Implementing Critical Literacy Pedagogy to Pose Challenges and Responses of Elementary School Learners

By: Nicole Pittman

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
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IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL LITERACY PEDAGOGY

Abstract

This case study was designed for the purpose of answering the following research question: how do elementary school teachers implement critical literacies in order to pose critical challenges and responses of learners in the twenty-first century? Using qualitative research methods I conducted semi-structured interviews to gain insight to whether practices and teacher prompts of critical thinking proposed by the recent curriculum documents of the Ontario Ministry of Education are working for my participants. An in-depth literature review and three face-to-face, open-ended interviews brought forth data that highlighted four key themes including: 1.) Constructing Student Identities, 2.) Teacher Critical Pedagogy, 3.) Differentiating the Classroom Environment, and 4.) Supporting Inquiry Based Learning. The accumulation of themes was integrated into a discussion of the research findings, providing recommended strategies and areas for future research.

By implementing critical literacies in the classroom, students learn to exist in the world through deeper involvement and engagement of content, leading towards greater social action that has the potential to transform environments of the school and their society. All of my participants along with supporting literature gathered suggest that teachers can foster the kind of inquiry and discussions necessary in a critical literacy program by building safe, inclusive classroom cultures that promote student inquiry. Alongside ongoing professional development, teachers are invited to be ongoing learners within their classrooms as they develop an understanding of students’ interests, backgrounds, values, and build on the strengths they bring to school, which is an integral part of fostering critical pedagogical strategies within a community of learners.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research Context

In the Industrial Age, systems of education were implemented with the motive of creating workers who could replicate and regurgitate information as well as formulas. This was the foundational system of our country’s race for rapid industrialization and modernity. In a post-industrial economy, merely replicating and regurgitating information no longer suffices. Today, we need students who can apply their learning to solve complex problems, propose innovative solutions, and work collaboratively to deepen their understanding (Gini-Newman, 2014). Within Canada’s educational reform, there lies greater emphasis on implementing concepts of critical thinking into pedagogical methods of instruction.

Within a diverse world that requires us to think critically, collaborate, and communicate effectively, teachers are being asked to prepare their students for the onset discoveries that they could potentially have access to at the click of a button or swipe of a finger. Educators are proposed to use their pedagogical methods to ensure a class culture of critical thinkers. They are required to learn how to address opportunities where students can think critically, such as writing. The focus of my research will be situated in critical literacy practices teachers utilize or could benefit from in order to engage their students to apply themselves in critical literacies.

Published writing on critical literacy practices within the classroom has expanded more and more towards authentic teacher accounts and experiences (Lewison et al., 2002). Teachers who are publishing about the incorporation of practices of critical literacy provide a great resource for novices who may have attended one or two conferences, or have read about critical literacy theory in courses they have attended, but have not applied the theories into practice. Throughout my research and gathering of information, I will set out to uncover the accounts of four teachers’
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attitudes toward critical literacy, may they self-identify as novices, experienced teachers, or somewhere in between, in practicing this theory. I wish to compare the accounts I have read of other self-identified novices to experienced ranged teachers and scholarly literature. The purpose of this comparison is to depict what critical literacy appears like in the classroom through the accounts I collect throughout my interview process. I hope to provide myself and the reader with an authentic understanding of critical literacy practices through my own observations and interview results of my recipients. I hope to anticipate that this case study should serve to further help formulate an opinion of whether critical literacy practices are doable and suffice as a way of teaching under Ontario’s educational reform.

Ontario’s educational reform policies are gearing towards a new pedagogy where teachers scaffold learning so that students exercise their minds beyond the learning of basic skills. In 2013, professor emeritus and policy advisor, Michael Fullan, published a next phase action plan for Ontario’s education system following Premier Dalton McGuinty’s exit from office. Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario’s Education Agenda highlighted the need for teachers to teach with a “new entrepreneurial spirit- a spirit characterized by innovation, risk-taking, commitment, and skilled problem solving in the service of a better future” (Fullan, 2013, p. 9). The document emphasized the key qualities of higher-level thinking; critical thinking being at the forefront in fostering the adaptability of the student into the greater society. A year later, in April 2014, the Ministry of Education published Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario, issuing the educational reformist call to

Raise expectations for valuable, higher-order skills like critical thinking and problem solving, communication, citizenship, creativity and imagination, collaboration, and character education...these 6 Cs are the attributes that employer have already told us they seek out amongst graduates (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.3).
Teachers are expected to shape students into well-rounded individuals who not only have strong basic skills, but also the critical thinking skills, creativity and resilience to excel in and create the new jobs of tomorrow. As a result, this raises the pressure of teachers to harness and nurture these skills amongst students who have a vast range of multiliteracies.

Today, students experience a constant stream of ideas and information – online, in print, and through electronic games and mass media. As they move into junior grades, they encounter an ever-widening range of texts. They need to be taught the skills of how to interpret messages and communicate them appropriately (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The proposed educational system in Ontario insists that teachers challenge their old ways of teaching and develop pedagogical methods to ensure the success of Ontario’s educational reform.

There has been an increased amount of research most recently on what Michael Fullan (2013) describes as a “new pedagogy.” Essentially, teachers need to teach students how to teach themselves. They need to exert less power and give more control. For example, in the processes of writing, teachers need to allow for more creativity and student choice. Teachers are being challenged to formulate their own pedagogical knowledge that corresponds to critical thinking theories, such as critical literacy theory in student processes of writing.

Ontario teachers are seeing the shift of implementing new forms of pedagogy, inviting critical thinking, identifying and developing what learning would actually look like under these new methods, and assessing its outcomes. Because this new pedagogy is such a recent proposition, teachers only have an introductory directional notion of what this may look like. In my case study, I seek to identify the challenges and prospects of implementing new pedagogical methods that foster further critical thinking skills within students’ writing.
1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to describe the instructional strategies of critical writing through the pedagogical methods of three elementary school teachers. I set out to discover whether practices and teacher prompts of critical thinking proposed by the recent curriculum documents of the Ministry of Education are working for my participants. I also set out to discover which practices and prompts are not working for my participants, and what kinds of external and internal factors they experience in the classroom environment that do not permit these practices and prompts to work. Furthermore, I wish to embark on drawing conclusions as to whether instructing critical thinking in writing is an inherent skill that teachers need to practice alongside with their students, or if this is a method teachers need to learn to implement through instruction and training of what Fullan (2013) proposes as a new pedagogy in Ontario’s educational reform plan.

This case study is integral for my audience, including myself as a researcher, teachers, teacher candidates, policymakers, and the general public, who have an interest in critical literacy, as they seek to gain a better understanding of how educators situate themselves in promoting critical thinking in student writing. Teachers can no longer instruct through a narrow approach of desiring basic skill outcomes. In a post-industrial economy, teachers are expected to showcase multiple approaches of instruction, using differentiated learning techniques for students to inherit higher-level thinking skills outlined in Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2014).

The educational reform in Ontario issues an increased awareness that processes of writing are no longer associated as a set of basic skills; rather writing serves as an interaction between the words in a text and the reader who looks for meaning based on their own lived experiences, by
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asking questions, and challenging assumptions. This study will focus on describing the uses of critical literacy theories exemplifying interactions between communications of text and students’ meaning of the world through the pedagogical knowledge of four elementary teachers.

1.2 Research Questions

The principle research question that I address within my research case study is: In what ways do three elementary teachers use their pedagogical knowledge to instruct student writing as a medium for learning to think critically?

The following list of questions will support my initial, principle research question:

1. How do teachers set up collaborative learning of the English language, whereby students can share various meanings of text?
2. How is the classroom environment used to motivate students to write through critical lenses?
3. What role does critical literacy play in a classroom of writers?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

Throughout my roles as a student in elementary school, I was always told which books to read in my language classes. My teachers laid out generic book report formats that, after a while, seemed like intrinsic rewards were being replaced by a tedious cycle of handing in reports only to retrieve a letter grade. I was often given a choice of up to three books to read for guided reading that were often the teachers’ favorite picks. The content of the books was often related to the teachers’ likes and interests. As a result, I felt that my teachers seldom took into account the relativity of my own context and position in the world, as well as the ways I wished to communicate my understanding of texts, such as through scrapbooks, or role-play.

Majority of my language tests and assignments would beg the in-the-text, or true and false questions, compared to the minority of questions that allowed me to make my own personal
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connections between the text and the context of my life and past experiences. I felt that engaging students to think critically was outweighed by the spelling and grammar drills I would experience every morning. I remember asking my sixth grade teacher why the class had to learn to breakdown every word in sentence examples written on the board to describe whether the word was a preposition, noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective, article, and so forth. I ended up receiving lines for having a ‘smart mouth;’ but what retained to be more powerful was the notion that maybe my teacher did not know exactly how this would help me. If I were studying to become a linguist maybe, but to this date, I do not think the drills aided my ability to adapt and thrive in an innovative workplace environment, nor formulate thought-provoking arguments in post-secondary school.

Within my second practicum experience in my first year at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, I saw the shift in the practices of instructing writing through Ontario’s language curriculum. During seat work periods after carpet readings, students were asked to work on thought provoking concepts of critical literacies, such as points of views. The teacher would scaffold critical thinking by allowing students to choose a character they would like to take the point of view of, and write about a particular event that happened so far in the story. The success criterion was readily available in the classroom for students to refer to, for example providing evidence from the story and making predictions. As I marked student responses, I encountered what I associated to be authentic writing that came from students’ ability to inquire.

I admired my practicum experience as my associate teacher set up a classroom culture of critical thinking whereby students were free to dig deeper into underlying political and socio-cultural issues relevant to their position in the world. Issues of implementing critical literacy
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theories into instructional strategies were a topic of discourse within my class. I remember the class consensus of teacher candidates recognizing that there was a need and place for students to express their own opinions on subjects and issues relatable to them throughout teacher implementations of literature circles, readers’ theater, and free choice creativity assignments. After learning about critical literacies and seeing them implemented in my second practicum, I was enthusiastic about incorporating these strategies within my own practice teaching. Having one month experience implementing critical literacy into my teaching practices, I knew the level of engagement and inquiry went beyond the learning I received in my past language classes in elementary school.

What I bring to this research study is a positive experience of incorporating critical literacy within a grade four classroom. Incorporating critical literacy theories into my pedagogy of instructing writing opened my students to a higher level of engagement with texts. I have only experienced one practice teaching block where I incorporated critical literacy through scaffolding writing, which was under the supervision of an associate teacher at all times. As a researcher, my goal is to retrieve the most authentic experiences of incorporating critical pedagogy and critical literacy practices. I will refer to authentic experiences whereby the sole supervisory role of the students is the teacher.

