment that I found the manner in which *the Revised Program* was delivered to the teachers interesting, since this new document is much longer and more complex than *the Program*. The participants agreed, and discussed the fact that students are not legally obligated to attend Kindergarten in Ontario and so the document is not curriculum, but rather a program. My participants told me that there are consequences of this fact for funding structures.

Bernice also brought up the topic of the political reasons for the inclusion of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*:

We all know it’s [in the revised *Program*] because they [the Ministry] have to say that critical awareness begins at birth. It does not begin when the child magically turns four or five or six or seven or eight...if they’re going to put it in the document for grade eight, they have to put it in the document for [Junior Kindergarten], whether it works or not.

Bernice suggested that since critical literacy is a part of the Ministry of Education’s curriculum documents for grades 1 to 12, and because the Ministry of Education maintains that *all* skills develop in a continuum from Kindergarten and until Ontario releases its jurisdiction on education, that critical literacy, or the version of it in *the Revised Program*, critical awareness, must be included as part of the province’s Kindergarten programs. I questioned Bernice and the other participants on the political point about critical awareness. I mentioned that I had not been cognizant that critical awareness was a part of the learning continuum theory that the province espoused, to which Bernice replied that since no researchers could definitively state that critical

awareness is impossible in early childhood, that the Ministry of Education could include it in *the Revised Program*.

The participants in this study also considered the possibilities for student evaluation of and reporting on critical awareness in Kindergarten. Margaret said that she included comments about critical awareness on her students' report cards, and she and Bernice discussed this possibility. Bernice mentioned that she did include comments about *media* awareness, and that she includes comments on students' ability to make connections between literature and their prior knowledge. Bernice mentioned that she already put comments about critical awareness on her students' report cards, but that she does not include the jargon critical awareness on report cards. Instead, she said that she comments on the level of connections that Kindergarten students are able to make to pieces of literature. She concluded that:

The terminology is new, but the expectation of how to teach that...is no different from the last document.

Margaret agreed in saying that, "everything...in [*the Revised Program*] we were also doing before." Brenda also made the comment that "critical awareness is in our classrooms, unconsciously there." Margaret came to the conclusion that:

Rather than saying we're going to teach critical awareness we need to be conscious of doing it, like we do everything...so it becomes [a part of] us as teachers.

And so Margaret suggested that all the participants are "exposing" students to critical awareness, even if this skill is only developed in the older children in their classrooms.

Students.

My participants described their students as open to new ideas, yet egocentric.

They used developmental terms associated with a psychological perspective on literacy

learning to describe their students. In other words, my participants tended to talk about literacy as a set of skills and children as individually developing organisms.

Wendy mentioned the two program expectations that involve critical awareness, which state that Kindergarten students are required to:

Demonstrate understanding and critical awareness of a variety of written materials that are read by and with the teacher...demonstrate a beginning understanding and critical awareness of media texts. (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.35)

She pointed out that the word “demonstration” is a highly vague term, open to interpretation, and can “look” very different according to different teachers’ practices, and according to responses of different children in the Kindergarten classroom:

In terms of the demonstration... demonstration is really difficult for 3, 4, and 5 year olds... for some of our children, especially boys who may not be as literate as girls, you have to look at a broader spectrum, it can’t be...looked at in terms of just...demonstrating by using oral language...you have some children whose oral language is not as strong, ESL children...and then looking at a developmental continuum of kids...demonstration is a lot of different things.

Wendy also explained that higher-order questions, which she supposed encompassed critical awareness, can be asked of students who are reading at a higher level (according to standardized reading assessments). However, the level of vocabulary and the amount of prior knowledge that a child reading at a low level possesses could make it difficult to ask that child higher-order questions:

You’re asking kids for higher-order thinking at that point...based on the level that they’re at, so if you had a child that was a level 2, from a developmental reading assessment...there’s four, five words on a page its patterned its that kind of thing... the amount of prior knowledge that you can access from a child it is limited, there’s no doubt about it... and you’re looking at limited vocabulary but that’s the stage that the child is at.

The participants also discussed students' willingness to learn versus their egocentrism and informally debated whether young children's willingness to try new things is more beneficial to critical awareness than their egocentrism is detrimental to critical awareness:

Brenda: Just the overall acceptance of other children, sharing ideas... they're much more willing to go ahead and just open themselves to that.

Jane: Yah, they're not afraid to take risks. Whereas by the time they get older...

Brenda: The willingness to...try...becomes a little more guarded.

Margaret: which...interferes...with their critical awareness.

Brenda: I think you become a little bit more confined to your...way of thinking and maybe not so open...to the perspective of others.

Bernice: And, yet it's funny because you commented about the [Junior Kindergarten students], being more egocentric and along with...egocentricity goes, I mean the risk taking is there...but it also goes with the 'my-way-or-the-highway.'

The participants compared these characteristics of young children to the developmental characteristic of junior high school students with a view to determining at which developmental stage students are more able to be critically aware. Sophia then brought up the point that critical awareness is further developed in Senior Kindergarten than in Junior Kindergarten students, and Brenda suggested that having both groups in the same classroom was beneficial for Junior Kindergarten students because of this greater degree of development in Senior Kindergarten students.

Margaret mentioned that the critical awareness example questions presented in *the Revised Program* (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.39) are difficult for all but the "brightest" students in Kindergarten to answer. I asked her if she had experienced instances when only one or two children in the class answer certain questions, to which she replied that she had experienced it from time to time, depending on the particular

group of students who made up her class, and especially depending on how many Junior Kindergarten students were in a class. Sophia agreed, saying that Junior Kindergarten students are more apt to answer direct or closed questions. However, Bernice disagreed on the grounds of anecdotal evidence of a Junior Kindergarten student in her class:

I mean it's interesting because the best child I've ever seen that's in my class for this year, she just turned four... and I have never met a child that can critically analyze something and I think it's because she has a very wide base of knowledge about everything, I have yet to find a topic that I can introduce that she does not know something about. And because of that, she has that knowledge basis and she makes the connection.

Teachers.

In describing the work that they do, the participants in this study also talked about Kindergarten teaching as a profession. Teachers were referred to as not only consumers of Ministry of Education information via professional development, but also as competent professionals who routinely make professional judgments that may be in conflict with Ministry mandates. My participants discussed their teaching practices, the knowledge and experience required to teach Kindergarten, their reactions and interactions with professional development and professional learning, teacher mentorship, the value that they place on certain aspects of their practice, evaluation and reporting on critical awareness, and the changing landscape of Kindergarten programming in Ontario over the past twenty years.

Wendy said that she did not experience any confusion in encountering the expectations of critical awareness. She and other Kindergarten teachers in her board took time to “break down” the new expectations when *the Revised Program* was released.