I wish to stray away from generalizing implementations of critical literacies and critical pedagogy based on my second experience of practice teaching. By interviewing four elementary teachers, I aspire to collect a diverse array of pedagogy and thoughts on implementing critical literacies within a diverse range of classrooms. As the role of researcher, I will set out to describe my participants’ knowledge and practices in order for my audience to make an informed choice.
whether to approve of or apply my participants’ experiences into their own practices of scaffolding writing in the classroom.

In conducting qualitative studies of research, it is no longer acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced researcher (Creswell, 2013). As a result, it is in my best effort to make my background and experiences with the topic of my case study as explicit as possible to my audience. Throughout my observations, interviews, and work surrounding this case study, I situate myself as a novice practitioner of critical literacies. I want to bring awareness to myself, colleagues, participants, policymakers, and the general public who constitute the audience of my case study, the biases and subjectivity that I inevitably bring to my research moving forward. Ultimately, assessing and describing teachers’ pedagogical methods of using writing as a medium to think critically motivates me to learn more about critical literacy and critical pedagogy implementations and limitations within contemporary elementary classrooms.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in the topic of study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature surrounding field studies of critical literacy, inquiry-based learning processes and critical pedagogy within elementary classrooms. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study, including information about the sample participants in the study and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in this study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end of this case study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Critical Literacy Theory

The dominant conception of literacy is that literacy references the ability, on the part of individual, to read and write. Those who conceive of literacy in broader, sociocultural and political terms refer to the term as “critical literacy” (Luke, 1997, p.98). Educators who are interested in critical literacy are concerned with written text, or any other kind of representation of meaning as a site of struggle, negotiation, and change. As Allan Luke (1997) notes, while earlier psychological perspectives conceived of literacy as the acquisition of particular behaviors, cognitive strategies, and linguistic processing skills, more recent insights from ethnography, cultural studies, and feminist theory have led to increasing recognition that literacy is not only a skill to be learned, but a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated. In this view, “literacy is best understood in the context of larger institutional practices, whether in the home, the school, the community, or the larger society” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 132).

Critical literacy requires students’ background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the authors’ texts. In this process, students play the role not only of meaning makers, but also the role of text critics (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Students have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing authors’ topics, and they exert that power when they read and write from a critical stance. As a consequence, students reading and writing from a critical stance raise questions about whose voices are represented, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of the text.

Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) breakdown critical literacy into four interrelated dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. By disrupting the commonplace, students use
multiple voices to interrogate texts by asking questions such as, how is this text trying to position me? (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Students are thus given the opportunity to analyze how the text shapes their identity, constructs cultural discourses, and supports or disrupts the status quo (Fairclough, 1989). This approach strays away from the institution of teachers dictating information from above, transmitting knowledge and curriculum down to the students, to adopting power amongst the students at a more grassroots level.

In order to hand over power to the students, teachers are suggested to stand in the shoes of their students so to speak. Furthermore, critical literacy invites students to stand in each other’s shoes by acknowledging each other’s points of views. Teachers and their students need to formulate a dynamic in the classroom that sets up the need to consider various perspectives concurrently throughout reading and writing processes. Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) address the act of teaching within the classroom, how teaching is not a neutral form of social practice, yet it often takes place with no attention given to how sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from teaching.

Paulo Freire (1970) addresses this notion whereby “any time we are teaching, mentoring, tutoring…consciously or not, we are engaged in a political act” (89). If teachers present themselves as knowers who try to fill empty heads with facts, a practice Freire (1970) refers to as the ‘banking education system,’ we help replicate a system of power and domination whereby those who can withdraw deposits of information, have only learned to repeat uncritically what authorities want them to think and adapt into a system of beliefs (p. 92). If teachers promote students to question information from a critical stance, they are encouraging students to actively change society for the better, and thus become more fully conscious of their actions and position within the world.
Critical literacy takes on a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance (Giroux, 1993). Critical literacies are used to achieve and promote social justice by engaging in what Paulo Freire (1972) refers to as “praxis- reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 85). Freire’s concept of praxis bridges together knowledge and action. The critique of existing sociopolitical conditions leads to the possibility of changing them. Implementing critical literacy urges teachers to move beyond student acknowledgement of indifferences in their writing, but to also take their knowledge and promote awareness through social initiatives within their immediate and extended social communities. By using critical literacy theory teachers pose present situations to their students as a problem, which challenges them and requires a response- not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of social action.

2.2 Critical Literacy in the Classroom

Lewison, Flint, and Sluy’s (2002) case study of novice and newcomer teachers who began practicing critical literacies in their grades three to five classrooms, showcased that in moving toward enacting critical practices, most recipients were faced with a continuing examination and revision of their long-held beliefs (p.389). Their recipients’ initial implementations of critical literacy were often overshadowed by hesitations of what critical literacy looked like in the classroom; they did not feel implementing critical literacies was an inherent process as a resort to conceptualizing text through a critical stance. After their eight month workshop sessions with novice and newcomer teachers, their recipients felt a pressing need to expand their abilities to have students inquire into sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and counter narratives to both historical and current events (Lewison et al, 2002).
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Their conducted case study raised awareness of critical literacy as a way to encourage students to go beyond writing and inferring personal narratives and connections. Critical literacy further challenged their students to better understand the ways in which larger sociopolitical systems position individuals, including themselves, in the world. Implementations of critical literacy also provided the novice teachers a lens to critique their own practice as facilitators of language and power (Fairclough, 1989). It provided a framework whereby teachers could also conceptualize and enact forms of literature within their classroom culture.

McGee and Tompkins (1995) presented a case study of four teachers’ plans to implement the story, *Stone Fox* (Gardiner, 1980) in their literacy program. McGee and Tompkins (1995) wanted to explore theory-based stages of literature implementation in the classroom to compare and contrast theoretical perspectives in light of several current stances toward literature instruction. McGee and Tompkins (1995) case study did not argue one perspective over the other, instead they wanted to explore the benefits of a variety of theoretical perspectives, one of which was reading and writing through critical literacy theory.

The teachers’ instructional pedagogical methods of implementing critical literacy theory stemmed from post structuralism, postmodernism, and feminist perspectives (McGee & Tompkins, 1995). Within these types of perspectives, writers were not viewed as having a unique, unified, or fixed essence; rather they were shaped as well as self-defined by multiple and contradictory cultural institutions. Writers were invited to respond to literature subjectively, based on their socialization into cultural viewpoints. At the same time, they were also shaped and influenced by certain cultural ideologies in which they were able to oppose or deconstruct meaning suggested by dominant ideologies.
Under practices of critical literacy, writers in the classroom were encouraged to acknowledge that they unconsciously adopt subjective positions that compel them to make ideologically interpretations of text. For example, the interpretation of female characters who wore pink were more submissive and less considered to be dominant heroines within the text as opposed to female characters who dressed androgynous. As a result, “students often used their interpretations of text to name the realities and positions of others within the classroom culture” (McGee and Tompkins, 1995, p. 411). Writers also developed the stance where they resisted authoritative, dominant interpretations reproduced within texts. Under critical literacy, students took positions of opposition of dominant groups in order to empower marginalized groups in society. Teachers scaffold the success criteria of their lessons with the big idea that “those who were marginalized should have the right to name their own reality and articulate how their social realities operate for them” (McGee and Tompkins, 1995, p. 412).

In McGee and Tompkins’ (1995) Stone Fox case study, the teachers who used critical literacy theories saved the reading of the story for the end of their thematic unit. Many individuals who read Stone Fox focused on the dominant interpretations of the story- Willy and his heroic acts to save his grandfather and his land. The critical literacy practitioners wanted to give students the opportunity to recognize other interpretations of the story and to question its dominant interpretation. In order to activate critical thinking, “the teachers used students’ understanding and knowledge of the Plains Indians’ own literary images as a contrasting discourse, and used poems along with other written texts by Aboriginal Peoples to counter the discourse in Stone Fox” (McGee & Tompkins, p.414). Students needed to have a sound knowledge of the Plains Indians before they could read the story. They then could explore issues of stereotyping evident within the story.
Practicing critical literacy theory within the classroom allowed teachers within the study to scaffold multiple meanings and interpretations of text. Students’ whom contemplated their own understandings and positions in the world around them were faced with the stepping stones needed for further explorations of text. Acknowledging critical literacy in the classroom assisted students to think about reading, responding to, as well as interpreting meaning both within and outside the contexts of the classroom.

Critical literacy practices include considering multiple perspectives in texts, the questioning of social practices, and the construction of identities in relation to discourses within texts. Allan Luke (2004) presents critical literacy in terms of two complementary practices: the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts (p.102). In order to deconstruct texts, students critically analyze how texts represent the world and construct individuals’ roles in a given social context. Students’ are given the opportunities to identify society’s injustices and limitations within the texts. Critical literacy also includes the reconstruction of texts, or the act of discovering new possibilities for the ways things might be (Janks, 2000, p. 76). Students engage in reconstruction of texts by drawing on their own experiences and identities to speak back to texts. Theorists often talk about drawing on multiple perspectives— the act of putting one’s own perspective in conversation with others—as one key aspect of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2007, p. 103). To reconstruct a text is to ask whose perspectives are represented, whose are left out, and how the consideration of all viewpoints informs our ability to understand and solve problems.

Through practicing critical literacies within the classroom setting, students often come to understand more about the discourses they are enacting and in turn, actively construct new identities or ways of being in the world (Lewison et al, 2007). Critical literacy theorist, Vivian
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Vasquez (2007) suggests that as students practice critical literacies, they not only revise their identities but they revise the discourses that are present in the social spaces of the classroom. This involves coming to terms with the notion that texts are never neutral and that they are written from particular perspectives, stances, or vantage points and that these carry with them particular ideologies (Vasquez, 2007). As such, texts work to position readers in particular ways. Likewise, we as readers, take in texts from particular perspectives, stances, and vantage points, and as Hilary Janks and Roz Ivanic (1992) suggest, “children need to understand that they can contribute either to reproducing or reshaping existing asymmetrical social relations where there are top dogs and underdogs” (p.19). Often issues of social justice and equity seem to be looked upon as heavy-handed issues; however such issues are often very engaging to students (Janks & Ivanic, 1992). Students enjoy such ‘heavy topics’ because they are socially significant and relevant to their existence in the world. Students thus become self-encouraged to write.