Wendy and her colleagues broke down the new program expectations in order to clarify

the expectations for evaluation and communication purposes. She suggested that confusion would arise for teachers who did not have the requisite background knowledge to teach young children, such as knowledge of child development, especially when the range of ages in a Kindergarten classroom can be as much as three years:

You want to be sure that when you're looking at critical thinking skills on the part of small children, that...you understand what the kids are doing and you understand what the developmental continuum is... and if you don't have a good background in development I think you end up shooting from the hip...*and* your program becomes very sporadic...it becomes very disjointed... and you're not going to be meeting all the needs of all those kids that are in the room.

Wendy explained that she looked at *all* the expectations in the documents and decided which could be achieved at particular points during the school-year and according to the skill level of the students in her class. She also explained that she continuously assesses her students in order to ascertain whether her program no longer needs to address some expectations and needs to address certain other ones. She mentioned that this was a complex job to handle, and praised new Kindergarten teachers for their “fantastic” efforts in doing this complex job.

I classified Wendy's breaking down of the expectations with her colleagues as an example of self-initiated, informal professional development effort and so I asked her: “have you had any formal professional development?” Wendy replied by describing the professional development program that has been initiated by her school board in response to *the Early Years Study*. That professional development program had literacy as its focus, according to Wendy, and conceptualized literacy from the perspective of:

Child development,...reading development, writing development, oral language development...balanced literacy, brain development.

She also mentioned that teachers who missed out on that professional development program such as new teachers, and teachers who taught in Kindergarten classrooms upon returning from a maternity leave were at a disadvantage:

Early years can sometimes be a transient profession. There's some hardcore Kindergarten teachers that have been at it a long time, and we've grown and we've changed, there's some of us that have not grown and changed, and that's okay, everybody has their own learning curve. But then we have the transient population of Kindergarten teachers, they are the teachers that go out on maternity leave, come back to their schools, they have to have a job when they get back, and Kindergarten is the easiest place to put them especially when they want to come back half-time. So then you have a teacher with no experience.

Wendy also explained that her school board has a mentorship program in place for those particular teachers. She pointed out that the literacy-focused professional development program in her school board has continued, with an outline of a balanced literacy classroom practice being released by the board in September, 2007. Danielle then mentioned that the further detail and examples that are given for expectations in *the Revised Program* were included as a result of certain professional development sessions, in the year before *the Revised Program* was released, during which Kindergarten teachers “dissected the old document, and shared ideas of how we...thought that they should change it or what they could add to make it better.”

Brenda then asked of the group, “How much time do we spend in the classroom helping [students] to develop an understanding of critical awareness of media texts?” Danielle asserted that it was “not very much” time, and Jane suggests that “it depends on how much we value it.” Margaret said that for any change in practice to occur in the Kindergarten classrooms, “[teachers] really have to want to know what [critical

awareness] is and how to do it,” due again to time constraints, as well as the professional pressure from school boards and the Ministry of Education to deal with more important tasks such as assessing reading levels in Kindergarten students and incorporating phonemic awareness instruction. The participants then had a short discussion about instructional limitations, and the fact that the personality of a teacher will drive instructional priorities and classroom practices. Margaret also explained that if a lot of time was spent focusing on these expectations, especially critical awareness of media materials, then there would be no time for her to deal with the balanced literacy approach that her school board requires of her Kindergarten program.

Bernice suggested that if the Ministry of Education were to mandate a required comment on all Kindergarten report cards in the province in connection with critical awareness, that Kindergarten teachers would be more open to incorporating it into their classroom practice:

Bernice: You can bet that if suddenly the board comes out and says “we want a comment on every report card for every term about critical awareness” all of a sudden people will pay attention to it because there’s a political reason for doing...

Jane: They’d have to assess it.

Brenda: They are being held accountable for that.

Danielle mentioned that in their school board, anecdotal comments on report cards were the norm, and said that she did not include comments about critical awareness since she felt she did not have enough room.

Bernice, for one, concluded that the Ministry is “asking too much of us [Kindergarten teachers].” Danielle, however, explained her experience as a grade 1 teacher looking at the older version of *the Program*, and being shocked at the vast gap

between the learning expectations to be achieved by the end of Senior Kindergarten, and the learning expectations to be achieved by the end of Grade 1.

Bernice then gave a short narrative of her experiences with Kindergarten programming prior to 1998, during which time play for play's sake was given priority over early literacy learning. She mentioned that during that time, she struggled with administrators to include print literacy learning as part of her Kindergarten program:

I was teaching a balanced literacy program... I started teaching that way when it was not allowed...when we were told what we couldn't...and I had to get permission from the early childhood representative to do shared reading in my class...I did it because I was doing it in grade one and why would you do it in grade one...and not do it when the kids were three and four...why would I have to wait until the kid was six to...get them to experience print?

Wendy, on the other hand, said that regardless of the release of *the Revised Program*, her classroom practice had changed. She mentioned that this is due to the change in student population and class make-up, and in terms of the changing knowledge and skills that her students will require in their adult lives. Because of those factors, she suggested that her professional learning and professional practice improvement have not ceased.

Home-school communication.

Although the participants in this study were cognizant of the need to keep parents abreast of their children's literacy development and involved in their children's education, the participants also outlined their ideas about parents' foremost concerns in regards to their children's education. Critical awareness is not one of parents' foremost concerns, according to my participants.

Wendy mentioned that critical awareness is a term that can be interpreted in many different ways, and that different interpretations will affect what comes out in

evaluations, and in the communication of those evaluations to parents and families.

Bernice commented on the difficulty of including critical awareness comments on report cards, since these are a form of communication with parents and families, and the term critical awareness is not clearly defined. Bernice stated that even though parents do not care whether or not their children possess the ability to be critically aware, that it is because of university researchers that critical awareness instruction is now mandated for publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms in Ontario.

Discussion

The teacher participants in this study spoke about many important issues related to the new expectations of critical awareness, as well as the practice of teaching Kindergarten in publicly-funded Ontario school boards in general. Their discourse in the interview sessions revealed very important and clearly defined aspects of their professional practice. I have organized my analysis of the focus group and individual interview transcript to parallel the organization of the data presented above. Where tensions are identified, I refer to those tensions in relation to the documents analyzed in the previous chapter. For the analysis of the transcripts, it is important to note that my participants' talk about literacy learning referenced a primarily psychological perspective – which suggests that the dominant literacy Discourse in early primary classrooms may also be a psychological one.

Critical awareness.