2.3 The Classroom under Reform

The time for student writing within the classroom is in short supply as teachers are expected to teach twice as much curriculum within the same amount of hours (Graves, 2004). Donald H. Graves (2004) insinuates that we live in an era where “children want to write, I would only add, if we let them” (p. 88). Ironically, with less time teachers are given to scaffold writing, now more than ever teachers and students are publishing. Within traditional classrooms, there is a tendency to underestimate the abilities of student writing. The hundreds of teachers publishing books, articles, and especially their students’ work have proven that expectations for student writers can be raised. Graves (2004) suggests that children should choose the topics of which to write about because, “writers can only write about what they know” (p.89). In order to stray away from
writing about violent action scenarios students may encounter on television or by playing computer games, it is the teacher’s role to provide a richer menu of literature to choose from.

By issuing the teachers’ role to provide a greater variety of literature in the classroom, Graves (2004) proposes teachers implement the strategy of reading the world (p.89). Teachers choose texts that are based on the immediate world surrounding their students’ lives and interests, rather than choosing texts that serves their greater interests. Graves (2004) says that he has reinvented Freire’s (1970) original term of reading the world in a completely new way, nonetheless, it is important to note that there are similarities. For example, issues of control and liberation are both common within both theorists’ notion of reading the world. Freire (1970) and Graves (2004) likewise see students of literacy as bounded by the institutions of administration and social politics of the greater world. Thus, through implementations of critical literacy within a reformed educational model, students have more control in incorporating their own personal narratives and positions within the texts.

Like Freire (1970), Graves (2004) issues teachers to stray away from the representations of knowers in a banking model of education; instead, teachers should act on their positions as facilitators of multiple ways to write and interpret texts. Graves (2004) suggests implementations of critical literacy within an elementary system should begin with personal narratives, whereby students have more control when telling their own stories (p.92). Processes of sharing their work with one another allow students to acknowledge other ways of thinking. Through this strategy, students develop their own points of view amidst recognizing other students’ ways of thinking besides their own. Teachers are also encouraged to provide multiple stories of the same topics, allowing their students to compare and contrast meanings of text through their writing.
Graves (2004) noted that teachers, who practice writing themselves as well as those who write with their students, offer a greater flexibility and understanding of the ways in which text is constructed (p.91). This places a greater emphasis on teachers’ writing in relation to their pedagogical methods of instruction as “teachers cannot simply teach writing if they have not experienced the process as well as enjoyment of producing text for the audience of the self and peers” (Graves, 2004, p.92). When defining the teacher's role through practices of critical literacy, Graves (2004) notes that teachers cannot just ‘become critical.’ Adopting critical literacy practices is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time. This includes developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires; changing with time and circumstance; engaging in self-critical practices; and remaining open to possibilities (Comber, 2001).

The teacher's role in helping students to become critically aware begins with a personal understanding of and engagement in critical literacy. Scholars, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) take an opposing approach to Graves (2004) by viewing critical literacy theory as more of an inherent process as teachers practice critical literacy theories themselves. Once teacher practice critical literacy theory, “teaching students to read and write from a critical stance should a natural process” (p. 56). Practicing critical literacy reminds teachers of the capacity of literature to generate multiple meanings and interpretations. Students’ own understandings and their position in the world around them provide for important stepping stones for further exploration of text. Students need to consider their responses as invitations for further explorations, and negotiations of a text’s meaning. Acknowledging critical literacies within the classroom can aid in guiding students to think about responding to, and interpreting meaning outside of the classroom setting, a life skill necessary to adapt in a mass media saturated society.
2.4 Disenfranchisement of Traditional Learning

Traditional forms of teaching have led to questions that showcased the desire not to think critically. Teachers in turn were not themselves generators of questions and answers of their own, but rather, they were purveyors of the questions and answers of others, usually those of a textbook. Critical social theorists are concerned with oppressive and unjust relationships produced by traditional forms of schooling and critique the traditional models of education, which typically place the teacher at the front of the classroom possessing and transmitting the knowledge to students who sit idly “learning” or receiving the information (Janks, 2000, p. 21).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) provides an example of how critical literacy is developed in an educational context. Freire proposes a system in which students become more socially aware through critique of multiple forms of injustice. This awareness cannot be achieved if students are not given the opportunity to explore and construct knowledge on their own terms. Freire describes a traditional type of education as the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1970, p.123). This model of education is characterized by instruction that turns students into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. In these classrooms, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing, thus the teachers separate themselves as being the possessors of knowledge” (Freire, 1970, p.125). In this role, the teacher does not necessarily challenge the learners to think authentically or value students’ own ‘funds of knowledge.’

In opposition to the banking model, teachers who recognize the possible value of developing critical literacy do not view their learners as vessels to be filled. Instead they create experiences that offer students the opportunities to actively construct knowledge. Teachers engaged in critical literacy “serve less as instructors and more as facilitators of conversations that question
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traditional power relations” (Camber, 2001, p. 3). By using critical pedagogical methods, teachers create spaces where they can be learners and students can be teachers, thus providing a grassroots level of learning where everyone can equally construct and interrogate theories of knowledge.

Freire’s work radically altered the concept of reading from a critical stance. Reading from a critical stance required not only reading and understanding the text, but understanding the text's purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it. For example, after viewing an advertisement for Pepsi showing fit teens playing sports, readers without critical awareness might begin to associate the image of physical fitness with the sugary, carbonated drink. Conversely, viewers who are critically aware and ‘read the world’ might recognize that drinking pop excessively contributes to tooth decay and obesity. When reading the world, the critically aware readers comprehend beyond the literal level and think about the function of the text - in this case, the advertisement was selling pop by creating an image that fun, fit teens enjoy drinking Pepsi. Promoting this type of critical awareness leads students to move away from naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level knowledge which enables them to discover imposed interpretations of reality.

2.5 Discovery Learning

Students who practice discovery or inquiry-based theory are active, interested explorers of their surroundings. This type of learning breeds curiosity, interest, and positive emotion towards reading and writing processes (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1962) issued the idea of overcoming motivational problems within students as a precursor for high levels of learning. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) address Vygotsky’s notion of overcoming motivational behaviours towards writing by stating that “inquiry-based learning seeks higher
motivational patterns of students who want to write based on topics of their own choices and interests” (p. 269). Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that places students’ questions, ideas and observations at the centre of the learning experience (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). The process of discovery learning involves open-ended investigations into a question or a problem, requiring students to engage in evidence-based reasoning and creative problem-solving.

For educators, inquiry-based learning theory entails being responsive to the students’ learning needs, and most importantly, knowing when and how to introduce students to ideas that will move them forward in their inquiry (Capacity Building Series, 2013) Discovery learning raises the issue of methodologies of teacher pedagogy and the abilities to create a space in the classroom for which topics of the playground are invited as discourse. Donald Graves (2004) argues that within practices of inquiry-based learning, “students need to choose most of the topics they write about, but we as teachers need to show students the places where writing comes from” (p.88). Through inquiry-based practices, teachers provide context through everyday current events to trigger student interests as events situate around their lives.

Together, educators and students co-author the learning experience, accepting mutual responsibility for planning, assessment for learning and the advancement of individual as well as class-wide understanding of personally meaningful content and ideas (Fielding, 2012). Ontario’s Capacity Building Series (2013) document notes that “inquiry-based learning theory is a pedagogical mindset that concerns itself with the creative approach of combining the best approaches to instruction, including explicit instruction and small-group and guided learning, in an attempt to build on students’ interests and ideas” (p. 2). Inquiry-based learning sets up equitable forms of learning where students are capable of contributing to a collaborative inquiry;
“for example, while some students might find it easier to ask questions and clarify other students’ responses, others are more likely to provide overarching theories, making connections between the ‘big ideas’” (Capacity Building Series, p. 2). Discovery learning allows for patterns of contributions made by both individual students and the class as a whole to be assessed as forms of inquiry.

Practices of inquiry-based learning flourish in language programs, such as guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). As practitioners of guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell (2012) use inquiry-based learning to “build a community of readers and writers in the classrooms so the students are engaged and become independent researchers in meaningful and productive learning opportunities while the teach meets with small groups of students” (p.278). Fountas and Pinnell (2012) embrace in small-group teaching as a way of effectively teaching the broad and diverse range of learners within their classrooms. They embrace discovery learning by providing a variety of student choice in reading and writing, that strays away from the notion that guided reading is a reading program based on reading leveled books only. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) argue against these notions, as they want students to learn to “select books the way experienced readers do- according to their own interests, by trying a bit of the book, by noticing the topic or the author” (p. 281). Text gradient and leveled books are meant to be used as a tool for the teacher, not to label a student.

Reading at one’s level is deemphasized within Fountas and Pinnell’s (2012) classrooms; rather there is a dynamic in place where the teacher takes on the role of assisting their students to learn how to choose books that are right for them to read and write about independently, which is more of a life skill to acquire. Inquiry-based learning prompts students to, what Paulo Freire (1970) suggests, exist in the world rather than just to live in it. Existing in the world showcases a
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deepen involvement and engagement in class communities. Students are given more opportunities to “affect their world by their creative ideas by means of the transformations they effect upon it” (Freire, 1970, p. 79). Teachers who implement discovery learning, assist students into a greater form of what Alvaro Vieira Pinto (1960) refers to in Spanish as la consciencia, or consciousness— a heightened awareness of themselves and the world they are situated in. Through independent inquiry, educational reform requires more dialogue and a breakdown of power relations between the teacher and the students as the recipients of knowledge.

2.6 Critical Pedagogical Methods

Critical pedagogy allows for supportive learning as a social experience, creating spaces in the classroom for placing student voices at the forefront of pedagogy through inquiry. Critical theorist, Carole Edelsky (1994) suggests that when teachers take on a critical perspective, attempts to expose inequality in the classroom and the greater society become discourse in language learned throughout the year. Critical pedagogical theory seeks to “construct a critical curriculum that is socially just and equitable, where issues including race, class, gender, and fairness are constantly on the agenda” (Edelsky, 1994, 45). Edelsky argues that “critical pedagogy cannot be preplanned because it is built of students’ questions about everyday life” (p. 46). As a result, teachers and students equally tune in to issues of social justice that unfolds itself throughout the classroom discourse.

Vasquez (2007) suggests that through critical pedagogies “students and teachers are actively involved in creating conversations that lead to ask questions in what ways are we already readers and writers of the world and in what ways can we equitably and democratically reread and rewrite the world” (p. 82). Her views of critical pedagogy lead to the assumption that critical methods of pedagogy cannot be pre-taught; rather it is a methodology that has to be lived
through in the present. By practicing critical pedagogy theory, teachers incorporate a critical perspective in order to assist their students to acknowledge and inquire about the social issues that are surrounding them.

Vasquez (2007) follows the postmodernist notion that that world cannot be full of knowable and predictable moments; rather the world is in a constant state of flux and full of contradictions. Learning under critical pedagogy thus becomes a negotiation of adjusting and reconstructing text and its interpretations. Barbara Comber (2001) takes upon a similar argument whereby implementing critical pedagogy theory and critical literacy theory within a curriculum needs to be lived through; “it arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in communities in which we live” (p. 3). Comber (2001) describes critical pedagogy as involving individuals using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, as well as to question practices of privilege and injustice.