My participants' ideas about critical awareness ranged from closely resembling the glossary definition in *the Revised Program* to completely departing from the meaning of critical awareness presented there. This is unsurprising, considering that Kindergarten

teachers in publicly-funded school boards in Ontario have very little to draw from in considering the new expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. By contrast, constructs such as phonemic awareness that appear in the previous version of *the Program* are well-established and explained in the professional literature, research literature, and professional development sessions provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education and by publicly-funded school boards across the province. Established constructs such as phonemic awareness are associated with psychological perspectives on literacy learning, a Discourse adopted by my participants in describe literacy learning and literacy instruction. However, critical awareness, which is related to critical literacy, is associated with New Literacy Studies and has not been institutionalized as practice in early literacy documents in Ontario. Some of my participants held a conception of critical awareness that approximates the definition in *the Revised Program*. For example, Brenda said that for her, critical awareness meant to view “the world from various perspectives.” Margaret also made the statement that critical awareness, for her, means to look at things from different perspectives or points of view. By mentioning perspectives, she is another participant who linked her conceptualization of critical awareness to that definition of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. However, Brenda and Margaret’s versions of critical awareness were wrapped in a thick layer of terms associated with the biomedical approach to literacy learning, as I will explore below.

Brenda brought up the issue of development, revealing this underlying Discourse of the psychological perspective and of the participants’ discourse early in the discussion. She said that critical awareness “is something that can develop with age, maturity, and certainly language development.” Another idea that the focus group participants had

about critical awareness was that in order to be able to “evaluate something from multiple angles” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63), students need a vast bank of knowledge from which to draw. As mentioned above, this idea also associated with the psychological perspective on literacy learning, since it means that those students who have not yet consolidated this knowledge base will not be ready to be critically aware of literary and media materials. Bernice described one exceptional student who she thought was able to be critically aware since “she has that knowledge basis and she makes the connection.” Critical awareness, transposed into a psychological framework, is a skill analogous to reading which will develop according to certain levels and as Margaret mentioned, corresponds to stages of exposure, exploration, and experimentation: terms that were already well known by my participants and were used to describe the new, unfamiliar concept of critical awareness.

Participants in this study also conceived of critical awareness as coming under the umbrella of “higher-order thinking” skills. Higher-order thinking skills, according to the discourse of my participants, encompass “the process of mentally manipulating and transforming information and ideas in order to solve problems, acquire understanding, and discover new meaning. Higher-order thinking skills include...evaluating” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.114). The participants in this study conflated critical awareness with the skill of evaluation.

Another definition of critical awareness came from Wendy:

And then we sort of take it and extend from that as well as [ask] open-ended questions [of the students].

Open-ended questions made an appearance in both transcripts, and originate in the Ministry of Ontario’s early literacy documents. The term open-ended questions refers to

“questions that can be answered in a variety of ways” (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.66).

Brenda offered another conception of critical awareness that is a departure from the document. According to Brenda, critical awareness means that students turn questions back on their own work in order for them to figure out “why they’re doing it.” The students are being reflective or as she says, are “questioning or examining their thinking.” Reflective practice, which means that teachers think “about and critically [analyze] their own professional practices and understandings in order to improve them” (Ministry of Education, 2004b, p.118), is an important Discourse for Kindergarten teachers in publicly funded Ontario schools, especially where it concerns professional development. By participating in reflective practice, a teacher sets his or her own professional goals and works to achieve those goals, thereby taking ownership of his or her professional development and improvement of classroom practice. I inferred that Brenda applied the idea of reflective practice to the unfamiliar terminology critical awareness. Jane also reconceptualized critical awareness as reflective practice, and applied her definition of critical awareness to students. Kindergarten students, she said, are “being reflective” or are “questioning and examining their thinking” in the process of learning new concepts and skills in the Kindergarten classroom. Like Brenda, Jane was talking past critical awareness in her attempts to define it, and was reconceptualizing it as something that is more familiar and already entrenched in the Discourse of Kindergarten teachers.

Danielle also offered a definition of critical awareness that seemed to be a complete departure from the definition of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*. For Danielle, critical awareness is “the [students’] ability to process information and apply

their knowledge to different learning situations.” By using the term applying to describe critical awareness, Danielle was aligning her conception of critical awareness with an important underlying and previously existing Discourse in Kindergarten teaching, that of Bloom’s taxonomy. According to this taxonomy, application of knowledge means that “given a problem new to the student, he [or she] will apply the appropriate abstraction without having to be prompted as to which abstraction is correct or without having to be shown how to use it in that situation” (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl, 1956, p.120).

Bernice’s definition of critical awareness of making connections, resembled the example of critical awareness given in the glossary in the Kindergarten Program (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63). However, Bernice went on to mention that because of the age of students who attend Kindergarten, the teacher will “have to find a way to make a connection for them,” thereby situating her practice as teacher-initiated. Teacher-initiated instruction, as I will demonstrate below, is another Discourse that constrains the ways in which my participants talked about and conceptualized critical awareness.

Some of the examples offered by my participants of critical awareness instruction were informative. Brenda used the term “collaborative learning” to describe the practice of teaching critical awareness. Collaborative learning means that “the decisions about what to study, how to study, and how to assess were made as a result of dialogue and equal input” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.13) from the teacher and his or her students. Collaborative learning suggests a program that is as child-initiated as it is teacher-initiated. Bernice went on to explain her approach to critical awareness with the following:

You come to a book and you think, what question...can I ask that I do not have the answer to?

This constitutes, as opposed to Brenda's mention of collaborative learning, an extremely teacher-initiated approach to critical awareness instruction in the Kindergarten classroom.

The teachers also conceptualized critical awareness in terms of the materials they would use in their practice of teaching critical awareness to Kindergarten students. For instance, Margaret and Brenda mentioned fractured fairy tales such as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, (Scieszka and Smith, 1989) which Margaret said would be "teaching critical awareness because it comes from the Wolf's point of view." Fractured fairy tales are possibly the best (and perhaps, the only) example of pre-packaged critical awareness instructional material for the Kindergarten or early primary classroom.

However, in using these books in read aloud lessons with Kindergarten students, the critical awareness work has been done for them. A read aloud lesson using fractured fairy tales would again constitute a teacher-initiated approach.