Critical pedagogical methods of instruction do not necessarily involve taking a negative stance, instead they include “looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement” (Comber, 2001, p.6). Critical pedagogy encompasses the notion that texts are never neutral and that they are written from particular perspectives, stances, or vantage points and that these carry with them particular ideologies (Giroux, 1989, p.125). When students learn how to use the tools of critical pedagogy, they can expose, discuss, and attempt to solve social injustices within their own lives.

2.7 Facilitators of Social Change

When engaging in the development of critical skills, students begin to acknowledge the unfair privileging of certain dominant discourses in which their society engages in (Delpit, 1988, p.180). Teachers engaged in methods that support critical literacy and critical pedagogy can, as
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Lisa Delpit (1988) suggests, “let our students become aware that they can resist a system that seeks to limit them to the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder” (p. 183). By developing lessons based on dialogue with students about their needs and interests, educators can invite students to take part in a larger community discourse that attempts to solve problems and create alternatives to oppressive situations. By participating in social action projects or creating a public discourse, students may see the relation between curriculum and the world beyond the walls of the school.

Edward Behrman (2006) explains that the development of critical pedagogy theory encourages social justice and exploration of language and literature in many forms. Since critical literacy looks different in every classroom, “based on the subject matter and the population of students, there is no formula for how teachers engage students in mastery of critical literacy; however, there are some practices that appear in lessons more commonly” (Behrman, 2006, p.483). Behrman’s (2006) research revealed that the most commonly used critical pedagogical practices that support critical literacy included “reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing counter-texts, having learners conduct research about topics of personal interest, and challenging learners to take social action” (p. 488). Reading supplementary texts representative of the current changing media and technology allow students to make connections with the literature and content being studied.

Through their critical pedagogies, educators also use lyrics from popular music as supplementary texts in order to engage students in discussion about topics such as race, gender, and politics. In her article, Carol Lloyd (2003) suggests using popular songs to show students how to make connections between the popular media and political issues. For example, Lloyd (2003) recommended using the lyrics of “Buffalo Soldier,” written by Bob Marley (1980), as a
supplementary text that mentions the freed slaves who fought as soldiers in America during the nineteenth century as their stories rarely appeared in traditional textbooks. Lloyd (2003) argues that incorporating multiple texts based on similar literary themes offers students the opportunity to critique the values or voices that are being promoted.

The practice of reading from the perspective of resistance involves “students’ interpretation of a text from the viewpoint of the world and not just the common Euro-centric ideology often found in standard texts” (Behrman, 2006, p. 489). By providing the stories of people whose voices typically are not heard, teachers provide students with the opportunity to participate in dialogue asking why certain perspectives are normally privileged while others are silenced. Through critical methods of instruction, teachers can have their students produce counter-texts. Essentially, this involves “having students generate narratives or other forms of texts that can serve to validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of underrepresented groups (Behrman, 2006, p. 490). Behrman (2006) notes that this approach to curriculum offers students occasions to speak from the point of view of those voices that are often silenced or marginalized, thereby empowering social justice of others around them.

2.8 Teachers as Learners, Learners as Teachers

Learners’ choice in any type of research has “long been touted by constructivists and critical pedagogues like John Dewey and Howard Gardner as an effective way to involve, encourage, and empower learners to actively participate in their own construction of knowledge” (Graves, 2004, p. 92). Graves (2004) suggests that implementations of critical literacy theory within the classroom allows for teachers to legitimize interests and knowledge of their students at the forefront of the classroom dynamic. Students are able to engage themselves and as a result,
produce the teachers’ role in the classroom as a recreation, rather than a fixed property of transmitting information to be regurgitated.

Freire (1970) acknowledged that implementations of critical literacy, inquiry-based learning and critical pedagogy theories sought to challenge traditional hierarchal relationships between the learner and educator by insinuating that teachers should be learners and learners should be teachers. He argued that

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views, never once taking into account the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed” (Freire, 1970, p.75).

By flipping the script so to speak, teachers alleviate traditional methods of choosing texts to be discussed and argued, giving priority of their own interest over their students. Critical literacy, discovery learning and critical pedagogy seek to problematize the authoritative relationships between the roles of the teacher and students. Together they advocate for the relinquish of teacher control, so that students’ choice becomes paramount in texts that are discussed and read in individual, small group, or whole class settings. As a result, teachers stray away from Freire’s banking education model as they become scaffolders of learning that is student-centered, rather than transmitters of knowledge at the forefront of the classroom.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the overall case study design as well as the instruments of data collection and analysis used to collect sufficient data to answer the study’s research questions. The process of participant sampling and recruitment will be elaborated on in conjunction with the ethical considerations significant to the study. The chapter also highlights the methodological strengths and limitations as well as the complexities of the research. This chapter also provides a succinct summation of the methodological rationale and reasoning given the purpose of the case study and supporting research questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

The research was conducted in a case study using a qualitative research approach through which a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teacher participants are orchestrated. The case study method was chosen due to the advantages of “creating profound insights by putting a spotlight on individual instances and experiences rather than a wide spectrum” (Denscombe, 1998, p.30). By looking at these particular instances through semi-structured interviews of teachers who partake in critical literacy practices in the classroom, the aim of this study is to inform the general society based on data collection and analysis.

A qualitative approach to inquiry is the “collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study” (Creswell, 2013, p.44). The qualitative approach of this case study provides what Robert K. Yin (1994) refers to as “thick descriptions of the case being studied.” Such thick descriptions give the researcher access to the subtleties of multiple and changing interpretations which would have been lost in quantitative or experimental research strategies (Walsham, 1995b, p.114). Rather than being reduced to several variables and their
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relationships, qualitative study presents itself as a complex system. This approach is used as an effective tool when exploring the limitations and possibilities of learning from teacher participants’ experiences and beliefs in a natural setting where these participants experience the issues in this case study.

Professor and historian, Christopher M. Clark (1990) refers to qualitative accounts as having a profound and unpredictable effect on human thought and action. By learning through participants’ experiences, this can evoke specific actions and advocate change inspired by or influenced by findings of qualitative research. The qualitative approach allows for face-to-face interaction with teachers which are conducted through semi-structured interviews. Using this strategy allows the researcher to become the key instrument in the research process, gathering information rather than using questionnaires or surveys as the basis for gathering data.

A qualitative approach assumes that each stakeholder brings various interpretations and values to the research process (Clark, 1990, p.338). This component of qualitative inquiry is suitable for this case study because it is directed towards gathering data from participants’ perceptions, beliefs, values, and experiences in regards to critical literacy lessons used in the classroom. The qualitative approach also imparts a flexible research design to the case study, allowing for the pursuit of new directions in data analysis developed during the research process.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Data collection of this qualitative case study was conducted through both primary and secondary sources. Given the parameters of the MTRP, primary source data collection is provided through a semi-structured interview protocol, interviewing a small group of teacher participants. Secondary sources are primarily covered by the government of Ontario’s curriculum publications as well as existing literature focused on critical literacy. The purpose of the case
study is to recount the instructional strategies of critical writing through pedagogical methods of my teacher participants. Through research questions, and methods of data collection, I discovered which practices and teacher prompts of critical thinking in literacy programs proposed by the recent curriculum documents of the Ministry of Education are working and which practices and teacher prompts were not working for my participants. The research questions, purpose of study, and literature review were essential in providing the context for accumulating the set of interview questions in order to organize the semi-structured interview protocol.

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, specific open-ended questions were written as part of the interview protocol (see Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews were flexible in terms of the order in which issues and topics are considered (Denscombe, 1998, p.113). By changing the order of questions discussed during the interviews, this addressed specific aspects that are important to individual participants and by doing so this will help gain a deeper understanding of the research questions as well as the angles of the topic the researcher has not foreseen.

The flexibility of the semi-structured interview was suitable for this case study as this design allows the researcher to go into depth with the ‘why’ questions rather than ‘how many’ or ‘how much’ (Denscombe, 1998, 117). The ‘why’ questions to be answered throughout the semi-structured interviews aided in the exploration of contradictory views within teacher participant accounts. This was particularly helpful when categorizing and synthesizing themes in the data analysis of this case study’s findings.

3.3 Participants
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In order to gather data for the purpose of this case study and research questions, only teacher participants will be interviewed due to the guidelines of the MTRP. The decision process and rationale behind the sampling criteria and recruitment of the teacher participants will be reviewed. There will also be a preamble of the background experiences of each participant once they have been recruited. With that said, for the meantime, the participant bios’ section will be vacant.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

In this section the rationale of the sampling process will follow the list of sampling criteria of teacher participants. Teacher participants were selected based on the following sampling criteria:

- Participants need to have exposure to critical literacy either as a novice, or an experienced practitioner;
- Participants must be currently teaching language arts at the primary or junior school age level;
- Participants are willing to share their lived experiences and personal attitudes answering questions and follow-up questions through a semi-structured interview protocol.

In order to expand research on the instructional strategies of critical literacies in the classroom, it is necessary to analyze the various pedagogical methods of individual teacher participants who are currently practicing critical literacies within their classrooms. A range of experience in critical literacies was welcomed because this depicts the realities of society; not all teachers are experienced practitioners of a certain topic. This sampling criteria sought to give meaning and further understanding to expressed interests in expanding prior knowledge of critical literacy practices to a wider audience of readers who may self-identify as being a newcomer, novice, or experienced teachers and/or practitioners of critical literacy strategies.
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By partaking in a qualitative approach, participants had to share in-depth their experiences and personal attitudes towards implementing critical literacies. This rationale enabled further insights and discoveries of the internal and external factors experienced by individual teachers in various classroom environments. Participant engagement and openness in the interview process helped me to decipher what critical literacy strategies were working and what strategies were not working for individual participants. This was extremely significant in order to draw conclusions whether instructing critical thinking in writing was an inherent skill teachers need to practice and work on alongside their students, or if this was a method teachers need to learn through ongoing training as a new pedagogy proposed in Fullan’s (2013) educational reform plan for Ontario.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

A non-random sampling method was used in this case study as opposed to a random sampling method. The non-random sampling method provided a better fit for this research given the small-scale nature of the study as well as the methodological parameters of the MTRP. A non-random sampling method encompasses various sampling procedures. One of the sampling procedures considered when conducting research was purposeful sampling. Natalie L. Sproull (1995) refers to purposeful sampling as a “non-random sampling method in which the sample is arbitrarily selected because characteristics which they possess are deemed important for the research” (p.119).

Another type of sampling to be considered was convenient sampling. Convenient sampling, otherwise known as incidental sampling, uses a suitable group or individuals as the participants of the researcher’s sample (Sproull, 1995, p.119). In correspondence with this study, convenient sampling is predicted to be the superior procedure given the sampling criteria of the study. The benefits of establishing networks throughout practicum school placements and through OISE’s
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Masters of Teaching program aided in establishing a comfortable rapport with fellow colleagues, allowing for a vast variety of potential participants.

To ensure that teacher participants took part in this qualitative study as volunteers, information Bristol boards were set up throughout various school staffrooms during lunchtime. The purpose of the study, research questions, sampling criteria and contact information was provided as an opportunity to be informed and to contact myself by their own personal accord. I was not in attendance during lunchtime after the information board was set up in order for potential participants to not feel obligated to sign the consent form. To ensure anonymity any questions and/or inquiries teachers may have about this study will be addressed in private conversation via email or cell phone call.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

My participants needed to be committed to inclusivity and equity, while also having substantial experience teaching English. The qualitative data I collected included each teacher’s background, beliefs and inclusive teaching strategies. The three participants of my study all currently employed under the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and York Region District School Board (YRDSB). I purposely sought teachers from a variety of backgrounds teaching English; may it be from experiences in IB, special education, and in perceived normative classrooms.

Pseudonyms were used to address my participants throughout my research analysis and discussion of findings. Tony is an elementary school teacher who is employed under the TDSB. He has been teaching for fifteen years and has been employed at his current IB school for nine years. He has accumulated enriched teaching experience in Korea, as well as teaching IB curriculum in Brazil.
Angela is a passionate teacher who is currently employed as a special education and resource teacher employed under the TDSB. Angela has been employed at her current IB school for one year. She has taught in Vancouver Island, working with diverse Aboriginal communities.

Linda has been employed under the YRDSB for nine years. She first taught in Israel where she incorporated critical literacies into her practice of teaching. She continues to undergo professional development in critical literacy pedagogy in Canada where she transitioned from special education, to embark teaching intermediate grades at the elementary school level.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis requires the reduction and interpretation of a voluminous amount of information collected into certain patterns, categories and themes (Johnson & Christenson, 2000, p.55). This involves what some qualitative researchers refer to as peeling back the layers of an onion in order to make an interpretation of the larger meaning of data. (Creswell, 2009, p.183).

The analysis of data was integral to the case study as it provided an ongoing process involving continual reflection of the researcher (Rossman & Rollis, 1998, p.112). Thorough note taking took place after the semi-structured interviews with participants was commenced. I did not take thorough notes during the interviews as I wanted to maintain the integrity of the semi-structure protocol in allotting so much time for the interviews to occur.

Once the data was collected from the semi-structured interviews, I transcribed my interviews using a personal, password-protected laptop. From there, data analysis was used to code each transcript. Through this process, the literature review and research questions were used as analytical tools to assist in looking for divergences within the data, including null data.

Analyzing what teacher participants do not speak to is as equally important when analyzing what they have spoken to. It is the role of the researcher to comprehend the overall narrative of
the research data by deciphering subtle differences and idiosyncrasies. Subsequently, null data can assist the researcher, influencing alternative categories that had the potential of being overlooked after reflecting on each interview.

During data analysis, the transcribed interviews were examined individually in order to categorize emerging themes from the data. The transcripts were also cross-examined as a whole in order to synthesize themes and to eventually make meaning of the study’s findings keeping in mind what existing research has already found.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

To ensure the integrity and anonymity of participants, each teacher was given a pseudonym. Participants were notified of their rights to withdraw from the study at any given time of the research study. This is clearly articulated in the consent form given to each participant (see Appendix A). A research proposal containing procedures and information about the participants will be reviewed by the Research Ethics Board (REB) to ensure the research being proposed does not put participants at risk. There are no known risks to participation involved in this case study that far. With that said, it is still important that the researcher maintains sensitivity and anticipates unforeseen risks throughout the interview process; such factors considered were the location of each interview.

Each location was decided based on a mutual agreement of the researcher and participant. It was integral that each participant feels comfortable in a setting where they disclose their information as participants can articulate the factors that could potentially interrupt, suppress, or oppress the exposure of data during the interview process (Fine & Weis, 2000). Kvale (2006) refers to the qualitative research approach as “an approach increasingly being seen by qualitative researchers as a moral inquiry.” Acknowledging the sensitivity of the interview interaction and
maintaining participant voice throughout data collection was integral. Within the consent form, participants were notified of their rights to retract anything recorded during interviews as well as follow up interviews. This ensured suitable member checking, where each participant would have the opportunity to review their transcript, and in turn, will have the right to clarify or retract any statement disclosed prior to data analysis.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Given the parameters of the MTRP guidelines of this qualitative study, the sample size of teacher participants is relatively small. As a result, data analysis may appear to only scratch the surface; informing the topic of implementing critical literacy strategies, but not being able to generalize the overall experiences of teachers’ implementations within Ontario classrooms. The scope of the variety of participants is very acute, narrowed down to the semi-structured interviews of only teacher participants. This presents a limitation within the case study because it requires a higher tolerance for ambiguities within the research (Patton, 2002). The researcher is forced to collect data based solely through the interpretative lens of the teacher occupation rather than being exposed to a variety of student and parental guardian interpretations.

Limitations of the case study are also prevalent through a non-random method of convenience sampling. The risk of potential biases runs higher in basing specific qualities of the participants for the recruitment procedure. Having had a previous rapport with each participant through affiliation with OISE practicum placement experiences also presents this method with a higher risk of bias whereby participants can potentially state what they think the researcher wants to hear for the purpose of their study rather than exposing their true inner beliefs and attitudes toward the topic discussed. This presents a lower probability of the research being a generalizable representation of a teacher population.
Non-random methods of convenience sampling present both sides of the coin, presenting strengths alongside their weaknesses. A significant strength of convenient sampling is the easier access and recruitment of participants due to the network of participants having already been established. Convenience sampling has the potential of setting up the researcher with rich qualitative data through elaborative, in-depth statements of participants through semi-structured interviews.

By conducting semi-structured interviews for this qualitative study, the researcher is able to gather in-depth insights of the topic at hand as opposed to surveys, where researchers tend to only gather conclusions of their participants (Sproull, 1995). Semi-structured interviews give participants the power to guide the interview process. Participants were presented with the opportunity to speak to issues that are of most significance to them, as well as the opportunity to reflect upon their pedagogical decision-making. This in turn, provided rich and authentic data for the researcher to analyze and develop themes reflecting diverse perspectives of the teacher participants in the case study.

3.7 Conclusion

The overall design of the case study presents a qualitative approach, including the literature review and semi-structured interviews with teacher participants given the parameters of the MTRP. Sampling criteria of teacher participants will seek to represent both novice and experienced practitioners of critical literacies in order to adhere to a generalized population. A non-random convenient sampling method will be conducted within a network of established teacher professionals in affiliation with the OISE community.

To ensure the protection of teacher participants, ethical considerations were accounted for. Assigning pseudonym and presenting the rights of the participant to retract any disclosed
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statements prior to data analysis was clearly articulated within the participant consent form. The storage of data collected was also taken into consideration in order to prevent a breach of confidentiality that may pose a threat to the research study.

Next, in Chapter 4, I will be reporting the findings of the data collected from the literature review and semi-structured interviews. Expansion and elaboration of the divergence of themes from the data will be thoroughly analyzed and integrated within the case study.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will present the data collected from three face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In keeping alignment with my sampling criteria, I interviewed three teacher participants who define themselves on a range scale of novice to expert practitioners of critical literacy practices. My questions were intended to gather information of the instructional strategies of critical literacies through pedagogical methods of my teacher participants. Participant engagement and openness in the interview process was aimed to help decipher what critical literacy strategies were working and what strategies were not working for the individual participants. It was also important to uncover how the classroom environment was utilized in order to motivate students to shape their critical lenses.

This case study is integral for my audience, including myself as a researcher, teachers, teacher candidates, policymakers, and the general public, who have an interest in critical literacy, as they seek to gain a better understanding of how educators situate themselves in promoting critical thinking through student oral and written communication. Teachers can no longer instruct through a narrow approach of desiring basic skill outcomes. In a post-industrial economy, teachers are expected to showcase multiple approaches of instruction, using differentiated learning techniques for students to inherit higher-level thinking skills

Based on the data collected, my participants agree that critical literacy serves as a benefitting factor for students, as they develop their analytic and inquiry skills needed for twenty-first century innovation. Through my data analysis, themes emerged from looking at divergences and convergences between my data findings and what has been mentioned within literary works within my literature review. Four themes along with their subthemes emerged from the data
collected, in which I have organized to provide an analytic overview of the responses provided by my participants. The four themes that have risen from my data analysis include: 1. Building Agencies, 2. Teacher Pedagogy, 3. The Need for a Safe Place, and 4. Supporting Inquiry Based Learning.

4.1 Finding Student Voice

4.1.1 Constructing Student Identities

“Through practicing critical literacies within the classroom settings, students often come to understand more about the discourses they are enacting” (Lewison et al, 2007, p.53). This quote used in my literature review guided one of my questions I asked in my semi-structured interviews, which was, what does a critical literacy program look like in your classroom? I found my second participant, Tony, had brought this quote to life when he described his critical literacy program. His program constantly refers to students’ positions on topics and in turn, begs to question how this affects the ways they identify amongst other people’s opinions. He elaborated on his grade six global issues unit where he says,

It’s good to do this; I always tell students, ‘So, you’ve heard ideas from home about things like poverty and why people are poor, and you’ve heard my perspective,’ … and sometimes your perspective and their parents’ perspective is night and day; completely different. So I ask, ‘Who do you listen to?’ I’m saying left and they’re saying right, and they just kind of look at me and ask, ‘You’re not going to make me pick are you?’ And of course I don’t…I tell them that they have to listen to them. You’re taking influences and you’re taking ideas from people and you formulate you’re own sense, and you own it. You’ve taken a stance, this is my beliefs, this is my ethics, and you’ve developed yours from listening, taking in and understanding, and coming up with your own ideas.

Participant 3, Linda, described her critical literacy program as students learn how to form their own opinions by learning that the content in texts is never neutral, thus neither are the opinions neutral amongst anyone. Linda provided an example she used in her grade seven and
eight combined class where “students had to deconstruct various historical news reports, for example, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Students had to consider various perspectives, whose stories were being told, whose weren’t, and how this represented social life in Canada.”