While I listened to what the participants in my study had to say about critical awareness, and when I analyzed the focus group and individual interview transcripts, I found that appropriateness was a concern for my participants, and that they thereby echoed the ideas about appropriateness in the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents. My participants implied that in making programming decisions for their classrooms, they were very concerned with the appropriateness of materials in terms of moral, ethical, or social appropriateness (Norton, 2005, p.123). My participants also were concerned with the *developmental* appropriateness of their curricular decisions, where development is a shorthand reference to children's physiological, psychological, and language development. The Kindergarten teachers who participated in this study were

most concerned about the seeming futility of attempting to teach Kindergarten-aged children critical awareness, since it is not developmentally appropriate. Jane voiced this concern when she asked whether Kindergarten teachers should “be focusing our time on other things which are more appropriate to their age?” She is convinced that critical awareness will inevitably develop with time and physiological growth. Wendy touched on the same idea when she said that her teaching practice is “based on a lot of different criteria of what is appropriate for kids and what is appropriate in terms of skills or concepts that I’m trying to get across to kids.” And while taking developmental concerns into account when teaching young children is of great importance, it may be that this over-emphasis on the psychological perspective on literacy instruction over-shoots the mark, leaving “many missed opportunities for learning in the name of developmentally appropriate practice” (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p.193). Developmental appropriateness is another Discourse that was employed by my participants in conceptualizing critical awareness, and it is a Discourse that constrained the ways in which they think about critical awareness. In some cases, as above, the Discourse of developmental appropriateness led them to rule out critical awareness as an instructional possibility in their Kindergarten classrooms altogether.

Although the psychological perspective on literacy learning is prevalent in my participants’ discourse, a paradox arose from their engagement with it. The teacher participants in this study used phrases that seem at odds with the concept of critical awareness. For instance, phrases such as “get more critical awareness because of it,” and “the group...they don’t really have a lot of critical awareness,” were used. Critical

awareness suddenly became a possessive noun, a thing that can be possessed or not, and to a greater or lesser degree. This is important, since for proponents of the psychological perspective, literacy learning is the process of learning *skills*. When transposed into the psychological perspective, critical awareness is a skill that needs to *develop* in a Kindergarten student. However, critical literacy, the apparent parent term for critical awareness, is a *practice* belonging to the sociocultural perspective on literacy learning, and thus must be practiced within the context of students' engagement with meaning making. Were this paradox explored further by my participants, the hegemonic ideology of the psychological perspective might soon begin to unravel, and may thereby be questioned and resisted.

It was also the general opinion of the participants in this study that critical awareness was included in *the Revised Program* due to educational research, and that educational research motivates many decisions made by the Ontario Ministry of Education in regards to curricular and program documents. This point is interesting since it is unclear whether or not it is the case that educational research motivates the decisions of governmental bodies in charge of educational document production. Is it possible, for instance, that the Ontario Ministry of Education ignores much educational research, including critical awareness in *the Revised Program* as a watered-down version of the critical literacy that has been researched and engaged with by teacher-researchers in Kindergarten classrooms? Either way, by aligning critical awareness with a research or collegial viewpoint, the participants in this study conceptualized critical awareness as outside the scope of their professional practice, and as imposed upon them by people who are not members of their Discourse community.

Critical awareness was also conceptualized by my participants as something that should be integrated into the existing daily routine of publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. Margaret said that “rather than saying we’re going to teach critical awareness we need to be conscious of doing it, like we do everything.” Critical awareness was therefore construed as an element to be integrated into the existing daily classroom activities, as opposed to Vasquez’s (2004) Kindergarten program that had critical literacy at its core. Related to this point, Wendy mentioned that critical awareness is addressed in the language section of *the Revised Program*, but not in the content areas of *the Revised Program*. For instance, she said that “critical awareness...should really be woven through the whole program.” For Wendy, critical awareness should apply to the study of any content, not just to literacy learning.

The Kindergarten teacher participants in this study began to reconceptualize critical awareness to correspond closely to the teaching practice that came before 2006. This reconceptualization was especially clear in the teachers’ discussion of learning evaluations and reporting on students’ educational progress. In particular, the participants debated the ways to report on students’ progress in learning how to be critically aware. After mentioning that she does not include a comment about critical awareness on her students’ report cards, Bernice said that she has always included a comment about media texts. In the context of the following comments, Bernice began to negotiate the expectations of critical awareness to align them to concepts with which she was already familiar (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002).

Bernice re-conceptualized critical awareness when she paraphrased the report card comments she could make about critical awareness:

I'd talk about...the level [of text or idea] the child makes a connection with...[that the student] is beginning to make connections with written materials or is able to...represent their own knowledge through understanding written materials.

The term "connections" is mentioned in the glossary of *the Revised Program*. In an explanatory example, it is stated that "children...may connect their thinking to a prior experience or another text they know" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63). However, this is only one in a series of examples laying out how students *may* demonstrate critical awareness, but it is the one phrase that all the participant teachers focused on in reconceptualizing critical awareness. The wording closely resembles the wording of a language expectation in the original *Program*, that "by the end of Kindergarten, children will...make connections between their own experiences and those of storybook characters" (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p.14). Bernice discovered this fact and thereby concluded, "It's just the same...the difference is the word critical is not in there."

The mirroring of the term connections in the Ministry of Education's program documents for Kindergarten and in my participants' discourse made me wonder whether the Ministry purposefully crafted *the Revised Program* in order to facilitate the transition to the new, unfamiliar expectations of critical awareness. Whether or not the Ministry worded the expectations of critical awareness to resemble expectations in *the Program*, the resemblance between the two gives headway to the effort by my participants to interpret critical awareness as the teaching practice with which they are already familiar. After noticing the resemblance between the two statements, Bernice came to the conclusion that she had been making report comments about critical awareness all along,

although she had been using the phrase making connections. Bernice's reconceptualization of critical awareness was an approximation of a concept in *the Program*: the skill of making connections to characters in stories, to other texts, and to students' background knowledge. This is known, in the professional Discourse of Kindergarten teachers, as making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections respectively.

Bernice was not the only one who came to the conclusion that she has always been "doing all the same things I'm doing now." Margaret agreed with her, as did Wendy. Wendy in particular referred to critical awareness in Kindergarten teachers' professional development. According to Wendy, critical awareness was "very much" a part of the professional development that occurred before the release of *the Revised Program*. The round of professional development for early years teachers in Wendy's school board focused on the balanced literacy approach which "recognizes the complexities of the act of learning to read and the need to utilize multiple approaches because children learn differently" (Chen and Mora-Flores, 2006, p.23). Critical awareness was reconceptualized by Wendy as being part of a balanced literacy program. By reconceptualizing critical awareness as part of a balanced literacy program, no tensions or contradictions were created by Wendy, but in doing so she was attempting to familiarize herself with the new expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program*.

Brenda made the point that critical awareness is "not something that is going to be a natural process for a lot of people." This sense of critical awareness being unnatural may be because of its origins in the sociocultural rather than the psychological

perspective on literacy learning, and if it is the case that Kindergarten teachers in Ontario find critical awareness unnatural, that would be the greatest obstacle to teaching it to Kindergarten students.