Both participants used interesting methods of critical literacy to promote student agency within discourses of global issues. Linda uses the deconstruction of texts as way for looking at characters’ positions within the text; this serves as an indirect approach for students to question their own identities within the discourses that are present in the social spaces of their classroom. Tony uses more of a direct approach, by having students reflect on other people’s perspectives on current issues, and advocates for his class to build their own understandings and viewpoints, revising discourses present inside and outside of the classroom.

4.1.2 Disrupting the Commonplace

In Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) breakdown of critical literacy into four interrelated dimensions, I used one of their dimensions as my subtheme, “disrupting the commonplace” (p.32). By disrupting the commonplace, “students use multiple voices to interrogate texts by asking questions such as how is this text trying to position me, and how am I positioned within this text?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p.45). My first participant, Angela, sheds light to this claim by sharing her insights on how

It is important when you try to get students to respond to questions about text that you try and make personal connections. This is often lacking in our Diagnostic Reading Assessments. Often I get nothing because it doesn’t relate to their lives…If the question asks, ‘When the dog lost its toy what did it make you think of? The student will literally write ‘nothing’ because he or she doesn’t have any personal relation to the content.
As a Special Education teacher, Angela expresses that often times, students do not have the active agencies in responding and relating to texts. This in turn acts against the students’ capabilities of diving deeper into content that relates to the context of their own lives. My second participant, Tony, illustrates a similar need for students to be able to position themselves in the text when he says,

They (students) respond really well when they hear or see thing in their lives and look up statistics; they respond really well to the wow factors. For example, one of my students challenged the notions of what is healthy eating to meat eating. The boy comes up to me and says, ‘Mr. T, did you know to produce one kilogram of meat …he found the statistic and even did the work to figure out that it would take ten backyard swimming pools of water to produce this, can you believe it? This statistic really challenged his notions of the world and what it means to preserve it and us for that matter.

Through disrupting the commonplace, both Angela and Tony stray away from information being transmitted down to the students, rather information needs to come through the power of student opportunity to analyze, what is cited in the literature, how the content shapes their identity, constructs cultural discourse, and supports or disrupts the status quo (Fairclough, 1989, p.111).

4.2 Teacher Pedagogy

4.2.1 Adapting a Critical Faculty

Michael Fullan’s (2013) next phase action plan for Ontario’s education system highlights the need for teachers to teach with a “new entrepreneurial spirit- a spirit characterized by innovation, risk-taking, commitment, and skilled problem solving in the service of a better future” (p.9). This document emphasizes the key qualities of higher-level thinking; critical thinking being at the forefront in fostering the adaptability of students into greater society. From the beliefs and values section of my interview questions, I asked my participants what prompts you to incorporate
critical thinking practices into your classroom? Tony mentioned his own educational histories as he shares,

It’s (critical thinking) is a thing you do when you’re in university- you look critically at stuff around you. It’s interesting because I feel like I didn’t go into teaching until later because I was very critical of what learning looked like….In my first years of teaching, it definitely was in the back of my mind to make sure that students, whatever information I’m presenting them, are getting varied perspectives of what they are learning.

Tony first acknowledged the place for critical thinking practices from teaching abroad where he felt his pedagogy should adopt critical thinking practices in order to be engaged in current issues of the world around him. In his interview he states:

It was definitely when I went to Brazil and started engaging in the inquiry concept and the IB program that there was a place for it. It was required and it was part of your pedagogy right. If people aren’t very engaged in the critical things around them, how much are they going to put that into their classroom?

Linda’s answers are similar to Tony’s due to that fact that critical thinking presents an adaptable quality teachers need to foster amongst their students. Linda feels that incorporating critical thinking practices in the classroom is important because “teachers need to be lifelong learners and so do our students…We are human and we are constantly learning all the time.” In order to foster critical thinking amongst students, both Tony and Linda suggest teachers should be adopting a critical faculty within their pedagogical practices. Linda also suggests that “teachers need to have a willingness to learn and they need to be able to take risks.”

Angela attributes to this suggestion by describing “critical thinking is messy… I often go into it where I’m not sure what the outcome is going to be because you just don’t know what that outcome will be.” All three of my participants suggest taking risks as part of critical thinking practices in the classroom. Angela states, “Sometimes we get off topic because someone says
something and then we get off topic from the idea of the reading and it goes on to another idea, but it’s still meaningful to students’ learning.” Tony follows up from this statement by contributing his advice for teachers when he says, “When you see something go for it... When you see a connection and you’ve engaged your students, take the time to go there.”

4.2.2 Seeking the ‘Fit’ for Critical Literacies

Under Fullan’s (2013) next phase action plan, each Ontario subject curriculum document issues the requirement for critical thinking practices, including literacy (p.3). Edelsky (1994) argues that “critical pedagogy cannot be preplanned because it is built of students’ questions about everyday life” (p. 46). This raises the question, how does critical literacy fit into curriculum? My participants provided me with a fair bit of their insight on the topic as Tony explains,

It’s tricky... Critical literacy is all in there (the language curriculum). The whole reason for the media literacy component is basically that. It’s looking critically at the world... So it’s nice that this is in all the new curriculums- the social studies curriculum, the science curriculum, they all have room for a critical place. But it’s really tricky when you think that it’s not so easy to assess it, to deliver it. It’s not just a little square box where you deliver knowledge, there’s perspectives and opinions.

Argued in my literature review, Edelsky (1994) states that “if critical pedagogy were applied to all aspects of curriculum, as a result, teachers and students can equally tune in to issues of social justice that unfolds itself throughout the classroom discourse.” (p.46). Tony speaks to the environment of teachers he engages with in professional development workshops that question the fit of critical literacies within the new curriculum.

I’ve been to some workshops where they were working out this new framework and idea of where to fit in critical thinking... The whole deal was that I have to get all this other stuff taught, there’s no place for this. This is an extra thing, there’s no place for looking critically at stuff because you have to cover curriculum and all these expectations. I would argue that that’s the place where they can really learn stuff and
make it a) meaningful and b) it sticks. It’s learnt when you can not only know ideas, but to think critically around them- it’s a higher level of looking at stuff. It depends I guess on the environment which you’re in, what else is expected of you as a teacher, and the initiatives of the school.

Tony stresses the factors of environment in being able to incorporate critical thinking practices into curriculum. The environments which he spoke of in our interview are highly adaptive for implementations of critical thinking, where in Brazil and the IB program, critical thinking is a standard by which teachers need to develop as part of their teaching pedagogy.

Angela testifies to critical literacy’s implementation into the broad subject curriculum. Unlike Tony, she does not see critical thinking as something that is newly brought into Ontario’s curriculum; rather it has always existed. She says, “We always change the name in education to make it seem like it’s something new… At the end of the day I do what works for me… I think I’ve always done it.”

4.3 The Need for a Safe Place

4.3.1 Individual Needs and Well-Being

Fullan (2013) acknowledges within his action plan the benefactors of incorporating “a new entrepreneurial spirit characterized by innovation and critical thinking” (p.9) He outlines a cyclical process whereby incorporating critical thinking in Ontario’s curriculum “will help Ontario students become analytic problem solvers who will then service a better future” (Fullan, 2013, p.10). Critical practices help students, which in turn helps the greater society tenfold. What Fullan fails to address presents a divergence in data by my participants’ responses and concerns about the mental health and well-being of students being molded to think critically consistently.

Tony acknowledges the need to look at the mental health of students as he states,

It’s interesting, because depending on the age it gets tricky the
level of criticism you want children to develop. In grade six, we have global issues, and we have a lot of environmental stuff, and I’m always cautious of how much doom and gloom I’m going to deliver. You need to have a slow release in terms of how much you think children can handle global issues. You don’t want to bash them over the head with too much reality of the issues in the world right. You can be highly critical of stuff, but I think you should be looking at the mental health of the students you’re dealing with.

From Linda’s past teacher experiences as a Special Education teacher, she sheds light on the need to be aware of student’s individual needs. When asking her how she became informed with critical literacy practices in the classroom, she made sure to address “the need to make sure you’re addressing students’ needs in the classroom while you’re incorporating critical literacies. You need to be able to differentiate your critical literacy program to fit all your students’ mental, social, and learning needs. Use their Individual Education Plans to help guide you through planning so each student’s needs are being addressed.”

When implementing critical practices, Angela notes that teachers need to be mindful of using positive reinforcement in the classroom. She says, “I think positive reinforcement is huge…When somebody has an idea you go, ‘Wow that’s a really great idea, can anybody add to that?’ Because kids, like all of us, adults, it doesn’t matter how old you are, really respond to positive reinforcement; kids in particularly.”

Angela also notes that as teachers, we must be aware of the comments being said within the classroom. “Comments need to be constructive. You can’t say ‘that’s bad’ without saying why. You shouldn’t say it’s bad anyway. What you can say is ‘I like such and such, but can I give a suggestion?’ There’s a lot of talk in the classroom about how to respond to someone else’s work and the ways you view situations in a positive way.” This may help to prevent self-esteem issues amongst children and adolescence as they grow and build their confidence as learners.
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Overall, Tony and Angela look at students’ mental well-being as a whole in implementing critical literacy practices. Tony looks at the age demographic of his students, and Angela looks at social patterns to describe the need for positive reinforcement when taking on critical approaches to learning. Linda addresses this through more of an individual approach, whereby each child has their own specific needs that need to be addressed through differentiated instruction.

4.3.2 Striking a Balance

“Critical pedagogical methods of instruction do not necessarily involve taking a negative stance, instead they include looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it, and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement” (Comber, 2001, p.6). Although this was argued in my literature review and remains a valid statement, my findings through the interview process suggest the need for striking a balance between the depths of criticism and enjoyment.

Tony addresses the issues of striking a balance when incorporating critical practices in the classroom as he admits,

It’s easier to go down that route of being critical about everything you’re engaging students with, but you want to have a balance at the same time. For example, with these global issues, I had a lot of art and drama activities that were just fun. They provided other places of learning for the students, because you didn’t want to make things too doom and gloom. It’s important that students look critically at the world around them and that can begin at a fairly young age; but you have to make sure that you’re not too over the top with it. You want to keep things enjoyable, keep the balance and keep the fun.

Linda touches upon this balance when she suggests the teacher characteristics of “being flexible in the classroom and bringing in different strategies to keep students engaged within their multiple areas of need.” Through forms of assessment, Linda also suggests “maintaining a balance of constructive and positive feedback as we learn best from one another.” Setting up
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spaces of care and balance in critical literacy practices in the classroom will safeguard and nurture the minds of students.

Tony invites teachers to engage their students in critical thinking practices to become ‘possiblitists’,

Teachers should try to really make sure that there is a positive, exciting element to looking at stuff critically. I’ve taken this quote out of a TEDTalk that I showed my kids…It was about overpopulation and poverty, and Grosling goes, ‘I look at it and I want to become a possibilitist.’ Being a possibilitist enables you to be creative and excited about what a future could look like. So with our students, we can look at issues and say we want to be possibilists. If we think in terms like oh we aren’t going to be able to live the same lives…who wants to live the same life? It’s pretty exciting what the future could hold. It’s an exciting time to be alive, so it’s always important, especially with kids, to put that spin on what you look at.