It is not surprising that my participants offered differing definitions of critical awareness, since the professional and quasi-policy documents from which they work contained hegemonic ideologies in regards to child development and literacy learning. These documents are not conducive to critical literacy (Martino and Kehler, 2007), and so the addition of critical awareness is a wildcard in this hegemonic context. The participants in this study therefore engaged with the concept of critical awareness in many different ways in order to reconcile it with their perspectives on child development, professional practice, and home-school communication.

However, through their talk about critical awareness and their reconceptualization of critical awareness to align with established instructional practice, my participants' talk of critical awareness referenced a liberal discourse. This was evident in their discussion of the prerequisites for critical awareness: prior knowledge, complex vocabulary, and a willingness to express one's ideas before peers with confidence. None of those prerequisites alludes to interrogating dominant views or overtly addressing social inequities and issues of power. The absence of those practices and the privileging of a readiness discourse appeared to constitute an important feature of my participants' Discourse community, although it is nowhere written in the Ontario Ministry of Education's early literacy documents that Kindergarten students require any prerequisites to practice critical awareness, and the researchers who study critical literacy in early childhood education have shown that young children are able to practice critical literacy.

It is also worth noting that the prerequisite skills identified by my participants are drawn from cognitive approaches, and thereby constrain the ways in which critical awareness could be conceptualized.

Students.

The participants' interview conversation positioned children in ways that differed from the way in which children are positioned by the Ministry of Education in its early literacy documents. Wendy described "some of our children...who may not be *as* literate" (emphasis added), and thus represented children as possessing literacy to a greater or lesser degree. The Ministry documents, on the other hand, represent all Kindergarten students as being not yet literate. Margaret also represented children as being literate, but she believed that five-year-olds in Senior Kindergarten are *more* literate than four-year-olds in Junior Kindergarten:

Margaret: The [Junior Kindergarten students] are not really ready to answer [questions that require higher-order thinking skills to answer]...but...they will hear it from the [Senior Kindergarten students].

Sophia: They just want to answer direct questions..."what's the character in the story?" But they don't want the higher level.

In the conversation excerpt above, younger children were represented as possessing some literacy skills as in psychologically informed Discourses of literacy learning, but to a lesser degree than older children in the same class. However, Bernice disagreed by adding that "the best child I've ever seen [at critical awareness] that's in my class for this year, she just turned four," thereby challenging the representation of four-year-old children as not yet ready for critical awareness that a greater degree of literacy would allow.

Although my participants positioned children as literate to a greater or lesser degree and thereby challenged the not literate/literate construct presented by the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents, they still conceptualized literacy in a way that is consistent with the psychological perspective on literacy learning. The literacy Discourse my participants appeared to take for granted depicted oral language as the foundation of print literacy, and did not take sociocultural perspectives into account.

The biomedical approach to literacy learning was one of the most defining characteristics of my participants' discourse. The language inherent to the Discourse of the biomedical approach was mentioned frequently throughout the transcripts, even though none of the questions posed to the participants contained the jargon of the biomedical approach. For instance, Wendy mentioned that if Kindergarten teachers "don't have a good background in development I think [they] end up shooting from the hip," highlighting a preoccupation with the biological or physiological features of childhood. Wendy also mentioned the speech and language services centre that many publicly-funded school boards in Ontario operate. The employees of speech and language services centres perform early identification of students who have difficulty learning to read, as well as phonological awareness skills screenings. Wendy said:

We also take the information from the speech and language department...at the beginning of the year, and use their phonological assessment...scores to help us plan what we're going to do with the kids.

The speech and language specialists Wendy mentioned give support to Kindergarten students with *suspected* oral language difficulties and "identify students who are not developing speech and language skills within normal ranges, so that remediation or treatment can be initiated" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.C5). Many publicly-funded

school boards in Ontario offer these services, and employ speech and language pathologists to administer the screenings. The mention of speech and language services by Wendy, and by extension the phraseology used by school boards in describing these services, reminds me once again of medicine, and thus, of the biomedical approach to literacy learning. The outcome of this hegemonic Discourse was apparent in the discourse of my participants, as they echoed the biomedical expressions used by the documents, and took on the view of childhood to which the biomedical approach adheres.

Sophia's ideas about children also echoed the biomedical approach to literacy. She pointed out that due to their egocentrism and their underdeveloped language skills, students in Junior Kindergarten would have more trouble considering issues "from multiple angles" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.63). She says that students "have to have knowledge and they have to have the vocabulary" in order to take part in this intellectual work. There was some disagreement amongst the participants in this study as to whether younger age helped or hindered the cause of higher-level thinking and of being open to taking risks. Critical awareness was classified as a part of higher-level thinking by my participants, and by taking risks my participants meant the ability to learn new things by engaging in activities that one may or may not fail at, and of openness to perspectives other than one's own. It was eventually agreed upon, in the course of the debate on the effects of egocentrism on learning critical awareness, that critical awareness was yet another skill that develops along a certain predictable and set path.

The issue of egocentrism versus willingness to learn was discussed by the focus group participants at length. The crux of the issue was revealed when the participants attempted to determine which tendency is more influential on the development of critical

awareness. The reference to the developmental Discourse and to the development of critical awareness set up a paradox between that which is accepted as given in the participants' discourse and their own informal observations of student behaviour. The discourse of my participants was informed by a concept of childhood made well-known by Piaget's (1999) research, which states that children in the age group between one and a half years to seven years old (those children in the pre-operational stage) are highly egocentric. However, the way in which my participants used the term egocentric was an over-application of Piaget's idea of egocentrism. His use of the word egocentrism meant the "actions" of the children in this age group "are centered around the body" that impacts their ability to, for instance, account for their knowledge of the way to and from school and home using concrete objects to construct the path (p.39). This is not the meaning of the term egocentrism that my participants used during the course of their debate. The participants in this study debated the ability of pre-operational children to take others' perspectives into account or recognize that there are other potential angles from which to solve problems. Through their discourse, it can be seen that the participants in my study believed that egocentrism (by their definition) permeates a three to six-year-old's world and mentality. The misapplication of the term egocentrism by my participants belies their adherence to a Discourse that positions young children as intellectually underdeveloped, naïve, and therefore unable to practice critical awareness, to say nothing of critically literacy. The particular Discourse, which is related to the Discourse of developmental appropriateness, constrained my participants' thinking about instructional possibilities for critical awareness in their Kindergarten classrooms. For example, I believe that it is due to this Discourse that my participants conceptualized

critical awareness as being taught only through teacher-initiated literacy lessons, as it is teacher-initiated lessons that provide young children with the intellectual guidance that the Discourse in question requires for them. The Discourse also privileges inauthentic literacy learning exercises that are removed from the local concerns immediate to Kindergarten students' experiences.