Engaging students in looking at global issues critically thus requires a balance between the critique and the outlook of the situation. Tony, Linda, and Angela advocate for always engaging students with a positive outlook for the future. With a negative outlook, the future will not be deemed as exciting and a place for innovation and creative thinking for our 21st century learners.

4.4 Supporting Inquiry Based Learning

4.4.1 Disenfranchisement of Traditional Learning

Critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and inquiry based or discovery based learning seek to problematize the authoritative relationships between the roles of the teacher and students. Paulo Freire (1970) acknowledged that implementation of these practices sought to challenge traditional hierarchal relationships between the learner and educator by insinuating that teachers should be learners and learners should be teachers (p.75). In my literature review, I argue that Freire’s position begs to flip the script so to speak; thus, teachers alleviate traditional methods of
choosing texts and content to be discussed, giving priority to the interests and discoveries of the students.

Linda draws upon this disenfranchisement of traditional ways of learning where she discusses her critical literacy program, “posing a question or situation related to current issues then you would brainstorm with the class... You set up the learning goals of your unit and brainstorm success criteria with your students as you go throughout your unit, which you and the students can refer back to and change the criteria as it appears fitting.” Linda stresses the successes of putting students into groups and assigning responsibilities, which they respond well to as “each member becomes an expert of what topic they are covering.”

Angela has also had positive experiences with group work as she explains, “my reading is done in groups... I assign a student the responsibility of group leader which makes the student feel very important in their role to facilitate. I usually have four groups going and I sit with one group and he or she would organize, saying ‘okay it’s your turn and your turn to read,’ and they would ask the questions to facilitate the group.”

In Tony’s class, “students have group projects that they’re doing and you see them engaging critically and talking about stuff and having different ideas, not so much debates, but different perspectives on things. Although they manage to go to that place of discovery learning themselves, a lot of this is still modeled.”

All three participants agree that group work must be guided to a certain degree. It becomes less guided when students develop the learning habits of accepting and respecting other students and their opinions. Thus, facilitation of content arises from more of a grassroots instead of content solely coming from the top.
4.4.2 Student Self-Directed Learning

Students’ choice in any type of research has “long been touted by constructivists and critical pedagogues like John Dewy and Howard Gardner as an effective was to involve, encourage, and empower learners to actively participate in their own construction of knowledge” (Graves, 2004, p.92). Within the literature, Graves (2004) suggests that implementations of critical literacy theory within the classroom allows for teachers to legitimize interests and knowledge of their students at the forefront of the classroom dynamic.

When asking what is the goal of your critical literacy program? Linda’s answers brushed upon Graves’ point of putting students’ interests and knowledge ahead of the class. Her goal for her critical literacy program is “not to teach students just automatic knowledge, but to have students feel comfortable in formulating opinions and knowledge on various issues that arise throughout the year. Having their opinions is very important for shaping our country of learners and shaping how we learn in the 21st century. In order to shape this learning, students need to become great compromisers and good listeners so they can discover new ways of thinking and innovating.”

Linda also mentions the types of strategies she uses to facilitate her program, which includes, “class discussions, brainstorming, activities, and modeling components… It is really important to model and teach students to ask ‘think questions.’” Such questions lead students to develop their own sense of inquiry and thirst for answers.

Angela suggests “a really good idea is to have children do the readings and make their own questions. Through novel study, one of the activities was to have the students write five questions in response to the story on their own. They were very detailed questions, so much that
they often needed to be more general for other students to respond. You would certainly need to do some training to get them to write good critical thinking questions.”

Ultimately, Angela’s goals for her critical literacy program is “to bring it (critical literacy) into the unit maybe earlier….So you could figure out with a child who struggles learning how to read, to not so much focus on struggling with the words, but see if you can get the story across and get them into the critical thinking skills early on. Maybe there’s a way of accessing the critical thinking skills without jumping through the other hoops.”

4.5 Conclusion

Based on my data collection and research findings, my participants agree that critical literacy serves as a benefitting factor for students, as they develop their analytic and inquiry skills needed for twenty-first century innovation. Through my data analysis, themes emerged from looking at divergences and convergences between my data findings and what has been mentioned within literary works within my literature review. Four themes along with their subthemes emerged from the data collected.

The first theme describes critical literacy as a medium for which students can act upon their own agencies, and formulate their own identities and positions from reading the world. In order for students to do so, content must be relevant to the students’ lives. This calls for teachers to take on the role of observers and get to know their students interests and backgrounds.

In order to adopt critical thinking practices, one must possess a critical faculty. To teach from a critical faculty, this results from being a lifelong learner. There remains an ongoing question considering where do practices of critical thinking fit within the classroom setting of Ontario teachers amidst school initiatives and teacher expectations that vary from school to school. This
question will hopefully be further addressed and developed through ongoing professional development of teachers across all Ontario school boards.

Teachers can foster an environment of critical thinking practices by addressing the need for a safe space in the classroom. Such spaces address the individual needs and mental health and well-being of each student, which Fullan’s (2013) phase of education reform does not address as of yet. Fullan’s plan shows how students can potentially lead new discoveries outside of the classroom and into the greater society. His work still leaves the question unanswered of how critical thinking practices affects the well-being of the student. Greater knowledge of these implications on Ontario’s youth needs to be addressed.

The final theme calls for a disenfranchisement of traditional learning which follows Freire’s (1970) notion of teachers becoming learners and learners becoming teachers. My participants were comfortable in removing the notions of teachers being sages on the stage, becoming guides on the side. They did stress however, the importance of modelling and scaffolding as a crucial component of student self-directed learning.

Based on my research question and interview process, much data has been presented to help inform and highlight what critical literacy looks like in the classroom to upcoming teachers or novice practitioners of critical literacies. I hope my findings serve as an enlightening guide to approach critical literacy practices as my participants view the upsides of implementing these practices through a balanced approach of analyzing and critiquing the world and its issues.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to Chapter

The present case study is designed to inquire further into the instructional strategies of critical literacies through pedagogical methods of my teacher participants. The findings serve to support the extant literature pertaining to critical literacy theories, critical pedagogy, and inquiry based learning. The findings specifically tell us more about how teacher participants in the study harness critical thinking skills amongst learners with a vast range of multiliteracies.

My main research question asks *How do elementary school teachers implement critical literacies in order to pose critical challenges and responses of learners in the twenty-first century?* My questions that assist my principal research question are *How do teachers set up collaborative learning of the English language whereby learners can share various meanings of text?, how is the classroom environment used to motivate learners to respond through critical lenses?, and what role does critical literacy play in a classroom of learners?*

This chapter summarizes the research findings, and highlights the present study’s implications for various stakeholders, including the educational research community, educational policymakers, educators who are already starting to implement critical literacy strategies and my own practices of teaching as a novice practitioner of critical literacies. Furthermore, this chapter provides several recommendations and suggests directional pathways for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

Following the semi-structured interviews of three teacher participants, a rigorous analysis revealed four important themes: 1.) Constructing Student Identities, 2.) Teacher Critical Pedagogy, 3.) Differentiating the Classroom Environment, and 4.) Supporting Inquiry Based Learning.
The first theme, *Constructing Student Identities* served to remind us that critical literacy practices have a tendency to disrupt traditional classrooms whereby students use multiple voices to interrogate texts. Both Tony and Angela stray away from information being transmitted down to learners. Rather, information needs to come “through the power of student opportunity to analyze what is cited in literature, how the content shapes their identity, constructs cultural discourse, and supports or disrupts the status quo” (Fairclough, 1989, p.111). Angela sheds light on this claim by sharing her insights on how it is important to try and get students to respond to questions about the texts in which students can make personal connections. Both participants advocate for a holistic approach of teaching critical literacy in order to understand the ways in which greater sociopolitical systems position themselves in the world. The significance of using holistic approaches through implementations of a variety of texts seeks to reflect the multiplicity of diversity within cultural contexts of the classroom environment and greater society as a whole.

The second theme, *Teacher Critical Pedagogy* attributes to seeking the fit for critical thinking in Ontario’s curriculum across all subject areas. Tony mentioned it is great that Fullan’s (2013) educational reform plan, *Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario’s Education Agenda* has made it policy to incorporate critical thinking components across all subject areas of the curriculum. All of the subject areas he notes have room for a critical lens; however, “it is tricky for teachers to assess and deliver critical literacies.” Seeking the fit for critical pedagogy in teacher practice is significant as this addresses the need for ongoing professional development for teachers in knowing what critical literacies look like and how do they implement critical practices within their classrooms and schedules.

The third theme, *Differentiating the Classroom Environment* acknowledges the need for balance and differentiation of critical literacy strategies that are being implemented within the
classroom. From Linda’s past experiences as a Special Education teacher, she sheds light on the need to be aware of students’ individual needs. As she became informed with critical literacy practices, she made sure to address how she was going to differentiate her program to fit all of her students’ mental, social, and learning capabilities within her class. Critical pedagogical methods of instruction do not necessarily involve taking a negative stance, instead they include “looking at an issue or topic in various ways, analyzing it, and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement” (Comber, 2001, p.6). Differentiating critical literacy programs is significant as teachers plan for an array of diversity of learning, socio-emotional and physical needs within their classrooms. With the help of literature support, recommendations of teacher strategies for differentiation critical literacy programs will be addressed further in the chapter.

The final theme, Supporting Inquiry Based Learning, entails teachers’ responsiveness and ways of knowing how to set up inquiry through every day current issues that trigger learners’ interests as these events situate around their lives. Similarities between Donald Graves (2004) research and my participants’ feedback unfold the consensus that critical literacy promotes creations of spaces in the classroom for topics of discourse to emerge as student-centered approaches of inquiry. Inquiry based learning serves to prompt learners to “exist in the world rather than simply live in it” (Freire, 1970, p. 18). It is significant to adopt an inquiry based learning approach, whereby implementing critical literacies in the classroom, students learn to exist in the world through deeper involvement and engagement of content, leading towards greater social action that has the potential to transform environments of the school and their society.
5.2 Implications

Through conducting semi-structured interviews with my teacher participants, their conversations unfolded that seeking the fit for critical literacies within the classroom remains a gray area for teachers. Tony noted that he continues to encounter teachers who question the fit of critical pedagogical practices. This has reoccurred during professional development workshops he has attended where some teachers question, “I have to get all this other stuff taught…there is no place for this in my schedule.”