The participants also explored the idea of willingness to learn and openness to new ideas in terms of developing *social* awareness in students. According to their arguments, older students are more restricted in their ability to be critically aware of literary and media materials because of social factors such as the pressure to conform to a social group, whereas younger students are not intellectually restricted by social pressures. However, by grouping critical awareness under higher-order thinking skills and conflating it with making evaluations, due to the colloquial definitions of being critical as "expressing adverse or disapproving comments or judgments" (Soanes, 2003), my participants made the assertion that older students *do* use this skill, albeit with careful adherence to social constraints such as peer pressure. The most important point here is the adherence to a Piagetian perspective permeated my participants' discourse. This Discourse has small and subtle holes in it, however, which the participants in this study encountered when its tenets did not correspond to their classroom observations. As revealed in the interview transcripts, in such cases my participants relied on their professional judgment rather than the psychological perspective on literacy learning. For example, Bernice described one student in her Kindergarten class by saying that, "the best child I've ever seen that's in my class for this year, she just turned four... and I have

never met a child that can critically analyze something.” Bernice’s observation does not strictly fall in line with the tenets of the psychological perspective.

The participants in this study made it clear that in order to be successful at critical awareness; students are required to make the connections between pieces of literature and the students’ own experiences. To be able to make connections, students must possess an unspecified amount of background knowledge. For instance, Bernice mentioned showing a “how it’s made” segment of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* video (The official Eric Carle website, n.d.):

And they don’t get how the technique’s done, and then you show them the Eric Carle video, which has the technique in it...if you then come back to *the Very Hungry Caterpillar* then you want to ask the same questions, do you get more critical awareness because of it?

However, Bernice’s question makes me wonder, at what point can a teacher say that Kindergarten-aged children possess enough knowledge to be critically aware of literary and media materials? All children enter Kindergarten with prior experiences and background knowledge about the world (Maxson, 2005; Arthur, 2001), but participants’ comments suggest that children require prior experiences or background knowledge *of the right kind* in order to be successful in critical awareness at school. Witness, for example, Wendy’s point that students who are reading at a very low level possess background knowledge that “is limited, there’s no doubt about it.” Wendy was referring to the connecting work that students do in seeking out the answers to questions about texts read in school. In her comments, critical awareness encompasses not only those higher-thinking skills such as evaluation, being “the making of judgments about the

value, for some purpose, of ideas, works, solutions, methods, materials, etc. It involves the use of criteria as well as standards for appraising the extent to which particulars are accurate, effective, economical, or satisfying” (Bloom et al., 1956, p.185). Being critically aware, for Wendy, also requires a broad and rich base of background knowledge on those topics that are deemed valuable by the Ministry of Education, as made evident through the early literacy documents. Wendy says that:

Critical awareness could be things such as...being able to ask higher order questions...being able to ask open ended questions, drawing on prior experience and knowledge.

Wendy’s representation resembles evaluation in Bloom et al.’s taxonomy. “For many North American reading educators, the term *critical literacy* refers to aspects of higher order comprehension” (Luke, 2000, p.450), rather than “a systematic analysis of the relations and fields of social, cultural, and economic power where people actually use texts” (p.451). The conceptualization of critical literacy that is subsumed under the term higher-order thinking skills follows from the psychological perspective on literacy learning (p.451) and that Discourse.

The discourse of my participants in the interview sessions also included ideas about the general nature of Kindergarten students. Margaret mentioned that critical awareness activities or learning activities of any kind are difficult to execute in the Kindergarten classroom since the attention span of that age group is approximately “four minutes.” Whether or not a relatively short attention span is a characteristic of young children, it was included in the discourse of the participants in this study and taken as given. Wendy echoed the ideas presented in *Me Read* (Ministry of Education, 2004)

when she said that for “boys who may not be as literate as girls, you have to look at a broader spectrum, [demonstration of knowledge] can’t be looked at in terms of just demonstrating by using oral language.” Just as in *Me Read*, boys are considered an exceptional group of students for which learning accommodations must be made. And as in the *Me Read* document, boys are here conceptualized as a homogeneous group of learners rather than individual students.

Teachers.

The participants in my study talked about Kindergarten teachers as if they fall into different groups, and they positioned the groups in a hierarchical structure according to commitment to the profession of teaching Kindergarten and amount of experience teaching Kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers were segmented into three distinct groups by Wendy: those more experienced teachers who continue with their professional learning, those experienced teachers who do not continue with their professional learning, and those teachers who will be a Kindergarten teacher for a short time. Wendy mentioned too that teaching Kindergarten is a complex job to handle, and praised new Kindergarten teachers for their “fantastic” efforts in doing this complex job. Margaret added, “I think as a new teacher teaching Kindergarten...[it] is quite a feat.” A fourth group is therefore made up of novice Kindergarten teachers who are committed to the profession.

All of my participants positioned themselves as being a member of the first group: those teachers who possess a great amount of professional experience but who nevertheless constantly continue their efforts of professional learning and development, thereby expressing their commitment to the profession of teaching Kindergarten. Since

this study involved voluntary participation, it is not surprising that the study attracted Kindergarten teacher participants who self-identify with the first group identified.

As Wendy mentioned:

It gets to be very subjective when you look at demonstration [as a way to assess critical awareness in students]. And not only that but you're looking at a first year teacher versus a twenty-year teacher; the definition of demonstration is very broad.

According to Wendy, the interpretations of terms used in the early literacy documents will differ depending on the group into which a teacher falls. The grouping of Kindergarten teachers according to levels of commitment and experience was therefore important for my participants. Possessing more professional experience, for my participants, translated into more opportunities for exercising professional judgment without being fettered by uncertainties concerning the physiological and literacy development of one's students, or by uncertainties as to which skills and knowledge the Ministry requires students to achieve and know.

Brenda had a different way of grouping Kindergarten teachers. She asked of the focus group:

Are you someone that your primary focus is targeting those benchmarks for assessment and evaluation...is that your be-all and end-all focus? Or are you genuinely interested in the way kids are learning?

According to this second grouping, Kindergarten teachers are positioned as either being part of a group of Kindergarten teachers whose professional judgment and practice depend on Ministry mandates and programming, or as being part of a group of Kindergarten teachers whose professional judgment and practice depend on the individual children in the classroom. Again, my participants all self-identified with the

second group discussed, which consists of those teachers whose first priority in making professional judgments and implementing classroom practices are the particular students in their particular classrooms. The groups of Kindergarten teachers that Brenda outlined have important implications for the implementation of critical awareness expectations in publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. As Bernice mentioned, not all Kindergarten teachers think about these new expectations or their implications on classroom practice. She says that:

If you...put a hundred Kindergarten teachers in a room just randomly, I would venture to say that not more than five of them...would have thought of what critical awareness was in relation to the document.

The implication of Bernice's statement is that some teachers do not bother with government mandates, but continue to trust their own professional judgment when it comes to teaching practice in publicly-funded Kindergarten classrooms. This preoccupation with issues of professional judgment may be due to the highly prescriptive nature of *the Revised Program*, "a document conceived outside the classroom" for which "teachers are not, for example, at liberty to make changes" (Heydon and Wang, 2006, p.34). Margaret also said that as a Kindergarten teacher, one has "to be a reflective kind of person" in order to implement the expectations of critical awareness in classroom practice, and the other participants agreed. In discussing the new expectations of critical awareness, my participants believed that some teachers would not incorporate critical awareness into their classroom practice unless certain other mandates, such as required reports card comments about critical awareness, were put in place.

Jane picked up on an extremely important point related to research done on public policy reform and interpretation. She says that the amount of time or commitment

Kindergarten teachers spend on critical awareness “depends on how much we [teachers] value it.” As Margaret put it “we’re doing phonemic awareness, we’re doing it all the time” because it is deemed developmentally appropriate according to a psychological Discourse concerning literacy learning, and is therefore deemed valuable.

Value was placed by my participants on specific aspects of professional practice as opposed to others. For example, Bernice asked of the other participants, “did you only meet the needs of that curriculum or did you meet the needs” of Kindergarten students? The question speaks to the issue of the value of standardized curriculum versus the value of teachers’ professional judgment. The classroom practice of my participants is not solely dependent on the Ministry dictates. Teachers may ignore early literacy programming or mandates wholeheartedly in the face of their professional judgment. It is worth noting, however, that my participants self-identified as experienced Kindergarten teachers who continually work on their professional learning. It is impossible to infer, from what my participants said during the individual and focus group interview sessions, that the other groups of teachers (other Discourse communities) also valued their professional judgment above Ministry of Education mandates.

Despite the value attached to professional judgment over Ministry early literacy documents, the participants in this study often closely echoed ideas that are presented in *the Revised Program* and in the supporting documents here analyzed. In talking about their knowledge of Kindergarten teaching and about critical awareness instruction in Kindergarten, they used phrases that closely resemble those in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents. In particular they used phrases that evoked the biomedical approach to literacy learning. For example, it appeared to me that the use of

the biomedical approach was apparent as my participants talked about themselves and their professional practice. Wendy mentions the importance of being able to meet “all the needs of all those kids that are in the room.” Positioning young children as having needs (and here my participants implicitly refer to *learning* needs) and the Kindergarten teacher as the one who meets the needs positions teachers as workers such as members of the medical profession, including doctors, nurses, hospice workers, or even social workers. “High-needs” is another phrase used during the course of the sessions that invokes the biomedical approach for me. A tension exists therefore between teachers as competent professionals, and teachers as dominated by the mandates of the Ministry of Education in Ontario. My participants believed that they had the professional knowledge and the professional power to make decisions about the best way to teach Kindergarten students. However, the prevalence of the biomedical approach and the hegemonic discourse that goes along with it undermines that professional competency and professional expertise. This tension can be found in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s early literacy documents as well, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Home-school communication.

In examining the transcripts from the interview and focus group sessions with the participants in this study, I noticed that my participants simultaneously positioned parents as having a monitoring role on their children’s education and as being stakeholders in curricular decisions. This became clear to me when my participants considered the viability of critical awareness in their classroom. For instance, after Bernice mentioned that parents of Kindergarten-aged students “could care less about this [critical awareness],” Danielle mentioned that:

Parents want to know do [their children] know their alphabet...can they write their name, can they count, can they write numbers?

The importance of critical awareness in the Kindergarten classroom is therefore, according to my participants, partially related to the value that parents attach to it.

Wendy contributed another important point about parents. She said that in the process of delivering the report card to parents:

You're taking the overall expectations and breaking them down, and you're doing [descriptions of learning progress] for report cards, it gets to be really tough because you're interpreting pieces of the expectations that are drawn up by the Ministry and by teachers as well...and...trying to be sure that when you are presenting that information to parents, they understand.

According to Wendy, teachers work at the intersection of evaluation of student learning progress, parental concerns, and the Ontario Ministry of Education's priorities.

Concluding Remarks

Although knowledge of child development is important for teachers of young children, the fact that the biomedical approach to literacy learning was present not only in my participants' discourse but also in their professional literature supports my assertion that publicly funded education in Ontario prepares students to undertake the two roles of "code breaker" and "meaning maker," but not the roles of "text user" and "text critic" (Luke and Freebody, 1999, n.p.). When it comes to the individual participant teachers working in their own Kindergarten classrooms, interpretations of critical awareness are informed by teachers' well-established funds of knowledge related to teaching the roles of "code breaker" and "meaning maker". The participants in this study interpreted the new expectations of critical awareness as corresponding with what they had done before, and what was already well known to them (Spillane et al., 2002, p.393).

In this chapter, I presented a narrative summary of the interview data organized according to the topics: critical awareness, students, teachers, and home-school communication. I also presented my analysis of the interview data. Having analyzed the data collected through the individual and focus group interview sessions I conducted, in the final chapter I present the conclusions I have drawn from my analysis and reflections on some implications for practice and further research.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Implications

Through this thesis, I have collected and analyzed pertinent related documents and interview session data to answer the question: how are the new educational programming expectations of critical awareness in the Revised Ontario Kindergarten Program (Ministry of Education, 2006) interpreted by Kindergarten teachers working in publicly-funded school boards? I have also used my data analysis to answer the question: how are the expectations of critical awareness implemented by Kindergarten teachers in their classrooms. In this chapter, I will present my findings, the implications of those findings, and questions for further research.

Looking at Literacy Learning from Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives

Psychological perspectives on literacy have provided classroom teachers with valuable insights for pedagogical decision-making. However, the sociocultural aspects of language and of literacy learning must not be ignored as they have been by the *the Revised Program* and the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents (Ministry of Education, 2003b). As an alternative to both the sociocultural perspective on literacy learning with its weaknesses and the psychological perspective with its weaknesses, Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) proposed looking at literacy through a "widened lens." Through a widened lens, language development is not viewed as "primarily unilinear or hierarchical but [is] a result of ongoing context-specific responses to need, use, and opportunity for literacy practice" (p.87). Viewed through a widened lens, literacy should not be taught as if it were "an autonomous skill" (p.126), but should also include

“bringing *authentic* print literacy practices into formal literacy instructional contexts” (p.154, emphasis added). Literacy can now be thought of not only as communication, but also as a means of expanding students’ identity options, as per balanced literacy (Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky, 2008, p.26). One word of warning, however: Purcell-Gates et al. are careful to point out that, in conflict with the ultimate aims of the Ontario mandates and program documents “achievement can no longer be seen as equivalent to standardized test scores” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004, p.149). Rather, achievement is measured through the complexity and range of texts that are written, read, analyzed, and critiqued by the students.