My research implicates that there are still gaps between current research of critical literacies and what teachers are practicing in their classrooms. If our goal within Ontario’s educational reform is to ensure that “all learners receive critical thinking skills needed to service the twenty-first century” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.3), then “ongoing professional development is necessary to help teachers break down critical literacy theory, learn specific step-by-step strategies, and generalize these strategies to confidently use them in our Ontario classrooms” (Klingner et. al, 2010, p.14).

Teachers are pressured more than ever now through educational policy documents to implement critical thinking skills across all subject areas of the curriculum. My research and literature reviewed implicates the need to take a further look at what is being taught at professional workshops in order for teachers to gain confidence in their abilities to foster critical thinking skills necessary for twenty-first century learning. If teachers do not know how to teach critical literacy how are we going to expect the future faces of the workforce to harness such skills?
5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

The present study has important implications for the broader educational research community, including school boards and educational policymakers. In broad strokes, this study should serve to remind policy makers and curriculum planners that in moving toward enacting critical practices, most teachers are faced with a continuing examination and revision of their preexisting pedagogical methods and long-held traditional beliefs (Lewison et. al 2002).

In my interview, Tony raised an important point that initial efforts of teachers toward implementing a critical literacy curriculum were often overshadowed by hesitations and uncertainties of what critical literacy looks like in classrooms and what is appropriate for elementary classrooms in terms of materials, texts, and discussions. With that said, school boards need to address these issues of hesitations and uncertainties through in-house support initiatives within education systems in order to engage current and future teachers in a conversation about educational practice that is critical in spirit, as well as in content.

Evidently, teachers may not be equipped or have the confidence to implement critical pedagogical practices as they become more and more familiarized with the new policies of Ontario’s educational reform outlined in Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario’s Education Agenda (Fullan, 2013). The findings in my case study provide fruitful information for school boards that can be utilized in order to advocate for an increased number of professional development workshops that will foster confidence in practicing critical literacy - an ambiguous concept in educational practices that is not easy to neither assess nor plan for.

5.2.2 Narrow: Your Professional Identity and Practice

Using a postmodernist theoretical framework to guide my case study has allowed me to situate practices of critical literacies within the ongoing transformation of information and ways
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of learning in the twenty-first century. Fostering a growing awareness of how sociopolitical systems and power relationships impact my own teaching will impact the types of texts my future learners read, the types of questions I scaffold, and the spaces for critical conversations I will make through a student-centered approach suggested by my participants and the literature I engaged in throughout the research process.

In order to incorporate critical literacy practices within my future classrooms, I will need to provide differentiated forms of assessment as Tony noted that “critical literacy is something that is not easy to assess or plan for.” Teachers face what are often perceived to be competing demands- preparing students for success on provincial tests while at the same time creating engaging and meaningful lessons to promote critical thinking (Gini-Newman, 2013). In my current and future practice, I will not succumb to letting these requirements of a teacher to be competing demands. Approached in a thoughtful manner, I feel that critical pedagogical methods can be used as a vehicle to engage learners while at the same time equipping them with the tools to succeed on the exam and beyond the exam.

Critical pedagogy is increasingly being valued in policies of educational reform, yet it is being inadequately addressed within our education systems (Gini-Newman, 2013). As a novice practitioner of critical literacies, I wish to seek ongoing professional development in incorporating critical pedagogical methods in my classrooms. In the future, as I gain experience, I wish to mentor other teachers to ensure that critical strategies are adapted by teachers who may not feel that they have the critical faculty as Angela describes, in order to center lessons using critical strategies. Having researched and practiced critical pedagogy, I feel that critical pedagogy has grown to be a part of my teaching self-concept that will play a transformative role in my future teaching practices.
5.3 Recommendations

Inquiry based learning processes call for a disenfranchisement of traditional learning which follows Freire’s (1970) notion of teachers becoming learners and learners becoming teachers. My participants in the case study were comfortable in removing notions of teachers being sages on the stage to guides on the side. They did recommend, however, the importance of teachers modelling and scaffolding as a crucial component of student self-directed learning.

To foster critical literacy programs through a student-centered approach to inquiry, all three of my participants recommended that group work must be guided to a certain degree. Group work becomes less guided when students develop the learning habits of accepting and respecting other students and their opinions (LiteracyGAINs, 2009). Angela recommended that teachers must adopt an awareness of the comments being said within student-centered classrooms as “comments need to be constructive.” Teachers should also be mindful of incorporating positive reinforcement as part of their own classroom dialogue, which can help set up more inclusive environments for critical discussions.

When incorporating a critical literacy program into the classroom, rather than waiting towards the end, Linda suggests bringing critical strategies earlier within the unit. This can be especially applied to gifted and special educational settings to challenge students as well as enable students to answer questions from their own experiences without having to know the semantics of writing. Linda recommends using students’ Individual Education Plans to help guide through differentiated planning in order to ensure each students’ needs are being addressed throughout the program.

It is important to note that critical literacy is not to be reserved for older or academically proficient students, but can be taught to a wide range of students in age and ability (Luke,
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O’Brien and Comber, 2001) (Vasquez, 1996). This is why differentiation of critical programs across all subject areas is integral in order to meet the diversity of needs within the classroom. Gee (1989) argues that literacy is empowering only when it renders active questioners of the social reality around them. Thus, teachers need to provide opportunities to all students to be able to reflect, and explore the implications of ideas for themselves (LiteracyGAINS, 2009).

Angela recommends working extensively with students in order to enable them to see that their answers can be wrong or right in juxtaposition with texts. Helping students understand that they can act with and/or against texts is a useful teaching strategy described as “developing students’ power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author’s topic” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p.37).

All of my participants along with supporting literature gathered suggest that teachers can foster the kind of inquiry and discussions necessary in a critical literacy program by building safe, inclusive classroom cultures that promote student inquiry. Alongside ongoing professional development, teachers are invited to be ongoing learners within their classrooms as they develop an understanding of students’ interests, backgrounds, values, and build on the strengths they bring to school which is an integral part of fostering critical pedagogical strategies within a community of learners.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

As much as the present case study has served to expand upon the extant literature of implementing critical pedagogical teaching strategies within the classroom, it has also highlighted the need for further research study. The case study advocates for increased research scholarship in studying ways professional workshops seek to teach educators how to adopt critical pedagogies within their classrooms. It would also benefit future research on critical
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pedagogies to account for the information of critical instructional strategies provided at professional workshops - what works and what is not working for most teachers.

Ultimately, further research should be directed towards ways in which ongoing teacher professional development can foster greater confidence amongst novice practitioners of critical literacies. There is also a need for scholars to research ways in which teachers can learn about critical literacy theories and practices through conversations amongst teacher colleagues who self-identify as experienced practitioners. Areas of this research can lend tremendous support in analyzing whether collegial support within school systems can be used as a systematic approach to foster critical strategies in all of our classrooms.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The purpose of the case study was to account for the ways elementary school teachers implement critical literacies in order to pose critical challenges and responses of learners in the twenty-first century. The findings serve to support the extant literature pertaining to critical literacy theories, critical pedagogy, and inquiry based learning through a postmodernist framework. Each theme that has emerged from the data has provided invaluable guidance in regards to fostering critical thinking skills amongst learners with a vast range of multiliteracies.

I acknowledge that within the limitations of the MTRP protocol, for which only teacher interviews could be conducted, does not provide a holistic overview of the topic. However, I believe the study’s value in highlighting implications for various stakeholders, and providing several recommendations and directional pathways for future research. Through my research and data collection I can conclude from my findings that engaging students in looking at global issues critically requires a balance between the critique and the outlook of the situation. My dedicated teacher participants advocate for always engaging students with a positive outlook for
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the future. With a negative outlook, the future will not be deemed as exciting and as a place for innovation and creative thinking for our twenty-first century learners.
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References


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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: ___________________
Dear ___________________

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I wish to investigate the instructional strategies of critical literacies through the pedagogical methods of teachers as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will help provide insights into this topic as I set out to discover whether practices and teacher prompts of critical thinking proposed by the recent curriculum documents of Ontario’s Ministry of Education are working or not working for my teacher participants.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process is Dr. Peter Yee Han Joong, who is also my tentative research supervisor for this year. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to conduct research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute semi-structured interview as well as a follow-up interview that will be audio-recorded using a password protected cell phone. The recording will be held and deleted after five years after the data has been collected. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer. Once the interview and follow-up interview have been transcribed, the interview transcript will be securely stored in a password-protected personal laptop as well as in a safe once printed in hard copy. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research and course instructor.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. To ensure your privacy and confidentiality, I will be giving you a pseudonym name. You will be given all rights to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You will also be given the opportunity to change or to extract any statements made during our interviews before I begin my data analysis. There are no known risks to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of the approval of the Research Ethics Board (REB) once a proposal has been submitted in order to ensure the research being proposed does not put you in any risk.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.
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Yours Sincerely,

Researcher name: __Nicole Pittman________________________

Phone number, email: __647-280-8617_nicole_pittman@hotmail.com________________________

Instructor’s Name: __Dr. Peter Yee Han Joong______________________________

Phone number: ____416-221-9917_____ Email: __peter.joong@utoronto.ca________________________

Consent Form

________________________________________________________________________

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by __Nicole Pittman_____ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Questions

Section A: Background Information

1. How many years have you worked as a teacher?
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2. How many years have you been working at your current school?
3. Have you taught outside of Canada? If so, were you influenced at all by any programs?
4. How did you become informed with critical literacy practices?
5. How many years have you been implementing critical literacy strategies in the classroom?
6. On a range scale of novice to experienced, where would you define yourself as a teacher who practices critical literacies?

Section B: Teacher Practices (WHAT/HOW?)
7. How do you introduce a critical literacy program in the classroom?
8. What steps do you take to familiarize your students to this program?
9. Tell me more about how you assess students in this program.
10. To what extent have your students supported one another in the process of responding to critical thinking inquiry?

Section C: Beliefs/Values (WHY?)
11. What prompted you to incorporate critical literacies into your classroom?
12. Do students prosper from critical literacy? Why or why not?
13. How do your students generally respond to your program? If you could provide an example that would be appreciated.
14. Do you think critical literacies should be incorporated into every classroom? Why or why not?

Section D: Influencing Factors (WHO?)
15. Have you faced any challenges or obstacles when implementing a critical literacy program?
16. What kind of feedback have you received outside of the classroom?
17. What are the qualities a teacher needs to possess in order to implement a critical literacy program?
18. Are these qualities inherent or do they need to be learned?

Section E: Next Steps (WHAT NEXT?)
19. What goals do you have for your critical literacy program this year in the classroom?
20. What advice would you give to upcoming teachers who are looking to incorporate a critical literacy program in the classroom?