By viewing literacy through this widened lens, and by incorporating critical awareness or critical literacy into our literacy instruction, we as Kindergarten teachers in Ontario’s publicly-funded school boards can teach our students to take on all four literacy roles of code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic (Luke, 2000, p.454). By combining strongly articulated best practices with critical awareness or critical literacy instruction, we can teach out young students not only the mechanics of language, but also the mechanics of its power.

Through my exploration of the instructional methods teacher-researchers use to teach critical literacy to Kindergarten students (either teacher-initiated or child-initiated), I was provoked into considering the consequences that the teacher-initiated and child-initiated instructional approaches had for critical literacy or critical awareness practices. I also asked myself whether either instructional approach for teaching critical literacy or critical awareness was superior to the other, if Kindergarten students are to practice critical awareness or critical literacy in the context of literacy learning. Looking at

literacy learning through a widened lens that incorporates both the psychological and the sociocultural perspectives, I maintain that the child-initiated approach to teaching critical awareness or critical literacy instruction in the Kindergarten and early primary classroom is the most effective approach. It fits well with Purcell-Gates and her colleagues' (2004) findings on the importance of authenticity both of texts and of purpose. For support of this claim, I appeal to a comparison of the child-initiated and teacher-initiated curricular examples cited in Chapter two, such as Vasquez's (2004) critical literacy Kindergarten curriculum and Huber's (2005) choice of read-aloud books that deal with social issues rather than "happy" themes.

During the course of this study, I have discovered ways in which my Kindergarten teacher participants re-conceptualized the new expectations of critical awareness in *the Revised Program* to align with established practices. I also discovered that some of my participants did not assign very much value to the teaching and evaluation of critical awareness in their publicly-funded Kindergarten programs.

In reference to the critical awareness expectations, and to general language and literacy expectations in *the Revised Program*, I discovered that my participants were most interested in those aspects of Kindergarten programming that they most highly valued: laying the foundation for reading and writing by working with their students on accepted foundational oral language skills such as phonemic awareness, as well as connecting new knowledge to previously acquired knowledge. I also discovered that my participants were cognizant of the value they placed on certain theoretical perspectives of Kindergarten learning, and on some learning expectations as opposed to others. My participants conceptualized this value as coming out of their professional judgments as a group of

experienced Kindergarten teachers who are devoted not only to improving professional practice, but also to promoting the education of the students in their classrooms. By incorporating only those aspects of *the Revised Program* that they value because of their continued professional learning, my participants were resisting certain representations of themselves that denied their professional competency and were therefore creating space within *the Revised Program* in which to question the position in which it placed them.

Vasquez (2004) is explicit in setting out the way in which she established a publicly-funded Kindergarten program in Ontario with critical literacy at its core, and explains how she managed not only to allow students to pursue their own learning interests but also to cover the learning expectations mandated by the older version of Ontario's Kindergarten Program (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). However, there has been no literature that I have uncovered in my research that accounts for the addition of critical awareness expectations to *the Revised Program*, nor any about critical awareness and early literacy learning generally, without this surrounding critical literacy framework. In this study, I have sought to uncover respondents' common sense assumptions and to point out specific power relations legitimized by the Ministry of Education's early literacy documents in connection with the inclusion of critical awareness learning expectations in *the Revised Program*.

The findings discussed above point to a need for professional development and the provision of resources for teachers. One of my participants mentioned that fractured fairy tales would be a helpful tool in teaching critical awareness to students in Kindergarten. An interesting question to ask in further research would be: is there a place for parodies of traditional stories from a mainstream canon of children's literature? In

particular, how does a fractured fairy tale support critical literacy if children are unfamiliar with fairy tales? Where does authenticity come into play in this teacher-initiated critical awareness instruction scenario?

As Luke (2000) says, “it’s not whether governments bring critical literacy into state curriculum policy but rather a ‘matter of government getting out of the way so that “critical literacies” can be invented in classrooms”” (cited in Comber, 2003, p.364). The main implication of my research for developers of mandated governmental program or curriculum guides is that, in order for critical awareness or critical literacy to be fully practiced in classrooms, guides should be less prescriptive in nature, and more emergent. I inferred that a program less packed with expectations would be Luke’s recommendation. However, my data throw doubt on whether critical literacy would be taught in Kindergarten classrooms if it did not appear in a regulatory text and remind us of the complex and situated nature of policy reform.

My study also has implications for further research in the field of critical literacy at all levels. Ethnographic research into the ways that critical literacy instruction is implemented in higher grades would be most helpful. For example, the following questions could be asked: How do teachers of older students engage with critical literacy expectations? And how do older students engage with and practice critical literacy?

Because of Vasquez’s (2004) work within a publicly-funded school board in Ontario, it is possible for Kindergarten teachers in Ontario, working within the constraints of *the Revised Program*, to explore critical awareness and critical literacy with their Kindergarten students. It is also possible for Kindergarten teachers in Ontario school boards to engage with *the Revised Program* to do the same kind of resistance

work done by the participants in this study. Furthermore, there is nothing in *the Revised Program* that mandates a teacher-initiated approach to critical awareness, and so a space can be created within which teacher-researchers can undertake and study child-initiated critical awareness or critical literacy programs within publicly-funded Kindergarten programs in Ontario, just as Vasquez did within the context of *the Program*. Space can also be created through research projects such as those described above and through the critical questioning that such research projects will inevitably give rise to in students, as evidenced by the case studies explored in Chapter two. The space created by the initiation of critical awareness or critical literacy programs with young children will give voice to and empower the teachers and students who have been silenced by the Ontario Ministry of Education's early literacy documents.

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE

Review Number: 0707-1

Applicant: Stephanie Wilson

Supervisor: Rosamund Stooke

Title: *Critical awareness expectations in the revised Ontario kindergarten program: teachers' implementation of new policy.*

Expiry Date: April 30, 2008

Type: MEd Thesis

Ethics Approval Date: July 25, 2007

Revision #:

Documents Reviewed &

Approved: UWO Protocol, Letter of Information & Consent

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

No deviations from, or changes to, the research project as described in this protocol may be initiated without prior written approval, except for minor administrative aspects. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information and consent documentation, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

2007-2008 Faculty of Education Research Ethics Sub-Committee

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